



On track for success

supporting mental wellbeing in sports



“ I’ve grown up in my sport with the impression I was meant to be a superhero. You’re supposed to be able to handle things. You are in high pressure situations so you are convinced you should be able to handle those situations yourself, so it is hard to get help, it is admitting you have a weakness.

” *Natasha Danvers,
British Olympic Bronze Medalist*

Introduction

Having a healthy mind is as important as having a healthy body.

However, we often wrongly assume that when somebody's body looks healthy, their mind must follow suit. While exercise can be extremely beneficial in helping people maintain good mental health and wellbeing, there can also be another more negative relationship between exercise and mental health. Many professional sports people are beginning to tell their stories. They are beginning to challenge the perception that they are super healthy superhumans.

What's clear from the people who have shared their struggles is that anyone in sport can be affected - even elite athletes.

This booklet looks at some of the issues that sports people face and how those around them can help them maintain good mental health.



“ I was becoming far too analytical of my performance, expecting too much of myself on a day-to-day basis in training...I always felt a huge deal of responsibility to do the best possible job I could and I just went really too far with that. ”

*Michael Jamieson,
Olympic silver medalist, London 2012*

What makes athletes different?

- Athletes often have high expectations for themselves and feel overwhelming pressure to perform. Poor performance during training can set athletes on a path of negativity which may last for a long time.
- Many athletes experience anxious feelings about the future. Concerns about progression, injury, or life after retirement can be daunting and stressful.
- Athletes often pride themselves on their physical strength. Therefore, if they start to struggle with their mental health, this can easily invoke feelings of shame and weakness, making it a very difficult topic for them to talk about.

Coping mechanisms

Brutal training regimes and pressure to win medals can lead to depression, stress, and anxiety.

Sports people may turn to alcohol, drugs, sex or gambling to cope with these feelings.

Research around players in the Scottish Premier Football League revealed that 64% had experienced or had a team-mate who had experienced a mental health issue.

In a study of Australian elite athletes, 46% were experiencing at least one mental health problem.

According to sports writer Alfie Harmer, athletes have among the highest rates of mental illness, with as many as 25% experiencing depression.

While appearing to soar, many top athletes are actually weighed down with the pressure placed upon them





Psychological therapist and former professional cricketer, Paul Kirsten

Why it's different for sports professionals

Psychological therapist and former professional cricketer, Paul Kirsten has been able to reflect upon his sporting career with a much greater understanding and insight into the importance of the relationship of positive mental health and performance on the field. Paul talks about his experiences and looks at why being an athlete can be tougher than it seems.

Paul's story

I was fortunate to play alongside some of the world's best cricketers and there were many occasions when I could hold my own alongside these elite individuals, however there were also times when I perceived my performance as simply useless and I would find it incredibly difficult to find the motivation to continue. I was often completely stressed and fatigued especially following hours of intense training and if a poor performance ensued, it could result in disproportionate worry, self-criticism and unhelpful behaviours such as excessive partying as a means of distraction and escape.

The issues

All sportsmen experience failure or a period of under-performance, so what is the problem one may ask? With hindsight, I recognise that the style of coaching two decades ago was on training harder. The focus was on achieving better technique, skill and levels of fitness. The spotlight was on physical condition. There was a complete absence of awareness of the critical role of mental health and psychological wellbeing to our daily functioning. It was my inability to reflect on my performance in a way that was rational and self-supporting and that would allow me to problem solve that was missing. I was ignorant of how best to help myself and seek out appropriate support and guidance.

What went wrong?

As an athlete, I was striving to be the best I could be - if not one of the finest in my sporting discipline. However, alongside this aspiration, I had an, unfortunate, overreliance on performance success for 'self-validation' and acceptance by others. This led to extreme negative emotions such as shame (a social emotion in which we believe other people hold us in a negative light and we are inadequate, inferior or defective in some way). My lack of understanding and awareness of how to care for my own psychological wellbeing ultimately led to maladaptive behaviours both on and off the field and the development of mental health issues including depression, performance anxiety and addiction which prematurely ended my cricket career and negatively impacted upon my personal life.

Today, research has progressed our knowledge and understanding of the prevalence of mental health issues among elite sports performers. Coaches are often the primary source for identifying such issues but continue to report a lack of information and education in how to do this effectively.

Improving mental health in sport - tips for coaches

The issues of mental health are prevalent in all sports and at all levels from school age children to elite athletes. Coaches can really make a difference by fostering a positive ethos (e.g. *see Thriving not surviving, right*) and by noticing and providing support where necessary.

Provide resources

There are numerous examples in the press of athletes who wanted help but felt unable to open up. It can be easier for athletes struggling with their mental health if they feel there are people out there who are willing to listen. Provide and actively promote resources to enable the people you work with to seek help.

Take warning signs seriously

Subtle differences in the mood of an individual aren't always a cause for concern but if you have your doubts, don't be afraid to offer support just in case.

Promote positive self image

Encourage body self-confidence. Help foster an environment in which those in your care feel good about themselves and enjoy what they do. Negative comments can impact people massively in the world of sport where expectations can be so high - whatever the level.

Thriving not surviving

New Zealand's All Blacks rugby team have an ethos of 'thriving' through rather than 'surviving'. Their approach promotes strength through adversity and mental health issues are perceived as manageable rather than simply as weaknesses.

The approach has been successful in achieving strong mental and physical health among players.

Paul's tips for coaches

- ❖ Aim to create a supportive environment.
- ❖ Consider suggesting psychological models such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which are highly beneficial in helping to gain an understanding of mental health issues and helping sports performers to navigate the ups, downs and struggles that are common in professional sport.

“I had an, unfortunate, overreliance on performance success for ‘self-validation’ and acceptance by others”

Paul Kirsten, former professional cricketer

Sequence for relaxation

1. Right foot
2. Left foot
3. Right calf
4. Left calf
5. Right thigh
6. Left thigh
7. Hips and buttocks
8. Stomach
9. Chest
10. Back
11. Right arm and hand
12. Left arm and hand
13. Neck and shoulders
14. Face

Common issues experienced by athletes

Being in the public eye and feeling regularly judged on your last performance can really take its toll on the mental wellbeing of professional sports people. Athletes have reported a range of symptoms including depression and low mood and a feeling that they're not good enough; general / performance anxieties and excessive worrying; alcohol misuse; drug misuse; excessive partying behaviours; relationship problems, and gambling.

And anyone involved in the world of sport can experience symptoms of anxiety, stress, eating and body image issues, feelings of not matching up to expectations, etc - even children and young people.

Learning to relax

Regular practice of relaxation techniques (such as the example given below) can be helpful for dealing with feelings of stress and anxiety.

It may also be beneficial to work on unhelpful thought patterns using techniques such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

Technique: Progressive muscle relaxation

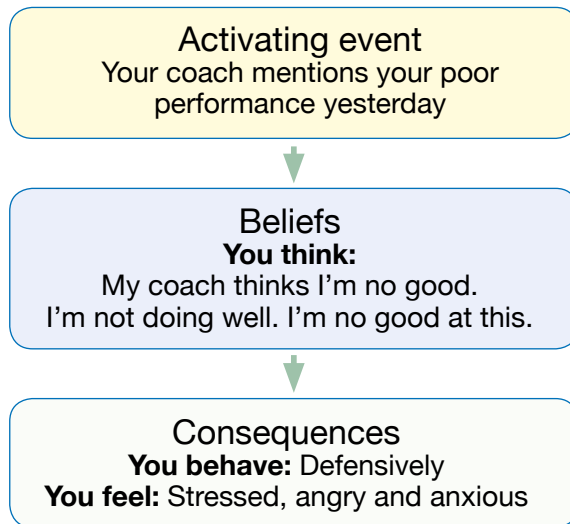
This technique involves systematically tensing and relaxing different muscle groups so you become aware of the difference between these two feelings in the body. By relaxing the body, this will relax the mind and consequently, you should learn to identify the signs of tension in the body when you start to feel stressed.

Note: This technique may not be appropriate for individuals with a history of back problems, muscle spasms or other injuries which may be worsened by muscle tensing.

- Get comfortable - loosen clothing and remove shoes.
- Take a few minutes to relax - take slow, deep breathes in and out.
- Next, turn your attention to your right foot and focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of ten. You may want to start with your left foot if you are left handed.
- Relax the foot and focus on how it feels as the tension flows away and it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When ready, focus your attention on your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release as before.
- Continue tensing and relaxing your muscles, starting with the feet and moving slowly up your body (see the recommended sequence *left*). Try to only tense those muscles you are working on.

Unhelpful thought patterns

The way we interpret the world around us is of key importance in how we think - problematic thoughts lead to negative emotions and / or unhelpful behaviours. For example:

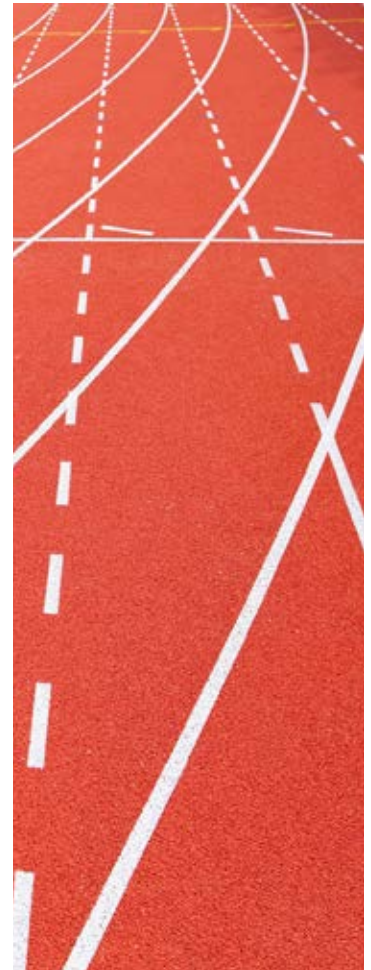


How CBT can help

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can be helpful as it can enable an athlete to understand the relationship between how they think and how they perform and feel.

People often give too much credence to the thoughts they have when in actual fact our brains are constantly running through past actions and how we performed and making up scenarios. These 'fictions' can have a huge impact on how we feel and perform and can make us feel anxious, stressed, depressed and like we're failing.

- ❖ CBT can help an athlete understand the processes going on in their head and provide them with a 'toolkit of techniques' which they can use to intervene in this unhelpful process.
- ❖ The process of CBT involves being introduced to a range of techniques that will challenge the belief system and help the individual to move on with life.
- ❖ CBT has been shown to be effective for a number of problems including: depression, anxiety, panic disorders, phobia and obsessive compulsive disorder.
- ❖ Anyone coming for CBT should expect to apply the techniques they have learned to their everyday lives between sessions.
- ❖ CBT helps people to feel empowered in dealing with their feelings.



“ People tend to think vulnerability and high performance culture don't mix. And that's false...Accepting your vulnerability and having comfort in uncertainty is one method of managing stress.

”

*Gilbert Enoka,
Mental skills coach to the All Blacks*

First Psychology's services to help those in sport thrive

Mental health has a direct impact on performance in all areas of life, including sports, and for people working to perform at the highest possible level, it can be a major issue.

The pressures placed on those in the sporting world are considerable, and can have a significant impact on mental health.

First Psychology can support the mental health of those in the sporting community by providing:

- ❖ Rapid access to highly professional expert help in a range of locations as well as online and by telephone.
- ❖ Support for all ages and stages in the sporting field, from children to young people to elite performers. We are also able to support those in associated roles such as coaches, trainers, etc.
- ❖ Expert consultancy, psychological assessment and training services to support sports organisations in raising profile and maximising the mental wellbeing of all those associated with them.
- ❖ A fully independent and therefore flexible and adaptable service to support the needs of any organisation or individual we work with.

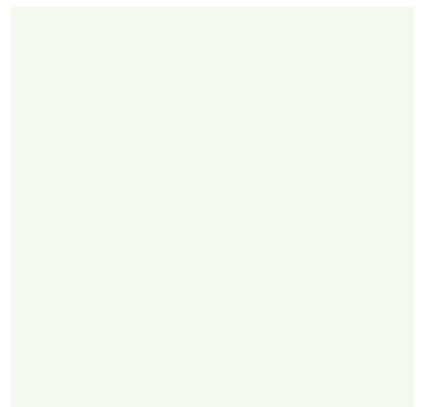
Contact us

We would be delighted to talk to you about our services and we can help those involved in sports at all levels.

Please call us on 0845 872 1780 or visit our website at:

www.firstpsychology-assistance.co.uk





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