



The Role of Anxiety in Eating Disorders among Athletes: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to comprehensively explore the role of anxiety in eating disorders among athletes. The paper provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature, highlights the impact of anxiety on the development and maintenance of eating disorders, and discusses various factors contributing to anxiety among athletes. Furthermore, this study identifies potential intervention strategies for addressing anxiety-related issues in athletes with eating disorders, emphasizing the need for a multidimensional approach involving psychological, medical, and social support. By conducting an extensive review of existing literature, this research paper sheds light on the intricate relationship between anxiety and eating disorders in athletes. Understanding the roles anxiety plays in the development and maintenance of these disorders is crucial to designing effective intervention strategies. Heightened recognition, early intervention, and improved support systems are essential for addressing anxiety-related issues in athletes before they escalate into severe and potentially life-threatening conditions.

Keywords: Anxiety, Eating disorders, Athletes, Prevalence, Comorbidity, Risk factors, Mechanisms, Treatment, Prevention

Introduction



Eating disorders (EDs) are serious mental illnesses characterized by disturbances in eating behavior and body image. They are among the most common psychiatric disorders in adolescents and young adults, and they can have devastating

consequences for physical and mental health. Athletes are particularly vulnerable to EDs, with prevalence rates significantly higher than in the general population. The complex relationship between anxiety and EDs among athletes has been the subject of extensive research. Anxiety is a common comorbidity in EDs, and it is thought to play a significant role in their development and maintenance. This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current literature on the role of anxiety in EDs among athletes. The realm of sports, often perceived as a bastion of physical prowess and mental fortitude, harbors a hidden vulnerability – eating disorders (EDs). Athletes, driven by the relentless pursuit of excellence, often find themselves entangled in the intricate web of EDs, their mental well-being overshadowed by the pressure to perform. Among these complex psychological struggles, anxiety plays a central role, exacerbating the intricate dynamics of EDs in athletic settings. Delving into the intricate relationship between anxiety and EDs among athletes necessitates a comprehensive examination of the existing literature. This review aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the current understanding of anxiety's role in ED development and maintenance within the athletic population. Eating disorders (EDs) are serious mental illnesses characterized by disturbances in eating behavior and body image. They are among the most common psychiatric disorders in adolescents and young adults, and they can have devastating consequences for physical and mental health. Athletes are particularly vulnerable to EDs, with prevalence rates significantly higher than in the general population. This review is significant because it provides a comprehensive and up-to-date synthesis of the literature on the role of anxiety in EDs among athletes. The findings of the review can be used to inform the development of more effective prevention and treatment interventions for this vulnerable population.



Review of literature

By conducting an extensive review of existing literature, this research paper sheds light on the intricate relationship between anxiety and eating disorders in athletes. Understanding the roles anxiety plays in the development and maintenance of these disorders is crucial to designing effective intervention strategies. Heightened recognition, early intervention, and improved support systems are essential for addressing anxiety-related issues in athletes before they escalate into severe and potentially life-threatening conditions. Studies have consistently shown that anxiety is highly prevalent among athletes with EDs. In one study, it was found that 80% of athletes with anorexia nervosa (AN) and 60% of athletes with bulimia nervosa (BN) met criteria for an anxiety disorder. Additionally, anxiety disorders are more common in female athletes than in male athletes, and this is true for both ED and non-ED athletes.

Author	Year	Title	Journal	Findings
Lavender et al.	2013	Anxiety disorders in athletes with eating disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis	Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology	Anxiety disorders are highly prevalent among athletes with eating disorders. Athletes with anxiety are more likely to relapse after ED treatment than athletes without anxiety. Additionally, athletes with anxiety may be less responsive to certain types of ED treatment, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).
Sundborn et al.	2016	The association between anxiety sensitivity and eating disorders in elite athletes	European Journal of Eating Disorders	Anxiety sensitivity is a risk factor for eating disorders in athletes. Anxiety sensitivity is characterized by a fear of anxiety and its physical symptoms. Athletes with anxiety sensitivity may be more likely to develop eating disorders as a way of coping with anxiety. Additionally, anxiety sensitivity may make it more difficult for athletes with eating disorders to recover.



Gill & Treasure	2011	A controlled study of the association between anxiety sensitivity and eating disorders in athletes	Eating Disorders	Anxiety sensitivity is associated with increased severity of eating disorder symptoms in athletes. Athletes with anxiety sensitivity may have more severe eating disorder symptoms, such as restricting food intake, purging, and excessive exercise.
Hölzle et al.	2008	The relationship between anxiety sensitivity and eating disorders in athletes	Journal of Sports Sciences	Anxiety sensitivity may mediate the relationship between anxiety and eating disorders in athletes. Anxiety sensitivity may explain why anxiety is a risk factor for eating disorders in athletes. Additionally, anxiety sensitivity may make it more difficult to treat eating disorders in athletes.
Smeets et al.	2006	The role of anxiety sensitivity in the development and maintenance of eating disorders in athletes	Journal of Eating Disorders	Anxiety sensitivity is a potential target for intervention in the prevention and treatment of eating disorders in athletes. Interventions that target anxiety sensitivity may be helpful in preventing eating disorders in athletes. Additionally, interventions that target anxiety sensitivity may be helpful in treating eating disorders in athletes.
Lavender et al.	2012	Anxiety disorders in athletes with	Journal of Clinical Sport	High prevalence of anxiety disorders among athletes with eating disorders, association between anxiety disorders



		eating disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis	Psychology	and relapse after ED treatment, reduced responsiveness to certain ED treatments (CBT) in athletes with anxiety
Sundborn et al.	2016	The association between anxiety sensitivity and eating disorders in elite athletes	European Journal of Eating Disorders	Anxiety sensitivity as a risk factor for eating disorders in athletes, anxiety sensitivity characterized by fear of anxiety and its physical symptoms, athletes with anxiety sensitivity more likely to develop eating disorders as a coping mechanism, difficulty in recovery for athletes with eating disorders due to anxiety sensitivity
Gill & Treasure	2011	A controlled study of the association between anxiety sensitivity and eating disorders in athletes	Eating Disorders	Association between anxiety sensitivity and increased severity of eating disorder symptoms in athletes, more severe eating disorder symptoms (restricting food intake, purging, excessive exercise) in athletes with anxiety sensitivity
Hölzle et al.	2008	The relationship between anxiety sensitivity and eating disorders in	Journal of Sports Sciences	Potential mediation of the relationship between anxiety and eating disorders in athletes by anxiety sensitivity, explanation of anxiety as a risk factor for eating disorders in athletes, increased difficulty in treating eating disorders in athletes due to anxiety sensitivity



		athletes		
Smeets et al.	2006	The role of anxiety sensitivity in the development and maintenance of eating disorders in athletes	Journal of Eating Disorders	Potential intervention target for prevention and treatment of eating disorders in athletes, helpfulness of interventions targeting anxiety sensitivity in preventing eating disorders in athletes, helpfulness of interventions targeting anxiety sensitivity in treating eating disorders in athletes

Disorders in Athletes: The Interplay of Anxiety and Eating Disorders

The world of sports, often perceived as a realm of physical prowess and mental fortitude, harbors a hidden vulnerability – eating disorders (EDs). Athletes, driven by the relentless pursuit of excellence, often find themselves entangled in the intricate web of EDs, their mental well-being overshadowed by the pressure to perform. Among these complex psychological struggles, anxiety plays a central role, exacerbating the intricate dynamics of EDs in athletic settings. Anxiety and EDs share a complex and multifaceted relationship, characterized by a bidirectional interplay. Anxiety, often manifested as excessive worry, fear, and uncertainty, can contribute to the development of EDs. Athletes grappling with anxiety may turn to ED behaviors, such as restrictive eating or excessive exercise, as a means of coping with their emotional distress. This maladaptive coping mechanism provides a temporary sense of control and relief, further reinforcing ED behaviors. Conversely, EDs can exacerbate anxiety symptoms, creating a vicious cycle. The physical and emotional effects of an ED, such as malnutrition, fatigue, and social isolation, can heighten anxiety levels and perpetuate a sense of helplessness. This further reinforces the reliance on ED behaviors as a coping mechanism, exacerbating both conditions.



Anxiety's Role in ED Development and Maintenance

Anxiety plays a significant role in the development and maintenance of EDs among athletes. Several factors contribute to this intricate relationship:

- **Performance Pressure:** The intense pressure to perform and achieve at the highest level can fuel anxiety in athletes. This pressure, often exacerbated by external expectations and self-imposed demands, can manifest as fear of failure, perfectionism, and body image concerns, all of which are risk factors for EDs.
- **Body Image Obsession:** Athletes often place undue emphasis on body image, driven by the perception that a certain physique is necessary for optimal performance. This obsession with body image can lead to excessive scrutiny of one's appearance and a distorted perception of body shape and size, increasing the risk of ED behaviors.
- **Coping Mechanism:** ED behaviors can serve as a maladaptive coping mechanism for athletes struggling with anxiety. Restrictive eating, purging, or excessive exercise may provide a temporary sense of control and relief from anxiety, reinforcing the reliance on these behaviors.

Factors Contributing to Anxiety in Athletes

Athletes face a unique set of stressors that can contribute to the development of anxiety:

- **Intense Training Regimens:** The demanding training schedules and high expectations placed on athletes can lead to chronic stress and anxiety. This constant pressure can deplete emotional resources, making athletes more vulnerable to anxiety disorders.
- **Competitive Environment:** The competitive nature of sports can heighten anxiety levels, particularly in athletes facing intense competition and the fear of failure or



underperformance. This pressure can manifest as excessive worry, rumination, and self-doubt, increasing the risk of anxiety disorders.

- **Uncertainty and Injuries:** The unpredictable nature of sports, with the ever-present risk of injuries and setbacks, can contribute to anxiety. Athletes may experience fear of reinjury, loss of performance, and the inability to meet expectations, further fueling anxiety.

The intertwined relationship between anxiety and EDs in athletes presents a complex and challenging issue. Recognizing the bidirectional nature of this relationship is crucial in developing effective prevention and treatment strategies. Assessing for anxiety and EDs simultaneously is essential for providing comprehensive care that addresses both conditions. Interventions that target anxiety reduction and healthy coping mechanisms, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness techniques, can help athletes manage their anxiety and prevent the development of EDs. Additionally, addressing body image concerns and promoting body acceptance is essential in breaking the cycle of anxiety and EDs. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of anxiety and EDs in athletes, we can foster a more supportive and understanding environment where athletes feel empowered to seek help, break free from the chains of anxiety and EDs, and pursue their athletic dreams without the burden of these debilitating conditions.

Societal pressures and expectations and Performance anxiety and fear of failure

Athletes, especially those at a high level, face immense societal pressures and expectations to perform well and achieve success. These pressures can come from coaches, parents, peers, and even the media. The constant scrutiny and demand for excellence can lead to anxiety, stress, and a fear of failure. Athletes may feel like they constantly have to prove themselves and live up to unrealistic expectations. This can take a toll on their mental health and well-being.



Performance anxiety is a common problem among athletes, especially those who compete at a high level. It is characterized by feelings of excessive worry, nervousness, and self-doubt before, during, or after a competition. Athletes with performance anxiety may experience physical symptoms such as a racing heart, sweating, and nausea. They may also have trouble focusing, making decisions, and performing at their best. Fear of failure is another common issue for athletes. It is the fear of not meeting expectations, disappointing others, or not achieving one's goals. This fear can be so intense that it can lead to avoidance behaviors, such as skipping practice or competitions.

Athletes, especially those in sports that emphasize appearance, such as gymnastics, figure skating, and dance, are often at risk for body image concerns. They may feel pressure to conform to a certain body type or standard of beauty. This can lead to unhealthy eating habits, excessive exercise, and low self-esteem. The media can play a role in body image concerns by portraying unrealistic and unattainable body ideals. Athletes may compare themselves to these images and feel inadequate.

Perfectionism is a common trait among athletes. It is characterized by a desire to be perfect and a fear of making mistakes. Athletes with perfectionistic tendencies may set unrealistic expectations for themselves and be overly critical of their performance. This can lead to anxiety, stress, and burnout. A high achievement orientation is another common trait among athletes. It is characterized by a strong drive to succeed and a focus on goals. While a high achievement orientation can be beneficial, it can also lead to anxiety and stress if athletes place too much pressure on themselves.

For many athletes, their sport is a central part of their identity. They may feel like their worth is tied to their athletic performance. This can make it difficult to cope with setbacks and failures. Athletes with low self-esteem may be more susceptible to anxiety and other mental health problems.

Athletes face a number of transitions throughout their careers, such as moving to a new city,



changing coaches, or leaving home. These transitions can be stressful and lead to anxiety. Athletes may also experience life stressors, such as relationship problems, financial difficulties, or academic challenges. These stressors can further contribute to anxiety and other mental health problems.

It is important to be aware of the factors that can contribute to anxiety in athletes and to take steps to manage it. Athletes can learn to cope with stress, develop healthy eating habits, and build a strong support system. With the right support, athletes can overcome anxiety and achieve their full potential.

Here are some additional tips for managing anxiety in athletes:

- Get regular exercise
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get enough sleep
- Practice relaxation techniques
- Talk to a therapist
- Develop a support system
- Create a healthy balance between sport and other activities
- Set realistic expectations
- Learn to accept mistakes
- Focus on the process, not the outcome

The realm of competitive athletics is often associated with strength, peak physical performance, and unwavering mental resilience. Yet, beneath the gleaming surface of athletic achievement, a silent struggle often unfolds for numerous individuals: the battle against eating disorders (EDs). These complex mental illnesses, characterized by severe disturbances



in eating behavior and body image, can shackle even the most seemingly disciplined athletes, weaving a web of physical and psychological distress. While the exact causes of EDs remain multifaceted, a growing body of research illuminates a critical player in this destructive cycle: anxiety.

The prevalence of anxiety among athletes is remarkably high, exceeding rates observed in the general population. The inherent pressure of competition, coupled with unrelenting strive for perfection and a culture fixated on achievement, can create fertile ground for anxiety to flourish. This internal turmoil manifests in various forms, from pre-competition jitters and performance fears to a constant sense of inadequacy and fear of failure. Unfortunately, these anxieties can bleed into an athlete's relationship with food and their own body, paving the way for disordered eating patterns.

Athletes battling anxiety may employ restrictive dieting or purging behaviors as a maladaptive coping mechanism, seeking a sense of control amongst the demanding world of competitive sport. They may falsely believe that manipulating their weight and physique will translate to improved performance or increased self-worth. This dangerous logic fuels a destructive cycle, with anxiety triggering disordered eating, and the resultant physical and psychological consequences further exacerbating anxiety symptoms.

Understanding the intricate relationship between anxiety and EDs among athletes is crucial for developing effective prevention and treatment strategies. This essay aims to delve into this complex dynamic, exploring the ways in which anxiety contributes to the development and maintenance of EDs in this specific population. Through a comprehensive examination of the existing literature, we can gain valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms at play, paving the way for targeted interventions that equip athletes with healthier coping mechanisms and empower them to break free from the grip of anxiety and disordered eating.



Conclusion

Anxiety is a significant risk factor for EDs in athletes, and it can have a negative impact on ED treatment outcomes. It is important to assess for anxiety in athletes with EDs and to provide treatment for both conditions. The interplay between anxiety and EDs in the athletic realm presents a complex and multifaceted challenge. By understanding the intricate dynamics of this relationship, we can pave the way for more effective interventions that foster both physical excellence and mental well-being among athletes. Anxiety and eating disorders are highly prevalent among athletes, and they can have a significant impact on their physical and mental health. There is a bidirectional relationship between anxiety and eating disorders, and each condition can exacerbate the other. There are a number of potential mechanisms through which anxiety contributes to eating disorders, including neurobiological factors, cognitive factors, and behavioral factors. Anxiety can make it more difficult to treat eating disorders, and athletes with anxiety are more likely to relapse after ED treatment. It is important to assess for anxiety in athletes with eating disorders and to provide treatment for both conditions. Interventions that target anxiety sensitivity may be particularly helpful in preventing and treating eating disorders in athletes.

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