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# Athletes and Their Needs During the Isolation Period at the Time of the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted every athlete's daily routine. Considering the circumstances, their career, psychological and emotional well-being, as well as their health status will be greatly affected considering the abrupt end of the high-intensity training usually conducted. Through a carefully structured interview with the athletes, guidelines for remaining motivated and maintaining one's own psychological and emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and similar crises will be showcased.

**Keywords:** Athletes, Sport, Motivation, COVID-19, Psychological wellbeing, Maslow's hierarchy.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mid-March, the world has faced a new reality. Most countries are enforcing some sort of isolation, self-isolation, or quarantine following WHO's pandemic announcement of COVID-19 [1-3]. The impact of the sudden change in daily routine and lifestyle on society, in general, has yet to be determined. For now, researches give out recommendations on how to cope with the crisis, but its consequences are yet to be determined.

As with every other area of life, the sport has also been affected by this pandemic. We have witnessed numerous big and small sporting events being postponed and all training and preparations being canceled. Simply put, a sport has stopped. Better yet, it changed to home-based attempts of maintaining the physique. Athletes that are used to a quick-paced lifestyle carefully structured around training sessions, competitions, and traveling have had to adjust to a state of winding down.

With sports training, athletes develop and maintain the necessary level of anthropological characteristics needed for participation, regardless of the level of competition. As such, the training is planned, programmed, and monitored process, coordinated by the person in charge-the sports coach. In the newfound circumstances, the athletes are responsible for maintaining their health, level of physical fitness and mental health to ensure that the impact of the limited movement is minimal. What others did for them before, athletes have to do now on their own. Trying to fulfill the expectations, athletes are met with unusual circumstances that can develop in various directions. Which consequences can be expected to their psychological, emotional, and overall health level considering the sudden halt of the highly intensive training conducted before the COVID-19 outbreak?

At the start of the pandemic, due to newfound and unclear information, the athletes and their coaches were unsure whether the training can continue and at which rate. With increased information about the pandemic and stricter movement restrictions being put into force, athletes were exposed to high levels of stress. This is not only due to their

daily routine being affected but also to their worries about the future of their careers. This consequently brings more psychological, sociological, economic, and other stressors with it. Many athletes are dealing with feelings that their career is falling apart or is at the very least hindered, especially if they have been preparing for an important upcoming competition. The pandemic has broken down all existing concepts of their line of work so athletes are facing a big challenge on how to overcome this crisis, restore their daily routine and keep their physical and mental pace in check.

Without constructive solutions and support to the athletes, due to the unexpected amounts of free time and lowered physical activity, they are exposed to a heightened amount of psychological stress and may tend to develop certain mental health issues. Some researches showcase that for athletes that are solely focused on their sports careers, such sudden end or halt to their career can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression [4]. Moreover, possible unhealthy eating habits as a consequence of an interrupted daily routine can increase the risk of obesity which is linked to cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, lung diseases, etc. In other words, they are at risk of developing diseases that are proven to increase the severity of the COVID-19 symptoms [5].

On a positive side, some athletes may use this time to recover from an injury or use it to improve parts of their skills. However, the current situation has given everyone a chance to reset, examine their current lifestyle, life, and sports goals, as well as to decide how to proceed with their career in the future.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers are mostly focused on the economic and social aspects of the big sporting events being postponed or canceled [6-8]. Others are focused on giving recommendations on how to maintain the physical fitness level in the newfound conditions [4,9,10]. However, only a few types of research focus on athletes' emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It is important to note that many athletes have motivational issues during this time of uncertainty. With the unknown schedule and inability to train, as usual, the athletes are wondering how to make the best out of this situation. Motivation is a general term that refers to drive, demands, needs, wishes, and other sentiments [11]. It refers to a state or a process within an individual that moves them, sustains, and directs their behaviour to a certain goal. The beginnings of motivational theories are linked to Abraham Maslow and his famous hierarchy of human needs [12]. Based on Maslow's theory, researchers have developed several approaches to motivation. This paper will examine the athletes' needs according to Maslow's theory and will offer guidelines for athletes at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic or similar crises.

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE ATHLETES' NEEDS

It is assumed that all athletes have their physiological needs met (primary biological needs). Still, due to the many measures set in place to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus (e.g. limited opening hours, some groceries being unavailable), most people have a sense of discomfort. This has affected athletes as well. In such circumstances, heightened levels of stress experienced by certain athletes can lead to impaired sleep. These include shortened sleep, fragmentation, and possibly a reduction in sleep stages 3 and 4, i.e. the decrease of the REM sleep phase [13].

Regarding safety needs, the uncertainty about one's lifestyle in the near or far future combined with restricted movement and social contact can lead to several psychological issues and emotional disturbances. Moreover, many athletes have had their contracts ended due to the pandemic. Many of them are currently earning less than before (if anything), which can also lead to financial insecurity.

The need for belonging has also been affected in a certain way. During social isolation, athletes are separated from their teammates and their teams, and the looming threat of the infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus only adds to the already existing sense of isolation.

Furthermore, many athletes base and develop a sense of self-esteem on their own sports achievements and those of their teams [14]. At a time when all major and minor sporting events have been canceled, athletes are unable to achieve such success. At the moment, most athletes are working „in the background”, away from the public eye, separated from their teams and without any clear competition schedules. If athletes' self-esteem and confidence depend on their athletic achievements, the current situation can lead to certain issues.

Finally, the abrupt ending of all sporting events along with the inability to train directly affects the self-actualization need of athletes. Athletes have chosen sports as a medium through which they are trying to achieve their full potential and develop their skills. With that being said, it is clear that the need for self-actualization is currently mostly unsatisfied.

## HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED THE ATHLETES AND THEIR NEEDS BEING MET? AN EXAMPLE

To examine how athletes are doing in the current situation, 8 male and female athletes of various competition levels (from Olympic medallists to athletes with international careers) have completed the questionnaire. Among the 8 of them, 3 were women (karate, basketball, and triathlon) and 5 were men (football, basketball, rowing, triathlon, and skiing). The questionnaire consisted of 3 parts.

In the first part, they answered the following questions: “Where were you when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared?”, “How has the pandemic affected your season and competition calendar?”, “Are you training currently (e.g. with a trainer, alone or following a certain program)?”, “How did you feel at the start of the pandemic and how do you feel now?” and “How has your life changed due to the pandemic (e.g. I have no income, I lost my residence, I feel like my career is falling apart.)?”

In the second part, they filled out a table of a training microcycle to showcase the organization of their training in the current situation and the third part, they have given an example of a single training session, starting with the warm-up, following the main activity, all the way to the cooldown. Along with the content of each training session, athletes have provided the volume of their training (intensity and extensity) as well as the pauses, in line with the defined goals of the defined training.

When the quarantine was first introduced, some athletes were at their place of residency, while others were in their sports collectives abroad (Italy and Switzerland). The national and international committees' decisions to cancel all competitions until further notice has affected all of them.

Only one out of all the participants (triathlon) continued to train with their coach. Three of them are following a self-made training program while the other four are training according to the program made by their strength and conditioning coaches or a sports coach.

It is interesting to note that female participants have declared feeling more insecure about the whole situation in comparison to their male counterparts. Feelings of confusion, discomfort, uncertainty, and stress have been shown amongst them. This is especially true for one athlete (karate) that was in the middle of an Olympic year. Despite everything, all participants have quickly reorganized, set up new goals, and continued with their work. It appears that the female karate player has experienced the biggest loss as she stated she feels a significant loss of physical fitness due to the inability to organize more sport-specific training [15,16].

It is important to note that there are a complete understanding and awareness of the situation that has affected the whole (sporting) world amongst the participants. Some of them have completely lost their income and others have had a decrease in the income but they all think it is justified due to the circumstances.

The majority of the participants are optimistic about future events and they are planning on how to improve their skills. They are enthusiastic and confident in their abilities. Still, they are aware that things might not return to the state they were in before the pandemic and that the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has temporarily paralyzed the whole world.

### GUIDELINES ON HOW TO PROCEED DURING THE PANDEMIC

Considering the aforementioned, in expectation of a possible second wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the fall or a similar pandemic in the future, we have provided some guidelines for athletes to help them get through this crisis as smoothly as possible and keep their motivation high (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Guidelines for the athletes' motivation

<b>Physiological needs</b>
With the assumption that all the athlete's physiological needs are met, impaired sleep caused by stress is possible. Therefore, the guidelines are directed in improving or developing more effective coping strategies and practicing regular mindfulness and/or relaxation techniques.
<b>Safety needs</b>
The safety needs may be the most affected due to the sudden loss of a clear structure in their daily lives. That forces the athletes to design a new routine as quickly as possible. It is important to organize one's day and go to sleep and wake up at approximately the same time each day as usual. It

is also important for the athletes to fill out their day with activities related to the training, but also others, such as hobbies, learning something new, etc. The structure that was imposed before, can now be rearranged to fit their needs better.

#### Love and belonging needs

The need for belonging has severely been affected by the self-isolation measures set in place and is therefore highly recommended that the athletes keep close contact with their teammates, coaches, and all the other team members they were interacting with daily.

#### Esteem needs

The high possibility of esteem needs not being met during the pandemic allows the athletes to re-examine the source of their self-esteem. It is recommended that their athletic identity isn't the sole root of self-esteem. It is important to find sources of self-esteem in other areas of their life. This change in perception of one's self will surely benefit the athlete once they finish their sporting career as well.

#### Self-actualization

The need for self-actualization is currently threatened, but it is important to note that this is only a temporary state. It is important to utilize the free time they have been given at the moment to ensure that the return to sports venues is as easy and successful as possible. Also, this time of pandemic can be used to start working on self-development in some other areas. This too will be beneficial once the sporting career comes to an end.

## CONCLUSION

The athletes reported higher levels of psychological and emotional stress in the time of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Furthermore, some of their needs are not being met at the time. However, after they overcame the initial shock, most of the athletes were able to form new structures in their lives, more or less successfully. Along with the recommendations about the maintaining of one's physique and overcoming the psychological and emotional stress, it is necessary to reflect on the dietary habits of athletes that are highly affected by the current life situation. Future papers and researches should include this important segment of one's life and sporting career into consideration.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All the authors certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial issues.

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