

FIFA'S RESEARCH INTO MENTAL HEALTH



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Introduction

Mental and behavioural disorders are not exclusive to any special group: they are found in people of all countries and all societies. According to estimates of the World Health Organization (WHO), they are present at any point in time in about 10% of the adult population worldwide.

Mental health problems can be emotional (e.g. depression, anxiety), somatoform (e.g. sleep disturbances, medically unexplained pain) and behavioural (e.g. eating disorders, alcohol or other substance abuse).

Unipolar depression ranked at first place in the leading causes of disease in middle- and high-income countries and at eighth place in low-income countries (WHO 2008).

FIFA's research into mental health has two directions: (a) improving the mental health of football players, and (b) evaluate the effects of playing football on mental health of different target groups.

Mental Health of Football Players

Despite some prominent cases, mental disorders are rarely reported in football and other sports. It is possible that the physical activity, the team support or the privileged life (e.g. financial security, access to various resources, admiration of the public) associated with professional football protect these players from getting mental disorders, or that people with a predisposition for mental disorders do not become high-level athletes. But it is also possible that the stigma attached to mental health issues makes it an under-investigated and under-reported area in football and in sport in general.

In fact, scientific data on the mental health of athletes is rare, and almost no scientific study has yet investigated mental health among football players. In a recent survey of FIFPro about a quarter of the 180 active male professional footballers who participated reported signs of depression and/or anxiety, and the percentage in former players were even higher. Malcolm and Scott concluded in their editorial in the British Journal of Sport Medicine 2012, "First, we need to assess the degree to which athletes experience mental health problems. ... Second, a clearer view of the training needs of sports medicine personnel needs to be established so that mental health problems are identified early and appropriate treatment given (or sourced)."

FIFA has launched this new research area to help lift the taboo on issues surrounding mental health in elite athletes and to improve the mental health of professional and recreational football players. First studies evaluate the prevalence, nature and associated factors of mental health problems in football players of different gender and skill-level. Based on the results, screening tools and information material for team physicians, coaches and players will be developed. It is intended to increase awareness and help-seeking (reduce stigma) for mental health problem of football players and to improve access to adequate treatment.

Effects of Football on Mental Health

Physical exercise has been shown to have considerable positive effects not only on physical but also on mental health. Several recently published studies proved the effects of playing football on risk factors for physical health, while the effects on mental health are not well evaluated yet. Football as a team sport offers great opportunities to improve psychological and social variables known as risk factors for mental and behavioural disorders. Thus, it can be expected that playing football has even greater effects on mental health than pure physical exercise. Therefore, another FIFA research project will evaluate a specially developed, football-based intervention to improve mental health, psycho-social variables and academic performance in school children. Further projects within the framework of FIFA's Football for Health initiative are under consideration.

References

<http://www.fifa.com/aboutfifa/footballdevelopment/medical/news/newsid=2428712/>