

STIGMA, SILENCE, AND SUPPORT: OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT FOR FEMALE ATHLETES WITH SLEEP DISORDER AND OCD

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Abstract

Investigation delves into the dual challenges faced by female athletes: the under appreciation of sleep's role in recovery and performance, and the impact of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) on their physical and mental well-being. Sleep, often overlooked in athletic training, is essential for physical recovery, cognitive function, and emotional stability, particularly for female athletes who face unique physiological challenges such as menstrual cycles, pregnancy, and menopause. Additionally, sleep deprivation can hinder recovery, increase injury risk, and impair performance. In parallel, OCD, which manifests through compulsive behaviors and intrusive thoughts, is increasingly prevalent among female athletes due to societal pressures and the demands of high-performance sports. These compulsions, such as pre-competition rituals or excessive monitoring, can disrupt both physical performance and team dynamics, leading to emotional distress, impaired relationships, and increased injury risk. The paper examines the symptoms, risk factors, and consequences of OCD in female athletes, highlighting the need for comprehensive mental health support, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), mindfulness, and team education. The study emphasizes the importance of addressing sleep quality and mental health in optimizing athletic performance and well-being, advocating for integrated recovery strategies that include both physical and psychological care.

Keywords: OCD, CBT, mindfulness and Sleep Quality

Introduction

Sleep, a cornerstone of health, is often underappreciated, particularly for its role in athletic performance. This undervaluation may have resulted from the emphasis placed on physical training and skill acquisition over recovery strategies. Moreover, the erroneous perception of sleep as a passive state rather than an active restorative process vital for cognitive and physical enhancement contributes to neglect in athletic programs. For athletes, sleep is not merely a period of inactivity but a crucial phase for recuperation, mental clarity, and physical development. This investigation explored the significance of sleep quality in athletes and its ramifications on overall wellness and performance. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) can substantially affect female athletes' lives and achievements, with potential consequences extending beyond the individual to affect their teams, coaches, and possibly their enduring sports careers. Understanding the manifestations of OCD in female athletes and their capacity to impede both physical performance and psychological well-being is crucial. This necessitates an analysis of the primary challenges, risk factors, and potential interventions for female athletes with OCD.

THE ROLE OF SLEEP IN RECOVERY AND PERFORMANCE

Engaging in athletic training places stress on the body, causing muscle fatigue, microscopic tears, and energy loss. Sleep plays a crucial role in the body's recovery process by stimulating the production of proteins and releasing growth hormones that are essential for muscle restoration and growth. The deepest stages of sleep allow the body to replenish energy stores, mend tissues, and strengthen the immune system. Additionally, sleep improves cognitive abilities such as responsiveness, judgment, and concentration, which are vital for peak athletic performance. Studies have shown that athletes who consistently obtain high-quality sleep demonstrate better precision, stamina, and overall competitive results. For example, research published in *Sleep* revealed that college basketball players who extended their nightly sleep to at least 10 hours saw a 9% boost in their free-throw precision and sprint speeds.

UNDERSTANDING SLEEP AND SPORTS PERFORMANCE IN WOMEN

The connection between sleep quality and athletic performance is crucial for maximizing outcomes in female athletes. Women in sports often face distinct physiological and hormonal changes, including menstrual cycles, pregnancy, and menopause, that can significantly affect their sleep patterns and recovery processes. For example, hormonal shifts during menstruation

may lead to sleep disturbances or fragmented rest, whereas pregnancy often causes discomfort and frequent night time awakenings that interrupt sleep.

Additionally, menopausal symptoms such as night sweats and hot flashes can further compromise sleep quality. Addressing these issues is vital for developing effective recovery strategies tailored for female athletes. These specific challenges can be mitigated by implementing personalized sleep management techniques that allow female athletes to reach their peak performance levels. The Importance of Sleep for Athletes

1. **Physical Recovery:** Athletes subject their bodies to intense physical stress during training and competition. Sleep quality is essential for muscle repair, tissue growth, and overall physical recovery. During the deep-sleep stages, the body releases growth hormones that aid in these restorative processes.
2. **Cognitive Function:** Sleep plays a vital role in cognitive processes such as decision-making, reaction time, and focus. For athletes, these mental faculties are crucial for peak performance, particularly in high-pressure situations.
3. **Emotional Regulation:** Adequate sleep helps maintain emotional stability, which is particularly important for athletes dealing with the stress of competition and rigorous training schedules.
4. Reaction times, potentially increasing the risk of injury during training or competition.
5. **Injury Prevention:** Poor sleep quality can lead to decreased coordination and slower

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN QUALITY OF SLEEP AND EATING HABITS OF WOMEN ATHLETES

A significant correlation was found between sleep quality and dietary patterns in female athletes. Insufficient sleep frequently results in hormonal imbalances, particularly in leptin and ghrelin levels, which regulate hunger and satiety. Female athletes experiencing sleep deprivation may exhibit increased cravings for high-calorie sugar-rich foods, potentially negatively affecting their performance and recovery.

Conversely, a balanced diet incorporating sleep-promoting nutrients such as magnesium, tryptophan, and melatonin can enhance sleep quality. Consumption of foods such as almonds, bananas, and cherries may naturally improve sleep. Understanding this relationship can enable female athletes to implement dietary strategies that complement their recovery and optimize their performance.

Impact of Sleep Deprivation on Athletes

Insufficient sleep quality or duration can have significant adverse effects in athletes. Sleep deprivation impairs the body's capacity for complete recovery, thereby increasing the likelihood of injury and extending recovery periods. Furthermore, it disrupts hormonal homeostasis, resulting in elevated cortisol and reduced testosterone levels, which negatively impact muscle hypertrophy and stress management. From a cognitive perspective, sleep deprivation affects memory consolidation, strategic cognition, and emotion regulation. Athletes experiencing sleep insufficiency are more susceptible to mood fluctuations, anxiety, and diminished motivation, which can compromise their training regimen and performance outcomes.

1. **Decreased Endurance:** Studies have shown that sleep deprivation can significantly reduce an athlete's time to exhaustion, thereby impacting endurance-based sports.
2. **Impaired Accuracy and Precision:** Sports that require fine motor skills and precision, such as archery or golf, can be particularly affected by poor sleep quality.
3. **Slower Recovery:** Insufficient sleep can hinder the body's ability to repair and rebuild muscle tissue, potentially leading to longer recovery times between training sessions or competitions.
4. **Compromised Immune Function:** Chronic sleep deprivation can weaken the immune system, making athletes more susceptible to illnesses that could derail their training and competition schedules.

Factors Affecting Sleep Quality in Athletes

Athletes frequently encounter distinct challenges that can disrupt their sleep patterns. For instance, a swimmer preparing for early morning training sessions may experience sleep deprivation due to a disrupted circadian rhythm. Similarly, professional tennis players traversing time zones for tournaments often experience jet lag, which significantly affects sleep quality. These examples illustrate the diverse factors that can interfere with athletes' ability to achieve restorative sleep. Rigorous training schedules, travel for competitions, and psychological pressure can lead to irregular sleep cycles and insomnia. Moreover, the use of electronic devices before bedtime and the consumption of stimulants such as caffeine further exacerbate sleep disturbances. Environmental factors, including unfamiliar sleeping conditions during travel, noise, and inadequate bedding can also affect sleep quality. Therefore, addressing these issues is crucial for athletes to achieve a restorative sleep.

Strategies to Improve Sleep Quality

1. **Establishing a Consistent Sleep Schedule:** Maintaining a regular sleep-wake cycle helps regulate the body's internal clock, promoting better sleep quality.
2. **Creating an Optimal Sleep Environment:** Ensuring a dark, quiet, and cool sleeping environment can minimize disturbances. Investing in comfortable bedding and using blackout curtains or white-noise machines can be beneficial.
3. **Limit Exposure to Blue Light:** Reducing screen time before bed and using blue-light-blocking glasses can mitigate the negative effects of electronic devices on sleep.
4. **Practical Relaxation Techniques:** Activities such as meditation, deep breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation can help athletes unwind and prepare for restful sleep.
5. **Monitor Nutrition and Stimulant Intake:** Avoiding heavy meals, caffeine, and alcohol close to bedtime can prevent sleep disruption.

PREVALENCE AND UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN SPORTS

The prevalence of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) transcends sex boundaries. Nevertheless, female athletes face increased susceptibility to developing or intensifying symptoms due to the complex interplay of societal expectations, personal challenges, and athletic demands. Research published in the American Journal of Psychiatry indicates a higher incidence of OCD among athletes than among the general population, with women potentially experiencing distinct manifestations of the disorder, influenced by hormonal fluctuations, social dynamics, and cultural norms.

In competitive sports, female athletes often face extraordinary pressure to adhere to specific physical ideals or performance benchmarks. This external pressure can intersect OCD symptomatology, resulting in amplified psychological and emotional distress. Notably, in disciplines such as gymnastics, figure skating, and swimming, female competitors are frequently expected to maintain particular body compositions, potentially fostering compulsive behaviors related to weight control, nutritional practices, and exercise routines.

Symptoms of OCD in Female Athletes

OCD is characterized by intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors (compulsions), designed to reduce anxiety or prevent a feared outcome. The following symptoms may be particularly prevalent in female athletes:

- ✓ **Pre-competition rituals:** Athletes may feel compelled to perform certain rituals or routines before every game or practice. These rituals may involve specific ways of putting on equipment, arranging items in a locker room, or repeating certain actions a set number of times (e.g., tapping their shoes before each event). This can lead to a cycle of anxiety and perfectionism.
- ✓ **Over-checking and excessive monitoring:** an athlete may obsessively check whether their gear is correct or ensure they have completed certain rituals before heading to the field or court. If these checks are not carried out in the "right" way or at the "right" time, they may fear something bad will happen during competition.
- ✓ **Fear of injury:** A common fear among athletes with OCD is that an injury will occur if they do not complete certain actions. A gymnast might feel that they will suffer a fall if they do not perform a specific set of stretches or warm-up movements. This fear can significantly hinder performance and risk of overtraining.
- ✓ **Body image and eating behaviours:** Female athletes, particularly in aesthetic and weight-dependent sports, may develop obsessive thoughts and behaviors related to their body image. The need to maintain a specific weight or appearance can lead to compulsive exercise, restrictive dieting, or binge-eating behaviors.

Impact on Performance and Well-being

The effect of OCD on athletes' physical and mental performance is profound and can have long-lasting consequences. Some of the most prominent impacts include the following.

- ✓ **Decreased focus:** OCD symptoms often consume significant cognitive resources. When athletes spend excessive mental energy on rituals or compulsions, their ability to focus on the task at hand (e.g., playing a game or executing a routine) is diminished. This may lead to poor performance or missed opportunities during the critical moments.
- ✓ **Injury and physical strain:** The repetitive nature of compulsive behaviors can lead to physical strain, as athletes may push their bodies beyond normal limits to fulfill perceived rituals. Overtraining combined with the mental strain of dealing with OCD can increase the risk of physical injury.

- ✓ **Emotional toll:** Distress caused by intrusive thoughts and the need to complete rituals can lead to significant emotional turmoil. Athletes may feel isolated, guilty, or ashamed, especially when their compulsions interfere with training or team dynamics. This emotional burden can lead to anxiety, depression, and burnout.
- ✓ **Impaired relationships with coaches and teammates:** In some cases, an athlete's compulsive behaviors can become disruptive to the team. For example, a player who insists on performing rituals before every game may prevent the team from warming up together or create tension within the group. Coaches may become frustrated or confused by athletes' behaviors if they do not understand the nature of OCD.

Risk Factors for OCD in Female Athletes

Several factors increase the likelihood of female athletes to develop OCD. These factors may include the following.

- ✓ **Perfectionism:** Female athletes often face societal pressures to be "perfect" in both their athletic performance and appearance. Perfectionistic tendencies can fuel the development of OCD as athletes strive for flawless execution and fear-making mistakes.
- ✓ **Body image issues:** Sports that emphasize leanness, such as gymnastics, ballet, or wrestling, increase the likelihood that athletes will develop OCD related to weight and appearance. The pressure to maintain a specific body type can lead to obsessive behaviors regarding food, exercise, and self-image.
- ✓ **Stress and anxiety:** High levels of stress and anxiety that come with competitive sports can trigger OCD symptoms or worsen them. Athletes may become obsessed with ensuring their success, leading to rituals aimed at controlling the uncontrollable aspects of their performance.
- ✓ **Trauma or past experiences:** Female athletes who have experienced trauma (e.g., sexual abuse, injury, or discrimination) are at higher risk of developing OCD. These traumatic experiences can lead to an increased need for control and repetitive behaviors as coping mechanisms.

MENTAL HEALTH IN WOMEN'S SPORTS: A CULTURE OF SILENCE

In many sports cultures, particularly those that prioritize winning and physical strength, there is often reluctance to acknowledge or address mental health challenges, especially among women. Athletes may feel pressure to “tough it out” or hide their symptoms, leading to delays in diagnosis and treatment. This culture of silence can perpetuate the stigma surrounding mental health and further isolate athletes who struggle with OCD.

However, the growing recognition of mental health in sports, especially with campaigns such as Mental Health Awareness, is helping to break down these barriers. Athletes, coaches, and organizations are beginning to acknowledge that mental health is just as important as physical health for performance.

Treatment and Intervention

Addressing OCD in female athletes requires a multifaceted approach that combines psychological support, medical treatment, and lifestyle adjustments. The key strategies are as follows:

- ✓ **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** CBT, particularly Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP), is one of the most effective treatments for OCD. ERP helps individuals gradually confront the things they fear without engaging in compulsion, allowing them to break the cycle of obsession and compulsion.
- ✓ **Medication:** Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are commonly prescribed to manage OCD symptoms. These medications help regulate serotonin levels in the brain, which can alleviate anxiety and compulsive behaviors.
- ✓ **Mindfulness and stress reduction:** Mindfulness practices, yoga, and relaxation techniques can help athletes manage anxiety and reduce mental strain caused by OCD. Mindfulness encourages athletes to focus on the present moment rather than irrational fears or compulsions.
- ✓ **Team support and education:** Coaches, teammates, and family members must be educated on OCD to provide appropriate support. This may include creating a more understanding and flexible environment that accommodates athletes' needs while also promoting open communication about mental health.
- ✓ **Holistic approaches:** A balanced approach to training, nutrition, and self-care is essential for female athletes with OCD. Ensuring that athletes have adequate

rest, social support, and a healthy approach to performance can help them manage their symptoms better.

Conclusion:

Sleep quality is a critical determinant of athletes' health, performance, and overall well-being. By prioritizing restorative sleep, athletes can enhance their physical recovery, cognitive function, and emotional resilience, ultimately optimizing their potential. To achieve this, athletes should focus on maintaining a consistent sleep schedule to regulate their circadian rhythm. Establishing an optimal sleep environment by ensuring a dark, quiet, and cool setting, along with utilizing appropriate bedding, is crucial. Limiting exposure to blue light by reducing screen time or employing blue-light-blocking devices can further improve sleep quality.

Engaging in relaxation techniques such as meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, or deep breathing exercises facilitates the preparation of the body for sleep. Additionally, monitoring nutrition and stimulant intake, including avoiding caffeine, heavy meals, and alcohol before bedtime, contributes to improved sleep outcomes. These combined strategies provided a comprehensive framework for enhancing sleep quality and athletic performance. Coaches, sports scientists, and athletes must collectively recognize and address sleep as an integral component of training regimens to ensure sustained success and optimal health. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) in female athletes is a complex and often misunderstood condition that can significantly impact both performance and overall well-being. Recognizing the prevalence and challenges associated with OCD, sports organizations, coaches, and athletes can begin to implement proactive measures to support mental health. Early diagnosis, intervention, and a supportive environment can assist female athletes with OCD in effectively managing their symptoms, leading to improved outcomes in both athletic performance and personal life.

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