

Enhancing the Utilization of Sport Psychology Services in Athletes

Background: Despite the presence of mental health and sport performance difficulties, student-athletes typically underutilize psychological services offered on campus. Of those who seek psychological assistance, many fail to return after the first session with a practitioner.

Purpose: To investigate expert approaches and practices to conducting a first sport psychology session with an athlete. Specifically, the aim was to identify objectives, aspects, strategies, and lessons learned that are salient across different first sessions conducted by experienced practitioners.

Participants: Nine sport psychology practitioners with an average consulting experience of 24 years. Both licensed and non-licensed Certified Consultants of Association for Applied Sport Psychology were sampled.

Interview: Semi-structured interviews during which participants were asked to discuss their consulting approaches and practices of conducting a typical first sport psychology session with an athlete. The first session was defined as a scheduled appointment in which an athlete first comes to seek help from the sport psychology professional. Four general questions were asked:

- 1) What are your objectives in the first session with an athlete, and how do you go about achieving each objective?
- 2) What are the important aspects that you typically include in the first session with an athlete (e.g., things you discuss, disclose, solicit, address, emphasize, or do), and what is it about each aspect that makes it important?
- 3) What strategies do you use in the first session with an athlete to increase the perceived benefits of engaging in sport psychology services or to decrease the perceived barriers, and what is it about each strategy that makes it effective?
- 4) What missteps/mistakes have you made regarding the first session with an athlete, and what was it about each misstep that made it problematic?

Analysis: Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after each interview. A qualitative approach using content analysis and consensus validation procedures was employed to produce interpretable and meaningful themes (Patton, 2002).

Results

Objectives/Aims (Highest Endorsed)

Theme	Respondents
Relationship Building	9
Gathering Information about Client Background and Presenting Needs	7
Establishing Consulting Expectations	5
Establishing Consulting Objectives	4
Skill Building	4

“The first aim and the most important one, from my perspective, is to make a positive and functional connection with the athlete.” (Relationship Building)

“I like to get a little bit of their make up...I try not to ask the question, what’s going wrong or what’s not working, or why are we here. I try to say, hey, what’s happening in your sport? Tell me how are things going?...I really like to leave that open-ended so that they can go down any path that they choose to go down.” (Gathering Information about Client Background and Presenting Needs)

Aspects (Highest Endorsed)

Theme	Respondents
Practitioner Disclosure of Relevant History and Personality	8
Address the Presenting Concern	7
Discuss Prior Experiences with Sport Psychology Consultation	6
Discuss Limits of Confidentiality	6

“I try to keep my personality, I try to keep it lively and I try to keep it fun and have a good time. And, you know I do that in a way to where I do it self-deprecating.” (Practitioner Disclosure of Relevant History and Personality)

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“I’m trying to understand, did you work with someone in the past and was that a good experience. Did you get something out of it? What things worked for you? And if they had certain things that worked then we are just building on that and expanding on that.” (Discuss Prior Experiences with Sport Psychology Consultation)

Conclusions and Future Directions

- Findings from the current study not only provide a better understanding of how expert sport psychology practitioners conduct a first session, but also have implications for the training and development of neophyte consultants.
- Best practices to conducting a first sport psychology session should be established and empirically examined.
- Results provide the basis for the development and evaluation of a novel first session intervention to enhance athletes’ attitudes and motivation toward engaging in sport psychology services and to reduce the likelihood of premature termination.

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