

Building the Resilient Athlete

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The official health care provider
of Sporting Kansas City



Introduction:

- Becky Wiseman, I am a Licensed Specialist Clinical Social Worker
- I have 24 years of experience working with adolescents and families
- For the last three years, I have been dedicated to Children's Mercy Sports Medicine Center providing mental health support to student athletes and families.
- Soccer mom of two teenage children and a wife to a husband who coaches soccer as well.



Objectives

- Provide a working definition of resiliency in athletes
- Discuss the impact and prevalence that a changing world has had on the mental wellness of student athletes
- Discuss the effects that racism has on the mental wellness of athletes of color
- Explore 3 types of anxiety
- Provide a performance model and language that helps athletes to deal with anxiety and develop resiliency
- Explore the role that mental wellness and resiliency plays in the prevention of injury
- Inspire a future where mental wellness is integrated into all youth sports

Work being done at Children's Mercy Sports Medicine Center

- Working with Athletes during adjustment to injury
 - Understanding their increase in anxiousness or depressed mood
 - Helping to develop new coping skills
 - Normalizing their experience
 - Readiness for return to play
 - Dealing with social issues created by injury



Work being done at Children's Mercy Sports Medicine Center

- Working with athletes who have not experienced injury, but are experiencing distress
- Distress can include anxiety, depressed mood, panic, relationship issues, low levels of confidence and trauma
- If kids are experiencing distress, it will affect all areas of their lives, including sports

What is Resiliency?

- In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways. — *Michael Ungar. [Resilience Across Cultures](#)*

Reducing the negative effects of stress on the student-athlete

- One goal of treatment is to reduce the distress and suffering that the student athlete experiences due to stress and/or fear. Another goal of treatment is for the student athlete to feel capable of helping themselves during times of difficulty

Effect of COVID on college athletes

The University Of North Texas Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence and in collaboration with Wayne State University

Launched a study to recognize the potential effects that the disruption in sports had on the mental health and psychological well-being of collegiate student athletes. Over 5700 student athletes participated in the survey which was given from April 2020-May 2020.

A small, but sizable number of athletes scored at the highest levels (indicating severe impairment) in terms of depressive symptoms, psychological distress, and dissatisfaction with life. Even more fell into the moderate (or subclinical) level on these measures; relatively few athletes reported having no symptoms or experiencing no distress.

The mental health effects of racism in sport

- A growing body of evidence demonstrates that racial discrimination triggers the body's stress response (PTSD)
- Over time, an increase of the body's stress response negatively impacts the individual's physical health, but even more so has a negative impact on an individual's mental health
- 121 studies were reviewed in 2013 and found that youth between the ages of 12-18 who experienced discrimination were significantly more likely to experience psychological distress such as depression and anxiety

Becoming a protective factor for athletes

- Racism is a mental wellness issue because racism creates trauma
- Every incident of racism that is prevented can help reduce the risk of a person developing psychological distress such as depression or anxiety.
- It is up to the adults and organizers of youth sporting events to be protective factors in the lives of young athletes

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Naming the experience

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
 - Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
 - Panic Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Characterized by chronic anxiety, exaggerated worry and tension, even when there is little or nothing to provoke it.

Signs and symptoms:

- Feeling apprehensive
- Feeling powerless
- Having a sense of impending danger, panic or doom
- Feeling unsafe in the environment

What GAD looks like in Athletes

- Worried about safety of self or others on the field
- Worried about being on time, forgetting items, or going to the wrong location
- Worried about failing in practice and/or games
- Worried about conditions for the practice and/or games
- Rapid breathing
- Sweating
- Increased heart rate
- Stomach issues

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which physical harm occurred or was threatened.



Signs and symptoms:

- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Severe anxiety
- Intrusive thoughts

What PTSD look like in Athletes

- Apprehension in recovery
- Hyper alert within their environment
- Physical reaction to sounds or sensations related to injury
- Physical reaction to watching others perform activity which resulted in injury
- Fear of returning to sport
- Rapid breathing
- Nausea
- Increased heart rate

Social Anxiety Disorder

Characterized by overwhelming anxiety and excessive self-consciousness in social situations.

Signs and Symptoms:

- Avoidance of groups, crowds, and/or social situations
- Fear of casual conversations with others
- Fear of performing in front of others
- Worried about judgment from others
- Strong emotions related to social events

What Social Anxiety looks like in Athletes

- Overthinking or getting stuck in mistakes
- Negative self talk
- Fear of failing
- Fear of embarrassing self
- Fear of disappointing parents, coaches, or teammates
- Trouble focusing on performance
- Stomach issue
- Feeling hot
- Sweating
- Loss of energy

Prevalence of anxiety in student athletes

- Nearly one in three adolescents in the United States (31.9 percent) meet criteria for an anxiety disorder.
- Of those, half begin experiencing their anxiety disorder by age 6.
- NCAA research shows that almost 85 percent of certified athletic trainers believe anxiety disorders are currently an issue with student-athletes on their campus.

(These numbers were reported before COVID.)

Presents of stress response and injury

- Based on the 1988, Stress and Injury Model developed by Andersen and Williams, a person's stress response can increase or decrease their potential risk of encountering sport injury
- Stress response causes increased muscle tension, narrowing of visual field, and increased distractibility

Can injuries be prevented through mental training?

- Several studies including one conducted with Swedish soccer players showed a reduction in injury for players using a combination of
 - somatic/cognitive relaxation
 - stress management
 - goal setting
 - confidence training

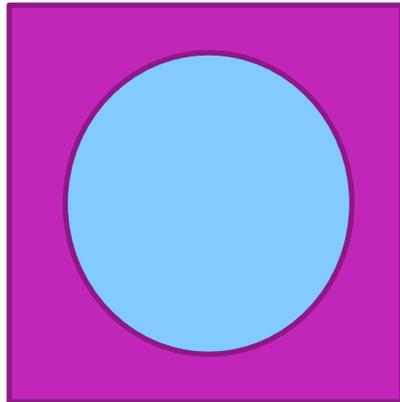
Can injuries be prevented through mental training?

- Results of the study
- In the control group of 16 male and female players there were a total of 21 injuries for an average of 1.31 injuries per person
- In the treatment group of 13 male and female players there were a total of 3 injuries for an average of 0.22 injuries per person

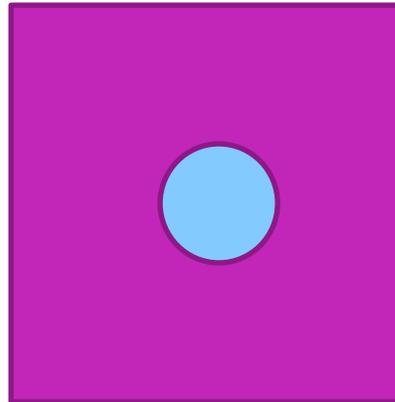
Developing a system for resiliency

- Having a system allows for emotions to be accepted and therefore less disruptive
- It creates the opportunity for the student athlete to navigate their own resources during times of distress
- A system should be developed and practiced prior to a distressful event occurring and should be able to be used with minimal thought or effort

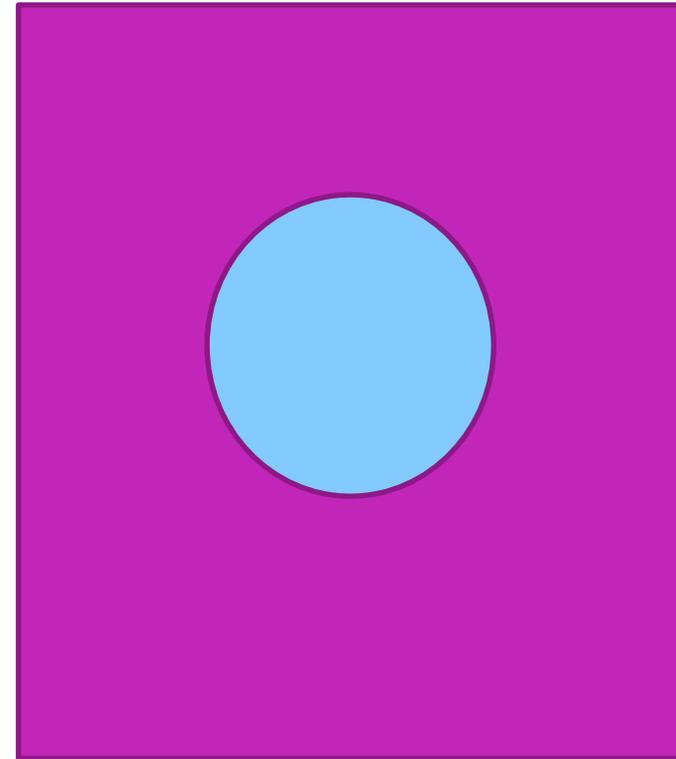
Acceptance and Commitment Theory



Baseline



Traditional
Treatment



ACT

Developing a system

Step One: Speak to the body

- GI discomfort
- Muscular effect, tension in the body
 - Breathing, rapid or shallow
 - Heart rate, increase
 - Glandular, increased sweating

Step 1:

- **Breathing techniques:**

- 4, 2, 7
- Diaphragm breathing
- Eye fixation breathing
- Body relaxation

- **Mindfulness:**

- Moments of peace
- Allowing thoughts to wander without judgment
- Bringing focus back to the breath over and over again



Developing a system

Step 2: Speak to psychological distress

- **Awareness:** Recognizing and naming the distressful feeling: anxiety, fear, or panic
- **Acceptance:** Accepting the experience without judgement of self or others. Not forcing any results, but allowing things to be as they are

Developing a system

Step 3: Commit to moving forward

- **Commit to what is most important:**

The understanding that you can experience discomfort and at the same time commit to moving towards what is most important. The commitment becomes the focus rather than the distress

Proactive verse Reactive

- “The question is not if an athlete will encounter adversity in sport, but instead, how will they respond when adversity occurs?”
- Let’s teach athletes the skills they need to respond as resilient players rather than waiting for them to break and then try to repair...

Future of Mental Wellness in Sports

- Give student-athletes the tools needed to navigate the ever-evolving world of organized sports.
- Develop programming that teaches coaches and parents ways to integrate mental strategies with their players.
- Have mental health programming become standard in youth sports.

Implementation in practice

- Breathing exercises as part of the warm-up
- Encourage players to accept their experiences without judgement of those experiences
- Help players to commit their thinking and actions to what is most important in that moment

- **Story of Caitlin....**

Questions???

Citations

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