The role of mental health care in reaching optimal performance in sports

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Introduction

Mental health care should be seen as an essential factor in sports performance, and athletes should be supported when seeking care for mental health issues. The Covid-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the importance of mental health care in sports. Athletes are speaking up about their experiences with mental health issues, underscoring the need for better care, resources, and support. Annual physical and mental health screenings, along with ongoing monitoring, should be implemented to ensure the overall health of athletes. This paper proposes reframing mental health care in sports as a ‘legal performance enhancement’ to improve and maintain an athlete’s performance.

‘Legal performance enhancement’ that will improve and maintain an athlete’s performance.

Objectives

The objective of this concept paper is to introduce mental health as a core component of an athlete’s development and performance. Intentionally addressing mental health in sports is a proactive approach that can shift current perceptions of remaining reactive to mental health issues.

Background

Sports psychiatry has advanced significantly over the past few decades, leading to a greater acceptance of seeking help for mental health issues among high performing athletes. Evidence suggests that athletes with better mental health are more likely to perform better than their peers, stay motivated, and show greater resilience in the face of difficult situations on and off the playing field [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Moreover, early sport-specific mental health interventions can improve an athlete’s performance [4, 5, 7]. However, mental health is often not given the same level of attention as other aspects of an athlete’s performance, and it is usually overlooked or downplayed as a factor in athletic performance.

Despite the increasing awareness of the importance of mental health on performance, many athletes are still often reluctant to seek help for their mental health issues. This is in part due to the stigma that is still attached to seeking help for mental health issues, preventing athletes from admitting to feeling vulnerable and losing their competitive edge. Many athletes feel that disclosing mental health issues evoke feelings of shame and being seen as being
The proposed approach is to redefine mental health care as a ‘legal performance enhancement’ for athletes, with the aim of giving mental health the same attention and importance as any other performance-enhancing tool. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the overall health of athletes, specific early screenings and monitoring must be implemented and conducted to gain an accurate view of their physical and mental health, including wellbeing, stressors, and adjustments [2, 3] so that timely sport appropriate interventions are implemented. This shift in perspective would allow mental health to be seen as a tool to improve performance rather than just managing psychopathological issues. To that end, the proposed approach includes the implementation of two assessments: the Psychiatric Basic Assessment (PBA) and Sports Psychiatric Examination (SPE) [10].

Implications for sports psychiatry, athletes and sporting organizations

The implications of this shift could lead to a greater focus on mental health interventions and the development of new techniques to improve performance. This could include providing education on the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, and guidance on how to seek help for mental health issues. This shift would also help destigmatize mental health care and encourage greater dialogue and support around the issue.

Additionally, sports psychiatry can also play an essential role in creating guidelines and protocols to ensure that the use of mental health treatments is done ethically and safely. This could include developing guidelines on the use of sport-appropriate psychotropics and other treatments, and developing protocols to ensure that athletes receive the best possible care and support.

Furthermore, it is important to understand the implications of an athlete seeking help for mental health issues. Seeking help for mental health issues can be a difficult decision for athletes. However, it is vital to recognize the potential benefits of seeking help and the importance of mental health treatment in sports performance. Suppose mental health awareness is initiated early, such as before college or becoming a professional. It can reduce the internal taboo, shame, and stigma an athlete faces while seeking help. In addition, sports psychiatrists can support athletes and coaches to help them navigate the complex process of seeking help for mental health issues and ensure that athletes receive the best possible care.

Overall, the redefinition of early mental health screening and treatment has the potential to revolutionize sports performance, and sports psychiatrists have an important role to play in ensuring that this shift in attitude is conducted ethically and safely; and this shift would...
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**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has explored redefining mental health care in the context of sports as a “legal performance enhancement”. By reframing mental health care in this way, the role of sports psychiatrists can be expanded to include not just treating psychopathological issues but also developing strategies to help athletes achieve and maintain their optimal performance. However, this cannot be done by sports psychiatrist alone, a multidisciplinary collaborative effort which includes sports medicine, sports psychologists, and sports psychiatrists is needed. They each play a critical role in helping athletes manage the physical, mental, and emotional demands of competition and training. In the proposed framework, these professionals can help athletes better understand and manage the physical and psychological aspects of their sport. The pre-participation Psychiatric Basic Assessment (PBA) and Sports Psychiatric Examination (SPE) concepts mentioned in this paper support the potential of early mental health screenings and interventions to improve and maintain performance. They provide a foundation for further research into the effects of mental health and early mental health care on athletes’ performance.

Furthermore, this shift in perspective could lead to more comprehensive mental health awareness programs for all sporting levels (primary, collegiate, and professional), greater collaboration between medical professionals, and the promotion of mental health resources and support within sports organizations. Ultimately, redefining mental health care in sports could lead to a new paradigm in which mental health is given the same attention and importance as any other aspect of an athlete’s performance.

By emphasizing mental health, sports organizations could create a healthier and more supportive environment for all athletes, leading to increased camaraderie and trust between athletes, coaches, and other staff, thus allowing for a better understanding of mental health needs and more effective strategies for performance enhancement. In addition, this shift in perspective can open the door for more evidence-based research into the effects of mental health interventions on athletes’ performance, which could help optimize athletes’ performance in various sports. Ultimately, by recognizing and addressing the importance of mental health in sports, we can create a better and healthier environment for athletes and help them achieve their highest potential.

**References**


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**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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