The WHO defines mental health as ‘a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’ (p. 12). According to this definition, mental health is more than a lack of symptoms of mental ill-being or disorders. Variations in mood and perception of symptoms, also with aversive valence, may occur during regular participation in competitive sports. This editorial discusses the importance of acknowledging nuances in studies of mental health and psychiatric disorders in sports medicine and calls for a deepened understanding of ‘mental health’ and how various mental health symptoms and disorders are reported.

PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS IN ELITE ATHLETES AND HIGH-PERFORMANCE COACHES

The occurrence of psychiatric disorders among treatment-seeking Swedish elite athletes and high-performance coaches was recently reported in BMJ Open Sports & Exercise Medicine. While acknowledging the importance of this research, the article exemplifies the need of a more careful conceptualisation of mental health and psychiatric disorders among athletes and coaches. Researchers must be cautious about methodological challenges, such as definitions of mental health constructs, symptom severity cut-off levels and functional impairment, to avoid misrepresenting the incidence and prevalence of mental health disorders at different levels. Insufficient attention to such nuances may overestimate problems related to psychiatric disorders or underestimate milder and non-clinical mental health issues requiring support efforts other than psychiatric care.

‘NATURAL’ VARIATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH VERSUS PSYCHIATRIC DISORDER

Mental health is a complex construct to define in sports research, with several theoretical approaches commonly adopted. In all sports settings, it is natural to experience short-term stress reactions that are, for example, related to temporary setbacks, injuries, career dissatisfaction, performance plateaus, training settings or competitions. Generally, little attention is paid to the complexity of separating mental states usually associated with performance issues from mental illness and psychiatric disorders. The influence of life events on an individual’s mental health is complex and depends on psychosocial factors such as socioeconomic status and general living conditions. Thus, factors outside of sport also affect an athlete’s mental health.

As Åkesdotter et al reported, anxiety and depression are the most commonly self-reported symptoms of affected mental health in sports settings. Nonetheless, observation of occasional depressive symptoms does not, from a clinical perspective, justify a diagnosis of depression. The symptoms may reflect healthy reactions to stress or specific life events in and outside a sports setting. Despite the availability of symptom-based criteria to diagnose depression, several criteria resemble symptoms found in non-pathological reactions to stressors or losses in life with a risk of false-positive diagnoses and mental suffering within normal boundaries misclassified as a psychiatric condition.

Therefore, in any sports medicine setting, it is crucial to remember that an athlete who experiences decreased mental health does not necessarily have a psychiatric disorder and that a total absence of symptoms cannot be expected. For example, a recent study in a global cohort of young athletic athletes reported a 5.6% prevalence of depression caseness defined as a...
vulnerability for depression. At a close examination, the prevalence is comparable to typical prevalence rates reported from general populations using the same case definition. 4

The lack of details regarding case definitions may also mislead the reader. For instance, two classification systems, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems system, are currently used to guide the clinical diagnosis process. No internationally agreed-upon standardised clinical processes are available to establish a psychiatric diagnosis. A diagnosis recorded in a health information system may have been specified using structured, diagnostic interviews, like the Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI) interview used in the study by Åkesdotter et al 2 or the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM (SCID) interview, 11 but may also have been based solely on a clinical examination. 12 In addition, psychiatric disorders (eg, anxiety disorders) can share aetiology and common symptoms but there is no consensus on a definition of what constitutes ‘a comorbid psychiatric disorder’. Decisions of what to classify as a primary or secondary diagnosis of what constitutes ‘a comorbid psychiatric disorder’. The importance of carefully paying attention to nuances in key concepts in contemporary systems-oriented mental health research in sports medicine.

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