

**MENTAL HEALTH  
GUIDANCE  
FOR SAFE  
INTEGRATION  
INTO FENCING**

**AFTER COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS  
FROM TRAINING**



**USA  
FENCING**

**M**ENTAL HEALTH plays an important role in people's ability to balance life and maintain good physical health. USA Fencing and the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) recognize the variety of mental health challenges that athletes and coaches will face during this critical time. As part of this reintegration strategy, we have worked with the USOPC and Sports Psychologist Dr. Karen Cogan, to provide mental health strategies for both athletes and coaches. The following information contains specific tips and valuable information for a return to training. These strategies are highly recommended to support the mental health needs of your athletes and coaches.



## THE MENTAL SIDE OF RETURNING TO TRAINING



**Karen Cogan**  
USOPC Sport Psychologist

It is a strange time in our world. We have spent months at home, plans have been changed countless times, and competitions at all levels have been postponed or canceled. Through this chaos, no one has been training in gyms or fencing clubs and now facilities are beginning to reopen throughout the nation. Now we are talking about going back. That brings a range of emotions, including both excitement and fear. Fencers most likely feel excited to resume training and regain some patterns of normalcy. At the same time, there will be fears about so many unknowns and potential risks. We WILL get back, but we will face some challenges.

### TIPS FOR RETURNING TO TRAINING:

1. Everyone is an individual. You will respond as you do. Your feelings are valid! Likewise, your teammates' feelings are valid ... and they may be different than yours. Accept each other where you are. That is exactly where you each need to be.
2. Attend to your anxieties and worries. Talk to your coaches, parents and trusted friends. Make sure you have a voice. If you feel something, say something. Then find solutions together.
3. We will all have to adapt. The most important muscle in adapting is the mental muscle. When we face adversity, we become stronger and that builds resilience.
4. Communicate with coaches and staff.
5. Physically isolate. But don't socially disconnect. Be creative in staying connected yet safe.
6. Realize that your body will not feel the same after time off. Be kind to yourself and manage expectations to be realistic about what you can achieve when training resumes.
7. Similarly, your confidence might not be where it was. Be patient and be kind to yourself. Your confidence will return with more training time.

### GET YOUR MENTAL GAME UP TO SPEED:

**During times when you cannot train physically, you can train mentally.**

1. Use imagery. Imagery is creating a picture in the mind's eye. While you are waiting to return to fencing, close your eyes and imagine what it will be like to come back. Use all your senses and imagine walking into the club for the first time and what it feels like to be back on the strip again, feeling your weapon in your hand.

2. Set goals. Remember to be realistic. The goals you had on the day your club shut down will not be the goals you have now. Be smart and patient with yourself.

3. Stay present. It's easy to go back to what could have been or what you could do before. Be careful about this type of "time travel" and stick with what is.

4. Use mindfulness. Mindfulness involves intentionally focusing on the present moment and doing it nonjudgmentally. Often the focus point is the breath. Develop a mindfulness practice to stay present. Some good apps are Insight Timer, Healthy Minds and Headspace.

For Resources go to: [TeamUSA.org/MentalHealth](https://www.teamusa.org/MentalHealth)

## SLEEP GUIDELINES:

### **Get up and go to bed at the same time every day, even on the weekends**

- We are creatures of habit, and our sleep is no exception. By consistently going to bed and getting up at the same time, we condition our body to follow a regular pattern of sleep. This allows our body's natural clock, called a circadian rhythm, to help initiate and maintain our sleep.

### **Make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark, cool and comfortable**

- Studies find that sleeping in a cool environment is most conducive to sleep. By eliminating excess noise and light, we can minimize the disruptions that might wake us up. In addition, the bedroom should be a relaxing place and not a source of stress.

### **Bedrooms are for sleeping, not for watching television or doing work**

- Somehow, we have managed to make the bedroom a multipurpose room. Televisions, gaming systems, computers, telephones and various other gadgets are stimulating and disruptive to sleep. Don't allow them in your bedroom and don't use them in the brief period before going to bed. Even the small amount of light from a computer screen in the evening hours can stimulate your brain into thinking it is time to be awake. Moreover, do not use the bedroom to do work as these activities are likewise stimulating and will disrupt your sleep.

### **Avoid caffeine, alcohol and nicotine 4-6 hours before bedtime**

- Caffeine can be found in expected places like coffee, soda pop or tea, but also in unexpected foods like chocolate. As a stimulant, it will keep you awake, even if used nearly six hours before bed. Likewise, nicotine will disrupt your sleep. And contrary to common practice, an alcoholic "nightcap" can actually make your sleep worse. Though it may cause you to become drowsy, alcohol fragments the stages of your sleep and makes it more disrupted.

### **If you are having trouble sleeping at night, avoid taking naps. But if you are sleeping well and need more rest, a 30-60 minute nap can help you get through the day**

- The period of time that you are awake adds to something called "sleep drive." The longer we stay awake, the more we want to go to sleep. By taking a nap we can relieve this desire to sleep, but it will also make it less likely that we will be able to easily go to sleep later. With that said, athletes put their bodies through so much during training and competition and might need additional sleep. If you are not having trouble sleeping at night and need extra sleep, then take that nap!



### **Avoid high intensity exercise 3-4 hours before bedtime**

- Many fencing practices are scheduled in the evening making it difficult to have 3-4 hours between the end of practice and bedtime. You may need to consciously relax, breath, meditate or establish a quiet bedtime routine in the hour before you go to bed if you are coming off a difficult practice.

**Additional information from the USOPC can be found at:** [teamusa.org/news](https://www.teamusa.org/news) - *Why Sleep is Key In Letting Both Mind And Body Recover For Athletes And Non-Athletes Alike* May 26, 2020 by Todd Kortemeier



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WOULD LIKE  
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