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## **Covid-19 Chapter of 2020: Empathy and our Children!**

By: Paul Assaiante

Clearly the Covid-19 chapter of 2020 has cost us so many things. Many have lost loved ones, friends, or acquaintances. All have lost certain freedoms that we used to take for granted, and all of us find ourselves living in a state of uncertainty! They say that a “person grows the most during states of “uncertainty,” but I would contend that if that “state” extends for too long there can be collateral damage.

As a parent, a college professor and coach, as well as a US national coach, I feel uniquely qualified to make some observations about where we are today and some warnings about managing the young people in our lives.

We, as adults, have the ability to verbalize certain things that we struggle with! I have a friend who mentioned that it had been five months since he had had any human contact, and it was that void that was resonating on his psyche. That self-introspective observation was the first step in his taking corrective steps to ameliorate that absence.

Children or young people would feel a void but would not be able to put their finger on what it was that was distressing them. We need to be there for them now more than ever to help their fragile psyches through this!

What is our greatest tool to help us negotiate this situation you might ask? EMPATHY! The ability to put ourselves in their shoes in order to understand where they are coming from. In March, when Covid-19 struck and when we sent people home, there was one particular student athlete that I was very close to, who sank into a depression. We spoke daily and being that he was a senior he was very sad about not having a "senior spring" and an actual graduation ceremony. I remember thinking to myself how that was pretty lame, as it is a long life and there will be plenty of other much more meaningful events to celebrate. My lack of sensitivity prevented me from being the true empath that he needed and deserved.

The upcoming fall looms on the horizon like tremendous thunder clouds. Will students be able to return to school, will it be safe, will it be face to face, hybrid, or remote? We must remember that young people are very driven by their peer needs, the basic driving social need. The fear of losing this is going to have collateral damage and we must be there for them, engage in ongoing conversations so that even if they cannot put their finger on their feelings, eventually there will be an "aha" moment where they can uncork, and begin to come to grips with their feelings.

As I mentioned, I am a professional coach, and in our culture, sport has a very powerful influence (too powerful perhaps, but be that as it may, it is here). For many their sporting experience is a healthy vehicle to growth and development, and I would contend that that should be the highest goal. For others it is a means to an end. Parents treating their "investment" as a way to get the college process as the payout with lessons, equipment, travel squads, every conceivable advantage to help their child get into a more favorable school! For some, albeit a very small percentage, there might even be an opportunity to represent ones' country or play professionally! I would NEVER condemn a person's motivation for why they might support a youngster's journey in sport but, clearly the latter motivation can have a very deleterious effect on a youngster. Regardless of ones' intent, ALL are being affected by the pandemic and again we must be there for these young people as empaths.

For many it is a healthy release; for others, a source of self-value, but the loss of this can be crippling. We must be there for them and not focus on “what we have lost as a result of the scourge known as Covid-19!

I see parents panicking, making irrational decisions to ensure other students do not gain a hidden competitive advantage during this isolation period.

My advice is simple:

Stop

Take a deep breath

Focus on the physical as well as emotional health of your children! Your world has been turned upside down, but hopefully, as healthy and evolved adults you have developed coping mechanisms. Our young people do not have these yet and there can be a terrible and even crippling sense of despair for them.

Be an empath, be there for them, now more than ever. I can assure you that you won't regret it!



Paul Assaiante is currently the Men's Squash and Tennis coach at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, Ganek Family US Squash Head National Coach, Professional Speaker and Author. Two-time Olympic Coach-of-the-Year, World Championship Coach and the "winningest coach in college sports history", Paul has motivated top athletes from around the world. His core belief is the need to embrace our fears and remove the obstacles to our success. He captures this concept in his book, *Run to the Roar: Coaching to Overcome Fear*, a visionary reflection on leadership and mentoring from one of America's most successful coaches.