

The design and evaluation of a Salutogenic mental wellbeing educational programme for sports coaches

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Importance of Focusing on Athletes' Mental Wellbeing

Athletes undergo numerous stressors that affect their mental health and wellbeing. From research literature, three main categories of stressors can be identified. First, they face stress related to their competitive performance. Issues such as underperforming, dealing with injuries, meeting team expectations, and rivalries negatively affect athletes' mental health. The second category of stressors includes organisational issues such as cultural problems, leadership and teamwork issues, and performance issues. These issues have been found to affect athletes' mental health negatively. Lastly, an athlete's mental health can be affected by personal non-sport-related issues such as family and work-life balance. With so many stressors in place, sports coaches should create an awareness and understanding on how to support their athlete's in preventing mental wellbeing issues and on how to deal with them when they arise. However, the development of mental wellbeing interventions in sport settings remain relatively underdeveloped and are often poorly theorised. To fill this gap, a mental wellbeing training programme was developed that sports coaches can use to integrate mental wellbeing training in their sports coaching practice.

Developing a Mental Wellbeing Training Programme for Athletes

The mental wellbeing training programme was designed using salutogenesis as an underpinning philosophy. The salutogenic theory is a model of health that focuses on the factors that promote health and wellbeing rather than those that cause disease, which is the focus of pathogenesis. An important element in the salutogenic model is the Sense of Coherence, which can be described as the ability of people to deal with stressors. The Sense of Coherence involves three interrelated components: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, which are the main focus areas of the mental wellbeing training.

Goals of the Mental Wellbeing Training Programme

The mental wellbeing training programme is designed to improve an athlete's Sense of Coherence. In other words, the athlete's ability to deal with stressors. In particular, the goals include:

- Recognise stress symptoms and identify the causes of stress (Comprehensibility);
- Locate the coping resources to deal with stressful situations (Manageability);
- Ensure athletes are moving toward what they want and can commit to (Meaningfulness).

What the Training Looks Like

The training programme is designed to have four main sessions. The first two sessions are training on comprehensibility, aiming at creating awareness of the symptoms of stress and stressors. The third session is one on manageability. It is focused on creating an understanding of stressful situations and how to cope with them. Lastly, the training session ends with a session on meaningfulness. This session is focused on creating engagement with the athletes and getting them committed to working on improving their mental health and wellbeing. To stimulate discussion, provide new insights and to suggest new ideas a comprehensive set of evidence-based storytelling cards relating to known symptoms of stress, personal, organisational and environmental stressors and the internal and external coping strategies used by athletes to deal with them were developed. Each card contained either a stress symptom, stressor or coping strategy and a graphic representation.

Evaluation of the Training

To assess the effectiveness of the training programme in fulfilling its main scope and aims, an evaluation study was carried out. The Delphi method was selected for the training evaluation study. This is a research technique that uses a communication approach to solicit expert opinions on a given topic. The panel of experts in this research included 32 Dutch coaches who had actively coached sports for at least ten years and participated in the mental wellbeing training programme. Discussions were initiated with participants after the workshop relating to its contents and activities. These discussions were framed around transferability, credibility, and dependability. Participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which the training could be helpful in their current and future coaching practice and how. They were also asked to comment on the question of whether the intervention achieved what they expected from it and why. Finally, to improve the dependability of the training, participants were asked to comment on workshop design of the workshop including what could be added, removed or adapted specifically relating to relevance to athlete mental wellbeing or coaching context.

Key Findings of the Research

The training programme was found to have adequate transferability. The study found that the activities developed for the training programme could be used in sports coaching practice. This training was also found to have adequate credibility. There was a consistent increase in the coaches' awareness of mental wellbeing of athletes and an understanding of the resources to deal with these issues. The research also found the training programme to be dependable. However, it is necessary for the coach and the athlete to develop a meaningful relationship for the training programme to work.

Directions for Future Research

This training programme was found to be useful in enhancing the awareness and understanding of mental wellbeing among athletes. However, there is a need for research to

understand the applicability of the training program in different training contexts. This study also recommends enforcement of the measure of credibility in future studies. The credibility measure was based on the coaches' perceptions of how the training improved their mental health awareness and understanding. There is a need for a test that is focused on the athlete's perspective. Lastly, there is a need for contextualised training strategies that are not too dependent on the relationship between the coaches and the athletes for the training programme to be effective.

Conclusion

Athletes deal with a vast number of stressors. There is a strong need to promote athlete mental health and wellbeing, and coaching interventions are needed. The evaluation study concluded that creating an approach to help coaches improve their awareness and understanding of mental health issues affecting athletes and the resources to approach those issues, is an effective way of improving the mental wellbeing of athletes. The development and validation of the mental wellbeing training programme is timely in that it strongly corroborates with the International Olympic Committee consensus statement on mental health in that they suggest that coaches and athletes ought to be well endowed with relevant information with a view to empowering them so that they understand the significance of creating an environment that provides support to the mental wellbeing of the athletes.

If you would like further information on the research or to receive a copy of the full project, please contact Jan-Peter Kastelein at info@bluemindsports.com.