

Coaches can boost athletes' mental health by being 'authentic leaders'

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Sports coaches could strengthen athletes' mental health and protect them from mental illness by adopting an "authentic leadership" style, a new study reveals.

Researchers found when [athletes](#) perceived that their [coach](#) engaged in behaviors such as openly sharing information, showing understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, acting in an ethical manner, and listening to alternative perspectives, they felt happier and dealt with problems more easily.

Publishing their findings in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, experts from the University of Birmingham reveal that athletes training with coaches who display the attributes of an authentic leader are likely to be more mentally fit.

Researchers found that the indirect effect of authentic leadership on athletes' positive mental health, through making their teammates act more prosocially toward them (e.g., encouraging them, supporting them, giving them [positive feedback](#), congratulating them for good play), was stronger in athletes competing at a higher competitive level.

This suggests that authentic leadership from coaches and better-behaved teammates are particularly important in athletes who compete at higher levels, such as national, international, or university leagues.

Study lead author Professor Maria Kavussanu, from the University of Birmingham, commented, "Higher level athletes tend to train together for longer hours and have the opportunity for more frequent social interaction with each other. The relationships that develop within the team become important, as does experiencing positive behaviors such as support and encouragement from their teammates, which can be promoted by coaches adopting an authentic leadership style.

"This may have greater potential to strengthen the athletes' psychological capital making them more resilient, confident, and optimistic with subsequent beneficial effects on their positive mental health. The stronger effect of authentic leadership on athletes' competing at higher

levels is a unique finding that is worth exploring further in future research."

The research follows findings by Professor Kavussanu and colleagues that sports coaches who display authentic leadership qualities could find their athletes are less likely to act aggressively towards competitors. Such leadership can also enhance sport enjoyment and commitment—both vital qualities in sport as they can influence athletes' continued participation, which tends to decline as sports participants get older.

The researchers also found that authentic leadership was related to lower mental illness—fewer feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress, through increased psychological capital, increased prosocial teammate behavior and reduced antisocial teammate behavior.

The study findings suggest that adopting an authentic [leadership](#) style may have the potential to protect athletes from [mental illness](#) by strengthening their self-belief, increasing positive, and decreasing negative [behavior](#) from teammates.

More information: Mental Health in Athletes: Does Authentic Leadership Matter?, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2024).

Provided by University of Birmingham

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