

Giving It All for Gold; The Stigma of Mental Health Crises in Sports

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Abstract

Current mental health resources and systems within sports are insufficient. Competing athletes face a myriad of mental health challenges. Various internal and external barriers exist that undermine help-seeking behaviors. Sports culture stigmatizes mental health issues, which exacerbates the psychological distress of athletes. The options available to an athlete confronting a mental health crisis are limited. Athletes transitioning out of sports also grapple with complex psychological issues. The authors analyze the unique factors present in the sports environment that interact to compound mental health crises among athletes. Suggestions are provided to buffer risk factors and ameliorate stigma within the athletic community. Future research around the areas of promoting awareness, building trust among athletes and sports psychologists, and support for athletes evolving out of sports is discussed.

Introduction

Whether experiencing the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat, the competitive sports environment breeds unique and specific challenges to the mental health of participants. Due to the nature of competitive sports, research has demonstrated that the athlete cohort experiences heightened vulnerability to mental health issues than the general population (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Poucher et al., 2021).

Despite this reality, athletes often have far fewer options to address the problem. There are significant internal and external pressures exerted on athletes (Rapkin, 2020). The stigma of mental health crises within the sport context leads many athletes to suppress or deny their mental health problems (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021).

The lack of accessible treatment resources coupled with the threat of intense stigma, leaves athletes to struggle with complex mental health issues alone (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021). Through established research and first-hand accounts, a clear picture emerges that demonstrates the universality of certain mental health issues, symptoms, and disorders pervasive among the athlete population (Chang et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2021).

Culture of Stigma in Sports

Enduring cultural myths promote the false notion that great athletes are invincible. The idea that athletes are invulnerable super-humans capable of extraordinary feats and unburdened by normal mortal failings can be very damaging. There is an immense, ongoing pressure on athletes to perform physically daunting tasks. There is also an insidious undercurrent pressuring athletes to maintain mental strength and composure (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018).

The stigma is such that to experience or discuss mental health problems is viewed as weakness (Rapkin, 2020; Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018; Way, 2021). In the sports world, there is no greater shortcoming than being perceived as vulnerable or weak. An athlete labeled as weak loses standing among coaches, competitors, sport officials, and fans. Far more devastating than an injury, disappointing loss, or temporary setback, the stain of this stigma is permanent (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021). Recovering a competitive sports career would be virtually impossible. It has never been done (Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018).

The sports culture sends a clear signal that there is no place in the discourse for mental health challenges (Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018). As a result of these rigid attitudes toward mental health issues, athletes may also experience concurrent feelings of failure, shame, fear, and guilt in addition to psychological symptoms (Rapkin, 2020; Poucher et al., 2021).

The stigma of experiencing a mental health crisis as an athlete can have tremendous consequences within sports (Rapkin, 2020; Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018). Being perceived as vulnerable by coaches, fellow competitors, and governing bodies jeopardizes an athlete's career. Maintaining competitive edge is of paramount importance in athletics. Any perceived weakness or vulnerability will be exploited by competitors (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021).

Coaches are performance-oriented and looking to extract the highest-level results from an athlete. Mental health struggles are viewed as a liability and athletes who have psychological issues find diminished opportunity (Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018). Governing bodies, like coaches, are seeking peak performance from athletes. Sports federations are also keenly aware of image and will not promote an athlete who is speaking out about mental health problems (Rapkin, 2020).

The stigma of mental health extends outside of the sports world. Elite athletes risk losing crucial financial sponsorships due to backlash (Rapkin, 2020). An elite athlete's image may also be important in terms of successfully transitioning out of sports. Due to the inflexible culture and perceptions surrounding sports, openly discussing mental health struggles can negatively impact the opportunities available to athletes outside of their sport (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021).

Focus on the Physical

There is an almost singular focus placed on an athlete's physical health within the sports environment. Being in peak physical condition is synonymous with success. If an athlete is strong and healthy, it is assumed that they are in top competitive form and that winners and losers are decided based on physical performance alone. Historically, there has been little discourse on the impact of mental health on performance in the sports community, yet it is crucial to competitive outcomes (Grand & Goldberg, 2011). An athlete could be in superb physical form, be the best in the field, and have once-in-a-generation abilities, but that is only half the equation.

Mental health in sports is a topic that has been rarely acknowledged by athletes and coaches within the community (Rapkin, 2020). Having mental health challenges or struggles as an athlete is viewed as a taboo subject. Conventional wisdom in sports has long dictated that open discussion regarding physical health and wellbeing as commonplace but speaking out about mental health difficulties was met with disapproval and judgment (Chang et al., 2020; Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021).

Openly suffering from a mental health disorder as an athlete is often unacceptable in conventional athletics (Rapkin, 2020; Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018). Athletes unable to hide mental health crises are stigmatized (Rapkin, 2020; Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018). Athletes dealing with mental health crises are subject to criticism, blame, and debate about their general fitness for participation in sports (Rapkin, 2020). The notion pervades that the champions of sports world do not struggle with mental health disorders (Way, 2021).

The general beliefs and attitudes surrounding the denial of mental illness in athletes belies a predictable truth: athletes are at a significantly increased risk of developing a mental health disorder (Poucher et al., 2021). Many athletes struggle with one or more mental health disorders (Chang et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2021; Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021).

Athletes are subjected to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, criticism, judgment (self-evaluation and evaluation by others), and time demands when compared to the general population (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). Participation in sports is taxing on both the physical and mental systems of the body (Grand & Goldberg, 2011).

Many resources are available to buffer the physical effects of sports but understanding the mental health effects of sports on athletes is far more limited (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010).

Outer and Inner Perfectionism

Competitive athletes endure outside pressure to be physically flawless and mentally strong at all times. This demand of perfection can trigger underlying tendencies and have major mental health consequences (Chang et al., 2020; Sauvé et al., 2021). The unrelenting pressure to perform physically and maintain mental composure promotes pathological perfectionistic tendencies in the athlete population (Chang et al., 2020; Sauvé et al., 2021).

Perfectionism is a personality trait defined as “the setting and pursuing of excessively high standards of performance together with overly critical self-evaluations (Chang et al., 2020).” Perfectionism is a personality component that is present in elite-level athletes. It is necessary to possess some level of perfectionism to succeed at any level in a given sport; however, this personality trait can trigger and exacerbate a myriad of mental health disorders (Sauvé et al., 2021).

Perfectionism as a personality trait can be divided into two categories: positive perfectionism and negative perfectionism. Positive perfectionism is associated with the underlying motivation of achieving a favorable outcome, whereas negative perfectionism seeks to avoid adverse or negative consequences (Chang et al., 2020). Both positive and negative perfectionism are associated with negative mental health outcomes. Overtraining, anxiety, and depression can also develop as a result of both types of the perfectionism personality trait (Chang et al., 2020).

Human beings are flawed and cannot be expected to achieve physical perfection or mental excellence all of the time; but those same basic standards do not apply to athletes. The burden on athletes to be perfect (imposed by both self and society) creates an intensely pressurized atmosphere that can worsen already existing mental health problems or trigger additional psychological disorders (Sauvé et al., 2021).

Isolation and Help-Seeking Behaviors

The nature of competitive sports breeds aloneness. As an athlete becomes more dedicated to their pursuits in sports, they become even more isolated (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018; Sauvé et al., 2021). This can reinforce a problem in fostering help-seeking behaviors among the athlete cohort (Sauvé et al., 2021). Mental health is deeply personal and elite athletes have few trusted sources upon which to rely.

The subject of mental health carries such a strong stigma within athletics that there is very little discourse among the sports community (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018). This culture of silence coupled with the athlete’s isolated existence leads to the belief that they are alone in their mental health struggles (Rapkin, 2020; Sauvé et al., 2021; Way, 2021). With no one to compare experiences and find common ground, the aloneness further intensifies and serves to compound suffering (Sauvé et al., 2021).

Athletes often believe that no one else is coping with mental health issues and that there is something uniquely wrong with them (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021). Whether spending hours training in solitude or performing in an arena with thousands of spectators, feelings of isolation and loneliness are a constant companion to many athletes (Sauvé et al., 2021). These feelings of aloneness exacerbate anxious responses and worsen mental health problems (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021).

It can be antithetical to the athletic mindset to seek help when grappling with a mental health crisis. This can be especially true for elite level athletes (Rapkin, 2020). Many in the athlete cohort are conditioned from a young age to possess a competitor’s mentality (Way, 2021). Elite athletes have grown accustomed to facing and overcoming many different types of challenges and obstacles in order to progress in their chosen sport. The principles of being unbeatable, working tirelessly to be the best, intense and continuous discipline, and elevated personal standards can be extremely detrimental to help-seeking behaviors (Rapkin, 2020).

Coaching Culture in Sports

Given the enhanced risk factors of developing one or more psychological disorders that athletes face, buffering effects and protective factors are crucial in coping with the mental health challenges that come with participation in sports. Coaching culture may influence the severity and overall expression of mental health issues in athletes (Grand & Goldberg, 2011; Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018; Way, 2021).

Coaching style affects athlete morale, influences attitudes, and sets the standard for healthy and productive failure-response (Grand & Goldberg, 2011). The coaching environment that reinforces positive and protective factors, such as choosing optimism over pessimism, may buffer some of the negative effects of sport-related stress and anxiety. Coaches are also on the frontlines of early detection of problematic mental health behaviors in athletes (Chang et al., 2020).

Coaching professionals have a powerful effect on the mental health of athletes under their instruction. A coach's response can accelerate an athlete's mental health crisis (Grand & Goldberg, 2011). The culture of coaching within sports can be toxic and misguided. Coaching culture creates an environment where empathic failure is prevalent, and emphasis is placed on internalizing perceived weakness (Grand & Goldberg, 2011; Way, 2021).

Coaches are focused on extracting peak performance from an athlete (Rapkin, 2020; Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018). Since sports is viewed as an exclusively a physical endeavor, traditional coaching techniques promote a militaristic type of approach to athletic training (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018). For the athlete struggling with mental health issues, this coaching style and approach exacerbates psychological problems (Grand & Goldberg, 2011). Athletes being coached in this environment become further isolated. Some may attempt to completely internalize and ignore their deteriorating mental health (Rapkin, 2020). Others who are unable to mask mental health symptoms may be shamed by the coach for being weak (Grand & Goldberg, 2011).

Strength of body and character are mainstay appraisals made in sports by all involved. An athlete openly experiencing a mental health crisis is at risk of being stigmatized and rejected as not having what it takes to succeed and lacking the heart of a champion. Coaches act as gatekeepers to opportunity and advancement (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018). There is no scenario in which an athlete benefits in the sports environment by exposing their mental health issues. There is a chronic and ever-present tacit pressure on athletes to appear invulnerable (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018). If an athlete is in crisis, there is immense external pressure to conceal it. This reinforces the stigma of mental health in sports and worsens an athlete's personal crisis.

A coach's response to an athlete's mental health challenges can profoundly worsen the situation. Coaches using humiliation, shame, or fear tactics create high levels of distress and anxiety in athletes (Grand & Goldberg, 2011). A harsh and authoritarian response can cause the deepening of a psychological crisis in athletes. This exacerbation of mental health symptoms often leads to a deterioration in physical skills and sport performance (Grand & Goldberg, 2011).

Alternatively, coaches can be a profound influence to promote and normalize mental health in sports (Way, 2021). Coaches that normalize open discussions about psychological health and engage in check-ins can help to buffer mental health issues among athletes. By leading with empathy and fostering awareness, coaches can be the frontline in identifying and treating burgeoning mental health problems in athletes (Way, 2021). Confronting a mental health challenge early on could prevent the issue from developing into a pathology. It would also greatly improve an athlete's quality of life and outlook (Way, 2021). A physically and mentally balanced athlete would be in the best position to reach peak sport performance levels.

Multiple-Role Relationships

The nature of multiple-role relationships is particularly problematic in the sports environment and places athletes at a heightened risk of abuse. Those closest to an athlete are in the strongest position to intervene during a mental health crisis, however, this rarely happens in sports (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018). The reason for this inaction can be explained by the abuse of multiple-role relationships (Rapkin, 2020; Sullivan & Nashman, 1998).

The relationship between an athlete and a coach is far more complicated than it appears. Coaches earn a salary from the athlete (Rapkin, 2020). They are also often viewed as a powerful authority figure by the athlete. Coaches stake their reputation on the performance and reputation of the athletes under their tutelage (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018). It is how they recruit future athletes and promote themselves in an extremely competitive environment.

An athlete exhibiting signs of a psychological crisis could have a significant impact on the coach's financial condition (Ryan & Dantzcher, 2018). It may also negatively impact their reputation within the sport. When viewed through this lens, coaches are incentivized on numerous levels to ignore signs of mental health problems and focus attention on getting the best possible physical performance from an athlete (Sauvé et al., 2021).

Governing bodies seek to promote the sport on a global scale. These federations exist to generate large fan-bases and promote widespread interest in the sport they represent (Rapkin, 2020). There is an immense amount of financial interest at stake (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021).

Governing bodies of sport also seek to increase participation and enrollment. If athletes are speaking out about the mental health challenges they face in sports, this can have a profoundly negative impact on fan-base attitudes, public interest, and participation levels (Sauvé et al., 2021). In a black and white world of profit and loss, mental health and wellness of athletes is not prioritized, and efforts are made to suppress the problem.

Beyond suppressing the discussion of mental health, governing bodies oftentimes fail to provide athletes key resources needed when confronting psychological crises. Where there are available resources, they are woefully inadequate, and access is limited (Rapkin, 2020). If an athlete's mental health issues bleed into sport performance or public discourse, governing bodies take punitive action (Ryan & Dantzscher, 2018). Athletes find that they are not selected to participate in qualifying competitions or other important events necessary to the success and expansion of their sports careers. Governing bodies create a climate that ties the stigma of mental health to real consequences for athletes (Ryan & Dantzscher, 2018).

Athletes, Sport Psychology, and the Multiple-Role Problem

Athletes view sport psychologists with distrust and skepticism (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021). In many cases, this distrust will have a chilling effect on help-seeking behaviors. There are pervasive concerns among the athlete cohort regarding issues of confidentiality. Athletes who do seek help from a sport psychologist are often plagued with the worry that the sport psychologist will claim credit for sport performance (Rapkin, 2020). Athletes internally assess what to share and conceal from sport psychology professionals.

These fears of breaches in confidentiality to coaches and governing bodies by sport psychology professionals are not unfounded (Sullivan & Nashman, 1998). The problematic multiple-role relationship issue is most prevalent among sport psychologists. It has been common practice among sport psychologists to view information sharing with coaches and governing bodies as part of their duties (Sullivan & Nashman, 1998).

Boundaries are often blurred since governing bodies are typically responsible for retaining the services of a sport psychology professional. Since the sports federation is the contracting agent, sport psychologists can feel beholden to provide details about their work with an athlete (Sullivan & Nashman, 1998). Coaches further strain the bounds of confidentiality with inquiries about subject matter and progress (Sullivan & Nashman, 1998).

This has led sport psychologists to view an athlete's professional circle as being entitled to information sharing. Central problems with multiple-role relationships, unwarranted breaches of client-athlete confidentiality, and established practices in the field are acknowledged and justified in the sport psychologist community as necessary in the unique sports environment (Sullivan & Nashman, 1998).

It is clear to see that when athletes talk about intense distrust and exercising great care in what they do and do not share during sessions with sport psychologists that their hesitancy may be justified (Rapkin, 2020; Ryan & Dantzscher, 2018). It is also plain to see how the malignant influence of multiple-role relationships would offer little to no therapeutic benefit to an athlete dealing with a psychological crisis and could potentially compound trauma.

Higher Incident Rates of Mental Health Issues in Athletes

Personality traits common in athletes coupled with the inherent stressors present in the sports environment serve to heighten their individual risk of developing psychological issues. Elite level athletes are especially vulnerable to mental health disorders within the athlete cohort (Poucher et al., 2021). According to a study on the prevalence of mental health disorders in the elite athlete population performed in 2019, it was found that 41.4% met the criteria for one or more mental disorders (Poucher et al., 2021). Depression symptoms were the most frequently reported mental health challenge at 31.7%, followed by symptoms of disordered eating at 8.6%, and general anxiety at 5.9% (Poucher et al., 2021).

Athletes have been shown to be more vulnerable to depression than non-athletes (Poucher et al., 2021). Stress factors present in the sports realm appear to increase the likelihood of depression among athletes. Athletes grapple with internal and external expectations more often than nonathletes (Chang et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2021).

Performance expectations account for some of the amplified risk of developing depression that athletes face, but it is not the only cause. Injuries, time demands, and identity issues related to athletic participation all play a role in worsening depression among athletes (Poucher et al., 2021; Sauvé et al., 2021).

Certain pressures and realities are integral functions of being a competitive athlete; a reality that serves to foster and cultivate an unhealthy anxiety response (Grand & Goldberg, 2011). Fear of failure, negative effects of a disappointing performance, social judgement, and crowd effects can all heighten anxiety response (Grand & Goldberg, 2011). Athletes suffer a range of anxiety related mental health disorders (Chang et al., 2020). Panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder all have shown a higher prevalence in the athlete population (Chang et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Given the scientific evidence regarding the pervasiveness of mental health disorders among athletes, it can be difficult to understand why action to alleviate the problem has not been more forthcoming (Chang et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2021). It has been a longstanding, chronic, persistent, and unacknowledged problem.

Perhaps the resistance to acknowledging the mental health crisis in sports is attributable to the cultural portrayal of sports figures as better and stronger versions of the general population (Rapkin, 2020). Recognizing and addressing the mental health crisis in sports would undermine that societal concept of athletes as superhuman.

The problem of complex multiple-role relationships in sports undoubtedly contributes to the deepening mental health crisis in sports. Oftentimes, those closest to and most trusted by an athlete are motivated by personal interests (Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018; Sullivan & Nashman, 1998). Clouded judgment paves the way for unethical multiple-role relationships, wherein conflicting interests subvert an athlete's personal needs (Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018; Sullivan & Nashman, 1998).

Even in circumstances where an athlete overcomes the multitude of internal and external barriers to help-seeking action, the fear of repercussions regarding career advancement and reputational harm are powerful and may dissuade the pursuit of mental health treatment (Rapkin, 2020; Sauvé et al., 2021). The culture within sports and the pervasive stigma surrounding athletes and psychological issues can derail athletic pursuits. The stakes are extremely high and the risk of coming forward with a mental health problem can be too much to bear. With one breach of confidentiality, an athlete's career can be extinguished (Rapkin, 2020; Ryan & Dantzschler, 2018).

Accepting that athletes are more vulnerable to certain mental health disorders and providing a supportive framework within which they can seek help, treatment, and resources without judgement is essential to their physical and mental well-being (Poucher et al., 2021). The overwhelming consensus of the information currently available suggests that comprehensive action is needed to address the distinctive mental health challenges that exist within sports and provide significantly more robust psychological wellness support to athletes (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010).

There are steps that can be taken which would immediately improve mental health services to athletes. Most of these actions can be integrated into existing framework and would not require a large financial commitment. 1) Mental health crises within sports can and should be treated with the same prioritization and nonjudgment as physical injury. 2) Confidential resources must be made available to athletes in a manner that eliminates the threat of multiple-role relationship abuse. 3) Mental health education can be a compulsory component of sports training and should include psychological coping skills and strategies (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010).

Future Research

Current research supports the idea that physical athletic training programs should include mental health coping skills and strategies (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). Broad scale systemic access changes are needed within sports. A shift in cultural expectations and attitudes outside of the sport context are also crucial in reducing the stigma faced by athletes who need mental health help, but real change is gradual and takes time.

Breaking the culture of silence is key. Former athletes being willing to speak freely and openly about the mental health challenges they experienced can pierce the stigma, and this is essential to expanding mental health support service for current athletes (Rapkin, 2020).

When former athletes speak out about their mental health journey in sports it makes the conversation normative; moreover, it communicates to current athletes that they are not alone and expands the future global mental health picture in sports (Rapkin, 2020). Future research may be directed toward developing outreach programs that connect former athletes willing to share their mental health struggles in sports with current athletes seeking support.

Future research is needed on ways to counteract athlete distrust of sport psychology professionals. Since sport psychologists are the frontline of care, it is crucial that the field adapt current resources to better fit the needs of the client-athlete (Rapkin, 2020). Altering common practices to address athlete perceptions regarding confidentiality and multiple-role relationships may increase help-seeking behavior habits among athletes (Sullivan & Nashman, 1998).

Improving the current picture of mental health in sports is an essential and long overdue first step, but far more action is needed. Future research may also include ways to support athletes who are transitioning out of their sport (Rapkin, 2020; Way, 2021). The mental health problems that plague athletes do not end on the day of retirement. These psychological issues grow and change in complexity as athletes evolve out of athletics and into the next phase of life (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Rapkin, 2020).

The creation of aftercare support programs and resources can help to prepare athletes for the changes that come with life after a sports career. Existing services should be expanded to include promoting coping techniques helpful to those ending a career in athletics and developing skills needed in non-sport life phases.

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