

Mental Health in Individual versus Team Sports: Which is Better?

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Across all sports, there has been increasing realization that mental health symptoms and disorders in athletes are common ((Akesdotter, et al., 2020; Gorczynski, et al., 2017; Reardon, et al., 2019; Schinke, et al., 2018). More specifically, there have been increasing reports of differences in mental health between *individual* and *team* sport athletes, though the topic remains understudied. A comprehensive narrative review on the topic was recently undertaken (Reardon, et al., 2024). Findings from the 82 included manuscripts revealed that individual sports may be associated with relatively more negative mental health than team sports. This includes depression, anxiety, and eating disorders/disordered eating. Substance misuse may be an exception to this pattern, with team sport athletes exhibiting higher rates of problematic alcohol use and use of certain forms of nicotine. Reasons for the greater overall mental health risk in individual versus team sports may include relatively more negative self-attribution after failure and less social cohesion/support. It is important to distinguish factors (e.g., baseline personality traits) that exist before an athlete chooses a sport versus factors that develop within sport once it is initiated. The ecological systems model (Purcell, 2019) can be used to conceptualize risk and protective within individual and team sports. This model seeks to explain the relationships between the aspects of a particular athlete and the larger interpersonal, sport, and cultural contexts in which the athlete exists. This may help to determine what it is inherent about the athlete versus what it is inherent about individual versus team sport and the larger sport culture that is responsible for mental health outcomes (Reardon, et al., 2024). Ultimately, steps should be taken to improve the sporting environment for all athletes—across individual and team sports—in order to optimize mental health outcomes. For example, social support should be built into sport where possible, and this includes in individual sports less classically amenable to peer involvement (Reardon, et al., 2024).

References

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