



USOPC

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

NEWS AND UPDATES

How to Maintain a Training Ready Mind and Brain During COVID 19 Uncertainty - PART 1

That big goal on the horizon just got shifted. You've been working for years towards it, and the start of 2020 brought more structure, intensity and focus in your pursuit. Now, with the 2020 season and Tokyo Games postponed, it's possible that you feel like you don't know what you're aiming for. There will come a time when you know more about the timeline for 2020 and 2021. In the interim, you have to bring some of the routine that was created by training to your everyday life. This is Part 1 of two-part series, containing strategies backed by neuroscience research for how to create an optimal foundation for functioning in uncertain times. Following these steps will help keep your mind, brain and body in a "ready" state so when we know when to "set" for Tokyo and 2020/21 seasons, you can GO:

Sleep Routine

Maintain a **regular bedtime and wake time**. This is a great opportunity for you to get extra rest. Pay down sleep debt that has accumulated. Regular, adequate sleep is tied to immune functioning. There is no specific COVID 19 and sleep related immune functioning data available, but numerous other studies support the strong link between sleep and the way our bodies fight infection. It's safe to assume that adequate sleep could prepare your body to have an optimal immune response should you be exposed to COVID 19 or another cold/infection. Maintaining regular sleep and wake times also allows your circadian rhythms (internal clock) to function optimally, helping you feel alert in the day and sleepy at night. You can sleep in or stay up late on occasion. But know that frequent significant shifts in your sleep and wake times can unintentionally induce jet lag symptoms and can negatively affect your mood, your mind and body. Set an hour long "zone" for your bed and wake times and try to stick to it. Allowing for about 9 hours in bed is a good starting point. Your overall need for recovery will likely change in accordance with changes in your training, so a potential reduction in your need for sleep could occur over weeks. One last thing: get some direct sunlight each day. If possible, open windows and let light shine directly on your face for several minutes first thing in the morning. Move your trainer, stretch or do yoga outside. Day should be bright. Night should be dark.

Exercise

You likely realize that for **exercise**, it's time to be creative. See what is possible for you to do in this time of restricted training. If you can't exercise outdoors, see what catches your interest for what is available via streaming or online (yoga, HIIT, dance, etc). Try being open to something new, even it's for 10 minutes. Exercise is a strong mood modulator, it buffers against negative moods. It activates your attentional networks and helps keep your mind nimble and memory robust over time. Think about addressing typical features of your training- cardio, strength, coordination, flexibility, balance- in new ways. If you can exercise outdoors, attempt to (obeying local rules). Consider how you have responded in times of restricted training in the past and how this may have affected your mood and thinking. You may need to do more cardio or strength to regulate your mind than you realize. Be wary of long sedentary periods. You are not accustomed to the current training reduction and you will likely feel unwell if you adopt a non-athlete lifestyle.

Nutrition

Put **nutritious food** in your body. Your needs could change with modifications in your training. Talk to your nutritionist about this. Similar to having regular sleep/wake times, regular mealtimes send a time signal to your brain and help regulate your biology.

Connection

Be nimble with **social connections**- FaceTime that old teammate, email your former coach, have an actual phone call with your current coach. Humans are social beings. We are designed to connect. Physical distance is for communicable diseases, not social distance. Try to talk about something else in addition to COVID 19.

Breathe

Breathe (in this particular way). In through your nose, counting to 5, out through your mouth, counting to 5. In for five, relax your jaw and shoulders. Long smooth exhale for the whole count of five. Repeat. Breaths are long, not deep, and only taking in as much air as you need. Breathing in this way will activate the parasympathetic response and shift your physiology out of fight-or-flight, and into rest-digest-recover-repair mode. Try this for several minutes through the day. When you feel antsy reading the news. When you awake in the night worried. Come back to what is in your control, which is slow, smooth inhale, long, smooth exhale. Repeat.

This message was made in part by the USOPC Sport Psychology Professional team.



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How to Maintain a Training Ready Mind and Brain During COVID 19 Uncertainty - PART 2

This is Part 2 of two-part series, containing strategies backed by neuroscience research for how to create an optimal foundation for functioning in uncertain times. Part 1 was an action-oriented series of steps for you to consider to create solid routines in your day and night. Part 2 is more about action in your mind. Following these steps will help keep you in a “ready” state so when we know when to “set” for Tokyo and 2020/21, you can GO:

Re-Tool Goals

Engage is something **goal directed** every day. You have major sport related goals in your life, and an important part of your identity is being an athlete. A lack of training and competition goals can leave you feeling aimless. Look for something to improve upon. You value excellence. Progress towards goals, even when challenging, gives a sense of satisfaction. Now is the time to consider devoting yourself to refining something in your sport training (review video, increase reps for small technique changes, practice in your mind/visualize) or to learning/refining some other skill (practice a foreign language, try a new recipe). To put this another way, be careful with the amount of shows/videogames/social media you are consuming. Lack of sport, with social isolation and a lot of screen time could be a recipe for depression. *(If you drink alcohol or use other drugs, pay attention to your patterns, if you are consuming more than you typically do/intend to, you may be letting yourself know that you need some help- you need, potentially with the help of a professional, to think through what the substance use is covering up in your life, and what other coping skills could be effective.)*

Express Gratitude

Count your blessings. Maintain a practice of **gratitude**. So many athletes realize that they are in the company of others who are less fortunate. Those who are worried about a preexisting health condition. Those who have different access to resources or less support. Your mind saunters from feeling thankful over to frustrated that you know some competitors around the world are already back to training. Suddenly that sense of appreciation fades to seeing that the playing field isn't level. The mind can hold onto two conflicting emotions (more on that below). Give yourself a nudge and try this exercise from positive psychology: “**Three good things**”- at some point every day, write down or state out loud three “good” things that have happened and why they went well. Focus on how YOU contributed/facilitated to the chances of those things happening today. (i.e. Today I stretched my lower body for 20 mins- I did this by disregarding the fact that I hate stretching and I did it anyways; Today my brother and I talked on the phone- I've made it a priority to reconnect with him and let him know I value our relationship)

Space for Emotion

Give yourself space to have a **range of reactions** for what is happening on the global scale and what is happening with your life. You can mourn what isn't going to happen in the 2020 season. It's a loss. You worked hard to get here. Some of you overcame significant injuries and rehab. Some of you have reached a lifelong goal of being in this specific position in your sport. That is to be commended, in your own mind privately, and publicly. Know the sport community sees all that you have done. We don't know what will happen next, or when, and this sense of uncertainty can induce free form anxiety that takes hold when we watch the news or think about the rest of the season. Your feelings are your feelings. They will come and go. (Even if you cry, you know that eventually you will stop.) A sign of psychological maturity is to be able to tolerate conflicting emotions, for example, the relief of having some time off along with the frustration of not being able to train. Remind yourself that you can hold these conflicting emotions even when it feels uncomfortable. This is a skill you can start small and improve upon with practice. Noticing is the first step.

Approach Uncertainty

Use this as an **opportunity to confront uncertainty** and difficulty in your life. For many athletes, you have already had to deal with challenges of a similar level, although not a similar nature. If you have not yet dealt with a significant obstacle in your life, we welcome you. However much we want to deny this, we all know that in the future, will have to say goodbye to people we love, or have to hang up our shoes before we're ready. We'll have to cope with an uncertain diagnosis or lose something that we value. Now is a time to practice the way you will confront ongoing challenges in your life. Start to act like the person you want to become, the person who can know that right now things are uncertain and continue to act every day to move towards a goal. Maybe you've allowed yourself to get caught up in the media and worry excessively about what is to come. If you want to change this, try something different. Read the media at a prescribed time in the day. Focus on facts. Remind yourself you can get through this difficult time. This is a chapter in your life. Writing this chapter out can help process your thoughts and emotions. You can get started with a draft of where you were in your life when COVID 19 created a disruption, how you are managing this time of uncertainty (or how you will start managing it more effectively), and what things look like by the end of this chapter.

Consider Non-Permanence

Your accomplishments before this still stand. Know that this will pass. Your accomplishments in the future will still come. Nothing lasts forever. Not this period of unknown. Not that last injury. Not COVID 19. Not your career as an athlete. On one hand uncertainty feels uncomfortable. On the other, it characterizes human life. We have routines and goals that help us create structure and predictability in our lives, and in rare moments the curtain is lifted, and we see how fragile and vulnerable human beings are. When this is over, there will be an element of getting back to business to pursue the goals in your life and you will regain a sense of control over your destiny. No matter how long this goes on, you still did all you did before this started. You still won that race. You still earned that medal. You still improved that last bit to put yourself on the international scene. You will still do all the things that are to come. That horizon is not too far.

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