

What barriers to help-seeking exist for elite, male athletes?



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Through writing his dissertation, Matthew attempted to uncover the barriers to accessing mental health services that exist for elite, male athletes. Matthew has always been fascinated by competitive sports and, more recently, his education in the field of counselling and psychotherapy has left him concerned with the effects that this highly competitive industry may be having on male athletes' mental health. Writing the dissertation has given Matthew a deep insight into the reasons male athletes struggle to access mental health services, something that he is now able to take forward into a potential counselling career within the sports industry.

Abstract

Introduction - With both men's and athlete's mental health receiving increased attention in recent times so too has the availability of mental health interventions. However, despite this increase, many elite, male athletes remain reluctant to seek help for their mental health issues. This literature review will seek to identify why this may be the case by investigating what barriers to help-seeking exist for elite, male athletes.

Methods - A systematic search of the Academic Search Premier, Scopus and Health Research Premium Collection academic databases was conducted, including articles from the last 10 years. A number of key terms were used and combined with Boolean operators when searching the aforementioned databases and a set of specified inclusion and exclusion criteria was also applied.

Results - The search of the academic databases returned twenty articles appropriate for inclusion in the literature review. Of the barriers to help-seeking for elite, male athletes that were identified, three key themes emerged due to their recurrence throughout the literature: Stigma, lack of mental health literacy and negative past experience.

Conclusion - The evidence curated by this literature review identifies these three themes of stigma, lack of mental health literacy and negative past experience to be significant barriers to help-seeking for elite, male athletes. Stigma, both social and self-stigma, represented the most prominent barrier within the literature, with athletes failing to seek help due to what others may think of them. A lack of mental health literacy, specifically a lack of knowledge about mental health symptoms and services, was also a barrier. Finally, negative experiences of help-seeking in the past also affected athletes' willingness to seek help, with negative experiences of counsellors or psychologists as well as breaches in confidentiality being specifically cited.

Further research should be conducted into interventions and education in an attempt to minimise the effects of these barriers in the future.

Introduction

Background

With studies and bodies of research identifying both the high prevalence of certain mental health outcomes, as well as the suggestion of marginalisation in modern society, men's mental health has been brought to the forefront of mental health discussions in recent years (Affleck, Carmichael and Whitley, 2018). Similarly, the mental health of elite athletes has also recently received increased attention (Chang et al, 2020). Despite the prevalence rates of many mental health disorders being cited as the same in athletes as in non-athletes (Purcell, Gwyther and Rice, 2019), it has been argued that the very nature of competition can cause or exacerbate mental health issues amongst athletes (Chang et al, 2020). Furthermore, factors such as loss of personal autonomy, high athletic identity, injury, failure and retirement have also been cited as potential causes of psychological distress in the athletic community (Hughes and Leavey, 2012). In addition, Chang et al. (2020) argue that certain personality traits prominent in athletes, such as perfectionism, whilst helpful in athletic success, can also contribute to negative mental health outcomes.

One contributing factor to the increased attention on athletes' mental health could be the increase in the number of professional athletes citing their own struggles with their mental health. Athletes such as Michael Phelps, Danny Rose and Mardy Fish, to name just three, have all spoken about their own struggles with mental health as well as the importance of seeking help (HeadsUpGuys, 2022). Additionally, the mental health of elite, male athletes may also have been brought into greater public awareness due to a number of high profile cases in recent times. For example, in 2021, Josh Cavallo became the first openly gay, male, top-flight professional football player (Kemp, 2021), helping bring awareness to the discrimination and homophobia often seen in sport and the impact of this on the mental health of LGBTQ+ athletes, with Cavallo himself speaking about the huge impact that hiding his sexuality had had

on his mental health (Denison, Bevan and Jeanes, 2020; Kemp, 2021). In the same year, England footballers Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka all suffered racial abuse online following their missed penalties during England's loss in the Euro 2020 final (The Athletic, 2021). This event was not only a further example of the all too common racial hostility aimed towards black footballers (Penfold and Cleland, 2022) but also served to highlight the potential negative implications of racial abuse on the mental health of those targeted (Wallace, Nazroo and Becares, 2016).

In line with this increased attention on athletes' mental health, the availability of mental health interventions amongst elite athletes has grown in recent years (Weir, 2018). However, some elite, male athletes still remain cautious about seeking help, particularly whilst still active in their athletic career (Souter, Lewis and Serrant, 2018). Additionally, it has been reported by Smith, Mouzon and Elliott (2018) that men's mental health remains relatively underresearched. These factors, coupled with the fact that men, in general, are often reluctant to seek help for mental health issues (Lynch, Long and Moorhead, 2018) has helped the author of this literature review to decide on the aim and rationale of their study.

Aim and rationale

When choosing a topic for a research project, it is important that the author picks a topic that is related to their professional career (Bell and Waters, 2018; Aveyard, 2019). Picking a topic related to their professional life allows the author to take the knowledge that they have learnt over the course of the project and to apply it in their future practice (Bell and Waters, 2018; Aveyard, 2019). The topic of the literature review should also be of genuine interest to the author as this makes it easier to maintain a level of interest whilst conducting the research project, as well as making it easier to write and communicate their extensive knowledge of the

chosen topic (Aveyard, 2019). As this literature review is being conducted as part of an academic dissertation, it must also be relevant to the field of the qualification (Aveyard, 2019) which, in the case of this dissertation, is counselling and psychotherapy. Furthermore, from an academic standpoint, selecting a topic with enough existing literature is important in order to have enough resources to draw upon to conduct the literature review and to ensure that the assignment is achieved by the submission deadline (Cronin, Ryan and Coughlan, 2008).

The rationale behind choosing this topic for this research project is to attempt to discover the barriers that make elite, male athletes reluctant to seek help for mental health issues. As mentioned earlier, despite the increase in demand for help-seeking interventions (Weir, 2018), some elite, male athletes still find it difficult to access these services (Souter, Lewis and Serrant, 2018). This literature review will attempt to discover why. The author of this literature review wants to have a career in counselling and psychotherapy, potentially with a focus on the sports industry, and therefore believed that selecting this topic would allow them to develop their knowledge and expertise to help with their future practice. With men being far less likely to seek help for mental health issues than women (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al, 2019), identifying barriers to help-seeking is important as improved access to such services can improve individuals' mental health (Xu et al, 2018) and can help avoid many of the negative outcomes of poor mental health among men such as alcohol and substance abuse, suicide (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al, 2019), premature mortality, cancer and cardiovascular disease (Russ et al, 2012). In identifying potential barriers to help-seeking for elite, male athletes, these findings can then be used in practice to make it easier for those athletes seeking help for mental health issues. Therefore, the topic for this dissertation is to identify "*What barriers to help-seeking exist for elite, male athletes?*".

Methodology

A literature review aims to address a specific and clearly formulated question posed by the author (Snyder, 2019). According to Jahan et al (2016), a literature review will attempt to address the question by compiling, surveying and critically examining different sources of research to provide an insight into a particular topic. A literature review achieves this through the use of specific and replicable methods to identify and select studies that can be used to answer the research question posed by the author (Booth, Papaioannou and Sutton, 2012). Additionally, a literature review should aim to include studies that are relevant to the research question, and, in demonstrating that a thorough and systematic search of the literature has been conducted, the author can enhance the credibility of their findings (Booth, Papaioannou and Sutton, 2012). The result of this is that a literature review can help identify gaps in existing knowledge, therefore highlighting key areas that require further research (Winchester and Salji, 2016). For example, during the process of conducting this literature review, the author identified that there is a lack of research into the barriers that exist for professional athletes, competing in the top leagues, series and championships in the world, with regards to seeking help for mental health issues. This literature review has therefore used both a comprehensive and systematic approach to attempt to find and include relevant and credible literature to increase the credibility of the research process and, therefore, its findings.

Furthermore, a literature review will also aim to assess and communicate the quality (or lack of) of the studies included in the review, therefore increasing the internal validity of the review and reducing bias (Booth, Papaioannou and Sutton, 2012; Winchester and Salji, 2016). Its replicable and transparent methods also mean that readers are able to judge the quality of the review for themselves (Booth, Papaioannou and Sutton, 2012). For the purposes of this literature review, the author has attempted to ensure that all of their methods are both replicable and transparent by documenting all of their methodological processes in the following sections.

Question formulation

For this literature review, the author's initial idea for a research question was centered around elite, male athletes, with the aim being to discover what barriers exist for them with regards to seeking help for mental health issues. The author has an interest in sport, particularly athlete psychology, and is also aware of the narrative that exists that high level athletes have a reluctance to seek help for mental health issues (Castaldelli-Maia et al, 2019). Therefore, the author believed that researching why this may be the case would be a viable topic for the purposes of this literature review.

An initial scoping search was used to ascertain whether or not this would be a viable topic. Conducting an initial scoping search allows the author to identify what literature on the topic already exists as well as helps to formulate the author's research question and search strategy (University of Hull, 2021) . Having conducted the initial scoping search, it appeared that there was enough existing literature available for this to be a valid topic for the author's literature review. The author therefore decided on the following research question:

“What barriers to help-seeking exist for elite, male athletes?”

With regards to the research question, the author's initial interpretation of the term 'elite' in the context of male athletes excluded college and student athletes. However, as will be explored later in this review, the parameters of the main literature search were subsequently expanded to include both college and student athletes. Informed by existing literature, it has been argued that no clear definition of the term 'elite' in the context of sport exists (McAuley, Baker and Kelly, 2021). Therefore, the author decided that, to improve the quality and rigour of the review, that it was important to include both college and student athletes when attempting to answer the research question. The research question did not change, however the parameters

of the search were widened to increase the number of studies that could be included in the review, through the re-defining of the term 'elite athletes'.

Search strategy

Databases

Whilst conducting the main literature search, the author chose to search for articles on a number of different academic databases. Academic databases contain scholarly and peer-reviewed articles for inclusion in literature reviews and allow users to narrow searches and find the information they need quickly (EBSCO, 2015). Accessing credible, peer-reviewed articles from academic databases also improves the credibility of the literature review (The University of Sheffield, 2021). It is important to access a number of different academic databases as this enables a larger number of articles to be recalled, improving the validity of the review (Zhao, 2014; Bramer et al, 2017). Including a greater number of articles also limits selection bias (Zhao, 2014; Wescott, 2021).

As a result, the author included articles from the Academic Search Premier, Scopus and Health Research Premium Collection academic databases for this literature review. These databases allowed the author access to a broad collection of published, peer-reviewed articles and are recommended for reviews conducted in the field of counselling and psychotherapy (University of Liverpool, 2020; Dublin Business School, 2022; Birmingham City University 2022). The Health Research Premium Collection also includes databases such as Medline, Psychology Database and Consumer Health Database (University of Liverpool, 2020). Other recommended databases such as Sage Research Methods, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Wiley Online Library

were also accessed and assessed for articles, however these databases did not return any relevant results.

Key terms

For the main literature search, it is argued by Winchester and Salji (2016) that the author should aim to address the objectives and scope of the literature review when deciding upon what key terms to use when searching academic databases. With the focus of this literature review being on the barriers to mental health help-seeking for elite athletes, the author therefore decided to divide the key terms used into three categories, which can broadly be defined as ‘athletes’, ‘barriers’ and ‘help-seeking’. When excluding or including college and student athletes at different points throughout the search, a fourth category was also employed, defined by the author as ‘collegiate’.

The author then expanded upon these terms by using synonyms and related terms in an attempt to identify all the key areas of the literature (Oliver, 2012; University of Hull 2022). As a result, the following key terms were used when searching various academic databases:

Athletes	Barriers	Help-seeking	Collegiate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Athletes - Sportsmen - Sportsperson - Competitor - Sportsman - Athlete 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Barriers - Obstacles - Challenges - Difficulties - Issues - Problems - Limitations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collegiate - College - Student

For the exact combination of key terms used and databases searched see appendix 1.

Boolean Operators

To narrow the literature search down to the most relevant articles, Boolean operators such as ‘AND’, ‘OR’ and ‘NOT’ were used and combined with these key terms. For example, the Boolean operator ‘OR’ was used in conjunction with terms such as ‘athletes’ OR ‘sportsmen’ OR ‘competitor’. The Boolean operator ‘AND’ was then used to combine those terms with ones such as ‘barriers’ OR ‘challenges’ OR ‘difficulties’ etc. Using Boolean operators has the potential to increase the accuracy of a search which, in turn, can lead to more relevant results (University of Exeter, 2022). Furthermore, as the author’s initial interpretation of the term ‘elite’ excluded college and student athletes, during initial searches the Boolean operator ‘NOT’ was also used in conjunction with search terms such as ‘college’ OR ‘student’ OR ‘collegiate’ to eliminate articles featuring college and student athletes as a number were appearing during the literature search. At the time, the author did not believe these to be relevant in answering their research question. Utilising the Boolean operators greatly reduced the number of hits down to a much more manageable level for the author, with the lowest number of articles returned being eleven. The highest number of articles returned was 124, which was still a manageable number for the author, however this was something of an anomaly found when searching the Health Research Premium Collection database, and none of the other searches conducted returned more than thirty five results. These low levels of articles returned shows that the Boolean operators helped to make the results of the search more relevant.

Inclusion/Exclusion criteria

As the author’s research question focuses on elite, male athletes, during the main literature search articles featuring exclusively female athletes were discounted. Articles featuring both male and female athletes were included, however during the review of the literature the author

will only be focusing on the results from the male participants. If the gender of participants are not specified, however, then the results will still be included due to their relevance to answering the research question.

For the purposes of their literature review, the author decided only to include peer-reviewed articles as part of the literature search. Peer-reviewed articles are generally accepted as higher quality research due to them being checked through the academic process (Kraus, Breier and Dasi-Rodriguez, 2020). However, as a note of caution, it has also been argued that published peer-reviewed articles are skewed towards research with positive results, and therefore may not be an accurate representation of the existing research (Keenan, 2018). In addition, only articles published in the last ten years were to be selected for the literature review. This was to ensure that the most relevant research was included as well as to ensure that the number of articles was not too many to review (Xiao and Watson, 2019). Furthermore, only articles written in the English language were to be included. All articles should also have full text availability.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Articles featuring both male and female athletes - Peer-reviewed articles - Published in the last ten years - Written in the English language - Full text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Articles featuring exclusively female athletes - Articles not peer-reviewed - Articles published longer than 10 years ago - Articles not written in the English language - Articles not available in full text

Searching the literature

When selecting articles to include in the literature review, the author initially screened the titles of the articles to assess their relevance before conducting a screening of the entire article. Screening an article enables the author to ascertain its relevance for selection in the literature review through the screening of its title and abstract (Foo et al, 2021).

The results of initial searches of academic databases yielded three results that specifically answered the author's research question of what barriers to help-seeking exist for elite athletes, with one and two results coming from the Academic Search Premier and Scopus databases respectively. However, with only three results, it became apparent to the author the need to expand their literature search to include articles that mentioned or referred to barriers to help-seeking for elite athletes, rather than only including articles where the aim of the article was to specifically address barriers to help-seeking for elite athletes.

The initial searches of academic databases were therefore conducted again but with these wider parameters for article inclusion being used. This yielded an additional seven articles, bringing the total number of useful articles up to ten. However, with only three of the articles being highly specific to the author's research question, the author felt that more articles were needed in order to improve the quality and rigour of the literature review as well as to limit selection bias.

Therefore, because of the highly competitive nature of college sport, the author decided that the inclusion of articles featuring college and student athletes was relevant due to the similarities between their experiences and those of professional athletes. As referenced earlier in this review, with it being argued that no clear definition of the term 'elite' in the context of sport exists (McAuley, Baker and Kelly, 2021), the author came to the conclusion that articles featuring college and student athletes would be relevant in addressing their research question.

Conducting the searches of academic databases again, only this time with the inclusion of college or student athletes, yielded an additional six articles of relevance for the literature review, improving the quality, rigour and comprehensiveness of the literature review.

When searching the Health Research Premium Collection database, however, the search terms used by the author had to be severely restricted. This was due to the large number of hits that the initial search terms were returning. Therefore, the search terms used for this database were ‘athletes’ AND ‘barriers’ AND ‘help seeking’. In addition, the subject ‘athletes’ had to be selected as well as limiting the results to only include articles written in the English language in order to lower the number of hits down to a manageable level for the author.

Furthermore, the author also wanted to reduce selection bias, as with so many hits being returned the author would have had to have limited the number of articles selected for inclusion in the literature review in an attempt to keep the workload needed for the literature review at a manageable level. Therefore, with so many hits being returned, the author would have had to have been selective with what articles they chose to include, therefore increasing selection bias. Reducing selection bias is important as personal bias in selecting articles to include can have an impact on the validity of the review (Keenan, 2018), as articles may unintentionally be chosen based on the author’s preconceived ideas or opinions on the subject (Winchester and Salji, 2016). In ensuring that search hits were kept to a manageable level, where being selective with what articles to include was not necessary, the author hoped to reduce this selection bias as much as possible.

Finally, having completed their searches of numerous academic databases, the author then reviewed the references lists of the articles they had deemed appropriate for the literature review. This was done in an attempt to achieve as comprehensive a collection of articles as possible. Utilising multiple sources for articles allows for a more comprehensive collection of

information on a subject (Winchester and Salji, 2016). Reviewing the reference lists of articles also reduces the risk of missing additional articles relevant for the literature review (Horsley, Dingwall and Sampson, 2011). As a result, the author also decided to include any relevant articles from these reference lists irrespective of their published date. As the article has been used by a previous reputable source this improves the relevance of the article. Reviewing existing reference lists enabled the author to discover another four appropriate articles for the literature review, bringing the total number of articles selected for inclusion in the review up to twenty. Furthermore, when the same articles kept appearing again and again in various reference lists, it became apparent to the author that saturation of the literature had been achieved. When the same articles continue to appear repeatedly then it is likely that saturation has been achieved and that the adequate number of articles has been discovered (Ogilvie et al, 2005).

Upon the completion of the author's search of academic databases and reference lists, the author then completed a full-text screening of all of the collected articles to fully assess their relevance and credibility. Conducting a full-text screening allows the author to ensure that the article meets all of the inclusion criteria (Foo et al, 2021). For this literature review, all of the collected articles were deemed relevant following full-text screening.

Whilst all were deemed relevant, when reviewing the credibility of the articles selected for inclusion, the quality of the articles did vary significantly. However, the credibility of three articles did stand out above the rest, with two of these articles being Systematic Reviews and the third being a Narrative Systematic Review. Systematic Reviews are considered to be the gold standard in the field of research as they aim to identify and include all the relevant evidence in order to answer a proposed research question through the use of systematic, transparent and reproducible methods (Snyder, 2019).

The two systematic reviews included in this literature review, conducted by Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019) and Bu et al (2020), both provide a detailed, transparent and replicable account of their systematic process and methods and both accessed credible academic databases when searching the literature for their reviews. Furthermore, the systematic review by Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019) also included a large number of articles at 52. The study conducted by Bu et al (2020) included relatively less articles at just five. However, those five articles themselves did include 1239 participants in total, therefore constituting a large sample size. Having a large sample size typically makes the results of the study more generalisable (Biau, Kerneis and Porcher, 2008). As a result of the credibility of these two articles, greater emphasis will be placed upon their findings in this literature review.

The Narrative Systematic Review mentioned previously, conducted by Rice et al (2016), is also a credible source for this literature review, with its systematic methods also being documented and credible academic databases being accessed. In addition, at 60, a large number of articles were also included. However, some limitations of the review do exist. Acknowledged by the review itself, the overall quality of the studies included in the review is poor, and very few of these studies reference barriers to help-seeking, which makes its relevance for this literature review somewhat limited. Furthermore, the review was also funded by a number of sporting bodies, which has the potential to influence both the results and the conclusions of the review (Forsyth et al, 2014). Despite these limitations though, overall, the review conducted by Rice et al (2016) still has good credibility and is one of the stronger articles featured in this literature review. As a result, emphasis will still be placed on this article's findings, although not as much as the previous two articles.

Of the articles included in this literature review, there is an additional fourth article of particular credibility, a Randomised Controlled Trial conducted by Gulliver et al (2012). Randomised Controlled Trials are considered to be highly credible and sit just below Systematic Reviews

in the traditional evidence hierarchy pyramid (Murad et al, 2016). Like the previous articles mentioned, the study conducted by Gulliver et al (2012) provides a detailed and systematic account of its methods, adding further to its credibility. However, again, some limitations do exist, particularly with regards to the participants of the study. Whilst the overall sample size is good, only sixteen of the 59 participants were male, therefore limiting the generalisability of the results for the purposes of this literature review focusing exclusively on male athletes. Therefore, whilst this article still holds good credibility, less emphasis will be placed on it compared to the previous three articles.

The remaining sixteen articles included in this literature review consist of predominantly Cross-Sectional Studies and Narrative Reviews. Cross-Sectional Studies are described by Kesmodel (2018) as being the most relevant study design when collecting information at any given point in time and can help to provide estimates of prevalence within a cross-section of a given population. For example, a number of the articles included in this literature review have collected information regarding athletes attitudes towards help-seeking or the prevalence of help-seeking amongst athletes. Therefore, whilst not as credible as Systematic Reviews or Randomised Controlled Trials, these Cross-Sectional Studies are still valuable to this literature review as they help to construct as comprehensive a collection of information on the subject as possible.

Narrative Reviews rank even lower down on the evidence hierarchy pyramid (Lander and Balka, 2019) and are therefore less credible again. Despite this, Narrative Reviews are often useful as they collect many sources of information and present it to provide a broad perspective on a topic (Green, Johnson and Adams, 2006) and, therefore, as with Cross-Sectional Studies, their inclusion in this literature review is still of value.

As reported, twenty articles in total were included in this literature review. Four relevant articles were included from the Academic Search Premier database, seven from the Scopus database and five from the Health Research Premium Collection. Four articles were then included from the reference lists of those articles found via database searches. For complete search strategy and prisma flow chart see appendixes 1 and 2 respectively.

Analysis

When analysing the results for this literature review, thematic analysis will be used by the author in order to identify and report themes present within the included articles (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method of analysis that allows the author to identify common themes across the entire collected dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2012). By identifying these common themes, the author can start to make sense of the meanings behind the themes which, in turn, allows the author to identify what is important in relation to answering the research question of the review (Braun and Clarke, 2012). A six phase process to conducting thematic analysis is proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021) and will be followed by the author for the purposes of this literature review:

1. Familiarisation
2. Data coding
3. Generating initial themes
4. Reviewing and developing themes
5. Refining, defining and naming themes
6. Writing the report

When conducting the thematic analysis, an inductive approach will be taken when identifying themes within the literature. Using an inductive approach when conducting a thematic analysis means that the themes will be derived directly from the literature and not actively searched for based on any preconceptions of what the themes should be on behalf of the author (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2021). Furthermore, when reporting findings, it is important to comment on the quality of the data and its sources, placing greater emphasis on stronger, more rigorous evidence in order to reduce bias (Winchester and Salji, 2016). However, despite these benefits it should be noted that inconsistencies can arise when using thematic analysis due to the flexibility it offers the researcher when deriving themes from the literature (Nowell, 2017).

Findings

The author will review the twenty articles selected for inclusion in this literature review and identify the themes present within the literature regarding the barriers to help-seeking that exist for elite, male athletes. As mentioned earlier in this review, due to their credibility, greater emphasis will be placed upon the themes within the findings of the articles by Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019), Bu et al (2020) and Rice et al (2016). Whilst many themes were present in the literature, three key themes were identified by the author as being of particular importance due to their recurrence throughout the literature:

1. Stigma
2. Lack of mental Health Literacy
3. Negative past experience

For findings summary table see appendix 3.

Stigma

Stigma can be defined as either stereotypes or negative views attributed to an individual or group of people (Dudley, 2000). It is also argued by Dudley (2000) that stigma occurs when the individual or group are seen as different or inferior to societal norms. Stigma can be further divided into a number of categories including: Social stigma and Self-Stigma (Ahmedani, 2011). Social stigma is a social belief system embedded in society where a large proportion of the population view an individual or group as inferior (Ahmedani, 2011). Self-stigma occurs when social stigma is internalised by an individual and can lead to them viewing either themselves or their situation in a negative way (Ahmedani, 2011). In the context of elite, male athletes and their mental health, social stigma can manifest itself as public stereotypes,

translating into discriminatory behaviour towards those with mental health disorders, whilst self-stigma involves the internalisation of these stereotypes and behaviours of others, leading those who suffer from mental health disorders to view themselves as less valued as a result of their disorder (Corrigan and Watson, 2002). According to the literature, it would appear that elite, male athletes have internalised the social stigma that psychological distress attracts and this has a negative impact on their help-seeking behaviours.

Focusing first on the systematic review conducted by Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019), the article reported stigma as being the strongest barrier to help-seeking amongst athletes. In total, eighteen articles included in Castaldelli-Maia et al's (2019) systematic review referenced stigma as being a barrier to help-seeking. Included in the findings of these eighteen articles was the correlation between both public and self-stigma and treatment-seeking for athletes, with higher levels of both types of stigma having a negative effect on athletes seeking help for their mental health symptoms or disorders (Castaldelli-Maia et al, 2019).

Stigma was also discovered to be a barrier to help-seeking within the systematic review conducted by Bu et al (2020), which reviewed the effects of mental health literacy interventions on athletes' help-seeking behaviours. They discovered that an increase in mental health literacy amongst athletes reduced stigma and increased help-seeking behaviour. Two articles reviewed by Bu et al (2020) provide evidence for the influence of stigma on help-seeking. The first article, a case control study by Kern et al (2017), reported that the help-seeking intentions of athletes significantly increased, whilst the second, a Randomised Controlled Trial by Gulliver et al (2012), which also features in this literature review, reported small increases in help-seeking behaviour amongst the athletes (Bu et al, 2020). Therefore, the evidence could suggest that higher levels of stigma represent a barrier to athletes' help-seeking as both their help-seeking intentions and behaviours are negatively affected. With regards to risk of bias, Bu et al (2020) rated the article by Gulliver et al (2012) as low risk due to its implementation of

random sequence generation, allocation concealment and blinded participants. Random sequence generation ensures that participants are randomly assigned to different interventions within the study, whilst allocation concealment ensures that this process is conducted without knowledge of which participants will receive which intervention in an effort to avoid the researchers selecting participants based on any perceived suitability to each intervention (Dettori, 2010). Blinding involves concealing the participants from which intervention group they will be involved in an attempt to reduce any preconceptions as to the perceived benefits of the intervention (Karanicolas, Farrokhyar and Bhandari, 2010). The inclusion of the study by Gulliver et al (2012), therefore, makes the systematic review by Bu et al (2020) more rigorous. In addition, the credibility of this literature review is improved due to the inclusion of the Randomised Controlled Trial by Gulliver et al (2012) as this article also features in the systematic review by Bu et al (2020).

Focusing specifically on the Randomised Controlled Trial by Gulliver et al (2012), the aim of the study was to explore the impact of internet-based interventions at promoting mental health help-seeking amongst elite athletes. As reported, the study found that a mental health literacy/destigmatisation intervention demonstrated a small increase in help-seeking behaviour amongst the athlete participants (Gulliver et al, 2012). Whilst this improvement was minimal, Gulliver et al (2012) believe that this could be due to the fact that an online resource promoting mental health may have attracted participants who already demonstrated less stigma towards mental health and may have a greater tendency towards help-seeking, thus reducing the opportunity for greater improvements in help-seeking behaviour. Furthermore, only sixteen of the 59 participants were male, which limits the generalisability of the study's findings with regards to this literature review.

A qualitative Cross-Sectional Study by Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2012), aimed at exploring both barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young elite athletes,

also suggests that stigma is a major barrier to help-seeking for elite athletes. Over 40% of the barriers to help-seeking listed by the participants of the study were related to stigma (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012). These included both public and personal stigma (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012). However, it should be noted that the sample size of the study was small, containing only fifteen athletes, nine of which were male (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012). Furthermore, the focus group discussion was structured, with a large number of questions focusing specifically on stigma (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012), which could have influenced the participants responses.

The theme of stigma as a barrier to help-seeking also emerged in a mixed-methods Cross-Sectional study by Kola-Palmer et al (2020), featuring 167 professional Rugby League players. Whilst not the main theme that emerged from the findings of the study, perceived stigma was identified by 30% of the participants as a leading barrier of help-seeking behaviour (Kola-Palmer et al, 2020). These participants, however, were recruited on a voluntary basis(Kola-Palmer et al, 2020), which limits the generalisability of the findings as the voluntary subject participation makes the study at risk of sampling bias (Cheung et al, 2017). In addition, help-seeking was only measured in relation to only one source of help, Sporting Chance (Kola-Palmer et al, 2020), and therefore the findings of the study cannot be applied to other help-seeking services.

Another Cross-Sectional study, conducted by Ojio et al (2021), also focused on the mental health help-seeking of Rugby players, this time featuring top league players in Japan who were also born in the country. The study also featured a slightly larger sample size of 233 (Ojio et al, 2021). Stigma again featured in the findings of the study, with participants reporting a perceived lack of acceptance from others and an unwillingness to display mental health symptoms due to what other people will think of them, resulting in negative help-seeking behaviours (Ojio et al, 2021). As with the similar study by Kola-Palmer et al (2020), however,

the main limitation of this study is the voluntary nature of the participants as people with greater mental-health stigma or symptoms may not be willing to participate, again, limiting the generalisability of the findings (Ojio et al, 2021).

Social stigma was specifically identified as a barrier to help-seeking for NCAA Division I-AA and Division I-AA student athletes in a Cross-Sectional study by Lopez and Levy (2013). The results of the study found that student athletes appear to place significant importance of the perceptions of others, believing that they will be perceived as unhealthy or weak for seeking help for mental health problems and, as a result, are reluctant to seek counselling (Lopez and Levy, 2013). A particular strength of the cited study is its use of existing questionnaires, which improves the validity of the study and also offers the opportunity for the results to be compared across studies (Boynton and Greenhalgh, 2004). Despite this strength, a number of limitations to this study also exist. Firstly, only 54 of the 165 participants were male (Lopez and Levy, 2013), which limits the generalisability of the findings for the purposes of this literature review. Secondly, whilst multiple different sports were represented by the participants of the study, the authors argue that the results cannot be generalised to all collegiate or professional athletes due to the fact that participants were recruited exclusively from NCAA Division I-AA and Division I-AA institutions (Lopez and Levy, 2013). This somewhat limits the generalisability of the findings of this literature review and, therefore, it could be argued that further research needs to be conducted featuring athletes from multiple divisions to discover if the findings match those of Lopez and Levy (2013).

Stigma was also the focus of the hypothesis put forward in a Cross-Sectional study by Kroshus (2017) aimed at discovering whether or not athletes who perceived less stigma from their coach, and who had more positive coping skills, would find it easier to access psychological help for mental health issues. The results of the study found that 20.34% of participants agreed that their coach would have negative attitudes towards athletes seeking mental health treatment,

with lower coach stigma scores correlating with an increased willingness for athletes to seek help (Kroshus, 2017). Despite this finding, the author did conclude that the overall influence of perceived coach stigma on athletes' help-seeking attitudes was minor (Kroshus, 2017). A severe limitation of this study, however, is the leading nature of the questions in the survey given to participants regarding coach stigma. Leading questions can influence a participant to respond in a certain way, therefore generating bias in the responses (Scott and Steward, 2018).

A Cross-Sectional study by Watson (2006) compared 135 student-athletes and 132 non-athlete students and the factors that influence their decision to seek counselling services. Social stigma was again a common theme for the student-athlete group, with 12.4% of the group reporting that 'perception of others' is a reason they would not access counselling services (Watson, 2006). Surprisingly, 'perception of others' was significantly more prominent in the non-athlete group, with 24% of participants reporting this to be a factor (Watson, 2006). However, the use of a qualitative question to determine factors related to the participants' decisions to seek counselling may represent a limitation of this study. For, example, Rahman (2016) argues that data interpretation and analysis is particularly difficult with qualitative research. It could be argued that this lack of interpretation can be seen in the data collected by Watson (2006), as 'personal discomfort' is cited as being a factor for not seeking counselling amongst 13.3% and 10.4% of athletes and non-athletes respectively. Personal discomfort appears to be a very vague interpretation of the results and could, potentially, include a number of responses from the participants, including stigma. This is, again, eluded to by Rahman (2016), stating that qualitative research can limit both the credibility and generalisability of the results.

Finally, within the articles included for this literature review, stigma was recognised as a barrier to help-seeking for athletes in three Narrative Reviews conducted by Souter, Lewis and Serrant (2018), Stillman et al (2019) and King et al (2021). All three articles cite stigma as being a barrier to help-seeking, with the articles by both Souter, Lewis and Serrant (2018) and Stillman

et al (2019) specifically referencing the finding that athletes do not want to be seen as weak to others. A strength of the Narrative Reviews by Souter, Lewis and Serrant (2018) and King et al (2021) is that they include articles present not only present in this literature review but also in each other's narrative reviews which, as mentioned previously, increases credibility. The articles included in Souter, Lewis and Serrant's (2018) Narrative Review which also feature in this literature review are those by Watson (2005), Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2012) and Roberts, Faull and Tod (2016), whilst the articles referenced by King et al (2021) also include the article by Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2012) as well as those by Lopez and Levy (2013) and Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019). Additionally, two authors both set the inclusion and exclusion criteria and selected the articles for inclusion in the narrative review by King et al (2021) to reduce selection bias.

However, despite the evidence found within the literature that stigma has a negative impact on athletes' help-seeking, certain findings from the systematic review by Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019) may provide some contradictory evidence. Whilst eighteen articles included in the review referenced stigma as being a barrier to help-seeking, seven intervention studies were also identified, studies where, despite decreasing the stigma attached to mental health disorders, no effects were reported on athletes' mental health treatment seeking tendencies (Castaldelli-Maia et al, 2019). However, Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019) reported that these interventions were, generally, conducted over a short time period and more time may have been needed for an effect on athletes' help-seeking tendencies to be measured. Therefore, in conclusion, whilst many studies included in this literature review suggest that stigma represents a major barrier to help-seeking for elite, male athletes, the findings of Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019) do raise some questions and perhaps suggests that the aforementioned interventions should be conducted again over a longer period of time to establish whether or not the same results would occur.

Lack of Mental Health Literacy

The second most common theme found when reviewing the literature was a lack of mental health literacy. Mental health literacy is a term used to refer to an individual's knowledge and beliefs of mental health disorders which, in turn, influence the recognition, management and prevention of such disorders (Jorm et al, 1997). An individual with greater mental health literacy will likely find it easier to recognise mental health disorders, will have a better knowledge with regards to mental health treatments and will likely have attitudes that facilitate appropriate help-seeking for mental health related problems (Jorm et al, 1997). Therefore, an individual's mental health literacy will influence their symptom-management activities (Jorm, 2000). The topic is growing in importance amongst health policymakers, indicated with a 6-fold increase in mental health literacy publications seen in the period between 2005 and 2019 (Sweileh, 2021), and a lack of mental health literacy as a barrier to help-seeking for elite, male athletes is also present as an important theme within this literature review.

A lack of mental health literacy was cited as a barrier to help-seeking across a variety of different sports, across multiple levels, in four studies included in the systematic review by Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019). One of these studies was the Randomised Controlled Trial by Gulliver et al (2012) which also features in this literature review, again, increasing the credibility of this review. Of the mental health literacy interventions evaluated by Bu et al (2020), three studies evaluated help-seeking attitudes, two studies help-seeking intentions and one help-seeking behaviour. The Randomised Controlled Trial by Gulliver et al (2012) featured in all three categories. All featured studies (Pierce et al, 2010; Gulliver et al, 2012; Kern et al, 2017) reported improvements in their respective categories as a result of the mental health literacy interventions (Bu et al, 2020), indicating that improving levels of mental health literacy can help improve help-seeking attitudes, intentions and behaviour amongst elite, male athletes. The Narrative Systematic Review by Rice et al (2016) also features the Randomised Controlled

Trial by Gulliver et al (2012), referencing the increase in mental health literacy as a result of the trial which, Rice et al (2016) argue, is an essential component of the help-seeking process. The final article included in this literature review that features the findings of the Randomised Controlled Trial by Gulliver et al (2012) is a narrative review by Uphill, Sly and Swain (2016), with the article citing that the trial concluded that mental health literacy was a barrier to help-seeking for athletes.

A lack of knowledge about both the symptoms of mental health disorders and mental health services, two indicators of poor mental health literacy (Jorm et al, 1997), were referenced as being major barriers to help-seeking by Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2012). Athletes reported that it was often difficult to apply their knowledge of mental health to themselves to distinguish the difference between general feelings of tiredness or sadness and symptoms of a mental health disorder, therefore impacting their help-seeking behaviour (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012). A lack of mental health related knowledge was also cited by Ojio et al (2021) as being a significant barrier to help-seeking. This is substantiated by the study by Kola-Palmer et al (2020) who found that athletes with better mental health literacy were 1.22 times more likely to report seeking help. Additionally, athletes in the study reported that a lack of knowledge or awareness of both mental health issues and available treatments were barriers to them for seeking help (Kola-Palmer et al, 2020).

It could be suggested, therefore, that the lack of mental health literacy being cited as a barrier to help-seeking for elite, male athletes, is significantly affected by interventions designed to improve athletes' mental health literacy. It would appear that interventions designed to improve knowledge of both mental health symptoms and treatments can go a significant way to reducing such barriers and, as a result, it could be argued that such interventions should be integrated into the athletic community.

Negative Past Experience

Negative past experiences of help-seeking have been cited in existing literature as being a barrier to further help-seeking in a number of different demographics and professions including men (Lynch, Long and Moorhead, 2018; Hogan, Clarke and Ward, 2021), medical students (Dyrbye et al, 2015) and carers (Challacombe and Halpin, 2022). The theme of negative past experiences affecting elite, male athletes also emerged when reviewing the articles included in this literature review.

The systematic review conducted by Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019) reported negative past experiences to be a barrier to help-seeking in a number of articles featured in the review. Similarly, the narrative systematic review and the narrative review by Rice et al (2016) and Uphill, Sly and Swain (2016) respectively, both make reference to the qualitative Cross-Sectional Study by Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2012), again, citing negative past experiences as being a barrier to help-seeking for athletes. Participants in that study by Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2012) believed that having a negative past experience with a particular counsellor or psychologist would influence a person's willingness to access help-seeking again. However, according to Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2012), the greatest barrier to help-seeking reported by the participants, with regards to negative past experiences, was if someone had breached confidentiality, therefore making it difficult for the individual to trust another mental health care provider in the future.

Discussion

Having reviewed the existing literature, the barriers to help-seeking that exist for elite, male athletes may have become clearer. The three themes of stigma, lack of mental health literacy and negative past experience as discussed in this literature review appear to be significant due to their frequent occurrences throughout existing articles. Stigma represented by far the most common theme found within the literature, with higher levels of both public and self-stigma having a negative effect on athletes' help-seeking behaviour (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012; Castaldelli-Maia et al, 2019; Kola-Palmer et al, 2020). This negative impact on help-seeking behaviour could be a result of the emotional impact of stigma, with feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment often being cited amongst people experiencing stigma (Dinos et al, 2004; Ashby and Carr, 2020). For athletes, this may impact help-seeking in two ways. Firstly, athletes may be less likely to seek help due to the feelings of shame this evokes (Dinos et al, 2004; Ashby and Carr, 2020). Secondly, stigma may also evoke feelings of shame in athletes who have received help in the past, making them less likely to seek help in the future. Public stigma, or perceived public stigma, appeared to be a particular barrier for athletes as a lack of acceptance from others and a negative perception of what other people will think of them, including being perceived as unhealthy or weak, was a common barrier reported within the literature (Watson, 2006; Lopez and Levy, 2013; Ojio et al, 2021). In the arena of competitive sport, athletes are judged on their perfection and excellence by many people in their field including their opponents, coaches, spectators, judges and the media (Hagglund et al, 2019; Graff-Kallevag and Stalsett, 2021). With athletic culture valuing psychological traits such as perseverance and mental toughness, in turn creating a stigma around perceived weakness, it is likely that athletes would find it difficult to admit to such psychological weaknesses for fear of being negatively judged (Hagglund et al, 2019). However, in their Cross-Sectional study, Watson (2006) reported 'perception of others' being a significantly

more prominent barrier to non-athletes, so further research may need to be conducted to verify these findings. In contrast, athletes who also perceived less stigma from their coaches also found it easier to access psychological help for mental health issues (Kroshus, 2017). Coaches play an important role in the life of athletes due to their influence, proximity and the frequency of time that they spend together (Murphy and Sullivan, 2021). Open and honest communication between coach and athlete has been cited as an important factor in reducing stigma and helping an athlete to feel supported (Murphy and Sullivan, 2021), and, whilst some coaches recognise this importance (Mazzer and Rickwood, 2014), according to Bissett, Kroshus and Hebard (2020) further work needs to be done to educate coaches in how they can facilitate a culture that promotes mental health help-seeking behaviour. This evidence around stigma was supported by several interventions that were designed to reduce stigma amongst athletes, with these interventions seeing increases in both help-seeking intentions and behaviours as a result of the lower levels of stigma (Gulliver et al, 2012; Bu et al, 2020). Therefore, moving forward, it may be beneficial for such destigmatising interventions to be further researched and, if the same benefits to athletes' help-seeking behaviours are found, implemented into the athletic community. Furthermore, the increased education of coaches into how best they can support their athletes with regards to help-seeking should also be facilitated. Current educational resources are lacking in this area and many professional coaching training programs, such as Uefa's football coaching programs, do not include mental health training as part of their courses (Bissett, Kroshus and Hebard, 2020; Cunningham, 2021).

Additionally, a lack of mental health literacy was identified as a barrier to help-seeking for elite, male athletes as the athletes featured in the literature were often reported as lacking the appropriate knowledge and attitudes towards mental health disorders and treatments conducive of effective help-seeking (Gulliver et al, 2012; Uphill, Sly and Swain, 2016; Castaldelli-Maia et al, 2019; Ojio et al, 2021). Specifically, a lack of knowledge of mental health services and

symptoms, with athletes finding it difficult to distinguish between mental health disorders and general tiredness or sadness, were cited as being particular elements of mental health literacy that these athletes lacked (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen,2012). For athletes, this lack of knowledge could be a result of the athletic community's constant pursuit of psychological strength and the attributes associated with it, which some believe has led to a lack of attention towards mental ill health (Hagglund et al, 2019). Certainly, good mental health literacy is cited as being an essential component of the help-seeking process, with athletes who possess better mental health literacy being 1.22 times more likely to report seeking help (Rice et al, 2016; Kola-Palmer et al, 2020). This is something that the existing literature would suggest, as increases in mental health literacy, as a result of mental health literacy interventions, not only reduces the stigma around poor mental health and help-seeking interventions but can also lead to increases in athletes' help-seeking attitudes, intentions and behaviour (Bu et al, 2020). Again, as with destigmatising interventions, it may be beneficial to the athletic community for mental health literacy interventions to be further research and implemented in order to improve athletes' help-seeking behaviours.

Finally, any negative past experiences with help-seeking was also cited as being a barrier to further help-seeking for elite, male athletes (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012; Rice et al, 2016; Uphill, Sly and Swain, 2016; Castaldelli-Maia et al, 2019). Negative past experiences with either a particular counsellor or psychologist were amongst the specific factors mentioned by athletes within the literature, with past breaches in confidentiality perhaps being the biggest contributing factor to an athletes' negative past experiences of help-seeking (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012). This would, in turn, make it difficult for them to trust another mental health care provider in the future, therefore affecting their willingness to seek help for any mental health related problems in the future (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2012). Further research could therefore be conducted into athletes' negative past experiences with the

intention of positively influencing mental health care practices moving forward, in the hope of reducing the occurrences of similar negative experiences for athletes seeking help for mental health disorders in the future.

Limitations

The first limitation of this literature review is that it was conducted as part of an academic dissertation, meaning that the author was a novice researcher who had to work on the project alone. These limitations of both experience and human resources may have affected the thoroughness of the literature review, as more experience and the assistance of additional researchers could have made it easier for the author to synthesise the existing literature (Aveyard, 2019). Certainly, the presence of an additional researcher would have been particularly beneficial during the study selection process, as a conventional double-screening process limits both discrepancies and the likelihood of human error when choosing which articles to include (Waffenschmidt et al, 2019). Furthermore, as reported earlier in the review, the scope of the review was somewhat limited due to the need to reduce the number of hits down to a manageable level for the author when searching the Health Research Premium Collection database. In doing so, the author may have failed to include relevant articles and, as a result, could have affected the comprehensiveness and rigor of the review (Booth, Papaioannou and Sutton, 2012; Snyder, 2019). With additional researchers working on the project, the need to limit the scope of the review would have been lessened and a more comprehensive search of the literature could have been achieved (Booth, Papaioannou and Sutton, 2012). In addition, the presence of an academic deadline may have also limited the thoroughness of the review due to the time restraints imposed (Aveyard, 2019).

The lack of an additional researcher also has carryover to the next prominent limitation of this literature review which is the potential for selection bias present within the study. With only one researcher there is a greater chance of personal bias when selecting articles for inclusion as there is no opportunity for discussion and so articles are more likely to be chosen based upon the author's preconceived ideas or opinions (Winchester and Salji, 2016; Waffenschmidt et al, 2019). As mentioned previously, an additional limitation of this review could also be the use of thematic analysis as, whilst it has its benefits, the flexibility it offers in allowing the researcher to derive themes from the literature can lead to some inconsistencies when interpreting the data (Nowell, 2017).

Perhaps the greatest limitation of this literature review, however, is the limited number of articles included featuring exclusively male athletes. The diversity of sports featured in these articles was also limited. In addition, the results of studies featuring both male and female athletes often did not report the male athletes' results separately, making it impossible to isolate their results from the female athletes. Therefore, whilst this literature review was conducted as thoroughly and as comprehensively as possible given the previous limitations mentioned, ultimately, the lack of exclusively male athlete results does somewhat limit the generalisability of the study.

Recommendations

Following the completion of this literature review the author has two important recommendations to make having reviewed the findings of the existing literature. The first is for further research to take place regarding the barriers to help-seeking discussed in this literature review and the interventions that can be put in place to mitigate them. The findings of this review suggest that both stigma and a lack of mental health literacy represent significant

barriers to elite, male athletes' help-seeking. Furthermore, the findings of the literature also suggest that reductions and improvements in stigma and mental health literacy respectively can lead to improvements in athletes' seeking help for their mental health problems. Therefore, as discussed earlier in this review, it may be beneficial for interventions that seek to reduce stigma and interventions that increase mental health literacy to be further researched and implemented into the athletic community, provided the same benefits are found as in this literature review.

The second recommendation is that a thorough and comprehensive study needs to be conducted featuring exclusively elite, male athletes, across a number of different sports and disciplines, with the specific aim of discovering what barriers exist for these athletes with regards to help-seeking. Whilst similar studies do exist, and were included in this literature review, as mentioned in the previous section these articles are often limited by a lack of diversity in the sports and disciplines featured, the inclusion of female athletes or the lack of focus on specifically addressing what barriers to help-seeking exist. The author of this study has attempted to answer their research questions of "*What barriers to help-seeking exist for elite, male athletes?*" using a literature review in an attempt to combine the results of many of these different studies to minimise some of these limitations. However, whilst this may have been achieved, question marks may still remain as to the generalisability of the results to male athletes exclusively. Therefore, this literature review has the potential to highlight the issue of a lack of specific literature surrounding barriers to help-seeking for elite, male athletes and to, hopefully, inspire the commission of a study featuring exclusively elite, male athletes over multiple sports and disciplines.

Conclusion

Overall, considering the findings of this literature review, it can be concluded that the main barriers to help-seeking for elite, male athletes appear to be the presence of both public and social stigma surrounding mental health disorders and help-seeking, a lack of mental health literacy including knowledge of both symptoms of mental health disorders and what help-seeking interventions can be accessed to help athletes suffering from them, and finally negative past experiences of help-seeking, particular regarding negative past experiences of counsellors or other help-seeking professionals.

Ultimately, these findings have the potential to influence policy makers of the athletic and sporting community to make significant improvements in the identification and treatment of mental health disorders. Not only were significant barriers to help-seeking identified within this literature review but also potential interventions were discovered, interventions that may provide the possibility of reducing these barriers for elite, male athletes in the future. Despite these promising findings, this literature review is not without its limitations, and therefore further research should be conducted, not only addressing elite, male athletes and the barriers they face that prevent them from seeking help, but also into potential interventions designed at reducing these barriers.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Search Strategy Table

Search	Date	Database	Search terms	Date limit on search	Inclusion/exclusion criteria	Amount of hits	Useful articles	Summary of main ideas/themes, results and finding
1	16/11/21	Academic Search Premier	athletes OR sportsmen OR sportsperson OR competitor AND barriers OR obstacles OR challenges OR difficulties OR issues OR problems OR limitations AND	2011-2021	Include: Peer-reviewed articles Full text	11	1	Stigma Lack of mental health literacy Negative past experiences of help-seeking

			help seeking					
2	16/11/21	Scopus	athletes OR sportsmen OR sportsman OR athlete AND barriers OR obstacles OR challenges OR difficulties OR issues OR problems OR limitations AND help seeking NOT college OR student OR collegiate	2011- 2021	Include: Peer-reviewed articles Full text	35	2	Stigma x2 Need to appear strong Lack of time Ambivalence towards treatment Confidentiality concerns x2 Difficulty finding local support Lack of mental health literacy Psychological stress
3	29/11/21	Academic Search Premier	athletes OR sportsmen OR sportsperson OR competitor	2011- 2021	Include: Peer-reviewed articles Full text	11	2	Severity of symptoms Hypermasculinity Marital status Loss of identity

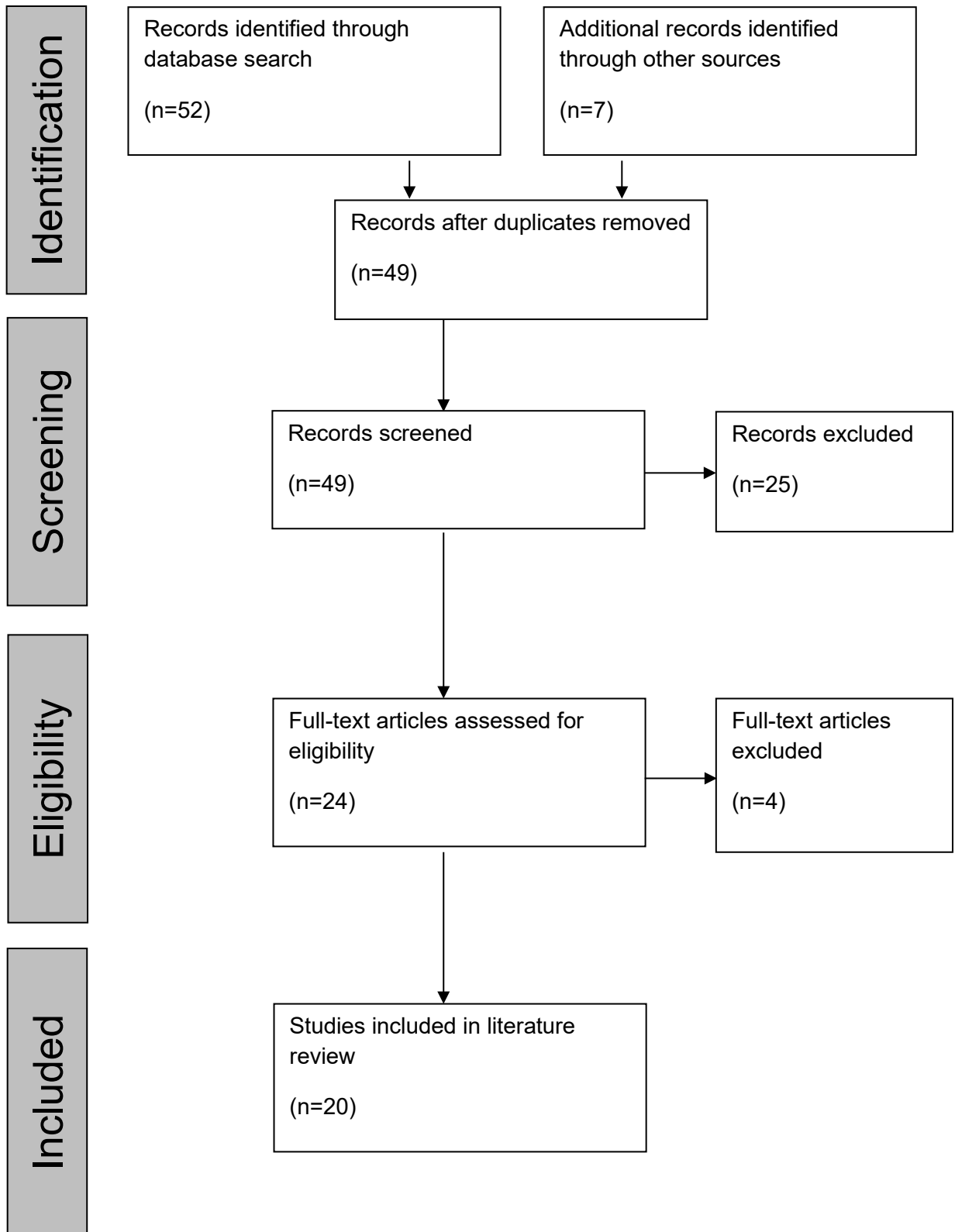
			<p>AND</p> <p>barriers OR obstacles OR challenges OR difficulties OR issues OR problems OR limitations</p> <p>AND</p> <p>help seeking</p>					
4	29/11/21	Scopus	<p>athletes OR sportsmen OR sportsman OR athlete</p> <p>AND</p> <p>barriers OR obstacles OR challenges OR difficulties OR issues OR problems OR limitations</p>	2011- 2021	<p>Include: Peer-reviewed articles Full text</p>	28	5	<p>Mental health literacy x3 Stigma x3 Negative experiences Lack of knowledge Culture of sporting environment Time delay Perceived risk of admitting problem How symptoms are labelled Preference for self-reliance</p>

			AND					
			help seeking					
5	29/11/21	Academic Search Premier	athletes OR sportsmen OR sportsperson OR competitor AND barriers OR obstacles OR challenges OR difficulties OR issues OR problems OR limitations AND help seeking	2011-2021	Include: Peer-reviewed articles Full text	11	1	Time to seek services Stigma
6	30/11/21	Health Research Premium Collection	athletes AND barriers AND	2011-2021	Include: Peer-reviewed articles Full text English language Subject: 'athletes'	124	5	Stigma x5 Low mental health literacy x3 Negative past experiences with mental health treatment-seeking x3 Busy schedules x2 Hypermasculinity x2 Denial

			help seeking					Fewer positive attitudes towards mental health services Fear of not being allowed to participate Sense of invincibility Not planning for the future
7	8/12/21	Review of reference lists	-	-2021	Include: Peer-reviewed articles Full text English language	-	4	Sign of weakness x3 Mental health literacy Fewer positive attitudes towards mental health services Stigma x3 Time to seek services Lack of knowledge of symptoms

Appendix 2

Prisma Flow Chart



Appendix 3

Findings Summary Table

Authors (year)	Type of article	Method	Main findings
Rice et al (2016)	Narrative systematic review	Systematic search of PubMed, EMBASE, SPORTDiscus, PsycINFO, Cochrane and Google Scholar databases, up to and including May 2015	A lack of mental health literacy and negative past experiences of help-seeking are both barriers for athletes seeking help
Castaldelli-Maia et al (2019)	Systematic review	PubMed, Cochrane, Scopus, SportDiscus and PsycINFO databases were all searched up to November 2018	Stigma was the strongest barrier to help-seeking Both a lack of mental health literacy, negative past experiences with help-seeking and time constraints were also cited as barriers
Bu et al (2020)	Systematic review	Search of PsycINFO, PubMed, Web of science, Scopus and SPORTDiscus databases were all searched with articles published before 8th May 2020 included	Increases in mental health literacy reduced stigma and increased help-seeking behaviour Increases in mental health literacy help facilitate help-seeking attitudes, intentions and behaviour
Gulliver et al (2012)	Randomised Controlled Trial	Randomised Controlled Trial featuring three internet-based mental health help-seeking interventions and 59 young elite athletes	Reducing stigma and increasing mental health literacy improved athletes help-seeking tendencies
Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2012)	Qualitative cross-sectional study	Focus group discussions featuring fifteen elite athletes	Stigma, poor mental health literacy and negative past experiences all described as major barriers to help-seeking
Ojio et al (2021)	Cross-sectional study	Surveys conducted with 233 Japanese Top League Rugby players	Stigma and poor mental health literacy referenced as barrier to help-seeking
Kola-Palmer et al (2020)	Cross-sectional online survey	Survey conducted with 167 professional rugby football league players	30% of participants referenced perceived stigma as a barrier

			Athletes with better mental health literacy 1.22 more likely to report seeking help
Confectioner et al (2021)	Quasi-experimental study	Questionnaires issued to 65 professional footballers following the viewing of a mental health awareness video	No differences in help-seeking behaviour following intervention
Bird, Chow and Cooper (2020)	Convergent mixed-methodological study	Interviews and questionnaires used, featuring six NCAA Division I student-athletes	The main barrier identified was the belief that help is not needed
Jones (2016)	Cross-sectional study	Survey self-administered to 112 football players	Marital status, sport level, hypermasculinity and degree of sport injury all identified as factors that influence the help-seeking process
Lopez and Levy (2013)	Cross-sectional study	Questionnaires and checklist given to 165 NCAA Division I-A and Division I-AA intercollegiate varsity student athletes	A lack of time to seek services and social stigma both referenced as barriers to help-seeking
Kroshus (2017)	Cross-sectional study	Online survey taken by 621 college athletes	Lower levels of coach stigma correlated with an increased willingness for athletes to seek help
Watson (2005)	Cross-sectional study	Questionnaire and forms completed by 135 college student athletes and 132 non-athletes	Expectations of counselling the main influence on attitudes towards help-seeking
Maniar et al (2001)	Quasi-experimental study	Questionnaire completed by 60 NCAA Division I university student athletes	Athletes influenced by their perception of help-seeking professionals and whether or not they believe these professionals will understand them
Watson (2006)	Cross-sectional study	Questionnaire and forms completed by 135 college student athletes and 132 non-athletes	Lack of time and social stigma identified as the main barriers to help-seeking
Uphill, Sly and Swain (2016)	Narrative review	A narrative review of the existing literature on athletes' mental health	Lack of mental health literacy and negative experiences of previous help-seeking identified

			as the main barriers to help-seeking
King et al (2021)	Narrative review	Sixteen articles included in narrative review	Stigma towards accessing support services identified as the most prominent barrier
Stillman et al (2019)	Narrative review	PubMed, Cochrane, Scopus, SportDiscus and PsycINFO databases were all searched	Stigma and perception of impact on their participation in sport identified as barriers to help-seeking
Souter, Lewis and Serrant (2018)	Narrative review	A narrative review of the existing literature on male athletes' mental health	Stigma identified as the main barrier to help-seeking
Roberts, Fauii and Tod (2016)	Case study	Case study of injured professional rugby union player	Athlete had doubts over psychologists experience which meant they did not seek their help