



Tackling Stigma: A Pilot Program to Promote Mental Health and Help-Seeking in Student- Athletes

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Background

College student-athletes are susceptible to experiencing mental health problems that disrupt optimal functioning in sport, school, and life

Only ~10% of student-athletes experiencing anxiety or depression seek professional help, compared to ~30% of non-athlete students (Eisenberg, 2014)

Stigma has been implicated as the main barrier to student-athletes seeking mental healthcare (Biggin et al., 2017; Bird et al., 2018; Gulliver et al., 2012; Moreland et al., 2018)

Attitudes and intentions toward seeking psychological help impact mental health service utilization (Moreland et al., 2018)



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Background

Student-athletes tend to have higher stigma than non-athletes (Kaier et al., 2015)

Different types of stigma: Perceived public, Self, Personal, Explicit vs. Implicit

Interventions designed to reduce stigmatization toward people with mental illness have demonstrated effectiveness in improving attitudes and intentions to seek help

- Mental Health Literacy, Empathy, Counter Stereotyping, Contact

Purpose: To develop and evaluate a 4-week program based on scientifically-based interventions to reduce stigma toward mental illness, enhance mental health literacy, and improve help-seeking attitudes and intentions among college student-athletes



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Method & Procedure

Participants: 33 NCAA Division I student-athletes (male = 13, female = 20); 2 groups

Recruitment: Support from Athletics Department, flyers, announcements, emails, snowball sampling

Procedure: Weekly 1-hour sessions over 4 consecutive weeks, in a group setting, designed using empirically-based interventions, led by two interventionists, joined by a research assistant

Evaluation: pre-, post-, and 1-month follow-up assessments including:

1. Measures of mental health literacy, self-stigma, perceived public stigma, personal stigma, attitudes toward counseling, and intentions to seek counseling
2. Implicit Association Task (IAT)
3. Individual Session & Overall Program Evaluations (e.g., effectiveness and satisfaction ratings)



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Session 1: Mental Health Literacy

Focus: Educating and creating awareness of mental health issues most relevant to student-athletes

Topics:

- Mental health continuum
- Causes and consequences of mental disorders
- Prevalence rates, signs and symptoms
- Barriers to help-seeking
- Ways to manage mental health including campus resources
- How to help a teammate who might be experiencing a mental health issue



Delivery:

- Questions posed for each area to gauge understanding and stimulate discussion
- Presentation of information
- Group debrief (What parts of today's session stand out for you the most?)



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Session 2: Empathy

Focus: Enhancing the *experience* and *expression* of empathy toward those with mental health concerns

Topics:

- Perspective taking
- Characteristics of empathy
- How empathy differs from sympathy
- Empathy skills (e.g., reflecting feelings, validating)
- How to have a difficult conversation with a teammate



Delivery:

- Listening to a 10-minute script about a student-athlete who has a mental illness, experienced stigma, and sought professional help; worksheet for internal thoughts and feelings
- Informational videos and education about empathy skills (e.g., modeling conversation)
- Role play activity
- Group debrief (following perspective taking, video, and role play)



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Session 3: Counter Stereotyping

Focus: Exposing student-athletes to information that contradicts common stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions about mental illness in athletes

Delivery:

- Presentation of common mental health myths and stereotypes
- Small group discussion based on statements (i.e., true or false; rationale to support answers)
- Shared responses in large group discussion
- Interventionists presented relevant information pertaining to each statement (e.g., statistics, counter stereotypes) and debriefed

Topics:

- Eight statements related to mental health myths
- Other common stereotypes and impact on athletes' willingness to seek help
- Factors related to attitudes and help-seeking behaviors



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Session 4: Contact

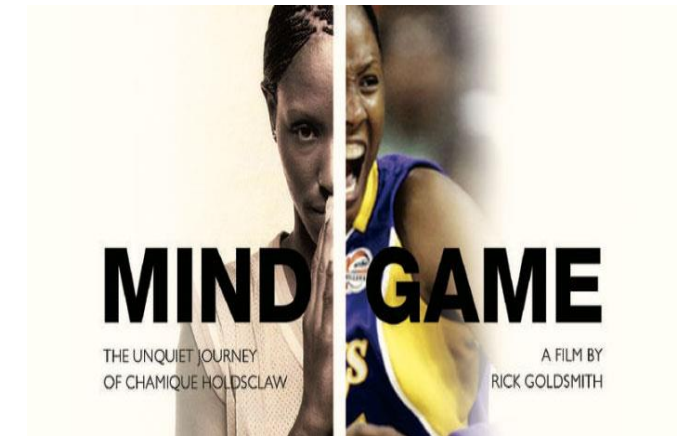
Focus: To present a real world example of a college/professional athlete diagnosed with mental illness, including their personal journey in sport, symptoms, and mental health treatment

Delivery:

- 1-hour video documentary on Chamique Holdsclaw
- Worksheet to take notes during the video
- Group debrief

Topics:

- Chamique's personal experience with mental illness, including:
 - Personal history (e.g., family background, environmental factors, emotions, experiences)
 - Impact of mental illness throughout her sport career, as well as life in general (e.g., relationships)
 - Obstacles faced, persistence in the face of challenges, and experience seeking professional help
- Questions to stimulate discussion about the film (e.g., How did shame about her illness affect Chamique's ability to seek out and get help at different points in her journey?)



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Results

Measure	Pre Mean	Post Mean	Follow-up Mean	Effect Size
Mental Health Literacy (35-160)	123.36	133.45	130.97	Large
Self-Stigma (10-50)	25.42	22.33	23.06	Medium to Large
Personal Stigma (0-36)	9.45	7.91	7.79	Small to Medium
Implicit Stigma (-2-2)	0.10	0.15	0.14	Small
Public Stigma (0-36)	20.36	23.03	20.73	Small to Medium
Help-Seeking Attitudes (10-40)	27.45	30.21	29.33	Medium to Large
Help-Seeking Intentions (10-40)	21.76	25.33	24.27	Medium to Large



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Results

Program Evaluation

Item	Mean	Frequency
Overall Effectiveness (1-5)	4.55	97% rated the program effective to very effective
Quality (1-4)	3.79	100% good to excellent
Satisfaction (1-4)	3.73	97% mostly to very satisfied

Session Evaluations

Mental Health Literacy (1-5)	4.25	87.5% effective to very effective
Empathy (1-5)	4.62	96.5% effective to very effective
Counter Stereotyping (1-5)	4.41	96.2% effective to very effective
Contact (1-5)	4.73	96.7% effective to very effective



Program Feedback from Athletes

*“This program is unlike anything I have ever been apart of. I have never really been educated on mental health, besides time I have met with counselors. This program is in its early stages, but I **strongly feel with time this can help change FSU's Athletic department's efforts on mental health.**”*

*“I understood that it was something common among athletes but not everyone faced their issues. I understand it differently now because I **recognize that 1) it is okay to ask for help even if you aren't sure if you're having a mental health issue 2) ways to spot mental health issues in teammates and how to help 3) I know more about different types of mental health issues.**”*

“This program was different in that I believe it more focused on the athlete side of mental health while also going into the broader side of just the general population. It worked well being very discussion based and hit many key points with lots of real world type examples.”



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Lessons Learned from Athletes

*“To help overcome stigma, **I can personally talk to fellow athletes** who I believe are struggling with mental illness. I can explain to them how there is no issue with getting help, and **give them information about possible resources**. I can also **tell stories** I heard in our sessions about major athletes who fought mental illness. No one saw them as weak because of it.”*

*“Just by spreading awareness and **letting people know that it is okay to ask for help**. It is important to commit to a **judgement free safe zone** that athletes are comfortable and able to communicate with coaches/trainers in regards to how they are feeling **not only physically but mentally as well**.”*

*“Learning about ways to help others if I notice they are having a mental health issue and learning how to be empathetic and well as learning about being open and positive about mental health issues. **I feel like I would have confidence in going to seek help if I needed it**.”*



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Action & Application from Athletes

“This program was very informative about the different types of mental illnesses and how to help yourself and others who have a mental illness. My other educational experiences have breezed over the factual information, and they spoke vaguely about what you can tangibly do in relationships to help others. The stress is usually on who to call if something were to happen, whereas **this study helped us to understand what is actually happening, why it is happening, and what we can do to help and even prevent it from happening.** This program, unlike others, has actually convicted me, rather than just feed me information, websites, and telephone numbers. **Because of this program, I have reached out** to my therapist from freshman year to speak with him again about things that have really bothered me recently, and **I have also felt called to be more intentional in the relationships I have with those I know need help** in this area.”

“I believe it takes open, honest, and vulnerable dialogue. Just yesterday in the locker room (and several other times in the past couple of weeks) a few of my teammates and I were talking about mental illness. One teammate was expressing how they have previously struggled with it, and how their experiences have helped her to relate to and aid another one of my teammates, as she is in the midst of it. It amazed me how open my teammate was once I started asking her specific questions and sharing with her some of my own experiences with mental health.”



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Best Practices

Using a range of modalities for sessions to enhance engagement and application

- When asked which part of the program was most useful, participants mentioned everything from video, education, discussion, training on empathy, listening skills, and coping mechanisms

Creating a safe space for student-athletes to explore mental health issues and help-seeking

Collaborative efforts are needed to address barriers to treatment and to improve treatment itself

Emphasizing that student-athletes can play an active role in changing the culture of mental health and well-being on college campuses, and educating and training them how to fulfill this role



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How Can the Program be Adopted?

1. Program Manual

- Curriculum and intervention protocols
- PowerPoint slides, session outlines, activities, worksheets

2. Program Manual + Training and Consultation

- Virtual or in-person
- Provide assistance to local professionals implementing the program

3. In-Person Delivery of Program

- Developers travel to site to implement program with athletes, coaches, or other relevant athletic staff

The program can be adapted for implementation with coaches, athletic trainers, and others in athletics departments who play a pivotal role in the recognition and management of student-athlete mental health concerns



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Thank you



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