

Reflect on the season, feel your feelings, reframe the experience, and focus on the future by setting new goals.

Written by: Dr. Tegan Adams, Sport Psychologist

It starts with reflection

One important practice to engage in after the end of anything is to spend some time reflecting and reviewing. This can be a brief process that you do in your own head while running, or even while sitting on your couch, but it can also be a process that you talk through with somebody else. Figuring out the best way for you is important, but I encourage you to write it down. Writing has been found to be an effective way to process emotionally. Ask yourself these questions to review your season: What was I anticipating or planning for this season? What were my goals? What went well? What do I wish had gone differently? What were the disappointments?

How do you rebound from disappointment?

First, it is important to notice any emotions you are having. If you don't, and the feelings are not attended to, they can develop into deeper concerns such as low motivation, burnout, anxiety, and depression.

A strategy that can help manage emotions is first to notice and recognize the feeling, name it, validate it, and then refocus.

How do you notice what you are feeling? Though this can feel obvious or simple to some, for others it can be very hard to recognize how they are feeling, or to recognize it early on. Some people notice behaviors before they recognize what might be the cause. For example, you might notice yourself sleeping more, or eating more chips, or feeling more annoyed than usual. These things could all indicate that you are feeling stress, but you might not have recognized the increase in stress. If you are having trouble trying to "tune in" to your feelings, you might try to schedule times to check in with yourself to recognize how you are feeling every morning and night. Or you can try to "pair it" with something you already do, such as every time the phone rings, or when you wash your hands.

Sometimes it is easy to identify what feelings we are having, and sometimes there are multiple feelings happening at one time, which can be confusing and therefore difficult to determine. At times we are impacted by physical things, such as hunger or feeling sleep deprived and that can impact how we feel and behave.

Validate the emotion you are feeling. People often struggle with this one. So often I hear people talk poorly about their emotional experience and say something to themselves such as "what's wrong with me?" or "It's so stupid that I am so upset about this." Try saying something like "that makes sense that I would be feeling disappointed." When we validate the emotion, we are more easily able to move forward.

It is possible to learn to do these steps in the moment, but it can be common to experience difficulty moving on from the stress or upsetting feelings. Some people find it very helpful to schedule time to worry, think, cry, or "feel", which can be especially important and useful if you find yourself unable to focus or the feelings are too strong

or overwhelming during a time when you cannot attend to them and you need to be focused on something else, such as during practice. This may look like scheduling ten minutes at 7 am or 7 pm every day, or by scheduling thirty minutes or an hour for the weekend.

Though it may sound a little silly, our brain is comforted by knowing we WILL be attending to the thoughts and feelings and it has an easier time setting it aside and not getting distracted by it in the moment. You might try saying to yourself, out loud or in your head: “I can think about that tomorrow morning, but now is time to focus on practice.” This can also be a great skill for refocusing when we are struggling to stay focused or even at night when we are trying to sleep. Using your “self-talk” in this way can be very effective once we get used to directing self-talk in this way.

Reframing your experience

While it can be easy to focus on the disappointments or loss experienced and maybe has even caused you to consider moving on from artistic swimming, this is the time when you can take advantage of ways your resilience has grown and to have an increase in confidence in your ability to adjust and be flexible. Focus on what you gained from your season, ways that you became stronger and more adaptable - avoid focusing on what you lost. Many high achieving leaders focus on the silver linings. What were your silver linings from this season? For some it was having more time with family, more time to rest your body and recover from injury, more time to focus on growing skills or flexibility, or even more time to re-evaluate and rededicate yourself to your goals.

Refocus and get ready for next year

You may need to refocus and or adjust your goals for next year. One of the foundations of setting effective goals is being able to adapt your goals when needed. This is an important aspect of moving forward into this new season.

How can you start fresh, and also continue pushing towards the goals you set last year? Ask yourself what is new or different about this upcoming year that you did not have to account for last year? Maybe your schedule is different as you add in academics, or maybe you finished academics and you will have more time to focus on your swimming goals. Either way, there will likely be some adjustment that you will need to account for in order to be effective.

Writing down goals and your intentions are critical in keeping you committed to them, and making sure they are SMART goals. You may already know these important tenants of how to make effective goals, but when you think about your goals make sure you have identified goals that meet these areas: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound. There are also many other words that fit into this acronym, and most often the A and R have a variety of words, but it is crucial to make sure it is attainable, knowing that you can adjust it if you need to. Having a goal that is relevant, means that it is important and not somebody else’s goal for you. If you are working towards a parent’s goal or coach’s goal and you are not committed to it, the goal will not keep you motivated during the more difficult times.

Develop long term and short term goals. If your goals are focused on the end of the season, or one that you might be able to accomplish in a couple of months, it can

be difficult to stay motivated when it feels so far away. Identify short term goals and even daily intentions that can help you work towards accomplishing the longer term goals.

Also, make sure your goals are within your control. While a goal focused on earning a certain spot on the team, winning a medal, or qualifying for the Olympics can be motivating and the reasons many people dedicate their time and energy, there are only certain aspects that are within one's control. Since we cannot control our competition (whether it be a teammate competing for the same spot, or the other teams you compete against), we cannot control whether we achieve these goals.

Similar to the adjustment at the beginning of the quarantine, it took your body and mind time to adjust to the new expectations, and to create a situation where you could work on your own doing much more dry land workouts than ever before! When you come back to the pool, whenever that happens, expect your body and mind (and emotions!) to need some adjustment as well.

To be our best, we need to know ourselves, our challenges, our strengths, our motivations, and our values. If we can understand ourselves in these ways we can help to anticipate what we will need, what might be challenging, and how to set ourselves up for success.

Other strategies to try if you aren't already

1) Deep breathing. This is known as one of the ways to impact the nervous system to calm you down. Your mind gets tricked into thinking there is no threat and can reduce anxious thoughts so you can focus.

2) Acts of kindness. Our levels of happiness increase when we are helping others compared to when we focus on ourselves. It helps us improve our social connections as well.

3) Focus on what you can control. There is power in realizing there are aspects out of our control, but we can focus on our reaction and where we invest our energy.

4) Exercise and eat healthy food. Nutrition has huge impacts on our mental and emotional health.

5) Gratitude. Being grateful increases happiness and well being. Write down three good things every day. Another way to practice gratitude is to write a gratitude letter to somebody else. This was found to provide a positive impact for up to one month!