

Monitoring mental distress in Para athletes in preparation, during and after the Paralympic Games 2022 – a prospective mixed-method study

CAPA 2022

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Background

- ✓ It is common in elite sports **to monitor athletes' training load**, injuries and illnesses, **but mental distress is rarely included**.
- ✓ **Para athletes on average report higher rates of sports injuries and chronic illnesses** compared to able-bodied athletes (Fagher et al., 2020; Steffen et al., 2021).
- ✓ **Mental distress** is especially **understudied among Para athletes**, which is a concern as the pre-existing impairment may compromise both physical and mental health.
- ✓ In addition, the **knowledge of coaches' awareness of mental distress** among Para athletes is scarce.

- 13 different position statements on mental health in sport
- Since 2018 – 9 positions papers
- However, only one that explicitly target Paralympic athletes

Psychology of Sport & Exercise 55 (2021) 101946

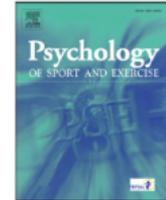


ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Psychology of Sport & Exercise

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/psychsport



Review

A systematic review and meta-synthesis of mental health position statements in sport: Scope, quality and future directions

Stewart A. Vella^a, Matthew J. Schweickle^a, Jordan T. Sutcliffe^{a,*}, Christian Swann^b



Monitoring... Screening... of mental health

Recent research describe: «How, when and what?»

International Olympic Committee (IOC) Sport Mental Health Assessment Tool 1 (SMHAT-1) and Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool 1 (SMHRT-1): towards better support of athletes' mental health

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Alan Currie ^{6,7} Lars Engebretsen,^{8,9} Brian Hainline ¹⁰ Emily Kroshus,^{11,12}
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Margot Putukian ¹⁷ Claudia L Reardon,¹⁸ Simon M Rice,^{15,16} Richard Budgett⁹

Building awareness of the signs of mental distress... It is not enough... (Purcell et al., 2019)

Ensure that elite athletes **receive the intervention and support** that they need at the **right time**, in the **right place**, with the **right person**.

CURRENT OPINION

Open Access

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



Rosemary Purcell^{1,2}, Kate Gwyther^{1,2} and Simon M. Rice^{1,2*} 

Purpose of study

- 1) prospectively describe elite Para athletes' mental distress, **before**, **during** and **after** the Beijing Paralympic Winter Games - 22 (PG22)
- 2) gain a better understanding of *if* and *potentially how* awareness of athletes' mental distress changed, through weekly monitoring, and influenced **how coaches perceive athletes' mental distress**, and if they accounted for this before, during and after PG22.

Method – design, participants & ethics

A sequential mixed-method research design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003):

- prospective longitudinal quantitative data collection of athletes' mental distress →
- qualitative data collection including coaches' experiences and awareness

- In September 2021, **all Swedish winter Paralympic athletes (N=13)** that were in the running to qualify for PG22 were invited to participate.

- **The head coaches for the included athletes were invited to participate (N = 3).**

- Ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2021-05827-01).

Methods – Quantitative data collection

- **Data collected weekly** in an adapted eHealth-based application (Fagher et al., 2017; 2020)
- **16 weeks before; 3 weeks during** precamp and PG22 and; **3 weeks after** PG22.
- **Support staff got weekly reports**

- **The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-4)** for anxiety and depression (Kroenke et al., 2009)
- *Response: 0=Not at all; 1=Several days; 2=More than half the days; 3=Nearly every day.*
- A total score ≥ 3 for each the sub-scales is defined as respectively anxiety and depression

- **Response rate for the 22 weeks (81.5%)**

Methods – Qualitative data collection

- Focus groups interview with 3 head coaches
- Researchers had knowledge of preliminary screenings of quantitative data
- **Topics interview guide:**
 - experiences with the weekly screenings and how this potentially influenced their coaching
 - awareness regarding mental distress in Para sport
 - experiences from participating in the protocol/initiative

Results quantitative findings

Before (preparation), 16 weeks:

- Mild symptoms: 9.6% anxiety and 10.1% depression
- Clear symptoms: 6.2% anxiety and 9% for depression
- *Three participants clear symptoms of both anxiety and depression*

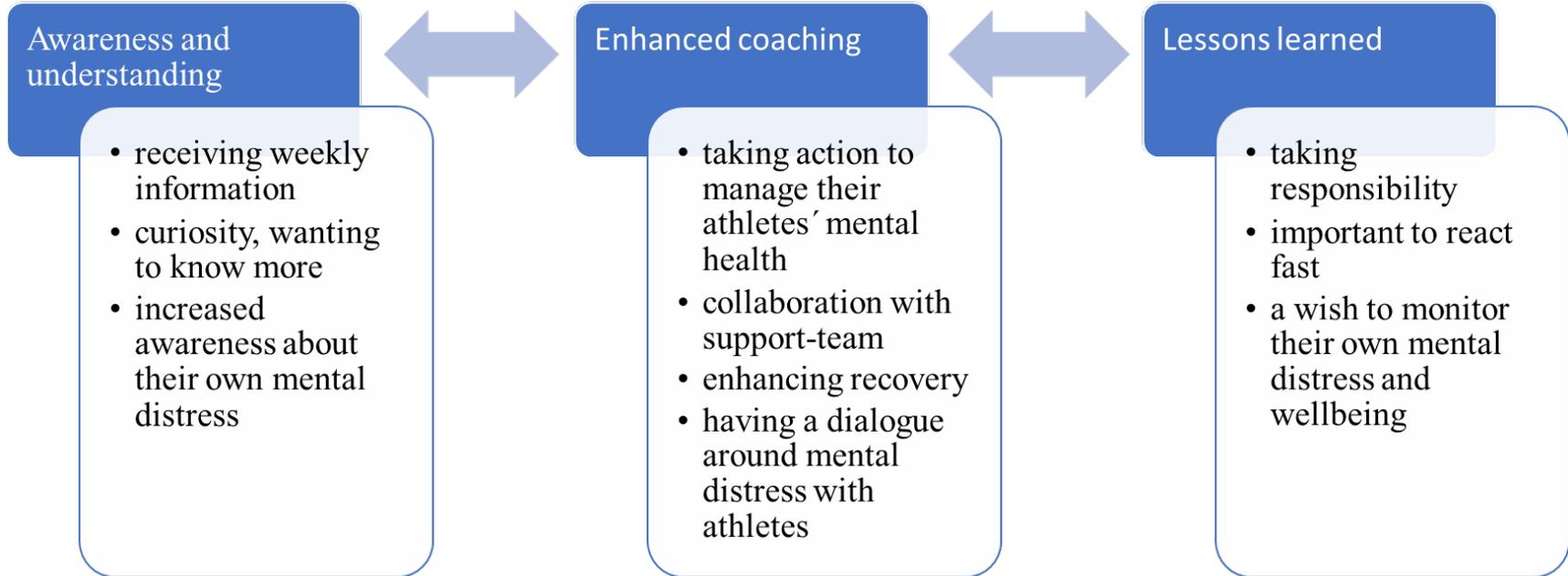
During, 3 weeks:

- Mild symptoms: 9.5% anxiety and 19.1% depression
- Clear symptoms: 38.1% anxiety and 19.1% for depression
- *Three participants clear symptoms of anxiety AND two clear symptoms of depression.*

After, 3 weeks:

- No symptoms anxiety: 100%
- Mild symptoms depression 11.8%
- Clear symptoms depression 11.8%
- *Two participants clear symptoms of depression.*

Results qualitative findings – Coaches perceptions



Key-findings

- ✓ All the **coaches' perceived it valuable** for performance and well-being to monitor their Paralympic athletes' distress.
- ✓ Altogether, results obtained **before PL** suggest that Para athletes and able-bodied elite athletes report similar rates of mental distress.
- ✓ Results **during PL** indicate that large competitions, such as PL-Games, are stressful events. Noteworthy, the results also indicate that mental distress symptoms are more prevalent than physical illnesses during PL.
- ✓ Taking a person-centered approach, it became evident that it was **three out of thirteen athletes** who reported clear symptoms of anxiety and depression **before** and during PL, with exception for one athlete that only reported anxiety during PL.
- ✓ **After** PL, most of the athletes in this population reported low levels of anxiety and depression.

Applied considerations

- ✓ **Considering a strict performance narrative**, it is a performance challenge **that three out of thirteen athletes** reported clear symptoms of anxiety and depression **before and during PG**, with exception of one athlete that only reported anxiety during PG
- ✓ This is a challenge that may need **involve ethically informed choices** when there is a need to **support both mental health and performance** during major competitive events such as the Paralympic and Olympic Games.
- ✓ One of the participants reported ***clear and prolonged*** symptoms of mental distress.

Applied considerations

- ✓ It is important that the medical and high-performance team provide support to athletes *prior* and *during* the competition, but also *post* competition.
- ✓ Awareness and understanding of mental distress have the potential to **lower the threshold for help-seeking**, thus facilitating recovery and return to competition.
- ✓ Athlete health monitoring has the potential of **improving the coach-athlete relationship** and thus enhance coaching.

**Thanks for your attention –
questions please**

Abstract we sent in

- Objective: It is common in elite sport to monitor training load, injuries and illnesses for athletes, but mental health is rarely included (Vella et al., 2021). Mental health is especially understudied among elite Para athletes. This is a concern as Para athletes on average report higher rates of sports injuries and chronic illnesses compared to able-bodied athletes (Fagher et al., 2020; Steffen et al., 2021).
- The purpose of this study was to 1) describe elite Para athletes' mental health before, during and after the Beijing Paralympic Games (PLG) 2022; 2) explore how increased awareness of athletes' mental health influenced how coaches perceived the athletes mental health and its association to preparation and performance during the PLG.
- Methods: A prospective mixed-method study design was used. Self-report data was collected weekly from 13 Swedish elite Para athletes in preparation (16 weeks), during (3 weeks) and after (3 weeks) the PLG 2022 (e.g., depression, anxiety). Data was screened and evaluated weekly by a physiotherapist and a sport psychologist, and coaches also received weekly reports. A focus-group interview with coaches was conducted post PLG to address: Mental health struggles, stigma and help-seeking behavior. For data analyses, descriptive statistics was used for the quantitative data and thematic analysis was for the qualitative data.
- Results: Preliminary results indicated that some of the athletes reported clear symptoms of anxiety and depression before PG, and that the proportion increased during PG. Coaches perceived the weekly reports as helpful for increasing their awareness regarding athletes mental health, and as a useful tool to initiate needed support for their athletes.
- Conclusions: The results will be discussed with an emphasis on the applied implications of weekly monitoring of Para athletes' mental health in order to enhance Para athletes participating and thriving while performing at the elite level.

Word Count: 296/300

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