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The role of sport in tackling mental health

16 October 2015

Saturday, October 10th was World Mental Health Day. To help mark the occasion, our contributors Dr Dan Parnell, Dr Simon Rosenbaum, Dr Kathryn Curran and Dr Brendon Stubbs consider the growing interest in the potential role that community sport may play in promoting positive mental health among both people experiencing mental disorders and the general population.

The problem

Poor mental health is a common and costly public health problem accounting for the leading cause of years lived with disability worldwide ([Whiteford et al., 2013](#)). One quarter of the UK population will experience one or more of the broad collection of mental disorders throughout their lifetime. This ranges from the common mental disorders (depression and anxiety disorders) to the severe and persistent mental illnesses (schizophrenia, bipolar affective disorder).

The cost

One in four adults and one in 10 children are likely to experience a mental health problem in any given year. This costs an estimated £22.5billion per year in the UK alone ([McCrone, 2008](#)). Therefore, it is of immense importance that greater support and services are established for people experiencing poor mental health.

Mental and physical health

Mental health conditions such as depression are consistently among the top five most commonly managed conditions in general practice ([Cooke, Valenti, Glasziou, & Britt, 2012](#)). However, these conditions do not just impact negatively upon quality of life, there is irrefutable evidence demonstrating the strong association between mental disorders and poor physical health including obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease ([Maube Vancampfort et al, 2015](#)).

Getting people active

Getting people with mental disorders physically active has been shown to provide both protective and treatment effects ([Rosenbaum, Tiedemann, Sherrington, Curtis, & Ward, 2014](#)), which has resulted in many researchers

and practitioners calling for physical activity to be included within integrated care for people with mental health disorders. The universal barriers to participation in physical activity faced by the general population are also experienced by people with mental health disorders, often to a greater extent and as such, programmes targeting this population can often struggle to attract, engage and retain their intended audience. This is where professional sports clubs and community sport programmes may prove valuable ([Parnell & Curran, 2015](#)).

Sport as a vehicle for mental health

Sports participation can have a positive impact on the physical health, wellbeing and social integration among people with mental illness and offers a unique opportunity to engage this population in physical activity ([Soundy et al 2015](#)). When it comes to making physical activity palpable and consumable for those with mental health disorders, community sports organisations have a real opportunity. Whilst currently there is a paucity of research, the community programmes attached to professional football have proven successful in working in this area. Below are two case studies:

1. 'It's a Goal' – This intervention involved the delivery of community mental health services within the confines of the 'football club'. The programme was for men aged 18 to 35 years of age and used football as a metaphor within activities to help the men with mental health disorders. The programme which was viewed innovative due to making mental health services accessible within the football stadia delivered improved self-esteem, aided inclusion and helped address the subject of suicide ([Pringle & Sayers, 2004](#)).

2. 'Imagine Your Goals' – The 'Imagine your goals' programme involved the delivery of physical activity sessions specifically targeted at participants with mental health conditions. The sessions were delivered by 16 English Premier League football clubs, in conjunction with England's Time to Change programme, which aims to reduce mental health-related stigma and discrimination. Results indicated significant improvements in personal skills and in individual skills for participants, who also reported that the programme had supported socialising and health and fitness ([Henderson, O'Hara, Thornicroft, & Webber, 2014](#)).

Moving forward

Community sport and professional sport clubs appear to offer an attractive, non-stigmatising location detached from main stream mental health services to deliver physical activity. Sport, or football in particular, may offer a unique opportunity to attract and engage participants with mental health disorders where they are not viewed as a 'patient'.

Caution

As the financial burden of mental health weighs on the purse strings of the Treasury, those in policy-making, commissioning, research and practitioner roles should consider how sport can support positive health outcomes. However, as recent research by [Lansley and Parnell \(2015\)](#) has highlighted, these programmes should be adequately resourced both financially and practically to ensure effective delivery for those experiencing mental health disorders.

In summary, sport participation enables a non-stigmatising and enjoyable way for people with mental health conditions to engage in physical activity and experience health benefits and feel included in society. Provisional results although sparse are promising, but now is the time for people with mental health conditions to be offered the opportunity to stand up, be counted and score goals.

[Click here to read the World Health Organisation paper for the World Federation of Mental Health.](#)