

Helping Our Athletes Deal With The Challenges of These Stressful Times

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Presenter Background

- Licensed Psychologist, State of Oregon
- Certified Mental Performance Consultant (CMPC),[®] Association for Applied Sport Psychology
- United States Olympic Committee (USOC) Sport Psychology and Mental Training Registry
- Psy.D., Clinical Psychology, University of Denver
- M.S., Exercise & Sport Science, University of Utah
- Arroyo High School Cross Country/Track & Field, Class of 1998

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The Landscape

Uncertain ■ Unpredictable ■ Unfamiliar ■ Loss of Control ■ Isolation ■ Change

- We like to feel safe, secure, and comfortable.
- We resist change, even positive change.
- We crave black and white. We avoid gray.
- 100 pennies = 1 dollar

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Driving Through Kansas



“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” – Viktor Frankl

Presentation Objectives

- Learn to help our athletes feel more comfortable in these murky gray waters.
- Develop strategies to facilitate positive interactions with our athletes in these stressful times.
- Identify factors that foster positive coach/athlete connection and team cohesion.
- Acquire skills to help our athletes gain perspective and to view challenges as opportunities.
- Promote mental health, interpersonal connection, and performance excellence.

The Why/What If Game

- We can play the Why/What If Game all day, all night, all week, all month, all year, all life
- The house always wins
- In this moment of change and uncertainty, you will surely field “whys” and “what-ifs.”
- Why/What-If → What-Is

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The What Is Reality

- Remain **factual**. Remain **concrete**. Remain **neutral**.
- “We don’t know, but this is what we do know.”
- Answers to “why/what if” questions are unsatisfying and may increase frustration.
- Think of What Is as a life raft to help athletes navigate the gray waters.
- It gives athletes something to hold on to.
- Remain neutral on government policy/governing body decisions.
- Rather, validate/reflect the athlete’s experience.

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Emotions

- The solution is sometimes the problem.
- The harder we try to change a negative thought, the fiercer it becomes.
- Emotions are not a problem. It's way we interact with emotions that matters.
- Think of emotions as data. They are telling us good information if we listen.
- It makes sense that our athletes are feeling certain ways.

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Emotion Regulation

- Intent vs. Impact
- Avoid minimizing, rationalizing, or blaming.
- Avoid problem solving.
- Express empathy. Listen and reflect back.
- When our athletes feel heard and understood, they will feel connected and invested.
- “What was the best part of your day?”

Coach/Athlete Connection

Collaboration ■ Empathy ■ Alliance ■ Affirmation ■ Genuineness

- Common Factors Theory
- Recognize that you are an important , valuable part of their lives.
- As such, you may be in the athlete circle of trust.
- Those that need help may not reach out for help.

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Team Connection

- The sport matters. The people matter more.
- Zoom Decathlon (and countless other games – with prizes that inspire)
- Zoom movie night
- Consistent, structured team meetings
- Group discussion prompts – from silly to meaningful
- Running strategy – how to mentally approach a race (prerace, race, postrace)

Encourage Routines

- I'm more like a two-year-old than I care to admit.
- Exercise, Nutrition, Sleep → Mental Health
- Control the controllables

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Opportunity

- Perspective. My magic wand wish.
- The Zen master story
- Diversifying our portfolios.
- Reevaluate. Integrate. Reconnect.
- Empower! The skills that make a great runner are transferable to dealing with current life.

Closing Thoughts

- The Everything Else
- Composure is key. Athletes will look to you for how to respond.
- When we know our athletes, we'll know how to motivate them.
- Accountability and support partners. Nobody can do this alone.

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The End

- Questions
- Comments
- Discussion

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Book Recommendations

- “Coaching for the Inner Edge” by Robin Vealey
- “Group Dynamics in Sport” by Albert Carron & Mark Eys
- “Applying Educational Psychology in Coaching” by Jeffrey Huber
- “In Pursuit of Excellence” by Terry Orlick
- “Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Exercise and Sport” by Hagger & Chatzisarantis
- Essential Readings in Sport and Exercise Psychology” by Daniel Smith & Michael Bar-Eli
- “The Happiness Trap: Stop Struggling, Start Living” by Russ Harris

Three Questions to Invoke Conversation

- Tell me about your relationship with your sport as if it were a romantic relationship. Where did you meet? Where was your first date? Where do you see it going? When did you know this sport was “the one?” Is this sport “the one”? How would you feel if this relationship ended? Etc.
- Your journey through your sport is being turned into a 10 episode Netflix series/documentary. Describe it to me. What’s the title? What’s the tagline? What’s the synopsis? What’s the theme? What’s the story arc? What do you want viewers to know?
- When a famous athlete retires, the sportswriters write a reflective piece on that person’s career. Think about your retirement story. What do you want your legacy to be? How do you want to be remembered? What are you doing/not doing now in service of this legacy?