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The Rhody Chronicles

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THE RHODY CHRONICLES



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Danielle Gariglio

Introduction

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in every five college students experience mental illnesses in a given year. There are no studies to prove that college athletes suffer more frequently or from worse conditions of mental health effects, however, there is evidence to suggest that student-athletes are not seeking help as frequently as general population students. With the combination of stigma tied to mental health illnesses, along with the culture of mental toughness surrounding athletics, student-athletes have a tough time defining a line between what it means to be mentally tough and mentally well. Education and starting conversations are a key aspect to help create a shift in this culture, where currently, mental health illnesses are not discussed and often a frowned upon discussion. Through discussions with athletes and URI staff members combined with my own insight as a URI student-athlete, we have begun to unpack what aspects of life can affect, harm and transform the mental wellness of NCAA student-athletes.



The Culture of Sport

In recent years, there has been an uptick in students using college counseling center services to seek help for mental health illnesses. But why is it that there is a gap in the number of student-athletes utilizing these same services that general population students are offered as well? Mackenzie Brown, PsyD and Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Rhode Island who sits down and speaks with many of URI's athletes believes that "the culture of sport" is one of the biggest factors pushing a divide in the numbers of student-athletes seeking out services.

"[Sports] generally have that idea of pushing through, being strong, both physically and mentally, being on your game," she says. As many student-athletes struggle with identity beyond the playing field in college, Brown claims that this culture collapses the identity structures of these students into "one sole thing of: you are an athlete," minimizing the effects of what athlete's other identities can bring to their lives. Collegiate athletics can sometimes encourage a lifestyle for student-athletes where they fall into the trap of becoming the "Vacuum of the Athlete," instead of seeing themselves as, "I am a person who plays sports, I am a student, I am a daughter, a son, a partner."



A more obvious factor impacting student-athlete mental health at the NCAA level of competition is time constraints. With heavy time demands and overloaded schedules, the life of a student-athlete does not always provide time for expanded identities, let alone time to take out of an already packed schedule to meet with mental health professionals. "One huge barrier is prioritizing mental health and dedicating just one hour a week to mental health counseling, can sometimes feel like it's too much because I have all of these other things I need to do or want to do," Brown explains.

Mental toughness is an ambiguous term but perhaps one that is most often used and associated with college athletics. Another driving factor behind this culture of sport that does not necessarily encourage open conversations about mental health illnesses, is the debate between what it means to be mentally tough but also mentally well. Is there a difference? And would an athlete even know the difference?

College athletics promote athletes being mentally tough and not showing emotions on the field, but it is important to remember that behind every athlete there is a human being who has feelings, living a life outside of their sport and possibly fighting an internal battle that you might not know about. "Don't fall under the umbrella of needing to be mentally tough," Brown says. "Look at mental toughness as more of the ability to regulate your emotions without invalidating your emotions. Regulate emotions, do not remove them."

The Resources Issue

In 2016, the NCAA released a Mental Health Best Practices guide for collegiate athletic programs with suggestions and ideas as to how colleges can better serve the mental health illnesses of their student athletes. Four seemingly simple ideas highlight the guide:

1. Identify certified mental health care professionals for student-athletes.
2. Identify routine and emergency referral practices for students' mental health issues
3. Develop preseason mental health screening questionnaires to help identify potential areas of concern.
4. Promote environments that support mental well-being, resilience and thriving.

So, on the surface it looks like the NCAA has spelt it out. Do these things and it will help your athletes, right? Wrong. Money, funding, differing opinions and an abundance of qualified professionals all serve as road blocks for university's like URI to provide these resources for athletes. URI does not technically have its own sports psychologist in the athletic department for athlete's to build a familiar face or relationship with.

Money:

"The biggest problem comes down to the dollar sign," Brown says. "It comes down to institutional opinions and preferences too." Brown believes that while URI does value mental health support in athletics, the necessary funding to be able to provide such a service is what holds the university back. Other schools like the University of Michigan have support groups such as Athletes Connected and several mental health care professionals involved with solely the athletic program, but being a BIG 10 school, they are in a much different position financially to be able to provide this kind of support for athletes. "It's kind of a two-fold," Brown claims. "If your student-athletes are in a good spot personally then they will be in a good spot athletically, and if your school thrives on athletic support for funding, then it will feed right back into the financial side of things for the institution."

Qualified Professionals:

Sports psychology is a relatively new field in the overall realm of psychology. "It's not just about the school having the money to hire someone, but there being someone who is qualified enough to be hired for that position," Brown explains. Sports psychology, as a specialty, just came to fruition in the late 70s, early

80s. And just because someone is a psychologist, does not necessarily mean they will be what an athlete needs out of seeing a sports psychologist. To Brown, there is a huge difference. Sports psychologists are needed to understand the mental health issue going on, as well as the vacuum of the athlete and the

specific kind of patient and life of the patient they are meeting with, she says. This February, Brown attended a conference for sports psychologists who

work at the NCAA level or with specific athletic teams across the country and as a record high, there were 120 attending sports psychologists. Put into perspective all of the colleges across the country and just 120 sports psychologists – It makes sense how limited resources truly are.

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URI SPRING 2017 FINAL EXAM SCHEDULE

| EXAM DATE / TIME | 8:00 am – 11:00 am | 11:30 am – 2:30 pm | 3:00 pm – 6:00 pm |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| Thurs. May 4 | TR 11 | TR 12:30 | TR 3:30, TR 4, TR 4:30, T 4-6:45 |
| Fri. May 5 | MWF 10 | MWF 11 | MWF 2 |
| Mon. May 8 | MWF 9 | Common Exam | MW 4, MW 4:30, M 4-6:45 |
| Tues. May 9 | TR 9:30 | TR 2 | Common Exam |
| Wed. May 10 | MWF 8 | MWF 1 | MWF 3, MW 3:30 |
| Thurs. May 11 | TR 8 | MWF 12 | Common Exam |
| Fri. May 12 | Common Exam | Common Exam | - |

Making the Change

Education is the key to changing a culture that is bound to stigmatizing mental health illnesses amongst student-athletes by just dubbing them as “not being mentally tough.” “We have to educate coaches and staff members to change the script and integrate the whole person when coaching their athletes,” Brown says. The more education that is provided the more conversations that can be had.

Psychoeducation to teams and coaches as a whole could be crucial in shifting the approach to supporting fellow athletes and players and how to change the message. Brown believes that if coaches are preaching toughness in sport, which isn’t the most ideal word to use, it can trap an athlete to believe, ‘well if I’m having this problem I can’t confront it because that’s not the kind of player that coach wants.

Athletes need to understand that they will not be punished for being honest about their mental health illnesses and will not be removed from their sports unless there is something life threatening happening at that moment in time. “We won’t take away an athlete’s main coping resource just because they come in to us for counseling,” Brown stresses.

It needs to be recognized that a university has strong athletes when they have strong individual humans, and strong individuals are healthy individuals, physically, emotionally and mentally.



A Letter from the Editor:

For me to sit here and say that this Honors Project has been an experience is an understatement. From the get-go, I was incredibly excited to begin this journey and take a step closer towards where I wanted to be in terms of career preparation after I graduated from URI.

Initially, I had wanted to interview student-athletes and get their inside perspective on this challenge that they or their peers may be facing through video. However, I faced several obstacles from staff members in athletics, who did not want me to be speaking with athletes one on one about mental health illnesses, in an effort to avoid ethical and liability issues. These obstacles frustrated and discouraged me but forced me to push past the limitations that were set and out of my control in order to produce the Honors Project that I had wanted to fulfill. All I was looking to do with this project was spark a conversation in URI's athletic program regarding mental health illnesses amongst student-athletes but it seemed that those above me did not want anyone to talk. Because of these obstacles I rerouted my project to what it is now. Opinion-editorial based news writing that highlights the journalistic skills I have learned during my undergraduate studies while still attempting to spark a conversation throughout my athletic community. I have always told myself that an open mind is the best trick one can have up their sleeves, so here is my biggest takeaway from this project experience:



One of the first conversations I had with Carolyn Hames in regards to my Honors Project, back in December before I really even had any idea as to what I wanted to do she said, "Imagine where you will be at when you graduate, what is one last thing you want to learn before you graduate that will help you get closer to where you want to go in life?" I one day hope to become an athletic director or athletic administrator in a university's athletic program. With that being said, this project has opened my eyes to the world of this field, and what it will take to one day provide my own student-athletes with the college experience that I would want them to have through my leadership over their athletic program, as well as the support system that I believe they will deserve in regards to mental health awareness, resources, education and proper funding for other programs that will benefit them as not just student-athletes but human beings as well.