Article for LACPA

Sports psychology demystified

Impact on private practitioners today

“’The question isn’t whether were emotionally invested in our children, because we are. It isn’t whether we see ourselves in our children, because we do, it’s when our investment becomes so great that what is good for the child becomes forgotten.’” (Ginsburg, R, as quoted in Hyman, M. 2009)

Many clinicians in California are growing their interest and curiosity into the realm of Sports Psychology. As mental health issues become more salient in the public eye and salience of mental health concerns amongst athletes grows, the prevalence of sports psychology professionals has too been on the rise. With the help of main stream media coverage of professional sports and US Olympic teams and greater usage and popularity of social media outlets younger minds are getting access to sports, performance, and all aspects of athletes’ personal lives on a constant basis.

The purposes of this article are to highlight overlaps between clinical and sports psychology and ways in which the clinical practitioner might interact or reach out to a sports psychology professional. Here are a few areas in which clinical expertise might be needed for an athlete or family or where the focus for the teen or collegiate athlete might be requested where triaging clinical versus performance concerns may come to your attention during assessment.

-injury (teen sidelined now effecting mood and relationship to family, friends)

An example of this would be if a clinician were referred a 12 year old middle school female who had injured her ankle 3 months ago. After going through physical therapy and being cleared to play she appears in your office. Levels of desire appear to wane into the sport and the return to play is delayed. Conflict between the parents arise as to the level of peer pressure to apply to rejoin the team or how hard to press the child is the presenting problem.

- Eating disorders (need to make weight for a competition or stay lean enough amongst a gymnastics team)

A scenario for a clinic might be at the high school level for a counselor or school psychologist. Whereby, one afternoon you return from lunch to find a 15 year old African American gymnast waiting to speak with you. Upon trying to attain consent you learn that her parents are concerned about unhealthy thoughts around body image and food and obsession with restricted calorie intake. They have also noticed an avoidance of family events or parties where food may be involved or she may be asked to participate in communal eating. The student has also been falling asleep in class throughout the day and displaying severe mood swings with peers and parents.

-lower income and environmental “meal ticket” culture

You receive a call from a 22 year old mother looking for assistance with her son who has been behaving “strangely” and acting increasingly moody and distant lately. The mother describes her son as a basketball player who has traditionally been a high performer on the courts and has been recruited to play professionally with hopes of making the NBA. The perceived underperformance in his summer after his senior season have cast some doubt on his potential. His parents notice withdrawal from his old friends and tends to display a more irritable mood as well. The young adult complains to his parents that he might need to talk to someone about having more energy in the mornings after difficulties with sleep and focus on school in the weeks to come despite returning to play at his near optimal level. The player asks his mother not to disclose anything to coaches or team staff because, “they probably wouldn’t understand”.

Depression/ anxiety masked or disguised due to stigma

You receive a call from a 45 year old married man at the encouragement of his wife of 20 years. He reports being a former college athlete and quarterback in his glory days and still maintaining a public role as a booster and fundraiser for his alma mater, hosting an annual charity golf tournament. However, he reports increased feelings of depression and irritability in his personal life and a tendency to get into conflicts over small misunderstandings at home or work. Client states his wife reported feeling afraid after seeing “rage in his eyes” on multiple occasions over simple misunderstandings. Client is aware of recent research on CTE and is frightened his playing days may have impacted him more than he once considered. Client requests to see you for anger management and to prevent from having “explosions” as well as to maintain his marriage.

“While the correlation between optimism and success is imperfect, there is almost perfect correlation between negative thinking and failure. “ (Rotella, 2015)

For those who wish to navigate the maze of discovering proficiency and certification with the relevant boards governing sports psychology, many universities and training programs have now adapted AASP standards that would lead to qualifications to work with the highest level universities or Olympic standards. Most recently, as of 2018, the title of CMPC or Certified mental performance consultant was adopted with a test, in order to provide some consistency in training and credentialing.

There are many roads and inlets to working with athletes and building a sports psychology practice. Many of you already see clients where the presenting problem is connected to sports, injury, eating or body image disorders related to competitive standards, and fear of disclosure of underlying mental health symptoms due to public persona or reputation in the sports world. Although there are clear circumstances where a sports psychologist devoted to an environment or team culture may be required, many situations can be handled through consultation with a sports psychology consultant or through utilizing family perspectives and influences of coaches, as well as by identifying parental attachment and pressures connected to performance and maintenance of sport related behaviors. I hope this article both brought clarity and showed the immeasurable value of this ever- growing, extremely relevant field of expertise.

Sports psychologists- current jobs and common applications

-university teams or staff

Most major universities have been developing and hiring sports psychology professionals or mental skills coaches to work with their athletes. Some have entire departments devoted to the application and collaborate with the schools’ sports teams hand in hand. Showing up during preseason, on the side line during games, and having office hours are part of the roles that may be played in the setting. Utilizing assessments, biofeedback, and virtual reality are current or expanding applications.

-professional sports team

Professional teams across baseball and basketball have employed or maintained a sports psychology professional on retainer, however now entire departments are being devoted to the transitions of young players from college to pros, or from a foreign country to the U.S. Assisting with mental approaches to hitting, batting, and pressure are part of the focus in preparing a team for a long season. Dealing with expected and unexpected challenges (injury, firing of a manager or coach, trades) may also be a part of this process.

- Military; focus and reaction time

Military units are interested in dealing with heart rate variability and reactions to stress as well as how to slow down mental processes under stress are becoming applications that are necessary and readily applied to military personnel. Deployment and adjustment to varied locations are also in the scope of psychologists in this realm and may also include improving ability to perform under stress and unpredictable conditions.

-defining and achieving excellence and leadership in organizational culture

Organizational psychology applications to team culture may assist in providing team building exercises or addressing breakdowns in verbal or nonverbal communication or in creating functionality.

Common titles in the field

Mental skills coordinator

AASP- as of 2017/2018 CMPC- Certified mental performance coach

Exercise and performance coach

Peak performance coach

Sports psychology consultant

Sports are increasingly tied to achievement, self esteem development, and the increasingly long checklist of parenting demands on youth development and belongingness. The impact of sports on development is also significant to American culture, with youth sports and travel sports taking on increased importance and prevalence across the nation. Injuries and identity after an athletic career are also increasingly at the forefront of concerns for athletes of all levels. The purpose of this article is to highlight the expanding roles for the psychology profession in sports and with athletes and to encourage an interest amongst professionals in greater expansion of the field and definition of clearly established training requirements.

References:

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