

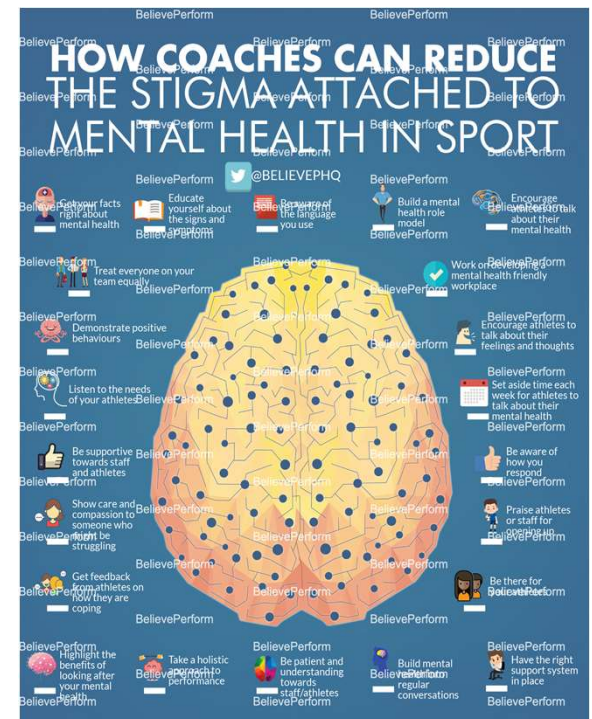
# Exploring Mental Health Aspects in Football: Perspectives of Coaches



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# Introduction

- Mental health (mh) in football not widely researched despite a number of well-known footballers who have suffered from mh issues (Sothorn & O’Gorman, 2021)
- A number of mh symptoms/illnesses more frequent among professional athletes, due to pressurised situations athletes face (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019)
- Few coaches know what to do when faced with a mh issue (Bissett et al., 2020)
- Thus, this study sought to investigate top-level football coaches’ understanding & perceptions of mh concerns amongst footballers & what they believe can be done to better assist players' mh

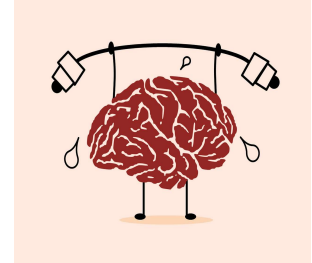


# Literature

- WHO, 2014 – MH is “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”
- **Mental illness** - characterized by substantial alterations in one's feeling, thinking, behaving, leading to distress & impaired functioning in one's personal & professional activities
- Physical training must be balanced with adequate recovery for progress to take place; psychological demands must also be balanced with recovery & mental performance/mh support (Henriksen et al., 2020)



# Literature



- Most clubs/associations acknowledge that mh & performance are linked
- MH support beneficial – for athletes performance, longevity of career, quality of transitions, better outcomes on retiring
- Inadequate mh support due to lack of knowledge, skills, funding
- Stigma - “Speaking to the coach would be good but the fear of not knowing if people will understand your situation and problems holds you back sometimes. **Besides as long as you're performing well no one seems to care**” – Micallef (2021)

# Methodology

- Qualitative Approach
- Semi-structured interviews with 12 male football coaches (6 coaching in the Premier League (2 foreign), 6 in the Challenge League (2 foreign))
- Interview Protocol – i) Interviewee's background; ii) mh including stressors, symptoms, role of the coach; iii) mh education – coaches awareness and ability to handle mh issues amongst players; role of the club/FA
- Ethical Considerations
- Pilot interviews
- Thematic Analysis used to analyse the data



# Results

## Themes and Subthemes

Mental Health: Meaning and Characteristics	Challenges Faced	Supporting Players	Mental Strength vs. Mental Skills
Definition of mental health	Lack of awareness/education	Team environment	Mental strength and mental skills
Indicators of mental illness	Lack of funds	Coach communication and helping skills	Inability to make a distinction between mental strength, mental health, mental skills
Causes	Lack of sports psychologists	Seeking professional help	
Effects on Performance	Stigma		
COVID Pandemic			

# Discussion

- Coaches lack relevant knowledge/training in dealing with mh issues
- Coaches mentioned behaviour changes including:
  - i) being more aggressive on the pitch,
  - ii) very quiet, and nervous when spoken to (C4, C5),
  - iii) isolating oneself (C1),
  - iv) lack of motivation, looking stressed and anxious (C6),
  - v) weight loss (P5).



- C4 and C5 - noticing the symptoms is the biggest challenge; some may be able to hide things well & one may not be qualified to notice the symptoms (C4)
- C6- “I have noticed some players being more quiet than usual & I would know that they might be suffering from mh challenges **as I have suffered from them myself**”. Four coaches expressed personal need for support with three actively admitting to having struggled with mh issues

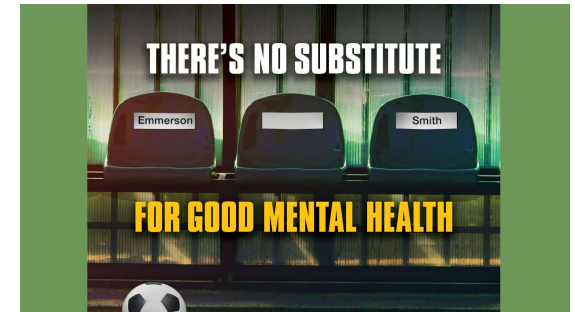
# Causes of mental illness

- - Genetic factors (P4);
  - injuries (C2);
  - lifestyle (P2, P4, C1, C3, C5);
  - transitional challenges (P2);
  - critical moments (P1; P4 );
  - personality (P1, P6);
  - fame (P1);
  - performance stress (P3, P5, P6, C1, C3);
  - family issues (P1, P2, C1).
- “In elite football, you can go from zero to 100 and from 100 to zero very fast. If you are not ready to manage this, this starts to create a big problem in terms of lifestyle. One day you are the best player in the world, everyone talks about you, they give you a lot of money ... two weeks later, you had a bad day, & no one wants to see you... if you are not ready or if you don't have the .... balance, this is a .... big mental problem....(P1).”





# Lack of Education, Funding, Availability of Sports Psychologists



- C3 - more men tend to commit suicide but despite this “we do not give much importance towards mh, even generally speaking, not just in football”
- P4 - whilst we say that the topic is important, players are not helped with their issues implying that the culture may not be very accepting of supporting mh (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019).
- C5 - “As coaches we do try to help our players mentally, but we do this with experience & not because we got trained on how to deal with mh issues.”
- “It could be that the football family is causing people to suffer from mh issues with the actions carried out by people at the top.... I wouldn't say that this is done intentionally.... obviously the objective would be to try to achieve a sporting result without spending all that amount of money, but, in reality with the actions done to try to get to this objective, it could be that they are imposing mh issues on individuals... (P4).”

# Coaches struggled to make a distinction between mental health and mental skills

- “I attended maybe two lectures about mh. Tbh, it was not mh, but more of *mental preparation/performance*, which, in my opinion, if you have a very good motivated coach, can take care of that aspect. My main concern, which I'm encountering lately, is literally about mh, where players are suffering from anxiety, depression... rather than working with a psychologist to perform better (P3).”
- “In some of the games we lost points because we lost concentration during the game. This has everything to do with mh, especially if a team is young & playing against an experienced team; it is very important that a team is strong mentally in order to win games. I am trying to teach my team because it is important to be mentally strong in certain situations of the game, as **at the end of the day for a coach the most important thing is the results achieved** (C2).”



# Implications and Conclusion



- Coaches in this study were willing to support players
- Limitation of the study – possibly only coaches invested in player's mental health participated
- The FA is recommended to provide education/support to all players, staff, stakeholders in football
- All coaches should be asked to do a mh first aid course as part of their yearly cpd so that they are able to recognise symptoms of mh illness & support players
- Currently, the MHPA are doing very important work in introducing mh talks in clubs – it remains the case that few take up this free opportunity
- Lives have been saved over the past years thanks to coaches/team managers who have noticed a player struggling

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