

**Course Name: Sports Psychology**

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Becoming a sport psychologist: lessons from the field- Challenges faced by sport psychologists

Hello everyone, welcome to the session 4. Here we are going to be talking about the challenges which are faced by sports psychologists. So research studies have pointed out a number of ethical dilemmas and challenges which are actually faced by sports psychologists. In this particular section we are going to be discussing and understanding about what are the challenges which are faced by sports psychologists. That is we will try to understand in terms of confidentiality what are the challenges which are faced, in terms of boundaries which are practiced by sports psychologists, why are they actually practiced. What are the challenges faced by sports psychologists while working with teams and what are the challenges faced by sports psychologists while working with parents.

So let us look at the first challenge. So the first is on the issue of confidentiality. Before I introduce the topic I think I would really like to talk about this particular case study. A 20 year old badminton player is feeling distracted and is not able to focus in her practice. The player is scared to approach the sports psychologist as she feels everyone on her team will get to know her problems. She is scared to trust the sports psychologists. So right now I think this is something most of you also have in mind in terms of whether can you trust the sports psychologists, can you actually share things which are actually bothering you when you go approach a professional psychologist. I would definitely say yes you can trust the person that you are actually confiding with, you can trust a professional who is a psychologist and works in the sports field.

Because what we need to understand is whenever you go out there and meet a psychologist there is something known as an informed consent and confidentiality agreement form. So there is a professional contract which is between the sports psychologist and the athlete or the sports psychologist and the player which says that without your consent no information will actually be revealed to any person be it your coach, be it your parents, be it your teammates etc. So what you share with the sport psychologist is going to be remain between you two and it is part of you know the ethical practice which the sports

psychologist will follow. Of course there are certain criteria and considerations where the confidentiality may be breached. Maybe if the athlete is harming himself in those cases we have to take necessary measures or if there is instances of abuse or if it is directed by the court of law or if the athlete you know has been doping then of course necessary actions will have to be taken and in those instances the confidentiality may be breached.

The informed consent and confidentiality form is a very transparent contract where the session guidelines, what will you benefit from especially going through the sessions, who will be the emergency contact person, what do you need to do especially when you have certain difficult situations to do every single thing will be pointed out.

However in the sports field you know the informed consent and confidentiality can have certain barriers. One because I think we are working in an ecosystem where there are coaches, where there are parents who are also responsible for the performance of the athlete. So in those instances what generally sports psychologists do is if they need to discuss performance related aspects with the coach they take the athlete's consent to discuss with the coach or the parent and apart from that another thing which can also be helpful and useful maybe encouraging the athlete to discuss his issues or her issues with the coach or the parent on their own. And the third thing is I think educating everybody on the importance of confidentiality and respecting the rights that the athlete has when it comes to keeping things confidential.

Now let us look at a second issue that sports psychologists face and it is another challenging issue. So we are looking at challenges and the ways to overcome as well. Here the sports psychologists are actually working with the junior national team. She wants to conduct assessments of the athletes. However she is finding it difficult to use some questionnaires.

What are the challenges of undertaking psychological assessments with the team in an Indian context? So this is a challenge which I am sure a number of sports psychologists will talk about and in fact I interviewed some of them and they all spoke about this. So of course questionnaires are mainly you know in English and a number of people may not understand English as a language and probably for them understanding a regional language is easier which is one of the drawbacks so of the questionnaire. So I am not saying that all questionnaires cannot be used but here I think using English questionnaires for an athlete who does not understand the language becomes a barrier. So in those cases yes in instances where they can understand the language usage it is very easy but otherwise I feel that it is so important for us to use multiple assessments like for example using questionnaires, equipment based test, interviews, field observations, discussions with the coach you know so that we get a clear cut picture of what and how to support the athlete and still do our required assessments. And also doing interviews in the regional languages of the athletes

can also be beneficial and crucial for helping us get as much as accurate information as possible.

In the next section we are going to be discussing and interviewing two of the prominent sports psychologists, we will hear from them in terms of what challenges do they face and how do they overcome those challenges.

Hello everyone welcome to this discussion on challenges faced by sports psychologists. We have a very prominent sports psychologist in India Dr. Chaitanya Sridhar who has joined us for this discussion. Dr. Chaitanya was the first woman psychologist to be associated with an IPL franchisee. She has worked for RCB and she has also worked with the Indian men's hockey team. She is working as a consultant with JSW as a psychologist. She has worked with multiple athletes from grassroots to the elite athletes so your experience and expertise is going to be so valuable for us to discuss on the challenges faced by sports psychologists. Before we move to the challenges I think I want to know about your journey.

Tell us about your journey as a sports psychologist. Why did you choose this field? Thank you, thank you firstly for having me. I think sports psychology has been very good to me. I have to start with that. So actually the field chose me to be very honest.

It was not me. It was one of my professors who actually told me to go and attend the interview at Sports Authority of India for the fellowship and after that there has really been no turning back. I still recall there was you know there were 6 or 8 people at my interview, if I am not wrong including Dr. M.P. Ganesh the then executive director and I remember after that I am like this is where I belong.

So then it went on, then I went on to get a PhD in Australia. I wanted to come back and do something for the country. So I feel like that was really my choice but like you know why did I choose sports like no sports like sports psychology actually chose me. Okay that is very nice.

So basically I know that you have been in this field for such a long time. No I am not that old but. I know you have 2 decades of experience. So what has shifted when it comes to the mental health aspect like I know that even probably when I started I was finding that you know it was challenging to convince people that you need to seek help, be open to seeking help. So for you what has shifted you know? Yeah that is a really good point actually to start with and to dwell into because yes you know I have been in the field for around 20 years I think now and I want to give this example which was in self and there was this young basketball player and she had missed her first conditioning camp okay. So she would hide the assistant coach brought her who was also a coach but the head coach

was not for okay and this is how things were right. So she would hide and meet me. If the coach sees he will be like why you are going you are not mad. And trust me this was one girl who I started the session and she was crying for probably at least half an hour right, she and she had missed the first conditioning camp but then she went on and actually got into the team. But things have shifted in terms of people embracing also I find it very heartening that young athletes you know and I do work a lot with cricket they reach out and say ma'am you know what I want support I want a session. So they always reach out you know which is something which was niche you know and I think it is also the influence of a lot of you know foreign teams there is a lot of exposure to athletes and I think you know one of the benefits of the internet as well in terms of understanding. So I would definitely say there has been a positive shift to an extent but we are nowhere close to where it is.

Let us say yeah especially in the western countries. Okay I know that you know you have worked with multiple teams you worked with you know individual athletes you have travelled with many of them. What do you think are the challenges which sports psychologists face especially when they are you know travelling with them because you know we know that in the field of psychology confidentiality has to be maintained we need to set boundaries with people that we are working with. What are the biggest challenges for you? What have been? So let me start with working with an academy first and then looking at working you know especially when you travel with you know with an individual team or you know a group. I think when we work for let us say a particular academy or an association you know you are going in through the federation.

So you know the athlete is going to have their guard right and it is also you have very less time to establish the process. So that is one. So how will you build that relationship? For me you know I always first get very clear with what is my philosophy. So I say look I am here to help you with whatever it is that you want to achieve right and what you tell me stays between us. The only thing which will probably come out is just something which you know can help with performance if not nothing comes out.

I will give you this example. So there was this one of these young cricketers who you know it was a state tournament and he said you know I was in the zone I was perfectly flowing and then from the dressing room you know he kept getting a message like you know do not go off spin, do not play off spin you know it was something on those lines and then he said three times and then he said I lost my focus I got out. But that was very important because then and this was a very reflective player very young but very reflective and then he said I told the captain that you know I do not want this. So now when you have a player like that in your team and you understood and this is shared now you do not disclose the entire thing but what you will say is this is an introverted guy who will function

best when he is you know left alone.

The only time you probably need to see when he is ready to receive a message and do not overdo it. Now the same thing you know you could see that maybe it is another player who is absolutely stressed and I remember a wicket keeper going on, ma is ko bol ratha ki yah ape madalo don't put here don't put here and then you work with that player and say listen but what this guy actually needs is information on yaha pe dalo. So you know these are the messages. The instructions have to be followed. Yeah be very clear and followed and I think this is where right when this is established it can really work wonders for the team right.

So your leadership group so if you take IPL for example, I had a very good working relationship with both Simon Katich and the cricket head ops you know. So that becomes very important as to are they open to you. Yeah correct and I know that I think you are making such an important point here that we always think that psychologists have to function independently but it is not true because we have to work as a team. And from what you are saying it definitely feels like you know as psychologists we have to work with coaches and the communication with the players and everybody who is involved in the ecosystem has to be extremely supportive for us.

Exactly bang on. Because if I have to give you another example of another league which was not cricket but you know the head coach who is kyaa madin aaf milai nahi you know and you know it becomes a little difficult because your head coach does not believe you are really fighting a very hard battle right. Thankfully that is changing at least I do not get this but you still know that it takes a lot of effort. So I think one of the challenges for me definitely is to and one of the things I take into consideration is how open is this team, how open is the especially leadership group, your captain all this becomes extremely important. Absolutely I remember when you are talking about the challenges also one of the biggest challenges I have also personally faced has been with respect to communication right.

Like sometimes we would say a psychologist out of 100 do 70 percent some days it is still fine but I have heard some of the coaches say that I want 400 percent. For me the logic says that you know what out of 100 it can only be you know 100 is the maximum but of course for coaches really that is their job right because they really have to push their athletes and excel them to do. I remember I was with one of these golf academies and I remember the you know head coach was like you will not talk about training. So I said yeah I am very clear of that boundary. So you know and what happens is athletes will come and ask you.

So that is something though I was an athlete myself like you know I do not give

instructions on even let us say athletics because I always say listen I do not know you know that is really not my place to say. So you know I think that also becomes important that to keep that clear demarcation of what we bring in let us say in a goal setting we will bring in examples ki ye karo do this but also knowing technique wise we do not enter because I think that gets a little messy with the coaches especially. Correct and definitely like the way you are saying we need to maintain boundaries and practice things with every single person. You have been in this particular field for such a long time people do come to us for quick fixes. They want like quickest solution so that they can become champions they can be like best performers be it parents or coaches or athletes. Are they really quick fixes? I actually do not know the answer but you know I think when I started my career I had this rule that I will not see an athlete when there is an immediate tournament coming up but unfortunately or fortunately I do not know like a lot of times they come to you in that state and I think at that point a lot of time what we do is basically you know we are just helping giving them a little bit of tips on stress management.

Sometimes all they need is that or at least that is the first step they go perform and then they come to you and then it becomes a journey. So you know I definitely do not agree with quick fixes but I think over time I have realized that okay take on your athlete you know take on the athlete because if not that athletes probably just not going to come. So you know I think and now you know being part of various academies and you know groups you realize that sometimes it is always an SOS call. So it is I do not think there are quick fixes but I think there can be some holding which really eases your athlete and I think that in itself helps.

So I feel that I could be right or wrong. Absolutely, absolutely. And the last question I want to ask you is you know there are times that you know as psychologist how do you look at your athletes being capable because you know Bert Hellinger actually in the high art of helping says that when a client comes to you it is so important that we look at him as being an equal to the therapist. How do you practice that because it is so challenging for us right because sometimes it is good for therapist to feel that I am superior than you but when clients come to us how do you make them feel that you are capable. Yeah I think I am also training to be a Jungian analyst and we believe that an athlete I mean an individual and the analyst or therapist is co- journey. So any shift right like there is this very beautiful quote by Jung which he says that you know therapy is like a chemical process. So there is any change in even one both are transformed. Wow that is so profound. Yeah and I think for me when an individual comes you realize that at this point of time this guy or this girl this athlete is actually in a low state and what we actually try to do is hold the mirror to their emergence because and that is where we bring in you know what is your potential and my aim you know is always that I do not want the athletes to get dependent on me.

Absolutely. So but you know when they are in a low state they are going to come dependent then interdependent and then you get them to be independent and I really like what you asked because I think they are capable right if not they would not come to you. I want to end this I mean you know we can with one of these panel discussions I was part of but you know I was on the phone and you know the host just threw the question at me going so you know is it possible that you can make your Olympian or you can make a champion clean you know like without anything. I had another colleague over there you know Asian athlete Asian medalist and you know he interpreted the question for me and then I said no like just because we are psychologists does not mean I can go win an Olympic medal now it is not just about doing something in your head but it is you know there is an amalgamation of ingredients needed right and then we also support and like you said it is that integrated approach which then brings out the best.

So that is what I feel and I think that is a really good question is to because I also feel that goes to coaches as well right like sometimes you just know a coach will tell you that you know this is how much and then sometimes you will see that athletes struggling or even the parents and you just there is only so much you can do because it is up to each individual and is that their journey that is always you know so I always go it is up to them and let us see what their journey really is. So I do not know if I went roundabout with that question. You know I completely understand that you believe that it is definitely their journey you know it is up to them to do what they want and we can only play a supportive role in the process and every individual. Supportive role I think that is what it is so that is the reason you know at least I for sure and I am guessing you we do not go around saying you know my athlete won. I kind of you know so even when athletes have told me or even you know coaches I always say that it is you did it ultimately.

People can tell you are a psychologist whatever but at the end of the day it is that individual who goes and performs. Absolutely. So you know I think that is a really definite answer to capability, point on capability. So thank you so much for this wonderful discussion. I think I hope you have all understood about the challenges that psychologists actually face in the field.

It can be with respect to confidentiality, it can be with respect to you know working with parents, coaches and also our own self journey which comes in. So thank you so much. Thank you.

Hello everyone welcome to this discussion with one of the prominent sports psychologist Nivedita Rajan. She has worked with elite athletes, athletes you know from the grass root levels and I think it is going to be so insightful and informative for us because she has been a sports person herself and she has been a sport parent.

I really am looking forward to this amazing discussion with you. So my very first question is being a sports psychologist and having worked in the sport ecosystem with parents, coaches what are the actual challenges you have faced as a sports psychologist working with the parents? Okay so thank you Priyanka for having me here and to share whatever I could you know share my insights. So parents are challenging you know I have also been a sports parent so parents are challenging. So that I can say with great authority and because you have you invest a lot of time into the sport, you take your kid to the sport, you follow nutrition patterns, you follow like you know schedules and you have to be up, you have to do so many things for as a parent. So it is a challenge for the parents and in terms of working with parents I found like there are like two to three different categories of parents you work with.

So you have lot of parents some category of parents who empower you you know they allow you to work freely with the athlete or the player and you know they are they leave it to you to decide what needs to be done. There are another group of parents who are knowledgeable, see today, in the yester years when we played then also parents were there right they provided all the support but they let us be. So the knowledge aspect for a parent has increased because of the information that is available on the internet and you have access to all that. So I find some parents are more knowledgeable and that in some ways can interfere with you as a sports psychologist because you are working on based on theory what you have studied and as a player myself I try to apply but you also have parents who see read it on the internet and kind of feel that they could also do the part of a sports psychologist. And then you also have another category of parents who are little apprehensive when you start with they feel you know what is going to happen and will they see when you go to a professional you want to see improvement right in your child or in your ward you want to see and unfortunately in the area what we are we do not have a magical pill right.

So it needs time but over the period when they see some quantum improvement when they see their child positive responding they give a lot of support.

Yes I think from the points you have made it is very evident that one is parents are apprehensive of course when they have to come to a psychologist for taking help and at the same time you know the challenges are with respect to you know if people are too knowledgeable and they may start giving you a lot of advice in terms of how you need to help their child. Yeah I think it happens even in coaching right like I find many coaches you know complain about parents are like directing their kids what to do and you know it keeps it becomes hard to keep them at bay right. Yeah no I completely agree with you because my experience also has somewhere been the same and sometimes yes I do feel that there is a lot of pressure sometimes from parents right and probably for us to also make them understand that you know the child is somewhere struggling also because of

these kind of pressures. Yeah like I can give you just one example you know couple of years back I was working with a player and we were looking at how to manage anxiety and arousal.

So I started the Jacobson progress of muscle relaxation for the player and you know she came for I think she or he I am not very sure they came for one or two sessions and after that you know she did not come and I asked her like you know what happened and they said she said you know what we have the downloaded version and we are going to work on that. So I mean it is fine but you know learn it the proper way and then once you know it you could practice right so. Yeah yeah and I think we definitely want the parents to be involved. You know in the process but at the same time also understanding that you are working with the professional so trust the process that the professional, be it a sports psychologist or be a coach.

Which is so important. Yeah very important. So one thing is I know that you have been a sport parent to two of the international players. Right. So what strategies did you use as a sport parent which I think can be extremely beneficial to a lot of people. Yeah. So my older daughter followed the same sport as my husband and me that is basketball.

So playing a team game is much easier in terms of you know you find a team and you are with the team for a you know longer period of time and you like you have the support system with the players right coming from a team you have the camera, you have all those things so the kind of investment a parent does when your child is in a team sports is comparatively less than you do if your child is in an individual sport. Right right right. Yeah so for an and if like my younger daughter came from she played tennis and she you know being an individual sport there are lot of challenges. So one of the things I would like you know want to make a huge point is you cannot shop about your sport right. Like I have lot of you know players I have seen their parents like they move from academy to academy.

So what happens is in a tournament they see one kid doing very well and then immediately they you know go there ask where you are playing and you know they make a shift. So this is like affecting the child. So my concern was that right my daughter like she played right when she started from the age of 4 I think she started at 4 till she reached 18 or even 20 or 19 she played in one academy where you know she was groomed and you know we were fortunate to have a very good mentor for her and very grateful to him also. So and we did not do the shopping part so there are lot of people who do shopping.

So you know this academy is not good let me move to this academy. Eventually you need to trust the people you need to give them time to work with your child right. There are

like many times some players learn the skill very fast. Some kids take their time right eventually they all evolve. So that is what that has been one learning lesson and then the other one is don't live eat and breathe the sport. That's what happens when you get so involved in it and I remember the tennis coach telling me you know don't be a tennis mom.

So you know you have to learn to back off you have to you know learn to and I think parents learn I also evolved. See even as a parent initially I was like you know my kid has to do that they have to win why didn't my daughter score the basket what is she doing you know all these kind of things are there but I evolved with the process slowly. Absolutely right. It's a learning process so you can't teach that to the parent right.

They learn it. They learn it. Yeah I mean you made a very interesting point where you said that you wanted to see your children succeed. Yeah. But then how did you manage your expectations or maybe for the parents out there what do you want to say in terms of how can parents set realistic expectations as a sports psychologist. Yeah so bringing in that angle of having a sports background also it was much easier because my husband and me we used to discuss about it right like we know at to what level the sport can take you. So the realistic part comes for a you know if your child is doing very well the parents are very happy of course that's correct but then you can't like think that you know everybody cannot be a champion there is one you know among so many hundred or two hundred who will make it big.

So that understanding we have to have and the other aspect is where is your child presently right I mean if your child is not doing so well in the circuit see if you are at 14 years as a 14 year old child or a 14 year old player you should be capable of playing in the 18 year age category and at 16 you should be able to play in the open category men or women. Is your child capable of doing that right I mean from your couple of years that you expose your kid is your child able to match up to that then you know what it is see the competition starts coming in only the higher age group not at the 12 the 14 you know because you can be a great player when you are young because the other players are still evolving they are catching up because players take time to learn the sport. So based upon where your kid is they are able to play at the senior age category by the time they are 15 or even 16 that you know that you know your child is making some progress. Absolutely. Yeah so that is that is that is very important and the thing is where what do you you can't like live your life through your child success or you can't see life through your child success right so the reality is very important like I have seen lot of you know children who have been in the sport and by the time they are 14 or 15 they have like completely don't want to go to the sports field at all.

Yeah they get burned out also. And they get very distressed because there is so much

pressure put by the parents because the parents couldn't play the sport right yeah so all those things are there. Yeah I think some of the of course these are realistic and real life challenges which are actually facing right one is definitely you know when it comes to the sessions how what kind of trust that the parents need to have right you know once you trust the sports psychologists and you have more dialogues and communication I think it will make the process easier for you to understand. Right. And at the same time I think you are also talking in terms of you know like having the faith that you know allow your child to just be and allow them to move forward at their own pace. And just grow and evolve right it takes time because you know the sports process is a long journey right like my daughter started at the age of 4 she was able to do well in championships and everything when she was 12 or 13 that many years and suddenly if you start winning that is also you know excitement for you you start investing more time so whenever I talk to parents you know I tell them like you know what you are doing is great like you know just encourage your child.

Yeah absolutely I think that is a beautiful lesson. As a sports psychologist I feel you know that we have to encourage the child. Yeah yeah and you know sometimes because children are coming to you for sessions or basically you know the athletes are coming to you for sessions and the parents may be very curious to know you know what is happening in the session.

Yeah. What is my child saying. Right. How do you you know decide in terms of what to be what has to be revealed what should not be revealed because we have also spoken in terms of the confidentiality that the athlete has. Yes. I mean yeah so how do you decide that.

It is a tricky thing actually you know. Yeah it is quite difficult. It is a tricky thing because you know at the see we have to remember one thing that more than the coach it is the parent who is got the most connect with the child right with the player so you know what happens is there are two things that can happen if you are working with children below the age of 18 years then some amount of information can be shared with the parent like you know I talk to the parent tell them this is what we worked on this is what we are working on or sometimes parents have studied their children well they explain to us what is the problem like you know they have low confidence or they get afraid like sometimes children open up to their parents. Yeah. There are scenarios where they open up.

I have worked with lot of parents and players where the coach is not involved actually right they have come on their own accord and I have worked with the players where the coach is also recommended so you have two scenarios. Absolutely. So yeah. And in both the instances I think like taking consent of the athlete and saying that you know what if is

this okay what do you want me to talk about it and how do you want me to share this information will you be comfortable because this is something your parents are actually asking.

Right. You know in the session and if the athlete is part of the session that is also good because most of the time the players might end up talking to their parents on their own and saying that you know what this is what is creating stress for me this is what is creating pressure for me.

Right. So that can really help you know easing the process. Right. For everybody. Yeah. And sometimes like you know I work with a professional player also based out of India and you know his manager wanted to know wanted to have a report about what was worked on. So you know you give the details but not what you discuss or not what the mental aspects like you can give a report about what you worked on and what progress you have seen because they come to you with this is the issue that the player has got.

Right. Absolutely. So many times the player themselves do not realize that they have these issues right. Correct. It is somebody else who notices it. Correct. Some of the organizations they also have a protocol with some of the psychologists that what you may have to give reports.

Yes. You know about the athletes on a regular basis. Right. You know it varies from organization to organization.

Yeah. Based on that I think our consent and confidentiality will vary. Yes. It will change and will differ so that is something that everybody also needs to understand.

Yeah. The kind of subtle information that can be given without revealing/ breaking the breach. Exactly. And what do you think are the challenges you know you faced while working with coaches? Ok. So, current generation coaches are very supportive and you know they themselves recommend athletes to meet sports psychologists, they study the athletes etc.

So, I think coaches are a great source of confidence building and reinforcement for the player. So, I have not you know come across any situation where you know the coach has been a challenge. In fact, the coach have been very facilitative. In fact after the debriefing of competitions etc they have come forward saying you know that mental training has been useful to them.

So, I think coaches play a big role right. Absolutely. Remember one thing Priyanka that

in the yester years the coach played an all in all role right. So, there was no compartment like. So, I think you know when you become a coach you develop all those skills I think unknowingly right.

It is there in you. It is there in you as a coach. Absolutely. Like I know I remember meeting a coach who said that you know he would make sure that he would take all the athletes to the sports medical expert. Yeah. You know he had to make sure that they go to all the sports science tests. So, he was the one who was booking train tickets and everything single thing for this particular competition.

And also our coach you know he used to take us for breakfast after the practice. I mean nobody knew that day that those days that you should do group outing, but it was there. Informally it was there which we are giving formal names nowadays right. Absolutely. And the role which is played by the coach and parents and everybody the organization in the sporting ecosystem is so required and so necessary.

Right. And I think for us to have less challenges we all really have to work together. Absolutely. Yeah. So, with that we will come to an end with respect to the discussion. Thank you so much ma'am for talking to us and also giving us so many insights and inputs. Thank you Priyanka. I hope it helped. Yes. Thank you.