

# A role for sports in men's mental health

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Sports can play a crucial role in challenging stereotypes and promoting

positive mental health for boys and young men, new research has concluded.

"Suicide is the leading cause of death for people aged 15–25 and the majority are male, so it's vital we find a way to support young men's mental health especially during the transition period between adolescence and adulthood," says lead author Professor Murray Drummond, Director of the Flinders University's SHAPE Research Center and a member of the Flinders Institute for Mental Health and Wellbeing (Órama).

"For many boys, sports is a significant part of their life and often the only 'safe space' where they can receive positive socialization and engagement, so it's logical it can play a substantial role in protective mental health.

"Our research set out to provide insights into how we can create safe spaces for males and influence positive forms of masculinities that can enhance mental health promotion."

The study, published in the journal *BMC Public Health*, surveyed [young males](#) playing either cricket or Australian Rules Football. The participants were then interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the responses received in the survey and to examine the role of sports in their lives and their mental well-being.

The results showed that players, parents and key stakeholders within the sporting club viewed the environment as being an important place to shape young men's positive mental health attitudes.

"We identified a number of positive elements to playing for a sporting club, including having like-minded friends, as a release from the stressors of school, and the ability to engage with other males

irrespective of age or demographic," says Professor Drummond.

"As clubs bring together different ages they are able to provide positive role models for the younger players, with strategic leadership and mentoring key to developing respectful relationships and positively shaping the young men's identities. Our study found greater club support was significantly associated with more egalitarian views."

Communication was also seen as a crucial to the young men's path through sports, with open and honest discussions critical to stave off issues associated with poor self-esteem and potentially dropping out of the sports.

While only representative of two sports, the authors say the research shows that sporting clubs can be important support networks for young men and provide for both physical and mental health.

"Sports offer the ideal space in which to create a nurturing environment while challenging stereotypical norms, important when most of the popular sports in Australia, including Aussie rules, cricket and rugby, have previously been seen to be sites of hyper masculinity," says Professor Drummond.

"Clubs are crucial to changing young males' attitudes and behaviors for positive mental [health](#) outcomes, with the benefits of socialization for [mental health](#) also not to be underestimated.

"We know so many young men will likely pass through a sporting [club](#) at some point in their life—we need to be engaging sporting clubs to ensure they can become an important vehicle for change under the right conditions."

"Level playing field: young [males](#), masculinity and mental wellbeing

through sports," by Murray Drummond, Ben Wadham, Ivanka Prichard, Sam Elliott, Claire Drummond & Sarah Crossman, is published in the journal *BMC Public Health*.

**More information:** Murray Drummond et al, Level playing field: young males, masculinity and mental wellbeing through sport, *BMC Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-022-13200-1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13200-1)

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