



# In Collegiate Athletes Does Mental Health Influence Occupational Performance

## Nike Corriane Sumler OTS; Valley McCurry, PhD, MBA, OTR/L

### Department of Occupational Therapy | University of Alabama at Birmingham

### Dan Springer MAEd, LAT, ATC | University of Alabama at Birmingham Men's Football Team

## Introduction

Athletes tend to not seek help for mental health issues for many reasons including the stigma surrounding it, lack of understanding about what mental health is and the potential effects of performance it might bring. Additionally, seeking help may be considered a sign of weakness (Gulliver, Griffiths, Christensen, 2012). Many factors can increase elite collegiate athletes' mental health, including sports-related stress, an array of workplace stressors, living away from home, and classroom schedules. There is comparatively less research on this than on mental health in other populations, but growing interest in mental health and psychological well-being of elite-level athletes. Practitioners around the world have seen mental health problems increasing in athletes (Wolanin, Gross, Hong, 2015). The mechanisms by which athletes appraise and cope with stressors has a powerful impact on their mental health and sporting success. A study that was done in the United States found that 21.4% of athletes self-reported clinically significant symptoms of depression (Yang, et.al, 2007).

## Methods

This research for this capstone project will be a mixture of Quantitative and Qualitative. There will be pre- and post-surveys completed using Qualtrics during the three months to collect data. No one in this project is forced to do the voluntary surveys. Eight questions on the pre-survey will just ask general questions that will be able to get the intended information for the project. By doing this and getting the information from the participants, the project can move forward into the intervention process. During this time in the research, participants will participate in a group session. After interventions and implementation have been addressed for the participants, the post-survey will be given at the end to give reflection on the whole process to see if it was beneficial.

## Results

The post-survey sent out to the team was a way to find a common theme that needed to be addressed. With a 38% response rate to the qualitative survey, themes were found within the eight questions that gave insight into areas of concern that needed to be addressed that the players deemed important to their performance on the field. A 30-minute intervention was held with 6 UAB Men's Football Team Players who completed the post-survey. Within this intervention, we addressed time management skills, how each individual prioritizes self-care, what works for them and what does not, what keeps them motivated through the hardships, and how they cope with these. At the end of the intervention, each player was given a four-question post-survey that reflected on the experience. 100% response rate stating that this helped them put into perspective that their mental health does affect their performance; they felt this experience was helpful and would recommend this to other schools with athletic departments.

## Discussion

The eight-question pre-survey themes were Family, God, Mindset, Preparation/Work Ethic, Adversity/Experiences, Time Management, Stress levels, Mental State, when things don't go as planned and can be harsh, the way you think and act, Well-being, School work, Anxiety, Burnout, Distracting self with leisure activities, and pushing through without dealing with what's actually wrong. The feedback from the players on the post-survey stated that mental health is one of the most important things for an athlete to perform at the full potential. One player said that when he cast his worries to the lord, he can play free. Writing down in his journal daily has helped him with his mental health to stay level-headed and play with no restraints. What they have gained from the intervention in the post-survey was that. It is okay to open up and talk about mental health because other players on the team can be going through the same problem, and they can both help each other overcome these problems. Self-care was stated in the post-survey that this is one of the factors that play into mental health that the players didn't give enough time to during their packed schedules because they didn't have time and weren't aware of how important self-care was. A mindset was shifted after the intervention, and players who wanted to control everything found that it was impossible to be in control of everything. This brings on unnecessary stress, so it was best just to be yourself and let the rest play out how it was supposed to.

## Discussion continued

Occupational performance is affected when players are undergoing mental health problems and do not have an outlet or resources to help them overcome these problems. When players are dealing with these issues, their performance on the field isn't at the optimal capacity that it could be. Players have confidence issues, and anxiety takes over. They are paralyzed by fear of failure and losing their position. Their mind is jammed packed with all these factors and it overall hinders their performance significantly.

## Conclusion

Occupational therapists have a unique therapeutic lens that can be brought into the sports world. The profession has little to no exposure to sports but brings much benefit and growth to these elite athletes who can excel in their performance. This project aimed to investigate if mental health hindered athletes' performance and if an occupational therapist could address these areas of concern and provide strategies that would increase athletes' performance within their sport.

## References

- Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K.M. & Christensen, H. Barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking for young elite athletes: a qualitative study. *BMC Psychiatry* 12, 157 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-12-157>
- Wolanin, A., Gross, M., & Hong, E. (2015). Depression in athletes: Prevalence and risk factors. *Current Sports Medicine Reports*, 14(1), 56-60. <https://doi.org/10.1249/jsr.0000000000000123>
- Yang, J., Peek-Asa, C., Corlette, J. D., Cheng, G., Foster, D. T., & Albright, J. (2007). Prevalence of and risk factors associated with symptoms of depression in competitive collegiate student athletes. *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine*:17(6), 481-487. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JSM.0b013e31815aed6b>