

## Emotional Triggers Regarding Covid-19 Postponement Tokyo Olympic & Paralympic Games 2020

Triggers are situations or thoughts that move a person from being emotionally regulated to being dysregulated or emotionally reactive. For example, waking up on the morning to attend training on the day you were scheduled to compete at the Olympic Games could result in physiological sensations of heaviness, tightness or lethargy, and emotions of sadness, regret, de-motivation and loss. Recognizing and accepting common triggers, as well as personal triggers, are an important way to neutralize their impact. The ability to self-regulate in the face of triggers allows for the building of resilience and leads to optimal mental performance and functioning, as well as increased mental wellbeing.

Triggers in the present moment are related to and fused with incidents or thoughts from the past, or potential hopes, dreams, and imaginings about the future. A negative life event or sport performance can become laid down in memory, within both the brain and the body, and can resurface when the situation or thinking acts as a reminder of such. Likewise, we can become triggered in the present moment if the current situation reminds us of our failings, deficits, losses, vulnerabilities, insecurities, weaknesses, lack of control or grief. This is particularly evidenced when we have perfectionistic or high achieving tendencies.

The brain and body can become triggered by words, actions, smells, thoughts, images, sounds, times of the year/month/day and specific anniversary dates. Triggers that remain outside of conscious awareness or remain ignored are more likely to result in greater dysregulation and emotional reactivity and run a greater risk of interfering with mental performance and mental health now and in the future. For example, the sound of our National Anthem, raising of our Canadian flag, footage of the Olympic/Paralympic torch being lit, or mental rehearsal of walking into the Opening Ceremonies all may trigger emotional or physiological reactions of loss or regret. When we notice, accept and normalize these responses, without judgement, should they occur, we are provided the opportunity to practice letting go of what is emotionally stressful, in order to reset quickly and be able to act, react, and think more clearly. If we fail to do this, we run the risk of becoming quickly overwhelmed or hesitant or impulsive when triggered in the future, resulting in cognitive confusion, increased anxiety or shutting down, which can all impact future performance and health outcomes.

Current potential triggers from Covid-19 postponement of the Tokyo Olympic & Paralympic Games:

- Day of Opening Ceremonies – originally scheduled for July 24<sup>th</sup> or August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020 respectively
- Olympic & Paralympic sport specific competition schedule – competition date(s)
- Replaying of past Olympic/Paralympic moments on television or social media feeds
- Other reminders of what you “would’ve, should’ve, could’ve” been doing July 24 – August 8, 2020 or August 25 – September 6, 2020

Typical emotional and physiological reactions resulting from being triggered:

- Frustration, Anger, Annoyance and/or Impatience
- Sadness, Grief, Loss, De-Motivation and/or Doubt
- Withdrawal, Anxiety, Depression and/or Hesitation
- Increased stress response – heart rate, blood pressure, respiration rate, muscle tension

Athletes, coaches and staff who anticipated competing and attending Tokyo Olympics & Paralympics 2020 could naturally be triggered by the loss, disappointment, potential grief and lack of control surrounding the postponement and may experience some of the above reactions, especially during the time-frame the Olympics & Paralympics would have taken place in 2020.

These steps can be taken to manage the impact of these potential triggers:

- **Recognize** – take time to identify the current triggers given the circumstances. Make a mental or written list of events that potentially could be triggers for you.
- **Predict** – know that these triggers are normal and expect them to show up. When elements of surprise are removed when triggers show up, they have less power over you.
- **Name** – notice and state your triggers and typical reactions as they occur. For example, when someone says or does something to annoy you – think, “Oh, I am being triggered right now as I notice my chest is tightening, my jaw is set and I feel angry”. This cognitive awareness will take the emotional impact out of that triggering exchange.
- **Accept** – acknowledge your triggers and do not struggle or fight with them. Remind yourself that these reactions are normal in these abnormal circumstances and are natural and human. Do not add extra emotional responses on top by being frustrated or discouraged by your primary emotional reactions.
- **Resource** – use your de-escalation and self-regulation strategies and practices. Breathing techniques, mindfulness practice, encouraging/compassionate self-talk, grounding techniques all help to de-escalate and reset quickly when being triggered.
- **Support** – seek out those who provide you with the best possible support, practice self-care, and check in rather than check out.

Managing triggers head-on provides an opportunity to increase coping, develop resilience, practice self-regulation and ultimately increase mental performance and mental health. These emotional reactions can be reframed as a reminder of the passion and commitment you have towards your sport. This “Bring It On” mentality is key to neutralizing the overall impact of emotional triggers and sets you up to more effectively manage the postponement of the Tokyo Olympic & Paralympic Games 2020, and be ready to perform when the time comes.

Susan Cockle M.A. R. Psych. – COVID-19 Mental Health & Mental Performance Taskforce, Pandemic Response Group