

Course Name: Sports Psychology

Professor Name: Ms Priyanka Prabhakar

Department Name: Humanities and Social Sciences

Institute Name: IIT-M

Week: 01

Lecture: 02

Becoming a sport psychologist: lessons from the field

Mental health issues in athletes

Hello everyone, welcome to the second session of the first week of Becoming a Sport Psychologist, I am Priyanka and in this particular session we are going to be talking about Mental Health in Athletes. In this particular session we are going to be discussing about the mental health issues in athletes, we are going to be talking about exercise and mental health, we are also going to talk about when, where and who to seek help from. I want to start this session by talking about you know what happened during COVID-19. I was actually doing this particular you know webinar, it was a very first time I was you know work had shifted online for most of us and I was talking about the very same topic on the importance of mental health in athletes. During that particular session I ended up speaking about you know how I also seek help and I work with this psychologist for my own mental health. As soon as I spoke about that I felt there was something which shifted in my body, I felt scared and I felt a sense of judgment, nobody judged me, but this was something that I really really felt in my own self.

And after having that particular experience I had to really reflect upon what was it about seeking help for betterment of my own mental health that made me so you know feel judged and also I having a sense of fear when I spoke about it. So, having been working in this field where I am actually supporting health in order to help athletes with their own mental well being, it was something that I really had to reflect on. And this is something I really realized that is when it comes to you know speaking about our own mental health and our own experiences, people generally feel these things and trust me I felt all these things that is you feel a sense of shame, there is a sense of feeling that I am not enough, others may think I am weak and people might judge me. And this particular stigma is something that is so prevalent all across the world and today we are going to talk more in terms of how we can start taking charge of our life and how it is important for us to help ourselves as well as help other people especially when they are actually struggling with mental health

issues.

Now, we move forward I think I would like to discuss a particular case. So, bring to your notice about this particular athlete. He is somebody you know who has been feeling difficulty in sleeping, he has been feeling you know anxious and also feeling sad and lonely. So, he goes to the sports medicine specialist and he ends up talking about his issues, he goes to the physician and says that you know these are the complaints that I am going through. The physician realizes that probably there is something else he needs help with, I think it is better that the psychologist of the organization just ends up seeing him.

So, this is a psychologist, so she refers him to her. He goes to the psychologist and he tells her that you know I am not able to sleep well, I am feeling extremely sad and I am feeling anxious, I do not know what to do about it. So, she starts working with him and also you know she starts supporting him. She feels that yes you know what you are experiencing is fine, let us see what way we can look at supporting you. And in the meanwhile what also happens is you know this particular athlete goes to his friends and you know they start making fun of him saying that you know what you are not even able to manage your own mental health issues, you are so weak.

There is a sense of shame this athlete feels, there is a sense of judgment he ends up feeling, he feels so lonely. He with a heavy heart he goes back to the psychologist and says that you know what everybody is making fun of me for coming to you for the sessions, I am feeling really lonely you know I do not think I need to continue the sessions with you anymore, it is too much for me. She completely understands what he is saying and she feels that you know what I would like to support you and we can see what best way we can help you. The psychologist also notices that probably he needs medical help as well because it is too much for him, what he is going through is quite a lot and he really needs to be supported. She asks him who do you think can also help you and support you with respect to what you are actually going through.

He remembers his parents and says that I think my parents can definitely help me with respect to this. She says fine, then let us speak to your parents and you know get help for you as much as possible. He feels really supported when the parents also are able to help him with respect to his mental health issues. And based on the protocol of the organization, she informs the medical expert and also the head of the organization together all of them support this particular athlete. And the athlete ends up going to the psychiatrist and he supported and after some time he is you know he is also able to make a comeback to the field.

And you can see here everybody is supporting him in this particular system. Although he

is going through it alone, but with support he is able to handle the situation much better. And you know the people in the organization you know be it the head of the organization, the physician and the psychologist decide that it is so important for us to support and also build the awareness in the rest of the athletes because someday when they may actually go through this particular experience. So, the psychologist ends up doing the sessions for everybody else and educates them about why it is important to support athletes. You can see here that one athlete may have gone through it, but we saw the importance in terms of help and support everybody did and what change they brought in you know systemically in the organization.

So, this is the power of mental health when we actually support everybody else with what they are actually going through. People may judge you, people you may feel ashamed, people may think you are weak or you may think you are weak, but it is important to go out there and seek help. So, generally this is what is expected from athletes. If you see athletes they are always so strong you know they need to handle pressure, they need to know how to move forward with life, they need to know how exactly to go out there you know and go out there and perform all the time at the highest level right. So, most of the time we expect athletes do not cry, you need to be strong all the time, you need to know how to handle this, how can anybody know how to handle things, certain things can be extremely overwhelming for athletes.

And we need to also understand that athletes are people who are so passionate about their sport and when you are so passionate and when you put in that hard work and the result really does not come the way you want. Emotions can be really difficult and intense to handle ok. This is something which is expected of athletes. However, I would say that seeking help and working with the psychologist can help you with all these things. It helps you express yourself, it helps you develop confidence, it helps you become compassionate, it helps you be comfortable to ask for help and apart from that it helps you understand yourself much better.

I would also like to bring to your notice that some athletes are comfortable working with one psychologist for their personal as well as performance related issues. However, you have some of the athletes who may work with one or more psychologists that is for personal issues they may work with somebody and for performance related issues they may work with somebody else. So, next let us look at you know the importance of exercise in mental health ok. In this particular section we are going to be talking about the role of exercise and the importance that exercise plays especially for the betterment of mental health. We all very well know how important it is to work out right, how important it is to maintain the particular fitness for ourselves.

And in fact, we also know statistically that and also with respect to research that you know whenever we exercise we feel better mentally, we feel you know more positive emotions, we feel more energy to move through the day. Having said that there are also times we are not very you know regular with the exercise. I still remember the times when you know there were times where I have started an exercise regime and that has just worked for probably 2 days. I remember joining Zumba class for like 3 months and you know maybe my cycling lasted for like 2 days. So, that is the way it was with me, but however, since the time I have actually joined the sports field since the time I have been working with athletes I feel I am more consistent and I can really see the difference working out physically you know the kind of help it gives me when it comes to focus and feeling better throughout the day is actually immense.

So, basically apart from this I also want to bring to your notice that the WHO actually says that 80 percent or more adolescents you know are insufficiently active in the world. We all know the importance of exercise I think the more we do it the more benefits we will be able to get. Now let us listen to Vidushi you know Vidushi is a student and she is speaking to us about the importance and benefits of exercise. I have been regularly exercising and going to the gym for like 6-7 months now and it has become a very very important part of my day. Every morning before I go to college I make sure that I go to the gym.

It gives me a sense of achievement very early in the day like when most of the people are sleeping I have already achieved something. So, it gives me a sense of motivation for my entire day. Other than the health benefits that it obviously has it also motivates me throughout the day and uplifts my mood and specifically on the days that I don't exercise it is still going on in the back of my head oh I could have gone to the gym and I could have done this I could have done that. So, it is it is become a very very integral part of my day. Now every single time we think about health it is always about physical health right.

Most of the times if somebody says and talks to you about your health maybe they look at you physically and say that oh maybe you need to eat better maybe you need to take care of yourself better. So, generally when we think of health it is always the physical health. However you know health is defined as this. Health is a state of complete physical mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Most of us think that you know we have to think of health in terms of being free from any sort of disease.

But if you actually look at the definition of health it says that it is a well being it is physical mental and social well being which we really have to practice. And having said this you know I want to leave you all with this particular question that is athletes are physically fit does it mean that they do not struggle with mental health issues right. So, in this particular section we are going to be talk about myths around mental health in sport ok. Let us just

take a moment there is a lot that we have taken in you know in terms of information, but now we are coming back to you know the myths around mental health. It is going to be quite interesting for you all to learn a lot of information around the myths around the mental health in sport.

Alright. So, let us look at this particular you know statement athletes do not have any mental health issues true or false what do you think? So, you know statistically speaking 1 in 8 people in the world live with a mental health disorder right. And this also says that you know athletes are also prone to mental health issues and mental health disorders. And basically you can see that there was a study which was done by Gotthard Bert et al in 2019. They actually found that you know in the current elite athletes there were there was a it was a study which was a meta analysis of various studies and they found that you know the percentage was between 19 to 34 percent for current elite athletes. That is 19 percent for alcohol misuse and 34 percent for anxiety and depression in current elite athletes.

And apart from that the same study found that you know the range or the stats range between 16 percent for distress to 26 percent for anxiety and depression in former elite athletes. So, we need to really understand that mental health issues and mental health disorders are prevalent even in the highly elite athletes because that is something which is expected for them to perform all the time. And apart from that most of the times when you think of athletes we think that they just have to perform. We forget that they have their own personal life, they have their own family issues, they have multiple things which are actually happening in their life right which can contribute to their well being or it may actually affect their well being. Now we have Santosh who is actually going to talk about the importance of mental health in athletes.

Santosh he is a head coach at Golden Age Shooting Academy in Bangalore and he is a prominent coach with respect to shooting and his words will be highly helpful for people to understand. Hi. Athletes do not have any mental health issues in a world where elephants fly. Today the real challenge is the sport itself. The requirement of the sport is very high.

Very high level of skill is expected to be delivered very consistently by an athlete because of which lot of health issues comes out. So the real reasons what causes these mental health issues is one slow and marginal improvement because the improvement is very small at the top level it becomes difficult for athletes to handle themselves well. Second is unable to handle drop in form. Drop in form can happen because of work overload, it can happen because of personal problems, it can happen because they are unable to handle the attention they are getting or it also can happen because they become complacent as they get closer to the goals. Third point, the competition itself is tough at the top level because of which

athletes are unable to handle the kind of pressures that are imposed on them because the challenges are so tough every second matters or every attempt matters so much these days.

Four, the bad financial planning which a lot of athletes suffer from is also a leading cause for mental health issues. Fifth is accidental athletes who pick up sports or they are first generation athletes there are not enough people to guide them and channelize their energies in the right directions. So all these combined create a lot of mental health issues in the athletes which requires serious consideration and help. Moving forward, the next statement I have in mind for you is if an athlete has a mental health issue it is always a mental health disorder.

So let us just think about this. Most of us think that if an athlete has a mental health issue it is always a mental health disorder. But this is what you know basically is told by the World Health Organization and the IOC a mental health in elite athletes toolkits that is nothing but mental health is always on a continuum that is you have athletes may have periods of good mental health you know there may be athletes who may struggle with mental health disorders and there may be athletes who may be having mental health issues. So what we actually need to understand is the fact that you know some athletes you know may have periods of very good mental health and some people you know who also struggle with mental health disorder if they actually seek help they will be able to go out there and also develop good mental health provided they are able to give themselves support. So this is something that which we really have to understand when it comes to working with elite athletes or with athletes in general. There may be athletes who have very good mental health, there may be athletes with mental health disorder and there may be athletes who struggle with mental health issues.

That person who has good mental health may also be expressing and experiencing stress around sometimes especially during times which are very overwhelming for them and also those people who struggle with mental health disorder provided they seek the right kind of help they will be able to handle their situation much better and probably they may also experience good mental health after they seek support. This is something that I really want you all to understand. So now moving forward if an athlete has mental health issues he cannot perform at an elite level. Okay. This is another statement which I want you to think about whether it is true or false.

Okay. So this particular statement is definitely false because honestly speaking there are multiple athletes who are performing exceptionally well at an elite level. If you actually see Michael Phelps he has spoken openly about his own battle with anxiety and depression. Now he is one of the world's most decorated Olympian who has won multiple medals and you know but at the same time he is a champion of mental health issues because he has

spoken about his own you know impact that mental health has had in his life and his struggles and his battles. So if he can perform at an elite level with his own mental health issues you know to think that if people have mental health issues they cannot perform is completely false. And we have also had some of the Indian athletes actually speaking about their own mental health issues and battles.

You know we have also had Simone Biles who said that you know she does not want to perform forward because she is really finding it difficult you know to be present in the moment and she decided not to move forward with the Olympics. So basically just imagine that athletes at the highest level have been able to perform irrespective of their mental health issues. So that is a biggest myth if you think that you know if athletes cannot perform. Now moving forward okay this is another myth sports psychologist can read my face and they will know everything about me without me discussing. This statement again is false because I remember you know there were times where you know I really clearly remember this particular incident.

So I had joined this one week yoga course and you know at the end of this program there was a person who was also part of the program. And he came up to me and he told me that what I did not interact with you the whole week because you are a psychologist and you will know every single thing that is happening on my face. You will know my whole life history. And this is something that is commonly happened with me and I am sure a lot of other psychologists would agree with me on this. One thing that we have to remember is psychologists cannot read face okay.

We do not know anything about you unless you actually express what is actually happening in your life. What is actually bothering you? So that is the most important thing for you to actually speak about it right. Only when you express people will be able to help you better. So now there is another question that is athletes which reach a mental health professional only when athlete symptoms are difficult to manage. Most of us really wait for a time where you know things get really worse and then we seek out help.

But honestly speaking it is so important for us to go out and seek out help when you know we feel that it is really it is something is really happening to me rather than waiting for it to get worse. That is another thing that we really have to practice. Now we will have Dr. Chaitanya Sridhar you know who will be giving her experience in terms of what myths she has actually faced with respect to the field of sports.

Hello everyone. So I am going to be giving a very brief preview on the myths associated with sports psychology. The first one would definitely be you know follows through forms psychology in itself which is that you know we are mind readers or psychologists are mind readers. I get to hear this a lot of times and you know which is totally totally wrong. And

I want to give an example which is of a very you know senior elite player because we have to understand the associations of what a person is thinking. So he came in you know his body language extremely tight tight jaws and he walked in with like okay I want to be done with this very soon.

And of course you recognize it right. And we started with okay so how was it and you know how did you get in and we had a little bit of elephant connection. And he was a very very strong team player. He was a very influential player. Got into that and the session went on for 45 minutes. And you know and then at the end of it he said and you know by then you realize his body language is opening up and everything and then he said oh that wasn't so bad.

And I was like were you expecting that. And you know and he just laughed and went but for me you know for us to consider oh my God like maybe they think like what is it that they're going to pick up right. If not like why would a senior player feel so insecure right. So that's the first one. Second I think follows through from the clinical perspective of you know you go to a psychologist only if there's a problem which is really really wrong. And I'm really talking about sports psychology here because we're really looking at helping an athlete touch their peak potential right.

Get into their zone and flow state. So it's not just problem oriented right. And I think the third would really be this thinking of you know some people are born mentally tough. Some people are of course strong but then also it's something which can definitely be built and it's essential to build it. So it's very very essential to remember that right. Then one of the you know the fourth is definitely also which I myself used to say like you know sports psychology is the cherry on the cake and which I think is really which is true but I think also the work the sooner it can go in the faster.

So you don't just go and think that magic is going to happen. It may happen but you know ideally it would be better if you can go in and build upon it. So that's very very essential. And I think one of the last myths really is you know more of physical training. You know if I do physical training and immense training it takes care of my mental side which is really not true.

As much as you need physical training definitely you also need your rest and you definitely definitely have to build your mental muscle right. Focus on growth. So it's extremely essential. You know I hear a lot of time we'll think about it.

So it's very essential to also focus on building mental strength. So thank you so much. Let's look at what is the common experience of mental health problems in athletes. And

what I also want you to remember is these symptoms that I'm going to be talking about they are not for diagnosis.

This is something for education and information purpose. And this is something which has been given by the International Olympic Committee. And they have something known as the sport mental health recognition tool. So probably you could go read up more on their website so that you can understand what you know this is all about. So we need to also understand that these are the common experiences of mental health problems people have.

That is they may it comes under four main experiences. That is with respect to your thoughts, it can be with respect to your feelings, it can be actions or it can be physical changes. So with respect to thoughts if you feel that there is excessive criticism, there is low self-esteem, pessimism, hopelessness, problems with focus, concentration and memory. With respect to feelings if you feel that there is irritability, mood swings, sadness, resentment, loneliness, lack of passion, purpose you know these can be also indicative of the fact that these are mental health problems. And in terms of action if you feel that you are being too aggressive, you want to withdraw from other people, you know there is an unexpected drop in performance and you are being much quieter than usual you need to really think about what can be done. In terms of physical changes if you feel you have not been sleeping well or there is low energy and there is changes in your eating habits or weight and also there is use of alcohol or other substances, you really have to seek help for these issues ok.

And if an athlete is suicidal or if you see any of the red flags this is for everybody all the stakeholders that is coaches, parents, anybody who is working in the ecosystem with the athlete, kindly seek help and do the necessity in order to help the particular athlete. So, now moving forward we have Dr. Vikram Jada who will be talking about you know why it is important to seek help. He is the psychiatrist you know he is going to give his expertise and also address some of the myths and misconceptions when it comes to working as a psychiatrist.

Hi everyone I am Dr. Vikram Jada, consultant psychiatrist from Bangalore. Today I am here to talk about few things about mental health and the mental health care. So first of all we are on various levels socially conditioned to believe right from our childhood that anything related to the body is openly addressed and it is addressed by the caregivers as well as the doctors. But anything related to the mental health people are always being told to control your emotions or regulate your emotions. So we are forced to believe growing up that everything related to the mind and its symptoms are pretty much under our control.

So this is something which puts us in the risk of not seeking help when we are actually

having a clinical problem. So to give you a fair idea, so anything which causes dysfunction either personal dysfunction, familial dysfunction or workplace dysfunction for more than two weeks mandates a mental health assessment and a lot of myths surrounding mental health care as well like the medication being long term or causing dependency. These things are not scientifically proven so and most of the disorders are well treated within a duration of 6 to 9 months and in milder cases even lesser than that. So my advice would be to seek help if you notice any of the disturbances in your mood, sleep, appetite for a duration of more than two weeks.

Thank you. Alright, so now when we actually look at seeking help what I want to say at the end of the session is that I think we all need to work towards good mental health right. This is for athletes, this is for coaches, this is also for the parents of the athletes. We need to really create a system where you know we really help each other and support each other when athletes are actually going through mental health issues. And it is also important for you to remember as athletes that if you are going through something difficult kindly reach out to a trusted friend or a parent or a coach, you could also seek help from a sports psychologist. And also remember that if there are clinical symptoms, there are psychiatrists and clinical psychologists who will be working with you.

We really want to create a system where there is no stigma attached to seeking help and be a very interesting session to learn and see for us in budding and in psychologist who really want to make a career you know in the sports field. Thank you so much.