
Original Article

Brief report on a resilience workshop for professional rugby players

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ABSTRACT

This brief report constitutes an evidence based, evaluation of a resilience workshop for 328 male professional rugby players, with mean age of 25 and standard deviation (SD) of 4.7 years. Quantitative findings revealed significant changes in pre-test to post-test resilience scale scores. Qualitative findings indicated helpful experiential dimensions and those needing change. Integral findings pointed towards ongoing, humanistic, dynamic and systemic approaches involving all stakeholders in the professional rugby fraternity are recommended. **Keywords:** Psychological well-being; Resilience; Workshop; Rugby players.

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INTRODUCTION

Once rugby became a professional sport in 1995, there were associated increases in stress on players (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Ng, 2008; Lindsay, Lewis, Gill, Gieseg, & Draper, 2015; Nicholls, Jones, Polman, & Borkoles, 2009). Consequently, stress management programmes, including psychological well-being and resilience workshops, became integral components of public health promotion in many countries (Brown, Cochrane, & Cardone 1999). In the humanistic orientated, positive mental health context of the present research, “psychological well-being” refers to a particular theoretical, empirical construct, which integrates various psychological well-being components (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and sport psychological skills, such as resilience, mindfulness, physiological arousal, cognitive arousal, mental imagery, attention, concentration, self-confidence, goal-setting and motivation (Edwards & Edwards, 2012). Resilience, in particular, has received increasing recognition (Smith, Epstein, Ortiz, Christopher, & Tooley, 2013).

In the present study, a psychological well-being workshop, based on an energetic, cognitive-behavioural model was used, with specific focus on resilience, defined as the capacity to prepare for, recover from and adapt in the face of stress, challenge or adversity. Resiliency was thus concerned with both the amount of energy one has stored within one’s “inner battery”, as well as one’s attitude, in terms of choosing optimal responses in different situations and contexts (Institute of HeartMath, 2014; Janse van Rensburg, 2015). The present study formed part of a large public health promotion campaign, which included resilience workshops for professional rugby players in the United Kingdom. The aim was to provide a brief, evidence based, evaluative report for future research and interventions.

METHODOLOGY

Resilience workshops were undertaken with rugby players from selected professional rugby squads. Player well-being managers, attached to each squad, arranged for workshops to be undertaken with the teams. A quasi-experimental, mixed methods design, consisting of integrated quantitative and qualitative components, was used for data collection and study evaluation. The quantitative component comprised pre-test and post-test assessments. The qualitative component consisted of players’ written, experiential and evaluative descriptions of the workshops.

Participants

Participants consisted of 328 male professional rugby players, with varying years of playing experience, between the ages of 17 and 37 years (with *Mage* of 25 and *SD* of 4.7 years).

Workshop

The main objective of the workshops was to enhance psychological well-being with special reference to resilience. The workshops initially were 60 to 90 minutes in duration and included workbooks. It became evident that these workshops were too long and with large squads workbooks were sometimes distracting. With the subsequent eight squads, workshops were reduced to about 45 minutes, delivered up to three times a day to include all members of a squad, workbooks removed and a synopsis provided afterwards to the players. The workshop format included: introduction; biological, psychological and social energetic factors affecting rugby players; the impact of chronic stress; mental health awareness; value of early intervention; accessing support; coping strategies; attitude in choosing responses; mindfulness; cognitive restructuring; anchoring experiences; task focus and flow; work-life balance.

Instruments

The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard, 2008) was administered before and after the workshops to detect any quantitative changes in resilience perceptions. The BRS has 6 items, which are equally positively and negatively phrased, along a 5 point Likert scale with requested answers ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Cronbach’s alphas for the BRS in six samples were found to be .836, .902, .877, .798, .754 and .702 (Smith et al., 2013).

Data analysis

Quantitative BRS totals before and after workshop data were analysed using the computer based Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the predominately single sentence feedback from players. Thematic content analysis essentially refers to a method of studying and analysing the meanings of communications in a systematic and objective way (Anderson, 2007). It is not bound to any pre-existing theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following repeated reading of data, the process involved: 1) capturing key words and phrases, 2) grouping these into subthemes, 3) condensing subthemes under higher order themes, 4) ensuring that higher order themes and subthemes faithfully reflected players’ experiential descriptions, 5) interpreting and discussing the findings.

Ethics

The necessary ethical approval was obtained from the affiliated university, local private practice, rugby association and resilience scale authors. All workshop audit information was kept confidential and only presented in group format.

RESULTS

Quantitative findings

Table 1 indicates that the resilience workshop was associated with a highly significant mean score increase in resilience; $Z(2, 328) = 3.24, p = .001$.

Table 1. Wilcoxon Z statistics and associated probability levels for comparisons between pre-test and post-test resilience scores as measured on the Brief Resilience Scale

Measure	Pre-test	SD	Post-test	SD	Wilcoxon Z	Probability
BRS	21.14	3.39	21.44	3.46	3.24	.001*

Note: * = probability of .001 indicates a 1 in 1000 chance that the results are incorrect.

Qualitative findings

In addition to their general experiential descriptions, players were requested to comment on the workshops with specific reference to aspects found helpful and aspects needing change. Many typical one line comments were synthesized into the following essential summary. Players were generally very grateful for the workshops. The workshops were described in the following terms: excellent, very good, well done, insightful, interesting, effective, useful, well organized and well structured, clear, short, concise and to the point. Players found the following valuable: anxiety/depression scale, mood and anxiety states, techniques to learn and practice, anxiety management, breathing and mood states for optimal relaxation, arousal and performance. Players appreciated the reinforcement of common knowledge with practical examples. Players endorsed use of diagrams on the board for anyone suffering from mental health issues, for retirement, avenues for accessing support and providing reassurance of support. Various players recommended the following

improvements: videos of players speaking on workshop topics, scheduling workshops at a time of the day for optimal engagement, additional examples, smaller groups and further workshops specific to loss.

DISCUSSION

Everything can and should be improved upon, especially in the field of sport psychology. Despite substantial quantitative and qualitative evidence as to the effectiveness and value of this workshop, it is recommended that further transfer of skills would be facilitated through additional sport psychological coaching clinics and continuing workshops with club coaches and other staff to ensure continuity and positive feedback spirals (Green, Morgan, & Manley, 2012). It is also recommended that, if they are not already doing so, players should develop group coaching skills amongst themselves, as well as coach junior players, in order to facilitate an ongoing action reflection cycle and reflexivity process of learning through teaching and application of skills learned. Such strategies are recommended to ensure an ongoing cascade of knowledge and skills amongst all member of the rugby fraternity concerned. This would hopefully provide better social support for individual players coping with inevitable injuries as well as facilitate "life after rugby" (Arvinen-Barrow, Massey, & Hemmings, 2014; Edwards & Edwards, 2016).

It is interesting that more use of examples was recommended by players. This recommendation resonates with the expressed value for humanistic, creative story telling practices in workshops (Waumsley, 2015). Players themselves typically go through professional sport life cycles, ranging from learning from established player role models and admiring perceived heroes, to becoming such role models and heroes. Story telling also reaffirms patterns found in all forms of adult education, and consolidates the ongoing cycle of guidance and support of less experienced and skilled players by those with more maturity, experience, knowledge, expertise and skill (Rowley, Earle, & Gilbourn, 2012). It is important that coaches in professional settings develop programs to assist players in acquiring skills both on and off the field of play. A focus on learning and improvement as opposed to a win-at-all-costs attitude is important in developing humanistic approaches to coaching, which focus on the total development of the person (Bennie & O'Connor, 2010). Social interactions within squads and relationships with others are key variables in this regard (Shipherd, Basevitch, Renner, & Siwatu, 2014).

Players' responses are instructive in their illustration of the total health and well-being context of professional rugby, in all its ongoing dynamic of various interacting energies, components, stakeholders and contexts. In this holistic context, the workshops constituted one single intervention in each club visited. Similarly, resilience was only one humanistic dimensions of the ongoing, dynamic context, which involves many stakeholders interacting in various settings that are constantly changing. Players' qualitative feedback effectively emphasizes the need for future interventions that address this total changing context.

CONCLUSION

Integrative findings provide some assurance towards satisfying basic research criteria such as validity and credibility, generalizability and transferability. Quantitative and qualitative results demonstrated the effectiveness and benefit of such a psychological well-being and resilience workshop for professional rugby players. Findings point towards an optimum workshop conditions of about 45 minutes in length delivered to small groups, with a maximum of 15 players, in order to provide the best conditions for covering theory and practical applications. Players perspectives and needs resonate with the expressed value for adult education orientated, humanistic, creative story telling practices in workshops. Ongoing, dynamic, systemic approaches involving all stakeholders in the professional rugby fraternity are recommended.

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