



USOPC

Sport Psychology

Coping with Competition Cancellations or Postponements in the Age of Coronavirus

The Coronavirus has turned the Olympic and Paralympic world upside down. Countless athletes made plans to compete in qualifiers and the Games only to be told that everything is indefinitely on hold. Canceled events such as World Championships or Last Chance Qualifiers can be a devastating loss to athletes who have trained years to compete or still need to qualify for the Olympics and Paralympics. Some may be wondering if their Olympic and Paralympic dreams are over. Athletes may experience pain similar to a death or an intense life loss. While there is no one perfect way to respond or to support someone facing a loss, here are some good guidelines.

#1 Grief belongs to the griever.

Many of the suggestions, advice, and “help” given to people facing losses suggest that they should be doing it differently, or feeling differently than they do. Grief is a very personal experience, and belongs entirely to the person experiencing it. Follow his or her lead.

#2 Stay present and state the truth.

It’s tempting to make statements about the past or the future when the athlete’s present life holds so much pain. You cannot know what the future will be, and it may or may not be “better later.” That the athlete’s life was good in the past is not a fair trade for the pain of now. Stay present with the athlete, even when the present is full of pain. It’s also tempting to make generalized statements about the situation in an attempt to soothe the athlete. You cannot know that the athlete will “bounce back” or “get past it.” These future-based, generalized platitudes aren’t helpful. Stick with the truth: This hurts. There are countless uncertainties. I’m here with you to listen.

#3 Do not try to fix the unfixable.

The athlete’s loss cannot be fixed, repaired or solved. The pain itself cannot be made better. Please see #2. It is an unfathomable relief to have a friend who does not try to take the pain away.

#4 Be willing to witness unbearable pain.

To do #4 while also practicing #3 is very, very difficult. Become comfortable with the uncomfortable, and recognize it will be challenging for you.

#5 This is not about you.

Being with someone in pain is not easy. You will have your own reactions — stresses, questions, fear, or guilt. Your feelings may be hurt. You may feel ignored and unappreciated. This is a one-sided relationship so don’t take it personally. Find your own people to lean on so that you feel supported in supporting the athletes. When in doubt, refer to #1.

#6 Anticipate, don't ask.

Do not say “Call or text me if you need anything,” because the athlete likely will not. Not because they don’t have the need, but because taking that initiative is beyond their energy levels, especially if they don’t know you well. Instead, make concrete offers: “I will stop by to say “hi” tomorrow morning” or “I am at my desk/this location each morning from 7-noon.” Be reliable.

#7 Do the small things.

The actual, heavy, real work of grieving is not something you can do (see #1), but you can lessen the burden of some life requirements for the athlete. Perhaps they need to eat but don’t feel like going to the grocery store or dining hall and facing everyone. Offer to bring them a meal. Support the athlete in small, ordinary ways.

#8 Show you care.

Above all, show you care. Show up. Say something. Do something. Realize it may not always be perfect but effort counts. Be willing to sit with the grief without flinching or turning away. Be willing to not have any answers. Listen. Be there. Be present. Be a friend.

Contact the USOPC Sport Psychology Team for additional assistance and resources:

Karen Cogan, karen.cogan@usoc.org
Sean McCann, sean.mccann@usoc.org
Alex Cohen, alexander.cohen@usoc.org
Peter Haberl, peter.haberl@usoc.org
Lindsay Shaw, lindsay.shaw@usoc.org
Sara Mitchell, sara.mitchell@usoc.org
Caroline Rodriguez, caroline.rodriguez@usoc.org

Adapted from Megan Devine’s “Everything is Not Okay: an audio program for grief.”