



**Assessing the Perceived Risks Associated with the Prevalence, Causes, and Ramifications of
Mental Health Issues Among Stakeholders in Rugby Union to Create a Risk Management
Framework**

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Introduction

The application of the risk management framework within the context of sports has been a game-changer, with notable successes exemplified by initiatives focused on injury surveillance. These initiatives have revolutionized how we understand and address physical injuries in the world of sports (Allegrante J. P. et al., 2016). The core components of risk management, which encompass risk identification, risk evaluation, risk control, and risk financing (Dugalic S., 2011), have played pivotal roles in enhancing the safety and well-being of athletes.

However, the current landscape demands a significant paradigm shift. It is increasingly apparent that mental injuries are equally significant and warrant the same level of attention and care (Purcell et al. 2023). Thus, there is a compelling need to establish a systematic approach that can effectively address the complex risks associated with mental health concerns within the sports arena. This pressing need underscores the importance of creating an injury surveillance initiative for mental injuries, akin to the one that currently exists for physical injuries in sports.

To embark on this journey, we start at the foundational stage of risk management: risk perception (Allegrante et al 2016). The primary objective of this project was to identify the perception of risks associated with mental health concerns among athletes. To achieve this, we employed a structured surveillance questionnaire designed to capture players' self-reported mental health issues. Recognizing the diverse and ever-evolving nature of these concerns, as will be elucidated

in the perception survey, the insights gleaned from this investigation serves as a guiding compass for future research involving risk management frameworks for mental health concerns amongst athletes.

These insights will guide us in identifying and prioritizing specific symptoms and challenges encapsulated within the questionnaire. This meticulous process will enable us to create a comprehensive risk management framework tailored to the unique needs and vulnerabilities of athletes' mental well-being within the sports context. In essence, this initiative aims to provide athletes with the same level of support and protection for their mental health as they receive for their physical well-being, ultimately fostering a healthier and more holistic sporting environment.

Athletes, along with various other demographic groups, are in urgent need of prevention and early intervention measures, primarily due to the escalating global mental health crisis that has become increasingly apparent in recent years (Henriksen K. et al., 2020). The world of sports, particularly a physically demanding and mentally challenging sport like rugby, presents its own set of unique challenges in this context. Rugby places a significant emphasis on qualities such as toughness and resiliency, creating an environment that can pose additional hurdles for players who grapple with mental health concerns. These athletes may find it even more difficult to seek therapy or open up about their struggles, fearing potential vulnerabilities and career-related consequences, which could exacerbate their mental health issues.

Understanding risk perception becomes a pivotal and multifaceted component within the broader framework of risk management, as corroborated by scholarly literature in the field. In the realm of sports, particularly within the governing bodies responsible for overseeing rugby union, the task of devising and implementing policies and protocols aimed at addressing mental health risks within the sporting domain takes on paramount importance. A critical prerequisite for the success of this endeavor is a profound understanding of how individuals occupying decision-making roles within these governing bodies perceive and evaluate the spectrum of risks associated with mental health.

In essence, recognizing the specific challenges that athletes face in the context of rugby and the broader mental health crisis, it becomes imperative to not only develop strategies for prevention and early intervention but also to ensure that these strategies align with the unique culture and demands of the sport. This necessitates a comprehensive approach that considers risk perception as a key factor in crafting policies and initiatives that effectively safeguard the mental well-being of rugby players. By acknowledging and addressing the psychological challenges within the sport and within the decision-making bodies that govern it, we can work towards a more supportive and inclusive environment that values both physical and mental health equally.

In addition, it is crucial to recognize that various incidents and contextual factors can significantly impact the way individuals assess and perceive risks. Therefore, achieving a

balanced and comprehensive understanding of how players and support staff perceive these risks becomes paramount (Allegrante et al 2016). This multifaceted perspective is instrumental in shaping informed decisions and strategies to address mental health concerns effectively within the realm of rugby union.

The primary objective of this research paper is to delve into the perceptions held by stakeholders in the world of rugby union regarding the prevalence, causes, and consequences of mental health concerns. In pursuit of this goal, the research seeks to construct a systematically ranked catalog that encompasses three key dimensions:

a) Concerns revolving around mental health: This aspect aims to capture the various worries and apprehensions related to mental well-being that are prevalent among rugby union stakeholders.

These concerns range from the emotional toll of competition to the pressures associated with maintaining peak performance and the challenges of coping with injuries.

b) Risk factors for mental health concerns: Identifying the factors that contribute to mental health issues is essential in developing targeted prevention and intervention strategies. This dimension of the research seeks to elucidate the specific elements within the rugby environment, such as rigorous training schedules, high-stakes competitions, and social dynamics, that may increase the risk of mental health problems among players and support staff.

c) Consequences of mental health concerns: Understanding the consequences of mental health challenges is vital not only for empathy and support but also for crafting effective policies and initiatives. This part of the research endeavors to delineate the potential repercussions of mental

health concerns, both on an individual level and within the broader context of the sport. It may encompass issues such as decreased performance, withdrawal from the sport, and the overall well-being and quality of life of rugby union participants.

By systematically ranking and cataloging these aspects of mental health concerns within rugby union, this research aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by stakeholders. Ultimately, this knowledge will serve as a valuable foundation for developing evidence-based strategies and policies that can better safeguard and enhance the mental well-being of everyone involved in the sport.

Methods

Study Design:

The study employed a cross-sectional design to assess rugby stakeholders' perceptions of mental health problems. The survey was administered as part of the World Rugby Injury Surveillance program, which obtained ethical approval from the World Rugby Institutional Ethics Committee.

The survey was developed based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature (IOC Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool-1 (SMHRT-1))⁸. The survey examined mental health policy awareness, rates of mental health problems, impact of sport-related events on mental health, consequences of mental health problems, and overall injury prevalence.

In the survey, respondents are asked to rate:

1. Awareness of mental health policy/procedure/guidance in their organization.

2. How often certain mental health problems occur. The initial prompts are taken from the IOC Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool-1 (Gouttebarga V et al 2020).
3. How often certain sport-related events impact mental health e.g. contract renewal, injury, maltreatment, personal relationships, physical injury, pressure to conform to gender norms, sexual abuse, social media, team selection.
4. Consequences of mental health problems e.g. aggression/anger, behavior change, disordered eating, drugs/alcohol use, gambling, self-esteem, sleep.
5. How often players sustain specific illnesses and injuries e.g. mental illness, gastrointestinal, respiratory, upper limb, lower limb, trunk, head/neck.
6. Their satisfaction with the mental health assessments provided in their organizations.

The importance of this survey is to help me understand how individuals in decision making positions evaluate the risks that are relevant to mental health

Participants:

The target population for this study included elite rugby players and staff (ie. coaches, team managers, team medics, and Chief Medical Officers) from the world rugby community. All were invited to respond and there were no exclusion criteria. The purpose of the study was clarified at the outset and participants provided consent to proceed with the survey questions.

Sampling Strategy:

The survey was sent out to a wide range of elite players and staff to ensure representation from diverse geographical regions and different levels of rugby leagues.

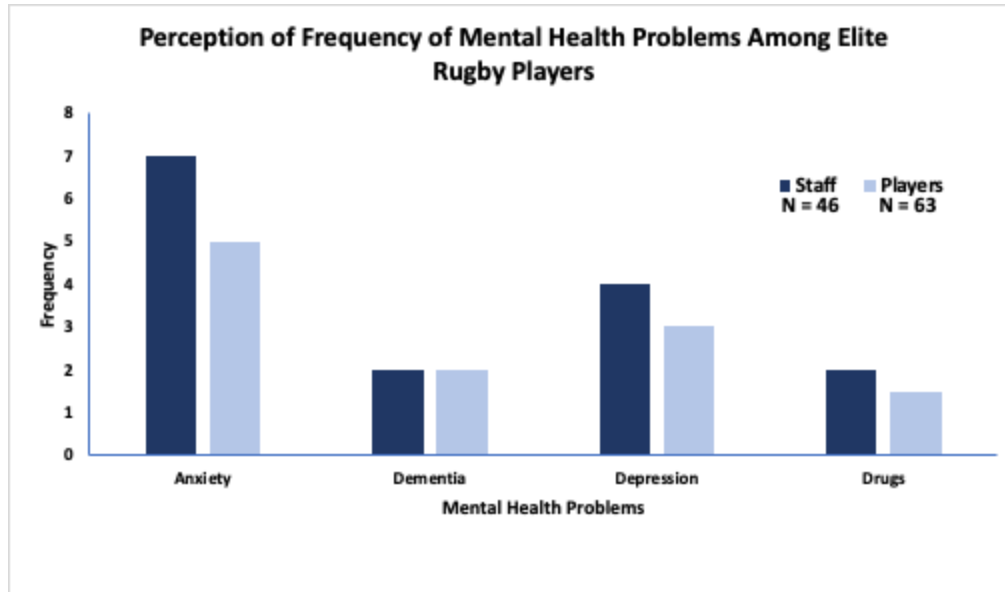
Results:

Demographic Results:

The survey successfully garnered responses from an extensive array of countries, each contributing valuable insights and perspectives to our study. Among the nations that actively participated in this comprehensive survey were England, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, Wales, Italy, Japan, and the United States. These diverse geographical regions are known for their rich rugby traditions, making their input particularly significant. The map below shows the range of countries the survey reached:



Survey results:



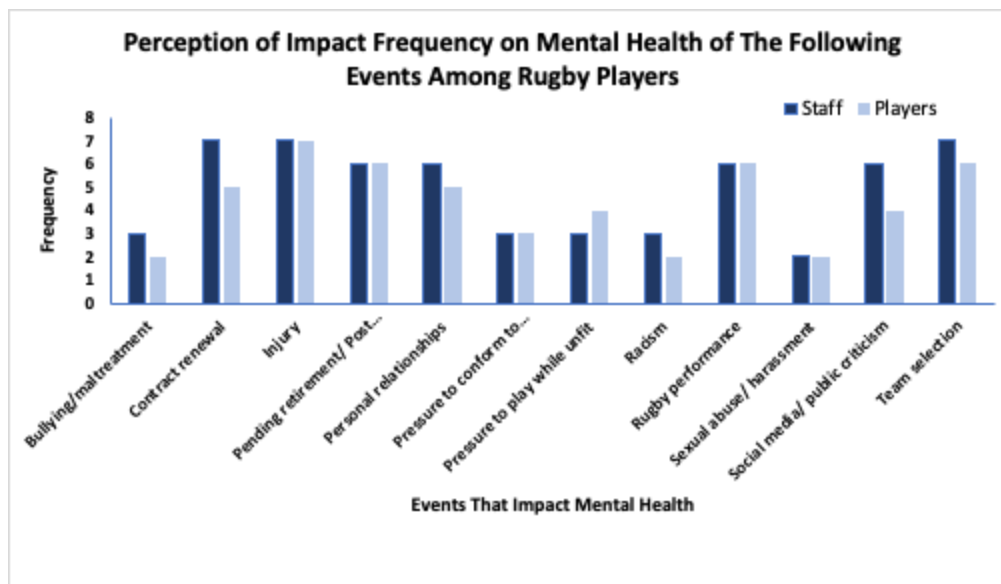
The results stemming from the initial set of survey questions provide crucial insights into the perceptions of mental health problems within the elite rugby community. This section of the survey aimed to uncover how frequently various mental health issues were experienced by both elite rugby players and the dedicated staff supporting them.

An intriguing finding that surfaced from this analysis was the prominence of anxiety as the most frequently perceived mental health issue, reported by both staff members and players alike.

Anxiety emerged as the foremost concern, drawing significant attention due to its prevalence within this elite sporting environment.

Moreover, while anxiety took the lead, it is worth noting that depression also emerged as a notable concern, securing the second position in the rankings. The fact that anxiety significantly overshadowed depression in terms of prevalence underscores the acute nature of anxiety-related

challenges faced by individuals within the elite rugby community. This observation raises important questions about the factors contributing to anxiety within the sport and highlights the pressing need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms.



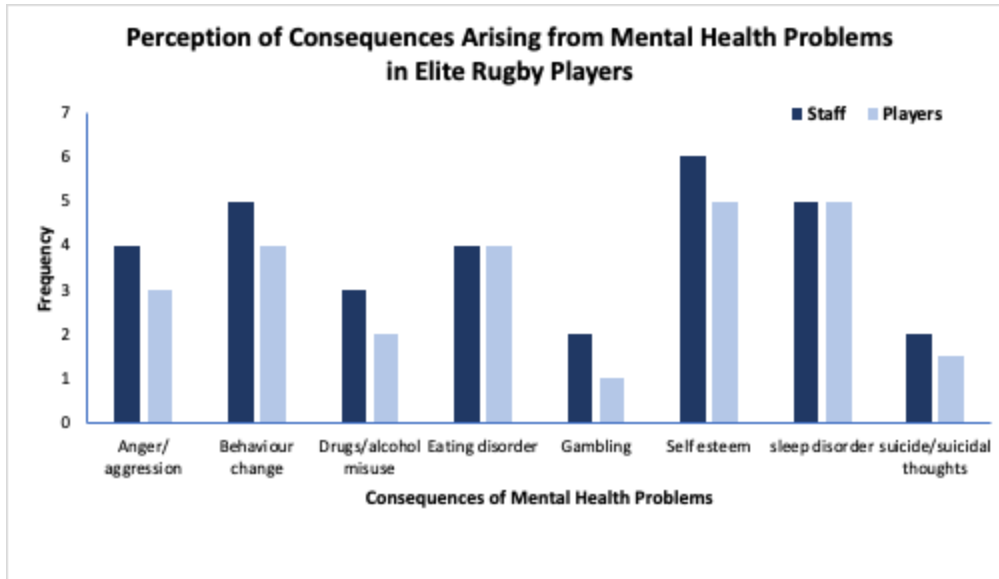
These set of questions delved into the perceptions of rugby players regarding the impact frequency of various events on their mental health. This aspect is critical in understanding the specific stressors and challenges that elite rugby players face within the dynamic and demanding world of the sport.

Among these events, contract renewal and injury emerged as the most significant in terms of their perceived impact on the mental health of rugby players. The implications of these findings are profound and shed light on the intense pressure and uncertainty that players may experience when it comes to contractual matters and the physical toll of injuries.

Contract Renewal: Contract renewal was identified as a major source of stress and anxiety for rugby players. The uncertainty surrounding future employment and the need to prove one's worth on the field to secure a contract extension can be mentally taxing. This finding highlights the importance of providing adequate support and guidance to players during contract negotiations and transitions.

Injury: The perception of injury as a major mental health concern is not surprising. Injuries not only pose physical challenges but also bring about emotional and psychological stress. The fear of recovery, the potential impact on one's career, and the frustration of being sidelined can significantly affect a player's mental well-being. It underscores the importance of comprehensive injury prevention and rehabilitation programs, as well as mental health support for injured players.

Furthermore, the survey results indicated that events like team selection, pending retirement, personal relationships, and rugby performance also had a notable impact on mental health, though not as significantly as contract renewal and injury. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by rugby players.



This set of survey questions aimed to uncover how rugby players perceive the impact of mental health issues on various aspects of their lives, shedding light on which consequences are considered the most significant.

Self-Esteem: The finding that self-esteem was identified as the highest consequence of mental health problems among elite rugby players carries profound implications. Low self-esteem can be a pervasive and debilitating consequence, affecting an individual's self-worth and confidence. In the intensely competitive world of rugby, where self-belief and mental resilience are paramount, compromised self-esteem can significantly hinder performance and overall well-being. This result underscores the critical need for mental health support programs that focus on building and maintaining players' self-esteem.

Behavior Change: The perception of behavior change as the second-highest consequence of mental health issues is notable. Behavior changes can manifest in various ways, such as increased irritability, withdrawal from social interactions, or alterations in daily routines. These changes can not only impact an individual's personal life but also affect team dynamics and relationships with coaching staff and teammates. Recognizing this consequence highlights the importance of early intervention and support for players experiencing behavioral shifts due to mental health challenges.

Sleep Disorder: The fact that sleep disorders were ranked as the second-highest consequence reflects the interconnected nature of mental health and physical well-being. Sleep is crucial for recovery, performance, and overall health. Mental health issues can disrupt sleep patterns, leading to fatigue, decreased concentration, and heightened stress levels. Addressing sleep disorders is vital not only for mental health management but also for optimizing athletic performance.

Overall, these results underscore the multifaceted and interconnected nature of mental health challenges within elite rugby. Low self-esteem, behavior changes, and sleep disorders are identified as prominent consequences, each with its own set of repercussions on both individual players and the team as a whole.

Conclusion:

The results of this study shed light on the critical issue of mental health in elite rugby and underscore the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support within the sport. Our

research sought to identify the multifaceted risks associated with mental health concerns among rugby stakeholders, including players and support staff, and to understand the perceived consequences of these challenges.

Perception of Mental Health Problems

One of the key findings from our survey was the prominence of anxiety as the most frequently perceived mental health issue among both players and staff within elite rugby. This result highlights the pervasive nature of anxiety within the sport and suggests that it is a significant concern for individuals at various levels of involvement. Anxiety, with its potential to impair performance, hinder well-being, and affect overall quality of life, must be addressed proactively. Interestingly, while anxiety was the most prevalent concern, depression also emerged as a notable issue. It's important to recognize that these two conditions often co-occur, and they share common risk factors. The fact that anxiety significantly overshadowed depression in terms of prevalence suggests that rugby stakeholders may be more attuned to the immediate impact and outward manifestations of anxiety. This underscores the acute nature of anxiety-related challenges faced by individuals within the elite rugby community.

Perception of Consequences of Mental Health Problems

Our survey delved into the perceived consequences of mental health problems, revealing that self-esteem was identified as the most significant consequence among elite rugby players. Low

self-esteem can have profound and far-reaching effects, negatively impacting not only an individual's self-worth but also their confidence and ability to perform at their best. In the high-stakes world of rugby, where self-belief and mental resilience are paramount, compromised self-esteem can be particularly detrimental. This finding underscores the critical need for mental health support programs that prioritize the development and maintenance of players' self-esteem. Behavior change was identified as the second-highest consequence of mental health issues. Behavior changes can manifest in various ways, such as increased irritability, withdrawal from social interactions, or alterations in daily routines. These changes can disrupt team dynamics and interpersonal relationships, which are essential components of success in team sports like rugby. Recognizing this consequence highlights the importance of early intervention and support for players experiencing behavioral shifts due to mental health challenges.

Sleep disorders were also ranked as a significant consequence of mental health problems. Sleep is crucial for recovery, performance, and overall health, and mental health issues can disrupt sleep patterns, leading to fatigue and decreased concentration. Addressing sleep disorders is not only essential for managing mental health but also for optimizing athletic performance.

Implications for Mental Health Support

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted and interconnected nature of mental health challenges within elite rugby. To address these challenges effectively, it is imperative to implement comprehensive mental health support initiatives that encompass anxiety, depression, self-esteem, behavior change, and sleep disorders.

These initiatives should focus on early detection, prevention, and intervention, recognizing that mental health is integral to both individual player well-being and team success. Furthermore, our results emphasize the importance of reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues within rugby and fostering an environment where players and staff feel comfortable seeking help and support.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the mental health landscape within elite rugby, emphasizing the need for tailored mental health programs that address the specific challenges faced by rugby stakeholders. By prioritizing mental well-being alongside physical health, rugby organizations can create a more supportive and resilient sporting environment that values and protects the holistic health of its participants.

Conclusion:

Building upon the insights garnered in this study, the future of mental health support in the rugby community holds the potential for pioneering a groundbreaking surveillance program dedicated to mental injury. The significance of this initiative cannot be overstated, as it seeks to mirror the success of existing injury surveillance systems, which have been instrumental in safeguarding

the physical well-being of athletes. The transition from a sole focus on physical injuries to a more holistic approach that encompasses mental health marks a paradigm shift in the world of sports and particularly within the sport of rugby.

This forthcoming surveillance program represents a pivotal step forward in addressing the multifaceted risks and challenges associated with mental health concerns among rugby players and support staff. It will serve as a proactive mechanism for early detection, intervention, and support, with the ultimate goal of promoting and preserving the mental well-being of all involved in the sport.

By leveraging the insights gained from this research and the comprehensive framework it aspires to establish, the rugby community can aspire to create an environment where mental health is prioritized, stigma is diminished, and resources are readily available to address the unique psychological needs of athletes. Just as physical injuries are diligently monitored and managed to optimize player safety and performance, mental injuries will be treated with the same level of care and attention.

This research serves as a foundation upon which future endeavors can build, contributing to a culture shift in sports where mental health is no longer overlooked but rather integrated into the fabric of athlete well-being and performance optimization. It is an essential step towards ensuring that athletes receive the comprehensive support they need to thrive both on and off the field.

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