



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jsams



Review

Are mental toughness and mental health contradictory concepts in elite sport? A narrative review of theory and evidence

Daniel F. Gucciardi^{a,*}, Sheldon Hanton^b, Scott Fleming^b

^a School of Physiotherapy and Exercise Science, Curtin University, Australia

^b Cardiff School of Sport, Cardiff Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 April 2016

Received in revised form 30 June 2016

Accepted 2 August 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Mentally tough

Mental health stigma

Organizational stressors

Self-actualization

Stress

Thriving

ABSTRACT

Objective: Athlete development and management encompass a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Within elite sport, multidisciplinary sport science and medicine teams play an important role in achieving an optimal balance between preventing athlete ill-health and optimizing health and performance. The psychological aspects of athlete health and performance have gained increased attention over the past two decades, with much of this research concerned with the mental health of athletes and the concept of mental toughness. Recently, it was proposed that mental health and mental toughness are contradictory concepts in the world of elite sport. Although an interesting proposition, this claim was not substantiated. Thus, the purpose of this narrative review was to evaluate theory and evidence regarding the thesis that mental health and mental toughness are contradictory concepts in the world of elite sport, with the view to advance scholarly knowledge and inform professional practice.

Design: Narrative review.

Results: A critical evaluation of this literature suggests that mental toughness may represent a positive indicator of mental health, or facilitate its attainment, rather than be at odds with it.

Conclusion: When implemented alongside multilayered approaches to organizational change (e.g., group structures, policies), mental toughness could be used as a 'hook' to attract athletes into settings that can open dialogue on the importance of mental health and improve knowledge of key issues (e.g., stigma, symptoms).

© 2016 Sports Medicine Australia. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The psychological aspects of athlete health and performance have gained increased attention over the past two decades, with much of this research concerned with the mental health of athletes and the concept of mental toughness. It was recently proposed that mental health and mental toughness are contradictory concepts in the world of elite sport.¹ The central thesis of this argument is that the culture in sport is one where there is stigma associated with athlete mental health issues, and therefore any desire to obtain professional help is undermined by the fear of being labeled 'mentally weak'. At first glance, the proposed contradiction between mental health and mental toughness has intuitive appeal; however, a short yet thought-provoking editorial of this nature precludes the opportunity to develop arguments fully, such that the central concepts remained undefined and many of the key assertions

were unsubstantiated. This point is particularly pertinent as the readership of sport science and medicine journals may be unfamiliar with the intricacies and details of the literatures on mental health and mental toughness, and therefore there is a danger of misinterpretation or uncritical acceptance of the essential proposition. As theory and evidence are essential to scientific progress and informed professional practice, the purpose of this narrative review is to evaluate substantive and empirical perspectives that can shed light on the target question; that is, are mental health and mental toughness contradictory concepts in elite sport? A narrative review was the preferred approach for two reasons: (i) collectively, we have published over 40 papers or chapters on mental toughness and therefore have a sound understanding of this literature base; and (ii) an electronic search of several databases (Web of Science, Scopus, OvidSP and EBSCO) using key terms ("mental toughness" OR "mentally tough" AND "mental health" OR "mental illness") identified fewer than 15 papers, most of which were irrelevant to the focus of this review (e.g., no data on the association between mental toughness and indicators of mental health). Cognizant of this key information, it is our hope that sport science and medicine per-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: daniel.f.gucciardi@gmail.com (D.F. Gucciardi).

sonnel will be better positioned to evaluate, diagnose, and manage issues that are important for athlete mental health and/or performance.

2. Synopsis of stimulus editorial

In a recent issue on mental health care in athletes, readers were provided with a timely reminder of the demands and challenges faced by elite athletes and the potential deleterious effects of such stressful events. Focused specifically on the concepts of mental health and mental toughness, Bauman contextualized his editorial with a brief historical overview of the importance of mental illness for human society and the prevalence of mental health issues among adults in the US. The main essence of the editorial served to answer the question, “Are mental toughness and mental health seen as contradictory in elite sport?” Referring briefly to the historical, social and cultural conditions of sport (e.g., profit and success driven organizations, media glorification of successful athletes), Bauman summarized elite sport as an environment where the perceived consequences of appearing ‘weak’ outweigh the incentives of seeking help. Thus, the answer to this target question was yes; mental toughness and mental health are contradictory concepts in elite sport.

3. Conceptual perspectives of mental health and mental toughness

Contemporary conceptualizations acknowledge that mental health encompasses the presence of positive indices (e.g., vitality) and absence of negative symptoms (e.g., depression).² In 1999, David Satcher, the Surgeon General (p. 4) defined mental health as “a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity”.³ This perspective has been reinforced by the World Health Organization, who defined mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”.⁴ These definitions underscore two key features of mental health that are pertinent to the purpose of this narrative review. First, mental health is not simply the absence of psychopathology or mental illness, but rather encompasses a consideration of two broad yet interrelated dimensions of positive and negative indices that are essential components of optimal functioning.² Second, mental health is state-like and therefore a dynamic construct, such that one could be considered as high in mental health at one point in time but low in mental health at another point. Without specific reference to such definitional points in a critical editorial,¹ it may be concluded mistakenly that mental health is concerned solely with the presence or absence of illness or pathological issues.

Current perspectives suggest that mental toughness represents a collection of personal resources that are salient for goal-directed behavior despite varying degrees of situational demands.⁵ Mental toughness is an aspect of psychological individuality that encompasses the aggregation and integration of resources over time through one’s experiences with stress and adversity.⁶ Broadly speaking, these personal resources are said to foster goal-directed behavior by enabling individuals to *strive* (i.e., direction and magnitude of effort expended on a task), *survive* (i.e., manage everyday challenges or overcome major adversities) and *thrive* (i.e., experience growth through one’s experiences).⁷ Hence, there are two core features of the conceptualization of mental toughness that are pertinent to the purpose of the present paper. First, mental toughness is an aspect of psychological individuality made up of positive indices

of personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, optimism). Consistent with this perspective, mental toughness is one of the most prevalent concepts of the broader field of positive psychology within the sport sciences.⁸ Second, mental toughness is a salient construct for positive human functioning in the face of situational demands, which might vary from the ‘ups and downs’ of everyday life (e.g., learning new team strategies) to major adversities (e.g., season ending injury). The exclusion of a conceptually sophisticated definition of mental toughness in a critical editorial¹ is an important omission.

Are mental health and mental toughness contradictory concepts? Intuitively, it is easy to see how readers who may be unfamiliar with these literatures may agree with the affirmative to this question¹. Nevertheless, a consideration of definitions and theory suggests that mental toughness may represent a positive indicator of mental health, or facilitate its attainment, rather than be at odds with it. Both mental toughness and mental health share conceptual overlap in terms of positive functioning (e.g., subjectively and objectively assessed) and the centrality of stress and adversity. In this sense, self-actualization, or the fulfillment of one’s potential,⁹ is a key conceptual thread between mental health and mental toughness. Stress is ubiquitous in contexts such as elite sport where high performance underpins innovation, success, and competitive advantage. Stressors experienced by athletes emanate from their interactions with multiple aspects of their lives and the sporting environments, including personal (e.g., work-life interface, family issues), competition (e.g., inadequate or disrupted preparation; risk of injury; expectations of media, sponsors, coaches) and the organizational contexts (e.g., selection processes, cultural and team issues).^{10–12,13} Unsurprisingly, there are many reasons why athletes are vulnerable to mental health problems, such as the considerable investments of time and energy, commitment to the identity of an athlete with little exploration of other aspects of self, competitive failure, injury, and recurring separation and reconnection with family and friends from travel.¹⁴ The extent to which these stressors and adversities are detrimental to performance or mental health is dependent upon the resources athletes have available to cope with these events.¹³ Conceptualized as a collection of personal resources that enables athletes to withstand stressors and adversities, mental toughness is expected to promote the fulfillment of one’s potential⁷ and therefore contribute to the attainment of mental health. From a theoretical perspective, therefore, mental health and mental toughness do not appear to be contradictory concepts.

4. Empirical perspectives of mental health and mental toughness

In addition to theoretical and definitional perspectives, it is important to consider evidence that may dis/confirm the proposition that mental toughness and mental health are contradictory concepts in elite sport. Unfortunately, there is no published research that has directly tested this thesis with elite athletes, thus reinforcing the natural appeal of the proposition that mental health and mental toughness are contradictory concepts.¹ Elite athletes have been the subject of past research on mental toughness; however, their data is typically analyzed in combination with performers from other competitive levels. Thus, there is a need to consider related research on mental toughness with non-elite athletes and performers from other achievements contexts (e.g., education, military) to provide insight on the evidence base regarding the contradictory nature of mental health and mental toughness.

In examining the validity of various tools designed to operationalize the mental toughness construct, researchers have sought to ascertain convergent validity with concepts that are represen-

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5573747>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5573747>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)