

Returning to sport after a pandemic - psychological and emotional considerations for coaches

What are common reactions and responses to trauma/disaster/grief?

Following a dramatic or significant event, people frequently feel stunned, disoriented or unable to integrate distressing information. Once these initial reactions subside, people can experience a variety of thoughts and behaviours. Common responses can be:

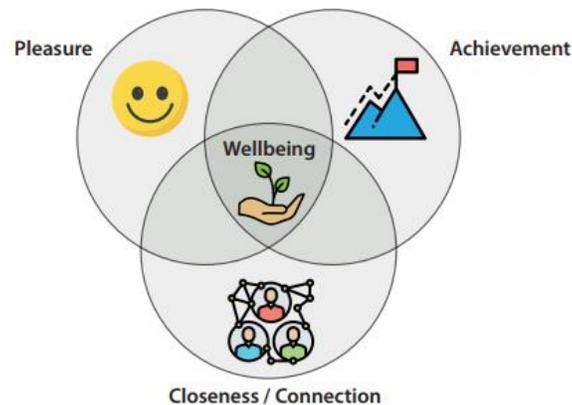
- **Intense or unpredictable feelings.** Athletes may be anxious, nervous, overwhelmed or grief-stricken. They may also feel more irritable or moody than usual.
- **Changes to thoughts and behavior patterns.** Specific factors may trigger the athletes and this may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. It may be difficult to concentrate or make decisions. Because their regular schedules and routines have been disrupted, sleep and eating patterns have likely suffered (and may continue to be irregular) some people may overeat and oversleep, while others experience a loss of sleep and loss of appetite.
- **Strained interpersonal relationships.** Increased conflict, such as more frequent disagreements with coaches and teammates can occur. Athletes might also become withdrawn, isolated or disengaged from your usual social activities.
- **Stress-related physical symptoms.** Headaches, nausea and chest pain may occur and could require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions could be affected by the newfound stress and uncertainty.

There are certain emotional and psychological considerations to take into account when “returning to play” after the pandemic restrictions are lifted or relaxed.

Conditions that can trigger individuals at this time include: ambiguity (information being open to different interpretations), novelty (some we don’t have experience with or have never encountered before), unpredictability (being unclear about the future or having to deal with sudden changes).

- For the first few practices at least, coaches should consider (1) laying out the practice plan clearly and in multiple manners (ex: visual and auditory) at the start of each practice. That way athletes know what is coming and can ask questions before an activity or drill is introduced.
- Coaches should try to minimize the amount of new skills and drills they introduce in a practice. Or whenever possible explain how this new drill is similar to drills the team has done in the past.
- If possible, coaches should only present information which they are certain about. For instance, as much as we usually set end of season goals, in this time we might instead just focus on daily practice goals – because we do not know if the season will end abruptly again or if restrictions will return suddenly.
- If this is something you can control, try to structure the practice in the same, predictable fashion for the first few weeks. Ex: Practice order will always be – greeting/practice overview, warm-up, new concept, skills and drills, endurance training, cool-down, debrief/wrap up. If the athletes can anticipate what is coming it will minimize worry.

- When planning your practice activities try to strike a balance between the “wellness trifecta” (pleasure, achievement, and connection). A great way to end things on a positive note would be to set aside a few minutes at the end of practice for a quick debrief and ask athletes to think of something that was fun, an instance where they accomplished something or improved, and an example of teamwork or great communication.



- Since connection is one of the biggest things that athletes have been missing in this time of physical and social distancing, it is very important for coaches to include more cooperative, collective, or communal activities. Anything that allows athletes a chance to connect with others in person will be beneficial for athletes. Keeping in mind that some athletes/families might be anxious about physical contact, make sure there are alternatives for drills or activities that involve being in close proximity or touching / being touched by others.
- Be prepared for regression – many individuals revert back to a time where they felt more comfortable and safer. This might manifest as a regression in their behaviour (acting younger than their physiological age), their cognitive capacity (only being able to focus on one concept at a time, reflecting on a more superficial level, having difficulty taking feedback on board), their emotional processing (reacting impulsively, being withdrawn or emotionally distant), or even their ability to face challenges – ex: what was once considered a realistic, but challenging goal might now seem overwhelming.
- Athletes will be experiencing a lot of emotions and sensations that they might not be able to make sense of. Whenever possible give them an outlet to identify their emotions without judgment (i.e., no evaluation or labelling of this is a “good” or “bad” emotion). Follow the “if you can name it, you can tame it” practice and perhaps highlight / introduce some emotions to increase athlete awareness about their feelings. Key emotions that they might be feeling but might not have a name for: grief, apprehension, uneasiness, weariness, frustration, elation, contentment, apathy, lethargy, etc.
- Be ready to navigate what the “new normal” will look like. Many individuals think that they will be returning to things exactly as they left them – same skill level, same schedule, same rules and regulations, etc. In reality, we know that many things will be different. Having a conversation with your athletes about how “different” isn’t a bad thing and what “different” looks like should help ease the return to sport.

- Reflect on your own expectations – for physical, psychological, and emotional readiness to return to sport. Self-awareness will be important and will help shape your coaching behaviour and the training environment. Once you are aware of your expectations it's important to set out what they are with your team (of coaches, athletes, even parents). Having a discussion with the athletes about their own expectations would also likely be beneficial when returning to sport.
- Bringing in a quick stress-release or mindfulness exercise every practice can also help with emotion control and reduction of psychological distress.
 - Focus on breathing for 60 seconds.
 - “Triangle” breathing (similar to box breathing, but instead of tracing a box, athletes trace a triangle. Each side of the triangle should take 4 counts to trace. Side 1 = inhale, side 2 = hold, side 3 = exhale)
 - Doing a quick bout of progressive muscle relaxation (1 or 2 muscle groups), tense the muscle group for 10 sec., relax and pair with a calming sensation for 10 sec.
 - Pick a cool yoga pose and challenge everyone to hold it silently for 30 seconds – make this extra challenging and fun by designating someone to try and distract the group or make others laugh.

- Final points coaches should keep in mind:
 - Be patient and understanding. Make sure you are validating the experiences and emotions of your athletes.
 - Don't pressure the athletes to talk or share their experiences but be available if they want to / allow for extra time during practice for questions and conversations.
 - Be specific about how you can help – instead of letting them know “you're there if they need anything” or asking them if they need anything – offer explicit examples of things you can do to help. Most of the time athletes will not know what they need, and so they are unlikely to take you up on your offer if it stated broadly.
 - Don't take the athletes' behaviour personally – we respond to stressful events differently and for some this might include lashing out, withdrawing, or unpredictable mood changes. Remember that this is a result and a response to the situation and not a reflection of you or your coaching.
 - Make sure you are taking care of yourself and considering your needs as well.
 - Don't be afraid to ask for additional support or to reach out and seek additional resources that could help.