

Promoting mental health and wellbeing within and through sport

Who is this briefing for?

This paper is for all of us involved in sport- coaches, officials, volunteers and parents, to help us proactively promote mental health well-being in sport. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that **one in four of us will experience a mental illness** at some point in our lives. Sport has a positive contribution to make to a person's welfare if the experience is one that reflects the positive values of sport that help build a person's resilience, (see below for more information on resilience).

Unfortunately sport can also add to the difficulties a young person may already have and in some cases even cause the young person emotional difficulty. A number of research studies have highlighted the particular vulnerability to abuse of young people participating in elite and pre-elite level sport. While experience of harm occurs at every level of sport, research shows that vulnerability to abuse and poor practice increases as young athletes make progress through the competitive ranks and talent pathways. NSPCC research into young people's experience of sport found that 10% of young people involved in sport had self-harmed at some time while participating in sport.

What is mental health and well-being?

When we talk about a person's mental health and well-being we are talking about how a person thinks, feels and acts in relation to their life experiences and, in particular, how they cope with life's challenges.

People who are emotionally healthy:

- have control over their emotions and their behaviour;
- are aware of their thoughts and feelings; and
- are able to manage them rather than be overwhelmed by them.

How can sports organisations promote mental health and well-being in and through sport?

1. Raise awareness within sport of the importance of mental health and well-being and how this can have an **impact on physical health**.
2. Engage young people in sport to **reach out to other young people** with mental health concerns.
3. Raise awareness of the **risks of self-harm** and importance of suicide prevention within sport.
4. Highlight the importance of training (in Governing Bodies and clubs) for their coaches and volunteers, to support them in **spotting early signs of emotional difficulty** and risk in current participants.
5. Create an environment where **people feel they can ask for help** and support when needed.

One of the ways we can help to prevent suicide or self-harm is by working to create communities in which people enjoy good mental health. This reduces the chances of people getting into difficulties that they are unable to cope with on their own.¹

Sport can play its part in helping people to learn a range of positive coping strategies so that they can better deal with difficulties in their lives by developing a young person's resilience through positive coaching values.

Resilience

Is when we have:

- the inner strength to cope with the challenges that life presents to us; and
- the outer resources to support us in doing this.

Top ten tips for an individual to improve their resilience include:

1. being happy with who you are and developing a positive self- image;
2. building fulfilling relationships;
3. being flexible enough to learn new things;
4. being able to adapt to change;
5. being able to manage stress and deal with difficulties;
6. having the ability to think realistically;

¹ Prevention in the Community - A Practical Guide: Health Service Executive 2011 pg 63-64



7. having a positive outlook on life;
8. having access to help and being able to ask for help when you need it;
9. accept circumstances that cannot be changed; and
10. seeing the good in others.

Being emotionally strong

If you are emotionally and mentally healthy, you still have to deal with tough times or emotional problems. We all go through disappointments, loss and change and, while these are all part of life, they can still cause sadness, anxiety and stress. Sport often only emphasises the importance of physical strength. However, being emotionally strong means we are better able to cope with difficulties in a positive way.

Key skills are being able to:

- balance our emotions;
- recognise our feelings; and
- express them appropriately.

These skills help us to identify and manage depression, anxiety or other negative mood states, seeking support appropriately.

Sport has a role in supporting young people by developing a community where individuals can seek assistance and share concerns, and clear procedures to report concerns where appropriate.

Physical fitness

Taking care of our bodies is an important part of protecting and improving our mental well-being. When we improve our physical fitness, we experience better mental health and emotional well-being. Regular exercise not only strengthens our hearts and lungs but it also releases powerful chemicals that energise us and lift our moods.

The link between physical activity and enhanced mood and wellbeing have been demonstrated in cross sectional studies (Breslin et al., 2012) with those people who are physically active being more likely to be happy compared to those less active (Pawlowski et al, 2011). Research has found that **people who are in good health, are three times more likely to be happy than those in poor health** and suggests that any attempts to promote happiness in a nation should focus on the health of the population.² Sport provides an opportunity for young people to develop their physical fitness in a safe, supportive environment

Useful contacts/links:

ChildLine – tel: 0800 11 11 website: www.childline.org.uk

NSPCC – tel: 0808 800 5000 website: www.nspcc.org.uk

Lifeline – tel: 0808 808 8000 website: www.lifeline.org.uk

Samaritans UK – tel: 08457 90 90 90 / Republic of Ireland – tel: 116 123 website: www.samaritans.org

Mind infoline – tel: 0300 123 3393 email: info@mind.org.uk website - www.mind.org.uk

Self harm UK – website: www.selfharmuk.org

Minding your head – website: www.mindingyourhead.info

MindEd – website: www.minded.org.uk

References:

ABC of adolescence: suicide and deliberate self harm in young people - Hawton K, and James A, BMJ 2005

Building an Economic Case - Lynn Friedli and Michael Parsonage, Mental Health Promotion: NI Association of Mental Health, 2007

Experiences of Children Participating in Organised Sport in the UK – Alexander K, Stafford A, Lewis R, NSPCC 2011

Mental Health Atlas - World Health Organization (2011) Geneva [online] http://www.who.int/mental_health/en/

Northern Ireland Lifestyle and Coping Survey - R.O'Connor, S. Rasmussen & K.Hawton 2010

Prevention in the Community - A Practical Guide: Health Service Executive 2011

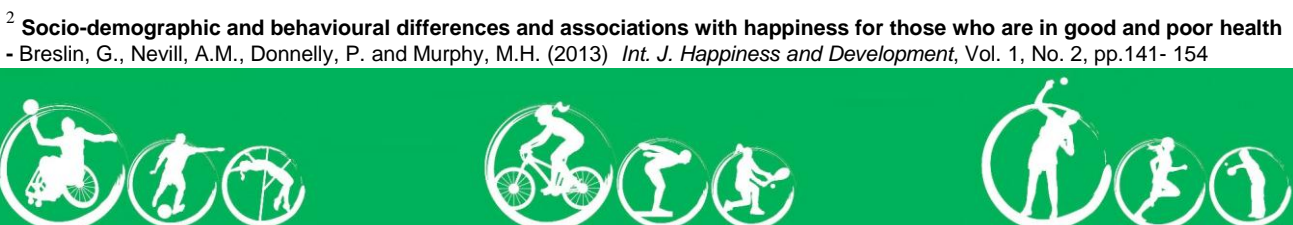
Protect Life - A shared vision - DHSSPS 2012

Socio-demographic and behavioural differences and associations with happiness for those who are in good and poor health -

Breslin, G., Nevill, A.M., Donnelly, P. and Murphy, M.H. (2013) *Int. J. Happiness and Development*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp.142–154.

Truth Hurts - Report of the National Inquiry into Self harm among Young People - Mental Health Foundation 2006

Sign up now to the CPSU E-Newsletter, we can email you the latest information about child protection in sport, visit the [CPSU website](http://www.cpsu.org.uk). Follow us on Twitter @TheCPSU (Sept 2014)



² **Socio-demographic and behavioural differences and associations with happiness for those who are in good and poor health** - Breslin, G., Nevill, A.M., Donnelly, P. and Murphy, M.H. (2013) *Int. J. Happiness and Development*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp.141- 154