

Mental Health Literacy in Sport: The Role of the Social Work Profession

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The Evolution of Sport Social Work

Recent studies show elite athletes are susceptible to mental health symptoms and disorders such as depression, anxiety, mood disorders, suicide, substance abuse and use, and eating disorders (e.g. Reardon, Hainline et al. 2019, Cox, 2015; National Collegiate Athletic Association, NCAA, 2020; Rao & Hong, 2015; Wolanin et al., 2015). We are using the International Olympic Consensus Statement definition of elite athlete as “those competing at professional, Olympic or collegiate levels.” (Reardon, Hainline et al 2019). There are sports specific stressors for example, severe musculoskeletal injuries, multiple surgeries, decreased performance, maladaptive perfectionism (Reardon, Hainline et al 2019). Additionally, athletes are often under the spotlight for sexual assault and interpersonal violence (Mordecai, 2017, Mountjoy, Brackenridge, et al. 2016)), impairments in physical health (e.g., concussion, overuse injuries, season- or career-ending injuries) (Vann et al., 2019; Putukian, 2014.), criminal justice involvement (Gill, 2017), adverse childhood experiences (Brown et al., 2020; Aron, et al, 2019; Kaier et al, 2015) and other health and safety concerns.

Over the last decade, a group of dedicated social work professionals started grassroots efforts to lead the integration of social work into elite athlete development to address these mental health symptoms and disorders and other presented concerns (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, ASWIS, 2020). These professionals also recognized the need for social workers to establish a professional network both within social work and related fields to promote the safety and well-being of elite athletes from an interprofessional perspective (e.g., social workers, sport psychologists, athletic trainers, and other licensed mental health professionals).

Through these interprofessional lenses, sport social work promotes social justice and social change by focusing on the unique needs of athletes at both an individual and an environmental level (Moore, 2016). From the early days of the Settlement House Movement, social workers promoted the health and well-being of athletes through direct practice, community organizing, and advocacy (Reynolds, 2017). Fast forward over a century, recent policy efforts, education ventures, expanded research agendas, and cutting-edge responses to current events (e.g., COVID-19 and race relations), sport social workers are solidifying their place at the proverbial table (ASWIS, 2020; Dean & Rowan, 2014; Gill, 2008; McCoy, Oregon, & Sullivan, 2017; Moore, 2016). At the heart of these efforts, is a focus on the values and ethics of the social work profession.

Sport social workers believe strongly in the values and ethics that define the larger social work profession (National Association of Social Workers, NASW, 2017). Of particular importance are the core values of service, social justice, and the dignity and worth of athletes (Moore, Ballesteros, & Hansen, 2018; Moore and Gummelt, 2018). First, sport social workers believe in helping athletes to address the mental health needs impacting their abilities to be successful both in and away from competition. Second, sport social workers ensure access to education and services to address mental health needs. Third, sport social workers are mindful of the individual and cultural differences each athlete and their athletic program brings to competition and life aspirations. The utilization of these core values is best understood from various theoretical lenses.

To promote well-being, social workers should be competent in various constructs and perspectives that support the engagement, teaming, assessment, planning, and intervention of elite athletes when they are experiencing mental health symptoms and disorders. Some of the

constructs and perspectives include: (a) ecological perspective, (b) systems theory, (c) empowerment models, (d) strengths perspective, (e) social learning theory, and (f) models of human development (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). Together, these core values and theoretical approaches establish a game plan for promoting the health and development of elite athletes.

This holistic approach is likely most effectively carried out by licensed clinical social workers. A licensed clinical social worker provides a high level of expertise theoretically, diagnostically, and interventionally. Additionally licensed clinical social workers are positioned to develop methods of prevention, early intervention and treatment. (American Board of Clinical Social Work, 2020). The knowledge base of clinical social work includes theories of biological, psychological, and social development; diversity and cultural competency; interpersonal relationships; family and group dynamics; mental disorders; addictions; impacts of illness, trauma, or injury; and the effects of the physical, social, and cultural environment. Given the unique challenges facing the elite athlete populations, the versatility and multidisciplinary approach of a clinical social worker is vitally needed across the sport spectrum. Clinical social workers also deeply connect with the emerging and significant need for mental health literacy amongst elite athletes (Gorczynski et al., 2020).

Mental Health Literacy in Sport

Mental health literacy has been defined as “knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders, which aid their recognition, management, and prevention” (Jorm et al., 1997, p. 182). In essence, mental health literacy has three main areas of concentration: (1) knowledge of mental health symptoms and disorders and strategies of self-care; (2) strategies to address public and self-stigma; and (3) create pathways to improve help seeking behaviors. Over the years, mental health literacy, like the concept of health literacy, has evolved. At one point, mental health

literacy was very *reactive* and solely focused on basic literacy skills, where individuals were taught to read and understand simple diagnostic information about various mental health symptoms and disorders and know where to go to access help. Since then, mental health literacy has become *proactive*, where individuals are not only taught about basic diagnostic information, but also instructed on how to develop social and cognitive skills necessary to address the various determinants of mental health and advocate for change within their communities (Gorczynski et al., 2020).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) identified universal access to mental health care as one of social work's top priorities. National and international initiatives to improve health literacy among elite athletes are congruent with NASW's goal. Social workers are well positioned to support mental health literacy practices (Mendenhall & Frauenholtz, 2013). Since the birth of the social work profession, social workers have been instrumental in the development, implementation, and research of many interventions that improve mental health literacy. Social workers provide the majority of mental health services in the United States (NASW, 2020). In addition, the concept of mental health literacy and its underlying goals of reducing stigma and improving access fit with our professional values, which highlight the dignity and worth of individuals, social justice, and service (Mendenhall & Frauenholtz, 2013; Moore & Gummelt, 2018).

While social workers are routinely at the forefront in promoting mental health literacy in the general population through knowledge of symptoms, reduction of stigma, and pathways to care, there has never been a more important time for sport social workers to position themselves as natural leaders in supporting the mental health literacy of elite athletes. Sport social workers have opportunities to repurpose existing efforts at both the micro and macro levels of sport. They

can also build upon the foundation established by other professions represented in the sport industry and the numerous athletes that are opening up about their own mental health experiences.

At the micro level, sport social workers are providing individual services that emphasize and deliver interventions that increase mental health literacy and assist elite athletes in accessing quality treatment and becoming empowered advocates for their own care. This begins with detailed knowledge of mental health symptoms and disorders, diagnosis and treatment, systemic issues related to sport identity and culture, and developmental factors (Gorczyński et al., 2020). Furthermore, sport social workers are utilizing interprofessional collaborations to design services that capture the needs of all individuals involved in sport through various lenses. These efforts are allowing sport social workers to establish pathways to care.

At the macro level, sport social workers provide community education and raise awareness of mental health stigma and realities within sport. Sport social workers do this through sound pedagogical approaches that emphasize mental health literacy consistently at all levels of sport from youth through Olympic caliber athletes (Gorczyński et al., 2020). This includes examining strategies for effectively and efficiently communicating about mental health risks through various media campaigns, traditional methods, and innovative technology. These approaches consider challenges associated with particular sports, personal factors, cultural components, environmental determinants, and appropriate formats for capturing the desired target population.

These mental health literacy interventions empower clients and demonstrate respect for self-determination. They place an emphasis on the sport social worker's responsibility to their athletic clients. They demonstrate a powerful cultural awareness, commitment to social diversity,

and a call to social action. Furthermore, sport social workers lead by example in promoting interprofessional collaborations that value training, evaluation, and research on best practices in mental health literacy (NASW, 2017). Yet, more must be done to meet the growing challenges of mental health in sports. Building off prior recommendations from sport industry experts (Gorczynski et al., 2020; Gorczynski et al., 2019; Kutcher, Wei, & Coniglio, 2016), sport social workers support these additional recommendations.

Conclusion

The sub-speciality field of sport social work will continue to evolve. With this evolution will come opportunities to shape the future of mental health literacy and practice for elite athletes. Sport social workers can leave their everlasting mark on the field of athletics through a variety of means. This might include: (1) establishing a research agenda designed to specifically drive and coordinate interprofessional collaboration for improvements to education and clinical care; (2) establishing links between mental health literacy and mental health needs outcomes that allow for a widespread translation of research results to improve services (Gorczynski et al., 2020); (3) maintaining a progressive approach to mental health promotion and treatment for all individuals in the arena of sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, match officials, and spectators); (4) given the social work emphasis on the biopsychosocial well-being of a person - linking mental health literacy to health literacy (Kutcher, Wei, & Congilio, 2016); and (5) empowering elite athletes to make informed decisions about their mental health. All of these approaches can be done through individual, team, and organizational efforts with an emphasis on the values and ethics of the social work profession.

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