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177 How to Use Sports to Help Athletes During the Pandemic

Overwhelming, prolonged stress from the pandemic can affect how young people respond to what would normally be considered manageable stress in their lives.

How the pandemic may affect athletes as they return to play

When athletes return to play, they may do so with less resiliency than before the pandemic. They simply will not be able to tolerate as much stress as they could previously.

Athletes may display hypervigilance (extreme sensitivity to a perceived physical or emotional threat). This may look like:

- Fear of failure
- Lack of focus
- Emotional volatility (having a short fuse)
- Withdrawal (shutting down)

For coaches the priority must be the person before the performance, outcome, or goal to support our players during this time of unprecedented stress and uncertainty. If we aren't approaching our athletes in this way, it will be difficult to maximize their performance.

Putting people first is not a direct contrast to winning - it's a competitive advantage.

How sports help kids learn to manage stress

- 1) Sports have a positive effect on children during stressful times because physical activity helps the body regulate our stress response systems.
- 2) Trust and relationships are perhaps the most significant factor in mitigating the effects of trauma. Sports provides an atmosphere of belong, acceptance, and connection that many lack during the pandemic. The presence of trusting adults will help kids feel safe which helps them mitigate the effects of stress in their lives.

Relational health is more important for a child's outcomes than the experience of adversity.



- 3) Sports provide manageable patterns of stress which allows kids to build resiliency.
 - a) When stress is prolonged, chaotic, or out of our control it creates vulnerability
 - b) When stress is controlled, moderate, and predictable it creates resilience

The little things matter in our relationships with players

As much as we want to connect, coaches give themselves some grace and remember that the smallest gestures, text messages, and emails add up over time.

How we show up to every interaction matters most. Can we make our athletes feel seen by asking good questions and actively listening so that they know they are cared for.

Should we just cancel sports to remove the stress of not knowing if / when a season will take place?

Trauma is the wrenching away of control when you need it the most.

The lack of control and predictability is one of the greatest stressors of the pandemic.

It's actually easier for a player to cope with the cancellation of a season than the uncertainty of not knowing if a sport will start / stop / continue.

The lessons that come from coaching through a pandemic

Certainly there will be times in life when we will all face situations that are outside of our control, and this experience can help build resiliency for those moments down the road.

We can learn how to focus on the things we can control. Many coaches are finding success focusing their athletes on fitness & strength training.

We can focus on our progress - how have we developed during this time? What have we improved / changed in our habits that will make us more successful when we return? What competitive advantage have we gained in our commitment, perseverance, relationships, fitness, etc.?

Emphasize gratitude. The pandemic can help players and coaches gain perspective and to not take the sport or team for granted in the future.



178 Creating the Right Environment for Our Athletes to Thrive with Megan Bartlett

To become resilient , children need environments where they feel safe and comfortable , and know what to expect so that their sensitized , over-reactive stress systems can gradually become calmer , and more “ smoothly ” regulated.

- Dr. Bruce Perry, *The Boy Who Raised as a Dog*

Resiliency is not a product of how much or how little adversity we face, but develops as a result of the environment and the relationships we experience in the midst of that stress.

Is the environment we create as coaches helping or hurting our athletes and their ability to develop resilience?

One of the biggest obstacles to creating a safe environment is when coaches respond to stress in unpredictable ways. The athlete responds by thinking, “I can’t trust this person.”

A dysregulated adult can’t regulate a dysregulated child.

Because of the brain’s tendency to mirror the attitudes and behaviors of those around us, athletes are more likely to emulate the stress response of adults positively or negatively.

Is it appropriate for coaches to yell at players?

What we don’t see on TV are the moments when coaches build a strong relationship that can withstand emotional outbursts. Players who have developed emotional resilience may be able to tolerate yelling better than others.

We don’t hear the stories of the players who were broken by a coach’s angry tirades, or who quit the sport because the coach’s behavior extinguished their love of the game.

Coaches need to reflect on their athletic past and consider some of their peers who may not have been negatively affected by a coach yelling.

As players return from the pandemic with less resiliency, coaches need to be mindful of how their athletes may not be able to handle “hard coaching” as they could before.

Athletes need coaches to model how to handle stress and uncertainty.



Players need to understand the What - How - Why of their decisions. Narrating the decision-making process can help players see how coaches think. It's not just our behavior that's impactful, but explaining the thought process behind the decision can be extremely effective.

This can be significant when talking about our failures, or recognizing when we responded poorly to stress, challenge, etc.