

College Coaches' Mental Health Literacy as it Relates to their Student Athletes

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College Coaches' Mental Health Literacy as it Relates to their Student Athletes

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### **Abstract**

Over the past decade, mental health has been a growing topic of discussion. Evaluating previous research, young adults, and specifically student athletes, face a variety of stressors in their lives. Student athletes have the responsibility to perform well in school and in their sport while maintaining their own physical and mental wellbeing. The purpose of this synthesis was to review the literature on college coaches' mental health literacy as it relates to their student athletes. Coaches spend a significant amount of time with their student athletes and are able to recognize certain signs and symptoms of mental ill health. Mental Health Literacy of coaches is imperative to being a source of support to their student athletes. There are numerous variables that influence whether a student athlete seeks help for their mental health issues, however, coaches with a high level of Mental Health literacy are in a better position to ensure their student athletes are taking the necessary steps to seek help. This literature review shows that coaches are in a position to be an initial source of support for their student athletes. Coaches' with a higher mental health literacy are able to create a more positive, stigma free team environment that promotes help seeking for mental health issues.

**Key Words:** Student Athletes, Coaches, Mental Health Literacy

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Mental health is a growing concern for people throughout the world as more people are cognizant of the issues that others may be facing. Mental health is a serious issue for young adults as almost 70 percent of mental disorders begin before a person reaches 25 years of age (Brenner, 2019). This is a critical time period for people as their body and mind are still developing into what they will be for the rest of their life (About Mental Health, 2021). Young adults aged 18 to 25 had the highest prevalence of mental health issues when compared to any other age group (Mental Illness, 2019). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is defined as, "...a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (Mental health, 2019, p. 1). Mental health allows people to function normally, handle stress, and perform work that is meaningful to themselves and the community (Gorczyński et al., 2020). Young adulthood is a time that brings change to a variety of areas in life. Many young adults are leaving home for college and living on their own for the first time. This can be an incredibly enriching experience for certain individuals but can lead to some issues for others as they struggle with relationships as well as providing for themselves on a daily basis (Teipel, 2021). College can result in a heavy workload of academics and an environment different than anything they have experienced before (The College Student Mental Health Crisis, 2020). These stressors can directly affect an individual's mental health.

College students make up a large percentage of young adults. Approximately 42 percent of Americans aged 18 – 24 attend a college or university (Hanson, 2021). From a recent survey sent out to college students, approximately 60 percent of students who responded felt "overwhelming" anxiety, while about 40 percent experienced severe depression (Davis, 2021).

Sullivan et al. (2019) stated, “University students are more than twice as likely to report mental distress as non-university students, and as such, have been said to represent a ‘vulnerable high-risk population’” (p. 442). Recent research has concluded that physical activity results in a variety of benefits to mental health, however, high performance athletes are not immune to mental illnesses (Sebbens et al., 2016). Young adults that participate in athletics are, in general, healthier physically than the rest of their age group, but studies have shown that these athletes show similar rates of depression and anxiety to their non-athlete peers (Kroshus et al., 2019). Sullivan et al. (2019) reinforces this by stating, “...student athletes experience depressive symptoms and disorders at similar or higher rates than non-athlete students” (p. 442).

With all of these statistics and conclusions in mind, student-athletes do have an advantage over their non-athlete peers when it comes to dealing with mental health issues (Kroshus et al., 2019). Student-athletes typically have tighter connections that include coaches, teammates, athletic trainers, and academic support staff (Kroshus et al., 2019). Possibly the most important relationship that a student-athlete has is with their coaches. During the season, coaches are with student-athletes almost every day. They are able to build a relationship with each individual that is based on trust and open communication (Duffy et al., 2019). Sebbens et al. (2016) stated, “Coaches and support staff have close proximity to and established relationships with athletes, therefore occupying positions well suited to be mental health advocates” (p. 7). Based on these conclusions, coaches are in an optimal position to be an initial source of help for their student athletes (Duffy et al., 2019).

Most coaches are currently not required to be trained in mental health support (Sebbens et al., 2016). However, coaches play a crucial role in developing a stigma free culture, recognizing when a student-athlete is having difficulties, and directing them to appropriate resources

(Kroshus et al., 2019). In order for a coach to perform this role effectively, they must have a base knowledge of mental health illnesses and issues (Duffy et al., 2019). This term is referred to as Mental Health Literacy (MHL) and it is more accurately defined as, “the knowledge and beliefs about mental health disorders that aid recognition, management, and prevention” (Duffy et al., 2019, p. 47). The overall goal of MHL is to not only have the knowledge of mental health issues, but to have the ability to act on behalf of oneself or others (Sullivan et al., 2019). Gorczynski et al. (2020) reinforces this notion by saying, “MHL is not merely the ability of individuals to detect symptoms of poor mental health, such as experiencing a low mood, but rather to drive individuals and their communities to collective action to acknowledge and address the determinants of mental health” (p. 715). MHL is crucial to coaches supporting their student-athletes because coaches are more likely to act and direct the student-athletes to the proper resources when they perceive themselves as knowledgeable in the area (Sebbens et al., 2016).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Student-athletes often face more barriers when it comes to seeking help for mental health issues when compared to non-athlete students (Kroshus et al., 2019). Sullivan et al. (2019) stated, “Stigma was perceived as the most influential barrier to seeking help, followed by a lack of athletes’ own MHL, and past negative experiences of help-seeking” (p. 446). Student-athletes often have negative attitudes toward help-seeking in part due to their competitive nature where admitting issues will be seen as a weakness (Sebbens et al., 2016). Other studies have shown that how a student-athlete views their coach and their MHL can be a determining factor in whether they seek help and open up about their mental health (Duffy et al., 2019). Duffy et al. (2019) went on to say that “By improving coaches’ mental health literacy, they will be better placed to identify the early warning signs of mental illness and to support and refer young people to



appropriately qualified mental health practitioners” (p. 55). The more knowledgeable coaches are about mental health, the more likely they can address issues and reduce stigma surrounding help-seeking (Gorczyński et al., 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this synthesis project is to review the literature on college coaches' mental health literacy as it relates to their student athletes.

### **Operational Definitions**

1. Mental Health – a state of well-being in which and individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (WHO).
2. Young Adults – people between the ages of 18 and 24.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the degree of Mental Health Literacy amongst college coaches?
2. What are the programs or trainings to help coaches improve their Mental Health Literacy?

### **Delimitations**

1. The articles used for this synthesis project were peer reviewed.
2. The articles were all published between the years 2011 and 2021.
3. The articles focused on college or university coaches' mental health literacy and college or university student-athletes' mental health issues.

## Chapter 2—Review of Literature

The purpose of this synthesis project is to review the literature on college coaches' mental health literacy as it relates to their student athletes. An in-depth search for data-based articles was conducted to obtain information on this topic.

The articles obtained for this synthesis were found using the SUNY Brockport Drake Library website. The SUNY Brockport Drake Library primary database that was used to search for articles was the EBSCO database. The EBSCO Database includes a number of other databases. Academic Search Complete, SPORTDiscus with Full Text, and APA PsycInfo were all databases that were searched within EBSCO Database. Overall, three separate searches were performed. One search used the Academic Search Complete and SPORTDiscus databases, while two separate searches were performed using the APA PsycInfo database.

The first search that was completed was within both the Academic Search Complete and SPORTDiscus databases. The initial keyword that was used was *mental health literacy*. This search resulted in 5,565 results. To lower the number of results, quotations were placed on around the term *mental health literacy* in order to specifically search articles that had these words linked together. The keyword of "*mental health literacy*" resulted in 1,026 results. Limiters were placed on the search. These included marking the box of *Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals*. This initial limiter resulted in 1,013 hits. A second limiter was used where the years to retrieve articles was changed to only find articles between the years *2011 and 2021*. This second limiter found 820 results. The second keyword that was added to the search was *coach\**. This search with the second keyword brought back 22 results. A third set of keywords was added to the search. These keywords were *college\* or universit\**. The purpose of using the \* at the end of the previous two keywords was to open the search to more options. The \* allows for

any additional changes to the keywords to be included in the search. This search resulted in 21 hits. Initially there were three pages of articles. Entering the second page removed any duplicate articles resulting in a total of 15 results.

The second search was completed using the APA PsycInfo database. The first keyword that was used for this search was *mental health literacy*. This initial search resulted in 4,211 hits. Limiters were placed on the search. The first limiter was marking the box for *Peer Reviewed articles*. This limiter resulted in 3,312 hits. The second limiter was changing the range of the publication dates. The range for the publication dates was changed to 2011 to 2021. This resulted in 2,582 hits. A second keyword was added to the search. This keyword was *coach\**. This resulted in 24 hits. A third keyword was used which was *college\** or *universit\**. This resulted in 22 hits.

The third search completed used the APA PsycInfo database. The first keyword was *mental health*. This initial search resulted in 703,258 hits. Two limiters were put in place. The first was marking the *Peer Reviewed* box. This resulted in 511,475 hits. The second limiter was changing the publication date range to 2011 to 2021. This resulted in 258,693 hits. A second keyword was used. This keyword was *coach\**. This resulted in 1,237 hits. A third set of keywords were used which were *college\* or unviersit\**. This third set of keywords resulted in 1,014 hits. A fourth keyword was used to lower the number of results. This keyword was *student athlete\**. This resulted in 28 hits.

Within each database, articles were obtained from a variety of journals. These journals included the following titles: *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, *European Physical Education Review*, *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, *BMC Psychiatry*, *Journal of Psychological Research*,

*Advances in Mental Health*. The *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology* gave four different articles for this synthesis project, by far the most used source for retrieving articles. Each of the other journals resulted in one article used for this synthesis project.

There were various types and number of participants within each of the articles used for this synthesis project. The most common participants within the articles were coaches at the college or university level. Throughout all of the articles researched, a total of 1,131 coaches at the college or university level were studied. The second most researched population were student athletes. Across all of the articles, a total of 246 student athletes participated in the studies. The third population that was researched were athletic trainers. In total, 18 athletic trainers participated in the studies performed across all of the articles that were researched.

The articles that were researched for this synthesis project were analyzed in a variety of ways. The most common analysis of the data was via descriptive statistics. Means and standard deviations were used to determine the relationships between variables and draw conclusions for the study. The following articles used descriptive statistics to analyze data: *Coaches' Mental Health Literacy and Role Perceptions for Supporting Young People's Mental Health*, *Pre-post Evaluation of the "Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness" Module for College Coaches*, *The Level of Mental Health Literacy Among Athletic Staff in Intercollegiate Sport*, *Predicting Student-Athlete Mental Health: Coach-Athlete Relationship*, *Student-Athletes: An Exploratory Survey*, *The Role of Stigma and Referral Source in Predicting College Student-Athletes' Attitudes Toward Psychological Help-Seeking*, and *Examining mental health literacy, help-seeking behaviours, distress and wellbeing in UK coaches*, *Mental Health in Sport: Improving the Early Intervention Knowledge and confidence of Elite Sport Staff*.

The second most common analysis used for the data in the articles researched was a simple comparison of pre and post test scores. The following articles had participants complete a survey prior to a workshop/intervention, then retake the survey to determine how the participants' scores differed: *Mental Health in Sport: Improving the Early Intervention Knowledge and confidence of Elite Sport Staff and Assumptions associated with mental health literacy training – Insights from initiatives in rural Australia.*

One of the ten articles researched for this synthesis project was a qualitative study. This article was *Barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking for young elite athletes: a qualitative study.* This article interviewed 15 elite athletes. Responses during interviews were analyzed by the researchers and categorized under different sub sections. These sub sections became the overall findings of the article as they were common themes found throughout the student athletes' responses during their interviews.

### **Chapter 3 – Review of Literature**

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of literature on college coaches' mental health literacy as it relates to their student athletes. In particular the following topics will be explored: Coaches' Role in Understanding Mental Health Issues, Mental Health Literacy Programs and Trainings, and Barriers and Facilitators to Seeking Help for Mental Health Issues. These topics came as a result of reviewing 10 peer-reviewed articles. Mental health is a growing topic of interest throughout the world and is highly prevalent in student athletes. Coaches can have a significantly positive impact on their student athletes when equipped with the proper knowledge and confidence.

#### **Coaches' Role in Understanding Mental Health Issues**

Coaches play an important role in understanding mental health issues of their athletes. Coaches are responsible for their student athletes' physical and mental well-being. As more and more people are diagnosed with mental health disorders, it is crucial for coaches to be prepared and knowledgeable about mental health. Coaches are in a position to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health issues as well as promote a stigma free team environment when it comes to seeking help.

Duffy et al (2019) intent of their study was to examine how coaches' MHL and their role perceptions relate to their engagement in promotion, prevention, and early intervention of mental health issues amongst their athletes. The study surveyed 296 coaches in Ireland where each individual completed a self-report measure of mental health literacy (MHL) as well as self-measured role perceptions. Role perceptions are a combination of role breadth and role efficacy. In this study, role breadth refers to how much a coach believes that mental health engagement should be a part of their job. Role efficacy is referring to how capable an individual is in

performing their role. This research study performed a cross sectional design which focused on Gaelic game coaches in Ireland. This survey was broken up into sections including the following: sociodemographic information, self-measure of participants' MHL for depression, and role perceptions focusing on their engagement in promotion, prevention and early intervention of mental health. This study found that personal experience with mental health issues was linked with a higher level of MHL. Also, this study noted that coaches should be an initial alternative source of help to their players who may be experiencing mental health issues. In addition, both role breadth and role efficacy were associated with coaches' engagement in promotion, prevention, and early intervention.

Reducing the barriers for student athletes to speak about mental health issues is the primary reason to improve coaches' MHL. Sullivan et al (2019) set out to investigate the levels of MHL in coaches and athletic therapists in the intercollegiate sporting system. 80 participants (57 coaches and 18 athletic therapists) from Canadian Universities were surveyed, as they were asked to complete the Mental Health Literacy Scale. This scale assesses knowledge and attitudes related to mental health. This study determined that females typically had higher levels of MHL and were also more literate when it came to mental health issues. This study also found that MHL was significantly correlated to age and total experience in their profession. Younger coaches and trainers are more literate as experience does not seem to have a significant effect on MHL. Stigma, student athletes' lack of MHL, past negative experiences are some of the main barriers to student athletes seeking help. Coaches should be able to display a level of support and understanding to help promote student athletes to come forward and speak about mental health issues.

Following the same line of research, Gorczynski et al (2019) focused on examining the MHL, help-seeking behaviors, distress, and wellbeing of sport coaches in the United Kingdom. Additionally, the study set out to evaluate the relationships between these mental health variables. A survey was sent out in the Spring of 2018 and was completed by 103 individuals. These individuals were over the age of 18 and coached any sport within the United Kingdom. These participants completed the Mental Health Literacy Scale, a General Help Seeking Questionnaire, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale. Similarly to the previous article, this study found that MHL was higher in women than in men. This study also found that individuals with less than one year of coaching experience have higher MHL than those with two or more years of experience.

Powers et al (2020) focused on the coach-athlete relationship and how this relationship can influence a student athlete's mental health and likelihood to seek help for mental health issues. There was a total of 79 participants in this study. These participants were all collegiate student athletes that participated at the Division I level. Each individual completed the Ten Item Personality Inventory, The Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire, the WHO-Quality of Life assessment, and The Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale Revised. All of these assessments consisted of Likert scale questions where the data could be easily analyzed using descriptive statistics. One of the primary findings of this study was that the coach-athlete relationship has a clear association with depressive symptoms and psychological quality of life in student athletes (Powers et al, 2020). Coaches can play a major role in their players' psyche simply by displaying their disapproval with behaviors. For student athletes, the relationship with coaches can be a major stressor that can impact other areas of their lives. Coaches who show



support and build a positive relationship with their student athletes can have a significant impact on their mental wellbeing.

### **Mental Health Literacy Programs and Trainings**

Research has shown that improved MHL amongst coaches can have a significant impact on student athletes' behaviors when it comes to mental health issues. But how do coaches and student athletes improve their MHL? This is an important question as identifying the problem is one thing, but actually attacking the problem is where change will take place. MHL programs and trainings are key for coaches and student athletes to break down any stigma associating with mental health by facilitating help seeking behaviors.

Sebbens et al (2016) intent of their study was to evaluate a newly developed Mental Health in Sport (MHS) intervention. This intervention was a MHL workshop for coaches and support staff working in elite sport in Australia. The intervention consisted of a 4-hour workshop where participants were taught the MHS action plan: recognize, reach out, refer, and remain supportive (Sebbens et al, 2016). A quasi-experimental design was implanted as groups were divided into experimental and waitlist groups. There was a total of 8 workshops that individuals participated in. A total of 166 individuals participated. This included coaches, trainers, support staff, service providers, and administrators within high level Australian sports. There were two major findings from this research study. First, the experimental group showed significant increases in depression literacy, anxiety literacy, and confidence after completing the workshop (Sebbens et al, 2016). Second, this study implies that MHS had a strong relationship in improving the knowledge in recognizing the signs and symptoms of depressed individuals (Sebbens et al, 2016). A key piece when talking about mental health issues is helping individuals take action. Focusing on knowledge and confidence (two key parts of MHL) are important to

increase the chances of early intervention (Sebbens et al, 2016). Another key factor in these MHL workshops is that by increasing the MHL of people, they began to recognize signs and symptoms in themselves and began to take action to seek help for their own mental health (Sebbens et al, 2016).

Kroshus et al (2019) set out to determine if the completion of the NCAA's "Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness" online module for coaches leads to greater mental health literacy and reduced stigma. A total of 969 coaches participated in this study. These participants were all head coaches of a sports team at an NCAA institution. All coaches answered a pre-module set of questions asking about demographics, past behaviors, MHL, and attitudes towards help seeking. Following these initial questions, coaches completed the NCAA's "Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness" module. This module consisted of several key factors: signs and symptoms of mental illness, the role of the coach in fostering a positive team environment, the role of the coach in encouraging student athletes to seek help, how to identify and respond to mental health situations, and stigma surrounding mental illness (Kroshus et al, 2019). Once the module was completed, the participants completed another set of survey questions. This was to determine what knowledge was gained compared to responses before the module was completed. One of the key findings of this study was that participants' MHL, intentions to create a positive culture, and intention to refer student athletes to the proper help greatly increased at post-test compared to pre-test (Kroshus et al 2019). The online module also resulted in a decreased stigma towards help seeking for mental health amongst the participants (Kroshus et al, 2019). Coaches are typically great communicators and have experience in listening to their student athletes. Coaches who create a positive team culture towards mental illness are in a great position to decrease stigma and help their student athletes seek help (Kroshus et al, 2019).

Anderson & Pierce (2014) set out to explore assumptions regarding past MHL programs. These assumptions include the following based on individuals who enter MHL trainings: (1) Individuals will increase their knowledge of mental health, (2) individuals will have increased confidence to help those in need, (3) individuals will have less stigma and prejudice towards people with mental health issues, and (4) individuals will help those in need (Anderson & Pierce, 2014). One of the key programs that these assumptions are based off of is the Mental Health First Aide (MHFA) initiative. This study included mixed research methods as well as pre and post-test measures (Anderson & Pierce, 2014). There was a total of 162 participants who completed the training. Participants completed pre-training and 6 months post-training questionnaires (Anderson & Pierce, 2014). In addition to these questionnaires, individuals took part in focus groups to focus on the experience of the participants in these mental health trainings. Following trainings, a greater number of people were able to properly identify symptoms of depression and psychosis. In addition, data from the participants showed that individuals' confidence to help others who are experiencing mental health problems greatly improved (Anderson & Pierce, 2014). There is also a link between MHL and stigma as those participants who improved their MHL also showed decreased stigma towards those experiencing mental ill health. Lastly, there was little to no evidence of individuals who participated in MHL training actually going out and using their knowledge to help those in need.

### **Barriers and Facilitators to Seeking Help for Mental Health Issues**

Student athletes who are experiencing mental health issues often face various difficulties to get the proper help they need. Wahto et al (2016) set out to determine two things from their study. First, the authors wanted to examine the relationships between public stigma, self-stigma, and mental health help-seeking attitudes in college student-athletes. Second, they wanted to

determine how different referral sources would impact student athlete's willingness to seek mental health help. Participants included 43 student athletes from a large university in the Northwest region of the United States. Participants were asked to complete a variety of questions asking about attitudes towards seeking professional help and stigma (Wahto et al, 2016). Then, participants were asked to complete another set of questions to determine their attitudes towards seeking professional help on their own compared to seeking help when referred by a coach, teammate or family member. To measure these attitudes, the following reports were used in the study: Inventory of Attitudes Toward Seeking Mental Health Services, Self-Stigma of Seeking Help Scale, and Stigma Scale for Receiving Psychological Help. Descriptive statistics and a hierarchical regression were used to analyze the data. In reference to the first purpose, self-stigma and public stigma had a significant effect on an individual's attitudes toward seeking help for mental health issues. Secondly, self-stigma has a larger effect on help seeking attitudes than public stigma. In regard to the second purpose, student athlete's perceptions of how others would view them was a significant factor in their willingness to seek help. This is shown by the lower rate of people willing to seek help from coaches, teammates or family members due to how an individual would view themselves in a negative way.

Barriers and facilitators of mental health help seeking are crucial to this conversation. Gulliver et al (2012) aimed to determine the barriers and facilitators for help seeking behaviors when it comes to mental health problems in young elite athletes. There was a total of 15 elite athletes that were between the ages of 16 and 23 years old that participated in this qualitative study. Each person participated in one of three focus groups where data was audio taped, transcribed and analyzed. All of the questions asked in the focus groups were open ended questions where the individuals could share information on a topic. Also, participants were given

ranking exercises to write out what they perceived to be top barriers and facilitators to mental health help seeking. There were three major themes that resulted from this study: mental health issues facing elite athletes, barriers to help seeking, and facilitators to help seeking. Two of the major themes to influence an individual's mental health was performance and injury. Both of these can lead to anxiety and depressive symptoms that negatively impact an individual's overall mental health. One of the major barriers from this study was the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues. Individuals were worried that teammates and coaches would find out, leading to a negative view of the individual. Another barrier to help seeking is the lack of knowledge about mental health symptoms and services. Young athletes noted that they thought that "feeling down" was an everyday occurrence and was something they needed to deal with since they are performing sports at a high level. In contrast to these barriers, the participants also noted some facilitating factors that could lead to them being more likely to seek help. The most cited theme here was the encouragement and positive attitudes of their coach and teammates. Another key facilitator was the emotional awareness of oneself. Understanding one's own emotions and easily expressing them is going to lead to an individual being more capable of speaking about their feelings in front of a mental health professional.

In addition, Giovannetti et al (2019) set out to determine the extent of the mental health issues and any contributing factors to mental ill health among student-athletes at a large Canadian University. A survey was sent out to 865 student athletes. 162 responded to this initial recruiting email, with 109 finishing the survey in full. The survey set out to determine demographic information, the extent of any contributors to mental health issues among student athletes, and the efficacy of mental health services on and off campus. This survey consisted of open-ended questions as well as multiple questions with Likert scale responses. This study used

descriptive statistics to determine the relationships between all variables. One of the most common responses found in the survey was that stress and pressure from sport is a contributing factor to mental health issues. Student athletes also cited that coaches and athletic administrators were the least preferred option to speak to about mental health issues. Student athletes also showed in their responses that mental health trainings for coaches would be helpful to decrease stigma towards mental ill health. Lastly, student athletes stated that “team mental health seminars” would be beneficial to creating a positive team culture that promotes help seeking from the entire team.

Overall, these topics are all crucial to the overall mental health literacy of college coaches. Coaches are primed to be in a position of support when it comes to understanding their student athletes' mental health. Knowledge in these areas is only a part of how to promote a positive team culture. Reducing any stigma is a key part of that. By participating in MHL trainings and programs, coaches can be better prepared to help their student athletes maintain and healthy physical and mental lifestyle.

## **Chapter 4 – Results, Discussion and Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the review of literature on college coaches' mental health literacy as it relates to their student athletes and how these results align with the purported research questions which guided this synthesis project. In addition, recommendations for future research as it relates to college coaches' mental health literacy are presented.

The results of this review of literature indicated multiple conclusions. First, college coaches are in a position to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health issues in their student athletes. They are able to notice changes in behavior since they are with their student athletes on a regular basis. Second, mental health literacy programs and trainings had a significantly positive impact on coaches' mental health literacy. Trainings with mental health professionals or seeing examples of mental health issues can increase coaches' knowledge and confidence when handling issues amongst their student athletes. Third, coaches can reduce barriers to seeking help for mental health issues by creating a positive, stigma free environment. This gives student athletes a sense of comfort that they won't be judged for seeking help and doing what is best for themselves.

### **Discussion**

#### **Interpretations**

As part of this literature review, multiple research questions were posed. The first research question examined was, what is the degree of Mental Health Literacy amongst college coaches? The results of the literature review performed show the positive impact that a coach can have on their student athletes. For example, in Powers et al (2020), the research showed that the coach-athlete relationship has a significant association with depression and psychological quality

of life in student athletes. In line with this research, Duffy et al (2019) found that coaches who felt that mental health support was a part of their role as a coach, were more inclined to be an initial source of help to their student athletes. This research also showed that coaches who have personal experience with mental health issues were linked with showing a higher level of MHL. The research of Sullivan et al (2019) found that females displayed higher levels of MHL and were more literate when it came to mental health issues. In addition, this research also found that MHL was correlated with age and experience in the profession (Sullivan et al, 2019). Gorczynski et al (2019) also found that MHL was higher in women than in men. However, in contrast to Sullivan et al, this research found that individuals with less coaching experience had higher MHL than individuals with two or more years of experience (Gorczynski et al, 2019).

The second research question that was examined was, what are the programs and trainings to help coaches improve their Mental Health Literacy? Through this literature review, there were multiple programs that focused on MHL of coaches. Sebbens et al (2016) evaluated the Mental Health in Sport (MHS) intervention plan in Australia. This was a 4-hour program that focused on recognizing, reaching out, referring, and remaining supportive of their athletes. This research displayed significant increases in depression and anxiety literacy, as well as confidence to handle mental health issues. In line with this, Kroshus et al (2019) found that participants who completed the online "Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness" module showed increased levels of MHL and increased intentions to create a positive team culture. This study also found that completion of the online module resulted in decreased stigma towards help seeking behaviors amongst their teams. Anderson and Pierce (2014) found similar results in their research. The program evaluated in this study was the Mental Health First Aide (MHFA) initiative. This research shows that following the trainings in this program, more people were



able to identify ill mental health symptoms as well as increasing their confidence to help those in need. This study also determined that the participants who increased their MHL also showed a decreased level of stigma towards those experiencing mental health issues.

### **Implications**

The literature review performed in this synthesis provide a variety of perspectives that give coaches a greater basis of knowledge in regard to mental health. These perspectives also allow researchers to see a full picture on how coaches' MHL impacts their student athletes. These results can offer practical implications for athletic departments and coaching staffs to improve the mental health of their student athletes.

Overall, the conclusions coincide with previous research. Coaches' MHL is a significant indicator of help seeking behaviors in their student athletes. Student athletes who may be experiencing mental health issues should feel supported to seek help. Their coaches can be a primary source of support to lean on if they are equipped with the proper knowledge and confidence. Coaches are also in a position to create a stigma free team culture reinforces that notion of support from coaches and teammates.

Understanding the mental health issues that are impacting student athletes across the board is key. It is impossible to properly train and prepare coaches with knowledge of mental health issues without first knowing the challenges that student athletes face on a daily basis. The barriers that student athletes face when seeking help for mental health issues include self and public stigma. Players are afraid that their coaches and players will have a negative view of them if they come forward and speak about their mental health issues. Proper trainings and programs to help improve coaches' MHL are essential to create a positive team culture that promotes help seeking rather than deter it.

Coaches who believe that the aspect of their student athletes' mental health is important are more inclined to support positive behaviors. Coaches and their student athletes have a significant relationship where they spend time with one another on an almost daily basis. Coaches must learn to understand the importance that their own MHL can have on their student athletes.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In reviewing the data base on coaches' MHL in relation to their student athletes the following limitations were noted regarding the studies under review. The studies surveyed and sampled only a certain number of individuals over a specific length of time. Another limitation was that the studies specifically measured certain variables that the authors thought were impactful to the situation. Additionally, a limitation of the research was that participants may not have been completely honest with their responses due to the subject in question. People are reluctant to open up about mental health even if the study remains anonymous.

Based on these limitations and other insights related to the literature, the following recommendations for future research should be considered:

1. Future research should continue to develop studies that extend over longer periods of time to determine how MHL influences student athletes over the course of multiple years. Future research should continue to analyze more variables that may influence college coaches' MHL in relation to their student athletes.
2. Future research should look to involve larger sample sizes in their studies to gather more data. More data brought in by a demographically diverse population will create more generalizable results for future use.
3. Future research should create a way to receive honest feedback from their participants. One possible way to do this is to state that their honesty may be information that can help

another person in need. By being honest about their own situation, researchers can identify the problem clearly, then work towards a solution.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this synthesis was to review the literature on coaches' mental health literacy as it relates to their student athletes. Delimiting variables were used to do an exhaustive data-based search which yielded 10 articles. These articles were then systematically used to determine how coaches' mental health literacy relates to their student athletes.

Research revealed that coaches play an important role in affecting the mental health of their student athletes. Due to the coaches being with their student athletes on a regular basis, they are in a position to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health issues in their student athletes. Coaches are also responsible for creating a positive, stigma free environment that promotes help seeking behaviors when it comes to mental health issues. MHL programs and trainings for coaches are related to increased knowledge and positive behaviors in those individuals. It is clear that increased MHL and an increased confidence to impact change are two key factors for coaches to positively support their student athletes.

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**Appendix A: Article Grid**

Author	Title	Source	Purpose	Methods & Procedures	Analysis	Findings	Discussion/ Recommendations Research Notes –  Commonalities/Differences
Duffy, J., Rooney, B & Matthews, J. (2019).	Coaches' Mental Health Literacy and Role Perceptions for Supporting Young People's Mental Health	Journal of Applied Sport Psychology	To examine how coaches' mental health literacy relevant to depression and their role perceptions relate to their engagement in promotion, prevention, and early intervention with young people in the sporting environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cross sectional design</li> <li>- Participants were Gaelic game coaches in Ireland</li> <li>- 296 coaches completed the survey (14% female) aged 18-64</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Means, standard deviations and correlations were calculated.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No difference based of sociodemographic characteristics</li> <li>- Participants primarily engaged in promotion, followed by prevention, and then early intervention.</li> <li>- MHL was not directly related to promotion or to role efficacy for this behavior. However, the indirect relationship btw MHL and promotion via role breadth was significant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personal experience of a mental health issue was linked with a higher level of MHL</li> <li>- Coaches should be an initial alternative source of help for a young person experiencing mental health issues</li> <li>- Future Research: Look at a wider variety of coaches (levels, gender, age)</li> </ul>
Kroshus, E., Wagner,	Pre-post Evaluation of the	Journal of Clinical Sport	Whether the completion of the online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Total of 969 coaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Descriptive statistics were</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Results suggest that exposure to the online module</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Future research suggestions: the extent to which change in the factors assessed in the</li> </ul>

<p>J., Wyrick, D., &amp; Hainline, B. (2019)</p>	<p>“Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness” Module for College Coaches</p>	<p>Psychology</p>	<p>module leads to greater mental health literacy and reduced stigma about athletes seeking help/</p>	<p>from NCAA institutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coaches answered a set of questions to determine baseline of MHL. Then completed the online educational module, followed by another short survey</li> <li>- 347 completed post-test surveys.</li> <li>- 57.85% were male coaches</li> <li>- 26.64% coached male athletes</li> <li>- 1/3 of participants were DI coaches, 24.32% were DII</li> </ul>	<p>reported for the full sample at pre and post tests</p>	<p>achieves its goals of increasing coach MHL and decreasing stigma about the sport consequences of mental health help seeking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online module showed minimal impact on coaches' intentions to respond to problem situations.</li> </ul>	<p>present study are associated with change in coach behaviors and to make comparisons between individuals randomized to complete or not complete the module.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Future research suggestion: include assistant coaches to determine if there are differences in MHL by coaching position</li> </ul>
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				coaches, 42.56% were DIII coaches.			
Sullivan, P., Murphy, J., & Blacker, M. (2019)	The Level of Mental Health Literacy Among Athletic Staff in Intercollegiate Sport	Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology	The current study was designed to investigate the levels of MHL in coaches and athletic therapists in the intercollegiate sporting system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 80 participants (57 coaches, 18 ATs)</li> <li>- Participants were from Canadian Universities</li> <li>- 67.5% of participants were male, 30% were female</li> <li>- Participants were asked to complete an online survey.</li> <li>- Survey consisted of the Mental Health Literacy Scale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Series of independent t-tests were conducted to compare MHL scores</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Females typically display higher levels of MHL</li> <li>- Females are also more literate when it comes to specific mental health issues</li> <li>- Females scored higher on MHL than males</li> <li>- No significant difference between coaches and ATs</li> <li>- MHL was significantly correlated to age and total experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coaches are in a unique role because they can be seen as a facilitator or an obstacle to help-seeking.</li> <li>- Coaches who are more supportive will likely result in their student athletes seeking help and vice versa.</li> <li>- Stigma was perceived as the most influential barrier to seeking help, followed by a lack of athletes' own MHL, and past negative experiences of help-seeking.</li> </ul>
Gorczyński, P., Gibson, K.,	Examining mental health literacy,	European Physical Education Review	The purpose of the current study was to: (a) examine the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An online survey was sent out in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kruskal-Wallis H and Mann-</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- MHL was higher in women than in men.</li> </ul>	

<p>Clarke, N., Mensah, T., &amp; Summers, R. (2019)</p>	<p>help-seeking behaviours, distress and wellbeing in UK coaches</p>		<p>MHL, help-seeking behaviours, distress, and wellbeing of sport coaches in the UK; and (b) evaluate relationships between these mental health variables</p>	<p>the spring of 2018.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inclusion criteria were individuals over 18 years old, a coach of any sport, and lived in the UK</li> <li>- Survey included Mental Health Literacy Scale, General Help Seeking Questionnaire, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale.</li> <li>- Total of 103 participants (65 men, 37</li> </ul>	<p>Whitney U tests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relationships between variables were examined through Spearman correlations .</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Age was not significantly associate with MHL</li> <li>- Women has a significantly higher MHL score.</li> <li>- No major differences between individuals who had or had not had previous diagnosis of a mental health disorder</li> </ul>	
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				women, and one individual who identified as another gender)			
Sebbens, J., Hassmn, J., Crisp, D., & Wensley, K. (2016)	Mental Health in Sport: Improving the Early Intervention Knowledge and confidence of Elite Sport Staff	Frontiers in Psychology	The purpose of the present study was therefore to evaluate a newly developed Mental Health in Sport intervention: a brief applied mental health literacy workshop for coached and support staff working in elite sport environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 166 participants</li> <li>- 22-66 yr olds</li> <li>- Included coaches, trainers, support staff and service providers.</li> <li>- Half were female</li> <li>- Participants completed a questionnaire prior to attending multiple workshops on Mental Health in Sport</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Descriptive statistics were used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Within the experimental group there were significant increases in depression literacy, anxiety literacy, and confidence from time 1 to time 2 and time 1 to time 3</li> <li>- Suggest MHS was effective in improving participants' knowledge of the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Targeting knowledge and confidence are explicit strategies to increase the likelihood of early intervention, a key behavior change in the prevention and management of mental illness.</li> <li>- The knowledge and skills learned by participants in the MHS workshop may be transferrable to contexts outside elite sport</li> <li>- Further research needed to evaluate the efficacy of brief mental health literacy workshops over both the short and long term</li> <li>- Future research should attempt to assess the longer term impact of brief interventions on MHL, levels of confidence and behavior change.</li> </ul>
Gulliver, A., Griffiths,	Barriers and facilitators	BMC Psychiatry	This paper reports the results of a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus group methodology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Had a control group,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Workshop was effective in improving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Targeting knowledge and confidence are explicit strategies to increase</li> </ul>

<p>K., &amp; Christensen, H. (2012)</p>	<p>to mental health help-seeking for young elite athletes: a qualitative study</p>		<p>qualitative study of the perceived barriers and facilitators to help-seeking for mental health problems in young elite athletes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Three focus groups of elite athletes were used.</li> <li>- Participants were 15 elite athletes</li> <li>- Each focus group was approximately 1 hour in duration</li> </ul>	<p>compared the experimental group with the control group to determine results of workshops</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- knowledge of the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety.</li> <li>- Confidence to help someone who may be struggling significantly increased following the intervention (workshop).</li> </ul>	<p>likelihood of early intervention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coaches and support staff have close proximity to and established relationships with athletes, therefore occupying positions well suited to be mental health advocates in the daily training environment.</li> <li>- Future Research: Need to evaluate the efficacy of brief mental health literacy workshops over both short term and long term</li> <li>- Future research should attempt to assess longer term impact of brief interventions on MHL, levels of confidence and behavior change.</li> </ul>
<p>Powers, M., Fogaca, J. Gurung, R., &amp; Jackman, C. (2020)</p>	<p>Predicting Student-Athlete Mental Health: Coach-Athlete Relationship</p>	<p>Journal of Psychological Research</p>	<p>Examined major contributors to college athletes' mental health with a special focus on the coach-athlete relationship.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants included 56 female and 23 male student athletes</li> <li>- Ranged between 18 and 23 years old</li> <li>- Participants completed questionnaires about</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Descriptive statistics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mental health issues affecting athletes: performance, injuries, appropriate behavior, weight control lifestyle issues</li> <li>- Public, perceived and self-stigmatizing attitudes to help-seeking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 40% of barriers were related to stigma</li> <li>- Found it difficult to apply MHL to themselves</li> <li>- Future research: Need to develop techniques for engaging and training coaches to facilitate appropriate help seeking among their athletes</li> </ul>

				<p>their personality traits, coach-athlete relationship, and mental health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ten Item personality inventory</li> <li>- The Coach Athlete Relationship Questionnaire</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Top three barriers to help seeking: Not knowing what mental disorders are, not knowing when to seek help, worried about what others think.</li> <li>- Barriers: Lack of knowledge of mental health services, negative past experiences,</li> <li>- Facilitators: already knowing a health professional well, being aware of your feelings and finding it easy to express them, having a positive attitude toward help seeking</li> </ul>	
Anderson, R., & Pierce, D. (2012)	Assumptions associated with mental health literacy training – Insights from initiatives	Advances in Mental Health	To explore assumptions that may underpin these mental health literacy programs where both the individual being trained and potential impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants completed a pre training and 6 months post training questionnaire</li> <li>- Focus group interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used statistical package for the social sciences for three major data analyses</li> <li>- Correlated the major predictor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Partial correlations between each of the mental health variables and the predictor variables</li> <li>- Coaches' relationship with their athletes showed a clear association with psychological</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reinforces the need for coaches to invest on the improvement of their relationships with their athletes</li> <li>- A coach and his/her disapproval could play a major role in the athletes' psyche</li> </ul>

	in rural Australia		on their local community are considered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 162 participants undertook the training</li> <li>- 53 females, 109 males</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>variables personality and coach athlete relationship subscales with measures of mental health</li> <li>- Used three hierarchical regression analyses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>quality of life and depression</li> <li>- A poor relationship with the coach can be a stressor in itself</li> </ul>	
Giovannetti, S., Robertson, J., & Colquhoun, H. (2019)	Mental Health Services for Canadian University Student-Athletes: An Exploratory Survey	Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology	The present study sought to explore the extent of and contributors to mental health issues among student-athletes at a large Canadian university.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A cross sectional electronic design survey was used to collect data</li> <li>- 162 student athletes responded but 109 were completed in full</li> <li>- 67 females and 44 men</li> <li>- Age range: 18 to 33 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comparisons between pre training scores and post training scores</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A significantly greater number of individuals correctly identified depression and psychosis following training</li> <li>- The view that MHL training increased participants' mental health knowledge was supported by the data</li> <li>- Participants' confidence to help others experiencing mental ill health improved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Training measures suggest an increased capacity to recognize common mental health problems</li> <li>- Training will develop an increased confidence in their capacity to help others who experience mental ill health</li> <li>- Individuals trained in MHL express less stigma and prejudice towards those experiencing mental ill health</li> <li>- Future research in this area following training with a well-established MHL approach such as MHFA is desirable.</li> <li>- Future research should be undertaken to determine the</li> </ul>

						<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- MHL and mental health stigma are linked</li> </ul>	<p>most effective approaches to support and measure potential benefits in others from mental health literacy programs undertaken by individuals.</p>
<p>Wahto, R., Swift, J., &amp; Whipple, J (2016)</p>	<p>The Role of Stigma and Referral Source in Predicting College Student-Athletes' Attitudes Toward Psychological Help-Seeking</p>	<p>Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology</p>	<p>The purposes of this study were to (a) examine the relationships between public stigma, self-stigma, and mental health help-seeking attitudes in college student-athletes, and (b) test whether referral source would have an impact on student athletes' willingness to seek mental health help.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 43 participants</li> <li>- Participants were all student athletes</li> <li>- Asked to complete a measure of attitudes toward seeking professional help and two measures of stigma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyzed using conventional content analysis</li> <li>- Used means and standard deviations to summarize close ended questions</li> <li>- Descriptive statistics were used to analyze attitudes, self-stigma and public stigma</li> <li>- Hierarchical regression was used for SSOSH and SSRPH scores</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stress and pressure were common among student athletes' surveys</li> <li>- External expectations were a major theme as many participants cited pressure from coaches as a significant stressor</li> <li>- Coaches were among the least rated options for student athletes to talk about their Mental health issues</li> <li>- Fear of stigma was highly rated as a reason not to seek help</li> <li>- Student athletes' perceptions that others would view them negatively if they were to seek help may be</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most common responses for not seeking help were a lack of time, belief that their issues were not serious enough, discomfort in discussing issues, lack of awareness or accessibility of resources/services, and stigma or embarrassment</li> <li>- Future exploration: Reasons for why coaches are at the bottom of list for student athletes to speak with about mental health issues.</li> <li>- Coaches can promote awareness about the mental health resources and services available to student athletes</li> <li>- There is a need to enhance awareness of mental health resources and services specifically for student athletes</li> <li>- MHL is crucial for student athletes and coaches specifically when it is appropriate to access mental health support and services</li> </ul>

						<p>internalized into negative views of oneself for seeking help</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Student athletes who are encouraged to seek psychological help by a family member are significantly more willing to seek out those services compared with other referral sources.</li> <li>- Social and self-stigma are significant predictors of attitudes toward help seeking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Authors feel it would be pertinent to provide MHL interventions tailored specifically to the student athlete and coaching population.</li> <li>- Further Research is needed that assesses attitudes toward mental health interventions in additional groups of college student athletes and tests additional predictors of the attitudes they hold</li> <li>- Future research should seek to examine the relationships between help seeking behaviors, attitudes, stigma, and other variables that have not previously been studied in college student athletes</li> <li>- Student-athletes would prefer to be referred to services by a family member, rather than a coach or teammate, possibly because talking to a family member is less stigmatizing than speaking with other student athletes</li> <li>- Findings suggest that coaches and teammates, who may have better knowledge of the mental health problems and needs, may be able to increase</li> </ul>
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							student athletes' willingness to seek help by involving family members in suggesting that the athlete seek help.
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