

Dealing with Anxiety in the Time of Covid-19

We're almost halfway through the South African Covid-19 lockdown and I'm sure a large number of us feel somewhat uneasy in these strange times. An experience of uncertainty is possibly at the core of many of our fears – physical, occupational, financial, and social uncertainty in the midst of a global pandemic.

As a practicing psychotherapist, I have both listened to and explored many versions of 'Corona Anxiety' through my clients. All versions have been valid and real. However, some observations from these sessions might also apply to sports performance anxiety. This article aims to shed light on current expected feelings of anxiety, but also looks at the differences between general life anxieties and performance anxiety in sports, as well as what we can possibly do about it.

For example, one of my own experiences of uncertainty during this time was moving my psychotherapy work sessions from my 'normal' practice rooms to sessions online. I had never offered 'teletherapy' before and the experience was a new and unpredictable one. Overall, however, clients surprised me and adapted with ease to the online space. Seeing clients in their respective homes, while opening up my 'couch' – and occasionally (when the computer battery is dying) – my kitchen to them, also added some talking points to many of our sessions.

I noticed in particular that a large number of my clients who lived with high levels of anxiety for an extended period of time before this lockdown period are – almost miraculously – enjoying nearly two weeks of feeling calm even though many real-time stressors exist! Of course, there could be many reasons why this might have happened – an easing off of work stress; getting to spend more time with their families; not having to worry about school; personality factors ... and the list goes on. Asking clients why they think they're enjoying a break from feelings of anxiety, many of them responded with statements like: "... everyone in the world is in this together ... I feel like I don't have to prove anything to anyone ... I can just worry about me and not what so and so is doing!"

It turns out that the need to perform and to compete with others 'out there', together with the fear of failing 'in public', has been removed for a moment (except in the social media space of course). We're all equally vulnerable and just trying to get by. Restaurants, gyms, social clubs,

and shopping malls – places full of social pressure and performance comparisons – have all but shut down and it's possible that some clients might be enjoying safe environments where the expectation to perform has been greatly reduced. The anxiety that comes with ideas of having to live up to the World's expectations has suddenly vanished and they're able to live, for once, in their own worlds by their own rules.

Sports people are no different. Some of you might have experienced the same reduced levels of anxiety linked to no longer needing to perform and to achieve during the lockdown. Generally, during the season, you worry about being the best for your team, performing for the coaches, and not messing up on the field. Thoughts of "... if I mess up, my team or coach is going to be angry with me ..."

or "... I need to prove that I'm good enough ..."

or "... if I don't win or perform well, my friends and family will be upset with me ..."

can result in uncomfortable and often painful feelings of anxiety.

Performance anxiety is almost always linked to some sort of social or relationship fear. The fear of letting people down and perhaps being 'kicked out' of the team, family, or 'tribe' for not doing one's part can feel very real for some individuals. A person who experiences this type of anxiety can often 'freeze' on the sports field or favour an overly rigid playing tactic rather than allowing for spontaneity and creativity. In fact, sports people who experience high levels of performance and achievement anxiety and who try hard to avoid 'messing up', often bring about the very thing that they fear the most – failure.

So, where does anxiety come from? Anxiety can be a general feeling of unease that potentially comes from fears around uncertainty and the unknown. Unlike fear, which is an uncomfortable feeling brought on by a specific thing (e.g. a snake, heights, or a virus), the 'thing' that causes the feeling of anxiety is not always known. That's one of the problems with anxiety, the fact that there is often not one specific worry that can be dealt with and fixed. Current anxiety connected to the lockdown situation could include many different fears that are potentially out of our hands, at least for now.

Anxiety is something that every one of us will experience at some time in our lives. It is often considered to be our personal motivational alarm system. This alarm system alerts us to things we should potentially take care of, fix, explore, or do in order to live a more fulfilling and authentic life. However, when anxiety becomes overwhelming and causes a person to worry

excessively, avoid life, panic, lose sleep, change eating patterns, freeze during work tasks, have disturbing thoughts, and feel unnecessary guilt, we could say that the alarm system has become faulty!

A description of performance anxiety in sport is similar to the above description of general anxiety. Studies on athletes who participate at professional levels have shown that these individuals seem to accept anxiety as a motivational factor rather than something to avoid. The anxiety of a future, unknown performance alerts the professional sportsperson to an upcoming challenge that requires a readiness to overcome.

However, some sports people's alarm systems that are attuned to detecting challenges and possible future failure can become overly sensitive to the slightest misstep or ball-drop, as it were. The fear of failure, and the many reasons for it, can consume them to the point of avoiding the game they love, altogether. They no longer use the anxiety alarm as a motivating internal guide. Rather, the alarm system wails and beeps at the slightest trigger, creating many unnecessary and often illusionary fears that exist only in their mind. A dropped ball, in their mind, becomes a good enough reason to be ousted from the team, forever. He or she might think that they will not only lose the opportunity to play but also the safety of the team itself. More often than not this is not the case.

If you experience what I have described, don't despair, there is hope! Overwhelming experiences of anxiety are treatable – even anxiety to do with issues of performance and achievement. Just talking to trusted family, friends or teammates about your experiences can alleviate the feelings of anxiety. There are also many proven mindfulness and meditation techniques to help express and contain some of these powerful feelings and to get your alarm system working for you again rather than against you. Finally, psychotherapy has proved very effective in helping to reduce feelings of anxiety. A trained professional is likely always a good person to see if you experience difficulties with painful feelings.

In summary, I urge you to take a moment during this lockdown – if only five minutes – and ask yourself if your 'normal' feelings of anxiety have increased or decreased during this time. Either way, ask yourself "why?", and perhaps explore some of the reasons for the change. Quite often, once we can pinpoint a particular reason for feeling a certain way we can solve the problem by accepting it (if it's out of our hands) or by putting a plan in place to take control of what it is

that we actually want for ourselves, authentically – even if the plan is occasionally to let go of the need to control. This lockdown time could be an opportunity to recalibrate your alarm system, ready to go. Good luck!

If you feel anxious or overwhelmed, seek professional help! It's just a chat. Contact your university counselling centre or The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) on 0800 567 567 or 0800 456 789.

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