

# Imagining future guilt helps athletes turn away from doping

December 8 2021

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Appealing to athletes' sense of 'future guilt' through psychological intervention could prove a powerful weapon in the fight against doping, according to a new study.

Researchers discovered that making [elite athletes](#) picture how guilty they might feel about using banned performance enhancing drugs produced a more powerful initial reaction than initiatives educating sportspeople about the health risks of doping.

Working with 208 athletes across the UK and Greece, researchers carried out two six-month trials—one a psychological [intervention](#) focussing on emotions and personal choice, the other an education program highlighting the risks and health consequences of doping.

Using real [athlete](#) stories and testimonies on video, they made participants aware of emotions experienced by sportspeople who had doped, contrasting those feelings with emotions experienced by successful athletes who competed clean.

Participants discussed the athletes' stories—enhancing their understanding of the emotions linked to doping. Researchers explored the justifications athletes use for doping (moral disengagement) and drew attention to the consequences doping has for others—whether family, friends, teammates or other competitors.

While the psychological intervention was more powerful than its educational counterpart, the experts found that receiving useful information about doping, doping control processes, the risks of sport supplements, healthy nutrition, and the anti-doping rule violations strengthened athletes' confidence to resist the temptation to dope.

Publishing the study findings today in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, the international team of experts, led by the University of Birmingham, therefore recommends that sports watchdogs combine both types of intervention into a single program.

Athletes from 19 sport clubs across the two countries were randomly

assigned to either the psychological or educational intervention, with researchers finding that results were consistent across both countries.

Project leader Maria Kavussanu, Professor in Sport & Exercise Psychology at the University of Birmingham, commented that they "found that appealing to athletes sense of 'future guilt' through [psychological intervention](#) was a powerful way of persuading sportspeople to steer away from doping."

"We focussed on psychological factors that have been empirically linked to doping—emotions. This social cognitive approach was as important in reducing doping likelihood as educating athletes about the harms of doping, the risks of supplements, and the importance of whistle blowing."

"Effective interventions must focus on preventing rather than detecting doping and we believe that targeting psychological variables in anti-doping interventions should help the regulatory authorities' efforts to stamp out doping in sport."

The use of prohibited performance enhancing drugs and methods can have significant health consequences for athletes, as well as posing a major threat to the integrity and image of sport, while undermining fair play.

Despite significant global investment by governments on sophisticated ways of tackling doping, the practice is common in both elite and amateur athletes with intentional doping in adult elite athletes as high as 57%. There is also a higher prevalence of [doping](#) among [young males](#) than young females and athletes participating in strength-based sports.

**More information:** Maria Kavussanu et al, A psychological intervention reduces doping likelihood in British and Greek athletes: A

cluster randomized controlled trial, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.102099](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.102099)

Provided by University of Birmingham

Citation: Imagining future guilt helps athletes turn away from doping (2021, December 8)  
retrieved 25 April 2024 from  
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-future-guilt-athletes-doping.html>

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