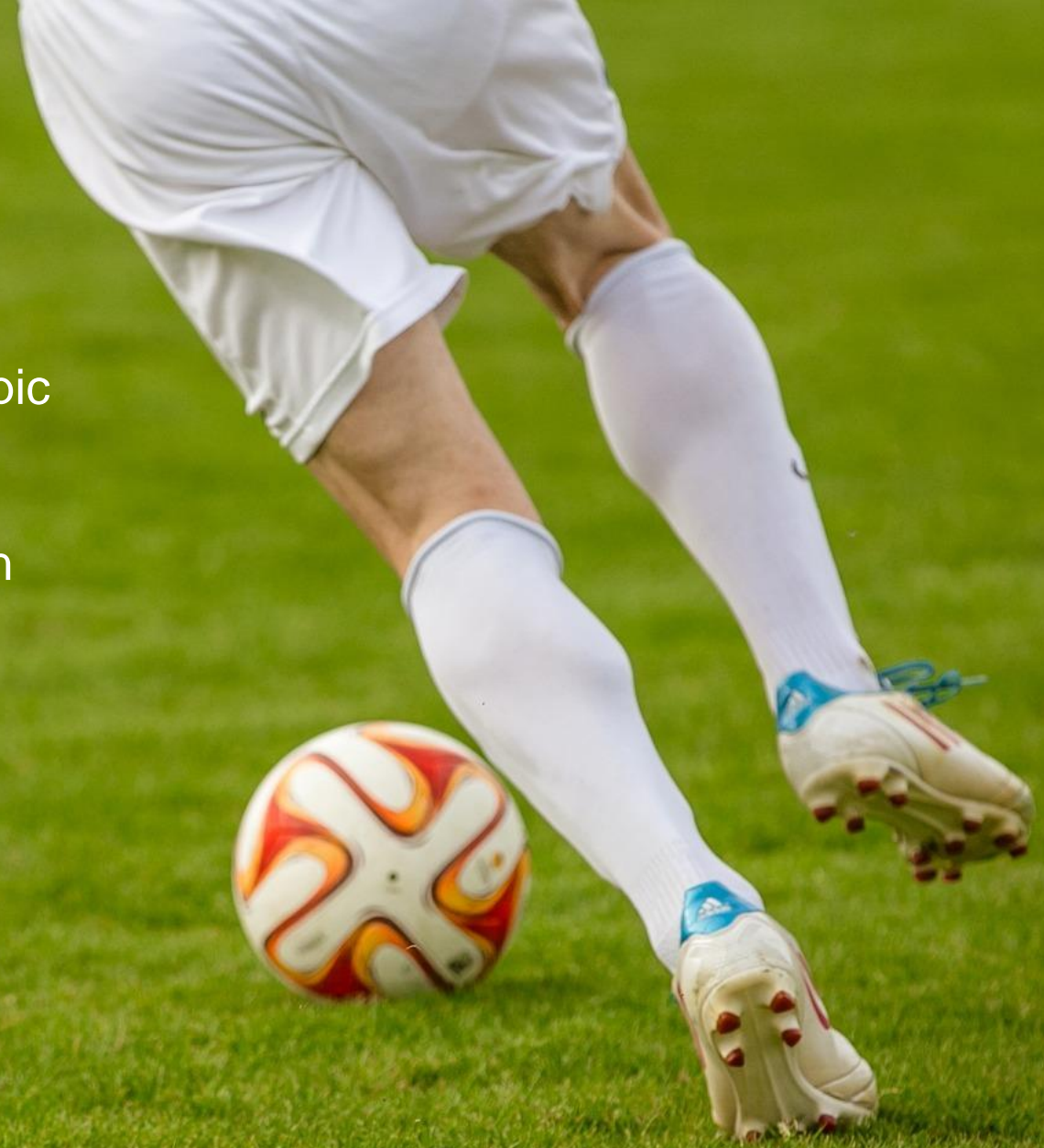


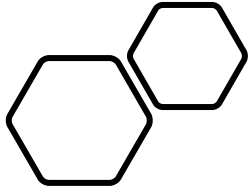
Mental welfare in professional football players

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The following PowerPoint, which will explore the topic of mental health and wellbeing in sport and society, aims to underline the importance of mental health in elite sports by giving particular attention to male elite footballers.





Did you know that elite athletes are vulnerable to mental health disorders?

This is due to the combination of constant training, performance and selection, which characterizes elite sports. However, before proceeding further with the topic of mental health and wellbeing in high-level sports, the concept of health needs to be firstly introduced.





Health

What is health?

Definition of Mental Health according to the World Health Organisation:

‘A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’.

Why is health important?

Having good health not only is crucial for the survival of a person, but it is also linked with their happiness.

Some of the major benefits of having a healthy lifestyle include the following:

- Improve your mood, confidence and self-esteem
- Lower the chances of developing many health problems, such as cancer and diabetes
- Reduce the risk of cardiovascular diseases (i.e. stroke, heart attacks)
- Help prevent obesity, hypertension and depression

What can I do to have a good health?

It is well known that having a balanced diet and practicing regular physical activity can keep people healthy; however, there are several other factors, which help individuals achieving and maintaining a healthy lifestyle including good personal hygiene habits, economic means and the amount of sleep a person gets.



**Going back to the topic
of mental health
and wellbeing...**

What is mental health and why is it important?

Mental health was recently defined as ‘a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society’.

In other words, the term mental health refers to a person’s emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

Mental health, whether positive or negative, not only has an impact on the way a person feels, but it also influences individual judgements, decision-making and behavior. That is why it is extremely important to take care of your mental health.

Definition of Mental Health

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community

World Health Organisation (2014)

What causes mental health problems?

Mental health depends on various factors, including both biological (i.e. genetic influence) and environmental (i.e. surrounding environment) factors. However, also lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise and sleep often play a crucial role in the development of mental illness. Importantly, a link between lifestyle factors and depression was recently observed.

Here is a list of some of the factors, which may contribute to mental health problems:

- Genetic inheritance
- Personal life experiences (i.e. trauma, abuse)
- Low social support
- Poor diet
- Physical inactivity
- Lack of sleep or reduced quality of sleep
- Chronic stress
- Substance abuse (i.e. alcohol, illegal drugs)

Mental health in sport

“Everyone is going through something that we
can’t see.”

- Kevin Love

The importance of mental health in sport

Being able to openly talk about mental health is extremely important, not only in daily life, but also in sport as poor mental health can negatively impact athletes' sport performance and private life.

Furthermore, if mental illness is not treated, it can result in chronic health problems, which will continue even after quitting sport.

Common mental illnesses include:

- Depression
- Phobias (i.e. social phobia)
- Social anxiety disorder
- Panic disorder
- Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Every year 1 in 4 adults and 1 in 10 children in the UK experience mental health problems with the most common being depression and anxiety.

Research investigating depression in athletes has yielded contrasting results; however, it has also established that depression is quite common among male athletes. Consequently, in 2017, Mental Welfare has been identified as a duty of care issue in the Duty of Care in Sport Review by Grey-Thompson. As a result of this, positive measures have been taken to raise awareness around mental health in both sport and society. For instance, several well-known athletes, who have experienced mental health problems, including English former professional footballer Clarke Carlisle, decided to share their story to help fighting mental health stigma.

Some statistics...

Did you know that up to 35% of elite athletes experience mental health problems (i.e. eating, anxiety and mood disorders)?

Were you aware that the frequency of mental health symptoms and disorders in male athletes, who participate in team sports including cricket, football, handball, ice hockey and rugby; can get up to almost 45% for anxiety and depression?

Moving on to football...

... have you heard that, in 2018, 16.7% of elite Danish and Swedish football players were found to display depressive symptoms linked to perfectionistic concerns, competitive anxiety and social phobia?

Mental illness concerns both former and current elite athletes.

Why are elite athletes vulnerable to mental illness?

Athletes have a higher risk of developing depression compared to the general population. In fact, besides being exposed to biological, environmental and lifestyle stressors like everyone else; athletes also experience sport-specific stressors, such as:

- Overtraining
- Injury
- Performance pressure
- Transition out of top-level sport

What can be done to prevent mental illness among elite athletes?

Stopping athletes from taking part in high-level competitions is not the correct answer. In fact, we showed that practicing regular physical activity brings several benefits, including the prevention of poor mental health. So, what else can be done?

The first thing to do is to start addressing mental health stigma in sport by talking about mental health and disorders.

In fact, not only research has recently suggested that the stigma surrounding mental health prevent men from seeking help, but it has also demonstrated that elite athletes, who participate in male-dominated sports, such as football, rugby and wrestling feel more embarrassed about having a mental health problem and may be ashamed to ask for help. Hence the importance to speak directly to you, the athletes.

Coaches can indeed be educated on mental health and wellbeing; however, they may not always realize if one of their athletes is experiencing mental health problems. Therefore, it is extremely important that if you, the athlete, need to talk to someone about your mental health concern, you first let people around you know, in case they have not noticed.

Remember, people will help you, you do not have to deal with this alone!



“For the longest time, I thought asking for help was a sign of weakness because that’s kind of what society teaches us.

Well, you know what?

If someone wants to call me weak for asking for help, that’s their problem. Because I’m saving my own life.”

MICHAEL PHELPS

Swimming legend

23-time Olympic gold medalist

Suffers from depression and was suicidal three years ago

How do I know if I may have a mental health problem?

Here is a list of some of the most common symptoms of mental illness:

- Feeling constantly sad
- Being anxious and/or irritated
- Experiencing a variation in sleeping or eating habits
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Having problems remembering things
- Losing interest in people and activities that you used to enjoy (= Anhedonia)
- Having unexplained aches and pains (i.e. headaches)
- Feeling worthless and hopeless
- Experiencing severe mood swings
- Thinking about harming yourself or someone else

In case you or someone you know are experiencing one or more of these symptoms, seek help.

Who can help me?

- Your doctor (GP)
- A trained therapist or counsellor
- Local and national charities (i.e. Samaritans)
- Peer support
- Student services
- Community support services
- Workplace support

Family and friends can also help you to find information and make the right decision. Furthermore, not only they can come with you to appointments, but they can also encourage and support you whenever you need.

For more information about getting the right support for you: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/where-to-start/>



Summary

Things to remember:

- According to literature, male elite athletes are vulnerable to mental health issues due to their constant exposition to a wide variety of stressors (i.e. biological, environmental, lifestyle and sport-specific stressors).
- The stigma around male mental health makes athletes feel embarrassed about having a mental illness and often prevents them from seeking help.
- The feeling of embarrassment is more intense among male elite athletes participating in male-dominated sports (i.e. football).
- Mental health problems are common, and help is available.
- Support is crucial to recovery.
- Unaddressed mental health issues can result in chronic health problems.

**Remember: it is important to discuss your emotions, concerns and anxieties.
We can only fight the stigma if we start talking about our mental health!**

Useful links

Anxiety UK: www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Association of Mental Health Providers: amhp.org.uk

CALM: www.thecalmzone.net

Centre for Mental Health: www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk

fft Friends Family and Travellers: www.gypsy-traveller.org

Men's Health Forum: www.menshealthforum.org.uk

Mind: www.mind.org.uk

Race Equality Foundation: raceequalityfoundation.org.uk

Rethink Mental Illness: www.rethink.org

Samaritans: www.samaritans.org.uk

The National LGBT&T Partnership: nationallgbtpartnership.org

VCSE Health & Wellbeing Alliance: www.engalnd.nhs.uk