



MULTIDISCIPLINARY SUPPORT FOR ATHLETES: SPORT PSYCH & SPORT NUTRITION

HOW TO WORK WITH A SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A SPORT NUTRITIONIST.

Supporting athletes in achieving their goals and developing their performances involves an ever-growing support team. Incorporating multiple disciplines can become disjointed but collaboration between nutrition and psychology can make a big difference to an athlete's health, wellbeing, and performance. As a nutritionist having a trusted colleague, referral path or collaboration as part of a multidisciplinary team for athletes who might need more specialist support can significantly impact on the outcome of interventions.

Collaboration between practitioners can take many forms. Sometimes it takes it a formal form of three-way chats with the athlete and both practitioners (and sometimes also a coach!). At other times it is much more indirect, seeking support as a nutritionist practitioner as part of professional development on the use of language with an athlete, or understanding more about behaviour change or triggers, without the sport psychologist ever engaging the athlete directly. In a fast-paced sporting world, often collaboration looks a lot like a "corridor conversation."

Knowing when to engage another practitioner can be tricky. On occasion, it's an obvious collaboration with key language being used that signals the need for other practitioner involvement, but often it takes the form of more subtle cues and acknowledging that working with an athlete requires working with the entire human being.

Nutrition is never simply about knowledge of micronutrients, macronutrients, calories and timing, put simply what's "good for us" – if it was, every New Year's resolution would be kept and nobody would ever need to make another. In the real world what we choose to eat is decided by knowledge, intentions, habits, feelings, emotions, environment, our perception of ourselves, feeling of self-worth and many other factors.

On occasion individuals present during a nutrition appointment with low body weight, often in Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-s), high energy expenditure through exercise/training and wanting to engage nutrition services to improve their diet. On these occasions it's important to support the individual, often creating a dialogue to reset their perceptions of self, improve health markers like hormone balance. In this circumstance, an open discussion with the individual about referring to a sport psychologist can accelerate this process. There is a combination of reasons someone could present with these factors, exploring these in a safe environment and then practitioners collaborating on key terminology, and a common language can create a much more supportive environment for the individual as well as change attitudes and behaviours to improve health in the medium to long term.

In a competition environment, athletes often struggle with gastrointestinal (GI) distress pre-competition. Nine times out of ten athletes will come to a nutritionist to change foods, address timings, or discuss caffeine intake. Yet the cause of this GI distress is often a lack of a routine, high anxiety, and many other potential causes which are best treated with work across the disciplines of sport psychology and nutrition. The collaboration between sport nutrition and sport psychology in creating a pre-race routine can eliminate the incidence of GI distress through a combination of strategies. Such as practicing timings of new meals, snacks, and drinks that are then habituated for days of high performance along with changes in cognition about competition pressures, as well as relaxation and mindfulness practises.

Working collaboratively and creatively in a multidisciplinary team, including physios, nutritionists, psychologists, doctors, lifestyle advisors and more, can create benefits for an athlete (and each practitioner) that are greater than the sum of its parts. Knowing how to utilise this team both as an athlete and as a practitioner to its fullest extent is key, and through communicating openly and with curiosity about other disciplines from the outset the team together can maximise physical health, mental health, and performance for each athlete.

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