Emotional scars increase the risk of sports injury

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Active top-flight athletes who have experienced sexual or physical abuse at some time in their life run a greater risk of sports-related injury. A new study from the Athletics Research Center at Linköping University in Sweden has shown an association between lifetime abuse experience and injury risk in female athletes.

The study has been carried out on elite athletes in Sweden, and is the first of its kind to investigate the consequences of sexual and physical abuse for athletes. Earlier in 2018, the Athletics Research Center published a report commissioned by the Swedish Athletics Association that surveyed sexual abuse within Swedish athletics.

"We wanted not only to repeat our study into the presence of abuse, but also examine what it means for the athlete. How does a traumatic event influence athletic performance? We wanted to investigate whether abuse is connected to the high degree of overuse injuries that we see in competitive athletics," says Toomas Timpka, professor in the Department of Medical and Health Sciences and head of the study, which is published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.

The study focused on the risk of injury. Does abuse increase the risk of injury related to sporting activities, or the risk of non-sports injuries? Of the 197 participants in the study, 11 percent had experienced sexual abuse at some time in their life, and 18 percent had experienced physical abuse. In female athletes who report a history physical abuse have a 12 times higher risk of sports injury. Sexual abuse involves an eight times higher higher risk for non-sports injury. The correlation between abuse and an increase in the risk of injury appears most clearly in female athletes.

"Many aspects of the correlation are also seen in self-injurious behaviour. We can see in both young women and young men that they tend to blame themselves. The athletes carry the trauma inside themselves, and take risks that can eventually lead to overuse injury. At the same time, it's important to remember that not all female athletes who suffer from long-term injuries have been subject to abuse. These injuries arise in interaction between many factors, which differ from one individual to another," says Toomas Timpka.

Epidemiological studies in sport and other sport-focused medicine have traditionally been targeted on the musculoskeletal system, while sports psychology has focused on performance. Toomas Timpka is looking for innovative thinking in the field. He points out that several factors may explain differences in performance, and it is important to deal with emotional scars that may have been left by, for example, abuse.

"We hope that our study can pave the way for a new multidisciplinary research area within sports medicine. We can gain new insights with the aid of clinical psychologists and child psychiatrists who participate in sports medicine research."

More information: Toomas Timpka et al, Lifetime history of sexual and physical abuse among competitive athletics (track and field) athletes: cross sectional study of associations with sports and non-sports injury, *British Journal of Sports Medicine* (2018). DOI: 10.1136/bjsports-2018-099335

Provided by Linköping University

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