Athlete Mindfulness: The Development and Evaluation of a Mindfulness Based Training Program for Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Student Athletes

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Robin Scholefield, Ph.D.
Dylan Firsick, Ph.D.
Lani Lawrence, Psy.D.
Mark Miller, Psy.D.
Student-Athlete Wellbeing

National Trends in College Mental Health

University Students
(2016 & 2017, National College Health Assessment study)
• In the last 12 months to 2 weeks...
  – 58.4%-60.8% experienced overwhelming anxiety
  – 36.7%-39.2% felt so depressed it was difficult to function
  – 39.6%-39.8% felt overwhelming anger
  – 9.8%-10.3% seriously considered suicide

Student-Athletes (2015, NCAA GOALS study, Paskus & Bell, 2016)
• Mental health issues, anxiety, and depression are on the rise
  – 30% reported overwhelming distress
  – More than 5% increase since 2010
  – Unique sources of stress: Performance expectations, Team responsibilities, Travel schedules, Notoriety

The Problem:
• Time demands complicate mental health delivery
• Nearly every minute of the day is programmed
• Helpful suggestions are often discarded as “Another thing to-do”
• Athlete support services increasingly struggle to manage this issue
Mindfulness

Purpose:
Develop, implement, and evaluate a mindfulness-based training program to improve mental health and wellbeing in college student-athletes.

Why Mindfulness?
• Teaches awareness and understanding of emotions
• In the present moment and Non-Judgmentally

Previous Research:
• Reduced stress, reactivity to negative emotions and increased wellbeing in College students
• Improved focus, wellbeing, cognitive awareness and decreased worry in athletes.

How it Works:
• Uses breathing & meditation
• Increases relaxation
• Identifies thoughts and emotions as temporary
• Improves emotional tolerance
• Develops acceptance of emotion
• Provides choice in How to respond to stress

(Goodman et al., 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Ramler et al., 2016 Thompson et al., 2011)
Program Development

5-Session Program (1 hour)
- Teaching relaxation, present-focused awareness, and acceptance of thoughts and emotions.

Goals:
1. Reduce Anxiety
2. Increase Wellbeing
3. Increase Mindfulness Ability

Division I Student Athlete Sample:
- 1 or more sessions= 61, All 5 sessions = 36
- 12 women and 24 men
- Ages 19-22 (M=19.7), 61% Caucasian
- Men’s Teams: Football, Basketball, Tennis
- Women’s Teams: Volleyball, Soccer

## Session Training Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Learning Goals</th>
<th>Experiential Training</th>
<th>After-Session Assignment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to Mindfulness</td>
<td>Hand Sensation</td>
<td>Breath Meditation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Walking Meditation</td>
<td>Check in to smart phone app</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meditation on App</td>
<td>Selected Readings</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mindfulness of the Body</td>
<td>Body Scan</td>
<td>Body Scan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Raisin exercise</td>
<td>Meditation on App</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meditation on App</td>
<td>Selected Readings</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Acknowledging Emotions</td>
<td>Loving Kindness Exercise</td>
<td>Kindness Meditation on App</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Selected Readings</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Acknowledging Thoughts</td>
<td>Mindfulness of thoughts</td>
<td>Noting Meditation on App</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Selected Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Building a Mindfulness Practice</td>
<td>Finding a home in the body</td>
<td>Creating an ongoing practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outcome

Results:
- Decreased Anxiety
- Improved Mindfulness and Well-being
- Statistically significant effects over time ($p < .05$)

Before Program: 64% did not practice mindfulness

After Program:
- 71% practiced related to life outside Sport (23% practiced 5-10+ times)
- 89% practiced related to Sport (40% practiced 5-10+ times)

Note: Values are mean changes per session. See final report for full statistics and procedures.
Qualitative Results

1 Month Follow-up:
- 85% Utilizing mindfulness the same or more frequently than before program
- 80% found material useful and applicable
- Three most common areas of application:
  - “Improved focus” (28.6%), “Managing anxiety” (20%), & “Increasing overall wellbeing” (17.1%)

Participant Responses
What concepts, techniques, or meditations did you find most helpful?

“Breathing, counting your breaths, and picturing myself doing what I need to do”

“The most helpful idea for me was focusing on something small...like the feeling in your feet or hands when you are nervous. Before a game, it helps me stop overthinking and being anxious.”

What aspects of the program could be improved, added, or modified?

“I think doing more meditations would be better”

“Though I thought the mindfulness training was good...I think we get a lot of guidance on how to cope with emotions/anxiety within athletic performance. However, sometimes I think my performance anxiety/lack of attention does not span from my sport but from my life outside my sport and being able to manage all aspects of my life when I am constantly being pulled in every direction.”
Implementation at Your Campus

Take-aways:

Student-athletes enjoyed mindfulness, found it helpful in alleviating distress, and were willing to continue practicing.

1. Highly Adaptable
   Mindfulness training is easily implemented (as a team), after initial training it can be practiced in a few minutes a day

2. Minimal Resources
   Does not require specialized equipment, customized facilities, or uniform procedures.
   Just a space large enough for a group to meet, copies of selected readings, and a general knowledge of mindfulness practice are required

3. Far-reaching Benefits
   Mental Health and Performance
   Student-athletes and coaches, department staff, athletics directors, administrators

   We have created a digital manual with presentation slides, instructions, and resources for implementation
   Resource Manual and the Final Program Report can be found on the NCAA Innovations Grant Website