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MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS AFFECTING ATHLETES AFTER CAREER TERMINATION: INTERVENTIONS SUPPORTING PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION — A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Loss of athletic identity — following retirement, athletes often lose the central element that previously defined their lives. This loss may lead to an identity crisis and significant emotional difficulties. Numerous studies indicate that former athletes are at an increased risk of developing depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders, particularly during the initial years after the end of their athletic careers.

Objective: The aim of this paper is to conduct a literature review on mental health disorders observed in athletes following retirement from professional sport, and to evaluate the effectiveness of various psychological, social, and medical interventions that support adaptation to post-athletic life.

Materials and methods: The study is based on a variety of analyses from 2007 to 2026 that were found using PubMed and Google Scholar.

Results: Research findings indicate that former athletes constitute a high-risk group for mood disorders and adjustment difficulties. Effective interventions include psychological support programs, psychoeducational interventions, development of non-sport-related skills, and social and vocational support.

Conclusion: Psychological support during the transition period following athletic retirement should be systemic and long-term. Integrating psychological interventions with career development programs can significantly enhance the well-being of former athletes.

KEYWORDS

Athletic Retirement, Mental Health, Psychological Adaptation, Retired Athletes, Support Interventions, Career Transition, Psychoeducational Programs

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Introduction

Retirement from sport is a process rather than a single event. The transition from an athletic career to “life after sport” is dynamic and multi-phased, and its psychological consequences may emerge long after the formal end of the career. Moreover, many athletes experience emotional reactions resembling the grieving process (shock, denial, anger, sadness), particularly when their athletic career had been a central element of their identity [1]. Mental health is increasingly recognized as a critical component in sport, particularly following injuries and career termination. Disorders such as depression, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem are common consequences of health-related issues and life changes experienced by athletes [2]. Risk factors include abrupt career termination (e.g., due to injury), lack of a contingency plan, insufficient family and social support, and limited vocational education. Globally, there are programs that focus on mental preparation for retirement while athletes are still actively competing [3].

Methodology

This systematic review is based on numerous peer-reviewed studies conducted between 2007 and 2026, with a particular focus on the relationship between career termination and mental health. Information was obtained from PubMed and Google Scholar using the search terms ‘career termination’, ‘mental health’, ‘athletic retirement’, which generated 1,264 results.

Results

Better adaptation after career termination is associated with social support (family, coaches, peers), education and non-sport-related skills, stress-coping abilities, and future planning skills [1]. The results indicate that psychological interventions improve athletes' mental health and support recovery following injuries or adaptation after career termination. Participants who underwent such interventions experienced enhanced emotional functioning, better stress coping, and overall improved psychological well-being [2].

Discussion

Depression is one of the most frequently reported mental health issues among former athletes. Symptoms of depression in former athletes are often associated with the loss of daily structure, a sense of purpose, and clearly defined life goals. Additional risk factors include chronic pain, functional limitations resulting from injuries, financial difficulties, and a lack of institutional support after retirement. Former athletes more frequently report low mood, anhedonia, and sleep disturbances, particularly during the initial years following career termination. Psychosocial factors (e.g., low social support, stressful life events) are significantly associated with depressive symptoms, suggesting that not only retirement itself but also the social context and life circumstances after leaving sport influence psychological adaptation [4].

Anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder and adjustment reactions, represent another significant category of psychiatric problems among former athletes. Anxiety often relates to career prospects, financial stability, and loss of social status. In some athletes, heightened somatic symptoms of anxiety are observed, such as muscle tension, palpitations, and sleep disturbances. After retiring from sport, the risk of experiencing anxiety symptoms is significant, particularly among younger athletes and women. One in three former athletes experiences substantial anxiety-related problems after career termination. Strong identification with the athlete role—where individuals perceive themselves primarily through their sporting career—is associated with greater difficulties adapting after retirement. Lack of social and family support increases the risk of more severe anxiety symptoms. Athletes who had an alternative career plan (plan B) or participated in psychological support programs during their athletic career experienced milder anxiety symptoms and better adjustment to life after sport [5].

In former athletes, sleep problems and sleep-disordered breathing (e.g., apnea) were associated with various health factors, indicating that sleep disturbances are a significant issue not only during the athletic career but also after retirement. The article emphasizes that difficulties with falling asleep, fragmented sleep, nighttime breathing problems, and other sleep disturbances frequently co-occur with anxiety symptoms and reduced psychological well-being. This suggests that sleep disturbances are part of a broader pattern of maladaptive adjustment following career termination. The authors note that the transition to life “after sport” often involves changes in daily rhythm, loss of structured activities, and the absence of training-related pressure and routine, which may lead to disruptions in circadian rhythm and sleep, particularly in individuals with strong athletic identity [6].

Substance misuse is often interpreted as a maladaptive coping strategy for managing emotions, physical pain, and stress associated with career termination. Substance use disorders and the misuse of alcohol and opioids represent significant mental health problems among athletes after retirement, particularly in sports where injuries and chronic pain are common. The review demonstrates that substance-related behaviors frequently co-occur with other adjustment difficulties, including low mood, anxiety, chronic stress, and sleep disturbances [7]. Additionally, it has been shown that opioid misuse among former athletes around the age of 47 was approximately four to five times higher than in a comparable general population group [8]. The prevalence of alcohol misuse varies across sports disciplines, with higher rates observed among former contact sport athletes (e.g., rugby, football, hockey). This may be attributed to the social and cultural drinking norms within these sports, as well as the higher incidence of injuries and associated health problems after retirement [9].

Repetitive head impacts in former NFL athletes are strongly associated with later neuropsychiatric changes and impaired brain functioning. Elevated inflammatory markers (e.g., IL-6 in cerebrospinal fluid and neurofilament light chain in plasma) correlate with mood disturbances and impulse-control problems. The findings suggest that inflammatory and neurodegenerative processes, along with white matter degeneration and neural network dysfunction, contribute to these outcomes. Consequently, individuals with a history of repeated head trauma face an increased risk of memory, concentration, behavioral, and mood disorders later in life [10].

We can distinguish five primary coping styles used by former athletes during adaptation to life after sport: (1) sport-related coping—maintaining physical activity or continued involvement in the sporting

environment; (2) self-distraction—engaging in other activities to avoid distressing thoughts; (3) proactive strategies—planning, actively seeking information, and problem-solving; (4) denial; and (5) escape [11].

Commonly used methods include psychological therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), mindfulness-based techniques, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and Behavioral Activation [2].

After participating in psychological therapy, participants reported significant mood improvement, reduced anxiety, increased sense of control, and better emotional regulation. Beyond mental health changes, interventions also had positive effects on motivation and attitudes toward life after sport, coping with difficult emotions, rehabilitation processes, and identity reconstruction following career termination [12].

Systematic studies on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) demonstrate that ACT-based interventions significantly reduce the severity of psychological symptoms (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression) while increasing psychological flexibility and life satisfaction. This mechanism operates through enhancing the ability to accept difficult emotions and engage in value-driven actions, which has important implications for athletes undergoing adaptation following career termination [13].

Mindfulness-based interventions demonstrate significant benefits for athletes' mental health, including reductions in anxiety and stress, improved emotion regulation, and increased mindfulness and psychological well-being. These interventions help athletes adapt to life after sport and cope with psychological challenges following retirement from active competition [14].

EMDR has therapeutic potential in reducing anxiety and enhancing self-confidence in the context of athletes' responses to traumatic events. The use of biological markers (e.g., heart rate variability, HRV) suggests that changes occur not only psychologically but also physiologically, supporting the notion of tangible intervention effects [15].

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) in athletes demonstrates positive effects on stress management, anxiety control, and coping with evaluation, while also helping to reshape healthier patterns of thinking and behavior. Although psychosocial improvements do not always translate directly into athletic performance outcomes, CBT provides practical tools for psychological adaptation, which are also highly relevant during the post-retirement period [16]. A CBT-based program can strengthen stress and emotion management, improve coping skills for dealing with pressure and external evaluation, and support the development of healthier cognitive and behavioral strategies related to goals and performance [17].

Conclusions and summary

Former athletes constitute a high-risk group for mental health problems following career termination. Psychological, social, and comprehensive interventions support adaptation and improve well-being. Early implementation of support, individualized interventions, and a multidisciplinary approach are crucial.

Individual profiles and needs of athletes are crucial — what is adaptive for one person may be less effective for another. Personalizing support and adaptation programs can significantly enhance positive coping after career termination [11]. It is important to emphasize that many former athletes exhibit comorbidity of multiple psychiatric disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders, and sleep problems. This clinical presentation requires comprehensive assessment and multidimensional therapeutic interventions. The authors emphasize that mental health care for former athletes should include both psychological and psychiatric interventions, as well as close collaboration with the healthcare system.

Key factors that hinder coping after career termination include loss of athletic identity, chronic health problems (including brain injuries), lack of psychosocial support, and difficulties adapting to the labor market. At the same time, effective coping strategies are highlighted, such as access to professional psychological help, transition support programs for athletic retirement, development of alternative life roles, and strong social support networks. The authors recommend implementing systemic psychological interventions already during the final years of an athletic career [18].

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