The Mentally Tough Process of Handling The Corona Virus: Inspired by Sports Champions

The Perturbing Effect of the corona virus

Last night I dreamed that my husband had an affair and left home! It was so vivid and I was aware of how profoundly disturbed I was about it! In the morning I woke up and there he was sleeping soundly next to me, with no sight of the other woman. What a relief it was when I realised that I was dreaming. The following night, I dreamt that I had invited many family and friends to my house but I had no food or drink to offer them! In fact, there was no food to serve them at all, and I could not leave to buy any, as I was under the impression for some reason that there was no food in the shops. I had to suffer the embarrassment, sending everybody home with no food to eat or even any drink to serve them!

It was obvious that my deep-seated fears were being provoked. Has my husband's behaviour recently changed? Was the fact that he was glued to his phone and withdrawn from me and the family a sign? Did he seem a little more edgy toward me and more preoccupied than usual? Was I feeling that there was a shortage of food and I wasn't able to feed my loved ones?

I answered yes to all of the above! These dreams occurred two weeks before lockdown. However, by looking at the nature of the disaster rate in other countries, I quickly realised what was perturbing me. The identity of the lady whom my husband was preoccupied with was obvious. Her name; Lady Corona Covid the 19th. The other fears of deprivation were a result of what may be felt when a simple thing like visiting the grocery store and buying food becomes a difficult process. Many fears, insecurities, and feelings of deprivation become normal reactions when an unknown, invisible enemy has the potential to destroy the health, well-being, and livelihood of society. This elevated level of anxiety, in sport we call "arousal levels". They are normal feelings related to any threats we might experience, especially the likes of Lady Corona Covid the 19th, and the effects she will have on us regardless of who we are.

Please take a moment to honour those feelings of anxiety, without judgement, and notice that they have mostly mobilised us all into taking action toward preventing us from becoming infected or spreading the virus further. The problem only occurs when your anxiety or arousal levels shoot too high, resulting in an immobilising demotivation, depression or frantic, paranoid thoughts and behaviours which disturb daily life, relationships, and performance as an athlete.

Even though they were dreams as I mentioned earlier, these two dreams left residual feelings of fear and insecurity, as well as anxiety over being unprepared and deprived of the basic needs. For someone, who is not usually anxious or fearful, I began to realise what a profound effect Covid 19 was beginning to have on my psyche. For my own safety, the safety of my family, my parents and my concern about the intactness of our social fabric as South Africans, I had to understand, learn and know exactly how I can contribute. For at least two weeks prior to lockdown, I found myself immersed in a stream of information purporting death from disease, symptoms of the disease, arguments around the symptoms of the disease, contamination and catching the disease, arguments around the prevention of the disease, quantity of cases with the disease, the global impact of the disease, the effect on South Africans of the disease, South Africa's

response to the disease, my response to South Africa's response to the disease, all my clients' responses to the disease and its effects on them, and finally lockdown and hopefully flattening the spread and therefore the effects of the disease.

If reading the above paragraph felt nerve-wracking, imagine what this constant stream of disease information is doing to our psyches, our anxiety levels, and the possibility of achieving our dreams and goals.

Fortunately, I caught myself in the early part of last week presenting the following behaviour: panicking when I thought I had developed an imaginary cough or fever or sore throat. Paranoid about going out where there were many people and how they could possibly contaminate me. Neurotic with my children's hygiene and vitamin supplementing obsessed about managing prevention. I then found myself in pain over the people who don't have the resources and care they need to conquer this invisible enemy, as well as the entrepreneurs whose businesses will take a knock or get wiped out, and the sportspeople whose performance levels could be hampered! I felt anxious, discouraged and despondent. I noticed the effect of my ruminating and marinating on all the negatives and what it was doing to my resources, relationships, clarity, and my purpose of serving my patients, clients, and my relationships. I had to make some important decisions in order to come back to my higher self; I usually refer to as my GREAT ME.

In my work with top athletes, I often speak of a GREAT ME and a "little me", both are normal and important parts of self – every Champion Athlete has both! Our "little me" usually is our part which does not handle intense pressure situations well. It may provide the right amount of anxiety to raise our arousal levels to psyche ourselves up, but when our little me begins to dominate, it is only destructive to our psyches during performance. Athletes who handle pressure well catch their little me's before it is too late. They remember the part of themselves, the GREAT ME, who can handle pressure, especially in crises. Champions have practised routines and tools which trigger the transformation from little me to GREAT ME during tough situations. When it came to the Corona Virus, I used a similar process.

Steps to shifting from little me to GREAT ME

1. I accepted all my negative feelings (little me) around this crisis and the ramifications, as normal. They had served the purpose of taking action and becoming well informed.
2. Information about the disease was important for me to know, however, I decided to only read and listen to sources, which were factual and emphasised prevention and healing.
3. I dramatically reduced the quantity of information I absorbed on the topic and spoke of it very little unless the language was around preparation for now or for the future, GREAT ME language.
4. My GREAT ME began zooming in on information on healing, meanings on how this crisis can shift us as human beings for the better, and opportunities that it can present in the future for myself and others.
5. My GREAT ME began creating a new routine and tools, which began creating composure and focused on GROWTH questions, which provoked positive action for myself and others.
6. My GREAT ME asked the following questions, "What is valuable for me about this time?" "How can I grow from such an experience?" "Can I look for opportunity and possibility when this all passes?"
7. And finally for Lockdown, "How can my GREAT ME come out of Lockdown more expanded and stronger in my own way?"

Lockdown As a Context For Growth: A Champion's Way

As lockdown becomes a reality, the above statements opened me up toward a more positive frame of mind. At this point, I decided to revisit the study of my speciality, Champions in Sport, and learn from them, how they have, and would handle a situation like or similar to this. How would they use their mental toughness tools and routines to adapt and improve in the midst of constraints?

For most of us, just the thought of being cooped up in our own homes can be naturally anxiety-provoking. We are not only facing the struggle of being with ourselves for three weeks, but also the struggle of being in our close relationships without our usual routines and social/physical/occupational outlets. For some, this may be a time of respite and peace, a beautiful time to come back to yourself and nurture yourself and your family. You will be surprised how creative you can be without the usual bustle of everyday life. Professional athletes have found remarkable ways to work on their physical and mental game in a different way.

Many professional sportspeople travel constantly around the world in order to compete in events for their livelihood. Professionals are used to living in a different city or country, sometimes as often as weekly, with different cultures, languages, food, environment, weather, resources, transport, etc., without any familiarity of a consistent home base. This requires major and constant adjustment. Even the way they train physically and prepare for competition physically and mentally will be slightly different in each place and each time. This is why Champion Sportspeople are valuable to model when we need to learn adjustability, resourcefulness, and creating comfort out of discomfort.

Emulating a Champion's Process For Lockdown

So how do Sports Champions conduct their lives in a way that allows for them to thrive in a new normal week in and week out whilst on their international tours? They do, of course, have the privilege of having a team of specialists which assist them to perform at their peak in diverse environments. More on that later in the article, but, like ourselves during Lockdown, Champions have nothing else to do but focus on their preparation and training routines that serve peak performance when it counts. In speaking to and working with a number of Sports Champions at this time of Lockdown, there is a common pattern in all of them. Lockdown is a time that can mean resting with families and working and training in the best possible way from home. Sportspeople can take advantage of this time by training "differently" to improve both their mental and physical state.

Let us examine the Champion's team and how they divide life and sport into different specialties... Secondly, I am going to look at the key reason as to why Champions can thrive in the context of uncertainty and how their mental toughness tools bring out their best, no matter the conditions.

<u>The Two Essentials That Create Champions Under Intense Pressure</u>

1. **<u>Champions access support of a specialised team</u>**

Most legendary athletes have a team of specialists, which supports their training and their performance. Some of these areas usually include a manager, a coach, a fitness trainer, a nutritionist, a physiotherapist and a psychologist. Most of us do not have these privileges, but I will share with you a technique that will segment our Lockdown time into the equivalent support areas without the need for this comprehensive support team. Using this technique should give you more confidence that each of the aspects necessary for

your performance or career preparation is being taken care of. Family members can also assist in leading a particular area of expertise or hold you accountable to your routine during the Lockdown period.

During this Lockdown period, even if you could afford a support team, you would be unlikely to have them at your side. By emulating the champion's support team during this Lockdown period, the champion and the ordinary person are able to bring out the GREAT ME in themselves.

A CHAMPION'S MANAGER's role is to access information about each new environment and then feeds accurate information to the relevant team specialties. A manager is clear about the regulations of each new place and assists the support team with adjusting the champions' usual routines.

A LOCKDOWN MANAGER's role is to access information about the new environment and prepares equipment and resources in order to assist all areas of your sports preparation. Your role as the manager is to choose your daily schedule, which includes all specialty routines and requirements of your particular sport as outlined by a champion's support team. The champion must risk being creative in their environment and its resources in order to assist in emulating some aspects of your standard performance training.

A CHAMPION'S COACH secures premises, schedules time and looks after the quality of training. Training sessions will be slotted into the weekly schedule so that the athlete knows exactly when and what they are going to be working on. The champion's coach is also present in most of the training sessions to give feedback, motivation, and instruction.

A LOCKDOWN COACH can be creative about how you can recreate scenarios or simulations of your sport regardless of the lack of space and quality of premises. In a small place, you can shadow or simulate your sport. Shadowing your sport with or without the equipment in front of a mirror, with music for a set time is not only valuable but necessary. For example, runners can run in front of a mirror on the spot whilst listening to music, swimmers can use only arms, tennis and cricket players can hit imaginary balls, horse jumpers can straddle a coach, all of these simulations enacting imaginary, perfect performance.

A CHAMPION'S FITNESS TRAINER has a unique program custom made for the athlete, regardless of the sport. In different places, they design different methods for training strength, speed, endurance, and flexibility. Every sport has a different emphasis and it is factored into the training depending on how soon the athlete is competing.

A LOCKDOWN TRAINER's role is to formulate your own detailed schedule. Jumping rope, running on the spot, press-ups, sit-ups, burpees, and a theraband are a few examples that can be carried out anywhere. It is critical to have your physical training scheduled in at a specific time each day and that the lockdown trainer in you ensures you adhere to times, number of sets, and levels of intensity as described in the detailed schedule.

CHAMPION'S NUTRITIONIST AND PHYSIOTHERAPIST: These professionals will ensure that they have all the goods and equipment necessary to keep to the standard regimens for nurturing the body with food, physiotherapy, and massage to bring out the body's best for sleep, training, healing, rapid recovery and eventually competing.

A LOCKDOWN NUTRITIONIST AND PHYSIOTHERAPIST's role is to attempt to keep nutrition as similar as possible to your standard regimen when you were training or competing before the Lockdown. This can be tough as familiar foodstuffs may be more difficult to access. Do your best to find the healthiest foods, drink a lot of water and get sufficient sleep. Physiotherapy may not be possible during this time. Googling pressure points and massaging those particular points on yourself can work wonders. If you have a roller, google how to roll for maximum muscle release. Extra stretches factored into your weekly schedule can make a huge contribution to recovery for the rest of your training.

2. **Champions train their mental toughness as they do their physical toughness**

At each new physical location a sportsperson might find themselves when competing locally or internationally, a top sportsperson knows that there will be a brief period of acclimatising to the different environment. During this acclimatisation, they need above all to firstly have full trust in their adapted physical training regime as the vehicle to acclimatise them to peak performance quickest. Secondly, they need to release themselves from personal judgement during the acclimatisation period, as they experience themselves most likely not performing optimally. No self-judgement is the key in this period, as it is also the key to reducing the noise of the little me, mentioned above, whenever we are faced with discomfort inside or outside our minds.

The above is usually taken care of by their psychologist or mental trainer, which supports the champion to thrive in uncertain, pressurising conditions.

THE CHAMPION'S PSYCHOLOGIST most often does not travel within the team. This offers the psychologist an opportunity to step outside the system of the team and observe objectively the aspects of the champion's psyche that need fortifying. The psychologist facilitates the athlete's goals, thought processes and mental tools, which assist in managing anxiety, uncertainty, stress, and intense pressure in and outside the sports arena. The performance psychologist is responsible for designing bespoke mental routines, exercises, and new thought processes that can and needs to be practised by the champion almost on a daily basis.

A LOCKDOWN PSYCHOLOGIST's role: Unlike Sports Champions, many of us are unfamiliar with dealing with large amounts of uncertainty in conjunction with new environments, in conjunction with a lack of resources, in conjunction with intense pressure and stress. This is exactly the context all of us are currently experiencing during Lockdown. As a result, we will need to invest in our mental toughness to increase our composure, confidence, and concentration on our goals as well perhaps redefining and inventing new ones.

A Champion's Mental Toughness: Seven Steps to Thriving in Uncertainty and Intense Pressure

1. KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE PRIZE
   - The prize is your goal/intention for this temporary period in your new place for Lockdown. Set two goals or intentions for yourself during this time; a mental goal and a physical goal. For example "to be composed during every decision I need to make during this time." or "to remain highly motivated throughout this lockdown period" – as your mental goals. "improve my speed" or "increase my concentration" – as your physical goal.
   - Write down your goals/intentions as if they are being achieved in the present, for example, "I am motivated to complete my routine with energy and joy."

- Write down some actions that can make completing your training routine with joy. For example, training with music, or rewarding your effort with screen time.
- Every morning revisit the mental and physical intention that you have set and written down. Every night, reflect on the day and check what needs more quality attention for the next day and reward yourself for what you did well, verbally and in actions.

2. A FEW DAYS OF ADJUSTMENT TIME
   - Give yourself a few days of adjustment time for you to figure out how you can create a schedule for yourself with the information, environment, and resources available to you. Even when your schedule is set you can keep adjusting it to serve your Intentions. Flexibility is very important during this time, as we are all creating a new structure for ourselves as well as with other family members.
3. CREATE A WRITTEN SCHEDULE OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL TRAINING, PEPPERED WITH RELAXATION AND FUN
   - Your training schedule/routine is your accountability chart. However, it is key that you pepper in fun and relaxing time between your daily schedules. Champions include connecting with family and friends as well as reading, listening to music and podcasts in their daily routines. They also include dancing, other recreational sports, social media, Netflix, cooking, playing online games and board games. They are human beings, just like us.

4. EMBRACE THE INNER CONFLICT IN YOUR MIND:
   - In uncertain conditions with unfamiliar constraints, negative thoughts and feelings can easily dominate. This too can happen during competitions in intense pressure situations. Gently remind yourself during these times to embrace the negativity that emerges, accept and normalise it. Rewind to the times when you were performing at your peak. Pay attention to how you were feeling? Take note of what tools you were using before and during performance, which enabled composure, confidence and concentration on each moment. Remember the feeling when you slipped into the flow or the zone, and you felt invincible. These memories are a treasure chest of your remarkable potential, and it is time to open it up! Then, pay attention to the intentions or goals you had set for yourself during this time. Your goals/intentions trigger quality attention to what you need to be feeling and acting on at that moment.

5. THE PURPOSE OF ROUTINES AND MENTAL TOOLS:
   - Champion athletes, over time, have realised that having a daily routine set for themselves, as well as the act of carrying out both their physical and mental tools for intense pressure performances consistently, evokes a quieter mind. It is these routines that allow the athlete to move into flow/zone states, which facilitate inspiration and automatic, creative problem-solving.

6. THE POWER OF MENTAL PRACTISE:
   - One of the most important exercises in sports psychology, as well as reality construction, is the powerful workings of visualization and your imagination. There are many documented experiments demonstrating that the mind and body do not know the difference between what we see in reality and what we see in our mind's eye. It is easy to figure this out by experimenting with imagining that you are winning the lottery in your mind and notice how you would feel if you did and what you can do with all that money? Conversely, imagining that you and your family contracted the corona virus and how you would feel and what could

happen, etc., etc. The more time you spend visualising either scenario the more your emotions and your body will respond accordingly. Notice; how you could create ecstasy or terror depending on what you indulge in your mind. Albert Einstein said, "Your imagination is the preview of your forthcoming attractions." Think about this provocative statement by one of the most remarkable and influential Scientists of the 20th Century.

- It is clear from the above that spending time visualising perfect aspects of your performance or whole performances will arouse your motivation and effect positive changes in your body and performance. Be deliberate with what you want to work on and treat your training in your mind as you would, your actual training in reality. Start small with 5 to 10 minutes a day and see how much you can build on that daily or eventually even twice per day. Most importantly have fun playing perfectly in your mind as if you were in the zone/flow state.
- Invest in mental performance training and you will surprise yourself after Lockdown!

7. THE MAGIC INGREDIENTS IN GOAL ACHIEVEMENT

According to the most influential specialists globally in GOAL ACHIEVEMENT, the two most important qualities needed to manifest anything from feeling motivated, to the executing of perfect performance, to winning at anything are INTENTION AND ATTENTION.

- INTENTION is the desire with mind, body, and emotion to achieve a particular goal.
- ATTENTION is focused awareness on any sensory or mental experience or action without judgement, in order to move in an aligned direction toward your goal.

- Champions are very clear about what their intentions are and have them alive in their minds. Clear Intentions (goals) drive your Attention. Whatever you pay Attention to will grow and carry the momentum needed to achieve whatever Intention/goal you have set. Therefore as mentioned in Step One, write down your Intentions/goals for the day, or week or month and revisit them daily, ticking off the actions you set in your schedule, and pay attention to each segment of your schedule with quality.

The simple process of setting your INTENTION and paying ATTENTION without judgment, will work for perfecting a particular type of shot, or movement in your particular sport. Setting your Intentions during this Lockdown and paying Attention without judgement, will certainly also work for living through lockdown with joy and inspiration, and coming out of this time expanded and developed in more than just sport!

In Conclusion

Champion Athletes have learned from their Specialist Support Teams, as well as their own experience of what works over years of thriving under constant change and intense pressure. Build your own internal support team and attempt to integrate this self-created team by utilising the resources you have at your disposal. Attempt to make connections in cyberspace with those who can contribute to your Champion Specialist Team. Make a commitment to grow as a Whole Champion by acknowledging your little me (negativity) and use your routine and mental tools you have used during peak performances when your GREAT ME (positivity) was dominating. Use Lockdown as the impetus to start honing the two essentials of what creates Champions, a Specialist Support Team, and a Mental Toughness Regimen, in spite of and because of the surrounding intense pressurising and stressful conditions.

Take charge of your safety and health, take in all that motivates and strengthens you, spread healing language and vibes to your family and the community you are immersed in. Take ownership of conquering Lady Corona Covid the 19th!

By Toni Gaddie
Clinical and Sports Psychologist
(toni@gaddie.net)

For more info go to:
www.championacademy.co.za
Follow on Twitter :
@ToniGaddie

* Toni Gaddie co-founded The Champion Academy with her sister Rikki Gaddie Dworcan in 2012.
* The Champion Academy offers private, group sessions, Mental Toughness Talks for corporates & organisations
* Online sessions available
* Sessions for high performance athletes (professional & amateur - all ages)
* Sessions for parents of all athletes