



Opinion Article

Mental Health and College Student-Athletes

Mayes A*

Adjunct Faculty, Department of Social Work, College of Health and Public Service, University of North Texas, USA

Introduction

When one season starts, another one ends, never giving a physical, mental or emotional break to an athlete. College student athletes are at an increased risk for mental health issues that disrupt their overall wellbeing and performance. Student-athletes leave any support at home and inherit tremendous responsibilities alongside constant exposure to physical trauma, putting them at an increased risk for mental-health problems. College athletics are glamorized in American culture and this places a lot of pressure to perform on and off the field. However, student-athletes never truly know when their game and career will be over; sometimes it ends by choice, through injury, due to academic reasons, mental health, and even death [1].

Anybody can experience mental health issues; mental illness is one of the most profound silent epidemics in America. More than 75% of all mental health conditions begin before age 24 [2]. Athletes are not exempt from mental struggles solely because of their elite status. Currently, one in every four student-athletes is experiencing depression symptoms. Between 2003 and 2017, 477 student-athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) died from suicide [3]. The traditional athletic culture expects student-athletes to handle emotions on their own, forcing them to turn to peers and athletic staff as their confidants [4].

Avoiding competitive sports is not the answer, despite recent debates. Sports have many benefits and many student-athletes come from households with social tribulations, poverty, or lack of caregiver involvement; their only way to succeed becomes their love of the game. These facts make college athletes in a riskier category for stereotypes [5,6]. Similarly, some student-athletes are living a legacy where their families were athletes, or perhaps they have been told that they are “good enough” to make it in professional leagues. Competitive recruiting tactics in division one athletics fails to discuss that only 2% of college student-athletes will make it past college level sports [3].

Every college student-athlete experiences stress regardless of the sport, gender, or their familial background. Yet, mental-health stigma is just now beginning to be publicly recognized and discussed in athletic settings. Until the implementation of the NCAA Mental-Health Best Practices, there was minimal emphasis on the prevalence of mental health issues within college athletics and unclear protocol on how coaches were to handle mental health crisis situations with their student-athletes. Even still, the majority of athletic programs are lacking in the variety of support mechanisms they can offer to a student-athletes overall wellbeing. The weight of college for student athletes is different from non-athlete peers. College student athletes have intense schedules and encounter physical turmoil that they on a daily basis.

Indeed, many student athletes are not taught basic mental health concepts like self-esteem, body-image issues, depression, or anxiety.

Research states the majority of college student-athletes do not believe there are enough easily accessible resources for mental health care; overall, mental-health resources are not specified for student-athletes and they are likely to be referred to either on-campus counseling services or outside providers. Athletes spend most of their day at the team facility and it is unlikely that they are able to add a counseling appointment to their lengthy day. A typical college student-athlete has a busier schedule than a professional adult with a full-time job. A student-athlete has a typical wake up time before dawn and may not leave the facility until after dark [4]. An opportunity exists for student-athletes to have accessible and non-stigmatized mental-health services by macro and micro practice social workers, should athletic programs begin to prioritize the need for mental health professionals as part of the regular athletic staff.

Social workers and other behavioral health professionals know how to help students with mental health needs by looking at their entire world while also embracing the athletic culture (Greg Harden, personal communication, April 4, 2018). Traditionally, athletics has based their support services around sports psychology theories where “if your head is strong, your game will be strong” [7]. Due to the theories engulfed in sports psychology, as well as the benefits to winning games, it seems logical to have a sports psychologist as the natural support for an athlete. A social worker compliments these theories by encompassing mind-body health and life skills. A sports-psychologist’s main focus may be on bettering the body to win games and in general is not a life-long holistic approach. According to ESPN, only about 39% Division I universities have a full-time licensed mental health professional in their athletic department; these professionals tend to be sports performance psychologists, proving ther a large and detrimental gap to provide student athletes well-rounded mental health care [7]. The reality for the “other” 98% of student-athletes is that after college, their game will end.

Themes

Stigma

Athletic culture implies that athletes cannot admit “weakness” because they have appear as strong emotionally as they are physically [8: para 5,4]. Having conversations about mental health may seem “miserable” or as a distraction away from the importance of the game (Coach Adrian Mayes,

personal communication, March 26, 2019). Questions about self worth, anxiety, depression, PTSD, substance abuse and other mental disorders often go unspoken. Stigma is already a strong issue regarding mental health in the United States, and it may be even larger among young athletes. Just as “normal” as it is to go to the trainer when hurt, it should be a regular practice to go see the mental health specialist when depressed.

Expectations to excel in college are already high, and in general, mental health problems are increasing among campus populations [2]. The implication being that a college student-athlete is expected to perform at their highest level 100% of the time, their mental health will equally decline, however, there is minimal education on how to handle it off the field. Support for the individual athlete is left at the discretion and constraints of the athletic staff: “Depression, stress, anxiety, and other mental health conditions often emerge when disciplined, driven, college athletes encounter the realities of college life and competition” [9: para 2]. Athletes are often left with crippling diagnoses in their athletic careers that affect them for the rest of their lives, [10]. There are set protocol treatments for injuries, concussions and sickness, but defined mental illness treatment for athletes is still in the making [11]. Additionally, with what research has been done around head trauma and the link to mental illness symptoms, the lack of mental health support is unacceptable. The way to start to change the stigma is to talk about mental health daily, and in normal conversation [12].

Part of the NCAA Mental Health Best Practices includes a statement confirming that best practice is “ensuring that athletes have access to trained mental health professionals,” and “screening athletes for potential mental health issues before they even begin participation” [9: para 8]. However, the NCAA Mental Health Best Practices remains a recommendation and its use is not mandated at this time. Even still, the majority of Division I schools are lacking in ensuring proper support is being executed, and far behind these programs are Division II and III schools. Similarly, the National Football League (NFL) has just started hiring specified mental-health professionals in the last decade for their athletes’ overall wellbeing benefit [13].

Accessibility

It is obvious that the needs of college student-athletes are not equal to the needs of their non-athlete peers as student athletes represent a very unique population of young adults [14]. Accessibility to mental health resources is promoted and even encouraged for emotional needs, however, it is especially remiss to send them to the location of the general campus mental health services (Chelsea Burkart, Team Dietician, Texas State University, personal communication, August 1, 2018). To the majority of college participants, avoiding on-campus counseling services is common due to the significant stigma among students and athletes alike. Truly, generalized campus services do not often offer an inclusive environment to the student-athlete and walking into what is perceived as “incompetence” of the student-athlete lifestyle may increase fear around getting help [12].

Several common symptoms of mental health crisis include change in sleep or eating patterns, mood swings, change in performance, apathy, decline in academics, and social isolation, among others [15]. Should an athlete suffer an injury, the likelihood of symptoms increases even more. The responsibility of knowing the athletes every move is the

responsibility of the coaches and support staff. However, most coaches admit to not have adequate training or the ability to recognize what to do if an athlete shows signs of mental decline. Along with the athletes., coaches and staff need access to ongoing specialized support to handle such situations as well as have formal training in place.

Of the 477 studied deaths of NCAA student-athletes, 7.3 percent were by suicide [8, para: 10]. According to data in the National College Health Assessment surveys, 31% of males and 48% of females of the NCAA reported symptoms of anxiety and depression at any point during their playing careers [14]. During a research panel of 24 athletes, with zero coach representation, the majority reported that there were not enough resources on campus for mental health issues, with 100% of them stating that there were several individuals on their team struggling with mental health [12]. Edison [8] argues that it is contradictory to focus on specific ways to prevent these numbers from increasing, but eludes to the fact that a “simple conversation” would have altered their decisions. With such high numbers, it is easily assumed that mental-health access was practiced in the coaching office along side workouts; however, this is not the case.

Vicarious trauma

Playing sports will always come with physical and emotional risks. Offensive lineman, John Galsusha, states that his mental health had detrimental effects on his relationship with his coaches and the sport and he discusses that he was told to “push through it” [12]. Student-athletes compete year-round, not just in season, and peruse perfection the entire time [3]. Sports psychology has placed an emphasis on bettering the mind in order to play the sport to win; there is minimal teachings that stress self-care and mental-wellbeing; the possible life-long vicarious trauma an ex-athlete may encounter [4,16]. Outsiders do not understand that one week might be grueling and unmanageable, and student-athletes “hang-on because next week will be light and easy if you win” [17]. The media does not discuss when teams don’t win; Kliegman [17] emphasizes, “What if you continue to have only a win or lose perspective with no knowledge of any kind of balance in your mental and physical well being?” This type of irrational thinking can last a lifetime and it must also be considered that student-athletes have put themselves through physical anguish as well. Once a player’s career is over, they can continue to experience significant physical and mental issues due to a significant lifestyle and emotional change [4].

There is very little balance in athletics because points, wins and losses are what measures success. This aspect of the athletic culture is not going away or likely to be tamed as universities and boosters continue to invest in college sports. Due to these points, professionals must learn to embrace the athletic culture not attempt to change it into something else; sports are meant to bring people together and help youth learn positive life-long skills. Likewise, kids who have come from extenuating life-circumstances need sports in order to provide themselves with more opportunity; they may not have gotten into college if they were not athletes. Despite some recent discussion on when the appropriate time to play a sport is, some student-athletes and their families are willing to undergo the risks of debilitating physical and emotional stress as it is the one-way pass out of poverty [6].

Solution

Conversations about stress, mental health, anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders like OCD and bipolar disorder need to be happening among players, coaches and staff in the athletic training facility on an everyday basis and not just when the media has brought attention to a crisis. Additionally, the current protocol is mostly flawed; should a student-athlete disclose a mental-health issue, protocol is currently to “tell the trainer” and then to receive on-campus counseling. Clearly, student-athletes are not experiencing the same stress as everyone else. In college athletics, a student-athlete is required to be treated if they are physically injured or sick; the same mentality and requirement needs to be adopted regarding open-door mental health support [18]. Stigma remains, and scares students away from help or treatment, due to the low priority that student-athletes emotional wellbeing has compared to their physical health. It seems obvious that conversations about mental health need to be discussed daily in order to even begin to change the stigma for college-athletes. However, mental health professionals have many solid assessment and treatment tools to help student athletes. The importance of a safe environment to talk about mental health problems is well established. Empowering student athletes with knowledge of basic mental health conditions and well-being, giving a name to what they may be feeling and identifying possible treatment options are great beginning steps to better lifetime mental health.

Stigma remains, and scares students away from help or treatment, due to the low priority that student-athletes emotional wellbeing has compared to their physical health. It seems obvious that conversations about mental health need to be discussed daily in order to even begin to change the stigma for college-athletes. However, mental health professionals have many solid assessment and treatment tools to help student athletes. The importance of a safe environment to talk about mental health problems is well established. Empowering student athletes with knowledge of basic mental health conditions and well-being, giving a name to what they may be feeling and identifying possible treatment options are great beginning steps to better lifetime mental health.

According to Coach Adrian Mayes (2019), the most undervalued factor in athletics is the importance of mental health and the connection to how an athlete performs. The general solution to the is to bring normalcy to mental health struggles and put emotional well-being on the same level as physical injuries. A social worker has been trained and educated in many areas including human development, psychology, micro and macro level, which compliments teachings of balancing the mind and body for the sport that are already in place through sports psychology. Social work holistic approaches are proven to work, and the benefits a social worker will bring to the field is underestimated. Social workers can bring expertise into the athletic world in a way that allows student-athletes to be empowered to self-determine their path to life-long success and be ready for when the game is over.

Declaration

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Nowinski C (2017) Can I have your brain? The quest for truth on concussions and CTE [Video file].
2. James SD (2017) Mental health problems rising among college students. NBC News.
3. Hendrickson M (2018) It's time to make mental health policy a priority.
4. Garrick V (2017) Athletes and mental health: the hidden opponent [Video file].
5. Leibowitz A, Ridley A (2016-2018) Last Chance U [Television series]. Scooba, Mississippi: Netflix.
6. Samaha A (2018) The kids who still need football: America is moving away from this dangerous sport. but some families will decide the risks are worth it.. NY Times.
7. Spencer K (2018) What can we learn from college athletes [Video file].
8. Edison J (2018) The issue of mental illness amongst student-athletes. The University Star.
9. The NCAA has begun to meet mental health issues head on, but which schools are ahead (2018).
10. Davoren AK, Hwang S (2014) Mind, body and sport: depression and anxiety prevalence in student-athletes: an excerpt from the sport science institute's guide to understanding and supporting student-athlete mental wellness.
11. Hansen L (n.d.) The prevalence of mental health in student athletes.
12. Kalandarov A (2018) Student-athlete panel says understanding of mental health is lacking.
13. Rodrigue J (2018) Everybody is dealing with something, so panthers invest in mental health of players.
14. Yang J, Coxe KA, Moreland JJ (2016) Collegiate athletes' mental health services utilization: A systematic review of conceptualizations, operationalization, facilitators, and barriers. *J Sport Health Sci* 7(1): 58-69.
15. Vickers E (2018) Mental health in the student athlete. BelievePerform.
16. Managing a mental health condition in college (2018).
17. Kliegman J (2017) College athletes are only starting to get access to the mental health care they need. The Ringer.
18. Scott J (2018) Focusing on student-athletes' mental health. Athletic Business.

***Corresponding author:** Dr. Amy Mayes, DSW, LMSW, Title IV-E Child Welfare Assistant Program Coordinator, Adjunct Faculty, Department of Social Work, College of Health and Public Service, University of North Texas, Chilton Hall USA; e-mail: Amy.Mayes@unt.edu

Received date: August 25, 2021; **Accepted date:** October 03, 2021; **Published date:** October 06, 2021

Citation: Mayes A (2021) Mental Health and College Student-Athletes. *J Health Sci Educ* 5(4): 216.

Copyright: Mayes A (2021) Mental Health and College Student-Athletes. *J Health Sci Educ* 5(4): 216.