

There is a great appetite to address mental health issues within sport and things are improving, but the support for athletes is nowhere near adequate. I believe that football, and sport in general, can lead the way.

- Clarke Carlisle, footballer and Mind ambassador



Performance Matters: Mental Health in Elite Sport



Mental health in elite sport: the issues

Everybody has mental health which, like physical health, can change throughout our lives. One in four people in the UK will be affected by mental illness in any year, the most common being depression and anxiety. So it should come as no surprise that professional sportspeople will face these issues too.

Following the increasing number of high profile sportspeople who have spoken out about struggles with their own mental health, and some tragic suicides, Mind commissioned research to explore how sports' governing bodies and players' organisations currently respond to, manage and prevent mental ill health amongst athletes, and to identify successful programmes which can be shared with other sports.

The experiences of Frank Bruno, Dame Kelly Holmes and Marcus Trescothick show that mental health is relevant to everyone in sport, even at the elite level. In voicing their opinions they are tackling stigma in wider society. But where these experiences remain hidden, it perpetuates the stigma and prevents others from speaking out.

Pressures and expectations

Sportspeople experience a unique set of pressures in their jobs from scoring goals and winning trophies to facing media scrutiny and meeting the high expectations of adoring fans. While these issues make for an out of the ordinary workplace, in essence they are all linked to employment. The managers, coaches, clubs, governing bodies and player's unions all have a role in supporting sports professionals to manage their mental wellbeing at work.

Our research identified three particular mental health pressure points for professional sports people, coinciding with times of key transition.

It is a rollercoaster emotionally. The threat of leaving the game is constant – will I get to the next stage? Will I be dropped? Will I get a contract or be released? What happens if I get injured? What happens when I retire?



1. Leaving

The exit route of young athletes was a key area of concern across team and individual sports alike. Of the players connected to football academies aged 16, the majority will no longer be playing as a professional aged 21. A bad performance by an individual athlete may mean suddenly being dropped altogether and a withdrawal of funding.

Coming to terms with life outside of sport can be particularly challenging, as can moving forward to compete as an adult professional with the increased profile and pressure this brings.

2. Retirement

Approaching retirement is a particularly challenging time for most sportspeople, who have spent their entire lives being defined as athletes.

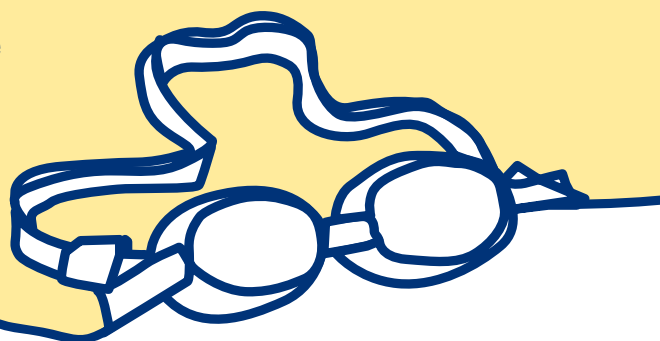
Your self-esteem is shot down; you don't know who you are as you've spent all your life pleasing others: managers, coaches, fans – you're by yourself, no-one wants a photo or autograph anymore.

3. Struggling in silence

Sportspeople who have revealed their own battles with mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and self-harm, have encouraged others to go public with their own experiences; however, the number who struggle in silence is unknown. Athletes who are still playing and competing have expressed concern about the impact revealing or asking for support for a mental health problem can have on their career showing there is clearly still a stigma attached to mental health.

I've grown up in my sport with the impression I was meant to be a superhero. You're supposed to be able to handle things. You are in high pressure situations so you are convinced you should be able to handle those situations yourself, so it is hard to get help, it is admitting you have a weakness.

- Natasha Danvers, athlete



Mind's Research

Our new research exploring six sports has shown that sports clubs, governing bodies and player associations are starting to recognise that mental health is as important as physical health.

Football

When Gary Speed took his own life in November 2011 it acted as a catalyst for change in the football world. Several high profile retired football players including Stan Collymore, Neil Lennon, and Mind Ambassador Clarke Carlisle have spoken of experiencing mental health problems in their playing days.

The Professional Footballers Association (PFA) has taken on a vital role in increasing support available to players with mental health problems. The PFA set up a National Counsellors Support Network, launched a 24 hour helpline for players, trained its coaches in mental health first aid and teamed up with the anti stigma campaign Time to Change to publish The Footballers' Guidebook, including advice on how to deal with depression, anxiety, panic and anger.

The Premier League is rolling out mental health training for their academy staff and The Football Association (FA) is planning to include content about recognising the signs and symptoms of mental health problems in its coaching qualifications as part of developing a mental health and wellbeing plan.

Rugby league and union

The death of Terry Newton, an England and GB Rugby League professional who took his own life in 2010, had an impact on the entire rugby league community.

A group of people with medical expertise and a passion for rugby came together to found State of Mind (SoM), a campaign to improve the mental health, wellbeing and working life of rugby league players and communities. SoM has delivered free mental health player awareness presentations to help players identify how they can improve their mental wellbeing and encourage them to ask for help if they need it. The success of SoM has been significantly aided by the support of the sports' sole administrators in England, the Rugby Football League (RFL), who have made it compulsory for every club to have the SoM workshop delivered to their players.

In rugby union the Rugby Players Association (RPA), run by Damian Hopley, an ex-England international forced to retire in his mid-20s following an injury, leads on player welfare. Hopley set up the RPA, which now tends to take responsibility for the welfare of players as a whole, which includes providing a confidential counselling service.

Cricket

Cricket has seen player welfare driven by the Professional Cricketers' Association (PCA), rather than county cricket clubs or the English Cricket Board (ECB) which holds the contracts of England cricketers.

The PCA set up a confidential helpline for players in 2007 and in 2012 launched 'Mind Matters' offering online support in how and where to seek help. As a result of this work, counties have become more accustomed to passing mental health issues over to the PCA with employment of cricket's six personal development managers moving from the ECB to the PCA and establishing clearer lines of responsibility for this agenda.

Individual sports - athletics and swimming

As with all professional sports, mental health issues for competitors in individual as opposed to team sports can be difficult to identify. Pushing oneself too far by continuing to train through pain could be seen as a form of self-harm, for example. British athletes including Jack Green and Natasha Danvers have recently spoken about their experiences of mental health problems.

British Athletics has a system in place to support athletes experiencing mental ill health – coaches share their or their athlete's concern with the British Athletics medical team who could then refer the athlete to a psychologist or psychiatrist.

The British Athletes Commission (BAC) has set up a triage service for support, and has access to appropriate sport counselling, ensuring a route to access mental health support for elite swimmers.

Notes

Mind commissioned Fiveways, an independent consultancy (www.fivewaysnp.com) to undertake a project about the mental health of elite sportsmen and women, gathering insight into six sports.

A total of 25 interviews with sports bodies, administrators and other relevant organisations were carried out, alongside desk and email-based research. These interviews were designed both to understand the activities relating to mental health, and to gather views about a pan sport network for this area.

Key learnings

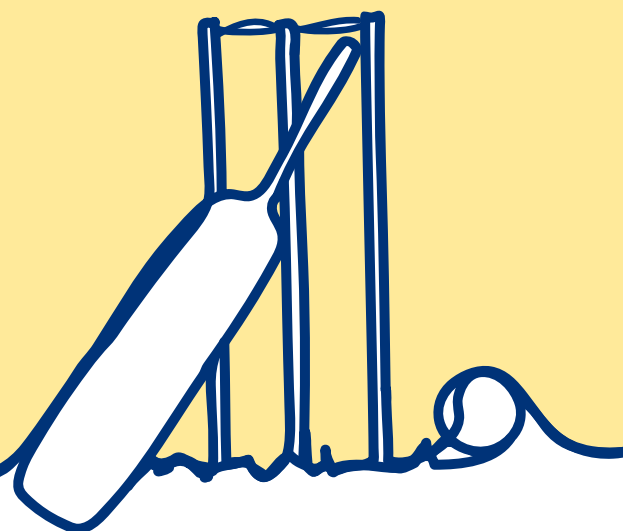
- There is no 'one size fits all' solution to addressing mental health in sport. All sports have different needs, based in particular on the structures through which they are organised, however there are some excellent initiatives out there and with real potential to share best practice and learning between sports.
- There is a need to build on and cascade the pro-active mental health initiatives started by individuals and players associations, in collaboration with clubs and across team sports.
- There is more to do to proactively support professional sportspeople at key transition points such as entering professional sport and signing their first contract, long term injury and retirement.
- Confidentiality and independence are highly important in provision of mental health support to athletes as an underlying concern about the impact on their career may prevent people from seeking help.

Recommendations

- **Coaches:** Coaches and managers need to understand the value of mental health and wellbeing, and be engaged in support of athletes, for change to happen at a club level. Educating coaches that dealing with problems early can be beneficial for both athletes' personal wellbeing and for sporting performance is key.
- **Clubs as employers:** Individual clubs have a responsibility as employers to proactively support the mental health and wellbeing of players and support staff, mitigating the impact of the changeable and uncertain characteristics of this unique working environment.
- **All:** There is value in a pan sport mental health network at elite level, to provide profile to this issue; enable the sharing and cascading of good practice and help create an environment where all sports professionals can fulfil their potential.

The coming together of different sports would bring opportunities for sharing ideas and initiatives, and joint creative working on similar issues - i.e. resilience building, and support to players at the end of their careers or when experiencing injury or illness.

- Malcolm Rae, State of Mind



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- Mike Yardy, cricketer
and Mind supporter



Ninety percent of people with mental health problems have experienced discrimination. While many people from the world of sport have already made a difference by speaking out, the role of sportspeople currently at the top of their game – to support their colleagues and tackle broader stigma – is key. If the England captain talks about needing help, others will be more likely to seek and accept help.

State of Mind's 'Round 25' weekend of Super League games which raise awareness of mental health issues, tackle stigma and signpost the support available to Rugby League players and fans is a great example of how leading sportspeople speaking out has an impact, particularly on men.

The process can be slow. One factor is ownership and responsibility. The FA says it's the responsibility of the clubs, the clubs say it's the responsibility of the union, and the conversation goes round and round. That's why I think we have to take funding for mental health support at source, from TV rights, because it provides a sense of collective responsibility.

- Clarke Carlisle

The cricket community has been very supportive. There's a small minority who don't understand it, but overall I think people are very understanding and if they don't totally get it they want you to be better. I think it's getting better and people aren't so afraid to talk because there isn't that kind of stigma.

- Mike Yardy, Sussex County Cricket Club and Mind supporter