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Sport Coaching for Mental Well-being: Recommendations for Coach Education and Club Management

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Sport & Psycho-social Initiative for Inclusive Training with an aim to develop a framework for humane, inclusive and empowering coaching and sport clubs that nurture mental wellbeing.

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**Recommendations for coach
education and club management
to develop humane and inclusive
coaching by focusing on mental
well-being**

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INTRODUCTION

The following recommendations were produced in the frame of the Erasmus+ Sport co-funded project “SPIRIT – Sport and Psycho-Social Initiative for Inclusive Training”. The recommendations primarily target people and organisations involved in the education of grassroots sports coaches. They deliver guidance and principles at a strategic level. This project and the following recommendations are not designed to address the coaching for specific target groups, but rather to generally create a more inclusive and humane coaching environment for anyone participating in organised sport. In addition, this work is referring especially to organised grassroots sport participation and does not address or recommend specific sport or physical activities.

The following recommendations derive from a [systematic literature review](#) and a [collection of good practice examples from sport clubs](#) that promote mental well-being. They also include carefully considered feedback and insights from six European sport or mental well-being experts with professional backgrounds such as coaching, coach education, mental well-being, sport psychology and others.

By reading this document you will also find answers to the following questions:

- What is mental well-being?
- Why does mental well-being matter? Why does it matter to sport?
- Can sport be a setting that is supportive of players’ mental well-being?
- What can a coach do to create an environment that is supportive of good mental health?
- How can implications of the collected knowledge about mental well-being be taken into account in coach education?

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Prioritise mental well-being and mental health in sport and coach education

- Sport and physical activity are important factors that affects mental health on a daily basis. Mental Health Finland (Mieli) has defined five areas to consider within mental health. One of the five areas is exercise and mindfulness, which implies that mental well-being needs to be thoroughly considered in the promotion of sport participation and therefore in coach education, since they are intrinsically connected. The five areas are covered in the Hand of Mental Health (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Hand of Mental Health, MIELI, 2020.

[Hand of mental health - MIELI](#)

- Coach education curricula mainly address physical aspects of health and delivery modes of activities in a sporting context. Mental well-being usually plays a subordinate role in coach education, if any. We recommend giving the same priority to mental well-being and its promotion in sport as other, mostly physical, aspects in coach education, understanding that well-being is not an option but an essential basis. As coaches are likely to be in the centre of the athlete’s focus, they should lead by examples.
- A sports culture of humanity, safety and inclusiveness is an empowering sport culture that promotes mental well-being. Skillful coaching can strengthen healthy lifestyle and mental health skills including emotional skills and interpersonal skills.
- Well-being is part of a person’s health and creates a solid foundation for success in sports. Mental well-being should be addressed as a health indicator that contributes to resilience, and a positive factor, that we can all strengthen through our everyday actions.

Recommendation 1.1: Include definitions of mental well-being & mental health in coach education programmes

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2014) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. In this positive sense mental health is the foundation for well-being and effective functioning for an individual and for a community” (WHO, 2004, p.12). Mental health, as part of health and well-being, does not refer to the absence of mental disorders or illness. Mental health takes a salutogenic approach, focusing on the resources that maintain the person healthy, instead of a pathogenetic approach, which searches for the causes of illness (Antonovsky, 1979). Both mental health and mental

well-being represent holistic perspectives, including emotional, cognitive, and psychosocial aspects. Thus, the concepts of mental health and well-being also include aspects of personal growth, psychosocial development and personal and social functioning, and relate to concepts like sense of coherence, resilience, self-determination theory, self-esteem, sense of mastery, self-efficacy, self-worth, empowerment, spiritual well-being and quality of life (cf. Antonovsky, 1979; Korkeila, 2000; World Health Organization, 2004). The holistic approach of both terms makes a distinctive differentiation difficult, and mental health and mental well-being are usually used interchangeably. We recommend educating coaches about the terms and definitions of mental health and well-being and focus on the role that mental health and well-being play in the holistic concept of health.

Recommendation 1.2: Educate to foster mental well-being in the culture of sport clubs

We recommend making the coaches understand that they are responsible for fostering mental well-being in the culture of the sport, the sports club and beyond. The education about the concept of mental well-being (see Recommendation 1.1) is a pre-requisite and will facilitate the implementation of Recommendation 1.2. Ideally, club managers have already started to implement a culture that supports mental well-being or supports the coach from the very beginning to develop such a culture. If mental well-being is not yet a topic in the sports club, it will help coaches if they have learned within their training to implement and foster a mental well-being culture.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Promote communication about mental well-being and mental health

Talking about mental health and well-being should be a core part of sport activities. As mental well-being is not traditionally the focus of sport activities, the coach should be the initiator of such communication. Specific exercises and training task will help to include the topic in regular sport or physical activity programmes. Practical examples are described under recommendation 5.

As the Delphi study revealed, coaches must get to understand their athletes. This includes their interests, challenges, motivations and goals beyond their sport participation in order to support them fully. Coaches must be aware of the extent of their responsibility and when an issue is beyond their remit they should direct their athlete to a professional. In such cases they should tell the athlete that they believe it is important to seek help (e.g. medical, psychological and social support) for mental health concerns (Bissett et al. 2020). Also, coaches should let athletes know that they believe it is

important to support peers in seeking help in case of mental health concerns. Coaches could enlist the support of relevant stakeholders (including parents and other family members, administrators and support staff) to endorse the importance of athletes seeking help for mental health concerns. Language that stigmatises mental illness and mental health help-seeking should be avoided and criticised when heard, in order to transform the culture and attitudes towards mental health and well-being.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Improve coach behaviour and care

The systematic review yielded important results for coach behaviour and the athlete-coach relationship that should be integrated in coach education. The findings mainly address, in the broad sense, the interpersonal relationship between the athlete and the coach. We advise to educate about the effects that the coach's behaviour has on the development of trusting relationship in the group as well as on the feelings and emotions of the athlete.

Recommendation 3.1: Educate about autonomy supportive coach behaviour

The systematic literature review revealed benefits of autonomy supportive coach behaviour and empowering environments which promote the satisfaction of needs. Based on these findings, we recommend that "coaches should use behaviours that support their athletes' autonomy in relation to their personal goals. For example, such behaviours can be demonstrated by providing a sense of choice and adopting their athletes' perspectives, being empathetic and compassionate, while also avoiding behaviours, such as the use of controlling language, which may exert external, or encourage internal, pressures" (Smith et al., 2010, p. 31). However, as the Delphi study also revealed, if coaches feel that an athlete's goal may risk his or her well-being, they are advised to respond to distorted expectations of athletes.

Recommendation 3.2: Educate about quality relationships between coach and athlete

As the relationship between coach and athlete influences the athlete's decision on whether or not continue participating in sport programmes, education about quality relationships is highly important. The Delphi study suggests that coaches and athletes must be able to distinguish between winning and giving ones best, and setting goals for the latter. The systematic literature review revealed closeness, commitment and empathy as well as the possession of self-control, to be characteristics of quality coach-athlete relationships. The athlete's fear of failure could be reduced by empathic coaching behaviour (Sagar & Jowett, 2015).

Recommendation 3.3: Educate about emotional dependencies between coach and athlete

The coach's emotions, such as anger or happiness, have an effect on the athlete's emotions. Coaches should be educated about these dependencies and be aware of the role they play in regulating the athletes' emotions. The dependence of the athlete's emotions on the coach's emotions is stronger in quality coach-athlete relationships. Numerous coaching strategies and behaviours, such as goal-setting, passion, reappraisal, positive reinforcement, feedback, constructive discussions and listening regulate the athlete's emotions. This includes leading by example and focusing on the human being rather than on the human body.

Recommendation 3.4: Cultivating a positive body image

One reason, why many people do not participate in organised sport activities, is feeling uncomfortable in their body or feeling self-conscious of their physical appearance. The body is particularly present and exposed in sport. We recommend highlighting the coach's role to de-emphasise aesthetic body image in order to improve self-worth. Instead, the coach has the important role of focusing on the body's abilities to perform and move successfully (Huberty et al. 2008, Soulliard et al. 2019). Furthermore, the Delphi study emphasised the link between mental well-being and physical health. This means that good mental health can contribute to injury prevention whereas less or no injuries has a positive impact on mental well-being.

Recommendation 3.5: Teach about provision of social support

The role of a coach goes beyond being an expert in a specific sport. Coaches should use social support strategies to support athletes' well-being (Koh et al. 2019):

- Emotional support, such as giving individualised attention, showing genuine concern in athletes' well-being;
- Esteem support, such as building a positive team culture by knowing athletes' interests and well-being, building athletes' confidence through self-discovery of techniques;
- Informational support, such as providing constructive feedback, understanding athletes' goals, guiding athletes by encouraging them to explore different playing strategies and techniques;
- Provide practical help to reduce athletes' worries and stress and signpost to external support services;
- Help athletes explore new opportunities.

Recommendation 3.6: Educate about the effect of peer support on mental well-being

Knowledge of the positive effect of peer support on mental well-being is crucial for coaches. Encouragement, verbal and non-verbal feedback and conversations foster resilience. Peer support influences the athlete's decision to participate regularly in group sporting activities and makes athletes feel welcome and empowered. Particularly athletes at higher risk of poor mental well-being, such as refugees and asylum seekers, benefit from peer support. Social peer support can be informational support, emotional support, esteem support, social network support and tangible support.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Create an environment that is supportive of good mental health

Policies and a club culture can promote a supportive environment which is a precondition for a supportive environment for the coach and for good mental health of the athlete. The latter impacts on coaches' mental health, which consequently influences coaches' interpersonal behavior towards the athletes (Stebbing et al. 2012). As coaches' well-being is associated with autonomy support towards athletes, the creation of an environment supportive of good mental health should be prioritized for everyone. This is complemented by the Delphi study which stipulates that coaches should lead by example. Making time and ensuring activity is fun and can contribute to build a supportive and healthy atmosphere.

Recommendation 4.1: Define indicators of a supportive environment for the coach

We recommend introducing the following guiding questions in coach education to test the quality of the coaches' working environment:

- Is the work environment empowering?
- Does the work environment offer opportunities for professional development and job security?
- Is the balance between work and free-time (work-life-balance) considered adequately?

The coach is partly the designer of his or her work environment. The coach should communicate the concerns with the club management in cases of dissatisfaction to avoid transferring negative feelings to the sport classes and thereby to the athletes.

Recommendation 4.2: Define indicators of a supportive environment for the athlete

The coach is responsible for the environment of the sport class and therefore responsible for creating a supportive environment for the athletes. We recommend including the following guiding questions in coach education to make the coach aware of their role in creating a supportive environment:

- Do you create an environment for the athletes that makes everybody feel accepted and empowered?
- Do you demand feedback from the athletes in terms of positive and negative aspects of the environment of your sport class?
- How do you support each athlete? Do you use an individualised and athlete focused approach?

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Find practical applications for mental well-being

This last recommendation gives practical suggestions and activities that promote mental well-being. The coach should be the initiator of the communication about mental health and mental well-being in sport classes (see recommendation 2). Routine activities, such as mood barometers indicating the mood and mental state of each class participant could be implemented in the beginning of each sport class. Also, specific sport activities that are known to have a positive effect on mental well-being should be delivered on a regular basis. Group activities in small and larger groups should be promoted. At the end of the sport class, relaxation exercises, with or without a partner could be delivered. The coach can also recommend other activities to enhance mental health.

CONCLUSION

Particularly now, during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health has declined for many and protective strategies such as sport have been unable to continue as normal. However, sport and specifically sport coaching should be regarded as a means to promote mental health and mental well-being. Numerous studies as well as practical examples from sport clubs have underlined the strong connection between sport and mental well-being. To get the benefits that sport and sport coaching could have on mental well-being, the topic mental well-being and mental health must be included in coach education programmes. The recommendations outlined in this document should facilitate the inclusion of mental well-being in coach education and deliver main themes and ingredients for implementation.