

YOUTH SPORT AS A CONTEXT FOR SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH: ADOLESCENT MALE PERSPECTIVES

WHAT WERE WE INTERESTED IN?

In Australia, in a given year, just over 14% of adolescents aged 12-17 years will have a mental health problem.¹ We know that these problems can persist over time and that young men are less likely than young women to seek help.² We wondered if community sports clubs might be a good setting to introduce mental health education and prevention activities to parents, coaches, and athletes.

This early research examined what **adolescent male athletes** thought about the role of clubs in promoting better adolescent mental health.

WHAT DID WE DO?

In 2015, we conducted 16 focus group discussions with 55 Australian adolescent males involved in swimming, cricket, tennis, AFL, soccer, and basketball across the Illawarra region of NSW. We asked questions about: (1) their mental health knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions, (2) the role of sports clubs in supporting mental health, (3) what they thought they needed regarding mental health, and (4) how they might like to learn about mental health through sports clubs.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

"It's not really something that you talk about with your friends and stuff. Even if they're your closest friends ... You never directly talk about mental health..." (12-15 years group)

We found that the young men didn't talk about mental health much with their friends, but they thought that sport would be an engaging setting to learn about mental health. They also thought that certain people, such as coaches, parents, family, and elite athletes or other role models could be key to supporting mental health in the club setting.



They highlighted that sport could have both positive and negative effects on their mental health, especially at higher competition levels.

“Whenever I’m feeling stress I’ll [go to a basketball court] and shoot, just because it’s a happy place for me. It feels like a sense of home...” (12-15 years)

“Playing sport, especially like cricket, it can get you down a lot. If you’re not scoring runs or playing well, you can get a bit stressed...” (12-15 years)

A key finding was that many didn’t know how to help somebody close to them if they had a mental health problem and were not confident approaching the topic. They thought that it would help to learn skills or strategies that would help them to manage challenges, build their resilience, and prevent mental health problems.

“I think we know about it. I don’t think I’d know how to go about helping someone else though...” (16-17 years)

“I’d want to help... probably not too sure how to help them out. You feel helpless, like you can’t do anything for them...” (12-15 years)

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Taken together with our earlier [research with parents](#)³, this study shows that sports clubs could be an ideal setting to run mental health programs. The young men were open to hearing about mental health in this setting, so long as it addresses their specific needs (e.g. helping their friends and learning specific skills for resilience). Importantly, they were open to coaches, parents, and family playing a supportive role, if those people had a good understanding of mental health themselves.

Further reading

1. Lawrence D, Johnson S, Hafekost J, Boterhoven de Haan K, Sawyer MG, Ainley J, et al. The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents: Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. Canberra; 2015. <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/mental-pubs-m-child2>
2. Gonzalez JM, Alegria M, Prihoda TJ. How do attitudes toward mental health treatment vary by age, gender, and ethnicity/race in young adults? J Community Psych. 2005; 33, 611-629 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/jcop.20071>
3. Hurley D, Swann C, Allen MS, Okely AD, Vella SA. The role of community sports clubs in adolescent mental health: the perspectives of adolescent males’ parents. Qual Res Sport, Exercise and Health. 2017; DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2016.1275751 www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/2159676X.2016.1275751

