

A Study of Mental Health Conditions Among Elite Level Athletes

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of stigmatization on elite level athletes' mental health and overall wellbeing. Within this study, elite level athletes will be defined as those that participate in collegiate programs and the levels beyond that. Stigma is generally defined as negative beliefs towards a particular group of people or a state of being. When stigma is prevalent within athletic settings, many athletes tend to be silent about the struggles they face daily. Stigma is manifested either publicly or personally in the arena of elite level athletics due to preconceived notions within this demographic. Through close examination of current tactics to lower stigmas and suggestions for future practices, this thesis will serve as a guide for athletes, coaches, and organizations moving forward.

While there has been extensive research on the physical effects of competing in elite level sports, little research has been done on the mental side of sport and in turn, the mental health disorders most common among athletes. However, in recent years more studies are being conducted focusing on the prevalence of mental health conditions that regularly occur among athletes competing on the elite level. These studies began after more awareness was drawn to the issue due to tragic suicides committed by collegiate athletes. Now researchers have begun to study common mental health conditions among athletes and how they handle these conditions. Multiple studies have found elite level athletes are highly susceptible to mental health problems which disrupt their overall well-being (Chow, 2021). Furthermore, these studies have found athletes experience depression, anxiety and other mental health disorders at a higher rate than the general population yet seek help at a lower rate. Collegiate athletes fall into the age range that experiences mental health conditions at the highest prevalence of any age demographic (Murphy & Sullivan, 2021).

Researchers have found public stigma, personal stigma, and a lack of education on the signs of mental health disorders are the common reasons athletes seek help at a lower rate than non-athletes (Kaier et al., 2015). Stigma is defined as “a set of negative beliefs that a society or group of people have about something,” which causes many athletes to be silent about the struggles they face daily (Webster, 2024). Stigmas are common in the athletic sphere due to a culture that fosters the expectation for athletes to remain strong and self-sufficient. Mental toughness and resiliency are encouraged by coaches, which has been shown to relate to higher levels of coping strategies, perseverance, and the ability to handle adversity if used correctly (Bird, 2021). However, this mental toughness can sometimes be used incorrectly to deal with problems that require more extensive insight from health care professionals. Despite the prevalence of mental health conditions among athletes, their desire to seek help is deterred by not

wanting to be labeled as incapable due to these perceptions (Tabet et al., 2021). In addition to not wanting to be seen as weak by their peers, many athletes have not been properly trained on the signs of mental health disorders and instead try to deal with them on their own. Not only are athletes uneducated on the signs of mental health conditions, but coaches and training staff also do not profess proper knowledge of the topic, thus continuing to not provide adequate support for athletes overall. On top of a lack of resources and comfortability with addressing mental health, colligate athletes are continuously dealing with outside stressors that far outweigh the cognitive benefits of competition from their sport, thus heightening their need for special treatment and attention (Tabet et al., 2021).

By studying the occurrence of mental health conditions among elite level athletes and the relationship between stigmas and help-seeking behaviors in relation to these reported cases, changes can be implemented to prevent future cases from occurring. Athletes will benefit from the athletic population continuously becoming more aware of mental health on multiple levels. Through studying personal and public mental health stigmas and the connection between mental health conditions and help-seeking attitudes common in elite athletics, recommendations will be made for practices to serve athletes in the future. The effectiveness of initial organizational practices regarding mental health will also be studied and further addressed. New educational standards for athletes and coaches will be proposed based on these current practices. These recommendations towards initial research for improving athletes' overall wellbeing will align with current practices, while adding a more in-depth analysis of the best ways to catalyst more progress towards the issue moving forward.

Public Stigma

Stigmatization is the foremost reason elite level athletes do not seek help to overcome their mental health disorders. Stigmatization can occur at various levels, but the most prevalent

among elite level athletes is public stigmatization. Public stigmatization is a belief about others' perceptions towards an event, practice, or people group (Kaier, 2015). People often develop public stigmas towards attitudes or practices that are uncommon or not regularly accepted by society. This occurs when there is a socially driven label commonly associated with a particular group of people which distinguishes such people as “abnormal” (Chow et al., 2021). This process is heightened in the athletic sphere due to athletes not wanting to be perceived as weak if others discover they are receiving treatment for mental disorders, which in turn causes them to develop public stigmas towards mental health treatments and practices. This mental construct is often formed when athletes do not perceive resiliency encouragement correctly from coaches (Gameiro, 2023). While mental toughness and resiliency are highly beneficial for athletes' performance, mental illnesses can be fostered through this process due to the stigmas toward help-seeking they may create.

Continuous studies have found this stigmatization is foremost developed by athletes internalizing prejudices towards mental health and projecting those beliefs onto society. Although public stigmas often create personal stigmas, an individual's personal beliefs towards mental health can create a perceived public stigma (PPS) (Kaier, 2015). This means that although others may not have a stigma towards mental health, athletes' own perceptions towards how they view mental health can create a PPS which affects their attitudes towards the issue.

Perceived public stigma directly relates to an individual's help seeking habits for psychological help based on the fear of others' negative judgments towards themselves for engaging in such behavior (Kaier, 2015). Researchers have found public stigma directly relates to athletes' help seeking attitudes and in turn deters them from seeking treatment. As compared to non-athletes, collegiate athletes have commonly been more likely to avoid seeking treatment

based on this stigmatization. This trend is largely due to the notion that athletes must be self-sufficient and strong enough to overcome adversity, including mental strain and external factors.

Public Stigma Research

Initial research has shown athletes experience public stigma at a higher level than the general population primarily due to the environment created within elite level sports. In a recent study, only 10% of college athletes reported seeking help with mental disorders as compared to 30% of non-athletes, largely because of the impact of public stigmatization (Tabet et al., 2021). This is due to the expectation of athletes to be self-sufficient and the culture created through these perceived expectations of elite level athletes. Most high-performance athletes have been conditioned to believe the idea they must be both mentally and physically strong and thus fear showing any signs of weakness. Emerging research continues to show athletes feel like they will be seen as inferior by their peers or coaches if they report their mental health conditions, further demonstrating perceived public stigmatization.

Furthermore, most athletes project this stigmatization onto the public, leaving them with the feeling that they cannot be vulnerable in any capacity. While research has shown competing in sports can be a buffer to stress, as suggested by the Cross-Stressor Adaptation Hypothesis, athletes also experience unique stress factors that add to their mental health challenges (Tabet et al., 2021). Higher rates of public stigmatization leave athletes with the perception that they have no choice but to face their conditions on their own, often having lasting implications on their overall wellbeing. In collegiate athletics alone, public stigmatization was reported as the cause of 66% of student-athletes not seeking help for their conditions (Chow, 2021). Not only do elite level athletes fear how they will be perceived by the public if they were to voice their struggles, but they also feel like they will be treated differently by their teammates and coaching staff. While perceived public stigma impacts their view on their acceptance outside of their sport, most

athletes fear how they will be treated by those within their team setting more. Elite level athletes fear they will be seen as mentally weak and incapable by their teammates and coaching staff, causing them to lose opportunities within their sport. This perception is the driving factor behind their silence on their issues, heightening the need for intervention and preventative actions towards this stigmatization process.

According to a recent study by the American Psychological Association (APA), 87% of adults reported that having a mental health disorder is nothing to be ashamed of (Cassilo, 2022). This number is reflective of the growing awareness and support for help-seeking by the general public. While this is encouraging, there is still a large gap between athletes' attitudes towards seeking help and society's acceptance of mental health conditions. Perceived public stigmatization continues to deter athletes from voicing their issues, even admits the acceptance of mental health awareness by society. This same report by the APA noted that even though this number is rising, elite level sports have continuously been an arena where talking about mental health is considered taboo due to public stigmatization.

Although public stigma plays a large role in athletes' acceptance of talking about mental health, there is evidence online platforms and other media sources can be used to combat this factor. One of the first of these platforms that has responded to this issue is *The Players' Tribune*, which has a few online articles of elite level athletes addressing their own mental health problems beginning in 2018. NBA players have personally written about their own experiences with mental health conditions, including stars like Kevin Love and Demar DeRozan. Love's article, which was titled "Everyone is Going Through Something" talks about the difficulty of sharing his personal struggles with mental health, but his realization in which it is something he needed to talk about for the sake of others (Parrott, 2021). His article elicited thousands of positive responses, fan engagement and news media coverage on mental health within the

context of sport. Researchers have found this has been the most effective way to break down stigma regarding mental health (Cassilo, 2022). When players begin to address mental health publicly, fans and other players take note, which raises a positive response from the overall public and helps lower stigmatization. It also gives other elite level athletes the ability to voice their struggles and seek help since their perceived public stigma is lower.

In the last decade, more athletes such as Michelle Phelps, Simone Biles, and LeBron James have used their platforms to raise awareness to mental health conditions, which has had a positive impact on lowering public stigma towards the issue. In addition to talking about their mental health struggles, other athletes have been labeled as mental health advocates within their sport. Specifically in the NBA, Demar DeRozan was named the organization's unofficial mental health spokesman after he published his article on *The Player's Tribune*. Sadly, this title came after Love implored the organization to begin to implement mental health policies after stating his own need for screening and the lack of resources available to him on various media outlets (Cassilo, 2022). After DeRozan expressed his mental health struggles, other NBA players voiced their own issues with the organization in regard to mental health resources, while citing him as a source of inspiration. This response brought public attention to the need for sport organizations to recognize the impact of mental health conditions on these athletes. Furthermore, these responses continued to have a positive impact on raising awareness of mental health conditions within sports, further lowering public stigmatization towards the subject and providing athletes the opportunity to seek resources.

This research shows the impact elite level athletes have on changing the general public's opinions towards mental health conditions. By continuously discussing mental health, athletes can continue to lower stigmatization levels common in elite level athletics. Besides simply talking about mental health conditions, having athletes continuously labeled as advocates for

mental health, such as NBA player Demar DeRozan, has been shown to help gradually lower stigmatization as well (Cassilo, 2022). Initial research has shown there has already been a positive response to athletes serving in this capacity, thus enforcing the impact they have on lowering public stigmas towards mental health conditions. As more athletes respond to this movement and become advocates for mental health practices and policies themselves, public stigmatization will continue to lower.

Implications of Public Stigma

Past research has shown there is a direct correlation between athletes' perceived public mental health stigma and their attitudes towards seeking help (Tabet et al., 2021). As previously discussed, public stigmatization has a large impact on elite level athletes' help seeking habits, yet research shows this stigmatization can be lowered through mental health advocacy by well-known athletes. This response by athletes is needed on multiple levels, including advocacy for mental health discussions and a call to action for sport organizations to recognize and respond to athletes' needs by providing more resources for them. Within this duty, organizations must recognize the impact they have on perceived public stigmatization and actively work to lower this while providing resources and enabling mental health discussion among all parties within sport. Researchers have suggested sport governing bodies and staff within these organizations and teams consider the unique culture of sport and the impact it has on developing public stigmatization across different athletic spheres.

Initial research has shown using the media as a form of information awareness can break down stigmas common in elite level athletics (Cassilo, 2022). This is exemplified by the fact that many people do not do their own research on mental health, thus highlighting the importance of using the media to raise awareness on the issue. While information on this topic has previously been provided by sport organizations, when athletes serve as advocates for mental health within

these organizations, the impact on societal views is greater. This is due to the celebrity status athletes have and the role sport has in society. Bandura's Social Learning Theory further supports this fact by theorizing that people learn and model behavior they see displayed by others (Mayer, 2009). This theory highlights the influence that athletes can have on society given the natural inclination of people to model their behavior after others. Within this context, people are more likely to listen to athletes and read articles on mental health when sport organizations provide a space for them to talk about their struggles. As elite level athletes serve as advocates for mental health training by using media sources, more information will be easily available to the public and stigmatization toward mental health within the sport world will continue to lower.

The effectiveness of players using their influence to lower public stigmatization towards mental health cannot be overlooked. Beginning research on this subject has shown the strong impact players have on lowering public stigmatization towards mental health conditions. Without these athletes voicing their own struggles and being vulnerable online, public attention and attitudes towards mental health conditions would not be the same. Athletes must recognize their influence and their potential impact on changing the culture of elite sports. It is imperative athletes do not shy away from this opportunity and instead keep using different platforms to make mental health part of everyday conversation within sport.

To continuously lower public stigmatization, sport governing bodies must also use their platform to raise awareness towards mental health. By working to promote mental health training and awareness, public acceptance in athletics towards mental health will continue to grow. While the NCAA has begun to provide guidance on treatment and prevention plans for mental health conditions that could lower public stigmatization, other governing organizations have not followed suit to the same extent. These organizations must also promote mental health advocates and encourage elite level athletes to use their platforms to dispel public

misconceptions and stigmatization. The effectiveness of athletes serving in this capacity must continue to be used to benefit athletes across all elite level sports through the encouragement and availability of platforms from sport organizations.

Personal Stigma

Personal stigmatization refers to the process of internalizing the stereotypes and beliefs towards help-seeking that would have a negative impact if one were to engage in those same behaviors (Hilliard et al., 2018). Self or personal stigmas occur based on an individual's accepted public stigmas. Although research has shown athletes experience public stigmas at a higher level than self-stigmas, self-stigmas have a greater impact on an athlete's individual help-seeking attitudes (Tabet et al., 2021). This self-stigmatization internal process has a direct negative impact on an athlete's help-seeking practices, causing many athletes to be silent on their issues instead of taking the steps needed to work through their struggles. Athletes who experience self-stigmatization are unlikely to tell others about their arising mental health conditions due to their fear of being rejected by their peers and coaches. This fear is created through the idea that those who seek treatment for mental health issues are considered less than, which is a direct result of this commonly accepted personal stigma.

Elite level athletes tend to place a large amount of pressure on themselves due to their need to perform at a highly competitive level, which in turn adds additional strain on them mentally. This internal pressure is believed to be the biggest reason athletes develop mental health disorders, which are heightened further through personal stigmas (Biggin, 2017). While dealing with these additional stressors, athletes are often left with the impression that they cannot voice their struggles due to their accepted personal stigmas and the fear of rejection created by this stigma. This impression is created by the idea that they will be judged or treated differently by those within their sport due to the prevailing accepted public stigmas within elite level

athletics towards mental health disorder treatments. Athletes' preconceived public stigmas directly foster these personal stigmas and in turn they do not seek help for their mental health conditions generated from their sport or other external factors. Although elite level athletes are among a large demographic that desperately needs specifically tailored mental health services, many of them do not get the treatment they need due to continuous personal stigmatization.

This personal stigma has a larger impact on athletes than non-athletes due to their perceptions of the importance of sport within their life and the feeling they need to be sufficient in all aspects of their lives (Bird, 2021). These perceptions along with additional stress factors that influence athletes' overall well-being are largely responsible for mental health disorders common to elite level athletics. As previously indicated, athletes do not seek treatment based on their fears of being rejected by coaches and peers due to the perception they will be discredited completely if they were to come forward with their struggles. This perception is a direct result of personal stigmatization, which regularly occurs at all levels of elite level teams. While personal stigmatization levels are continuously high in elite level programs, athletes will continue to suffer from mental health disorders, furthering the need for change towards mental health treatment practices within these various teams and organizations.

Personal Stigma Research

Studies have found that public attitudes and external influences can significantly impact individuals' self-perceptions, especially when engaging in behaviors perceived as negative. (Tabet et al., 2021). These attitudes are manifested in self-stigmatization which directly deters athletes from reaching out for support and treatment for their mental health disorders. This factor has been found to be the biggest reason elite level athletes do not vocalize their mental health struggles to those within their sport. Furthermore, researchers have found personal stigma negatively impacts athletes' attitudes towards counseling and their willingness to seek help

(Chow et al., 2021). Not only is this a major deterrent for seeking help amongst athletes, but these studies have continuously found this stigma is the largest barrier student-athletes must overcome to seek help from professionals (Bird, 2021). Many athletes do not feel as though they are able to speak about their mental health struggles with those within their sport due to personal stigma created within the team culture. This perception deters them from vocalizing their struggles to their fellow teammates and coaching staff, further lessening the chance for them to receive support due to a fear of rejection or loss of playing opportunities.

The prevailing presence of personal stigma within elite level athletics has undermined the opportunity for athletes and coaches to unite and work through mental health issues together. In a recent study, researchers identified stigmatization as one of the main reasons athletes do not confide with their coaches about their struggles (Murphy, 2021). While coaches are considered by some as the gatekeepers to pointing athletes to psychological help, they are often not afforded the chance to do so due to personal stigmas common among athletes (Biggin, 2017). Elite level athletes typically do not seek help from their coaches due to this high level of stigma within their sport. This stigmatization can be heightened through a team culture promoting the acceptance of athletes being expected to deal with their struggles on their own or hostile attitudes towards help seeking by either coaches or fellow teammates.

In an initial study about athletes' relationships with their coaches and their help seeking attitudes, researchers found athletes do best when they feel supported by their coaches and staff through honest and open discussions (Murphy, 2021). Coaches' influence on the team culture and attitudes towards mental health highly affects the accepted stigmas within the team due to the large amount of time spent with the athletes. This research noted the majority of coaches recognize their role within the team to promote a safe place for discussions on mental health, but most have not been properly trained in the best ways to do so. Researchers also found an increase

in these open discussions between athletes and coaches on mental health struggles tend to lead to conversations that can prevent and treat maladaptive self-coping practices. These conversations not only help athletes vocalize their issues and get treatment, but they also serve as a way to lower personal stigmatization within elite level athletics moving forward. When athletes feel supported by their coaches and peers in working through mental health issues, they are more likely to lower their perceived personal stigmas and seek the proper treatment for their conditions. By continuing to implement discussion and create safe spaces for athletes, coaches can help lower personal stigmas commonly found within elite level sports on various levels.

A recent study among male college athletes reported over 55% of these athletes agreed there is a negative stigma towards mental illness in athletics (Grundy, 2021). In this same report, over 60% of these athletes stated they would be treated differently if their teammates found out about them coming forward with their mental health problems. This research shows the dramatic impact perceived personal stigmas have on athletes' help seeking attitudes and the need for personal stigmatization levels to lower so that athletes seek treatment more frequently. Researchers of this study suggested certified athletic trainers and coaches take this information and work to destigmatize the issue amongst athletes by educating them on the best ways to prevent mental health conditions from becoming more serious.

In studying the best ways to lower and prevent further personal stigmatization levels from arising, researchers have found targeted, structured, and systematic programs have provided the best results (Chow, 2021). Initial studies have focused on using these programs on college campuses to begin changing the culture internally with the intention that these perceptions would disseminate into the sports within these campuses.

In the first of these studies was a program aimed at reducing self-stigma toward mental illness while improving help-seeking attitudes among NCAA Division 1 athletes. It was the first

program to use evidenced-based destigmatization interventions to improve help-seeking attitudes among collegiate athletes. This intervention program focused on lowering athletes' personal stigmas towards mental health by using specific psychoeducational methods to normalize mental health conditions. Furthermore, these methods helped add to their overall mental health literacy, which has been proven to lower self-stigmatization towards mental health conditions. The results of this study showed after one session athletes already had lower levels of self-stigmatization towards mental health (Chow, 2021). Researchers noted this was likely due to their discussions on how often mental health conditions occur amongst athletes, which helped normalize the topic for them. As a result, athletes' help-seeking attitudes increased drastically due to their changed perceptions on the topic.

Researchers of this study further noted this program was more successful than previous ones due to the mix of instruction, education, and conduct (Chow, 2021). Athletes are less likely to change their perceptions towards mental health when they are not engaged in contact-based classes, as noted by this research. Online programs aimed at destigmatizing athletes' feelings towards mental health have not been as successful due to their isolating nature. This highlights the importance of providing programs that are engaging and community-based so athletes continue to lower their self-stigmas towards mental health.

Personal Stigma Implications

When individuals perceive they will be treated differently if they seek help, these ideas are internalized and cause athletes to develop self-stigmas (Wahto et al., 2016). By developing these attitudes, athletes are unlikely to ever receive mental health counseling. Research has shown mental health literacy training and awareness can help reduce self-stigmas, which would change the culture surrounding elite level sports and reduce mental health problems for athletes moving forward (Chow et al., 2021). Furthermore, community-based educational courses have

proven to be the most effective type of mental health training. These courses have had the greatest impact on normalizing mental health struggles for athletes, which has the biggest reduction in self-stigmatization amongst this group.

In addition to this training, coaches have a large role to play in working to lower personal stigmatization among athletes common within elite level athletics. As noted in the previous research section, athletes do best when they feel supported by their coaches and staff through honest and open discussions (Murphy, 2021). Not only do athletes feel more supported and comfortable discussing their conditions with their coaches and peers when such space is encouraged and mental health conditions are normalized, but they begin to lower their personal stigmatization towards seeking treatment. When coaches and administrators show their acceptance of mental struggles, athletes are more apt to change their perceptions of how they will be treated. This is another aspect of normalizing mental health struggles in the athletic sphere. When athletes feel encouraged to discuss their mental health conditions and are pointed towards treatment by coaches, accepted stigmas by these athletes begin to lower. In working with sports psychologists on the best ways to serve athletes and lower personal stigmas accepted by athletes, coaches must recognize their role. By continuing to normalize mental health conditions, coaches and staff members can help change the culture of sport for the better.

Mental Health Literacy Development

Due to research and awareness of mental health conditions being limited in the sport arena, many athletes do not possess proficient knowledge of signs and symptoms of mental health conditions. Elite level athletes lack a high level of mental health literacy, which represents a person's "knowledge and beliefs about mental health disorders which aid in their recognition, management, and prevention" (Chow, 2021, p. 190). This accounts for the main reason athletes struggle with identifying the issues they are facing and whether they should seek help based on a

lack of knowledge of the problems they are going through (Sasso et al., 2022). Athletes are undereducated about early signs of mental health conditions, ultimately resulting in more serious disorders later.

Within mental health literacy training is the knowledge of available resources and available professional health. Although athletes are desperately in need of these resources, they are often unaware of useful treatment options. Not only are treatment plans and resources not available to athletes at the same level as other training essentials, but coaches and staff do not emphasize the importance of using these, contributing to this low mental health knowledge. Mental health literacy and treatment has not been disseminated at an appropriate rate due to a culture that minimizes perceived weakness (Uphill et al., 2016). While athletes receive treatment and various resources for their physical needs, their mental health is not given the same consideration.

A common reason mental health has been undermined in the athletic sphere is due to the general attitudes of coaches and other staff on mental health. Many athletes will minimize or not acknowledge their mental health issues because of the fear of getting rejected by their coaches (Tabet et al., 2021). This fear is created by the prevailing atmosphere within many collegiate teams. Coaches and training staff do not instruct athletes on proper procedures for addressing mental health or cite resources for these athletes. By using their influence within teams, coaches can help increase athletes' mental health literacy, while also dispelling their fears of being rejected or labeled as incapable due to such conditions. In working with educating athletes on mental health conditions, coaches and governing bodies must continue to raise the standard for mental health literacy education. This will help lessen the stigmatization of mental health in athletics and help point athletes to receive treatment.

Mental Health Literacy Research

In response to the need for mental health literacy training, the NCAA came out with their own guidebook on the subject in 2016. The booklet, titled *Mental Health Best Practices*, outlines researched based techniques and procedures for identifying and treating mental health conditions among college athletes. Within this guide, the NCAA makes recommendations for college institutions to follow to best provide for their athletes holistically. This study serves to address research done by the organization that reported “only half of student-athletes believe mental health is a concern to their teams” (Huge et al., 2023, p. 37). This research study once again shows the deficiency of available resources, training, and overall discussion of mental health within athletics. These findings further highlight the need for direct intervention by organizations like the NCAA to ensure athletes' mental wellbeing is being properly supported.

To begin, the booklet stresses the importance of athletes having multiple facets of resources at their disposal. It notes athletes are best able to perform when they are engaged through a collaborative process of combining a variety of resources to better their overall wellbeing (NCAA.org, n.d.) By noting athletes are more than how they perform and by recognizing their mental stability is the most important thing, the NCAA immediately addressed the underlying issue within many sport organizations. This identification and recognition of athletes being more than their stats sets a precedent for colleges to follow. Furthermore, it could serve athletes well by making coaches adhere to this standard. This guidebook also gives multiple practical recommendations on how to best help athletes avoid arising mental health conditions. It lays out mental illness identification procedures, treatment recommendations, and ways to create an environment that supports mental wellbeing (NCAA.org, n.d.)

While this pamphlet is a step in the right direction, it does not provide an in-depth analysis of the issue. It is merely a generic guide on ways college programs can provide for their athletes, while missing key information about mental health. The implications of stigmatization

in college sports are not addressed, thus missing an opportunity to help lower the occurrence of this issue. While recommendations on creating a positive atmosphere within sports were given, the impact of coaches on athletes' mental wellbeing was not expanded upon. To have a greater impact on athletes' overall wellbeing, the NCAA could provide clear guidelines on mental health practices within college sports. Specifically, athletes would benefit from mandated rules that are implemented across the board. By enforcing these guidelines, the NCAA would be fulfilling its duty as an organization to provide the safest environment for athletes within their collegiate environment. Furthermore, it would also be fulfilling its duty to hold coaches accountable to put their athletes' needs above their performance. This duty is outlined in the NCAA Division 1 Conduct Code (NCAA.org, n.d.) Although this code is generic, it still states coaches should provide the safest environment for their athletes to enable them to succeed. By adding onto this code by recognizing athletes' mental health plays a role in their overall wellbeing, coaches' attitudes towards mental health and their role in promoting a holistically positive environment can continue to grow.

In adhering to these policies, stigmatization towards mental health among coaches would continue to lower, which would allow athletes to feel as though they can talk about their conditions with their coaches. These regulations would continue to add onto the mental health literacy development process because clear guidelines would be set by the NCAA, enforcing coaches to adhere to them. By following these guidelines and recognizing athletes' mental health is a crucial factor in their overall wellbeing, mental health literacy would continue to rise. This would serve elite level athletes collegiately, while also providing opportunities for this new educational standard to make its way to professional sports.

Furthermore, research has shown mental health literacy training has been proven to improve athletes' overall attitudes and confidence towards improving their mental state (Chow et

al., 2021). By informing athletes of the common signs of mental health conditions, they can be better equipped to overcome their struggles before they become more serious. In addition to training athletes, encouraging them to seek help has been shown to prevent athletes from developing stigmas toward mental health and from seeking help (Uphill et al., 2016). This encouragement is a crucial part of the educational process within mental health literacy training, yet is not common in the athletic sphere. Athletes are undereducated on signs of mental health conditions and do not receive sufficient support from coaches and other trainers in regard to turning to professional care. By implementing more discussions about mental health and encouraging athletes to receive treatment for early signs of mental health conditions, stigmatization within elite level sports towards mental health treatment will continue to lower.

Initial research regarding how coaches perceive mental health conditions has shown they are unaware of the conditions athletes are facing or are unwilling to acknowledge their symptoms. One study found athletes reported having mental health conditions at a higher rate than coaches reported witnessing the signs of these conditions (Biggin, 2017). These results show that coaches minimize mental health conditions and lack a proper understanding of the subject themselves, thus enforcing the need for more mental health education overall in elite level athletics. Furthermore, another study that surveyed college athletes found the reasons they did not seek treatment were mainly a lack of mental health literacy in sport and stigmatization from coaches which originated from their environment (Murphy & Sullivan, 2021). This study highlights the role coaches play in creating a space for athletes to discuss their mental health conditions. Athletes must first have mental health literacy training and then feel supported and encouraged by their coaches through having a safe environment fostered by their coaches.

The impact coaches have on athletes' perceptions towards mental health and their role in reducing stigma cannot be overlooked. This same study noted the best way to help collegiate

athletes feel encouraged through an uplifting environment is by changing the team culture which directly starts with coaches (Murphy & Sullivan, 2021). This study also noted this environment stems from coaching staff due to their proximity and involvement within the team. Coaches play a significant role in their athletes' perceptions of what is accepted and discussed, thereby creating the environment within their team. Coaches can work to change their team culture and reduce the overall stigmatization levels towards mental health within a team by regularly discussing different mental health struggles. Initial research has found athletes feel best supported when there is honest and open conversation and athletic staff is available for them emotionally. This is a small step that can make a big difference in changing team culture, which would help lower mental health stigmatization within teams. By implementing conversations about mental health, coaches can change the culture of a team and help lower the foremost barrier within the athletic context towards seeking help.

In addition to changing the environment of teams through education on mental health conditions and signs of mental health disorders, research has also shown other forms of mental health training can help athletes fight mental health disorders from developing. Researchers have found by training athletes in mental toughness and resiliency techniques, they can be better equipped to fight off stressors that could lead to more serious conditions. Mental toughness has been defined as the "capacity to produce consistently high levels of performance despite everyday stressors as well as adversities" (Gameiro et al., 2023, p. 1204). It is directly linked to higher levels of resilience and other successful coping strategies that support performance excellence. Furthermore, resiliency has been noted as playing a major role in protecting a person from negative effects of stressors. These qualities make mental toughness and resiliency valuable tools for athletes to employ when faced with various stressors that could lead to more serious mental health conditions. When properly trained in these mental toughness and resiliency coping

techniques, they can be better situated to maintain the ability to compete to the best of their abilities (Gameiro et al., 2023).

Training athletes on mental toughness can help them develop the ability to face unexpected mental strain. Through training and developing stronger levels of mental toughness, athletes are more able to sustain goal-directed behavior while facing stressors (Bird, 2021). Goal-directed behavior has been shown to promote self-actualization, which has a positive impact on athletes' personal control, thereby equipping them to deal with external stressors. This self-actualization development process naturally progresses from mental toughness training, thereby showing the impact it could have on athletes' overall mental wellbeing. This research was backed by a recent study on adolescent athletes, which showed higher levels of mental toughness correlated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.

The correlation between mental toughness training and personal stigma was further researched amongst a group of collegiate athletes. Researchers conducted multiple tests to investigate how higher levels of mental toughness correlated to personal stigma and in turn mental health seeking attitudes. They found there was a positive correlation between higher levels of mental toughness and overall sport-related well-being (Bird, 2021). Furthermore, their study noted there was a negative relationship between mental toughness and negative indicators of well-being. This research showed athletes with higher levels of mental toughness were able to overcome stress factors and thus more likely to pursue their goals amidst stress.

In addition to this, another indicator of mental toughness, known as buoyancy, showed these athletes were able to overcome adversity more easily than their peers with less mental toughness (Bird, 2021). Athletes with higher levels of buoyancy were shown to be more likely to adopt adaptive coping strategies that helped them overcome mental health conditions. These athletes possessed a stronger ability to overcome the pressures they were facing and were more

likely to seek help as part of their coping strategies. This ability was curated by developing specific mental toughness skills that allowed them to identify stress factors and use goal-directed behavior to overcome it. By having goal-directed behavior, strengthened by mental toughness skills and knowledge, these athletes were able to develop a plan for confronting their issues.

This research showed by practicing this, these athletes were less likely to consider stigmatization from their peers which could come from seeking help. Furthermore, it showed goal-directed behavior that comes from mental toughness training could be linked to lower levels of stigmatization, which is the forefront issue of mental health treatment among elite level athletes. This theory is based on athletes being less likely to perceive stigmatization when they view seeking treatment as part of their path to reaching their athletic achievements.

Additionally, this study noted athletes with higher levels of mental toughness are more able to deal with the inherent stressors within their sport. These findings showed a positive correlation between mental toughness and goal-directed behavior which enables athletes to overcome their conditions. This correlation was driven either by help-seeking from these athletes or the ability to implement behavior to address these conditions on their own.

Furthermore, this goal-directed behavior was related to lower levels of stigmatization because of the mental framing of help-seeking within this context. Those with higher levels of mental toughness were less likely to experience stigma towards seeking help themselves and their teammates. This research shows mental toughness training could not only be related to higher levels of psychological wellbeing in elite level athletes, but also related to lowering levels of stigmatization towards help-seeking attitudes (Bird, 2021).

This research is encouraging because it shows mental toughness training can be effective in helping athletes fight off serious mental health conditions. Mental toughness training can be used effectively by educating athletes on the different instances when mental toughness can

positively be used to overcome stress factors and when they should seek treatment. As more training is continuously developed, there must be a distinction between healthy levels of mental toughness and the time to reach out instead of overcoming arising issues with mental durability and coping strategies.

Initial research on the impact of mental health literacy training has continued to show a positive correlation in raising athletes' overall wellbeing. Murphy and Sullivan's research stated this educational process should be promoted to all members of the athletic community within all sports due to the impact it has on equipping athletes to understand mental health conditions thoroughly (2021). Their study showed this training helps improve attitudes, perceptions, and social norms within a sport which directly relates to the team culture and how athletes deal with mental health issues. Without this understanding, athletes will be ill-equipped to identify certain struggles and will not feel comfortable talking about them due to a lack of such discussion within their everyday environment. Furthermore, when coaches possess a base understanding of the signs of mental health conditions and promote training within their team, training is more effective given the impact of this training on the team atmosphere and promotion through discussion.

Mental Health Practices

Recently, governing bodies and sport organizations have started implementing mental health awareness programs and protocols which will help disseminate mental health literacy. The effort from these organizations continues to play an integral part in helping athletes as more knowledge of mental health literacy is studied. Even though these efforts have been quite recent, their impact in reducing stigmatization within the athletic atmosphere has been positive. Some of these protocols have also mandated coaches to receive such training to be more equipped in thoroughly understanding mental health within athletics. Coaches must respond to such training

and recognize their role in educating athletes and provide resources for them to talk about their mental health problems moving forward. By fostering an environment that encourages discussions about mental health by taking such training seriously, coaches can increase the impact of mental health literacy training and change the course of future teams.

Implementing more strategies to combat mental health conditions would help athletes overcome barriers that commonly prevent them from seeking counseling. Athletes regularly receive support from physical therapists and athletic trainers, yet do not receive mental health treatment at the same rate (Sasso et al., 2022). By raising awareness of mental health conditions through discussion, athletes will be more equipped to deal with their struggles and avoid the long-term impact of mental illnesses. These discussions should center around the idea that strong mental health is a vital aspect of the athlete's well-being and emphasize it is not something to be ashamed of. These discussions would continue to lower stigmatization toward mental health conditions, while educating athletes on mental health. Coaches and other training staff should all enforce this idea and in doing so, point athletes to other counseling services.

By developing more practices based on research in different areas of mental health training, the best strategies to reach athletes can be developed. While more research is still needed on the most effective practices, there has been positive data showing training athletes on mental toughness helps them fight off stress factors that could bring about more serious mental health conditions. Practices must be mandated and implemented on an organizational level to ensure training is provided for all athletes. It is imperative elite level athletes are not only equipped physically, but that their mental well-being is accounted for as well.

Mental toughness training should be developed and continuously researched moving forward. Based on initial research, this training would be effective on multiple levels. Given the nature of elite level sports and the never-ending factors common among them, the stronger

mental durability an athlete has, the more they can balance these factors. Furthermore, this training would lower perceived public stigma levels and self-stigma levels common among athletes. It would also change their view of fellow teammates who seek help, which would continue to change the future of sport.

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