

Mental health awareness: Changing times and focused minds

Published 16/05/16 by [Anonymous](#)

Anxiety

In our third blog on mental health awareness in sport and the implications for coaches, we talk to Steve Price, who is using techniques picked up from his battle with anxiety to help coaches and athletes develop their mental toughness.

Three people, three intimate stories, one important message: sports coaches need to be more mindful of mental health issues so they can identify and act on problems that may arise in their own group of athletes.

A huge thank you to [Sophie Parsons](#), [Michelle Smith](#) and, in this latest article in the mini-series, [Steve Price](#) for agreeing to talk openly about their own struggles with post-traumatic stress, self-harm and anxiety respectively.

A deafening national silence has been broken in recent years, helping to raise awareness and make important inroads into shattering the stigma that surrounds mental illness.

This has set up a positive chain reaction, swelling the reach of the support network so that friends, family, sports coaches, youth workers and teachers, and not just charities and health care providers, are all a crucial part of the mix when it comes to dispensing comfort and guidance.

Lots more still needs to be done, but the snowball is in motion.

Those who are plagued by intrusive thoughts or who suffer from a mental health disorder should know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, that talking is great medication – a problem shared is a

problem halved – while coaches should now appreciate the need to be vigilant and open to the subtle signs, and be unafraid to ask for more guidance from their governing body or club hierarchy if resources are lacking.

Yes, it's a challenge; yes, it's asking a lot, but as diagnoses reach epidemic proportions, it's a case of all hands to the pump.

Seeing the light

The traditional route into coaching is through your children's involvement in sport, or after age catches up with you and you make the natural, if reluctant, progression from pitch to dugout.

For ConnectedCoaches member Steve, a human resources manager and self-employed performance coach, it was a personal battle with anxiety that proved to be the catalyst for his decision.

He had been in the grip of anxiety for many years, at times chronic, but said he had a 'light bulb moment' one day and thought, 'I've had enough of feeling like this.'

'I researched a lot into how to control the mind and over time began to successfully manage my own anxiety.'

'I knew the techniques would cross over easily into my role in the workplace. I thought I might as well help a lot more people than just myself.'

Steve used the techniques he practised on himself with individuals and teams in a variety of industry sectors, helping them alleviate pressure and overcome nerves – for example, instructing employees on how to manage key events like job interviews and presentations.

As a sports enthusiast, the obvious next step was to use his transferrable skills in the sports arena so he began helping with sessions at his local rugby club, where his son was a member of the colts' side.

He would work with new coaches to build their confidence levels, using similar strategies to those he employed in his day job.

As his interest in developing mental strength in coaches and athletes grew, so did his client base.

'As much as I like to get involved in a wide spectrum of sports, I don't confess to be a technical expert in any of them,' says Steve. 'But I like to think I add value and insight in other places, particularly the psychological and well-being side.'

'You can't give your best for other people if you don't do the best for yourself. There are all these people helping others, but who is helping the people who help the others?'

Steve now works with the third and second XVs of Waterloo RUFC in Liverpool, primarily on maintaining focus, goal setting and game management.

Emotionally draining

On successfully turning a negative situation into a positive one, Steve says: ‘My wife worked for Mencap for a long time, and it was through her and flicking through websites that I realised there were resources out there and that I didn’t have to live like this.

‘From a coach’s perspective, I appreciate the prospect of tackling mental health can be quite daunting.

‘A lot of people go into coaching because they enjoy it, they like being part of a big family group. For some, it may be achievement-oriented, and they may have, or have had, a passion for the sport as a player themselves. Whatever the reason, it must come as a shock to find out how challenging being a coach is.

‘I’ve done a lot of workplace counselling, and it is stressful when you take on the role of trying to support someone else in their particular challenges. It is emotionally draining.’

A career to a minority, a hobby to the vast majority, those taking their first steps into coaching can be forgiven for concentrating predominantly on technique and tactics.

Steve believes even experienced coaches can be guilty of turning a blind eye to mental health issues – simply because they don’t know what they are looking for.

‘From a government perspective, mental health is high up the agenda at the moment,’ he says.

‘But I think, from my own experience, I didn’t really know what was wrong with me. I felt on edge all the time, and day-to-day trivial events, I found nerve-racking.

‘I do think there is a real lack of understanding out there. But I don’t think it is a lack of understanding in terms of people accepting mental health issues, it’s more – and this is particularly true at grass-roots level – a lack of understanding of what to do if it surfaces.

‘It’s all about understanding your athletes, and I think, for many years, and to a certain degree it still happens, there is a sense that, if something is wrong, and the athletes are underperforming or they are not performing as you would expect, it must be a technical issue or they are lacking confidence. That it might be an issue affecting their mental well-being just doesn’t come on to a coach’s radar.’

Fictional stories

There is a downside to improved mental health awareness, and that is a growing number of people who exaggerate, or fake, their condition. It may be a sensitive subject, but it grates on Steve.

‘People are more open to talking about these things, that’s for certain. The only thing that disappoints me, and that I find quite challenging, is people also now tend to use it as an excuse sometimes,’ he says.

‘So when you talk about coaches needing to spot the signs, in my day job, I find some people tend to use stress, anxiety and depression as an avoidance technique.

‘For example, in a performance management situation, when they know they are going to be brought to task over non-performance, they will maybe pre-empt that by going to the doctor and saying they are stressed at work. I do see much more of that tactic being used.

‘I find that a little bit sad in a way because we’ve finally got mental health out in the open and are prepared to talk about it, but then you get people who take advantage of that.

‘For a coach not trained in these matters to understand what the real cause of the issue is is so difficult. Is it really a mental health issue or is it – and I know this sounds awful – just a lazy athlete? The answer, I guess, is knowing your athletes.’

Public perception is that psychiatric disorders are over-diagnosed by doctors. It is a real catch-22 and infuriating for those who are genuinely suffering from a condition like depression to know there may be people who are suspicious of their intentions and their honesty.

Those who do use a mental health disorder as an excuse for poor performance are redirecting the conversation away from where it should be focused and damaging all the positive inroads being made by mental health campaigns.

Scout’s promise

I ask Steve if he believes, in his experience, enough is being done to furnish sports coaches with information on managing athletes with mental illness.

He shakes his head and argues that it is generally left to individual coaches to do their own research.

‘While guides do exist (see my previous blog: [Coaches need coaching on mental health awareness](#)), there isn’t really anything coaches can tap into in layman’s terms that is a really good resource bank of information.

‘Certainly with a lot of the coaches I’ve worked with in the past, their background, all their training and experience, has been on the technical side of coaching and traditional coaching theories. No wonder they are not picking up on mental health problems.

‘Are coaches being given the resources that **are** out there, or being pointed in the right direction? I don’t think they are. There are no easy signposts that are available.’

Be prepared. It is the golden rule in business, whether you are planning for a company presentation, sales pitch or job interview; it is also the motto of the Scouts; and it is good advice for sports coaches too.

So, while governing bodies continue to play catch-up and work towards developing sport-specific guidelines for coaches, a proactive solution would be to browse the information and support section of the [Mind website](#), which includes in-depth individual guides all types of mental health disorders.

If you have an opinion on mental health awareness, please leave a comment below.

UK Coaching has set up a 'Mental health for sports and physical activity providers' guide on their website. [View it here.](#)

Update 2019

[Mental Health Awareness for Sport and Physical Activity](#) is a new online course produced as a result of a collaboration between Mind, 1st4sport, UK Coaching and Sport England. Complete the course and you’ll gain the confidence to be able to support people experiencing mental health problems, helping them to thrive inside and outside of your sessions. [Learn more about this course.](#)

Login to follow, share, comment and participate. Not a member? [Join for free now.](#)

tags : mental-health, mental-health-awareness, anxiety