International Sport Coaching Journal, **(Ahead of Print)**
https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2024-0095
First Published Online: Mar. 11, 2025

Human Kinetics
ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Ice Hockey Coaches' Perceptions of Their Role in Supporting Athlete Mental Health

Siobhan Henderson,[1] Gordon A. Bloom,[1] and Nancy L. Heath[2]
[1]Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada; [2]Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada

Many coaches have reported not feeling well equipped to support and discuss mental health issues with their athletes. The purpose of this study was to understand elite ice hockey coaches' perceptions of their role in supporting athlete mental health, along with their experiences in taking part in a mental health and suicide awareness program. Five coaches of elite 16- to 20-year-old ice hockey players who had taken part in a mental health and suicide awareness program for at least one season each participated in an individual, semistructured, open-ended interview. Data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis. Results revealed that coaches perceived their role to entail integrating mental health considerations into their daily coaching practices, paying attention to signs of player distress, assessing risk in various situations, and referring players to health professionals when necessary. Overall, our findings offered insight into coaches' perceived role in providing mental health support to athletes, as well as helping to identify strengths and areas to improve the mental health and suicide awareness program. Consequently, coaches are primed to be key players in helping to create a sport climate in which well-being is prioritized and is perceived as a catalyst to performance.

Keywords: elite sport, mental health intervention, suicide awareness

Key Points

- Coaches created a safe and supportive environment by developing trusting relationships with their athletes, in addition to sharing, acknowledging, and accepting mental health challenges.
- Coaches described their role in supporting athlete mental health to include intentionally integrating mental health considerations into their daily coaching practices, actively monitoring players for signs of mental health issues, and connecting players to resources when necessary.

In recent years, a number of high-profile athletes (e.g., Simone Biles), including professional hockey players (e.g., Carey Price), have publicly shared their experiences with mental health challenges and/or illness. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), mental health is defined as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." Thus, mental health is more than the mere presence/absence of mental illness, as mental illness is characterized by significant alterations in one's feelings, thinking, and behavior, leading to significant distress and impaired functioning in one's activities that can result in clinical diagnoses (e.g., major depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, eating disorders, bipolar disorders; WHO, 2018). Given that individuals can experience subclinical levels of mental illness that negatively impact functioning and performance (Gouttebarge et al., 2019), the current study will employ the term Mental Health Issues (MHIs) to encompass issues related to mental health (e.g., distress, sleep disturbance) and mental illness (e.g., depression, anxiety), including suicide ideation.

Emerging evidence has reported that elite athletes have experienced comparable or slightly more elevated rates of symptoms of MHIs relative to the general population (Gouttebarge et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019), where one in five Canadians have reported experiencing MHIs in any given year (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2021). For example, in their systematic review and meta-analysis of the occurrence of mental illness and mental health difficulties in current and former elite athletes in a variety of sports, Gouttebarge et al. (2019) found that self-reported symptoms of distress, sleep disturbance, anxiety/depression, and alcohol misuse ranged from 19% to 34% in current athletes and 16%–26% for former elite athletes. In turn, these mental health challenges have been related to a range of stressors, including, but not limited to, overtraining (Kenttä et al., 2006), expectations to perform (Mountjoy et al., 2015), injury (Putukian, 2016), and transitioning out of sport (Kuettel et al., 2017). Consequently, it is imperative that elite athletes have access to

Bloom https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4679-9922
Heath https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8062-7801
Henderson (siobhan.henderson@mail.mcgill.ca) is corresponding author, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9716-0011