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SPORT COACHING FOR MENTAL WELL-BEING: KEY FINDINGS FROM A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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SPRIT

Sport & Psycho-social Initiative for Inclusive
Training with an aim to develop a framework
for humane, inclusive and empowering coaching
and sport clubs that nurture mental wellbeing.

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“The best [grassroot] coaches are [...] the ones who adopt a shared leadership approach and who strengthen the leadership quality of their players” (Fransen et al.,2020).

Background/Context

This document summarises the findings of a structured literature and study review (for the structured review, please click [HERE](#)) on the relationship between inclusive sports coaching and mental well-being. Coaching in grassroots sport focuses on enjoyment and health-related outcomes and not on competition and performance. Indicators for mental well-being are happiness, (life) satisfaction, resilience, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-concept, self-efficacy and body image/satisfaction.

Mental health disorders and social exclusion can negatively affect sport and physical activity participation. On the other side, there are benefits of sport and exercise on well-being, mental health and social capital. However, in order to achieve these mental well-being benefits, sports coaching needs to focus on coach behaviour and the relationship between coach and athlete. In fact, supportive coaching behaviour positively affects the coach-athlete relationship.

Summary of findings for coach behaviour and the coach-athlete relationship

Benefits of Autonomy Coaching: Coach behaviour that supports the autonomy of the athlete, in relation to the athlete's personal goals, creates empowering climates, increases the athlete's well-being and has a positive effect on basic psychological needs satisfaction*.

- Does your club/federation promote the autonomy of the athlete? Have you seen athletes benefit from this coaching style?

Harmful Authoritative Coaching: In contrast, controlled coach behaviour, such as the use of controlling language, hinders the fulfilment of basic psychological needs* and might lead to ill-being or negative health outcomes, such as eating disorders, depression, burnout, physical symptoms and antisocial behaviours. Poor coaching, like aggressive coaching styles, might inhibit the athlete's mental skills by distracting, engendering self-doubt, demotivating, and dividing the team.

- Have you ever observed controlled coaching behaviour in your sport club/federation? How do you think athletes, who are vulnerable, might be affected by this?

Coach Wellbeing: A happy coach who feels supported is necessary to prevent controlling behaviour. Basic psychological need satisfaction* of the coach is crucial for the mental well-being of both coach and athlete.

Working Environment: Coach behaviour is influenced by the coaching environment. Therefore, the working culture should be inclusive and empowering. The coaching environment should offer opportunities for professional development, job security and work-life balance to promote the coach's well-being and mental health.

- Is the working culture empowering for coaches? Does your sport club/federation offer opportunities for professional development, job security and work-life balance for coaches?

Getting the balance right: Power can be both restrictive and productive; discipline can be both limiting and enabling. This represents the challenge for the coach to give opportunity and choice when needed, as well as constraint and control when needed.

- Have you observed situations in which power has been exploited? Have you witnessed instances where athletes required more guidance from their coach?

Ability, not Aesthetics. Coaches should encourage a sport culture that focuses on positive body image, which does not include body appearance. The emphasis should be on the body's ability rather than on aesthetics. This improves the athlete's body satisfaction and her/his self-esteem.

- Please think of concrete examples of actions/words/sentences that you use to promote a positive body image and focus on the body's ability.

Quality relationships. Healthy coach-athlete relationships are characterised by closeness, commitment and empathy, as well as the possession of self-control. These are key factors in reducing fear of failure among athletes.

- How have you seen vulnerable athletes' well-being, benefit from a quality relationship with their coach?

Regulating Emotions. Coaches' emotions, such as happiness or anger, influence the athlete's emotions. Quality relationships between the coach and athlete favour coaches' attempts to regulate athletes' emotions.

- What advantages and disadvantages have you observed in a quality coach-athlete relationship?

Peer support. Encouragement and support from others, especially coaches and teammates, via verbal and non-verbal feedback, promotes the mental well-being of the athlete and fosters his/her resilience. Coaches should be aware of the complementary support offered by peers.

- What does the club/federation or coach do to promote a supportive atmosphere among athletes?

Basic psychological need satisfaction is the nurturing of the three basic psychological needs -Autonomy, Relatedness and Competence. To maintain optimal health, performance and well-being, these needs must be satisfied.

The key findings above are part of a comprehensive and systematic literature review that included studies which focus on the promotion and protection of mental well-being in sport.

To access the full report and to keep up to date with future recommendations and tools on how to protect and nurture mental well-being in sport, please visit: www.engso.eu/spirit-project