

## **COVID AND SPORTS**

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### **Challenges of Downtime from Sports**

Whether it is fourth and goal or down by 5 points with one minute left in the game, sports is filled with challenging situations. As coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues to spread, the lives of youth athletes will be met with many more challenges. How will schoolwork to be done virtually? How will friendships and connections with teams continue when we are supposed to be away from others? How can I continue to be an athlete when all sports are cancelled? How do I handle the uncertainty that may continue over the next several weeks? The level of uncertainty associated with restrictions due to COVID-19 are likely to cause high levels of stress in youth athletes.

Generally, common signs of stress in children include: (1) irritability, (2) sadness, (3) changes in eating, (4) changes in sleep, (5) acting out, (6) hard time focusing, (7) lack of interest in things that were previously enjoyable, (8) unexplained body aches/pain, and (10) substance use. While several of these signs are common in children, greater concern is warranted if these changes are quite abnormal for the child and/or causing children to not do things they would normally do. Given the potential for stress during such a challenging time, youth athletes are likely to need a team of support to help them through this situation.

### **Parents - Sympathize, Set Goals, Provide Perspective**

Parents play an integral role in helping their children through the current crisis. During the current times, children will benefit from several strategies. Early on, do not try to justify or problem solve the child's concerns as this will only result in conflict. Instead, early in this process, be sympathetic and allow the child to feel bad and vent about how much their life has changed. If the negative mood persists, then work your child to set up a plan to improve in their sport (see later on goal setting) by controlling what they can control in this uncontrollable time. Finally, understand that children often have a short-term view of the world and will struggle to see how things will return to normal after this crisis. Parents need to help them gain perspective on how short-term decisions can have a long-term impact.

### **Coaches - Continue Meaningful Contact for Well-being, Training, and School Emphasis**

Current guidelines are restricting interactions between coaches and athletes limiting the perceived impact of coaches. However, coaches still remain crucial in helping athletes through this challenging time. In many situations, coaches spend as much time with athletes as parents per night and develop close relationships with athletes. When this relationship ends abruptly, it can cause distress. Thus, players would benefit from staying connected and being connected with coaches. Our technology-focused society allows individuals to easily communicate via means such as Facebook Messenger video chat or Google Hangout allowing communication between

coaches and athletes. The bigger role is being connected with players to maintain the pre-existing relationship between coach and athlete. Coaches could schedule frequent “check ins” with athletes to assess general well-being and use similar approaches as mentioned above for parents. They can provide individualized training programs to provide athletes with a sense of sports, aid in goal setting (see below), but also afford them an opportunity to feel successful. Coaches can help re-enforce the importance of remaining current on virtual school during such time. Ultimately, although restrictions are in place, coaches continue to serve a role of staying connected and “being connected” with athletes.

### **Athletes - Control What You Can and Set Daily Physical and Sport Goals**

During the COVID-19 crisis, it is expected that athletes will struggle with a lack of feeling in control and feeling successful. Athletes will likely demonstrate such feelings in sport as well as in other aspects of their life. In such times, athletes are encouraged to “control what you can control,” as athletes typically focus on what they cannot do (e.g., not play sports) without noticing what they can do (e.g. shoot free throws).

To improve level of control, athletes are encouraged to set up process goals. Athletes often make goals around outcome or performance, like how many points they make in a game. While out of their sport, these goals are not within their control making them not successful. However, athletes that develop goals completely within their control, called process goals, are often the most successful. Athletes should develop daily goals around physical and technical aspects of their sport that are entirely within their control. For example, athletes might create daily goals on nutrition, sleep, or general conditioning to improve overall physical fitness. For instance, athletes might work on daily goals on a specific technique in their sport to improve overall sport ability upon returning to their sport. In example, a youth basketball player could set daily goals around increasing sleep behaviors, increasing protein intake, and taking a set number of shots daily. All goals are entirely within their control and can result in feelings of success and ultimately improve their sense of participation in sport and level of performance upon return to sports. Despite the restriction on sports, participation in aspects of sports are not restricted, which may help youth athletes continue to remain invested and develop in sports.

Overall, the uncertainty over the next few weeks will be challenging to youth athletes. They have faced several challenges in sports, and this will be one more. Once conquered, youth athletes will have one more tool in the toolbox: adversity. With the support of parents and coaches, youth athletes will be able to successfully face the uncertain challenges ahead.