Factors Associated with the Perceptions of Help-Seeking and the Mental Health of Student-Athletes

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Introduction

- Psychological distress of college students has been extensively researched; however, the mental health of college athletes is understudied and misunderstood. College athletes are under a unique set of stressors that can impact psychological well-being (Wolanin et al., 2016; Armstrong & Oomen- Early, 2009)
- College athletes have a 14% lifetime prevalence of mental health conditions. Specifically, depression and anxiety are of concern; however, rates significantly differ across studies ranging from 4- 68% (Sarac et al., 2018; Nixdorf, Frank, & Beckmann, 2016)
- Contrasting results appear regarding the mental health of athletes
  - Some studies conclude that athletes' mental health can deteriorate with the chronic stress of being an elite athlete (Demirel, 2016; Nixdorf, Frank & Beckmann, 2016)
  - Others conclude that elite athletes' mental health is improved as compared to non-athletes, and may be improved due to heightened exercise (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009; Tahtinen & Kristjansdottir, 2019)
- Thorough research indicates athletes' tendencies for low help-seeking behaviors, with studies estimating that only 10% of athletes with mental health conditions utilize services (Wahto & Swift, 2016; Lopez & Levy, 2013; Bird, Chow, & Cooper, 2020)

Facilitators
- Females athletes were more likely to seek help than male athletes (Breslin et al, 2019)
- Team athletes were more likely to seek help than individual sport athletes (Breslin et al, 2019)
- Athletes with greater resilience scored highest on problem-solving, social support, and minimizing the threat (Joyce, 2005)
- Coaches, family, and peer social support encourage help-seeking behaviors (Gulliver et al., 2012)
- Athletes positive past experiences with counselors can also facilitate help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2012)
- The general help-seeking literature also suggests that help-seeking is higher in the context of higher severity of problems (Magaard, Seeralan, Schulz, & Brütt, 2017)

Barriers
- The largest barrier to mental health is stigma including both perceived public stigma as well as personal stigma (Wahto & Swift, 2016; Castaldellie et al., 2019; Lopez & Levy, 2013)
- Lack of knowledge about mental health and the symptoms of mental health contributes to athletes' lack of help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2012;
- Other notable barriers include time, geographical accessibility, and lack of knowledge of resources available (Gulliver et al., 2012; Lopez & Levy, 2013)

Purpose

- Given the conflicting information about athlete mental health and the low prevalence of help-seeking behaviors in athletes, this study attempted to:
  - Understand and help to clarify the mental well-being of athletes
  - Understand what factors are related to athletes' perceptions of help-seeking
    - Based on past research, we explored how one's grit/ resilience, social/ physical functioning, as well as one's perception of attitudes, social norms, and control might be related to mental health symptoms and beliefs in college athletes

Methodology

- The sample included 331 student-athletes of which 189 were male and 142 were female
- Participants were recruited from Elon University, a division one university, from a variety of athletic disciplines including varsity athletes, club athletes, and dance majors
- Participants completed the measures as baseline testing data at the beginning of their college athletic career

Measures
- Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9; Kroenke & Spitzer, 2002)
- General Anxiety Disorder-7 Questionnaire (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006)
- Short Grit Scale (Grit-S; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009)
- Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008)
- Promis-29 (Hays et al., 2018)
- Theory of Planned Behavior Measure (Hess & Tracey, 2013)
- Help-Seeking Behaviors Measure (Unpublished Questionnaire, Fleming)

- A correlational analysis was conducted to understand which factors were related to athlete help-seeking beliefs using SPSS-26
- Two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to predict depression and anxiety in student-athletes using SPSS-26

Results

Correlational Analysis
- Athlete positive beliefs about help-seeking were related to: increased depression and increased anxiety
- Athlete positive perceptions of social approval about help-seeking were related to: lower depression, lower anxiety, increased social functioning, lower physical functioning, and increased resilience

Regression Analysis
- Depression was regressed onto the expected predictor variables, and the overall model was significant, $F(8,136) = 13.46$, $p < .001$. Decreased social functioning, lower levels of grit, lower levels of resilience, and higher levels of help-seeking were related to depression in student-athletes.
- Anxiety was regressed onto the expected predictor variables, and the overall model was significant, $F(8,141) = 9.60$, $p < .001$. Decreased social functioning, increased help-seeking, and female gender was related to anxiety in student-athletes.

Table 1

Correlations with key study variables

Variables	1. Depression	2. Anxiety	3. TPB Attitudes	4. TPB Social	5. TPB Control
1. Depression	---				
2. Anxiety	.75**	---			
3. TPB Attitudes	.19**	.15**	---		
4. TPB Social	-.35**	-.22**	-.29**	--	
5. TPB Control	-.43**	-.42**	.16**	.10	--
6. Age	-.08	-.05	-.10	.02	-.08
7. Help-Seeking	.41**	.41**	.04	-.38**	-.01
8. Physical Fxn	-.00	-.05	-.06	-.11*	-.01
9. Social Fxn	.52**	.39**	.03	-.19**	-.14*
10. Grit	-.35**	-.22**	-.02	.09	.09
11. Resilience	-.43**	-.42**	-.01	.21**	.13*

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Multiple regression predicting depression symptoms

	R^2	ß	B	SE B	p
Step 1	.27				
Physical Fxn		-.09	-.17	.13	.198
Social Fxn		.54	.58	.08	**.000**
Step 2	.41				
Physical Fxn		-.08	-.14	.12	.262
Social Fxn		.37	.40	.08	**.000**
Grit		-.15	-.69	.31	**.030**
Resilience		-.19	-.82	.30	**.006**
Help-Seeking		-.28	.65	.16	**.000**
Step 3	.41				
Physical Fxn		-.07	-.13	.13	.300
Social Fxn		.38	.41	.08	**.000**
Grit		-.15	-.67	.31	**.034**
Resilience		-.17	-.73	.31	**.018**
Help-Seeking		.28	.64	.16	**.000**
Race/ethnicity		-.02	-.16	.47	.728
Age		-.08	-.22	.18	.222
Sex		-.05	-.27	.39	.485

Table 3

Multiple regression predicting anxiety symptoms

	R^2	ß	B	SE B	p
Step 1	.13				
Physical Fxn		-.11	-.23	.17	.174
Social Fxn		.38	.49	.10	**.000**
Step 2	.26				
Physical Fxn		-.08	-.17	.16	.301
Social Fxn		.24	.31	.10	**.003**
Grit		-.02	-.08	.40	.842
Resilience		-.21	-1.04	.38	**.006**
Help-Seeking		.29	.78	.20	**.000**
Step 3	.32				
Physical Fxn		-.02	-.05	.16	.741
Social Fxn		.27	.34	.10	**.001**
Grit		-.01	-.07	.39	.854
Resilience		-.13	-.65	.38	.084
Help-Seeking		.26	.71	.20	**.000**
Race/ethnicity		.08	.69	.57	.232
Age		-.01	-.05	.23	.838
Sex		-.27	-1.75	.48	**.000**

Discussion

- Depression in student-athletes is related to decreased social functioning, lower levels of grit, lower levels of resilience, and higher levels of help-seeking
- Anxiety in student-athletes is related to decreased social functioning, increased help-seeking, and gender
- Increased severity of distress is related to more help-seeking
- Females athletes are at greater risk for depression and anxiety as compared to male athletes
- Lower levels of grit and resilience are related to depression

Implications
- Student-athletes' help-seeking behavior is low and thus attitudes and perception of social disapproval may act as a barrier to help-seeking behaviors
- Based on previous research, athletes display lower levels of psychological distress; however, the culture of sports may contribute as barriers to seeking help
- Athletic departments should be aware of how perceptions of social approval act as barriers or facilitators to help-seeking and athletes' overall mental health
  - Mental health measures, such as the inclusion of psychologists, should be added to the department to facilitate help-seeking
  - Measures should be implemented to foster student-athletes' grit and resilience
  - In accordance with previous research, increasing athletes' awareness and knowledge surrounding mental health will help to improve attitudes and perceived social support and in turn facilitate help-seeking
  - Athletic departments should educate student-athletes on how gender differences can act as a barrier to help-seeking
- Social functioning may be an indicator of the deterioration of a student-athlete's mental well-being

Limitations
- The analyzed data describes the mental health of athletes at the start of the academic year rather than throughout the academic year when stressors may be of greater concern
- The sample was obtained from a singular university, which limits the results generalizability to the larger population of student-athletes
- Mental health measures in the baseline data consisted of multiple missing data entries, which limits the statistical power provided in the results

Future Research
- Future research should examine the impact of including mental health professionals in the athletic departments on help-seeking behaviors
- Future research should examine the mental health of athletes throughout the academic year to describe their mental health in all levels of stress

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