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ATTITUDE TOWARDS MENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT AND COUNSELLING SERVICES AMONG UNIVERSITY ATHLETES IN KWARA STATE

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Abstract

Student athletes especially in tertiary institutions experience academic, social and personal struggles like other students. It is of importance that student athletes to seek mental health service as a means to maintain a balanced mental health and performance as an athlete. Hence, the study investigated attitudes towards seeking mental health services among University athletes in Kwara State. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. Stratified and proportionate sampling technique was used to select 172 athletes in University of Ilorin. Researcher's designed structured questionnaire was used for the study. The reliability of the instrument was tested and a co-efficient r of .75r was obtained through split-half method. Data was analysed using Chi-square statistic at 0.05 alpha level. The findings revealed that: mental health assessment and seeking counselling services had significant influence on seeking mental health services among University athletes in Kwara State. It was therefore recommended that university administrators, sports coaches, and mental health professionals should create a supportive environment for athletes to encourage mental health screening; sports specialists should also develop appropriate interventions for athletes experiencing mental health issues to assist them in leading quality life.

Keywords: Mental health assessment, Counselling services, University athletes

Introduction

Athletes' mental health is of utmost importance as well as their physical and emotional health. The mental health and strength of athletes are the foundation for efficient practice and competition performance. One of the most important factors in mental health is the ability to handle the stress of everyday life. World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) defined mental health as a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his/her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make meaningful contributions to the society and the immediate community in which they live. American Thyroid Association (ATA, 2016) enumerated a number of factors that affect the individual's mental health; among these are self-esteem, feeling loved by others, confidence,

family breakup or loss, physical ill health and abuse. Most times, people focus more on their physical health while their mental health is neglected. This does not exempt athletes who place much emphasis on mental toughness and play down on the disclosure of weaknesses.

According to Ayobami and Aderonmu (2019), participating in organized sports can positively impact mental health by boosting confidence and reducing feelings of social anxiety, depression, and stress. The experiences of student-athletes in tertiary institutions are different from their non-athlete peers as athletes have responsibilities for competition, performance and academics. These obligations can facilitate tensions, which may result in mental health challenges (Moreland, Cowe & Yang 2018). Barnard (2016) stressed that student-athletes experience psychological disturbances caused by stressors that are related to the demands of competitive sport and competition. These stressors include academic challenges, travel, time compression, or even competition pressure if they experience injuries which require rehabilitation.

A study by Kabir, Iliyasu, Abubakar and Aliyu (2014) indicated aggression, talkativeness, eccentric behaviour and wandering as common manifestations of mental illness as reported by respondents in the study. Moore (2017) and Sudano (2017) in different studies averred that depression is the most common challenge for student-athletes. Depression, disordered eating, substance misuse and suicidal ideation are alarming concerns of university athletes considering their lack of or low level of mental health services utilization (Moore, 2017). Distinct from their non-athlete peers, university student athletes have to contend with managing the challenges of academics while maintaining a peak physical fitness level and the responsibilities associated with sports team membership. Therefore seeking mental health services is a recommended pathway to maintenance of optimum mental health including management of mental health problems or illnesses (Davidson & Roe, 2014).

According to Queensland (2017), mental health services are concerned with the assessment, diagnosis, monitoring and treatment of people who experience mental illness or disorder characterized by a clinically significant disturbance of thought, mood, perception, memory and/or behaviour. Moreland et al. (2018) stated that mental health services offered to athletes in tertiary institutions may be performed by a variety of professionals among which are sport psychology professionals and consultants, licensed clinical social workers, psychiatrists, psychiatric mental health nurses, licensed mental health counsellors, mental skills trainers, mental resilience specialists, and even primary care physicians trained specifically to manage mental health issues. Such professionals possess varied educational and training backgrounds and may provide highly individualized support and treatment or more generalized team support to athletes (Moreland et al., 2018).

For elite athletes, a number of individual barriers to accessing help for mental health issues have been identified. Chinedu, Udo and Chinelo (2023) affirmed that a significant number of undergraduate students were unaware of availability of these services as it was also revealed that students had negative attitude toward the mentally ill, many of them were of the view that the mentally ill should be avoided, and not to be allowed to stay in the hostel with colleagues. Research by Armstrong (2019) demonstrates college students often do not recognize or admit personal mental illness symptoms or are unaware of available mental health services (such as counselling,

psychotherapy and comprehensive treatment plans). Further, Castaldelli-Maia (2019) stated that cultural factors (such as attitudes towards help-seeking) also play a role, particularly where a sport emphasizes mental and physical toughness.

Oyedokun (2021) noted that athletes' attitudes towards seeking psychological help include how willing they are to ask for assistance, how much they value professional help, and whether they prefer to deal with the problems on their own. Some athletes may decide to seek counselling (as a form of mental health service) but may refuse to go for post-hospital care which is also a service rendered by mental health service providers. Gulliver (2017) reported that student-athletes utilize counselling, among other mental health services, less frequently than non-athletes despite experiencing comparable levels of psychological distress and the availability of promising interventions.

Griffiths and Christensen, (2015) stressed that some of the most frequently identified attitudinal barriers to seeking mental health care include athletes' wishes to handle problems on their own, thinking the problem will go away by itself and doubts about the perceived benefits of help seeking. Furthermore, Martin (2017) stated that athlete's intention to engage in sport psychology consulting is a major determinant of seeking mental health care services.

Regarding the issue of knowledge, athletes tend to poorly self-diagnose mental illnesses or do not understand what resources are available to them. Moore (2017) and Putukian (2016) affirmed that student-athletes have a negative attitude towards recognizing mental health symptoms or when they should seek help; they often do not know if what they are feeling is normal or abnormal because of the stress they encounter daily. This uncertainty about mental health status from an athlete can suppress mental health disclosure. Gulliver (2017) noted that poor self-diagnosis is typically due to believing the degree of distress was "normal" and therefore not actively seeking resources to help them change.

Generally, university students are faced with challenges such as meeting with lecture periods, extended hours of lectures on daily basis and the challenge of hustling for vehicles to convey them back to their various hostels at the end of the lecture as sizable number of the students live outside campus. These athletes are tasked to combine educational activities with the demanding training period. Athletes often go for training early in the day prior to lecture period so as to be able to attend lectures and sometimes return for training in the evening. The stress of educational activities combined with training stress and fatigue on these athletes contribute significantly to mental health issues.

Expectedly, university athletes need to utilize mental health services as a means to improve mental health and detect mental issues that may result from both physical activities and academic activities. However, it is pertinent to understand athlete's attitudes towards seeking these services to create a positive mindset to athletes and other stakeholders towards seeking mental health services. Hence, this study examined the attitudes towards seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Statement of the Problem

Student athletes in tertiary institutions do experience academic, social and personal stress like other students. However, these athletes need to learn how to manage the stress of performance, maintain their physical health and how to avoid as well as manage injuries. They must also develop time management strategies for practice, work-outs, games and travel. The combination of these activities could lead to emotional stress and mental health related issues. One of the challenges student-athletes have especially in this part of the world is difficulty in recognizing symptoms of mental health issues/challenges including knowing when to seek for help because they are often concerned about physical performance and injuries. In the process, some of these athletes experience symptoms of depression, loneliness, eating disorder and even suicidal thoughts.

Certain factors inhibit athlete's utilization of mental health services among which are individual intentions, unwillingness to go for mental health assessment, and seeking counselling services. Therefore, understanding the attitudes of athletes towards seeking mental health and counselling services may assist in creating a positive mindset for student athletes to embrace seeking mental health services. Many of the previous researches have not focused on athletes' attitude towards seeking mental health services examining variables such as mental health assessment, fear of stigmatization, consultation with experts and counselling. Hence, the research believes it is pertinent to investigate the attitudes towards seeking mental health and counselling services among university athletes in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to determine if:

- a. mental health assessment will influence seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.
- b. counselling will influence seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

- a. Mental health Counselling assessments will not significantly influence seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.
- b. will not significantly influence seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Methodology

Descriptive research of survey type was adopted for this study. The population of the study comprised student athletes in University of Ilorin totalling 351. Systematic and proportionate sampling techniques were employed in this research. Proportionate sampling technique was used to select 50% of the total numbers athletes in each sport (football, athletics, basketball, volleyball, badminton, tennis, handball and table-tennis). 172 respondents were selected for the study.

The research instrument adopted for gathering data was a researcher designed structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was entitled Attitude towards Seeking Mental Health Services among Athletes in University of Ilorin. The data collected were sorted, coded and analysed using frequency and percentage for personal data of

the respondents and research questions while mean, standard deviation and inferential statistic of Chi-square were used to test the formulated hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 25.

Data analysis

Table 1: Demographic Data of Respondents

Item	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	102	59.3
	Female	70	40.7
	Total	172	100.0
Age range	16 -18 years	7	4.1
	19 – 24 years	12	7.0
	25 years and above	153	89.0
	Total	172	100.0
Level	100	22	12.8
	200	23	13.4
	300	35	20.3
	400	92	53.5
	Total	172	100.0

Table two presents the demographic information of the respondents, 102 (59.3%) were male while 70 (40.7%) were female. indicating that female who participated in this study were more than the male. The table further shows that 7 (4.1%) of the respondents were between 16 – 18 years, 12 (7.0%) were between 19 – 24 years and 153 (89.0%) were 25 years and above. The table further indicates that 22 (12.8%) of the respondents were in 100 level, 23 (13.4%) 200 level, 35 (20.3%) 300 level and 92 (53.5%) 400 level respectively.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Mental health assessment will not significantly influence seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Table 2: Mean Analysis on Mental Health Assessment and Seeking Mental Health Services

S/N	Items	<i>Sd</i>	Mean
1	I do not seek mental health service because I thought the problem would go away	.80	2.61
2	I do not seek mental health service because I thought the problem was not serious	.80	2.67
3	I have had a bad experience with mental health service personnel	1.19	2.24
4	Through assessment results, I am able to understand the severity of my condition influencing me to seek services	.57	3.28
Total		0.84	2.70

Table two presents mean analysis on mental health assessment influence seeking mental health services among athletes. The table indicates the grand mean of 2.70 and standard deviation of 0.84. This means that mental health assessment influences seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Table 3: Chi-square analysis on Mental Health Assessment and Mental Health Services

N	ITEMS	(SA A)	+ (D SD)	+ Row Total	df	Cal Value X ²	Table Value X ²	REMARK S
1	I do not seek mental health service because I thought the problem would go away	91 (53.0%)	81 (47.1%)	172 (100)				
2	I do not seek mental health service because I thought the problem was not serious	104 (60.5%)	68 (39.6%)	172 (100)	9	147.30	16.92	Ho Rejected
3	I have had a bad experience with mental health service personnel	60 (34.9%)	112 (65.1%)	172 (100)				
4	Through assessment results, I am able to understand the severity of my condition influencing me to seek services	162 (94.2%)	10 (5.8%)	172 (100)				
Column Total		417	271	688				

@ 0.05 alpha level

Table three presents chi-square analysis on mental health assessment and mental health services. The Chi-square value is 147.30, the critical table value is 16.92, and the degree of freedom is 9 at significant alpha level of 0.05. Therefore, hypothesis two which stated mental health assessment will not significantly influence seeking mental health services among athletes is rejected. This implies that mental health assessment influences seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Hypothesis 2: Counselling will not significantly influence seeking mental health services among athletes in University of Ilorin.

Table 4: Mean Analysis on Counselling and Seeking Mental Health Services

S/N	Items	Sd	Mean
1	I learn coping strategies through counselling and it enables me to take the next step and seek additional mental health services	.46	3.21
2	I normalize seeking mental health service I openly discuss my mental health struggles and engagement in counselling	.68	2.84
3	I might seek counselling to regain motivation and enthusiasm for their sport	.40	3.15
4	I believe that counselling promotes the idea that seeking mental health support is a sign of strength	.35	3.11
Total		0.47	3.07

Table four presents mean analysis on counselling influence on seeking mental health services among athletes. The table indicates the grand mean of 3.07 and standard deviation of 0.47. This means that counselling influences seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Table 3: Chi-square analysis on Mental Health Assessment and Mental Health Services

N	ITEMS	(SA A)	+	(D SD)	+	Row Total	df	Cal Value X ²	Table Value X ²	REMARK S
1	I do not seek mental health service because I thought the problem would go away	91 (53.0%)		81 (47.1%)		172 (100)				
2	I do not seek mental health service because I thought the problem was not serious	104 (60.5%)		68 (39.6%)		172 (100)	9	147.30	16.92	Ho Rejected
3	I have had a bad experience with mental health service personnel	60 (34.9%)		112 (65.1%)		172 (100)				
4	Through assessment results, I am able to understand the severity of my condition influencing me to seek services	162 (94.2%)		10 (5.8%)		172 (100)				
Column Total		417		271		688				

@ 0.05 alpha level

Table three presents chi-square analysis on mental health assessment and mental health services. The Chi-square value is 147.30, the critical table value is 16.92, and the degree of freedom is 9 at significant alpha level of 0.05. Therefore, hypothesis two which stated mental health assessment will not significantly influence seeking mental health services among athletes is rejected. This implies that mental health assessment influences seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

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S/N	Items	Sd	Mean
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2	I normalize seeking mental health service I openly discuss my mental health struggles and engagement in counselling	.68	2.84
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4	I believe that counselling promotes the idea that seeking mental health support is a sign of strength	.35	3.11
Total		0.47	3.07

Table four presents mean analysis on counselling influence on seeking mental health services among athletes. The table indicates the grand mean of 3.07 and standard deviation of 0.47. This means that counselling influences seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Table 5: Chi-square analysis on Counselling and Mental Health Services

N	ITEMS	(SA + A)	(D + SD)	Row Total	df	Cal Value X ²	Table Value X ²	REMARKS
1	I learn coping strategies through counselling and it enables me to take the next step and seek additional mental health services	168 (97.7%)	4 (2.3%)	172 (100%)				
2	I normalize seeking mental health service I openly discuss my mental health struggles and engagement in counselling	117 (68.0%)	55 (32.0%)	172 (100%)	9	179.17	16.92	Ho Rejected
3	I might seek counselling to regain motivation and enthusiasm for their sport	169 (98.3%)	3 (1.7%)	172 (100%)				
4	I believe that counselling promotes the idea that seeking mental health support is a sign of strength	170 (98.8%)	2 (1.2%)	172 (100%)				
Column Total		624	64	688				

@ 0.05 alpha level

Table five presents chi-square analysis on counselling and mental health services. The Chi-square value is 179.17, the critical table value is 16.92, and the degree of freedom is 9 at significant alpha level of 0.05. Therefore, hypothesis four which stated that counselling will not significantly influence seeking mental health services among athletes is rejected. This implies that counselling influences seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that mental health assessment had significant influence on seeking mental health services among athletes in University of Ilorin. This implies that athletes are hesitant to seek mental health services because they thought the problem would go away, thought the problem was not serious and have had a bad experience with mental health professionals. Also, this finding underscores the vital role of proactive mental health assessment in promoting the well-being of athletes. This finding supports that of Hashim et al (2021) which submitted that athletes reported a high score of confidence in sport psychology, which indicated that they have a positive attitude toward sport psychology services. Rooney et al. (2021) reported that athletes involved in individual sports were able to assess themselves and were more likely to have greater confidence in sport psychology consulting. Pandey and Deshmukh (2022) examination of mental health and attitude towards seeking psychological consultation found positive attitude of respondents towards seeking psychological help.

The findings further revealed that counselling had significant influence on seeking mental health services among athletes in University of Ilorin. Through exposure to counselling skills, athletes learn coping strategies through counselling and it enables them to take appropriate steps towards seeking additional mental health

services and might seek counselling to regain motivation and enthusiasm for their sport. Also, this result underscores the critical role that counselling services play in addressing the mental health needs of athletes. This corroborates findings of Tuner (2016) who affirmed that lack of engagement with support services such as counselling among athletes also impacts their mental health seeking services as athletes navigate performance, career transition, and personal life issues. McCarthy et al. (2010) study also revealed that an overwhelming majority of graduate students would not travel to the main campus to utilize counselling services. Daltry et al. (2018) study also revealed that expectations about counselling were a significant predictor of attitudes toward counselling.

Conclusion

Based on the findings from the study, the following conclusions were drawn: Mental health and Counselling assessments had significant influence on seeking mental health services among university athletes in Kwara State.

Recommendations

- i. Mental health professionals should ensure that assessments are conducted in a supportive and non-judgmental manner, encouraging athletes to seek assistance when needed.
- ii. University health centres in Kwara State should conduct enlightenment programmes for athletes and student body in general highlighting the benefits of seeking timely help for mental health concerns among athletes and inform them about expert help.
- iii. Counselling unit in universities in Kwara State should consider tailoring their services to meet the specific needs of athletes.
- iv. Coaches and managers of University athletes in Kwara State should assist athletes through teaching confidence building strategies to embrace mental health services to improve their mental health status which is necessary for good performance.

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