

# Mental Training Toolbox: Taking Advantage of Adversity and Disappointment



By Dr. Alan Goldberg//[Competitivedge.com](http://Competitivedge.com) | Thursday, March 26, 2020

Swimming – like life – is always loaded with the “uncontrollable.”

That is, there are always things in this sport that you have no **direct control** over – how big, strong and fast your opponents are; how your taper went; dealing with a nagging injury; how you did in your last event; if you'll get the time you want; how you felt in warmup; whether your coach or parents might be disappointed in you if you swim poorly – the list goes on and on.

Focusing and dwelling on these “**UCs**” will always make you unhappy, jack your nervous system into the “red zone,” undermine your confidence and sabotage your performance. As an athlete, you want to learn to **identify the things that you have no direct control over** and discipline yourself to focus on the one thing that you can **always** learn to control: **How you choose to respond to these uncontrollables!**

Sometimes the impact of these uncontrollables can rock our world and the effects can be felt far beyond swimming.

For example, your favorite coach suddenly leaves the team, or you develop an illness or sustain an injury that takes you out of the pool for months or even longer, or your parents suddenly decide to move to another part of the country, or you have a family trauma... When these upsetting events happen, it's easy to get depressed, lose your confidence and feel your motivation do a disappearing act.

But these unexpected, upsetting and uncontrollable events pale in comparison to the disruptive effects of what is happening around the world right now with this pandemic.

Your taper meet gets cancelled, and schools have been shut down. Suddenly your team can't practice anymore, and your season has been cancelled.

The most unsettling part is the uncertainty of it all.

***So how do you ride the wave of emotions generated by this massive uncontrollable so that when it's finally over, you can come out of this experience stronger, calmer and confident?***

As a dedicated and committed swimmer, you probably train six to nine practices a week, depending upon your age and level.

You have important goals that keep you focused. Your sense of identity is closely tied up in being a swimmer. Your self-esteem comes from your training and meets, as does your ability to cope with life's stresses.

You swim to help manage the challenges life throws your way. Finally – and equally as important – swimming is your social life. Your best friends are usually your teammates.

When you can no longer train because of an injury or something as out-of-the-blue and disruptive as this pandemic, you may find yourself lost, isolated and anxious. What are you supposed to do now if you can't regularly swim?

You've heard the expression, ***“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”***

Your response to this or any massive uncontrollable must be guided by this saying.

***You want to DO everything in your power to manage how you respond to this stressor in as positive a way as possible and stay focused on what you CAN control, NOT on all of the things that are totally out of your control.***

Here are some guidelines:

1. First, try to ***keep a long-term perspective***. Understand that while what is going on right now is unprecedented and maybe even scary, ***eventually things will resolve, and your life will return to something more normal***. Right now, we're all in a state of extremely high activation (anxiety, upset, frustration, etc.), and sooner or later like any activation, what goes up will come down. Even if it's a month or two or more, things will eventually begin to settle.

2. ***Whatever hardship you're dealing with right now, don't go it alone***. Let yourself feel the feelings that have come up around this and talk about them with someone you trust. This could be a friend, your parents or even a counselor. ***While we're all asked to “socially isolate,” this does not mean you should emotionally isolate***. You can continue to talk with people and professionals remotely, over the phone or by video chat.

3. ***Sharing your fears, frustration and feelings with others is critically important to you maintaining your health***. Allowing your fears to escalate out of proportion and bathing in these stress hormones will only make you extremely unhappy and depress your immune system. When this happens, you'll be less able to fight off sickness. Talking with others is a way to calm your fears.

4. ***Let yourself “lean into” this forced rest***. Most swimmers forget that rest is an important part of training. Having adequate and regular time off tends to get lost in the shuffle. Most swimmers are used to hitting the “override button,” and just keep pushing. Resting your body, even if it's a forced rest, is not all bad. It will help recharge you both physically and emotionally

5. ***Stay mobilized and continue to take action!*** When we face any kind of “trauma” or adversity in our lives, it's critically important to ***do*** whatever ***YOU*** can to help yourself and those around you. ***Upsetting events become traumatic and potentially long-lasting in our psyche when we allow ourselves to become immobilized and go into freeze because of them.*** Therefore, you want to make sure that you get enough rest, eat the right kinds of food and stay hydrated as if you were still in the middle of active training, and take good care of yourself. ***In fact, I would strongly recommend that you act as if you were still in the middle of active training.***

6. ***A critically important part of this staying mobilized is for you to continue to “train.”*** If you were injured, I'd be recommending to you that you train “around” your injury. That is, if your shoulder was injured, you might not be able to pull, but you could continue kicking. However, most facilities have been closed, and most of you can't continue swimming. Equally as frustrating, many gyms have also been closed, eliminating access to cardio and weight equipment. Find other ways to keep your muscle tone and cardio up. Go out and run (if local authorities permit), do consistent ab work, exercises and weights at home, etc.

7. ***Keep your long-term swimming goals in mind.*** Even if you can't swim, you can still work towards your goals. When you're taking care of yourself, making decisions about what to eat or whether you'll get up early to run, ***you want to ask yourself, “How is what I'm doing today – right now – going to help me get to my goal?” Keep in mind that all of your competitors are in the same boat as you.*** The swimmers who are going to come out of this adversity in good shape are the ones who will continue to “train” consistently and work towards their goals in any way that they can.

8. ***Work on strengthening your weaknesses.*** Whenever adversity hits, we tend to focus on the terrible parts and not on the opportunities these events potentially provide. Forced time off can offer the chance to work on parts of our sport that we wouldn't normally work on – specifically our weaknesses.

If you can't train in the pool or elsewhere, you can always work on strengthening your mental muscles. This is a perfect time to add some effective tools to your mental toughness toolbox. If you tend to fall apart under big meet pressure, you can work on your ability to stay calm and composed under pressure. You can develop the skill of mental rehearsal or visualization. You can learn to manage last-minute negative thinking and self-doubts. If you've been the kind of swimmer who gets psyched out before and during your races, this is a great time to work on improving your concentration skills. I have a ton of free articles and videos on my website ([www.competitivedge.com](http://www.competitivedge.com)) to help you develop these skills. This kind of mental training will pay off big time for you when things eventually return to normal!

9. Finally, ***please limit the amount of time you watch and read about this pandemic.*** Being informed is certainly important, but overloading your nervous system with anxiety-laden information that you have no direct control over can be depressing and

immobilizing. I suggest developing a regular schedule of activities throughout your day to stay active and constructively distracted. Within this schedule, you can build in a regular, but limited time to take in the news, if that feels necessary to you.