

Getting Back to “Life as Usual”

The psychological impact of lockdown on athletes

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The official health care provider
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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 four years, I have been dedicated to Children's Mercy Sports Medicine Center providing mental health support to student athletes and families
- Soccer mom/soccer wife



Objectives

- Explore the impact that the lockdown had on athletes' well-being
- Discuss how athletic identity is developed
- Explore how an athlete's identity is affected by unexpected events
- Examine themes that were seen in the Sports Medicine mental health services.
- Discuss supporting a “new normal”



“The COVID Experience”

- “A significant feature of the ‘the COVID experience’ has been the abrupt and repeated halting of competitive sport due to national lockdowns or outbreak of the virus in sport teams and/or their respective institutions. The start-stop nature that has existed over the course of the pandemic has presented a multitude of stressors.”

Knowles, C., Shannon, S., Prentice, G., & Breslin, G. (2021). Comparing mental health of athletes and non-athletes as they emerge from a COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2021.612532>

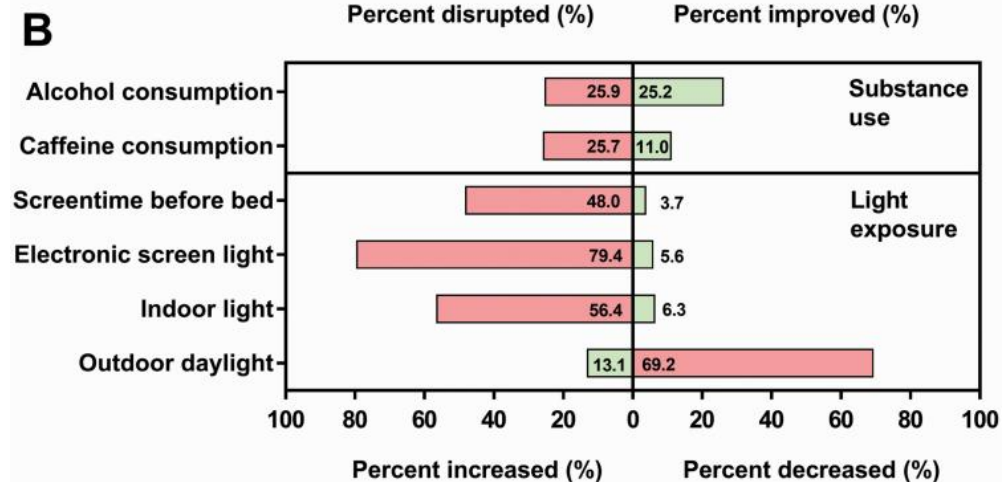
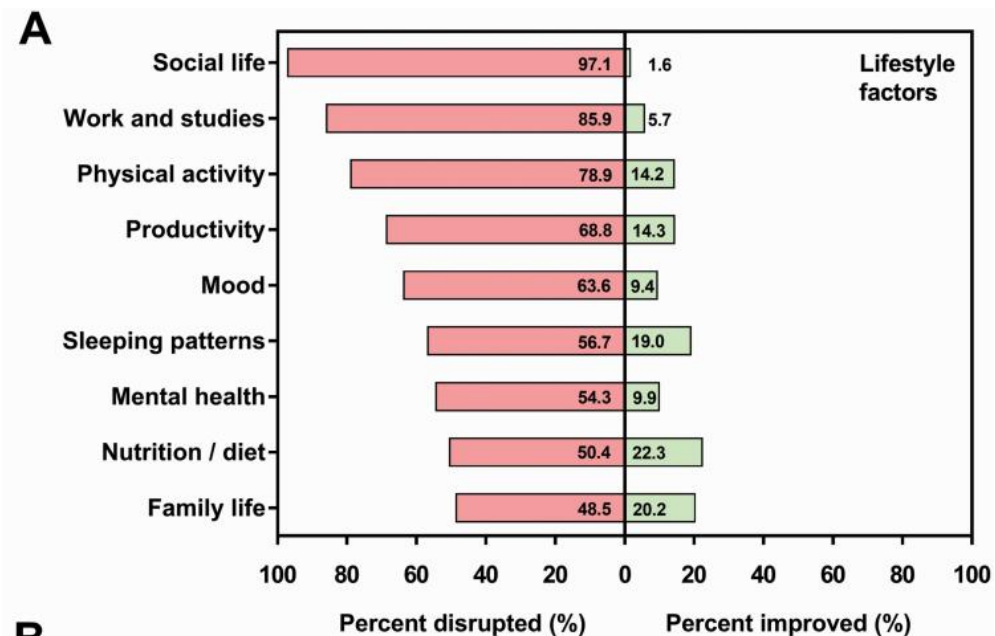
Student-Athlete Mental Health

- **NCAA Student-Athlete COVID-19 Well-Being Survey (Spring, 2020)**
 - Elevated rates of mental exhaustion, social isolation, anxiety, hopelessness, and feelings of being depressed
 - Higher levels of mental health distress among demographic subgroups (women, student-athletes of color, LGBTQ, athletes living alone, athletes reporting economic hardships)
 - Many student-athletes experienced academic worries and concerns about their next steps

Australian Sleep Study during COVID-19

- Frequency and duration of training decreased during COVID
- Decrease in outdoor light exposure
- Increase in screen time
- Increase of individuals being “night owls”
- Increase in irregular sleep patterns
- Increase in sleep duration
- All behaviors associated with high levels of depression

- A study in Australia conducted a survey which included a combination of validated scales and additional expert-designed questions.
- A total of 565 athletes participated in the survey with a median age of 24 years.



Impact of Lockdown

- Nigerian study with 64 athletes from 9 different sports represented
- Study showed that athletes from individual sports experienced more psychological distress than athletes involved in team sports
- Study showed that the age of athletes and number of years spent participating in sports did not predict psychological distress, however athletic identity and category of sports participation were able to predict psychological distress to some degree



Athletic Identity

Athletic identity has been defined as the degree of strength and exclusivity to which a person identifies with the athletic role



Athletic Identity

- Early in life, those with high athletic identity begin to base their self-worth on athletic performance and tend to support their self-esteem through their strong athletic identity, which further develops if an athlete reaches elite levels (e.g., intercollegiate, Olympic, and professional).

Athletic Identity

- Thus, athletes, as well as important people in their lives often focus on only one aspect of their personality and neglect the salience of other identities (e.g., family, friendship, religious, academic, romantic). This overemphasis on sport involvement may cause a lack of participation in other activities such as, but not limited to, school and social interactions

Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity measurement scale. *PsycTESTS Dataset*.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/t15488-000>

Erikson's Identity Development Theory

- As individuals are exposed to new life demands, and earlier identity commitments no longer fit their current life situation, they may fall into a period of disequilibrium caused by an identity crisis. Identity development from an Eriksonian perspective evolves from the absence of a clear, stable, and coherent understanding of who we are and what we seek to pursue in life (i.e. identity confusion).

Erikson's Identity Development Theory

- With a fragmented sense of self, individuals enduring identity confusion lack directions to make important decisions in their lives; they feel disorientated and uncertain about deciding what goals to pursue in life as well as what is worth valuing and what to believe (Erikson, 1968).



3 Factor Model of Understanding Athletic Identity

- **Social Identity:** Considers the extent to which an individual identifies themselves as an athlete
- **Exclusivity:** Considers the degree to which the individual's self-worth depends on their athletic identity in comparison to other roles they fulfil
- **Negative Affectivity:** Assess the negative emotions that occur due to non-participation

Brewer et al., 1993

Mental Health of Athletes verses Non-Athletes

- 2020 study comparing mental health of athletes and non-athletes as they emerge from a pandemic lockdown
- 753 participants over the age of 18
- 199 male athletes, 161 female athletes
- 148 male non-athletes, 236 female non-athletes
- Following scales were utilized: Anxiety and Depression, The Brief Resilience, The Short Loneliness, and The Athletic Identity Measurement

Hypothesis 1: Resilience will be positively correlated with mental health

- Resiliency was moderately positively correlated with mental health factors
- The relationship was observed in both athletes and non-athletes

Hypothesis 2: Athletic Identity will Be Negatively Correlated with Mental Health

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics for the severity of anxiety and depressive symptoms, and the rate of flourishing, languishing, and extreme loneliness in athletes and non-athletes.

Mental health	Athlete		Non-athlete		
	n	%	n	%	
Anxiety	Normal range	153	47.2	187	55.2
	Mild	83	25.6	65	19.2
	Moderate/Severe	88	27.2	87	25.7
Depression	Normal range	242	74.7	247	72.9
	Mild	59	18.2	61	18
	Moderate/Severe	23	7.1	31	9.1
Overall loneliness	No evidence of loneliness	9	2.8	16	4.9
	Extremely lonely	29	9.1	38	11.6
Emotional loneliness	No evidence of loneliness	24	7.6	27	8.2
	Extremely lonely	79	24.9	82	24.9
Social loneliness	No evidence of loneliness	135	42.6	141	42.9
	Extremely lonely	55	17.4	55	16.7
Wellbeing	Flourishing	32	9.7	45	12.9
	Moderately mentally healthy	290	87.9	290	83.1
	Languishing	8	2.4	14	4

Hypothesis 3: Resilience will be higher in Athletes than Non-Athletes

- There was no significant difference between athletes and non-athlete concerning resilience

Discussion

- Athletes showed no significant difference in resiliency during transitional times away from sport
- Athletes' resiliency could be seen as circumstantial and may fluctuate depending on their involvement in sport
- Could explain high level of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse during times of injury and retirement
- Let's not forget the stigma around athletes and "mental toughness"
- Knowles, C., Shannon, S., Prentice, G., & Breslin, G. (2021). Comparing mental health of athletes and non-athletes as they emerge from a COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2021.612532>



Sports Medicine Center

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Themes Seen in Sports Medicine during COVID

- Higher levels of fear
 - Will we have a season?
 - Will we have a game this week?
 - Will we have enough players?
 - Will we be able to train or travel with the team?
 - Will this continue another year?
 - Will this effect my ability to play in college?
 - Is it safe to reenter sports?

Themes Seen in Sports Medicine during COVID

- **Higher levels of depressed mood**
 - Feeling lazy
 - Procrastination
 - Lack of daily structure
 - Hopelessness
 - Increase in exhaustion
 - Isolation

Themes Seen in Sports Medicine during COVID

- **Higher levels of disordered eating**
 - Cutting calories as a response to decreased training
 - Increased snacking; at home 24/7, bored
 - On-going fear about gaining weight
 - Increased amount of time to think about and worry about body image
 - Increase of social media influences

What COVID Exposed

- Our student-athletes are great at following structure when it is provided for them, but struggled with the task of developing their own structure
- Lock down was difficult, opening everything back up was just as difficult
 - Schedules
 - Social pressures
- Athletes going through lockdown experienced many of the same emotions that injured athletes' experience

Supporting Healthy Adjustments to a “New Normal”

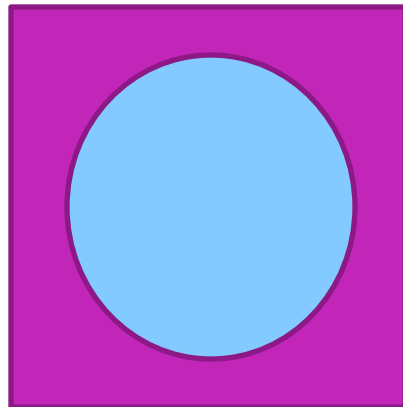
- Allow student-athletes to describe and own their experiences
- Encourage being value-driven rather than avoidance-driven moving forward
- Encourage autonomy and capability
- Help student-athlete determine what is most important and define actions that move them in that direction



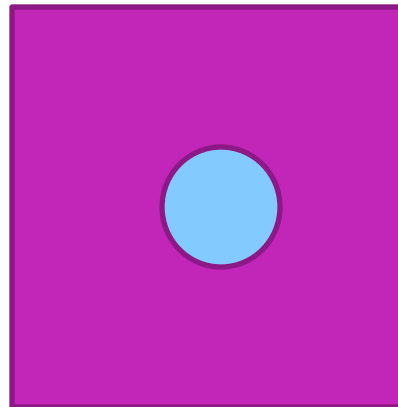
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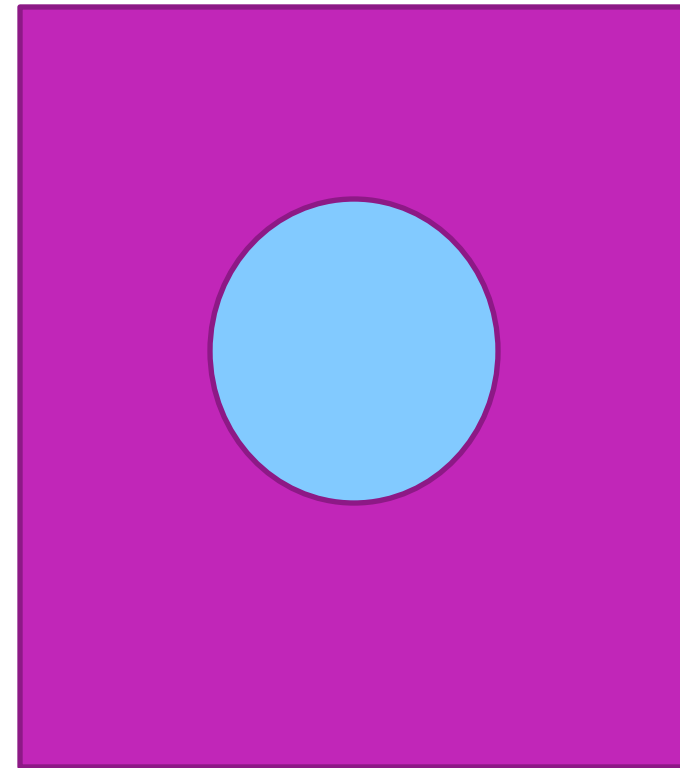
Acceptance and Commitment Theory



Baseline



Traditional
Treatment



ACT

Validation of Concerns

Step 1: Allow student-athlete their experiences

- “That makes sense”
- “I can see how you feel that way”
- “I never thought of it that way, thank you for explaining your point of view”
- “That is tough, I can see why you are frustrated”

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

Future of Mental Wellness in Sports

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

Questions???

Citations

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