

## Elite youth athletes: is mental health compatible with high-performance sport?

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#### **DISCLOSURES**

- Member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Mental Health Working Group
- IOC External Consultant on Mental Health
- Advisory Board Member, Sports Oracle IOC Programs on Mental Health in Elite Sport
- Mental Health Consultant, Cricket Australia
- Research & consulting funding received from various (non-commercial) entities (e.g. Australian Institute
  of Sport, Australian Football League, Tennis Australia,

  Research Council)

## Demise of the fittest: are we destroying our biggest talents?

Roald Bahr<sup>1,2</sup>

### Does elite sport compromise the *mental health* of youth athletes?

"Most high-performance sports are harvesters rather than farmers"

Duncan Murray, former head of Cycling Australia

What does research say about mental health in elite youth athletes?

What's needed to enable elite youth athletes to thrive in sport and life?



#### **CONCEPTUALISING MENTAL HEALTH**

#### Mental health

Overall sense of wellbeing and ability to cope with sport and life

Emotions like anger, frustration, worry are manageable

Ability to function and achieve goals

#### **Mental health symptoms**

Psychological distress, low mood, loss of interest or pleasure in sport/life, anxiety, disturbed body image, poor sleep, irritability

Usually mild-moderate and lasts a few days

Can be self-managed and/or supported by friends and family

#### Mental ill-health

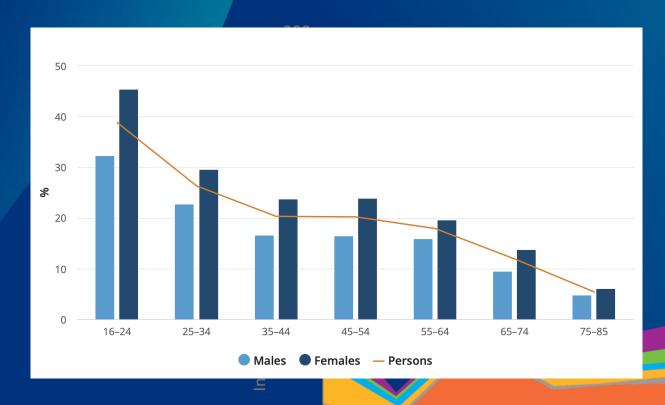
Symptoms persist for weeks/months

Significantly interfere with daily life (e.g. ability to train, compete, study/work and relate to others)

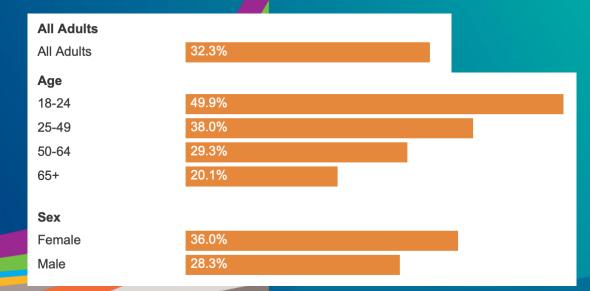
Symptoms and impairment usually can't be managed without professional help

#### WHY FOCUS ON "YOUTH" MENTAL HEALTH?





#### Anxiety and Depression Symptoms



ABS, 2020-22, National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing

US Bureau of Statistics, 2023



## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH IN ELITE ATHLETES?

#### Consensus statement

#### Mental health in elite athletes: International Olympic Committee consensus statement (2019)

Claudia L Reardon, <sup>1</sup> Brian Hainline, <sup>2</sup> Cindy Miller Aron, <sup>3</sup> David Baron, <sup>4</sup> Antonia L Baum, <sup>5</sup> Abhinav Bindra, <sup>6</sup> Richard Budgett, <sup>7</sup> Niccolo Campriani, <sup>8</sup> João Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia, <sup>9,10</sup> Alan Currie, <sup>11,12</sup> Jeffrey Lee Derevensky, <sup>13</sup> Ira D Glick, <sup>14</sup> Paul Gorczynski, <sup>15</sup> Vincent Gouttebarge, <sup>16,17</sup> Michael A Grandner, <sup>18</sup> Doug Hyun Han, <sup>9</sup> David McDuff, <sup>9,20</sup> Margo Mountjoy, <sup>9,21,22</sup> Aslihan Polat, <sup>23,24</sup> Rosemary Purcell, <sup>25,26</sup> Margot Putukian, <sup>9,27,28</sup> Simon Rice, <sup>29,30</sup> Allen Sills, <sup>31,32</sup> Todd Stull, <sup>33</sup> Leslie Swartz, <sup>9,34</sup> Li Jing Zhu, <sup>35,36</sup> Lars Engebretsen <sup>37,38</sup>

Systematic review



Occurrence of mental health symptoms and disorders in current and former elite athletes: a systematic review and meta-analysis

Vincent Gouttebarge, <sup>6</sup> 1,2 João Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia, <sup>8</sup> 3,4 Paul Gorczynski, <sup>5</sup> Brian Hainline, <sup>6</sup> Mary E Hitchcock, <sup>7</sup> Gino M Kerkhoffs, <sup>1,2,8</sup> Simon M Rice, <sup>9,10</sup> Claudia L Reardon <sup>11,12</sup>

#### **ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Open Access** 

Do Rates of Mental Health Symptoms in Currently Competing Elite Athletes in Paralympic Sports Differ from Non-Para-Athletes?



Lisa S. Olive<sup>1,2,3\*</sup>, Simon Rice<sup>1,4</sup>, Matt Butterworth<sup>5</sup>, Matti Clements<sup>5</sup> and Rosemary Purcell<sup>1,4</sup>





#### **BROAD CONCLUSIONS?**

Elite athletes experience mental health symptoms at or above levels in the general community



Psychological Distress: 9 - 38%



Depression: 17 - 48%



Body Image Disturbance: 9-38%



Problematic Alcohol Consumption: 3 – 40%

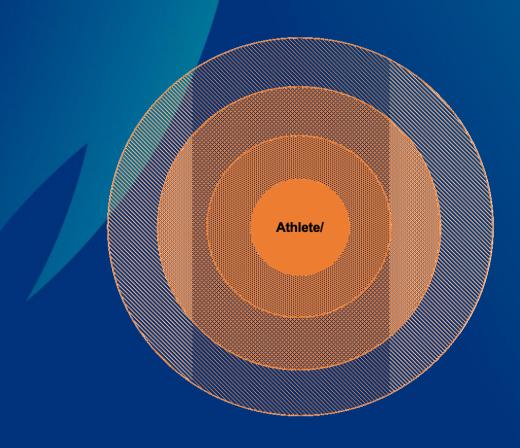


Sleep Disturbance: 9 - 38%

Rates vary significantly according to type of sport and type of mental health condition (and when research was conducted)

#### **KEY CONTRIBUTORS?**





Sex

Injury

High athlete identity

Adverse life events

Maladaptive perfectionism

Unexpected sub-performance

Harassment or abuse

Low social support

Unhelpful coping

**Discrimination** 

CURRENT OPINION

Mental Health In Elite Athletes: Increased Awareness Requires An Early Intervention Framework to Respond to Athlete Needs

Rosemary Purcell<sup>1,2</sup>, Kate Gwyther<sup>1,2</sup> and Simon M. Rice<sup>1,2\*</sup>



#### WHAT ABOUT ELITE YOUTH ATHLETES?



#### Mental Health Among Elite Youth Athletes: A Narrative Overview to Advance Research and Practice

Courtney C. Walton, MPsych PhD,\*<sup>†‡</sup> Rosemary Purcell, MPsych PhD,<sup>†‡</sup> Jo L. Henderson, PhD,<sup>|¶</sup> Jeemin Kim, PhD,<sup>#\*\*</sup> Gretchen Kerr, PhD,<sup>#</sup> Joshua Frost, MSc,<sup>†‡</sup> Kate Gwyther, BA(Hons),<sup>†‡</sup> Vita Pilkington, BA(Hons),<sup>†‡</sup> Simon Rice, MPsych PhD,<sup>†‡</sup> and Katherine A. Tamminen, MEd PhD<sup>#</sup>

Psychological and social factors associated with mental health of European dual career athletes: A systematic review

Esa P. Aalto<sup>1</sup> | Joan Pons<sup>2,3</sup> | Saul Alcaraz<sup>3,4</sup> | Rocío Zamora-Solé<sup>3,5</sup> | Yago Ramis<sup>1,3</sup> |

Review

Mental health and well-being of elite youth athletes: a scoping review

- Early specialisation
- Over-training
- Critical or demanding coaches and parents
- Inadequate/poor sleep
- Balancing educational and social needs with increasingly professionalised sporting demands

## WHAT ARE THE RATES OF MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS IN YOUTH ATHLETES?

• 16.9% met criteria for a mental disorder, with a lifetime prevalence of 25.1% (Schaal et al, 2011)

#### Large variability in self reported symptoms:

- o **6.7% anxiety, 9.5% depression** (Weber et al, 2018)\*
- O 29.5% anxiety, 25.8% depression, 39.4% sleep disturbance, 54.5% alcohol misuse, (Mountjoy et al, 2023)\*
- \* gender differences where F > M

Student-Athletes' Mental Health in the European Sport School Context:

A Scoping Review

Milla Saarinen, Michael McDougall, Siv Gjesdal, and Christian Thue Bjørndal 1,3





ELITE YOUTH ATHLETES MAY BE AT LOWER RISK FOR MENTAL ILL-HEALTH COMPARED TO NON-ATHLETIC PEERS

BUT MORE RESEARCH IS NEEDED TO
DETERMINE THIS





**Structure in life** 

**Commitment/Determination** 



## HOW CAN WE PROMOTE AND PROTECT MENTAL HEALTH IN ELITE YOUTH SPORT?



#### PROMOTE EARLY INTERVENTION



Remove barriers to talking about mental health and seeking help

Elite youth athletes have more stigma towards mental health than their community peers

- Build mental health literacy
- Positive role model examples/narratives
- O Positive attitudes of others, especially coaches



#### PAY MORE ATTENTION TO THE TRANSITION INTO ELITE **SPORT?**

Transitions into elite-level sport can pose additional risk factors for mental ill-health:

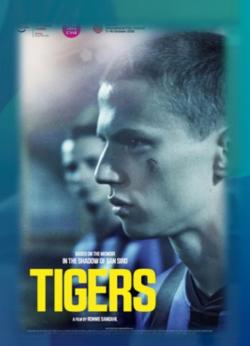
- increased performance expectations
- greater public scrutiny
- changes in lifestyle demands, such as diet, training loads and sleep
- relocation
- increased living and financial independence

These occur in the context of adapting to established teams and learning about the systems, processes, norms and culture that exist within the new sporting environment

**Open Access** 

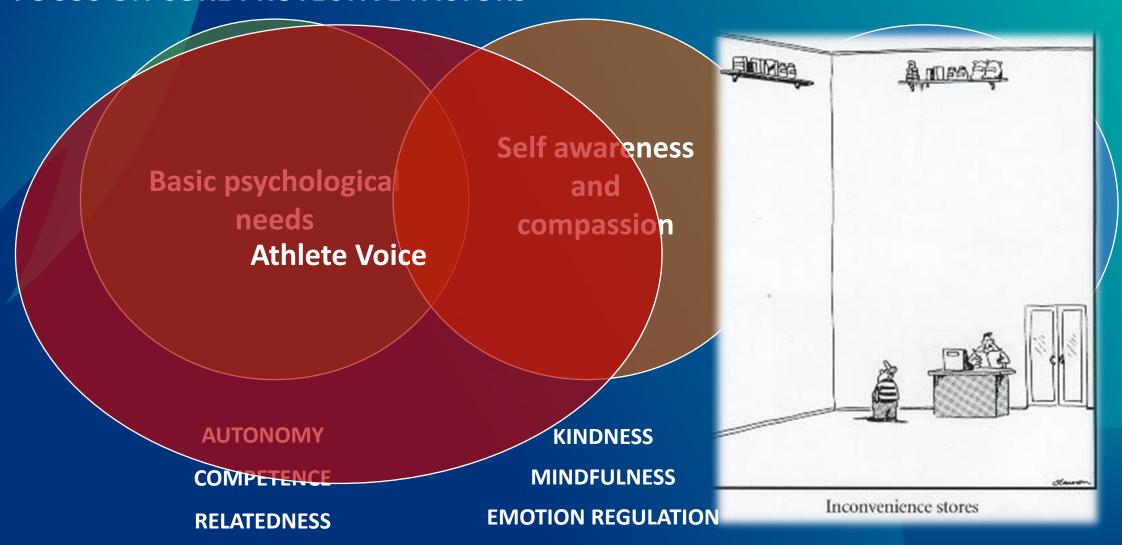
Athlete Mental Health and Wellbeing During the Transition into Elite Sport: Strategies to Prepare the System

Vita Pilkington 1,2 0, Simon Rice 1,2, Lisa Olive 2,3,4, Courtney Walton and Rosemary Purcell 1,2





#### **FOCUS ON CORE PROTECTIVE FACTORS**



#### WE NEED A CULTURAL SHIFT IN ELITE (YOUTH) SPORT





Genuinely value all athletes as people first and assets, not commodities

+Win Well



#### Danke/thankyou

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