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Mental Health in Performance Sport: An Inter-Disciplinary Approach

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Introduction:

The mental health of athletes, coaches, and referees has recently been the topic of much interest (Reardon et al., 2019). Research has consistently shown that a multidisciplinary approach, one rooted in an ecological understanding of the influences of mental health, be they biological or environmental, is needed within sport (Gorczynski et al., 2020). Within the field of sports science, a well-choreographed dance must occur, where performance and wellbeing are carefully understood and balanced. This dance, too, is observed by the many support staff who aim to help their respective teams compete. But how prepared are sports scientists to support the mental health needs of athletes? The purpose of our study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of individuals who work in an athlete support role.

Methods:

After receiving ethical approval, we invited delegates to a World Café – a meeting where participants share their knowledge and experiences on a topic – at the 2019 British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences conference.

48 individuals (23 Females, 22 Males, 3 other) provided informed consent and participated in a World Café (mean age 37 ± 9.7 years). Participants included applied practitioners (n=18), academics (n=23), and included individuals from physiology (n=8), biomechanics (n=3), psychology (n=18), and sociology (n= 7).

The World Café consisted of a short presentation on mental health and sport, and activities where participants provided their thoughts in small groups. The activities addressed the

following topics: (a) mental health knowledge, stigma and support networks in their current role; (b) the extent to which mental health issues are present in their practice and how they approach mental health care; (c) how training has prepared them to understand mental health; and (d) the referral processes they follow and barriers to effective referral. Each group recorded their answers on post-it notes affixed to large sheets of paper. After the World Café, responses analysed thematically.

Findings:

Overall, the majority of participants could identify, had knowledge of mental health symptoms and disorders and could identify pathways of seeking support for poor mental health. Despite this, many participants felt unprepared and specifically not trained to work with athlete mental health. The majority of participants also stated that poor mental health was an issue that was encountered in their roles, and that challenges existed pertaining to self-stigma, the stigmatization of others living with mental health symptoms or disorders, and the stigmatization of seeking support. Prevalent perceived barriers to helping athletes seek support for poor mental health were a stigmatizing environment and workload.

Reflections

While our findings are preliminary, interest surrounding the topic of mental health from participants suggest that it is an important one for sports scientists. Participants drew from multiple roles as applied practitioners, university lecturers and coaches. Most recognised their role in supporting mental health. Participants painted a 'messy landscape' in which they illustrated that some high-performance environments and educational institutions have clear referral processes. In other environments, referral processes were poorly defined. Support was often lacking for sub-clinical conditions, with agency and disciplinary

boundaries preventing many from doing more. Whilst, many agreed that there was more openness surrounding talking about mental health, athletes were more likely to talk to physiotherapists or coaches than trained psychologists. The recommendations of Patel *et al.* (2018) are important in this regard. They view mental health as a complex product of socioenvironmental influences that affect how people think and feel. Therefore, whilst clinical experts have a role in supporting mental health, engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders in the development of sustainable beneficial mental health practices is key. Regardless of discipline, developing capacity to support good mental health in sport requires engagement from everyone, even if we consider ourselves to be non-specialists.

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Bios:

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