

Set of Exercises to help athletes avoid emotional stress during self-isolation

Svetlana Shirochenkova: "To cope with your emotional state, you need to learn to identify your emotional issues in advance"

Currently there are active discussions about how the forced quarantine affects the sporting fitness of athletes and how the absence of full training can affect their further performance.

The general consensus among physicians, including specialists from the FMBA of Russia, is that risking athletes' health and their careers for the sake of organizing collective training camps now, during the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, is a bad idea. The highly precarious situation owing to the coronavirus pandemic is definitely not worth it.

However, remaining in self-isolation, according to experts, also affects the psychological state of athletes, and this topic needs to be addressed.

We discussed this issue with Svetlana Shirochenkova, Head of the department of medical and psychological support for the national teams at the Center for Sports Medicine of the FMBA of Russia.

"Today, athletes are faced with the need to adapt to a new way and rhythm of life, and on top of it all, there is great uncertainty, lack of information and no clear time frames. This has caused a lot of stress," said Svetlana Shirochenkova. "But there are effective and simple methods of dealing with stress when we take specific actions ourselves."

However, you can take control of your emotional state by consciously controlling your muscle tone, breathing, perceptions, sensations, attention, as well as your images and ideas.

But in order to cope with your emotional state, first of all, you need to learn to identify your emotional issues in advance.

Emotions always manifest in the body in the form of muscle clamps. To reduce the intensity of your emotional experience, you need to relax a specific muscle group. The same is true for voluntary breathing techniques. They help you relax or vice versa they activate the body.

Combined with a positive attitude, breathing exercises help develop a calm and positive outlook on life in these unprecedented times and allow to adapt to the situation altogether.

Exercise "Controlling facial muscle tone."

The stronger the emotional stress, the stronger the response of mimic muscles. During severe emotional experiences and negative conditions, athletes should concentrate on asking: "What is happening to my face?", "Are my teeth clenched?", "Is my forehead tense?" and so on. The crucial thing is to relieve muscle tension by relaxing the facial muscles, including the muscles of the forehead, eyes, cheeks, jaw, neck and hindhead.

Relaxation training takes place on the basis of verbal self-orders, when you intentionally direct attention to certain muscle groups.

You should affirm:

- I am focusing on my face.
- My face is calm.
- The muscles of my forehead are relaxed.
- The muscles of my eyes are relaxed.
- My cheeks are relaxed, and my teeth are unclenched.
- The muscles of my neck are relaxed.

The best effect will be achieved if you use these techniques in real-life situations.

Exercise "Forehead-hindhead correction procedure"

When feelings of anxiety and agitation set in, the so-called forehead-hindhead correction procedure is useful. It is necessary to put one palm on the forehead, the other on the back of the head and concentrate, making several deep, even breaths. Next, start counting your inhalations and exhalations: "one" when inhaling, "two" when exhaling, "three" when breathing in again, "four" when breathing out again, and so on. You should count till ten and then start from one again because with large numbers it is difficult to track the respiratory cycles. In this case, it is better to take deep, slow and moderate breaths through the mouth.

For a change, you can use another version of the count: "Gently unclench your teeth and, after counting 1-2-3-4, take a slow, deep breath (as the stomach expands and the ribcage is motionless). Then, on the next four counts, you should hold your breath. Afterwards, a smooth exhalation should follow while counting 1-2-3-4-5-6. Again, make a quick delay before the subsequent breath as you start counting 1-2-3-4 once again. This is considered as one breathing cycle."

Then calmly voice your problem. If you can't, just think about it. In your mind imagine possible positive courses of events and your actions in these hypothetical conditions. Sit down for a few minutes. If you yawn, it means that the body is already releasing stress.

The Lemon Exercise

Assume a comfortable sitting position: let your hands rest freely in your lap (palms up), your shoulders and head should be in a downward position; your eyes should be closed. Imagine that you have a lemon in your right hand. In your mind, begin to squeeze it until you feel that you have squeezed out all the juice (tension). Relax. Memorize your feelings in that particular moment. Next visualize that the lemon is in your left hand. Repeat the exercise. Relax again and memorize your sensations. Then do the exercise imagining that the lemon is in both hands. After completing the exercise, enjoy your newly acquired state of relaxation.

The Lampshade Exercise

Assume a comfortable sitting position, relax and close your eyes. "Imagine that inside you, in your chest, you have a bright lamp, covered with a lampshade. When the light shines downwards, you are warm, calm and comfortable. But sometimes, when we start to get nervous, the lampshade turns upside down... A bright light hits our eyes, blinds us, and it becomes hot and uncomfortable.

Now imagine a situation that worries you. You have the power to fix it and put the lampshade in order. Imagine how the lampshade slowly and smoothly turns back into its normal position. The blinding light fades away gradually. And once again you become warm, cozy and comfortable.

The Elevator Exercise

Take three short breaths (the elevator cabin goes up the 1st, 2nd and 3rd floors), hold your breath on the 3rd floor, reckon to three and then go down, making a slow exhalation through your mouth. Here it is important to fully exhale. Breathe normally for some time and then repeat this exercise once again. Additionally, you can visualize the elevator cabin moving.

Repeat this exercise 3-4 times.

Square Breathing Technique

Stand up or assume a comfortable sitting position. It is advisable to support yourself. It is advisable to breathe with your stomach.

Breathe in the following pattern, in your mind imagine the edges of a square:

On the count of one, two, three, four, we inhale.

On the count of one, two, three, four, we pause.

On the count of one, two, three, four, we exhale.

On the count of one, two, three, four, we pause.

Repeat again.

We do this breathing exercise for several minutes.

However, do not overdo it and do not allow oxygen oversaturation.

Do this exercise when you have an opportunity to relax.

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The cancellation of sports competitions and the postponement of the 2020 Olympic Games have had an adverse effect on many athletes, combined with a feeling of losing control in life. Now it is very important to take care of your mental health and psychological well-being. This can also be achieved by doing practical exercises.

Breathing Meditation Exercise

Find a comfortable, quiet place where no one can disturb you for 5-10 minutes. Close your eyes and observe your breath. You don't have to do anything else. No need to breathe deeply or change the breathing rhythm. Just observe. The purpose of this meditation is to achieve a mental state where the flow of thoughts decreases. This should be achieved since you focus all your mental energy on observing the breathing process. At first it may seem that nothing is happening; this is because most athletes are not used to observing their bodies or their emotional states. But gradually the sensations will become more distinct.

How to get motivated when there is no full-time training?

The lack of habitual emotional fatigue and exhaustion after training can alter the internal motivation for future sports achievements.

I will not be stating anything new when it comes to recommendations for athletes in conditions of self-isolation. However, there are several simple things that can be done to minimize or completely eliminate psychological discomfort.

You need to structure your day. Pay special attention to your work, rest and sleep schedules as this is crucial. You need to plan out your actions for the near future, observe the training regimen according to individual training plans and be in constant contact with your coach.

The right way forward is to engage in self-development. For example, keep a diary of self-improvement and go in for activities that have high personal interest. Mental techniques that improve your psychological well-being should be added to physical training as well.

I would also recommend strengthening social interaction, discovering new opportunities for communication, as well as receiving emotional support from family and friends.

Positive Thinking Exercises

Positive thinking is the key to success in the present and the future paving the way for a new standard of living and personal growth.

Say "No" to your negative thoughts

It is a good idea to monitor your thoughts and the words that you speak. You should avoid negative attitudes such as: "I'm not sure...", "I don't think I can...", "I'm unlikely to succeed...", "I doubt it..." and so on.

Positive Five exercise

The essence of the matter is very simple. We will re-analyze all the negative thoughts that occupy your mind. In order to complete this exercise, you need to think about and write the five most pressing problems that are currently bothering you. Then, opposite each problem, write five positive aspects of this situation.

Releasing the negativity of the Past

Where is all the negativity anyway? In the past. It is neither in the present nor in the future. It is in the past. Memories of a negative past can take up a lot of your time and mental energy. If you often think about the negative, then your vital energy will be wasted. We spend too much time in the past. We dig up everything and we re-analyze various situations. "If only..." is a common thought pattern. Meanwhile, the negative state is only accumulating. It is better to direct all our energy into the present moment and our plans for the future. To avoid living in the past, we must learn to concentrate on and receive joy from the present moment.

Negative thoughts

Note that when having a conversation with negative thinking people, they always have negations in their speech. This is a denial of the positive outcome of a given situation: "I can't", "I don't want to" or "I won't do it". The key is change and say: "I can", "I want to", do you see the difference?! It doesn't matter where I am in life right now, or what happened in the past, or what resources I have or don't have. What is most important is that I'm creating my future experiences by putting out positive thoughts into the Universe.

How to cope with your "unfulfilled dreams"?

We know that after the announcement that the Olympic Games would be postponed to 2021 numerous athletes felt extremely disappointed. They are the so-called "unfulfilled dream" state characterized by frustration and dissatisfaction.

Today, athletes are in a situation where the physical activities they are accustomed to have considerably decreased, as a result, they now have a lot of free time. But not everyone can reorganize so quickly and get used to working at home – there is no clear understanding of what needs to be done and what to prepare for.

In this case, we suggest resorting to goal setting. Tune into your ambitions, look forward to a bright future, set goals and believe that they can be achieved. Usually it is fear, negative thinking patterns and our limiting beliefs that hold us back. You can and should address these issues: limitations can turn into opportunities, concentrate on your achievements and successes, shift your focus on results,

There are also techniques that will help athletes revise their goals and change behavior based on the current situation so as to quickly adapt to the novel conditions. Use this ample free time as a period during which you can conceive new strategies for being fully prepared for upcoming competitions.

Creating a goal map

Having a goal is a prerequisite for success. Goals should come from a positive space without any negative connotations. Goals need to be clearly stated.

Imagine your future in the form of a geographical map. Designate your major goals as final destinations on the map where you would like to be. On the way to these final destinations designate longterm, intermediate and imminent goals. Give a name to these secondary goals that you seek in your personal and professional life. Get creative and use the power of your

imagination. Also draw the streets and roads that you will use as avenues to attain your major goals.

Step One: Take a piece of paper and outline an imaginary country.

Step Two: Draw the landscape of the country. Use pencils or felt pens.

Step Three: Think about what motivates and inspires you. Outline the most important, major goal for yourself; all your efforts will be directed at attaining this goal. Give a name to this objective, for example, the name of a city or town. Also outline your longterm, intermediate and imminent goals. So now you have a final destination and a place from where to begin your journey.

Step Four: Lay out your route with dotted lines or direction arrows, mark the obstacles that arise on the way to achieving this goal (for example, mountains, lakes, impassable swamps) and difficulties (for example, fortresses or enemy patrols), and also highlight possible trophies or bonus points that could be received during your journey.

Step Five: divide your map into 9 equal parts - 3 horizontal parts and 3 vertical parts. Each of these squares (just like in a puzzle) gives you an idea of the stages, time and effort that you will need in order to achieve your major goal.

And now carefully look at your itinerary and you will see the general map of your goals. You were able to specify goals at different levels, as well as connect everyday goals with major ones.

Such a graphic image will allow you, first and foremost, to perceive your goals so that you can make concerted efforts and maximize all your energy to attain them. The metaphorical representation of goals in the form of final destinations on the map, as well as avenues to achieving them in the form of streets and roads, will allow athletes to have a clear mental picture of their future.

After creating such a map, an athlete will be able to correlate goals with each other and understand how they blend in together, identify obstacles and clearly see what new opportunities have appeared along the way.