Sport Psychology of the Female Athlete

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Disclosures

- None
Shira A. Oretzky, Ph.D.

• Clinical And Sport Psychologist
• Sport History
• Doctoral Dissertation
  • The Effects of Yoga on Elevated Depressive and Somatic Symptoms in Young Adults
• San Diego State University
  • Liaison to SDSU Athletics
• Private Practice- La Jolla, CA
• San Diego Psychological Association
  • Board of Directors
• San Diego Sport Psychology Associates
Mental Health Stigma and Athletes

• There has been a lot of stigma around mental health, especially in the sports culture.

• Athletes are taught to tough it out, act strong, persist through pain.

• This may work for a little distress but not for more serious issues.
  • There is a difference between pushing through discomfort and playing with a broken leg.

• Athletes are much more comfortable reaching out for help around physical health complaints and injuries than around mental and emotional challenges.
Mental Health Statistics for Athletes

• Athletes experience mental health issues at about the same rate as non athlete peers but reach out for help at much lower rates.

• In a random sample of approximately 7,000 students at nine colleges and universities in 2014, use of mental health services was much lower among intercollegiate athletes as compared to students overall. Among students with significant depression or anxiety symptoms, only 10% of athletes used mental health services, as compared to 30% of students overall.¹

• Student-athletes are often missing the care that would be beneficial.
Mental Health Statistics for Athletes Versus Non-Athletes

Have you ever felt so depressed that it was difficult to function? (Yes, in the last 12 months)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STUDENT-ATHLETE</th>
<th>NON-ATHLETE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Have you ever felt overwhelming anxiety? (Yes, in the last 12 months)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STUDENT-ATHLETES</th>
<th>NON-ATHLETES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STUDENT-ATHLETE</th>
<th>NON-ATHLETE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STUDENT-ATHLETES</th>
<th>NON-ATHLETES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within gender and within race differences are statistically significant, chi-square, $p < .01$

Figure 1 ACHA NCHA-II Mental Health Statistics
Mental Health and Wellness Initiatives

- Professional Sports Leagues such as the MLB and the NBA, and the USOC and Team USA are implementing mental health & wellness initiatives to better address:
  - The role of the mind in health and performance: Optimal Health = Physical + Mental
  - The importance of players overall well-being
Mental Health and Wellness Initiatives

• NCAA Best Practices Guidelines: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness
  • Mental health is a part of athlete health, not separate from it
  • Promoting health enhances performance

• 4 Best Practices:
  1. Clinical Licensure of Practitioners Providing Mental Health
  2. Procedures for Identification and Referral of Student-Athletes to Qualified Practitioners - MHEAP and Routine Referral
  3. Pre-Participation Mental Health Screening
  4. Health Promoting Environments that Support Mental Well-Being and Resilience
Mental Health and Wellness Initiatives

• San Diego State University
  • Collaboration between:
    • Athletics Medicine
    • Counseling & Psychological Services
• Student-athlete mental health and wellness initiatives
  • In accordance with NCAA Best Practices
  • Treatment team approach to provide the best care
  • Proactive approach- early identification and Tx
• Task Forces- Mental Health, Disordered Eating
• SAC
Mental Health Continuum

Figure 2 Mental Health Continuum
Protective Factors from Sport

- Increasing number of females participating in sports.
- Participating in sports can help females develop confidence, leadership, and team building skills.
- 94% of women in the C-suit played sports
- 52% of women in the C-suit played sports at the university level

Figure 3 Women, Sport, and Leadership
Athletes and Mental Health: The Hidden Opponent  
| Victoria Garrick | TEDxUSC
Prominent Issues Facing Student-Athletes

- What issues do you think student-athletes most frequently present to sport psychologists?
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Sleep Issues
  - Performance Pressures and Concerns
  - Injuries
  - Disordered Eating
  - Confidence
  - Burnout
  - Substance Abuse
  - Relationships with Coaches, Teammates, Significant Others, and Family
Recognizing Signs of Distress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Signs (may be the most obvious)</th>
<th>Mental Signs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Changes in appetite or weight</td>
<td>• Difficulty with focus/concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Changes in sleep-difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much</td>
<td>• Forgetfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dragging at practice</td>
<td>• Difficulty making decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Physical complains not related to sports injury-headaches, GI complaints</td>
<td>• Negative thinking or negative self-talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Overuse injuries, unresolved injuries, or continually being injured</td>
<td>• All or nothing thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological Signs</th>
<th>Behavioral Signs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Agitation</td>
<td>• Withdrawing from teammates or daily activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Excessive worry</td>
<td>• Substance use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Significant fluctuations in mood</td>
<td>• Out of control behaviors, getting in trouble, acting irresponsible, lying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of interest or pleasure</td>
<td>• Significant decreases in academic and or athletic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Suicidal thoughts- talking about death, dying, or going away</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
General Assessment for the Mental Health of Athletes

• What type of questions would you typically ask athletes to assess for mental health?

• What do you do with the information? Referrals?

• As a doctor you are often the first line. It is much safer and less stigmatized to go to a doctor than a psychologist.
### PHQ-9

Patient Health Questionnaire-9  
PHQ-9 Diagnostic tool for mental health disorders for healthcare professionals.

#### PHQ-9 Diagnostic tool for mental health disorders for healthcare professionals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Several days</th>
<th>More than half the days</th>
<th>Nearly every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feeling tired or having little energy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Poor appetite or overeating</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite — being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For office coding:  

\[ \text{Total Score: } \]

If you checked off any problems, how difficult have these problems made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

- Not difficult at all  
- Somewhat difficult  
- Very difficult  
- Extremely difficult
Psychophysiology and Athletic Performance

• The Psychophysiological Principle: “Every change in the physiological state is accompanied by a change in the mental/emotional state, conscious or unconscious, and conversely every change in the mental-emotional state conscious or unconscious, is accompanied by an appropriate change in the physiological state.”

7
The Autonomic Nervous System

- **Sympathetic - Fight, Flight, or Freeze**
  - Mediates the stress response
  - Activates or alarm reaction
  - Energizes
  - Survival mechanism

- **Parasympathetic - Rest and Digest**
  - Mediates the relaxation response
  - Deactivates
  - Restores, replenishes, recovery
The Autonomic Nervous System

Figure 4 Autonomic Nervous System
Biofeedback

What is biofeedback?
HRV Biofeedback involves using a computer-based training system to increase participant’s self-awareness of physiological responses to stress (heart rate, respiration, temperature, muscle tension) and learn how to regulate these responses more effectively and efficiently, thereby reducing the effect they have on performance.
During biofeedback training, an athlete is taught how to breath at his/her resonant frequency of approximately 5-7 breaths per minute which synchronizes the heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration. This enables increased psychophysiological (mind-body) functioning when a person is in a resting state. In turn this can help with pre-competition preparation, recovery, general stress management, focus during a task, and improved performance.
Biofeedback for Optimal Sport Performance

- Two key mental skills are needed for consistent successful performance in high performance environments:
  - The ability to self-manage activation
  - The capacity to effectively focus
- **Biofeedback training provides psychophysiological feedback to the athlete, helping them to develop:**
  - Improved self-awareness
  - Greater ability to self-regulate psychophysiological processes
- **Biofeedback training helps athletes to:**
  - Reduce anxiety
  - Improve attention
  - Enhance Performance
Biofeedback

- **Modalities**
  - Heart Rate
  - Respiration Rate
  - Hand Temperature
  - Muscle Tension (EMG)
  - Respiratory Sinus Arrhythmia- The change in heart rate that occurs along with respiration.
  - Heart Rate Variability- the rhythmic change in heart rate. Measured by the difference between the fastest and slowest heart rate.
Heart Rate Variability (HRV) and Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL</th>
<th>MENTAL</th>
<th>EMOTIONAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased oxygen flow to your muscles and cells</td>
<td>Improved cognitive abilities</td>
<td>Increased mood and mental state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased blood pressure</td>
<td>Improved focus and concentration</td>
<td>Decreased performance anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased physical sx of stress-ie. headaches, stomach aches</td>
<td></td>
<td>The ability to remain calm even during stressful situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased muscle tension</td>
<td></td>
<td>Improved Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved sleep</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved motor coordination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased immune system functioning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faster reaction times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HRV Training + Mental Skills Training for Optimal Performance

• HRV training can be combined with:
  • Mindfulness
  • Awareness, Acceptance, Action
  • Performance Cue Statements/Positive Self-talk
  • Visualization
  • Progressive Muscle Relaxation
Questions

Contact Info:
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www.themindedge.com

Thank you!
References