

#MentallyFit Aquatic Athletes with the COVID-19 Pandemic

Few events have altered day to day function across the globe as has COVID-19. In what seems like an instant, we have gone from training and competing wherever and whenever we want- to travel restrictions, closed borders, closed training centers, and millions of people living in self-isolation.

Pandemics in one sense are isolating, while in another they are unifying. Neighbourhoods and communities band together to ensure that the least advantaged are taken care of. Teams find themselves in similar circumstances of training and competition interruption, while wondering if they are being disadvantaged if other nations are not abiding by the same restrictions. At the same time, teams have unified with virtual training sessions and social media posts of support.

Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Athlete Mental Health

Since COVID-19 started to spread around the world, it has affected aquatic athletes in a number of different ways. There were initial uncertainties and anxiety about when Olympic qualifiers would be held, how to maintain fitness and training, and whether the Olympic/Paralympic Games would occur this year. The decision has now been made to postpone the Olympic/ Paralympic Games until July 2021, and these initial concerns are gone. The new reality may pose different concerns for you as athletes.

There are many ways in which an aquatic athletes' mental health may be affected.

Geographic isolation

Many aquatic athletes live and train in countries other than their home country. They may be training at FINA Training Centres, international training camps, with professional teams, or in foreign university sport systems. Some athletes were trapped in the location of their training centres as the travel bans were imposed by countries around the world and are now isolated from family and friends. They may have symptoms of fear, helplessness and isolation; all of which are compounded by the health concerns caused by the pandemic itself.

Social isolation

In many countries, citizens are facing government-imposed home isolation requirements in an attempt to stop the community spread of the corona virus. This public health practice may result in different effects on athlete mental health including:

- Social isolation from friends, teammates, family
- Disconnection from normal outdoor or social activities
- Fear of falling behind in physical sport preparedness
- Fear of competitive disadvantage in comparison with athletes in other countries with less restrictions
- Being isolated in an unsafe environment

Uncertainty and lack of control

Transitions in an athlete's career are inevitable. Retirement after the FINA World Championships or major Games are natural transition points in an athletes' career. These transitions are most often under the athlete's control and are planned transitions. Sometimes, however, these transitions are not under your control; for example: following significant injuries, deselection, and event cancellations. All of these scenarios force an athlete in a direction that is not within your control. For many aquatic athletes, the COVID-19 pandemic feels like a similar situation, where the change in the sport calendar and ability to train and compete normally engenders feelings of uncertainty and a lack of control.

Anxiety

While athletes have '*super human*' physical skills and attributes, they are also human beings with fears and concerns like non-athletes. The additional stressors in an athletes' life caused by the pandemic may include:

- Concern for the health of friends, family or teammates who are ill from the corona virus
- Fear of contracting COVID-19
- Uncertainty on how to pass unstructured time
- Feeling sad or anxious about the future sport career, or life in general
- Feelings of guilt for worrying about ourselves, when we are aware that there are others who have lost their sources of income, or may be fighting for their lives

As such, it is important in times of crisis to validate your experiences and feelings – ***it is normal to feel increased anxiety in a crisis situation.***

Athletes with mental health disorders

The COVID-19 global pandemic can also cause significant impact for those athletes who normally train and compete with underlying mental health symptoms and disorders. On top of coping with the stresses of regular daily life while training and competing, the pandemic adds complexity that can either result in a **worsening** (an exacerbation) of an underlying pre-existing mental health disorder, or it can **trigger** a mental health disorder. These may include:

- Anxiety
- Depression or mood disorder
- Insomnia or sleep disturbances
- Substance abuse disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Eating disorders or disordered eating

What can you do as athletes to be #MentallyFit during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Apply your sport skills to your new reality

Participation in elite sport provides athletes with mental skills that make them strong competitors: competitive drive, resilience, mental toughness, adversity tolerant. These mental skills make athletes not only strong competitors in the pool, but also provide them with skills that can be adapted for life outside the pool in times of adversity. We have seen aquatic athletes demonstrating these skills of leadership and resilience in social media posts of inspirational messages for other athletes and for local communities, team building initiatives, and creative, novel training opportunities while in isolation. Isolation does mean “alone”!

Tom Daley's new hobby – Knitting



Alia Atkinson – Cooking Recipes



These activities bring people together and inspires and encourages not only teammates, but also your large fan base that follow the FINA aquatic stars on social media. Humour and sharing a common experience are an oasis in this storm! Enjoy the many creative ways your fellow teammates and competitors are posting in social media to keep our FINA family together, inspired and #MentallyFit!

Social media and the internet

While many of our aquatic stars are using social media as a means to assist in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, other aquatic stars have been silent on social media. For many athletes, social media is a source of community and is a means of connecting with others, however for other athletes, the internet and social media outlets may actually increase mental distress from an overload of negative or false messaging about the COVID-19 pandemic. The important thing is to recognize if you are distressed by surfing the internet and social media and to restrict your on-line activity to what works for best for you. Limit your time spent on the internet to only accurate sites that provide factual information (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>) and/or positive sites that you enjoy and connects you with your community.

Tips for coping with the COVID-19 pandemic

1. **Take care of your health:**

- Your personal physical health is most important! Although you possess unique physical skills as an athlete, you are still a human being with vulnerabilities to infections. **Being young and fit does NOT protect you from contracting COVID-19!** Please follow the local public health restrictions in your country and community. These regulations are in place to protect your health and to decrease the corona virus transmission. Please be diligent by playing your role in 'flattening the curve' of the spread of the corona virus.
- If you are experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19, seek medical assistance through your local health care system.
- Eat well, sleep well, wash your hands!
- Participate in an at-home training routine in collaboration with your coaching staff

2. **Take care of your mental health:**

Your mental health is also important! It is normal to feel fear and anxiety at this time of uncertainty and change. Acknowledge your feelings and then find ways that work for you to help you cope. The following tips can provide you with ideas to help you remain #MentallyFit:

- **Control what you can control:** Trust that the public health and medical experts are using their collective expertise to stop the pandemic. Control your own experience by restructuring your schedule to create a healthy daily routine.
- **Change your field of vision:** Shift your focus from the Olympic Games or FINA World Championships to the present. Redefine your goals for the short game. Focus on the health and fitness building blocks so that you are prepared for when the isolation restrictions are lifted, and you can return to training and competing.

- **Take up a hobby:** Like Tom Daley, find a hobby that brings you pleasure and structure to your day. This may be painting, reading, writing, watching movies, playing video games, listening to music, creating music with friends via the internet – be creative!
- **Practice mindfulness or meditation:** Find ways to relax and calm your mind that work for you.
- **Stay connected:** Reach out to friends, family, teammates, your entourage and your fans. You are not alone! Everyone is affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; by staying connected you will not only help yourself, but your actions will help others who are inspired by your acts of kindness, humour and inspiration.
- **Reach out for help:** if you are feeling even mild anxiety, it may be helpful to express what you are going through with a health care professional.
- **Know where to go for help:** Where to go for help will depend on what you are experiencing and the resources available to you. For example,
 - if you are worried about the disruption to your training and how it may affect your performance, you may wish to consult a mental performance consultant.
 - Counsellors or sport psychologists can assist with the feelings of anxiety, mood changes and sleep strategies etc.
 - A team physician can assist with more severe symptoms of anxiety or mood disturbances. He or she can refer you to a sport psychiatrist for more specialized support if required and available.
 - Your national federation may have other resources available to you including sport physiologists, sport dieticians, and specialized trainers.
 - Another free resource available to you is the IOC's Athlete365 webpages which provides expert developed messaging around athlete mental health and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://www.olympic.org/athlete365/login/>. Create an account and password for access.

Stay #MentallyFit during the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to seeing you on the pool deck of a FINA event in the future.

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