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Sport, exercise and good mental health

Good mental health is more than the absence of a mental health problem. This Mental Health Awareness Week, we are going to look at mental health from a new angle. Rather than ask why so many people are living with mental health problems, we will seek to uncover why too few of us are thriving with good mental health (Mental Health Foundation)

Recent increases in media coverage and public knowledge have shed light on Sport and exercise as key contributors to our mental health. However, the contrast between discussions in each of these areas is clear:

- Discussions around sport and mental health link to the concerns for athletes in the pressure environments of high-level competitive sport.
- Discussions around exercise and mental health link to the benefits of exercise to improve mental health

Mental Health – What is it?

Mental health is 'a state of well-being in which the individual realises their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community' (WHO 2001, 1). Therefore, in contrast, mental health problems are characterised by alterations in cognition, emotion or social behaviour associated with distress or impaired functioning (Sawyer et al. 2000).

Mental Health and Exercise

There have been many publications citing the mental health benefits of physical activity. There are benefits from the social interaction and mutual support resulting from participating in group exercise (Peluso & Andrade, 2005, p. 62); the improved mood, self-confidence and self-esteem resulting from engaging in challenging physical activity (Biddle & Mutrie, 2008); and the distraction that physical activity provides from day-to-day stressors (Morgan, 1985).



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Other suggested reasons for taking part range from the sense of autonomy that comes from self-selecting the exercise and doing it voluntarily and solely in one's own interests and the importance of the effort expended in exercising through to the improved sense of relatedness created by engaging in physical activities with others (Deci and Ryan, 2002 ; Sylvester et al., 2012).

Mental Health and Sport

Elite athletes are not immune to developing a mental illness and are often at the peak of their competitive careers during these high-risk years (Allen and Hopkins, 2015). Moreover, elite athletes experience unique stressors that can have deleterious effects on mental health including sport-related stress (Noblet and Gifford, 2002), injuries (Smith, 1996; Appaneal et al., 2009), living away from home (Bruner et al., 2008), and burnout (Gustafsson et al., 2011).

Mental toughness in sport has always been a buzz phrase. However, it has been proposed that mental health and mental toughness are contradictory concepts in the world of elite sport. Accordingly, mental toughness – ‘an unshakeable perseverance and conviction towards some goal despite pressure or adversity’ (Middleton et al. 2004) – has long been valued in sport and is an important factor in determining sporting outcomes and success. Athletes with greater mental toughness cope more effectively with adversity and pressure, possess increased resilience in the face of challenges and deliver more consistent, cognitive and physical performance in sport (Crust 2007). This link provides motivation for coaches to play a role in the promotion and practice of psychological skills that are beneficial to athlete mental wellbeing.

Behind the attention on the Mental Health challenges that many athletes face we have lost the focus on the many positives that playing competitive sport can bring to athletes. The sports environment fosters positive athlete development (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin 2005) by facilitating the self-esteem, identity formation and feelings of competence, and encouraging positive peer relationships, leadership skills, teamwork, commitment and discipline (Danish, Forneris, and



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Wallace 2005). The reciprocal social support that occurs in sport is also an important factor in promoting physical and mental well-being (Carless and Douglas 2008).

Good mental health is not 'one size fits all'...

For some sport and/or exercise is the activity that helps them overcome mental health issues. While for many it is the social network from these environments that help them. Therefore, within sport, multidisciplinary sport science and medicine teams play an important role in achieving an optimal balance between preventing athlete ill-health and optimizing well-being and performance. The role of support staff is reinforced by the fact that when people do reach out, they prefer to seek help from someone they already know and trust. This is a form of guidance from trusted connections in order to seek appropriate professional help for their mental health problems (Rickwood et al. 2005).

'Whether you opt for competitive sport or exercise, find the activity and support network that helps you establish and maintain good mental health'



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