

Introduction

Many people do not realize how prevalent eating disorders are in athletes because they are often assumed to be/appear to be physically healthy and strong. “Research indicates that certain athletes, particularly those in sports that emphasize leanness to enhance performance or appearance (e.g., gymnastics, wrestling, figure skating, diving, and ballet), are at risk for eating disorders. Little is known about the risk for eating disorder symptoms in weight and strength training.” (Garner). As indicated in this source, there are a few sports that are particularly known for eating disorders but, I am interested in exploring how disordered eating affects sports that are less associated with leanness and appearance. This topic is important because people do not realize how being a participant in athletics makes someone more susceptible to eating disorders and the long lasting mental and physical health problems. “Eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, can have devastating effects on both the health and performance of athletes. Compared to non-athletes, both female and male athletes are at higher risk of developing an eating disorder.” (Joy).

Research Question

My research question is “Are competitive athletes more susceptible to eating disorders that go undiagnosed and how does this affect their mental and physical health into adulthood?”

Background and Literature Review

There is an abundance of literature that exists on eating disorders in young adults, specifically young athletes. This topic is important because eating disorders can be extremely harmful to physical and mental health and it’s especially important among athletes because the symptoms often go unnoticed and are chalked up to being an athlete’s competitive attitude or drive rather than being a mental illness. There is extensive research on eating disorders and risk behaviors that develop in athletes. However, a lot of this research focuses simply on the fact that eating disorders are more common in athletes; they do not discuss why or what causes the effects of eating disorders to develop at a higher rate in competitive athletes. Also, none of these studies addressed how the mental and physical effects of eating disorders follow these athletes into adulthood, even after they no longer compete in their sport.

Methods

My study will consist of participants split up into four different groups. The groups will consist of current competitive athletes, non athletes, non athletes with a diagnosed eating disorder, and former competitive athletes. Each group will be interviewed and given questionnaires. The participants will be recruited through flyers on high school and college campuses as well as contacting high school/college coaches to recruit the athletes and former athletes.

The procedure of my research will be relatively simple. The participants will be interviewed individually and anonymously only labelled as group A,B,C, or D. They will be given a generally open ended interview. Due to the subject matter (mental health, physical harm) the interview questions will be flexible and conversation like. The interview will be the first part of the procedure. Next, all participants will have to complete the EDE Q (Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire).

The primary material in this study will be the EDE Q. This is considered to be the most widely used and reliable eating disorder self examination survey.

Expected Conclusions

I anticipate that the competitive athletes and the non athletes with diagnosed eating disorders will have similar answers on this questionnaire, proving that athletes exhibit eating disorder symptoms that go undiagnosed.

I also expect to see eating disorder symptoms present in the adult former athletes, suggesting that the attitudes towards food and bodies that develop while competing in a sport do not go away after involvement in the sport ceases.

The conclusion I expect to draw is that athletes are living with eating disorders that are being undiagnosed due to our perception of athletes being healthy. These symptoms are also following them into adulthood and continuing to affect their physical and mental health.

Significance

Developing knowledge in this topic will allow us to develop more resources for eating disorders in athletics. It will also bring more awareness to the topic and possibly make people look out for possible warning signs more often.

A more long term goal would be that research in this area will bring about a required, procedural method of checking athletes for eating disorder signs in the same way that athletes are required to get physicals to be able to compete.

References

Garner, David M., et al. "Eating Disorders Among Athletes: Research and Recommendations." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, Elsevier, 19 June 2018, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1056499318302153.

Joy, Elizabeth, et al. "2016 Update on Eating Disorders in Athletes: A Comprehensive Narrative Review with a Focus on Clinical Assessment and Management." *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, BMJ Publishing Group Ltd and British Association of Sport and Exercise Medicine, 1 Feb. 2016, bjsm.bmj.com/content/50/3/154.short.