

The Importance of Resilience during COVID-19

Introduction to an approach to help professional athletes endure the stressors of coronavirus and develop psychological resilience – Mental Fortitude Training

Keywords: resilience, professional athletes, coronavirus

Coronavirus has changed our lives. We have all been experiencing unexpected difficulties and challenges, however, some of us have been more affected by the pandemic. Professional athletes can certainly feel the impacts of the virus due to the sudden changes to their world. Major events such as the Olympic Games, and competitions have been cancelled or postponed, and even ongoing sport seasons are being disrupted, which have increased professional athletes' concerns about the present and future (Giallonardo et al., 2020; Paredes et al., 2020; Schrinke et al., 2020). They also come across challenges such as self-isolation, and unusual and restricted training conditions that can affect their sport performance and psychological well-being (Carriedo et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Reardon et al., 2020). However, some athletes are capable of managing difficult challenges and accomplish their top performance, while other athletes give up and/or fail to maintain their performance. What is all behind this? According to researchers, it can be linked to athletes' psychological resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012) or as sometimes called, mental fortitude (Fletcher, 2019; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

Resilience – Mental Fortitude

Training Program

Before any misunderstandings, it is important to explain resilience.

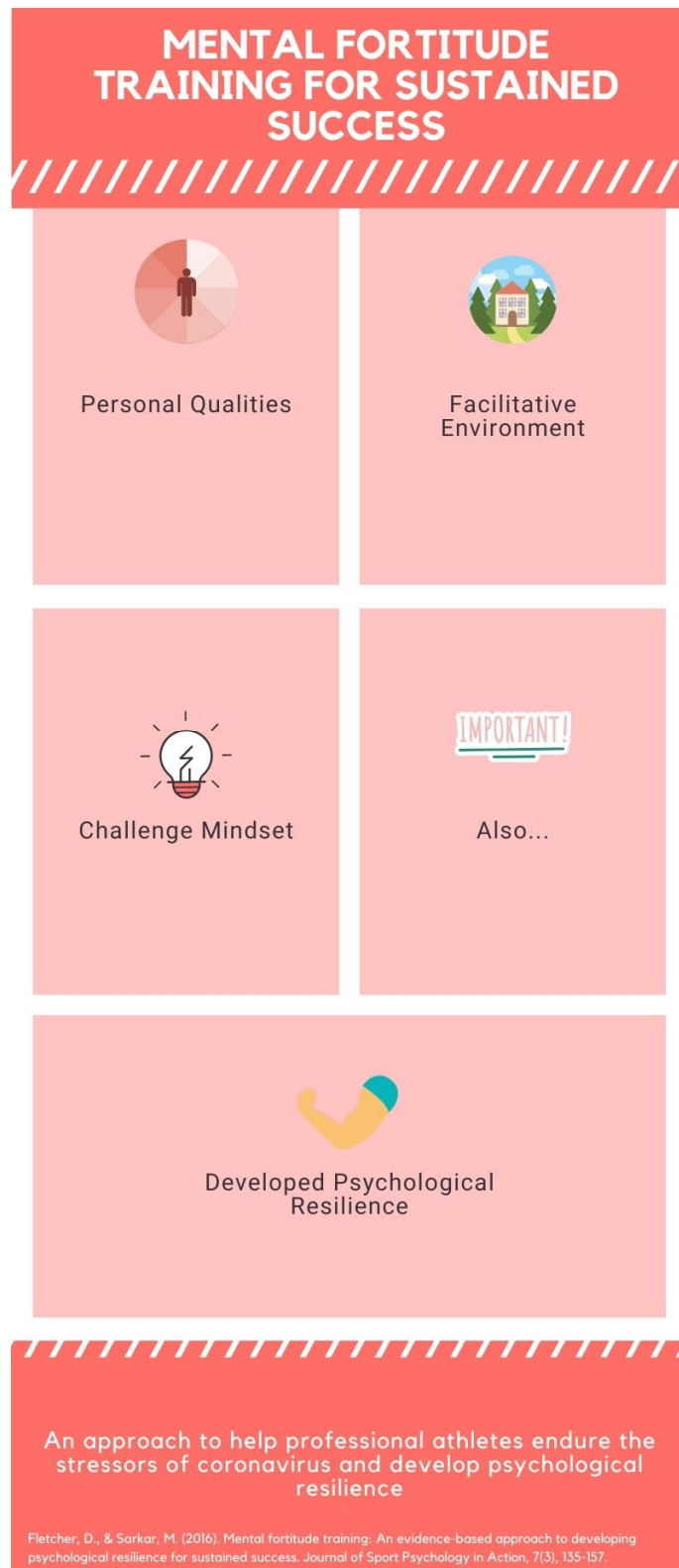
Psychological resilience (i.e., mental fortitude) refers to “the role of mental processes and behavior in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors”

(Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013, p. 14.).

Professional athletes are generally recognised for their resilience (Schinke et al., 2020), but now their resilience is being tested. To manage this unexpected adversity, being resilient seems necessary for athletes to cope with and adjust to the changes caused by the virus (Carriedo et al., 2020; Paredes et al., 2020) and uphold their sport performance (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Thus, sport psychologists and coaches need to find an

appropriate evidence-based approach that helps to improve athletes’ resilience during these

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Fletcher, D., & Sarkar, M. (2016). Mental fortitude training: An evidence-based approach to developing psychological resilience for sustained success. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 7(3), 135-157.

trying times. Recently, Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) designed the Mental Fortitude Training program that aims to develop psychological resilience for maintained success. The program concentrates on personal qualities, facilitative environment, and challenge mindset, three fundamental subjects that promote the development of athletes' capability to manage stressors, which is explained in detail below.

Personal Qualities

The present program regarding personal qualities distinguishes between personality characteristics (e.g., holding optimistic outlooks about the future), psychological skills and processes (e.g., goal-setting), and desirable outcomes (e.g., handling stress) that keep a person safe from adverse effects. Focusing on the difference between various types of personal qualities is necessary because it concentrates on the foundation of personality aspects and psychological skills that form an individual's mental preparedness for challenging times. Also, psychological skills (e.g., relaxation) need to be taught with the aim of promoting particular and assessable desirable outcomes (e.g., stress management). Athletes' personal qualities would change depending on the context, as different contexts and stressors, like training and competition, will require two distinct mixtures of personal qualities. Furthermore, it should be noted that changing athletes' personality features can be more complex than altering their psychological skills.

The Mental Fortitude Training can help sport psychologists and coaches enhance athletes' personal qualities so that they have the capacity to endure hardships and stressors that they come across during the pandemic.

Facilitative Environment

Resilience is strongly affected by environmental factors, thus, the environment wherein athletes work and play needs to be taken into account to develop resilience (Fletcher &

Sarkar, 2012). A facilitative environment has been revealed to promote the improvement of psychological resilience with the balance of challenge and support. With regards to challenge, it introduces responsibility to athletes and developmental feedback that advises them about how to progress and enhance resilience. Regarding support, it empowers athletes to improve their personal qualities and encourages them to foster trust. Besides support, motivational feedback is necessary to inspire and apprise athletes about their resilience development. The notion of challenge and support resulted in creating different 'matrixes' (Daloz, 1986; Sanford, 1967) in which four types of environments can be found:

1. Stagnant environment:
 - a. Athletes do not care
 - b. Athletes are not motivated or encouraged
 - c. 'Invisible' leaders
2. Unrelenting environment:
 - a. Athletes are criticising the culture when important requirements are not satisfied
 - b. The outcomes of making mistakes lead to an 'avoidance mentality'
 - c. Athletes are feeling isolated or alone
3. Comfortable environment:
 - a. Tough discussions are ignored
 - b. No personal and professional growth
 - c. Athletes are staying in their comfort zones
4. Facilitative environment:
 - a. Everybody supports each other
 - b. Athletes flourish in a challenging but supportive environment and look for opportunities to progress

c. Appropriate relationships between athletes and coaches

In order to develop resilience, a facilitative environment should be established and sustained. Extreme challenge and insufficient support can weaken athletes' well-being; on the other hand, excessive support and lack of challenge can stop improving their performance. Therefore, balancing challenge and support is critical.

Challenge Mindset

Having the capacity to induce and uphold a challenge mindset (i.e., the way athletes respond to stressors) is vital for resilience to be improved. In every experience, athletes evaluate the importance of the situation with regards to their aspirations and the significance of what is at risk. The response of the athletes might be destructive, appraising the experience as damaging, or constructive, appraising it as challenging (e.g., an opportunity). Moreover, the accessibility of coping sources to manage the experience is assessed by athletes (i.e., "how can I manage this situation?"). A challenge mindset during the pandemic can help athletes perceive stressors as opportunities for personal and/or professional development (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012) by re-evaluating and reflecting on their performance. For example, they might recognise gaps in their performance and professional development and find solutions to address these gaps with the help of their coaches or sport psychologist (Schinke et al., 2020).

The program can facilitate a constructive appraisal and perception of stressors. To attain a challenge mindset, the program also helps to alter destructive evaluations into constructive ones. However, it should be noted that for some athletes with particular personalities (e.g., seeing the bad in everything) and unique experiences, this change might be harder to achieve. That is the reason why practicing psychological skills, and creating a facilitative environment with the right balance of challenge and support is important.

Also, it is important to highlight that...

1. due to the misunderstandings regarding resilience, any resilience program needs to clarify what resilience is.
2. weakness should not be misinterpreted as strength, for instance an athlete is feeling stressed but contradicting it.
3. not finding the right way to handle stressors must not be seen as weakness. Instead, explain athletes that talking honestly about it, is considered a strength.
4. everyone, regardless of their personality, will experience their “breaking point”, which again, should not be considered as weakness. In some cases, these “breaking points” can help an athlete grow and improve, for example, finding the most suitable coping strategies.
5. personal qualities, facilitative environment, and challenge mindset should be properly focused on the improvement of athletes’ capability to endure stressors. Only addressing one area would not systematically develop resilience or maintain top performance. Even though the topics were described individually, when employing the program, they should be incorporated together.

Overall, the Mental Fortitude Training was introduced, an approach to help improve resilience in professional athletes during the pandemic. There are many advantages of the program, but it needs to be underlined that it is not a solution for every psychological or performance issues. It is hoped that this article will assist sport psychologists and coaches give a better understanding of developing resilience within their athletes.

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