

# Where to after an **unsuccessful Olympic Games?**

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You devoted the last four years of your life to your Olympic dream. Everything you did was guided by your Olympic dream. You sacrificed everything, your time, energy, financial status, social life, relationships, emotional energy and likely even more. Then the unexpected happened! You did not perform like you expected or the way you know you can. You feel you let yourself, your teammates, coach, parents and your country down. It is hard to look others in the eyes, but worst of all, how do you answer to the man or women in the mirror?

Participation in the Olympic Games is most probably any sports person's dream. From a very young age any sports person will share that they would like to go to the Olympic Games one day. Then it happens that you do get your opportunity but you don't grab your opportunity. You don't perform. Where to now? Are the retirement cards on the table? Do you persevere for another 4 years and another Olympic cycle?

When sports people describe their experience after a disappointing Olympic performance one can almost compare it with a grieving process. They experience loss and that almost puts them into a process of grieving.

One of the biggest losses they refer to is loss of identity. For 4 years they have been known as "an Olympian".

If you ask them before the Olympic Games: "Who are you", they will answer with no hesitation: "I am Jackie, an athlete who is going to London in 2012". Then after the games if you ask them again: "Who are you", this question becomes so much harder, and then the common reply is "I don't know".

For a lot of elite sports people this is quite a frightening thought if all of a sudden they don't know who they are if their identity of "Olympian or elite sports person" is challenged. It further influences all the other aspects of their lives such as their personal relationships, studies, work and so on.

When these sports people share their stories and experiences of Olympic losses it can often be understood according to the Five Stages of Grief by Kubler-Ross. The reason for that is that when they talk there are often similarities and language that is linked to the grieving process.

Here are the Stages:

## Stage 1: **Denial**

The first stage helps athletes to survive the loss. You did not even make it to the second round. There are 13 days of the Olympics left and you had your chance. Your role now is to be a spectator like millions of other people around the world. The world and your sporting career become

meaningless and overwhelming. You feel numb and wonder; "how can I go on?" Denial and shock are ways to cope and attempts to make things bearable. As you start accepting that you did not do well and start asking questions to yourself on why, you are beginning the healing process. Denial will start to subside and all the feelings that you were denying will start to surface.

## Stage 2: **Anger**

Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. You are angry with yourself because you know you were well prepared. You are also angry with your coach and perhaps teammates as well. Underneath anger is pain because you feel let down, disappointed and hurt. Everything you worked for as well as all the sacrifices you made in the last 4 years went up in dust and you can't do anything about that. There is no second change. The anger is often an indication of how much your sporting career means to you and how desperate you felt in performing well.

## Stage 3: **Bargaining**

The bargaining stage involves a lot of "what if or if only..." type questions. What if I had a better start? What if I slept more the night before? What if it wasn't so rainy and cold? These questions often lead you to find fault

in yourself and also let you think what you could have done differently. You often tend to bargain with your pain. You remain in the past and keep on negotiating your way out of the hurt and disappointment.

#### Stage 4: **Depression**

After bargaining your attention moves back to the present and you want to withdraw from the world. You don't want to do anything and feel down and depressed. Everything feels like effort especially talking to people who want to know how the Olympic Games were. You don't want to see a boat, hockey stick, ball, spike or javelin ever again let alone getting out of bed early to train. This depressive

state is part of the healing process and can take from days to weeks depending on the person.

#### Stage 5: **Acceptance**

This stage is about accepting and acknowledging the reality that you did not do well and you failed. You learn to live with it. In this stage you are starting to review your options again. You are more ready to decide whether you want to try for another 4 years or do you want to consider retirement. Your decision is now not purely based on emotions but more on accepting the reality of your sporting career. In this stage you go back to the drawing board and revisit your goals and dreams. You also feel more ready to

share this process with your coach or other significant people in your life. You start to engage in sporting career again and also find some enjoyment. You reflect on what you have learned from your Olympic experience and how you would like to use that in your life going forward.

Although these are responses to loss, there is not a typical response as there is not typical loss. This is also not a linear process but more circular in nature as sports people can move back and forth between stages and also sometimes skip certain stages. Some sports people will also report more stages. Remember your experience is as unique as you are.

#### **Conclusion**

The aim of sharing these Stages of Grief is an attempt to understand or make sense of the Olympic losses that sports people experience especially after not performing well or failing. It aims to help us understand, frame and identify what they might be feeling which hopefully can give us guidance how we can help these sports people to deal with their loss.

