

# PROTECTING MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG ATHLETES

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FRAMEWORK DEVELOPED  
BY LAUR AMANOLESEI



EDUCATIONAL TOOLKIT  
FOR SPORT FEDERATIONS  
HealthyLifestyle4All



The toolkit “Protecting mental health of young athletes” targets a wide range of people and institutions: from national sport federations to European institutions. The toolkit cultivates an educational and healthy path in elite sports from a young age.

Being a ‘navigator’ is purely based on education and how young athletes manifest empathy through direct action (seeing their peers being treated badly then reporting; it’s quite a courageous thing to do when you live in a bubble). That’s why education is at the core of this research.



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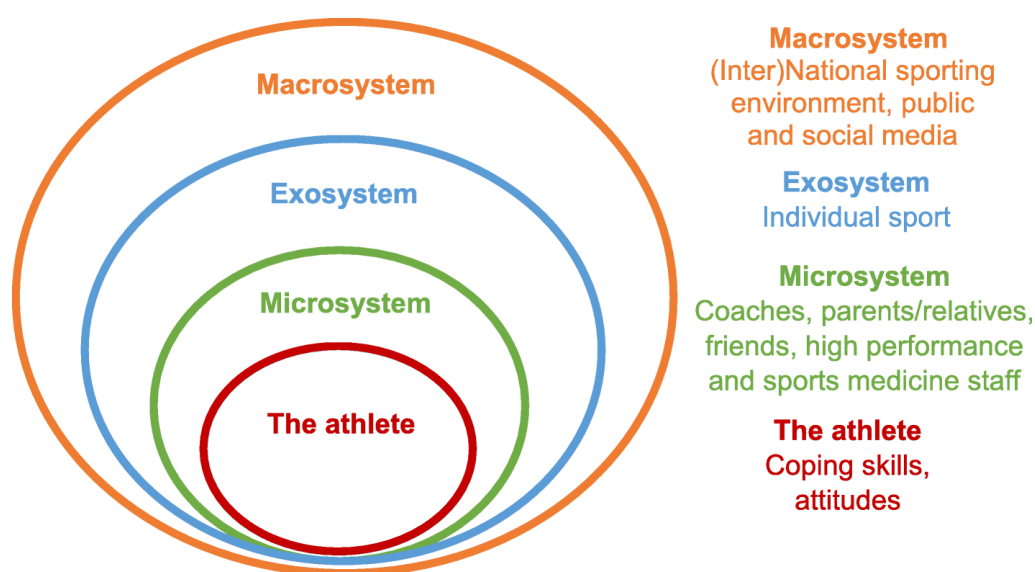


## DAY 1: Ecological system model for elite athletes' mental health

Visual representation: picture with the ecological system; **it is crucial to not ignore the wider ecological factors by pathologizing athletes because other factors might be prominent 'in contributing, or perpetuating poor mental health and...such factors may include maladaptive relationships with coaches or parents, social media abuse and/or financial pressures.**

The above ecological system provides a model that should be promoted because of its simple and effective way of understanding athletes' mental health. A comprehensive framework will establish new parameters of action and young athlete's behavioural and mental changes need to be monitored in order to diminish potential risks.

**Figure 1. An ecological system model for elite athlete mental health**



Source: Rosemary Purcell, Kate Gwyther and Simon M. Rice, "Mental Health In Elite Athletes: Increased Awareness Requires An Early Intervention Framework to Respond to Athlete Needs", *Sports Med - Open* **5**, 46 (July 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-019-0220-1>

To grasp the meaning of Figure 2, it is imperative to define the term 'ecological system'. "Ecological systems help to explain the relationship between the aspects or experiences of an individual (termed 'ontogenetic' factors, such as coping or substance use and the broader social and cultural contexts in which they exist)."<sup>1</sup> It is also a

<sup>1</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Ecological systems theory": Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 1992 as cited by Rosemary Purcell, Kate Gwyther and Simon M. Rice, in "Mental Health In Elite Athletes: Increased Awareness Requires

multi-layered model that assures the integration of all important parties in the life of athletes such as coaches, parents, medical staff and the surrounding habitats. As Purcell, Gwyther and Rice describe the ecological system, it is crucial to not ignore the wider ecological factors by pathologizing athletes because other factors might be prominent 'in contributing, or perpetuating poor mental health and...such factors may include maladaptive relationships with coaches or parents, social media abuse and/or financial pressures'<sup>2</sup>.

The main purposes of the campaign are **prevention and early intervention**.

- Early intervention should be a pillar in dealing professionally with mental health issues among individual athletes. Figure 2 encompasses a complex path to recovery with a **significant focus on prevention stages in order to narrow down the intensity of the symptoms**. In addition, early intervention phases 'seek to identify and halt the progression of emerging mental health difficulties'<sup>3</sup>. The last phases propose continual care for individual athletes in special facilities.

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An Early Intervention Framework to Respond to Athlete Needs", Sports Med - Open 5, 46 (July 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-019-0220-1>

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Purcell, Kate Gwyther and Simon M. Rice, "Mental Health In Elite Athletes: Increased Awareness Requires An Early Intervention Framework to Respond to Athlete Needs", Sports Med - Open 5, 46 (July 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-019-0220-1>

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Haggerty and Patricia Mrazek J, *Reducing risks for mental disorders: Frontiers for preventive intervention research*: National Academies Press, 1994 as cited by Rosemary Purcell, Kate Gwyther and Simon M. Rice, in "Mental Health In Elite Athletes: Increased Awareness Requires An Early Intervention Framework to Respond to Athlete Needs", Sports Med - Open 5, 46 (July 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-019-0220-1>

## DAY 2: Discovering a non-athlete identity which assures a balanced sports life, preparing the individual elite athlete for life outside competitive sport

Visual representation: The ladder (mentioning the source) + first phase: PREVENTATIVE COMPONENTS – mental health literacy, individual athlete development & skill acquisition, mental health screening & feedback.

The framework is built on **four major fundamental action plans**. Today we'll take a closer look in the first one:

### Preventative or foundational components

- **first phase of prevention** which encapsulates components that are meant to **incrementally develop a healthy sports culture**. For instance, **mental health literacy, awareness and practical programs could be put into practice among elite athletes, coaches and parents**. The program's content may cover the following necessary topics:

"firstly, athlete-specific and general risk factors that can increase susceptibility to mental ill-health;

secondly, key signs or symptoms of impaired wellbeing;

thirdly, how and from whom to seek help, both within and outside the sport; and

fourthly, basic techniques for athletes to self-manage transient mood states or psychological distress, such as relaxation techniques, adaptive coping strategies, self-compassion and mindfulness"<sup>4</sup>.

- The **'individual athlete development'** has great importance in an athlete life cycle because it implies the process of discovering a **non-athlete identity which assures a balanced sports life, preparing the individual elite athlete for life outside competitive sport**. Most of the elite athletes manifest egotistical approaches even after their career has ended and it projects a disengaged social attitude. Plus, the perpetuation of abuse in their daily lives is easily encountered after a successful career in sports because of the emotional pressure that has been surrounding the toxic training environment.
  - o It is known that abusers have been abused in their childhood and this vicious circle has systematically deteriorated the discovery of a

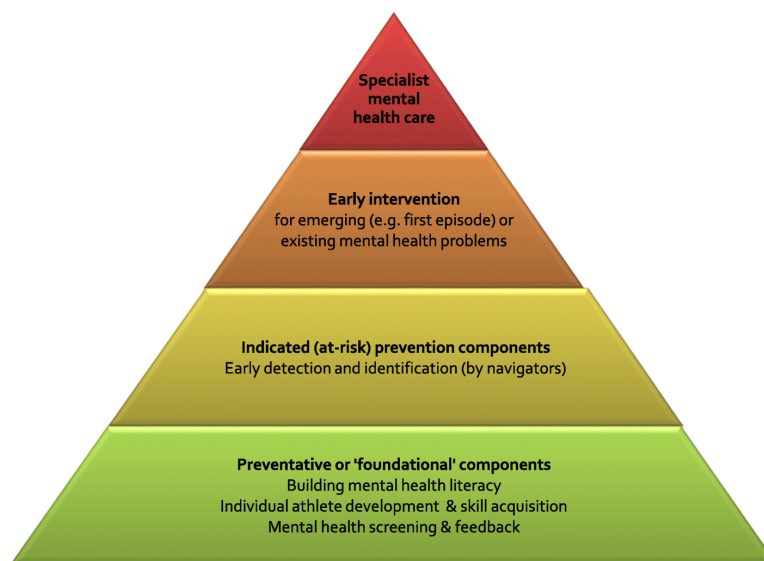
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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

non-competitive identity. In this process, “former athletes can assist with athlete development programs and mobilise athletes to the importance of actively participating with such programs, based on their own experiences”<sup>5</sup>.

- The last point emphasises the absorption of various release mechanisms that allow people in sports to manage their stress indicators better and to trust the limits of their bodies. In a precarious sports environment where pushing corporal boundaries affect tremendously mental health, the development of effective mental health literacy programs cannot be neglected.

The key part in this first action plan is definitely, mental health literacy. Education in sports barely exists because of the lack of emotion-based pedagogical surveillance. Children are thrown in a world where their existence dissipates for the sake of results. It is significant to point out that since children start playing sports recreationally, the paternalistic voices around them introduce them competition and the importance of being competitive.



Source: Rosemary Purcell, Kate Gwyther and Simon M. Rice, “Mental Health In Elite Athletes: Increased Awareness Requires An Early Intervention Framework to Respond to Athlete Needs”, *Sports Med - Open* 5, 46 (July 2019).  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-019-0220-1>

## DAY 3: Early detection and identification by navigators

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Football League Players' Association, “Development and wellbeing report 2014”, <http://www.aflplayers.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Dev-Wellbeing-2015.pdf>, as cited in *Ibidem*

Visual representation: Indicated prevention components. Early detection and identification (BY NAVIGATORS): strong emphasis on NAVIGATORS who can **'understand athlete privacy concerns that inhibit the disclosure of mental health symptoms and build self-efficacy to be able to raise their concerns safely with the affected athlete or medical/mental health staff;**

**Early detection and identification by navigators** - a follow-up stage that is meant to detect symptoms as early as possible and involve health professionals.

- The term **'navigators'** has a major significance because these people can be coaches, teammates or physiotherapists who can notice small changes of behaviour in an athlete over weeks such as body tension or energy.<sup>6</sup> These **'navigators'** are crucial to the proposed mental health framework because they are the only ones who can create a connection between symptomatic athletes and professional care. The authors of the article mention the possibility to equip 'navigators' with supplementary training to better grasp and interpret a concerning behaviour in relation to their overall state of mind. Further, it will be useful to **"understand athlete privacy concerns that inhibit the disclosure of mental health symptoms** and build self-efficacy to be able to raise their concerns safely with the affected athlete or medical/mental health staff"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Rosemary Purcell, Kate Gwyther and Simon M. Rice, "Mental Health In Elite Athletes: Increased Awareness Requires An Early Intervention Framework to Respond to Athlete Needs", *Sports Med - Open* 5, 46 (July 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-019-0220-1>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

## **DAY 4: Assessment of athletes (by mental health advisor) → referral to a qualified practitioner → individual work phase with specialists**

Visual representation: **Early intervention for emerging and existing mental health problems. Example, Australian Institute of Sport mental health referral network.**

**Assessment of athletes (by mental health advisor) - referral to a qualified practitioner - individual work phase with specialists**

**Early intervention for emerging and existing mental health problems** and a relevant example is the **Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) mental health referral network.**

- The Institute has a clear action map, starting with an assessment of the athletes by an AIS mental health advisor who may make a referral to a qualified practitioner that works in collaboration with the network and the final part is an individual work phase in order to openly discuss mental impediments and overcoming them.<sup>8</sup> The Australian case is a great example of commitment to their athletes. Sport governing bodies should actively communicate with entities in other countries and set up bilateral or multilateral collaboration schemes between practitioners. **The exchange of good practices is always a great incentive towards building a healthy sports community.**

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Rice, Matt Butterworth, Matti Clements, Daniel Josifovski, Sharyn Arnold, Cecily Schwab, Kerry Pennell and Rosemary Purcell, ‘Development and implementation of the national mental health referral network for elite athletes: A case study of the Australian Institute of Sport’, in *Case Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology*. Volume 4:Issue S1, pp. S1-27, S1-35 <https://doi.org/10.1123/cssep.2019-0016> as cited in *Ibidem*



## DAY 5: Guidance programs for athletes who manifest the desire to return to competitive sport after recovering from mental illness

Visual representation: Mental Health Care Specialist. **In 2019, the International Olympic Committee Expert Consensus statement listed a brief of recommended clinical interventions for several mental issues<sup>9</sup> which include psychotic episodes, bipolarity and depressive and eating disorders.**

### Mental health care specialist

- who can intervene if athletes experience complex psychopathology despite the accessed help from the previous steps. In 2019, the International Olympic Committee Expert Consensus statement listed a brief of recommended clinical interventions for several mental issues which include psychotic episodes, bipolarity and depressive and eating disorders.<sup>10</sup> It is pivotal to develop guidance programs for athletes who manifest the desire to return to competitive sport after recovering from mental illness.<sup>11</sup>

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<https://olympics.com/ioc/news/consensus-paper-on-mental-health-published-by-the-ioc-medical-and-scientific-commission>

<sup>10</sup> Claudia L Reardon, Brian Hainline, Cindy Miller Aron, David Baron, Antonia L Baum, Abhinav Bindra et al. “Mental health in elite athletes: International Olympic Committee consensus statement”, *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, (June 2019), 53(11):667–99. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2019-100715> as cited in *Ibidem*

<sup>11</sup> Paul McCrory, Willem Meeuwisse, Jiří Dvorak, Mark Aubry, Julian Bailes, Steven Broglio, et al. “Consensus statement on concussion in sport—the 5th international conference on concussion in sport held in Berlin”, *Br J Sports Med*. 2017;51(11):838–47, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2017-097699> as cited in *Ibidem*