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## **“Understanding Elite Athlete Mental Health Challenges”**

### *Sport Motivations*

Self-determination presents meaningful explanations related to primal motivations of athletes toward success. Elite athletes can have an inherent motivational drive to master their social environment through self-determined actions. Here, the athlete's actions are performed under one's own volition and endorsed by one's sense of self. This determination is fueled by an individual's basic psychological needs being met through environmental support that promotes their autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Beyond self-determination, there are other key factors related to athlete's sporting motivation. These include:

Stability, success, and achievement

Good physical shape and health

External incentives

A sense of belonging, camaraderie, and fun

Intra- and interpersonal desires are formed and adapted towards these pursuits that shape the nature of the athlete's identity as they matriculate through the athlete developmental pathway and tend to intensify and shift into other areas of the athlete's life. As the athlete becomes attached and engrained in their specific motivational factor(s), negative experiences in sport or life can threaten their sense of determination, motivation, and identity which can stunt their personal growth.

### *Stress and Common Stressors*

Elite athletes experience unique stressors that compromise their well-being. Common stressors include loss of identity associated with stardom experienced in high school, injury, potential of losing playing time, maintaining academic eligibility, work/life balance, and interpersonal challenges. Other stressors include time constraints related to a volume of various activities and responsibilities leading to mental and physical exhaustion. Minority groups can be exposed to uniquely different challenges than majority groups such as self-image, self-esteem, and self-worth as a result of discrimination, stereotyping, and poverty. Such challenges place minority groups at risk of experiencing depression and increased risk of substance abuse as pressure and stressors within the competitive sectors of sports culture as well as from family-based or environmental systems lead to significant distress, anxiety, and isolation.

Excessive stress or anxiety interferes with athletic performance due to the impact of the anxious mind on tension as a physical response, which leaves the athlete cognitively distracted and physically stressed. Anxiety and negative emotions cause threatening stimuli within internal processes of thoughts, feelings, and personal concerns creating a negative impact on attention and concentration. Poor health habits tend to occur when athletes experience high levels of stress such as negative self-talk. Negative self-talk can be damaging to athletic performance as derogatory internal statements or dialog extract a reaction to stress further impacting performance. Stressors of athletic participation for young elite athletes can include pressures to win, competitions for athletic scholarships, pressures

to overspecialize or overtraining, fear of being cut from a team and performance challenges, and chronic or debilitating injury. Such stressors can be physical, mental, and academic in nature which places numerous expectations on young athletes. Lack of sleep and under-recovery occurring in athletics can result in chronic fatigue which can elicit symptoms of anxiety or depression. Focus on weight management can become obsessive causing eating disorders to develop.

### Identity Issues

Late adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods in which individuals define their present and future behaviors, while establishing a sense of identity. Adolescence through developmental transitions into adulthood is a time period of onset or offset of psychopathology due to vulnerabilities that alter the course of development.

### *Concerns for Psychological Well-being*

Higher levels of sports participation and physical activity can increase potential of physical injury and impairment, increased stress, and psychiatric issues. During adolescent and early adulthood years, these athletes tend to experience substantial levels of stress that can lead to mental health concerns. These stressors can cause a past concern to resurface, exacerbate an existing concern, or trigger a new psychological concern. Dual roles for young elite athletes can impose such stress-related problems that mental health disorders, substance abuse issues, and criminal justice involvement can occur as a result. Young elite athletes face several different challenges within and outside of sports including depression, isolation, role conflict, academic inferiority, substance abuse, identity foreclosure, pregnancy and parenting, mental health disorders, learning disabilities, exploitation, poor educational outcomes, and retirement or termination of collegiate career. Former elite athletes tend to encounter more problems in physical function, depression, fatigue, sleep disturbance, and pain interference than non-athletes. The extent of contact (collision sports versus non-collision sports) could also have a long-term impact on athletes' health-related quality of life with athletes who participate in collision sports tending to be more at-risk of physical and psychological problems later in life.

### *Physical Health Issues*

There are considerable health concerns related to athletic participation and strenuous physical activity. An athlete's ability to participate in sport long-term can be limited by injuries produced in the early years. Elite athletes have a higher risk of joint health concerns later in life when compared with same age and gender groups of non-athletes. Collision sports athletes tend to encounter more issues in joint and musculoskeletal health disorders among elite competitive athletes when compared with other populations. Frequent retirement problems include physical pain, loss of fitness and lack of exercise, excessive weight gain, difficulty with aging, and trouble transitioning to life after elite participation in athletics.

### *Injury and Career Termination*

The life-span health of elite competitive athletes is a challenge and growing concern due to the nature of their unique health risks in sports activity. Elite athletes tend to play through injury for fear of loss of playing time leading to chronic issues regarding their injury which can lead to more serious injuries later in life. Long-term consequences of participation in athletics are often not considered. Physical injury can produce psychological effects that are similar in nature to the stages of grief. Injury and sport career termination experiences by young elite athletes are requisites to mental health disabilities. Problems in social relationships, children out of wedlock, financial issues, violence in relationships, and risk-taking behaviors may increase at the end of athletes' careers.

### *Depression*

Depression can occur before and after competition within the athletic population. Depression can occur as a result of athletic aspirations not meeting actual performance standards. Pre-competition problems were considered physiological as opposed to psychological leading to athletes being more susceptible to under-diagnosis of depression. Factors that contribute to depression can include insincere appreciation from sports culture figures, ego gratification, mistrust, factors of resiliency, and racial issues. Elite athletes encounter an increased risk of substance

abuse as a result of depression. Depression can lead to substance abuse and substance use can lead to depressed feeling and thinking. Male elite athletes may experience a higher number of drinking episodes, performance enhancing drugs, nutritional supplements, and smokeless tobacco than non-athletes.

### *Substance Use*

The use of drugs as an elite athlete can intensify stressors as pressure from strict rules instituted by sports programs around the use of drugs and alcohol can be enforced leading to the loss of social and financial support. Drugs and alcohol use have been found to lead to poor performance of the athlete causing additional challenges in maintaining presence on the team and retaining scholarships. The culture of athletics, misperceptions of future risks, and collegiate sports

leaders' relaxed attitudes toward drug use can contribute to substance abuse. Such manifestation of stressors creates negative effects on athletes' mental health which can negatively impact academic, physical, financial, and psychosocial outcomes.

### *Performance-Enhancing drugs*

The use of performance-enhancing drugs can be reinforced by the norms and values associated with winning and self-interest. Sports leaders such as coaches have unintentionally encouraged the use of performance enhancing drugs due to concerns for attendance and winning records and a lack of concern for the abuse of substances. Coaches have contributed to the environmental needs of athletes in that their interpersonal styles support or destruct self-efficacy.

In collegiate settings, academic performance may be impacted by mental and/or emotional disturbances compounding distress and impacting the elite athlete's overall well-being. Additionally, elite athletes' mental health issues have been found to relate to risky and delinquent behaviors.

### *Bullying and Hazing*

Young elite athletes may experience bouts of bullying and hazing which contributes to loss of focus, lapse in concentration, apathy, mistrust, depression and isolation, low self-esteem and self-confidence, and high levels of anxiety. These young elite athletes may be hesitant to report such occurrences due to feelings of shame and embarrassment and desiring to maintain a relevant part of the team. Bullying and hazing can go unreported due to youth having no one to tell and fear of adults not handling the delicacy of the situation effectively.

### *Environmental Barriers in Academic Settings*

Elite athletes in academic settings can experience environmental barriers from faculty. These barriers may include faculty's attitudes toward athletics in relation to academics, stereotypes, and biases toward young elite athletes, as well as attitudes toward graduate students with interests in collegiate athletics. Faculty members can possess stereotypes of elite athletes that imply they are lazy, pampered, over-privileged, and out of control. Some faculty members generally believe that elite athletes perceive academics to be subordinate to athletics and that athletic commitments undermine academic performance.

### *Suicide in Elite Athletes*

Psychiatric issues are a prominent predictor of suicidal behavior in elite athletes. Depression, alcohol and drug abuse, and personality disorders all infer a high incidence of fatality and nonfatal suicide behavior in elite athletes. Risk factors of suicide in elite athletes can include social relationships, substance abuse, sexual abuse, bullying, steroid use, concussions and brain injuries, substance abuse, social relationships, bullying, psychiatric issues, and retirement. Stigma to seeking help can account for an increase in risks of suicidal behaviors and successful suicide. Many elite athletes find it difficult to seek help from coaches, teammates, and spouses. Elite athletes may exhibit a thwarted sense of belonging, perceived burdensomeness, habituation to pain, and fear of death upon retirement. Identity issues after retirement may impose a lack of desire to seek help. the lack of desire for professional athletes to seek help.

### *Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Services*

There are a variety of barriers that may prohibit elite athletes from seeking support when they encounter significant levels of distress. Young elite athletes may not seek help or treatment due to stigmatization of seeing a mental health professional, disdain for prescribed medication on athletic performance, and fear of coaches and teammates challenging their mental toughness. Experiences of "star status," demands of academic schedules, travel schedules, practice schedules, and game preparation and participation, attitudes related to help-seeking and social stigmas of counseling services, and fears of being perceived as weak all affect the extent in which young elite athletes may desire to seek support. Commonly reported barriers to seeking help can include a preference to use spirituality, family and friend support, lack of insurance coverage, and lack of recognition or acknowledgement of issues.

Some young elite athletes perceived that counselors outside of their athletic department did not understand the culture of athletics as it related to their specific needs and concerns.

Despite mental health issues and barriers to treatment experienced by the elite athlete during and post-athletic career, many athletes have overcome life circumstances in route of improving their overall functioning and contributing to their positive mental health. Elite athletes have used adaptive strategies to protect themselves from setbacks, regulate their autonomy, display satisfaction with life, and experience positive outcomes in and beyond sport. These athletes develop positive resources for coping and managing resistance to everyday life stressors. They engage in the intentional use of self-regulation and positive psychological strategies that can be formulated over time (i.e., resilience and optimism) leading to more optimistic thinking, better mental health or psychological well-being, and improvements in sports performance and life after sports. In response to the role that setbacks and positive experiences have on the psychological development of elite athletes, personal reflection can be used as a tool for athletes to enhance their perspective taking, logical analysis, reasoning skills, and a greater understanding of cause-and-effect relationships.

### **Elite Athletes Need...**

#### **Individually focused development programs [12].**

Individual-focused development programs can be used in all phases of the sporting career especially across transitional phases of sport. Through engagement with a trained professional or a designated institution/platform, an athlete may be able to identify their personal/vocational goals and develop strategies that help adapt skills to achieve their goals. Athletes can be assisted in areas of developing an identity beyond athletics, creating life-sport balance, and preparing for the end of their career.

#### **Prevention and early intervention[12].**

Where the performance and life demand of the athlete exceed their ability to cope (i.e., injury or life stress), prevention and early intervention resources are instrumental. Prevention involves reducing the risk of developing mental health symptoms or minimizing the impact and severity of potential or actual symptoms. Early intervention is designed to identify and halt the progression of emerging mental health difficulties. Prevention and core foundational components can include mental health literacy enhancement, a focus on athlete development from a career and personal developmental goal perspective, and mental health screening which addresses workplace duty of care and occupational health and safety responsibilities towards athletes' overall well-being in the context of sport-related stressors. Implementing basic self-management techniques (e.g., relaxation and mindfulness, adaptive coping strategies, and self-compassion) within mental health literacy programs serve as a way for athletes to better manage transient mood states or psychological distress. Clinical interventions may assist in targeting the athlete's psychological processes along with specific familial, sporting, and organizational issues that may impact the athlete's well-being. Early intervention strategies are needed in all forums throughout the sporting landscape and are especially useful in low resource settings with innovations in general mental health serving as a blueprint.

### **Access to mental health care.**

Elite athletes also need access to mental health care to address severe or complex psychopathology. Here, athletes should have access to treatment and continuing care options designed as a recovery and relapse prevention phase in which an athlete may maintain ongoing clinical care with a mental health professional.

### **Self-management practices.**

Mental health self-management was described as a process of monitoring one's mental health functioning and the utilization of strategies to protect and promote one's mental health. Self-management techniques provide elite athletes with skills and internal resources to combat maladaptive tendencies and coping strategies (e.g., substance misuse). The elite athlete throughout development needs to be capable of facilitating their mental health process using personal resources (i.e., spiritual adaptations, multiple positive identities, mental health competence, and positive self-talk) that enhance psychological resilience, mental toughness, motivation, and confidence.

### **Effective self-leadership skills[4].**

Self-leadership can be used as a way for athletes to manage their willpower, thoughts, and behavior. Self-leadership strategies have been found to generally support health with the promotion of intentional behaviors (i.e., adequate physical exercise and healthy eating) that have resulted in other benefits such as disease prevention, increased recovery, and enhanced mood, self-esteem, and social identity.

- **Behavioral-focused interventions** (self-observation, self-goal setting, self-reinforcement or self-cueing, and self-correction or self-punishment) are designed to increase self-awareness which serves as a basis for positive change in how individuals make choices that influence their behaviors.
- **Natural reward strategies** work to redesign tasks or thought processes to create motivating feelings of self-control, competence, and purpose when goals and naturally motivating tasks are consistent with personal values and one's sense of well-being.
- **Constructive thought strategies** (self-influence of self-talk, mental imagery, and beliefs and assumptions) operate according to the assumption that people can influence their thoughts through a focus on mental activity and how cognitions are processed. Constructive thought can be used to promote self-efficacy, persistence, and increased effectiveness in challenging and pursuing one's goals. Understanding these self-leadership strategies is foundational to interpreting how elite athletes may draw upon internal psychological skills processes that allow them to reflectively self-manage thoughts and regulate feelings fulfilling to their needs satisfaction, holistic identity, and a greater establishment of a sense of purpose

### **Mental health competency.**

Throughout development, athletes need to be capable of establishing a mental health competency that helps to maintain adequate self-confidence and motivation to achieve goals. Motivation is considered to be fundamental to successful sport development as well as positive cognitive and affective outcomes that improve well-being. Athletes who lack confidence tend to self-criticize more often, adopt inadequate decision-making styles, think less positively once negative thoughts or problems occur, and dwell on problems when attempting to identify solutions. Athletes who are more confident in their abilities think more positively and focus on solutions rather than problems when negative thoughts or challenges occur.

### **Psychological resilience.**

Psychological resilience can be facilitated by factors that increase mental toughness such as expanding upon personal resources that foster goal-directed behavior enabling individuals to strive (i.e., direction and magnitude of effort expended on a task), survive (i.e., management of everyday challenges or overcoming major adversities), and thrive (i.e., experiencing growth through one's experiences). Psychological resilience may stem from spiritual reinterpretation of one's suffering to create a realization that extends from distressful life events. Spiritual adaptations can be essential to individual athlete's resilience and motivation. The establishment of multiple positive identities is considered to be preventative to mental illness as a person with fewer identities may place a greater investment on those identities allowing for threats to mental health to occur if one of the identities were to be compromised.

### **Engagement in unitive experiences [8].**

To promote resilience and to support the spiritual aspects of elite athletes' well-being, unitive experiences serve as spontaneous experiences of unity and transcendence that present a sense of engagement in meaningful activity or situations. As an extension of mindfulness-based techniques, unitive experiences are reflective of a mystical experience denoting psychological and spiritual feelings of oneness, timelessness, a sense of connection, and higher states of consciousness that transcend the feeling of embodiment. As with mindfulness, the unitive experience emphasizes the mind and body connection as well as an exploration of the human experience within a complex interaction between the interpersonal, ecological, social, and cosmic context. Unitive experiences possess an innate regard for peak/flow experiences which are consistent with athlete performance initiatives and goals. Additionally, unitive experiences have been associated with physical, psychological, and spiritual health benefits such as improved mental states and higher quality of life.

Such may occur by way of increases in self-acceptance, concern for others, expansion in meaning and sense of purpose, and a general appreciation for life. Unitive experiences have also been associated with higher psychological well-being as well as spiritual and physical transformation.

### **Engagement in mindfulness activities[11].**

Mindfulness-based mental health interventions can be effective at reducing stress and promoting the well-being of athletes. Individuals can draw upon internal psychological skills to satisfy their needs and well-being. By reflectively self-managing thoughts and regulating feelings, athletes can attend to basic psychological needs. Mindfulness interventions can necessitate having a certified or qualified professional (i.e., licensed mental health professional or clinical psychologist) to work with elite athletes. There can be cost considerations as well as structural/systemic components that present as concerns regarding the implementation of mindfulness-based techniques in athletic organizations. These challenges can be mediated with recent advances in auditory meditative guidance in smartphone applications, which has extended mindfulness beyond its traditional practice within group-based or individual therapies.

### **Positive self-talk.**

Positive self-talk can serve as a protective factor to elite athletes' mental health. Elite athletes can utilize constructive thought patterns and behavioral habits that are consistent with how they perceive themselves. These thoughts and behaviors can be exercised through methods of self-talk to achieve a state of flow. Self-talk is overt or covert self-directed speech that serves as both the processing and interpretation of feelings and perceptions. Optimizing self-talk contributes to self-reflection, self-regulation, positive cognitions, resilience, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation. Positive self-talk may assist both mental health symptoms and sport performance in athletes as it produces a positive attitude and prevents negative aspects associated with anxiety and depression while also contributing to benefits such as controlling one's mood, correcting bad habits, stopping negative thoughts, and improving focus, planning, skill acquisition, and problem-solving ability.

### **To promote their authenticity.**

Authenticity involves an act of oneness with one's true nature and consistency with one's beliefs and thoughts. It represents a process of attaining a clear sense of self and a deep awareness of personal values. Being authentic reduces personal dissonance and promotes a variety of positive responses from others as well as the management of one's well-being and performance. Authentic self-leaders have a particular focus on superordinate goals that enhance intrapersonal and interpersonal effectiveness through characteristics such as self-awareness, mutuality, conviction, and transparency. Authenticity reflects a genuine approach to the "why" underlying the "what" components of promoting the elite athlete's goal orientation beyond external orientations (society, the boss, the organization, etc.).

### **Responsibility toward virtuous behavior.**

Elite athletes that are responsible in their pursuits of virtuous behavior carry out responsible and have extraordinary intentions. They embrace higher-level values that involve transcendent principles, high aspirations, and connect with meaningful purpose. To explore deeper meaning underlying motivations attached to uncertainty. Having a safe space to process and explore the meaning and purpose within their sport involvement may reinvigorate their sense of passion which presents an opportunity to develop a more formidable motivation that comes from meaning and purpose in struggle.

Purpose in life benefits individuals as it helps them to manage behaviors, organize goals, and produces a sense of meaning that provides direction. Particularly important to emerging adults, the development of purpose can be associated with a tendency to focus on the self while navigating identity exploration as advances in cognitions occur throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. Self-reflection on values and responsibilities is also considered to contribute to better performance and emotional health.

High levels of purpose, global self-worth, and positive views of the future post-athletic career contribute to better psychological well-being and emotional resilience in elite athletes.

### **Emotional self-leadership.**

Emotional self-leadership involves the self-influence of emotion. Positive emotions (e.g., joy, interest, and contentment) expand options for thought and action, while negative emotions (e.g., anger and fear) tend to limit those options. Positive emotions foster self-exploration, individual creativity, integration, and engagement through an expansion of behavioral, psychological, and social resources. Positive emotions can result in improvements in attention and processing information, expansion in coping capacity, and significant health benefits. Antecedent-focused emotional regulation strategies, which promote a sense of self-awareness and growth in emotional tend to be more effective than response-focused strategies. Thus, emotional self-leadership strategies work as a protective factor against emotional labor.

### **Positive associations to the role of failure.**

Elite athletes that view failure and setbacks from a perceptual basis of learning attends to their personal growth through courage and persistence, skill development, the potential for empathy, and other desirable outcomes. They are able to acknowledge perceived or short-term failures and revoke avoidance behaviors. If an athlete can embrace continual learning and foster an adaptive effort to overcome challenges, they may be better able to promote their own psychological resilience and mental toughness leading to greater autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In this way, every experience is designed to enhance the psychological well-being and self-determination in athletes in pursuit of their goals.

### **Focus on body-mind connections.**

A focus on body-mind connections to enhance or reduce stimuli in order to foster constructive thoughts and emotions or to inhibit deconstructive and self-sabotaging cognitions and emotional states. Choosing to utilize sensory stimuli (e.g., specific aromas, colors, music, sounds, and relaxation) to engage in stillness or a sense of the present moment can help an individual de-stress in hyper-stimulating environments while promoting positive physical and mental outcomes. By engaging in sensory promoting activities, athletes may be better able to cope and enhance their feelings of empowerment when under stress. Mind and body interventions include techniques based on connecting the mind, body, and behavior to positively influence health. Unitive experiences emphasized the benefits of athletes encountering peak/flow experiences inclusive of a mind and body connection that stimulates motivation into efforts toward positive mental health and well-being. Athletes throughout sport development who have experienced childhood trauma or traumatic inferences that underly their mental health condition may benefit from sensory promoting stimuli introduced in mind and body connections to foster positive mental health and well-being.

**Maintain health and fitness.**

A focus on maintaining health and fitness has several performance-related, social, and psychological benefits. Choosing a healthier lifestyle promotes benefits to health, well-being, and performance. Continual sporting activity for athletes experiencing injury or transitioning out of elite sport may increase factors associated with positive mental health. Physical activity and exercise can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, improve mental health and well-being, and enhance cognitive functioning. They also can support improvements in self-esteem and assertiveness. General health and fitness and continued sport participation at a mild to moderate level may be important ways former elite athletes can engage in activities that promote their mental health.

**Continual integration of social and collegial relationships.**

Social and collegial relationships can significantly affect performance and a general sense of well-being. Trusting relationships are considered to be a vital source of feedback and guidance while poor (toxic) relationships can be a source of emotional depletion, pain, and general dysfunction. Social support from teammates, sport administrators, coaches, trainers, and parents/family serve as a protective factor to various mental health symptoms and disorders.

Coaches and parents have an important role in supporting athletes in seeking mental health treatment as their frequent contact and roles in de-stigmatizing the sport environment can eliminate some of the individual and cultural barriers often experienced by athletes in need of mental health services. These supports have the ability to foster positive psychosocial development and well-being by helping athletes learn skills that promote self-compassion, psychological resilience, psychological flexibility, and adaptation to situational demands while also maintaining a sense of one's values. During difficult times, relationships can serve as an ongoing source of learning, enrichment, and resilience as well as a cue for personal reflection and general development. The process of intentionally choosing and nurturing positive relationships can be a way that elite athletes contribute to their positive mental health and well-being over time.

<p><b>EMERGENCY</b> In a crisis call "911" immediately ● If considering self-harm, call "988" The National Suicide Intervention Lifeline</p>	<p><b>SEXUAL MISCONDUCT</b> To speak to a counselor, Call (800) 656-4673 RAINN</p>	<p><b>BULLYING/HAZING, VIOLENCE, ADDICTIONS &amp; SUBSTANCE ABUSE</b> For helpful resources, <a href="http://thebmsproject.org/Safety">thebmsproject.org/Safety</a></p>	<p><b>CHILD ABUSE</b> To report suspected child abuse, Call (800) 422-4453 Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline</p>
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It is recommended that incident(s) of serious misconduct be reported to law enforcement.  
Minors should report incidents of misconduct to their parent(s) or guardian(s).