

Current Events Paper #3 – Anxiety in Athletes

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Depression and Anxiety in Athletes

In 2021, a study published by the American College of Sports Medicine found that 30% of female and 25% of male student-athletes reported having anxiety. It further found that 35% of professional athletes suffer from some kind of mental disorder, which may include depression and anxiety (Jackson, 2024).

Athletes were once thought to be immune to depression on the basis that exercise makes you happy and releases endorphins. However, this is untrue. Athletes are just as susceptible to depression as non-athletes. In fact, athletes have risk factors that put them for a higher chance for depression that include injury, over-training, involuntary career termination, and unrealistic performance expectations. Signs to look out for include increased irritability, the athlete becoming withdrawn, lack of motivation, loss of interest in their sport, social isolation, changes in eating patterns, and irregular sleep patterns (Mass General Brigham, 2024).

Anxiety is also one of the mental illnesses that is cause for concern among athletes. Performance anxiety and generalized anxiety disorder can both be seen among athletes. Common symptoms to look out for are feelings of powerlessness, a strong sense of impending doom, increased heart rate, trembling, feeling weak or tired, and shortness of breath (Mass General Brigham, 2024).

Kevin Love, power forward for the Miami Heat, suffered an anxiety attack during a game while playing against the Atlanta Hawks in 2018. Love wrote an article detailing his experience with depression and anxiety. He wrote about how his entire personality was tied to basketball and how if he wasn't performing, it felt like he wasn't succeeding (Love, 2020).

He detailed his panic attack and how he had the symptoms of shortness of breath while he was playing, which didn't feel right. He left the court and went to the locker room and felt like he was looking for something, but didn't know what. He wrote about how his return to playing

didn't feel quite right. He was relieved no one knew he had suffered a panic attack because of the stigma that came with mental illness. The feeling of being less reliable of a teammate was weighing on him. To get over this, the Cavaliers helped Love to find a therapist to start to work on his anxiety (Love, 2018).

Love is just one example of many athletes struggling with depression and anxiety. Many baseball players report suffering from anxiety when they make the jump from high school or college to the professional level. Multiple factors including homesickness, the stress of playing every day, learning to live with a new salary, and just the general pressure can lead to development or exacerbation of mental illnesses. This has led to organizations keeping psychologists or psychiatrists on staff as part of their player development team (Hannah Huesman, personal connection, March 2023). To take it a step further, the MLB Players Association has launched a new Mental Health and Wellness Program separate from the MLB or any club to further support the players (MLBPA, 2024).

Another way that organizations can support players is to simply educate them. If Kevin Love knew what the symptoms of a panic attack were, he may have known he was having one before he ran from the court. If more players knew about mental illness, there may be less of a stigma. If there was more education for players at the high school and college levels, they may be more prepared going into the professional levels.

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