



Mental Health
Foundation



HEAD IN FOR SUCCESS

Supporting the wellbeing
of the elite or dedicated
athlete and player





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SUPPORTING THE WELLBEING
OF THE ELITE OR DEDICATED
ATHLETE AND PLAYER

Compiled by the
Mental Health Foundation &
Sports Chaplaincy UK

INTRODUCTION



The aim of this booklet is to highlight potential challenges dedicated athletes face and offer guidance and suggestions on how to deal with these stresses. Included in this booklet are tips on how to cope with injuries, how to manage uncertainties and disappointment, and suggestions of healthy strategies to cope with stresses that arise from sport and life in general and build resilience. This booklet aims to give the reader the knowledge and freedom to look after themselves and feel good about it.

Being an elite athlete has many positives, including keeping fit and active which can lead to many physical benefits. Additionally, this is coupled with the enjoyment and purpose of playing your favourite sport, camaraderie and friendship, and the loyalty and togetherness you can get from your team or club. Being in a performance environment also brings some pressure and stress, some are positive like building resilience, improving performance and work rate. However, there can also be negative effects as well where too much stress is unhealthy and can lead to different physical, emotional and mental challenges.

Dedicated athletes experience similar rates of anxiety, depression and sleep disorders to the general population but there is increasing evidence pointing to a range of specific wellbeing issues athletes might face at all ages and stages of participation. In our research we carried out, the key themes of what athletes told us were:

Their identity was affected as they felt like they were known for their sport rather than as a person.

Feeling isolated when they are injured although some felt they coped well with injury.

Coping with uncertainty around selection, how they were valued at a club.

Many bottle up their emotions.

Most admitted to always trying to look positive even when they don't feel like it.

Most feared showing they were not coping or looking 'weak' emotionally.

Over 9 in 10 said that they perform better when they are feeling happy.

Other factors such as specific injuries like concussion, major negative life events e.g. a family bereavement, poor support networks and impaired sleep can all impact mental wellbeing/health. We also found that extended travel away from home and exposure to unfamiliar (training) environments can take its toll. Transitioning out of sport which includes involuntary or unplanned retirement can also have a significant impact on personal identity.

“It would definitely be something that people don't see, they can cope with their training schedule and then other things can come in and they can't cope”



Para-athletes often encounter challenging logistical issues associated with travel, such as a lack of adaptive sport facilities and sleeping conditions. Involuntary retirement due to declassification (i.e. no longer meeting the required criteria to be classified as a para-athlete) is a unique burden.

THIS BOOKLET SETS OUT TO HELP YOU IN THE VITAL AREAS OF IDENTITY, UNCERTAINTY AND INJURY

To help you better take care of yourself and to know when it might be good to reach out to others for support like family, friends or a trusted confidant like a sports chaplain to help you develop a wider support network who are there for you.

One of the biggest challenges is recognising when an athlete might be struggling with a mental health problem or difficulties experienced in the journey of life and helping him or her seek assistance whether from a family member, friend, club chaplain or medical professional. It is recommended that you, teammates, parents, and coaches watch for signs and symptoms of mental ill health such as withdrawing, negative or destructive conversation, behaviour or mood changes or regular lack of good sleep.



WHERE DID WE GET OUR INFORMATION FROM TO WRITE THIS BOOKLET?

Over 170 players and coaches took part in a study from various sports including, football, rugby, netball, hockey, rowing and windsurfing. It provided us with valuable information which you will see throughout the booklet. Both a large online survey and a small number of in-depth interviews were carried out and from this we gained rich information that helped shaped our findings. Literature was used from various sources to help shape the booklet. It was a collaborative piece between the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) and Sports Chaplaincy UK (SCUK), with help from Chaplains in Wales, Northern Ireland, MHF staff in Wales.

We would like to thank all those that contributed to the development of this booklet.

CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 7 | WHAT KEY ISSUES DO SPORTS PEOPLE TYPICALLY FACE? |
| 8 | Identity |
| 10 | Uncertainty |
| 12 | Injury |
| 15 | WHAT HELPS DEAL WITH THESE ISSUES? |
| 16 | Managing Identity |
| 18 | Managing Uncertainty |
| 20 | Managing Injury |
| 27 | THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SPORTS CHAPLAIN |
| 31 | MORE TOP TIPS |
| 40 | UNHELPFUL COPING STRATEGIES |
| 43 | CONCLUSION |
| 45 | RESOURCES |

WHAT KEY ISSUES DO SPORTS PEOPLE TYPICALLY FACE?



IDENTITY

As an elite athlete, you may have been competing for a very long time, and you may have come to see yourself in terms of your sport. In your eyes, it's who you are and what you do. With your long-term investment and commitment of time, energy and pain over the years, your sport might have become your identity, for example you may say 'I am a footballer' rather than 'I play football'. When you compete, this sense of identity may further expand to include the role that you play on your team both tactically, and socially and emotionally.

For most serious athletes, your sport can provide you with a continual source of positive reinforcement and feedback. There is enjoyment and self-satisfaction in mastering new skills, overcoming ever more challenging obstacles and progressively getting stronger and better. Additionally, the outside recognition of your accomplishments by friends, family and

your community might stoke the fires of self-esteem so that they burn even brighter within you. Having a great game, race or match feels fantastic and provides concrete evidence that your hard work is paying off and might make you feel that you're standing out from the rest.

Also, sport and exercise provide a great outlet to deal with stress. You may feel that involvement in your sport is a constructive way to escape from the pressures of study, work, relationship, and other life problems. Sport offers a safe and structured way to channel frustrations and aggression. Being able to do a big bout of exercise can help you relieve stress and make you feel better both psychically and mentally. Exercise reduces levels of the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol while also stimulating the production of endorphins, chemicals in the brain that are the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators.

“*“I’ve been doing gymnastics since I was six years old. It’s all I know. It’s who I am and what I do. If I’m not a gymnast, then who am I really?”*



With the various benefits athletes get from their sport, there can be a major transition when an athlete retires. An athlete might lose their sense of self when they can't compete with teammates or when they stop training and might feel they lose some social connections they made from playing sports. These feelings of loss can impact on an athlete's mental health as they might feel they lost their identity, but retirement also brings new opportunities. An athlete can find a new passion in their life and can transfer the skills they learned from their sport into other areas of their life. They might have more time to spend with family, friends or begin a different vocation and find a new hobby.

Coaches and leaders also need to care about life-balance in their dedicated or elite athletes. In order to pursue excellence in sport it will be necessary for you as an athlete to make that your top priority, but that should not exclude other interests or cause lack of balance in your life. This could mean you prioritizing time and action away from sport in order to get a good life balance.

If sport is indeed a mirror of life itself, it holds the potential for the best and worst, and as such it has enormous potential as a learning environment, including learning about your identity.

UNCERTAINTY

However, living in the sporting world can bring with it many elements of uncertainty. In sport, you don't know if you are going to get selected for the next match, tournament or competition and you could get dropped from the team and replaced by someone else. You must maintain a high level of performance at all times or run the risk of not getting selected for a game.

“*“You are under pressure all the time because everyone wants to beat you”*

David Healy current Linfield Manager and all-time leading scorer for Northern Ireland with 36 goals (shares the record for the highest scoring tally during a UEFA European Championship qualifying campaign of 13 goals, with Robert Lewandowski.)

In individual and team sports the responsibility for winning is taken by the performer, who also has to learn to come to terms with the fact that losses are disappointing and must learn the best way to deal with losing while also not dwelling on them. In sport you are not always in control of what happens, and you must accept that which you can't control. There might come times where you feel you are training well and are performing better than others, yet you are not making the team. This might be because the coach has a certain preference for how they want to play, certain formations or tactics and there will be players who fit those systems and those who won't. This might come in the form of your coach looking for a very fast team and your style of play is based on other attributes such as ball control or intelligence. You have the skill, but you might not fit what the coach is looking for. In other situations, a new coach may come in and it disrupts your relationships with management where they were once good, but now you find yourself on the bench due to different ideas. In these situations you have to remember you can't control everything and these challenges might be seen as opportunities, where you might have the opportunity to develop skills for a new position or might move clubs and meet new people and gain new experiences.

Added to this you may experience injuries which can impact your mental state in a negative way. You might feel you need to play through injuries as you don't want to let the coach or team down. You might play an individual sport where an injury might derail months of preparation for a competition or you might feel that when you are injured and can't play and perform you don't feel like the same person without your sport or might feel isolated without it.

Learning ways to manage this uncertainty will not only benefit you as an athlete but will help you maintain good mental health in and out of sport. Throughout this booklet there will be some suggestions to manage your uncertainty, such as having realistic goals when coming back from injury and talking to family and friends and confidants when feeling the pressure of your sport.



INJURY

Most top performers monitor and assess their physical wellbeing, which allows for greater control of themselves and their potential. Some players might see getting injured as an opportunity to overcome or an obstacle or a challenge to be accepted. They can become focused on putting the same effort into their recovery as they did for their sport and they might make their recovery their new goal to strive towards. A sports person in this position might reframe how they see their injury and instead focus their energy on healing and recovering and coming back stronger than they were before their injury. They might ask questions of "why did I get injured" and "can I act differently in the future to prevent injury?" From this a positive might come where an athlete focuses more on nutrition, exercise, and recovery in order to prevent injury occurring in the future.

"I didn't cope well with injury and I've never met an athlete that copes with it perfectly well. It's tough times, sometimes dark times, for some it feels like the end of the world"

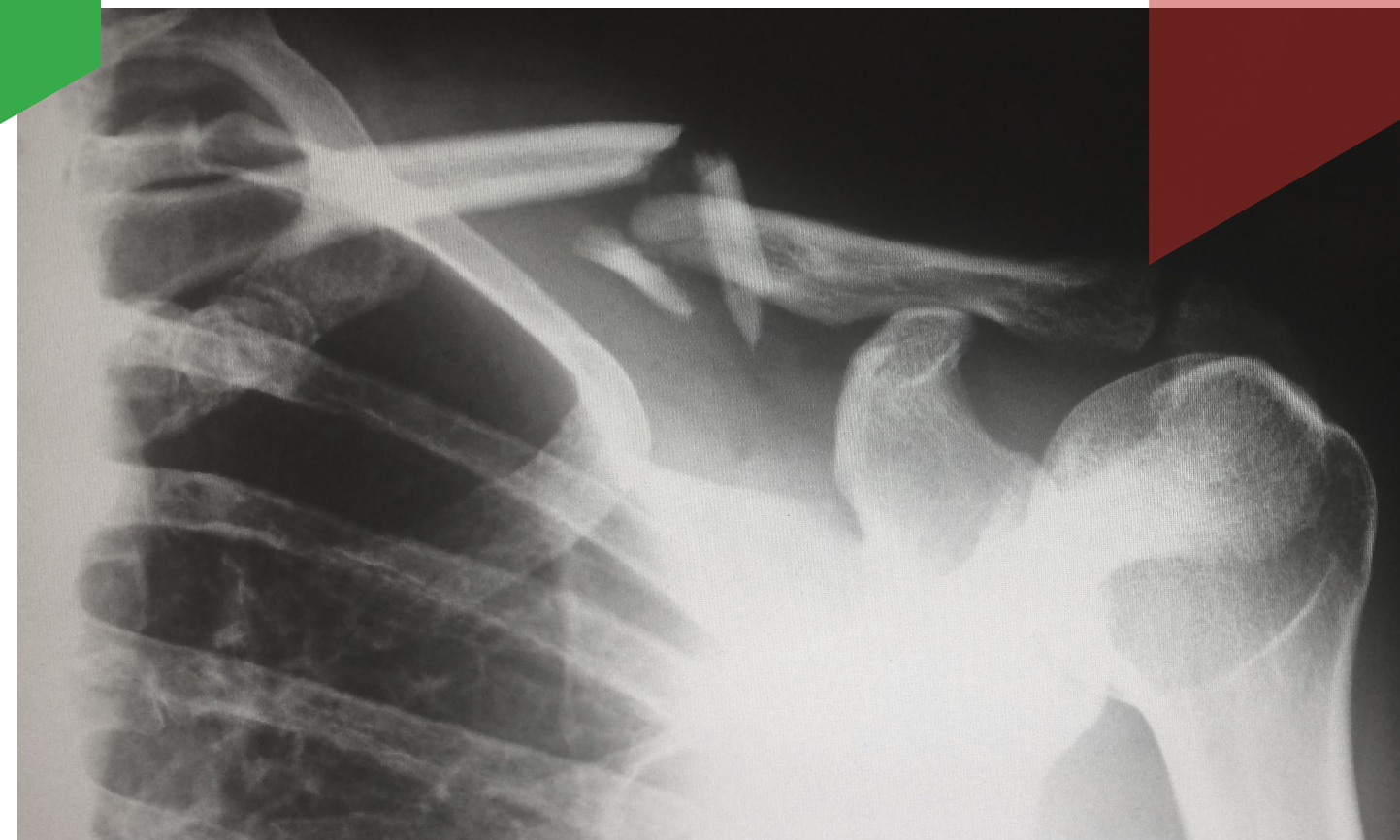
“*I feel like I miss out a lot when I am injured, I tried to detach myself a bit and do other stuff*”

However, some players when injured may become overwhelmed by a variety of internal and external factors. With a significant injury that may keep you from your sport for a long time, the first thing that you can lose is your place on the team or role as a team member. You may start to question who you are if you're not constantly in the pool, out on the field, course or court practicing and competing in your sport.

Without your sport, with its frequent practices and competitions, you may suddenly have a vacuum in your sense of self that you have to try to fill. This feeling of “who am I without my sport?” can be made worse by the fact that your injury has suddenly changed your identity and place on the team. Your position is no longer on the pitch, but rather in the physio room, on the bench, or side-lines with the coach and your role on the team is suddenly unclear and questionable.

For many athletes, they may lose their physical health and sense of invincibility. Many athletes are used to being independent and relying upon their bodies to respond as trained and directed. With the injury, you have to face that your body has somehow failed you. Furthermore, injuries frequently make you dependent upon others, i.e. doctors, trainers, physical therapists, etc. You might have a strong independent streak and struggle having to depend on anyone other than yourself.

Second, you lose a major source of your self-esteem. If you get confidence from being good at and participating in your sport, then you may get precious few good feelings from standing on the side-lines helplessly watching the action. You may start to have self-doubts and may struggle with questions of your own self-worth. If you're not pushing yourself training and helping yourself or team in competitions, then you may begin to wonder what real value you might have on the team. For many athletes this is probably the hardest part of their injury.



The other significant feeling that accompanies injury is a sense of alienation and isolation. Being unable to fulfil your old role on the team, and unable to practice with the rest of the team, it's common to struggle with feelings that now you are suddenly very different and that you no longer fit in. You may have developed closed friendships in your sport, and you may feel left out when all your friends talk about practise or a game which may make you feel sad and vulnerable.

In many team sports players' frustration may come from not being involved in competition and training with team members. You may feel you're not contributing to the team and that you are missing out on team activities and cohesion. This can lead to becoming emotionally withdrawn from the team and it is common that when you re-join the team after injury, you may feel like you are less comfortable in participating in team activities.

WHAT HELPS DEAL WITH THESE ISSUES?

MANAGING IDENTITY

A balanced life may include personal time for reflection, meditation, creativity and time for family and friends. You also have to cater for recreation time (which might be sport) and work time (which might also be sport!). Often, sport can take over the high achiever's life. Your identity must extend beyond that of an elite athlete – you are also a son or daughter, potentially a parent or a brother or sister, or a friend, a work colleague or part of another community. Above all you are valued and unique as a human being. There's nothing wrong with striving for achievement but it will at some point feel empty unless you hold it in conjunction with an understanding of a bigger whole picture.

If the mind is the link between body and spirit, then key to the thoughts that spring from it is awareness – knowing what's going on, what's happening (now); knowing where we are and who we are (identity); knowing where we are going and what we really want (goal). Our thoughts whether conscious or unconscious, determine our action and therefore it is important that you guard your identity by keeping hold of the bigger picture of your life. As a person thinks in their heart, so they are.



“For me the bigger picture was understanding the greatness and vastness of the universe and where I fitted in. Connecting body, mind and spirit gave me the confidence to believe in myself on this journey of life”

Stephen Baxter BEM, Manager, Crusaders FC. Baxter is the club's most successful manager of all time. In 2018, Baxter was awarded a British Empire Medal for services to football in Northern Ireland.

It is important also on a practical level to note that most sports performers don't believe they're the ones who will get hurt and have to end their careers prematurely. The ones who have had injuries which might have put them out long term or actually have finished their careers realise how little it takes and how much they have lived in sport. They pass on an important message to the healthy – develop interests beyond your sport. Your sport may be the top priority but there must be life after competing as an athlete and not many are able to continue in the game as coaches or managers or as a part of a wider backroom staff. Investing time in preparation for life beyond your competitive days is important preparation for a larger life.

It may sound strange but the integration of a healthy body, mind, and spirit in the pursuit of excellence by dedicated and elite athletes cannot be matched in other ways in life. The fusion of a healthy, fully fit body, clarity of purpose, total enthusiasm for the quest, commitment to the goal and the exhilaration of executing an excellent performance is very rare. It makes the search for a healthy transition to life after competitive sport and above all a greater realization of your identity now, essential.



MANAGING UNCERTAINTY

When it comes to being selected for the team, this can bring feelings of uncertainty. You train hard all week and feel you deserve it, but what happens when you don't get selected? It can be a hard time for many athletes when they are not picked, and it can make even the most elite level athlete feel negative and upset. You may also lose some income too. This may increase your stress. Maybe you were dropped or injured and weren't able to take part in something that meant a lot to you. It's easy to lose motivation when these kinds of things happen, and you could even start to think "what's the point?" but often disappointment gives us an opportunity to make some changes for the better. Below are some tips to help if you don't get selected:



“There are so many things people don't see going on in an athlete's life away from the playing arena – and this is where the chaplain can play a pivotal role”

Megan Bell (Glasgow Rangers and Northern Ireland International)

GIVE YOURSELF TIME

It can take a while to process these feelings. Being upset is a normal reaction. Be patient and be kind to yourself. Learning to move forward after a disappointment is a skill that will be helpful all your life, so take enough time you need to get through this.

SHARE WITH OTHERS

Lots of people have had the same experience. Ask good friends, family members or club chaplains to talk about when they faced it. Listen to what they went through and how they dealt with it. A loss like this can feel like the end of the world, so getting perspective from someone who has been there before is helpful. Sports Chaplains are great at helping you build perspective and resilience because of their unique position.

MEET WITH THE COACH

Ask for input on why you didn't make the team. This can reassure you that it wasn't personal. Coaches have to consider the team as a whole, and not just a single player. Listen to the reasons that contributed to the coach's decision. Find out if there's something you can work on to help motivate you to go again.

TRY A NEW ACTIVITY

If it's a long-term injury, take this opportunity to explore another activity that you're interested in.

STAY IN TOUCH WITH YOUR TEAM

Don't lose relationships with teammates, which will only make you feel more alone. Stay in touch with your teammates. Go to games and support your teammates.

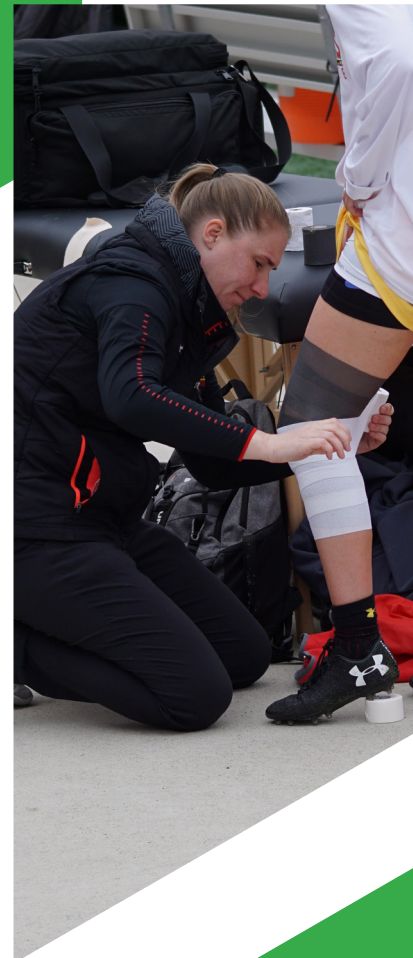
GET READY FOR TRYING AGAIN

make a concrete plan for improving your fitness and skills. Focus on the areas the coach or manager advised and find the drills and exercises to help you improve. Work out a training schedule to keep you on track.

DON'T GIVE UP

Whether you decide to try out for the team again or not, remember how much you've learned through this experience. Finding your way through disappointment makes you stronger. Keep working to improve, in sports and in life, and believe in yourself.

MANAGING INJURY



There are lots of feelings associated with injury which can be hard to manage. Many athletes first meet their injury with denial. They may downplay or ignore the seriousness of the injury, falsely believing that everything's O.K. They may continue to train through the injury which might make things worse.

You may adopt a "why me? why now?" attitude and become hostile and resentful to coaches, teammates, parents, and friends. But better questions are "why not me? why not now?" – it reminds you that the world doesn't revolve around you and keeps you humble and helps you to refocus again. Some athletes then get into an internal bargaining with themselves, i.e. "if I do this and that, then maybe I'll be able to get back out there".

For some, serious injury can be a significant loss in terms of losing the ability to do what you're good at and you might go through some of the signs of grief: Denial and isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance*. People who are grieving do not necessarily go through the stages in the same order or experience all of them, but at some point in this whole process, a low and depressed mood may set in such as a loss of interest in or withdrawal from once favoured activities, sleep and eating changes, low energy and, in the most extreme cases, suicidal thoughts and feelings. Ultimately the athlete must accept the situation and make the best of it, and it is this acceptance that allows them to make the best of the outcome of the injury.

But there are ways to cope with these feelings, and below are key messages to maintain while injured. Read on...

** Five stages of grief - As per the Kubler-Ross model.*

BE POSITIVE

To heal quickly you need to be committed to overcoming your injury by committing to your treatments and listening and doing what your doctor and/or athletic trainer recommend. You may also need to monitor your self-talk, ask yourself “what am I thinking and saying to myself regarding the injury and the rehab process, is this helpful for me?”.

As difficult as this will be, try to stay as positive as possible. Your attitude and outlook can influence a lot. When positive, your attitude can speed up the healing process and lessen the emotional pain that you may be going through. However, when you're negative, you'll slow the rehab process down and can make yourself feel worse. Try to avoid negativity as it will only make the process harder. Thoughts, negative and positive are frequently fulfilling.

You can try to stay positive by using positive self-talk, giving yourself motivation to keep going and acknowledging your accomplishments no matter how big or small. Having balanced life interests can help you maintain a good mindset as if you have a bad day with your sport, you might be able to rebound with a positive experience in a hobby of yours, such as seeing friends or going for a walk.

SET REALISTIC GOALS

As you begin the recovery process, you may very well have to learn to measure your successes very differently than ever before, perhaps in millimetres now instead of meters. It may mean that you have to start all over again back at ‘square one’ to build up arm or leg strength and endurance. Keep focused on your NEW goals and leave the old ones in the PAST for now, where they belong. Once you've fully recovered from your injury you can start entertaining your old goals.



BE AN ACTIVE PART OF YOUR HEALING

Be conscientious about your physical therapy. Follow the medical staff or physio's advice closely. Don't cut corners. Work as hard with your rehab as you did in your training. Make it your new goal to be as good in rehab as you were in your sporting life. By creating goals within the injury and rehab, it gives you something to strive towards. So, instead of striving to be back on the pitch right away or on the court, you're now focused on little steps such as getting your knee to bend more or to be able to hold more weight on your shoulder.

BE REFLECTIVE

If your injury forces you into an early permanent retirement you may feel that you have little to no skills or expertise that you can transfer from your sport to other endeavours. This couldn't be further from the truth. To excel as an athlete in your sport you have gradually developed some pretty powerful success transferable skills like dedication, commitment, persistence, motivation, the ability to manage time, overcome setbacks and failures, as well as a whole host of other valuable life skills. These success skills can be readily harnessed to other challenges that you pursue in your life outside of sports. Don't think for a minute that much of what you've learned and mastered is not transferable to the ‘real world.’ These ‘skills’ can also be used to help others who may be more junior in your team, where an athlete might consider becoming a mentor to help guide them and teach them key skills.

BE PATIENT

"With a long-term injury, you have to take your time, you can't rush it back and you have to understand that and take it step by step"

If your injury is temporary, allow yourself enough time to heal properly. If you're anxious to get back to the court, field, course or pool and rush the healing process, then you may set yourself up for another, more serious injury which may cost you even more time. You might get back a few days earlier, but because you didn't wait those extra days to heal properly, you may end up developing a chronic injury that could keep you out for extra weeks and even months. Remember, sometimes the fastest way of coming back is the slowest.

"It's important in recovery to have things to aim for, but there's lots of instances when people have pushed themselves too much and set themselves back a bit."

BE BALANCED

It will also be helpful to you to stand back a little and take a wider view of life. Consider what is going well, what things bring you a sense of satisfaction and happiness – partner, family, friends, work, the beauty and awe of nature, your home, a book to read, music to listen to, a film to watch, food on the table...

Stop and reflect and start to develop what many term as an attitude of gratitude. An attitude of gratitude improves our physiological functioning. Research shows that those who engage in gratitude practices have been shown to feel less pain, go to the doctor less often, have lower blood pressure, and be less likely to develop a mental disorder. It will help you keep a healthy balance!



CONSIDER FAITH

Consider how this injury or interruption in your life can be put into perspective and how what you learn may be helpful for others. Having faith or belief in something or someone greater than yourself can help you see a bigger picture and will help put things into perspective. People of faith may feel that God has a plan for them and has a view of their life from birth to death and all that happens in between. This belief allows them to recognise that certain things happen in order to shape their character and to learn new things about themselves. So, if an athlete gets injured, instead of feeling negative and down about it (which is understandable), their faith in God can help them ask 'what can I learn from this? How can this shape me?'. Having a faith during challenging circumstances can help build resilience, maintain hope and know you are not alone.

“ *"I always looked at injury as just another one of those tests that life throws at you. Although at times it can be a struggle, knowing that God would not allow me to be tested beyond my ability to endure, always gave me the strength to get through the tough times"*

Kyle McCallan, MBE, Former Irish Cricket International Captain (227 CAPS)

You may find that this is an opportune time to revisit or explore faith with your club chaplain. Whatever your thoughts on faith, it is important to recognise that all aspects of ourselves (physical, mental, and spiritual) need nurturing in order to cope with what life brings our way.

“My faith has always helped give me a sense of perspective; a freedom to go out and play fulfilling the ability He (God) has blessed me with, together with understanding the need to work hard and not take things for granted, and to know when I’ve suffered injury setbacks and life’s challenges away from the game, that there is a bigger picture to life underpinned by an assurance that our Heavenly Father has got my back no matter what”



Nick Williams former number 8 for Cardiff Blues, and formerly Ulster and Junior All Black player
Ambassador of Sports chaplaincy UK & Ireland.

“I’ve had the privilege to coach across a range of countries, cultures and religions. Across that spectrum I have first-hand experience that athletes (and coaches) with a faith in God have an inner peace and calmness which helps steer them through troubled waters they may encounter in their sporting career or personal lives. Whether the issue is injury, uncertainty or identity, or a combination of all three, their faith allows them to face those challenges with greater ease”

Jeff McCready, International Performance Coach
including two International Olympic Teams, Performance2Win.com



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SPORTS CHAPLAIN



George Best once said “I am talking about someone not necessarily connected with the football side of the club, that if you have a problem and it’s a little bit personal, you don’t want to go to talk to a trainer or a manager or a coach or even other players about it. If something is bugging you, you want to go and talk to someone else who can advise you, away from the playing side, away from the family, away from the club itself... young players have no-one to advise them - they have no-one to turn to when things go wrong “

We all know George could have done with such help, perhaps you feel the same. Well perhaps the Sports Chaplain is just that person. When Manchester United appointed a chaplain Sir Alex Ferguson said:

“Chaplains can be of help to all sorts of people involved with sport, when in crisis, needs or difficulty comes. I commend the idea of sports chaplaincy and the work of Sports Chaplaincy UK”



750*

Did you know that there are over 600 chaplains across the UK supporting sports people from local teams to international level? (*Oct 2020)



A Sports Chaplain offers a non-judgemental listening ear in total confidence. Someone you can talk to about anything - yes anything!



A chaplain at work

Chaplaincy is not just for on field stuff, but the wider things in life. Research shows that problems and uncertainties off the field will impact our on-field training and performances.

Sports Chaplains are good listeners. They won't be shocked by what you share. They work in total confidence and are impartial.

They will be dedicated to your wellbeing and have a wealth of practical wisdom and life experience to draw on.

They deal with a myriad of issues from relationships, family matters, bereavement, addictions, debt, injury and the uncertainties of a sporting life and as such are a great place to provide help, support and hope. They can help with personal identity and personal worth. They will do life with you - through the ups and downs, even beyond your playing days and help with the subsequent transitioning.

Although they will be regularly present at your club, they will meet you away from the club if you'd rather.

Sports Chaplains are not there to push faith, but obviously faith is an important part of their life and life for many sports people, and so they can help you here too if you want. We are constantly reminded by mental health experts that it's always good to talk - why not chat with your chaplain and see how they can encourage you!

“

“I think this sports chaplaincy is really important for players or coaches to have an avenue where they can go and deal with issues of life, not just rugby and sport, with someone who is impartial, totally confidential and able to really help them in a pastoral way. I think it's such a vital service because players and coaches alike, we suffer with a lot of things, life in general and not just sport and rugby things. There is a lot of issues that the players have to deal with. If you are a young man or woman and you get injured it's very serious and can affect you mentally. It is so important that players and coaches have that support and I think that a sports chaplain, along with many other things in their role, offers that”



Byron Hayward, Former Wales Rugby Union Defence Coach, former professional player and who boxed for Wales

MORE TOP TIPS

1 INVEST IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Spend time with your family and friends. People knowing us well will help them to recognise triggers that may be affecting our stress levels. We all perceive and react to situations in different ways. Talking to family or friends can act as a buffer as the support provided by them can help you feel supported and loved, that you are not alone and that you have somewhere to go if needed.



2 LISTENING TO MUSIC

Over 71% of respondents in our survey said that they feel music helps them relax. Listening to music can have a tremendously relaxing effect on our minds and bodies, especially slow, quiet calming music. This type of music can have a beneficial effect on our physiological functions, slowing the pulse and heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and decreasing the levels of stress hormones. Find what music best suits your needs and use it to your benefit.



3 READING

Allowing the right people to speak into your life through other people's stories and experiences, can help you be challenged, encouraged and to reflect. It's not just about information transfer but reading is also enjoyable, a healthy discipline, increases your understanding of life and how to live well and can help you in other areas of your life. It requires silence and attention so can have a profound effect on your actions.





4 GET GOOD SLEEP

Our survey said that only half of athletes felt they got a good 7-8 hours of sleep. Sleep is important so aiming to make sleep a priority in your life is important, as it aids in recovery, preparation, and performance. Just like athletes need to make sure they have enough calories to perform and recover, they also need sleep for the same reasons. Practicing sleep 'hygiene' can be a way of helping you meet these demands through quality rest. It is a set of simple tips that, practiced over time, can become a habit to help you get valuable rest at night.

Going to bed and getting up at regular times introduces a routine and your body begins to adjust to this.

Getting between 7-9 hours of sleep provides recovery for body and mind.

Go to sleep earlier the night before a competition, as nerves and stresses can keep you awake and impact your sleep.

Finding a quiet, dark, cool place to sleep in is helpful in creating a calm space for complete rest.

Use your bed for sleep rather than a place to watch screens; this reinforces the subconscious message that your bed is for sleeping.

Stop screen time an hour before going to bed as the light and brain activity acts as a stimulant.

Naps can be good to reduce sleepiness and improve alertness, but limit naps taken during the day to 30 minutes as any longer will impact on the quality of sleep at night.

Do not eat or drink alcohol or caffeine excessively or take illicit drugs late in the day or before going to bed.

Doing regular exercise during daylight hours (not too close before bedtime) is one of the best ways to get a good night's sleep.

If you are still having trouble sleeping, get out of bed. This might seem counter intuitive but the longer you thrash around the sheets you can get progressively more frustrated and angrier, which can make the insomnia worse. Go into the next room and do some reading, listen to some chill music—any kind of low-level activity, then return to bed to sleep.

5 BUILDING RESILIENCE

Resilience is a key psychological aspect of sport and one you are probably familiar with. The ability to bounce back from not being selected, injury, poor performance or a detrimental mistake is crucial to an athlete's success. As much as athletes hate to admit it, failure is a part of the game and it is important to recognize that mistakes and failure are part of the game.

However, it is impossible to remain confident at all times and sometimes it takes longer to bounce back, and this is okay. Go at your own pace and don't worry if you aren't feeling at your best right after. For some, it can be harder than others to get back to form and this is okay, resilience is something that everybody can learn, even if it takes a little longer.

Building resilience to maintain good wellbeing takes dedication and commitment. Resilience is like a muscle that needs to develop and strengthen, the more you practice looking after yourself, the greater your resilience will be. This gives you an ability to cope with the stresses of being an elite athlete, as well as life more generally.

Developing resilience will help you perform well in the face of adversity. A resilient athlete is one who is able to overcome setbacks, remain confident, and focus on the present. Here are some key tips to developing resilience;



Develop a positive outlook – Be open to new experiences, be optimistic, competitive and conscientious, as well as proactive. Focus on the present situation and avoid focusing on disappointments of what has passed or fear of what might be to come.

View your decisions as active choices, not sacrifices – This helps maintain a sense of control over the situation. This will also keep your internal, intrinsic motivation high. Being in control of choice can include choosing to let go – trusting and allowing the body, mind, and spirit to function as an integrated whole.

Use support available to you from other people – Seek out people who can help you. This can include technical advice from coaching staff or people within the game on what you are doing, having someone who is a good non-judgemental. A good listener, such as a club chaplain, can help build resilience and perspective or just social support from family and friends to make you feel better when times are tough.

Identify your own motivation for succeeding – Identify what's important to you. This will help keep you motivated and determined, especially when you have had a set-back or your goal seems far away.

Focus on personal development – Don't spend time comparing yourself to others. This can increase stress and the fear of failure. Learn to realise that you do have time to be clear and calm.



View setbacks as opportunities for growth – Ask yourself what you have learnt and what you would do differently next time. These sorts of questions can help improve your growth mindset as well as resilience. We can learn from all experiences but sport in particular can provide a special opportunity.

Strengthen your confidence from a range of sources – Drawing on a range of sources can make your confidence more robust. This can include your preparation, your previous successes or the faith that other people have in your ability. You need to recognise that you have more reserves, more gears and more options than first appears. Sometimes you need others to help you realise this.

Take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings and behaviours – Avoid the temptation of playing the blame game. Externalising all your problems may protect your self-image for a little while but is unlikely to help you develop in the long run as you will not have a balanced picture of yourself or life.

Concentrate on what you can control – Focus on what you can control, not on what you can't change or can only influence. This means focusing on the process, not the outcome. Control means staying calm in body, mind and spirit.

Self-belief – Believe in yourself that you can overcome obstacles and setbacks. Develop confidence in your skills and encourage yourself as a person, you don't need to compare yourself to others, aim to become happy with yourself and to be the best version of you.



6 PRACTICE SELF-REFLECTION

(not just when you are injured or on the bench)

Self-reflection encourages a level of self-awareness and consciousness about practice, it enables you to identify areas for improvement and also areas where you are strong, allows you to recognise what works and what doesn't and you are able to think deeply about your coaches/trainers' reactions to your performance. Try turning off all devices when taking time to self-reflect, just focus on your thoughts. Find a comfortable place away from others where you can limit the amount of noise. Self-reflection is not about focusing solely on the negative, to make sure you have a balanced view, allow yourself to think about the things you do well also.

7 TALK TO SOMEONE

It's helpful to get help - It's OK to not be OK:

The sporting world understands the pressures that are placed on you and the detrimental impact this can have on your mental health. The message 'it's OK to not be OK' is vital in helping combat this by reducing the stigma around getting help. Traditional sporting culture saw an inability to cope or showing of vulnerability as weakness, which was not to be tolerated. There is a developing understanding in sport that athletes are also human beings that have a right to experience and express their emotions along with the rest of the population. And once saying I'm not OK, we want athletes to be supported to move back to feeling OK. Chaplains play a vital role here.

“*Maybe that person is dealing with xyz and their experience is different to mine. Accepting we are different and dealing with people and get to know them as individuals*”

In acknowledging this, the culture is changing and beginning to help its elite athletes in coping with life on and off the pitch. Both the physical and mental health of elite athletes combine to create the high performance expected on the pitch. All areas of an elite or dedicated elite athlete's health combine to create the high performance expected on the pitch. Therefore, those involved in sport need to pay just as much attention to their mental health as they do every other area.

UNHELPFUL COPING STRATEGIES

EXCESSIVE ALCOHOL

Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol can be a common mechanism for dealing with stress. Alcohol may help deal with stress in the short term but in the long run it can contribute to feeling of depression and anxiety and make stress harder to deal with. When you drink, it doesn't stop the stress, it momentarily blocks it, but unfortunately, the stress is waiting on the other side of the hangover.

DRUG ABUSE

Similar to drinking to coping with stress, taking drugs to deal with your stress can be harmful. Self-medicating with drugs increases your risk of addiction and it prevents you from developing natural coping strategies that will be of benefit in the long term. Substance abuse may make a person feel better in the short-term, but it will exacerbate problems if it continues.

GAMBLING

Gambling problems can happen to anyone from any walk of life. Your gambling can go from a fun, harmless diversion to an unhealthy obsession with serious consequences. Whether you bet on sports, scratch cards, roulette, poker, or slots—in a casino, at the track, or online—a gambling problem can strain your relationships, interfere with work, and lead to financial disaster. You may even do things you never thought you would, like running up huge debts or even stealing money to gamble. Avoid excessive gambling as it may make you feel better in the short-term, it doesn't solve the problems you are facing and can make them worse as time goes on. Consider talking to somebody, possibly the club chaplain, if you feel things are getting out of hand.



EXCESSIVE/UNDER EATING

Over or under eating are common ways to deal with stress in sports, particularly in lean sports. Lean sports are sports that have a weight-class requirement or for which a low body weight or lean body is believed to give a competitive advantage, including gymnastics, diving, rowing, ballet, running, cycling, jockeying, wrestling, and martial arts. Over or under eating for a prolonged time could lead to an athlete developing an eating disorder. Eating disorders develop in women and men, but women tend to be affected more. In recent years, there has been a trend toward earlier onset of eating disorders, where disordered eating typically begins during adolescence and becomes more pronounced during the college years. Depending on the sport, athletes may be most vulnerable earlier in their professional career.

If you or a loved one who participates in a sport is at risk for an eating disorder, the first thing to do is watch out for warning signs; Preoccupation with body weight, size and shape, Obsessing over calorie intake, Over-exercising or training beyond the coach's recommendations, Menstrual irregularity in female athletes and a decrease in sport performance

EXCESSIVE EXERCISE

For many, exercise is an excellent outlet for the feelings that come up when things aren't easy -- it's been shown to decrease stress levels, ease anxiety, and boost confidence. By shooting endorphins to your brain, it can give you an instant rush of feel-good energy. But, when you work out, make sure to take care of yourself; when it becomes excessive, exercise can hurt more than it helps, through muscle tears, dehydration, and decreased appetite. The potential negative effects can go beyond the physical, as well, and can include fatigue, irritability, fitful sleep and drowsiness, and even anger and inability to concentrate. Listen to your body and prioritize recovery and avoid excessive amounts of exercise if it begins to impact on your life balance.



IF YOU NOTICE ANY OF THESE SYMPTOMS IN YOURSELF OR A LOVED ONE, YOU SHOULD SEEK HELP FROM A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL

CONCLUSION



GIVING YOURSELF PERMISSION TO PRACTICE LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF IS ESSENTIAL

Throughout this booklet we have aimed to provide advice, signpost to support and highlight learning and reflection points. We hope to have achieved this with a focus on human endeavour and the individual person, both of which transcends the outcome of a contest and is not limited to sport. You may feel like your sport defines you, but it does not. The skills and dedication you've learned from the hard work you've put in can be transferred into many different areas, all of which help to contribute to who you are.

As has been shown in the booklet, many different factors can affect your mental health, from becoming injured, retiring from your sport, and not knowing if you are going to be selected on match day. These factors can cause stress for the individual that may lead to feelings of sadness, anger and confusion that could result in unhealthy coping such as excessive alcohol consumption or gambling. We hope that you now know that these feelings are perfectly normal and that many people experience the same thing and that this booklet has shown you ways to cope with these unwelcome stresses, such as talking to family and friends, speaking with the coach or club chaplain, listening to music, developing interests outside your favoured sport, or seeking professional help.

Striving for achievement is wonderful but at some point it may leave you feeling empty unless you hold it in conjunction with an understanding of a bigger picture. Therefore, we encourage you to take time to reflect on what you have read to continue the journey in your own development. What positive action can you do today to take the best care of yourself? Remember, to reach your potential, you need to nourish yourself and make a habit of doing this. Giving yourself permission to look after yourself is essential in building resilience to cope with life's stresses and sustain performance in your chosen sport. Being on a right path for mind, body and spirit can provide a powerful feeling of being with the flow, so set yourself care goals that nurture each aspect of who you are. We hope this booklet will help support and encourage you on your path to fulfil your full potential.

RESOURCES



SPORTS CHAPLAINCY UK & IRELAND

If you would like to speak with a chaplain, or find out about getting a chaplain for your club/team then please contact us:

w: <https://sportschaplaincy.org.uk>
e: admin@sportschaplaincy.org.uk
t: 0800 181 4051



MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION

The vision of the Mental Health Foundation is good mental health for all. We work to prevent mental health problems, to drive change towards a mentally healthy society for all, and to support communities, families and individuals to live mentally healthier lives, with a particular focus on those at greatest risk. The Foundation is the home of Mental Health Awareness Week.

w: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk>



STATE OF MIND

State of Mind Sport is a charity that harnesses the power of sport to promote POSITIVE mental health among our sportsmen and women, fans and wider community

w: <https://stateofmindsport.org>
e: info@stateofmindsport.org
t: 0333 011 3535

SPORTING CHANCE

Sporting Chance helps 100's of professional sportspeople each year who are experiencing emotional problems or are worried about an addictive disorder

w: <https://www.sportingchanceclinic.com>
e: info@sportingchanceclinic.com
t: 0870 2200714

CARE FOR THE FAMILY

A national charity which aims to promote strong family life and to help those who face family difficulties.

w: <https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/>
e: mail@cff.org.uk
t: 029 2081 0800

RELATE

Relate offers counselling services for every type of relationship nationwide.
w: <https://www.relate.org.uk>

CHRISTIANS AGAINST POVERTY

CAP services are transforming lives from debt and poverty through free expert debt counselling.
w: <https://capuk.org>
e: contact@capuk.org
t: 01274 760720

GAMCARE

The National Gambling Helpline provides confidential information, advice and support for anyone affected by gambling problems
w: <https://www.gamcare.org.uk>
e: info@gamcare.org.uk
t: 0808 8020 133

SAMARITANS

A free, 24-hour helpline offering support and a listening ear whenever you need it.
w: www.samaritans.org
e: jo@samaritans.org
t: 116 123

LIFELINE NI

A crisis response helpline service for people in N Ireland experiencing distress or despair, for all ages.
w: www.lifelinehelpline.info
e: info@contactni.com
t: 0808 808 8000



Contact:

☎ 0800 181 4051
(Mon-Fri 9am - 5pm)

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