

Smoother sailing for elite athletes

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Credit: rory.ramsden@btopenworld.com

When it comes to dealing with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, elite athletes are ‘just like us’, and ‘just like us’ they need help, research from The Australian National University reveals.

Amelia Gulliver, a PhD candidate at the Centre for [Mental Health Research](#), in the ANU College of Medicine, Biology and Environment, recruited young elite athletes in a collaborative project with the Australian Institute of Sport to study the effectiveness of three online interventions aimed at increasing knowledge about mental disorders and reducing stigma.

She found that the more information the athletes had, the more likely they were to seek help.

“The first online intervention was very basic and minimal. It had a list of people that the athletes could contact if they were experiencing emotional problems, such as their doctor or GP, website links for online treatment programs such as moodgym.anu.edu.au, and telephone organisations such as Lifeline. This list was provided in all the interventions,” Ms Gulliver said.

“The second online intervention measured the athlete’s symptoms of depression and anxiety and provided them with instant feedback about their symptoms relative to others of a similar age. But neither intervention worked – the athletes didn’t report any increased help-seeking behaviors.

“Far and away the most successful was the third online intervention, which comprised 34 web pages of information – the most of all the online interventions – and was aimed at increasing mental health literacy and knowledge about mental health disorders and decreasing stigma.”

Ms. Gulliver said that gaps in mental health knowledge as well as the stigma surrounding [mental health issues](#) can act as barriers to seeking help for both athletes and young people in the community, so it was exciting that there was a trend for increased help-seeking in the third group who received the mental health literacy information and stigma busting intervention.

“Athletes can experience the same feelings of stigma around mental [health issues](#) as everyone else, which they may feel more acutely being in the public eye. It was thrilling that we were able to improve knowledge of mental disorders, specifically [depression](#) and [anxiety](#) and reduce stigma about these disorders in young [elite athletes](#),” she said.

“The research shows we need to provide more mental health education and reduce the stigma of mental health issues. Internet-based

interventions are particularly promising because they are relatively inexpensive and widely accessible.”

Ms. Gulliver said in a previous study, which also forms part of her PhD, athletes identified factors that may influence the development of mental health problems, such as performance-related stress, injuries, pressure to maintain a high standard of behavior, weight control, and lifestyle issues such as moving away from home for training and competition.

More information: The research is published online in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*: www.jmir.org/2012/3/e69/

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