Mental Health in Collegiate Student-Athletes vs. Non-Student-Athletes

Noah Stansbury

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

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INTRODUCTION

Poor mental health remains a concern among young adults, especially young adults who attend college. The American College of Sports Medicine estimates that around 30% of women and 25% of men who are student-athletes report having anxiety, however, only 10% of all college athletes with known mental health conditions seek help from a specialist (The American College of Sports Medicine). According to the National Alliance of Mental Health, 73% of college students experience some type of mental health crisis during college (Gruttadaro, 2012). It's important to understand, to what extent, the student-athlete is driving the mental health crisis that is going on across institutions around the country. The research questions that will be discussed in this review are: Does being a student-athlete have a different effect on mental health than being a regular student on campus? And if so, what is the nature of this effect?

My thesis for this review is that being a collegiate student-athlete does affect one's mental health differently than the average college student, and this effect on mental health promotes negative mental health symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and depression. The purpose of this literature review is to compare and contrast the mental health effects of being a college student versus being a collegiate student-athlete. This topic is sociologically relevant due to the fact that there is an apparent mental health issue on campuses throughout America that is affecting populations of young adults, and in order to understand the magnitude of this crisis, we need to understand how mental health tracks within different populations of students on campus. Having poor mental health limits college students from maximizing their potential and being functional in our society.
Student-athletes, and college students in general, represent the future of our work force and are going to be instrumental in pushing our society forward in the next decade of economic uncertainty. Therefore, in order to be healthy contributors to our social and economic stability in the near future, our current students will need the right level of support and resources from their educational institutions. There is a plethora of data and information on the mental health of college students and student-athletes and this review will tie together how mental health affects these populations of people while leaving room for future research and solutions for improving overall well-being of college students. First, I will be discussing what mental health is and what the factors are that contribute to poor mental health. I’ll then present information that highlights the major risk factors that contribute to the poor mental health of regular college students and collegiate student-athletes, with a comparison of these two student experiences. Lastly, there will be a conclusion that will summarize the findings of the data, reflect on larger implications of the research, and address room for potential future research.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health can be defined as our overall emotional, psychological, and social well-being (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Population Health, 2021). It also plays a crucial role in our thoughts, feelings, and actions (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Population Health, 2021). Poor mental health limits us from maximizing our overall well-being which can be a big issue in environments like college institutions where students are constantly working and managing multiple responsibilities at once. Poor mental health, as a whole, affects all human beings and specifically mental illness, is one of the most common issues within our country (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Population Health, 2021).
Health, 2021). In fact, more than 50% of people in the U.S will be diagnosed with a mental illness in their lifetime (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Population Health, 2021).

Stress, Anxiety, Depression

In reference to the definition of mental health; stress, anxiety, and depression are three factors of poor mental health which tie into negatively affecting our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Stress is defined as “any type of change that causes physical, emotional or psychological strain… is your body's response to anything that requires attention or action” (World Health Organization, 2021). Anxiety can be defined as a negative reaction to stressful or dangerous situations that can cause serious harm to one's mental health (Weber, 2021). Lastly, depression can be described by, “mood changes, loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities and associated symptoms of sleep and eating problems, low energy, lack of concentration and self-worth (Weber, 2021).”

NON-STUDENT-ATHLETES AND MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

College can be seen as a huge transition in one's life, with the freshman year creating many new challenges and experiences for young adults who are often away from home for the first extended period of time. Without the support of a team or friends on campus, it may be challenging for new students to adjust to unfamiliar living situations, lifestyle changes, a more rigorous academic schedule, and more complex social relationships (Norman, 2018). There are also various studies showing that physical inactivity promotes increased symptoms of depression and anxiety in college students (Ghrouz, 2019). Unlike highschools, colleges don’t require any physical activities from their students in order to graduate. Therefore, students who are not active
on their own or in non-organized sports miss out on the positive effects that physical activity has on promoting positive mental health (Ghrouz, 2019).

Stressors for College Students

Crutcher, et al. (2015) examined the perceptions of wellness, stress, and social support among collegiate student-athletes and non-athletes (Crutcher, 2015). Researchers predicted that college student-athletes will have lower perceived wellness, and higher levels of perceived stress (Crutcher, 2015). They also predicted that higher social support would result in lower perceived stress and higher perceptions of wellness in both college athletes and non-athletes (Crutcher, 2015). Researchers used the PROMIS, PSS-14, and the SSQ6 questionnaires to measure wellness, stress, and social support on 256 student-athletes and 233 non-athletes (Crutcher, 2015). They found that there was no difference between perceived stress between student-athletes and non-athletes. They also found that higher perceived stress was the biggest factor in lower perceived wellness in both groups and higher social support was a significant indicator of lower stress for athletes alone (Crutcher, 2015). In this study, both populations produced nearly the same levels of perceived stress showing that one population's mental health isn't being more negatively affected than the others. Also, student-athletes in the study benefited from having high social support which reduced levels of stress. Non-athletes do not benefit from the level of social connectedness, social support, and institutional support that student-athletes benefit from in the college setting.

Armstrong, et al. (2009) explored whether there are significant differences in self-esteem, social connectedness, and depression between collegiate athletes and non-athletes (Armstrong, 2009). The researchers predicted that collegiate athletes may be protected from depression due to their healthy lifestyle, increased self-esteem, and social support (Armstrong, 2009). The
researchers surveyed 227 college students using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (Armstrong, 2009). They found that athletes had greater levels of self-esteem and social connectedness, and lower levels of depression in comparison to nonathletes (Armstrong, 2009). This study shows how nonathletes produce lower levels of self-esteem, social connectedness, and higher levels of depression in comparison to student-athletes. It also brings up the fact that non-student-athletes do not benefit from having a required active lifestyle that is required from student-athletes.

STUDENT-ATHLETES AND MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

College is an important but also stressful time in a person’s life. Student-athletes share a lot of the same stressors as regular college students, but with the added stress of a competitive sport. Playing a sport while in college can be very time consuming, placing the student in situations where they need to figure out how best to balance participation in practices, performing in games, film study on top of going to class, studying for exams, doing homework, etc (Norman, 2018). Division 1 athletes compete at the highest level of collegiate sports and spend an average of 34 hours a week on athletics (Norman, 2018). Having these constant demands contributes to the increased levels of stress in student-athletes (Norman, 2018). Another aspect of being a student-athlete is the physical toll it takes on your body. In addition to this, athletes can potentially experience increased levels of stress and isolation associated with the high demands their sport places on their body and the complexity of also coping with injuries.

Stressors for Student-Athletes

Hwang, et al. (2016) explored the various stressors that may be associated with being a NCAA student-athlete (Hwang et al. 2016). They predicted that personal attributes, social
context, and physical well-being would have the most influence on student-athlete stress (Hwang et al. 2016). Researchers used results from a 2010 GOALS survey that included 19,967 samples from 609 different colleges (Hwang et al. 2016). They also used a data mining methodology in order to model perceived stress (Hwang et al. 2016). They found that academic anxiety was the biggest stressor and sufficient sleep was a moderator in the relationship between stress and academic anxiety (Hwang et al. 2016). This study shows how managing the academic part of being a student-athlete can be stressful and lead to anxiety as well as a lack of sleep which is a well-known factor of negative mental health symptoms.

Norman, et al, (2018) discusses the experience of student athletes at the collegiate level and the roles of stress, coping, and resilience (Norman, 2018). The researchers used qualitative research methods (focus groups) to explore the overall experiences of college athletes (Norman, 2018). They conducted four focus groups where interviews from 17 student-athletes were transcribed and categorized into categories based on themes within the content of the interviews. The researchers were able to draw many conclusions based on the data such as stress being a natural part of the student athlete experience, a student athlete's sport greatly impacted overall stress, and students struggling with balancing academics and athletics (Norman, 2018). They found that students struggled to maintain close friendships and find new ones outside their sport (Norman, 2018). This study shows how balancing both academics and athletics can be difficult for student athletes. It also introduces a social challenge in finding and maintaining new relationships outside of sports which can be extremely difficult due to the high demands on time.

EVALUATION OF RESEARCH

The studies in this review shared similarities but also gave contradicting results that did not just help me understand how being a student-athlete can negatively impact stress and mental
health, but also to understand how it can be associated with having positive mental health. The studies in this literature were detailed and well written but there are concerns with the methods used. Most, if not all, of the sources used surveys to gather data on the populations which are not the most reliable due to bias and the inaccuracy that can appear in the data.

Surveys that talk about mental health can be skewed and inaccurate due to the fact that if a student who completed the survey was experiencing a challenging day or week, this could reflect negatively in the way they responded to the survey. This may explain why a lot of the studies produced inconsistent data that supported student-athletes' mental health being more negatively affected, nonathletes mental health being more negatively affected, and both populations having no difference in levels of stress. This is also why future research is important and required in order to find links between mental health in both populations. More quantitative data is required to show a correlation between both populations and to see if one population has higher rates of mental health problems than the other. Variables in a quantitative study can be the size of the school, the race and gender of the student-athlete, the location of the school in the country, these are all variables that when analyzed could create a more detailed view of the factors that are related to a students’ mental health, whether they are a student athlete or not.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, college presents a lot of similar and different challenges to mental health in both student-athletes and nonathletes. There is a lack of research in comparing both populations' mental health levels which leaves room for future research to be done. Future research is required to understand how these two populations can be accommodated better on campus to promote better experiences and over well-being. Student-athletes may require a designated person that is trained to provide mental health services that is not a coach or a part of
the team. Players may be reluctant to reach out to coaches or staff members about their mental health in fear that admitting to mental health challenges can create a stigma that can lead to reduced playing time and a general perception that the player is not stable enough to perform. Student-athletes and college students as a whole represent the future of our workforce and economy so investing in their mental health and well-being should be prioritized.

The educational community and policymakers should share in the responsibility of understanding the research on mental health among students and use the data as a way to make a case for additional funding and support for students to both identify their own mental health issues and receive the necessary personal and social support to address any issues. This level of intentional and comprehensive support should show up in the form of training for educators and coaches on how best to identify students in crisis, stronger support services through additional counseling available to students, and a better connection between campus resources and community resources as it relates to prevention and treatment options. The investment in mental health support for students will help assure the resilience of our students and help prepare them to be more resilient adults as they enter the workforce and lead within their communities.
REFERENCES


