

Managing the COVID Wall

It's become obvious that coping with the COVID pandemic is more like running a marathon, rather than a sprint – and not by choice. Whereas in the early days of lockdown in March 2020, there was a sense of urgency, cohesion and determination to overcome a difficult situation, for some, as we face the uncertainty of more challenging times ahead, a sense of fatigue, weariness and disappointment predominate. So given this health crisis is ongoing, what lessons if any can we draw from those who train for long distance running?



Recently a number of articles have been appearing about hitting the COVID wall, which is characterised by increasing levels of anxiety, helplessness, irritation/conflict, boredom, and a general drop in mood, motivation and enthusiasm. Runners also speak about “hitting the wall” after covering long distances once their energy reserves have been depleted. Physically, it is reported as feeling drained and weak; there is a strong desire to stop having to run and every step is a triumph of sheer willpower. There are clear parallels to the COVID wall.

Obviously, prevention is better than cure and runners use strategies to try to avoid hitting the wall in the first place but should they find themselves in this situation two key things are helpful:

1. Slow down i.e. pace.
2. Refuel with an easily accessible source of energy e.g. sports gel or jelly babies.

How can we apply this to the COVID wall?

1. **Pace yourself appropriately.** Remember this is a marathon, not a sprint. Be kind to yourself. Manage your expectations and if you have responsibility for others e.g. children, staff, or parents, don't allow yourself to become overcommitted. Preserving your wellbeing is important to enable you to continue to play a part in helping others.
2. **Keep yourself fuelled.** What recharges your batteries? What brings you joy? For many, the strategies they had which allowed them to destress or unwind or simply have fun have become inaccessible because of COVID and therefore they need to be careful that they don't inadvertently end up running on empty. Instead, thought needs to be given to what alternatives can be put in place, rather than just missing what is no longer available and carrying on.

Managing your Fuel Level

Here are some energy drainers or boosters to consider to help avoid or manage the COVID wall.

Drainers	Boosters	Comments
Isolation	Connection	How we engage with others may have changed but it is still important to stay in touch. Are there people you haven't heard from in a while? Even if you don't need them, they may need you. Remember, being kind and reaching out to others often incidentally benefits us too.
Boredom	Variety	Introducing routine was something which we were encouraged to do during lockdown. It was a sound strategy and is still a good recommendation to bring structure to days which can otherwise feel unstructured. However, from time to time it's good to shake things up – vary routines to ensure that boredom doesn't creep in. Strategies which worked for us in spring and summer may not be so helpful in autumn and winter so don't be afraid to modify and adapt. Novelty and variety can add interest, whereas monotony and boredom deplete energy.
Physically Inactive	Physically Active	This doesn't really need explanation. Most of us know exercise is good for us e.g. by encouraging the release of endorphins which have a beneficial effect on our sense of vitality and wellbeing. If you are someone who is currently working from home, you might want to consider the amount of time you have saved commuting and whether you could use some of this to be physically active. E.g. If it normally took you 30 mins to get to and from work, would it be possible to go for a 15 min walk at the start and end of your working day? This would also help draw a boundary between home and work.
Yearning for the past	Focusing on what's possible	Inevitably there are things which we miss since freedoms have been curtailed as a result of COVID restrictions e.g. social gatherings, family events, holidays, sporting fixtures etc. However, dwelling on what we miss heightens a sense of loss and helplessness and depletes our resilience. Instead, while there can be a factual acknowledgment of what we can no longer do, it is better to keep focussed on what choices are still available and embrace those opportunities, knowing that struggling against things we can't control is a waste of energy.
Rigidity	Flexibility	For many of us 2020 has been a year of change and national and community challenge like no other. Plans have been ripped up, sometimes on more than one occasion, and things that were taken for granted have slipped away. It's a bit like finding oneself caught in a current in a river. One can try to swim against the flow of water to reach the original destination but if the current is strong, the wise choice is to float with it and conserve energy rather than fighting against it and becoming exhausted. Learning to hold things lightly, to plan in pencil, and to relax into uncertainty is challenging but these are skills worth cultivating to enhance flexibility.