

The Mental Health of Elite Athletes is More at Risk

Callie Reing

Elon University

SPT2120B

Dr. Dabbs

1 December 2021

Introduction

Society today is finally beginning to address and focus on mental health. As mental health has gained more awareness there has been more research conducted studying it and its effects on individuals. Through numerous cases one can conclude that the mental health of elite athletes is more at risk than those of an ordinary individual. In this case I am defining an elite athlete as someone who plays professional sport or plays at a highly competitive level. These athletes are exposed to unique stressors which increase their risk of getting a mental illness. They also face unique barriers and obstacles, making it more difficult for them to seek help and aid.

Stressors Athletes Face

Elite athletes' careers and lifestyle differ from the average person as they are exposed to stressors that can negatively impact their mental health, "Competitive international sport has led to increased pressure on elite athletes and the high demands and extensive training loads present potential threats to athletes' MH" (Kuettel & Larsen, 2019). Some of these stressors include, "overtraining, pressure to perform, poor athletic performances, tense coach-athlete or team-mate-athlete relationships, injury, and stressors related to retirement from sport" (Poucher, Zoë et al., 2019). Kuettel and Larson (2019) identify similar risk factors in elite athletics which include; maladaptive personality traits and identity, negative relationships, lack of social support, low quality of sleep, poor eating habits, pressure or competitive anxiety, fear of failure or injury, low support from teammates, uncertainty about retirement, and stigma towards seeking help for mental health. They also found that sports career dissatisfaction poses the strongest threat to the mental well being of athletes, as it has the highest correlation with depressive symptoms, and female athletes are more at risk to developing these depressive symptoms. All these things

contribute to creating an environment which puts elite athletes more at risk to have a mental disorder.

Negative Effects

The consequences of the stressors and pressures elite athletes face can be detrimental to the athletes mental health as they can lead to anxiety or depression induced mental illnesses or disorders. Through a survey conducted polling professional athletes, Gulliver et al. (2015) found that close to 50% of the elite athletes [...] met diagnostic criteria for at least one mental disorder” (62). The majority of whom are younger and typically female. This indicates the prominence of mental illness among this population, especially for women. In another survey conducted polling elite athletes and ordinary individuals it found that elite athletes are 34% more likely to have depression or anxiety than the general population (Tardelli et al., 2021). This statistic clearly proves that the environment and lifestyle elite athletes are exposed to and live in, have a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. To emphasize the point, another survey done polling 187 elite athletes from various sports and various age ranges, found that “21% of elite athletes met the criteria for moderate symptoms of depression with 8.6% meeting the suggested criteria for a major depressive episode (Kuettel & Larsen, 2019). These are concerning high rates for those in elite athletics.

One can see these statistics come to life when looking at what has been happening recently in the realm of athletics, as athletes are beginning to speak out about their mental health. Naomi Osaka withdrew from the 2021 French Open because she had suffered from “long bouts of depression” since the 2018 US Open and needed to take some time away from the tennis court. Inspired by Osaka, Simone Biles stepped out from the 2021 Tokyo Olympics demonstrating how detrimental the “winning at all costs” mentality can be, especially for an elite

athlete. Many other athletes are starting to speak out about their mental health struggles through various different forms, frequently through autobiographies. These athletes universally claim that the pressure from feeling as if everyone is watching and depending on you, can build up to be too much. This pressure that comes from the athlete themselves, teammates, coaches, fans, and others causes many to not enjoy their sport anymore. This unbearable pressure is why Simone Biles decided to step out of the Olympics and is what prompted her to address that, “It's OK sometimes to even sit out the big competitions to focus on yourself, because it shows how strong of a competitor and person that you really are” (Biles). Athletes like Osaka and Biles who are openly addressing their problems with mental illness help to destigmatize and bring awareness to mental health especially within competitive athletics.

Barriers Athletes Faces

Mental health has a pre-existing incorrect stigma of being fake or seen as a weakness. In athletics this stigma is intensified as athletes are supposed to be viewed as mentally and physically tough. This often stops athletes from admitting a mental illness and/or from getting help for it. “Overt comments and encouragement from various figures in an athlete’s life to play through disorder or injury, or more subtle suggestions that imply those who experience injury are weak may also contribute to an athlete’s desire to dismiss and play through mental disorder” (Poucher, Zoë et al., 64). Since athletes are supposed to be mentally tough and mental disorders used to wrongfully be viewed as weakness, there is a negative stigma around admitting mental illness and getting help for it. Besides stigma, elite athletes face many additional barriers that may discourage them from seeking help for a mental illness. These include a lack of time, with their intensive practice and competition/game schedules, time to get the appropriate care is limited. A lack of knowledge surrounding mental health, athletes, coaches and staff may not

know enough about the symptoms of mental illnesses to recognize that an individual needs help, and they may be unaware of the best way to go about treating the patient. And finally negative experiences when seeking help in the past, which could discourage athletes from getting care again.

Solutions

Education on research, stigmas, and barriers is important to improving the mental health of elite athletes. Firstly, it is essential to identify what puts elite athletes' health at a higher risk than the average person, in order to recognize what needs improvement and identify what needs to be focused on. Next, the industry must acknowledge the barriers athletes face so they can better combat these in their efforts moving forward. It's also important to know and acknowledge how powerful the stigmas on mental toughness are, and how they deter athletes from seeking the appropriate treatment. Finally, it's critical for the industry to look at research and studies on mental health and take these findings into account when developing the environment for elite athletes so that it has the best, most mentally friendly, atmosphere possible. The concerning statistics should also serve as a motivator for individuals to make more of an effort to normalize getting help, and to make getting help more accessible.

Besides educating oneself on the best way to go about combating the problem, organizations and individuals need to take action by providing more accessible help. There was another study done during the Rio 2016 Olympics where 58% of the athletes received psychological care and then took a survey which showed that out of the 58%, 91% of the participants considered the care very valuable and essential for their athletic performance (Tardelli et al., 2021). This demonstrates that when athletes do receive psychological support,

they find it very helpful and worthwhile. So if sports psychologists were made more accessible the mental health of many athletes has the potential to improve.

Counter Argument

Many argue that athletics can have positive effects on mental health because they can increase a participant's physical activity, give individuals a feeling of belonging and community, and can serve as an outlet from real life stressors. In a questionnaire with 750 respondents that examined the long-term value of competitive exercise over a 7 year period, it found that 90% of the respondents were interested in good health (Shephard et al., 1995). Good health includes mental wellness which is gained through the exercise and the socialization one experiences in competitive sport. 76% of individuals considered themselves as less vulnerable to viral illnesses than their peers (Shephard et al., 1995). This is significant because there is a strong positive correlation between physical health and mental health, so since playing sports lessens risks to physical health, mental health risks are lowered as well. 88% of respondents reported sleeping well or very well after participating in sport (Shephard et al., 1995). Good sleep has a positive correlation with improved mental health, so as people participate in athletics, they experience a better night's rest, and as a result develop better mental health. Finally, 68% of people polled regarded their quality of life as much better than that of their sedentary friends (Shephard et al., 1995). When one reports having a good quality of life, their mental health is typically in good shape. These statistics show the positive effects sports have on mental health, so since an elite athlete's career is playing sports one might contend that this continuous exposure to sport does not put the athlete's health at risk, rather it does the opposite and benefits their mental health.

Bias

Since I am not an elite athlete I have my bias. I do not know what the pressures are like when being held on a platform, or what it's like having my whole career be based on my athletic performance. Athletes could have different views on how to best address and combat the issue of mental health as they are actually experiencing it and know all the behind the scenes factors involved that I might overlook. I am also biased in the way that I regard mental health. I think that it is a very important and heavy issue that has impacted the life of many and has taken too long to be openly addressed. Others might not regard mental health as such a pressing issue or may argue that athletics are actually beneficial to mental health.

Conclusion

In conclusion the mental health of elite athletes is more at risk than the average person due to the unique stressors they face and the extra barriers that may prohibit them from obtaining suitable care. In order to fix this problem we must break the stigma, address the problem, and educate ourselves on the additional risks elite athletes face. Along with that the industry needs to take action and make care more accessible to athletes. The problem of elite athletes' mental health is a critical issue, as the consequences of pressure and stigma filled environments can have prominent negative impacts on athletes' lives. Many athletes are suffering and either have no outlet for care or feel as if they should not need care. This can be even more detrimental for the individual and their overall well being. So, teams should take research into account to develop a more positive, mentally friendly environment for their athletes so the number of individuals who suffer from depression due to the stress of their competitive environment decreases, and so that the stigma against getting help for these illnesses fades.

References

- Kuettel, A., & Larsen, C. H. (2020). "Risk and protective factors for mental health in elite athletes: A scoping review." *International Review of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 13(1), 231–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2019.1689574>
- Poucher, Zoë A., et al. (2019) "A Commentary on Mental Health Research in Elite Sport." *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2019, pp. 60–82.
- <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2019.1668496>
- Shephard RJ, Kavanagh T, Mertens DJ, et al. (1995) "Personal health benefits of Masters athletics competition." *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 29:35-40.
- <https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/29/1/35>.
- Tardelli, V. S., Parmigiano, T. R., Castaldelli-Maia, J. M., & Fidalgo, T. M. (2021). "Pressure is not a privilege: What we can learn from Simone Biles." *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry*.
- <https://doi.org/10.1590/1516-4446-2021-0036>