

Managing Your Stress Level During Times of Adversity

by Dr. Alan Goldberg

(Great article for difficult times when it isn't the COVID-19 pandemic!)

If you really want to get the most out of your training during these crazy COVID-19 times so that you're ready to race to your potential whenever those big meets start up again, then you want to understand and master this very simple, yet critically important mental concept. This is a skill that you need front and center in your mental toughness toolbox if you want to be able to avoid the debilitating, long-term effects of stress on your training and performance! This is also something I've briefly touched upon in other posts, but it's worth highlighting now in more detail.

The MAJOR cause of stress for swimmers and other athletes, both in and out of their competitive arenas, is the mistake of allowing your thoughts and focus of concentration to go to things that you have no DIRECT control over. Whenever a swimmer allows their thoughts and focus to dwell on what I call the "UC's," or "uncontrollables," they will inadvertently set into motion a chain reaction that will lead to out of control nervousness, a lack of confidence and a sub-par performance.

What are these uncontrollables that we're specifically talking about? Well, during "normal" times, both in practice and meets, some of the common UC's in this sport are:

- How BIG, strong or fast another swimmer is on your team or in this race, (You have NO direct control over what happens in someone else's lane, only what is going on between your two lane lines!);
- How YOU FEEL that day, (Are you tired, just getting over a sickness, dealing with a nagging injury or emotionally upset over something that happened outside of the pool?);
- What's already happened in the PAST is another huge UC, (For example, how you might have felt in warm-up, how you performed in your last event or the last time you raced in this meet);
- Anything in the FUTURE is also something directly out of your control, (The time you want to hit, a cut you're going for, needing to qualify for another meet or needing a good race to attract college coaches);
- Other PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS of you is an uncontrollable, (How they may view you, think of you, whether they'll be disappointed in you, etc.);
- Your COACH'S WORDS AND BEHAVIORS are also out of your control, (What your coach may say to you either before or after a race or in practice, and how they act towards you);
- POOL CONDITIONS are uncontrollables, (Is this a fast or slow pool, what's the air quality like, the blocks, etc.);
- WHO'S WATCHING, (Are there college coaches in the stands, important people in your life, etc.);
- THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MEET is a UC, (is this your last chance to qualify, a huge opportunity to prove yourself, etc.) and the list goes on and on!

In fact, if you think about the last time you got stressed out at a meet, chances are really good that what you were focusing on either before and/or during your races were things that you have no direct control over!

Because of COVID-19, you are now dealing with additional, incredibly powerful uncontrollables: Your practice times may be seriously limited because of difficulty getting regular access to pools, especially as the weather begins to turn colder; You may have to travel to train in any number of different pools, some that you like and others that you feel less favorably about; Because of the limits on the number of swimmers allowed in any one practice, you may not be able to swim and train with all of your teammates; You have NO idea what meets you'll be able to complete in this short-course season and whether you'll even have a taper meet; "Set schedules" may be a thing of the past since practice times constantly change as your coaches scramble to find open pools to train in; And then there's the uncontrollable of being safe as you train as well.

Focusing on anything that you have no direct control over will immediately raise your anxiety level and tighten your muscles. It will cause you to become flooded with negative thinking and self-doubts, which will eventually

lead your self-confidence to do a disappearing act. And finally, this kind of UC focus will ALWAYS result in a sub-par performance whether you're in training or meets!

You have to understand that these uncontrollables are mental traps and they're lying in wait for you and every other swimmer around you. The only way for you to avoid these performance-disrupting and stress-inducing traps is by being aware right now that what you're focusing on is directly out of your control, and then quickly and gently bringing your focus back to what you CAN control, which is what you're doing right now! As long as you don't allow the uncontrollables a lot of "air time" in your head, they will not have a negative effect on you! So bringing yourself back as quickly as possible from this kind of focus is key!

So when you're struggling in or out of the pool and feel upset and stressed, you have to ask yourself in that moment, "Do I have direct control over this right now?" If the answer is "NO," then you need to discipline yourself to immediately "change the channel" and get your focus back on what you CAN control! With sufficient practice, you'll come to see that the one thing you can always learn to control is how you CHOOSE TO HANDLE these uncontrollables! Stay aware of where your thoughts and focus go and be prepared to reset your focus whenever it drifts to these UC's! When you learn to regularly do this, you'll find that you are suddenly able to handle the stress and uncertainty of these times like a champion!