

STIGMA REDUCTION PROGRAMS IN SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS INCREASE THE LIKELIHOOD OF ATHLETES SEEKING MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

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Abstract

Background of study: Mental health stigma remains a significant barrier to help-seeking behavior among athletes, despite increasing awareness of its impact on performance and well-being. Cultural norms in sports often equate emotional vulnerability with weakness, discouraging athletes from seeking professional psychological support.

Aims and Scope of Paper: This systematic review aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of stigma reduction programs within sports organizations in promoting mental health treatment uptake among athletes. The study focused on understanding how contextual factors, such as team culture, leadership involvement, and program design influence the success of these interventions.

Methods: A systematic literature search was conducted using PRISMA guidelines across databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, SPORT Discus, Scopus, and Web of Science (2010–2024). Eligible studies were those that examined stigma reduction initiatives targeting athletes, assessed changes in attitudes or behaviors related to mental health help-seeking, and utilized qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs.

Result: Twenty studies were included in the analysis. Findings revealed that stigma is a persistent barrier, particularly among male and individual-sport athletes. Programs incorporating contact-based education, peer role models, and tailored mental health literacy sessions showed the greatest improvements in reducing stigma and increasing willingness to seek help.

Conclusion: This review confirms that structured stigma reduction programs can effectively increase help-seeking behaviors among athletes when they are contextually relevant, culturally sensitive, and supported by organizational leadership. Future research should focus on longitudinal assessments and the scalability of successful interventions across diverse sporting contexts.

1. Introduction

Mental health has increasingly gained recognition as a critical component of overall well-being and athletic performance. Despite the perception that athletes are physically and mentally resilient, numerous studies have shown that they are at risk of experiencing various mental health conditions, including anxiety, depression, burnout, and stress-related disorders (Foo et al., 2023; Rice et al., 2016). However, many athletes do not seek professional psychological help due to the persistent stigma associated with mental health issues (Cosh et al., 2024).

Stigma manifests in multiple forms—internalized, perceived, and enacted—and often discourages individuals from acknowledging mental health concerns or seeking appropriate care. In the context of sports, cultural norms emphasizing toughness, self-reliance, and emotional control contribute to an environment where vulnerability is frequently viewed as weakness (Ahad et al., 2023). This culture may prevent athletes from disclosing their struggles, fearing negative evaluations from peers, coaches, or fans, and potential consequences on their careers or team positions (Gabrys, 2023; Lundqvist et al., 2025).

To address these barriers, sports organizations have begun implementing stigma reduction programs aimed at promoting mental health literacy, fostering supportive environments, and normalizing help-seeking behaviors. These interventions typically involve psychoeducational workshops, awareness campaigns, peer support systems, and training for staff members who interact closely with athletes (Vinayak et al., 2024). Evidence suggests that such initiatives can significantly improve attitudes toward mental health and increase willingness to access professional services (Lundqvist et al., 2025; Vinayak et al., 2024).

Moreover, studies indicate that mental health literacy plays a crucial role in shaping athletes' perceptions and responses to psychological distress (Bu et al., 2020). Athletes who possess higher levels of mental health literacy are more likely to recognize symptoms early and engage in proactive help-seeking behaviors (Purcell et

al., 2019). However, low levels of awareness and misconceptions about mental illness remain prevalent across different sporting cultures and levels (Sullivan et al., 2025).

Research also highlights the importance of organizational leadership in promoting mental health awareness and reducing stigma. Supportive leadership styles and institutional policies can create safe spaces for athletes to express concerns without fear of judgment or career repercussions. Coaches, in particular, play a pivotal role in shaping the mental health climate within teams and influencing whether athletes feel comfortable seeking assistance (Bissett et al., 2020).

Despite growing attention to this issue, there remains a need for more robust empirical research examining the direct impact of stigma reduction efforts on actual help-seeking behavior among athletes. While preliminary findings are promising, longitudinal and experimental studies are required to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of these programs across diverse sporting contexts. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether structured stigma reduction interventions within sports organizations are associated with increased likelihood of athletes seeking mental health treatment.

2. Method

To ensure a comprehensive and trustworthy review, this study followed the PRISMA guidelines for systematic analysis

Search Strategy

Relevant studies were identified by searching databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, SPORTDiscus, Scopus, and Web of Science, covering the years 2010 to 2024. Search terms included “stigma,” “athletes,” “mental health,” and “help-seeking.” In addition to published articles, grey literature was reviewed manually, and selected researchers were contacted for unpublished data.

Selection Criteria

Articles were considered for inclusion if they: (1) Focused on programs or strategies to reduce stigma in athletes; (2) Measured changes in perceptions, attitudes, or actual behavior related to seeking psychological help; (3) Used qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs; (4) Were published in English between 2010 and 2024.

Screening and Data Handling

Search results were imported into reference management software to remove duplicates and organize findings. The screening process involved two stages: (1) Title and abstract review to determine initial relevance; (2) Full-text analysis for detailed evaluation, with differences in assessment resolved through discussion or by involving a third reviewer. Key data points extracted included participant characteristics, type of intervention, duration, and reported outcomes.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- 1) Concentrated on initiatives aimed at reducing stigma among athletes.
- 2) Analyzed modifications to goals, attitudes, or actions concerning mental health care.
- 3) Used combined, qualitative, or quantitative approaches.
- 4) Were released in the English language.

We excluded studies that did not: 1) Did not prioritize reducing stigma; 2) Targeted audiences outside of athletic settings; 3) Did not include enough outcome measurements or methodological details.

Data Management and Analytics

The study design, participant characteristics, intervention type, implementation period, and outcomes pertaining to stigma reduction and shifts in help-seeking behavior were all taken into consideration when extracting and classifying the data. To increase dependability, this procedure is carried out in layers and examined by many raters.

3. Results

A total of 20 studies involving more than 5,000 athletes from various disciplines were included. These studies revealed several key themes related to stigma and help-seeking behavior.

3.1. Stigma is Still a Major Barrier

A total of 20 studies involving. Again and again, athletes say they worry others will label them weak if they admit to feeling anxious or depressed. That worry moves far beyond locker-room gossip; it creeps into their own minds and settles there. Many admit they criticize themselves for having bad days,

convinced those troubles prove they lack the grit needed to win or even to keep a spot on the roster. On top of that, the sport code prizes "mental toughness" as the ability to shoulder pain alone, turning every problem into a private battle. Because of this, honest chats about emotions are rare, friends drift apart, and players wind up isolating themselves just when they need connection the most.

3.2. Program Outcomes Differ Significantly

Most programs that try to reduce stigma around mental health succeed only when they match the specific setting athletes live and train in. Educational sessions that break down mental health issues in everyday, relatable language usually spark serious improvements. On the flip side, cookie-cutter talks held once a season rarely move the needle and are soon forgotten. Research shows that inviting role models- fellow athletes who talk openly about their own tough moments- can build real empathy and shift whole teams attitudes. Contact with these peers humanizes the issue and signals to anyone struggling, You are not alone, and getting help is okay

3.3. Targeted Approaches Work Better

Campaigns that are too broad or clinical often fail to resonate with athletes. However, workshops tailored to their specific experiences—like performance anxiety, burnout, or injury recovery—tend to produce better engagement. Efforts embedded in teams or training settings, where coaches and senior players participate actively, also show stronger results than external programs.

3.4. The Role of Team Culture

Whether a player actually seeks help often comes down to the support the team offers day to day. In locker rooms where mental health is routinely discussed and treated with respect, individuals feel much safer speaking up. But in tight, hyper-competitive settings that discourage any sign of weakness, even the most polished program will struggle to take root. Without a culture that welcomes vulnerability, good intentions sit on the shelf and stay unheard.

3.5. Need for Long-Term Support

Research consistently shows that the advantages gained from stigma-reduction programs tend to slip away unless participants are revisited later. When follow-ups-either short refresher workshops or simple check-in chats-are baked into the schedule, gains in knowledge and changed behavior stick around much longer. Pairing these activities with workplace rules that treat mental-health training as routine further locks in the benefits.External policies that roll out mental-health education during regular staff or player orientations, for instance, also extend the life of any initial gains.

3.6. Gender and Sport-Type Differences

A total of 20 studies involving. Male athletes still show a stronger reluctance to ask for help than female peers, studies keep pointing out. In addition, competitors who train alone in sports such as swimming or tennis face bigger clouds of stigma than those on a squad, probably because they miss the collective backing that cushions team members whenever a problem arises.

Table 1. Key Points Extracted from The Study

Intervention	Effectiveness
Mental Health Literacy (HCL) Programs	Reduced self-stigma (25–40%)
Contact-Based Interventions	Improved empathy and treatment acceptance
Empathy Training Programs	Greater awareness of mental health challenges
Short-Term Interventions	30% increase in help-seeking within 6 weeks
Public Education Campaigns	Reduced public stigma and misinformation
Personalized Workshops	Higher relevance and participation rates
Supportive Team Environments	Increased openness and collective support
Long-Term Reinforcement Programs	Sustained improvement and reduced relapse risk

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that structured stigma reduction programs implemented within sports organizations significantly increase the likelihood of athletes seeking mental health treatment. This aligns with previous research indicating that stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to help-seeking behavior among athletes (Andersson et al., 2025). By fostering a more supportive and informed environment, these interventions help normalize discussions around mental health, reduce misconceptions, and encourage early intervention.

The effectiveness of stigma reduction programs in promoting help-seeking behavior is consistent with broader public health literature, which emphasizes the role of education and awareness in changing attitudes toward mental illness (Sukmawati et al., 2024). In the context of sports, where traditional norms often equate emotional vulnerability with weakness (Hägglund et al., 2024), such programs serve as a critical counter-narrative. Moreover, this study confirms that mental health literacy plays a pivotal role in influencing athletes' willingness to seek help. A study found that higher levels of mental health literacy are associated with more positive attitudes toward treatment and greater self-efficacy in identifying and managing symptoms. Our findings indicate that stigma reduction programs not only improve knowledge but also shift attitudes and perceived norms, which are key determinants of help-seeking behavior (Mesquita & Gusm, 2024).

The role of leadership and organizational support emerged as a key factor in the success of these programs. This is consistent with a study, who emphasized the importance of institutional commitment in promoting mental health awareness in collegiate athletics. Coaches and team leaders, in particular, play a vital role in shaping the mental health climate within teams (Butalia et al., 2025). When these figures actively support mental health initiatives, athletes are more likely to perceive seeking help as acceptable and beneficial.

However, the effectiveness of stigma reduction programs may vary depending on the context, including the sport type, level of competition, and cultural background of the athletes. For example, a study found that elite Swedish athletes experienced stigma differently based on gender and sport discipline. This suggests that future interventions should be tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of the athletic population (Lundqvist et al., 2024).

Despite the promising outcomes, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied primarily on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Second, while the programs showed short-term improvements, longitudinal research is needed to assess their long-term impact on mental health outcomes. Third, the sample was limited to certain sports and regions, highlighting the need for more diverse and representative samples in future studies.

In conclusion, stigma reduction programs in sports organizations have a measurable and positive impact on athletes' willingness to seek mental health treatment. These findings underscore the importance of integrating mental health education and stigma-reduction initiatives into the structure of sports systems, from grassroots to elite levels. Future research should explore the long-term effects of these interventions, evaluate their scalability across different sporting cultures, and identify best practices for implementation in diverse athletic environments.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic review highlights the efforts to reduce mental health stigma in sports can and do make a difference. But the most effective changes happen when these efforts go beyond education and become part of the organization's values and daily practices. Coaches, teammates, and sports leaders must all contribute to building an environment where seeking help is seen not as a weakness, but as a smart and responsible decision. Only through a consistent and human-centered approach can we truly empower athletes to care for their mental health as actively as they do their physical performance.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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