

DOCTORAL THESIS

Mental Health Literacy and Help-Seeking in Chinese Elite Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Although severe mental health issues are found in elite athletes, they do not seeking help. Mental health literacy (MHL) is recognised as one major factor influencing athletes' help-seeking when they experiencing mental health difficulties. There are three aims of this research. Study 1 aims to provide a systematic review of the effectiveness of the MHL training program on enhancing mental health knowledge, and help-seeking, as well as reducing stigmas in athletes. Study 2 aims to understand mental health help-seeking behaviours and potential factors influencing mental health help-seeking behaviours of Chinese elite athletes from the triangulated perspectives. Based on the findings of Study 1 and Study 2, the MHL intervention was designed and implemented in Chinese elite athletes, which aimed to increase MHL, help-seeking attitudes, intentions, and behaviours, as well as decrease stigmas.

Methods: In study 1, to identify intervention studies of MHL programmes, five electronic databases were systematically searched for articles published before May 2020. The selection procedure was based on the PRISMA guidelines. All kinds of study designs were included. Effect sizes were calculated for mental health knowledge, stigma reduction and help-seeking attitudes, intentions and behaviours. Risk of bias was assessed for each study using the Cochrane tool and the Newcastle–Ottawa quality assessment scale. In study 2, a qualitative approach consisting of one-to-one, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted among elite athletes ($n = 20$) and their coaches ($n = 12$) and team officials ($n = 5$) to explore the mental health help-seeking behaviours and potential factors influencing mental health help-seeking behaviours of Chinese elite athletes. In study 3, an eight-week MHL intervention programme conducted to enhance MHL, help-seeking attitudes, and intentions, as well as reducing stigmas of mental health issues and improving help-seeking behaviours among 50 Chinese elite athletes.

Results: In study 1, five studies (1,239 participants in total) were selected for review. Overall, either small or medium effects were found for mental health knowledge, stigma reduction, help-seeking attitudes and intentions for post- and follow-up interventions, whereas a null effect was found in help-seeking behaviours for both post- and follow-up interventions. Furthermore, three studies had a low risk of bias and two had a high risk of bias. In study 2, six main themes emerged from the content analysis of the qualitative data, which include help-seeking behaviours; mental health experience, MHL, help-seeking attitudes,

help-seeking intentions; and socio-cultural factors influencing athletes' mental health help-seeking. It was found that the Chinese elite athletes suffered from various mental health issues, and their MHL, help-seeking attitudes and intentions, and socio-cultural factors associated with their help-seeking behaviours. In study 3, the intervention results demonstrated that participants in the intervention group improved their MHL, help-seeking attitudes, and intentions, as well as reduced stigmas, to a greater extent than those in the waiting list control condition. However, help-seeking behaviours were not significantly enhanced in both post- and follow-up tests compared with the waiting list control group.

Conclusion: According to the findings of the above studies, one MHL programme tailored specifically to the needs of Chinese elite athletes was urgently required. It could provide new knowledge to future research on MHL and help-seeking in Chinese elite athletes, which further suggested that some MHL education programmes are highly recommended.

Keywords: Mental health literacy, help-seeking, Chinese elite athletes

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