**A-Z OF CRICKET AND MENTAL HEALTH – second draft**

We all have mental health and it affects us all. We need to be aware of the importance of wellbeing.

Sport offers us benefits for many aspects of life and has been used as a means of improving health and wellbeing since ancient times.

Playing cricket in a team and for a club makes us more aware of, and can even improve, our health and wellbeing.

Here is a useful ‘A-Z’ that can be taken into consideration, both on and off the field of play.

**ALCOHOL**

There is nothing wrong with sharing a few drinks in the pavilion after a match or at a social event – it’s a great way to unwind. But we need to remember to stick to our limits and bear in mind the importance of moderate consumption rather than drinking to excess. Alcohol changes our mood. It can provide a temporary improvement in our mental state and helps us to cope with stress by relaxing us. However, it can also affect our brain chemistry and decrease the levels of a brain chemical called serotonin. We need to avoid getting into a negative cycle of drinking too much in order to improve our mood, because this then causes a depletion of serotonin levels in our brain, leading to us feeling worse than before, and therefore drinking even more to improve the situation.

Too much alcohol before going to bed can also interrupt the quality of our sleep.

Be aware of other potentially addictive substances also, such as nicotine.

**BULLYING**

Bullying isn’t just restricted to children in the school playground or classroom. Cricket is a sport known for fair play and good sportsmanship and so, in theory, bullying should not occur. It is not in keeping with the spirit and ethos of the game. However, we need to be aware of the difference between good-natured banter and bad-natured sledging. The latter, when done with definite malicious intent over a sustained period of time, is quite unnecessary. Think *S.T.O.P.* If it’s starting to get under your skin and the bullying is being done **S**everal **T**imes **O**n **P**urpose it’s time to **S**tart **T**elling **O**ther **P**eople.

**COMPETITION**

There is nothing wrong with competition or playing competitive sport! But our fierce competitive urges should not take us outside of playing fairly, ethically and within the rules and spirit of the game. Athletic competition does things to us, both positive and negative. It can draw out the best in us (and our teammates, squad members and opponents) and enable us to reach higher levels of performance, but it can also bring out the worst in us (and our teammates, squad members and opponents). Interestingly, the word *competition* has the root meaning of ‘striving *together*’ (rather than ‘striving *against*’). When we ‘strive *together*’ we are showing a mutual respect that pushes our teammates, squad members and opponents to perform to the best of their abilities and to become the best version of themselves – and hopefully they will do likewise to us! Play to win, but honour your competitor – there’s no game without them.

**DEPRESSION and STRESS-RELATED ILLNESS**

By 2030, the World Health Organisation predicts more people will be affected by depression than any other health problem, and it will be ‘the single biggest cause for burden out of all health conditions’ (see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8230549.stm). A number of high profile professional cricketers have spoken about their experiences of depression and stress-related illness in recent years, including Graeme Fowler, Marcus Trescothick, Monty Panesar and Jonathan Trott. Elite, professional, amateur and recreational cricketers are not immune from becoming depressed. It can sometimes be a psychological and physical consequence of excessive pressure and demand. The illness is no respecter of persons and has been described as like a “dark patch” or “never-ending tunnel”. The illness leaves the pervasive feeling that there’s no hope of finding a way out and its symptoms may include a loss of interest in pleasurable activities, a sense of detachment or inner emptiness, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, reduced appetite, poor concentration, low energy levels, inability to carry out normal routine duties, difficulties in decision-making, morbid thinking patterns, foreboding and sleep problems.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that the NHS estimates to affect approximately one in 15 people in the UK between September and April (see:

https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad). It can be particularly severe during winter when there is less daylight. Its milder version is commonly called ‘winter blues’. It is worth bearing in mind that SAD coincides with the period of ‘inactive’ playing time when one cricket season is ending and another one beginning.

If you say to yourself “I’m not supposed to feel like this”, visit your G.P. and ask for a diagnosis and advice about medication, such as anti-depressants. This is not a sign of weakness. They will be able to offer a short-term solution and/or long-term treatment. Talking-based counselling therapies (such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) are also very helpful in overcoming depressive and stress-related illnesses.

**EDUCATION**

Deepening our knowledge and understanding of the brain and the mind can only be good for us. The brain and the mind are co-dependent. Alterations in brain chemistry can cause changes in our moods, memory and attention.

There are approximately 100 billion neurons (brain cells) electrically transmitting information throughout our nervous system (which moves information like the heart moves blood around us). Each neuron can link up with 10,000 to 100,000 neighbours and make connections. The parts that join up are branches or dendrites (which receive incoming information) and axons (which send signals). The neurons don’t actually touch each other because there is a tiny gap called a synapse, between which chemicals are passed called neurotransmitters.

Become better acquainted with the workings of the limbic system – the more ancient mammalian part of the brain – which includes: the *hypothalamus* (involved with the translation of conscious experience into bodily processes), *thalamus* (where most sensory information is passed and processed), *hippocampus* (retrieves memories) and *amygdala* (co-ordinates physiological responses to get us ready to fight or run). Learn about chemicals such as *serotonin* (the feel-good chemical), and *endorphine* (reduces pain and stress) and hormones such as *adrenaline*, *cortisol* and *noradrenaline* and the affect they have on the body and mind.

You can then impress friends, family and teammates by using words like ‘neuro-plasticity’ and ‘cognitive restructuring’!

**FEAR**

Fear is like anxiety in the sense that it only becomes a problem if it prevents us from behaving as we would normally do in any given situation. Heightened fear clingfilms the body and feels hard to escape from. Its physical symptoms may include aches, dizziness, sweat or quickened heartbeat.

A particular fear for cricketers to be mindful of is the fear of failure – that one poor performance means that we won’t ever score any runs or take any wickets again. Or we drop a simple catch and doubt that we will ever be selected again to play. Fear can knock a player’s confidence and lower self-esteem.

A good way to overcome fear is to remember that our identity is not determined by our achievements. When the mind is racing into imagining or believing that the worst-case scenario is about to actually happen, remember to think *FEAR*: **F**alse **E**vidence **A**ppearing **R**eal.

**GENERALISED ANXIETY DISORDER**

A nervous batsman, watching and waiting from the sidelines, finds ways to mentally prepare for their innings so that the butterflies don’t set in too much and leave them feeling unfit for the task ahead. Some level of anxiety can be good because it alerts us to perceived challenges, difficulties and threats. But acute anxiety becomes a problem because it is a killjoy and may feel like being stuck inside a thick fog that makes it hard to see clearly and stops us from doing what we usually do.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is a severe, excessive (out-of-proportion) worry that is difficult to control. We may experience panic attacks or catastrophize a situation (i.e. automatically think the worst) as a consequence. Its symptoms may include restlessness, fatigue, difficulty breathing, irritability, muscular tension, or sleep disturbance. Visit your G.P. and ask for a diagnosis and medication.

**HEALTH**

Cricket has numerous health benefits. It can improve hand-eye co-ordination, balance, fitness and stamina. But a long afternoon in the field or at the crease on a hot, summer day can increase the risk of dehydration, heatstroke and heat exhaustion due to the considerable length of time in open daylight and exposure to the sun. Be sensible: keep your head covered, make use of the regular drinks intervals and keep applying sunscreen!

**INJURY**

Injury is annoying! The demanding physical requirements of playing sport can threaten our legs, knees, arms, legs, backs, heads and eyes. Hopefully our injuries are infrequent, don’t pose a serious setback and are relatively minor rather than major. The emotional reaction to injury is normal. A spell on the sidelines feels like the longest of waits and is also a burden because we are ‘missing out’ and we think ‘they’re doing fine without me’. It may play on our minds and cause us to feel isolated, irritated or angry. Rehabilitation takes time and resilience of mind is required in order to find positive ways of coping with the setback during our recovery process.

We may seem less inclined to socialise with teammates and want to isolate ourselves, but it is important to keep their company and receive their encouragement at each stage of recovery. We don’t have to face our injury alone!

**INDIVIDUALISM**

Cricket is a team game but also an individual pursuit. The individualism of cricket can affect a player’s mental health. Players come under scrutiny for their performances. A batsman’s solitary, lonely walk back to the pavilion following a dismissal can be humiliating. A bowler’s exposure in the middle during a bad spell of bowling can leave them feeling stuck in a rut. The worse a bowler bowls the longer they have to stay there, cruelly exposed.

Cricket is known as a statistical and analytical game. A batsman’s average/strike rate or a bowler’s figures can seem like an obsession, and if not kept in check can have a detrimental impact on a player’s mental health. Records are there to be broken, but a person’s worth and identity is not to be wedded to the numbers and statistics associated with them.

**JOY**

‘I don’t like cricket … I love it!’ If there is no enjoyment in playing the game, then ‘it’s just not cricket’. Why play on? Play on because this should be a game of fun, laughter, playful leisure and re-creation for its own sake. Enjoying cricket could seriously affect your wellbeing – for the better!

**KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON**

‘I cannot believe I’ve just dropped that! How embarrassing! Swallow me whole, ground! It was a regulation, simple, easy catch. That’s swung the whole game. He’ll probably go on to score a century now! The bowler’s going to go ballistic. What will my captain think? “The only thing you’ll catch today is sunburn!” someone shouts from the pavilion’ …

Take a breath. Show some annoyance with yourself. Say sorry. Don’t make too big a deal of it. Don’t dwell on it for long. Don’t carry out an internal investigation in your head. Put it behind you. You’re not the first person this has ever happened to, and you won’t be the last. Keep calm and carry on!

**LONELINESS**

Becoming part of a cricket club’s social life can help to ease loneliness. The rise in the use of ‘screen time’ (television, computers, Internet, emails, electronic devices, etc.) and the increasing popularity and prevalence of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) means we often spend too much time watching other people’s ‘filtered lives’ and not enough time meeting people face to face. It is also important to remember that tackling loneliness is as much about dealing with the times of being alone as it is getting out and socialising. We should use the time we are alone to do something constructive, enjoyable and get into our creative flow – for example, painting, cooking, playing a musical instrument or gardening.

**MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness is a therapeutic tool that offers ease of being when life seems like pandemonium in the midst of this frantic world. It is being used for conditions such as depression, insomnia, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm and chronic pain. It focuses us on our breathing and our five senses which grounds us in the ‘here and now’, and therefore enables us to become more aware of, and give better attention to, the present moment. As we step away from being on ‘auto-pilot’ and into stillness, it helps us to manage unhelpful feelings and thinking habits, and befriend ourselves non-judgementally. Mindfulness helps us to realise that ruminative and negative thought patterns (such as replaying over and over in our heads an argument, mistake or conflict) that lead us down a dark and gloomy path are not a direct read-out of reality. They are just brain events rather than absolute truths. We are not our thoughts. They are just passing mental events that come and go. It helps us to look *at* our thoughts, not *from* our thoughts.

A long afternoon session of fielding for the team is not the most appropriate time to sit down on the grass, close our eyes and meditate, but it does at least provide the opportunity to become more intentionally aware of our mind’s thoughts and avoid ‘wandering off’ or ‘zoning out’ by cultivating better ‘present-moment awareness’.

Being outdoors also enables us to enjoy our natural surroundings and the fresh air can be very restorative.

Today is a gift to be enjoyed.

**NUTRITION**

Nutrients revitalize our bodies. A varied diet is good for us. There are strong links between the kinds of food and drink we consume and our mood. What we eat and drink today, walks and talks tomorrow!

Enjoy the tea interval (and post-match drinks), but don’t over-indulge on the cakes and chocolates (and beer!).

**OPPORTUNITY**

Our busy lifestyles mean leisure activities are a way of escaping from the stresses and strains of daily life. Belonging to a cricket club provides a great opportunity to interact and socialise with others. Playing for a team develops opportunities for teamwork, co-operation, endurance, discipline and self-control (for example, accepting defeat graciously!). Internalised emotions and pent-up feelings can be vented in socially-acceptable ways during a game of cricket. Great camaraderie is also guaranteed! Seize the opportunity and get involved.

**PERFECTIONISM AND PERFORMANCE**

“You are only as good as your last innings!” We might think this is true (especially if we have a perfectionist kind of personality), but it’s rubbish! Remember Sir Donald Bradman? He was bowled out for a duck in his final innings, meaning he finished with an average of 99.94, so tantalizingly close to 100. He was a truly great batsman.

We need to train ourselves to feel good about our achievements despite whether we have just won or lost, or put in our best ever performance or not. Building up a performance-based identity about ourselves is not conducive to good mental health.

Cricket often involves a considerable amount of ‘hanging around’ or waiting – before, during, after and in-between matches. During these times, we should not dwell on past disappointments or worry that we will repeat below-par performances again. We need to shrink our inner critic! Not achieving 100% does not make us an utter failure. Near enough is often good enough. We don’t need to take ourselves so seriously – it’s only a game!

**QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS**

We are relational beings. Cricket is socially inclusive. It breaks down barriers between ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds. It shows us that true friendship and companionship isn’t based on Facebook. We can bond with each other through celebration and commiseration, both on and off the field of play. We cannot get to know everyone to the same degree and depth, but there can still be a quality of relationship amongst players, coaches and club representatives.

Not all relationships in life are so easy. Work colleagues can be frustrating, relatives can be demanding and children can be exhausting. Difficult or broken relationships need to be worked at through reconciliation, forgiveness and acceptance so that there is an authenticity about them. Quality relationships help our mental health.

**ROLE MODELS**

Who inspires us? Who do we look up to? Who do we aspire to be like? What is it about certain people, whether well-known or little-known, that attracts us to their personality and makes us admire them? Is it their courage and tenacity? Is it their character and personality? Role models in professional and social environments can help us think about our own personal development, ambitions and vocations.

**SPIRITUALITY**

For some people, religious or not, belief in God/a higher power who is gracious, faithful, loving and who provides a deeper meaning to life and who is ‘only a prayer away’, is a great spiritual resource of encouragement and hope. It can provide a way of understanding the world and our place in it, and give a feeling of connectedness to something bigger than ourselves and a taste of the ‘divine’.

Spirituality and faith provides a quest for wholeness and harmony. Being able to express and explore spirituality is a basic human need and a universal human right.

**TALK, TALK, TALK**

It’s not weak to speak to others about our thoughts, feelings and emotions. Don’t suffer in silence with your anger, shame, bereavement, insecurities or guilt. Help to break the social stigma surrounding mental health by chatting with our family, friends, work colleagues and acquaintances. Don’t be afraid to talk about mental health with teammates, squad members, coaching staff and club representatives.

**UNDERSTANDING**

It is helpful to understand ourselves and embrace who we are. What makes us tick? What are our strengths and weaknesses? Often our thoughts and feelings have an impact on our actions and behaviour. We need to be aware of building up beliefs about ourselves, and others, that aren’t conducive to a healthy state of mind.

How do we cope under the pressure of external factors (for example, exams, work, boss, money, relationships, unforeseen events and bereavement)? What internal factors trigger a change in how we see ourselves (for example, self-expectation, self-esteem, athletic achievement, ambition)?

We should not become our own worst enemy by comparing the best trait in someone else with the worst in us.

**VICTORY**

Enjoy the thrill of taking the tenth wicket or hitting the winning runs or captaining/coaching a team to success – it really increases feelings of happiness and puts us in a very good mood when we have played our part in our team’s or club’s latest victory! Basking in the reflected glory of the victory of a team or club we support also improves our mood. Remember, however, that the joy of winning may be short-lived, especially when matches come thick and fast. Aim for the strong, emotional middle ground so that we are ‘never too high and never too low’.

**WIN-AT-ALL-COSTS**

Pressurised and excessively competitive sporting environments can lead us into developing a ‘win-at-all-costs’ mentality where we are led to believe that we cannot entertain any outcome other than victory and success. When taken too far, this mentality becomes a threat to the integrity of cricket (for example, the issue of match-fixing, gambling and cheating) and also leads to an unhelpful state of mind that negatively affects our self-perception and can cause unnecessary stress on us and others too.

**(E)XERCISE**

Some of us play sport to get fit, whereas others of us get fit in order to play sport. Either way, regular exercise releases chemicals that make us feel good about ourselves, elevates mood, takes our mind off work and improves our cognitive functions. It also improves our strength, dexterity and stamina, and lowers the likelihood of slipping into an inactive, lethargic, sedentary lifestyle which is a risk factor for metabolic conditions (for example, cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity). Keep exercising regularly!

**YIPS**

Some darts players suffer from ‘dartitis’ – thinking too much about what they are about to do, which results in an inability to release the dart or throwing action problems. “Yips” is very similar. The term “yips” comes from golf and was originally used to describe involuntary twitching and jerking at the precise moment a player is about to swing their club. In cricket, the probability of us being prone to “the yips” is not very high, but it has been known for some to experience the affliction of this mental hazard. It is the result of an excessive self-consciousness about technique and of thinking too much about our movements when we are about to bowl the ball. Slow spin bowlers are most at risk because their ball delivery is not so much a part of an automatic routine (as is the case with faster bowlers).

If finding the right line and length becomes an issue for us and we catastrophize the situation by thinking we are about to bowl The Longest And Worst Over Ever and we fear that our teammates and opposition will say we’ve “yipped up”, we need to find coping mechanisms that work for us. It is our positive mental attitude rather than our physical technique that will keep us from being held captive by our nerves.

**ZZZZZZZZ**

We need to be aware of our sleep hygiene and develop good sleeping habits. We can train our bodies to sleep well by going to bed and getting up at more or less the same time every day, even on weekends and days off! This regular rhythm makes us feel better. If we haven’t been able to sleep after about 20 minutes or more, we should get up and do something calming or boring until we feel sleepy, then return to bed and try again. Sit quietly on the couch with the lights off (bright light will tell your brain that it is time to wake up). We should avoid doing anything that is too stimulating or interesting, as this will wake us up even more. Avoid caffeine and nicotine for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed. Alcohol can also interrupt the quality of sleep. If we can’t make it through a day without a nap, make sure it is for less than an hour and before 3pm. Develop rituals such as relaxing stretches or breathing exercises or a hot bath before bedtime. Let our bodies associate bedtime with sleep by creating the right environment and getting into the habit of not watching TV, working on a laptop, checking social media on a mobile phone, doing internet banking, etc., when we are in bed.

**Useful Websites**

www.babcp.com

*British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies*

www.bacp.co.uk

*British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy*

www.franticworld.com

*Book resources on how to find peace in a frantic world*

www.freemindfulness.org

*Free-to-download mindfulness meditation exercises*

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/sleep-report

*Sleep Matters: The Impact of Sleep on Health & Wellbeing – a free-to-download report*

www.mind.org.uk

*A Mental Health charity*

www.mindandsoulfoundation.org

*Exploring Christianity and Mental Health*

www.mindtools.com

*The Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale – Understanding the impact of long-term stress*

www.nhs.uk 111 (non-emergency medical advice)

www.overcoming.co.uk

*Common mental health problems … one step at a time*

www.samaritans.org 0845 90 90 90

*“People talk to us for as long as they like, as many times as they like”*