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Mental Health Literacy Handbook



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About the handbook:

A Mental Health Literacy workshop was created within the Erasmus+ project “Dual Careers for Mental Health”. This handbook represents pedagogical material for a workshop with DC athletes and/or DC stakeholders to increase mental health literacy.

The workshop is divided into three sections:

- I. Mental health stigma (90 minutes)
- II. Mental health and dual career (75 minutes)
- III. Seeking help and support (75 minutes)

Each section consists of several activities. The educator can individually decide whether to use all three sections or not and which activities will be implemented within these sections.

The format of the workshop allows two versions: for individual use and for use in groups.

The workshop can be combined with Mental Health Literacy Quiz available online:



I. MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

Theoretical background:

Stigma refers to when someone is viewed with disapproval because of a particular characteristic, such as having a mental health issue. Stigma relating to mental health means that people with a mental health condition may be viewed negatively, have assumptions made about them, or be discriminated against because of their mental health.

Stigma is a mark of disgrace that sets an individual or a group apart. Stigma leads people to reject, avoid, or fear those they perceive as different. We've all seen stigma in action, and probably experienced it ourselves as well.

Stigma is perpetuated through mistaken beliefs about mental illness and can be seen in people's attitudes, in public policy, in the media, etc. It often derives from a lack of understanding or fear. Inaccurate or misleading media representations of mental illness contribute to both of those factors. A review of studies on stigma shows that while the public may accept the medical or genetic nature of a mental health disorder and the need for treatment, many people still have a negative view of those with mental illness.

Stigma seriously affects the well-being of those who experience it. It can also result in people with mental health concerns feeling shame, guilt, and being afraid to tell others about their experiences. This can make it hard for them to access support and help. Stigma frequently acts as a barrier to people seeking help for mental health problems and conditions.

Stigma and discrimination can also make someone's mental health problems worse by leading to negative effects such as e. g., reduced hope, lower self-esteem, increased psychiatric symptoms, difficulties with social relationships, and more difficulties in sports, study, or work.

Stigma can be reduced by providing accurate information about mental illness and its treatment.

Learning outcomes, major learning intentions

After this section, the student athletes will be able to:

- Define stigma and how it is connected with mental (ill)health.
- Understand the impact of stigma on help-seeking behaviour.
- Begin to differentiate between some common myths of mental (ill)health and realities
- Explore possibilities of overcoming the stigma of mental illness within their dual career environment.

Activities (structure):

Activity 1.1: Defining stigma

Activity 1.2: Common myths and realities of mental illness

Activity 1.3: Which famous athletes lived with mental illness?



Preparation (for group version):

1. Get to know with the topic by reading the Introduction and other sources about mental health stigma.
2. Prepare the environment: you will need a classroom or a similar room for this workshop.
3. Prepare the materials.

Materials required:

- Computer, projector
- Powerpoint presentation
- For Activity 1.3, student athletes will need their own computers

Activity 1.1: DEFINING STIGMA (20 - 25 min)**Purpose:**

- To understand stigma in relation to mental health
- To identify options about what student athletes can do to reduce the stigma of mental illness in their dual career environment (i. e., school, club, sports organization).

Instructions:**Individual version**

“See the PowerPoint presentation “Defining stigma” in which you will get to know the stigma and understand stigma in relation to mental health.”

Group version

To lead this activity, you will use a PowerPoint presentation – part “Mental health stigma”. In the presentation, questions about mental health stigma will be presented. Lead the discussion by using these questions and follow it by using the explanation on the slides. You can, of course, add to the explanation.

Questions to lead a discussion:

- What are the negative things you have heard people say about mental health conditions?
- Why do you think mental health conditions are stigmatized?
- How do you think stigma affects the lives of people with MH conditions?
- What could you do to reduce the stigma of mental illness?

Closing activity 1.1:

Introducing positive steps to eliminate stigma associated with mental illness.



Activity 1.2: COMMON MYTHS AND REALITIES OF MENTAL ILLNESS (35-40 min)

Purpose:

- To detect and debunk some common myths connected to mental health and mental illness.

Instructions:

Individual version

“See the PowerPoint presentation “Common myths and realities of mental illness” in which you will be presented with some common myths about mental (ill)health.

With each of these statements answer yourself to the following questions:

- *Can I identify myself with this statement? To what extent?*
- *What are the possible outcomes/consequences of this belief?”*

Group version

Divide student athletes in groups of four. Assign each group with one or two common myths (statements) about mental (ill)health from the list below. You can select the same or different statements for each group.

The assignment for student athletes is to discuss within their group about the given statement:

1. Can they identify themselves with the statement?
2. Do they believe the statement is correct? Why (not)?
3. What are the possible outcomes/consequences of this belief?

After discussing in groups, the whole group comes together again. As the educator, you ask the participants for their reflection of their group work. If you discuss about the statements, you can use the explanations bellow (you can, of course, add to the explanation).

Statements and explanation

A. Once you get a mental health problem, you suffer from it for the rest of your life.

Explanation: Most people with mental health problems have the potential to recover. Effective treatment methods exist, including individual counseling or psychotherapy, lifestyle interventions, or support groups. In most cases, mental health problems can be resolved without medical treatment or hospitalization. Some sensitivity might remain, but can usually be managed with appropriate support and treatment.

B. If you have a mental health problem it's better to hide it from others.

Explanation: When dealing with mental health problems it's important to reach out for adequate support as soon as possible. Unfortunately, many athletes may still try to hide it from others. This can, for example, be out of stigma or fear of negative consequences (e.g. deselection). Hiding your problems may cause



them to develop into more serious conditions, which are more difficult to treat. Contrary, being open about your problems may help you directly (talking can help), may help people around you to better understand your situation and may be a starting point of receiving the necessary support.

C. If you have mental health problems, you cannot be successful in sport and/or school.

Explanation: There exist plenty of examples of athletes who are capable of performing at a high level, even when experiencing mental problems (e.g. Simone Biles and Ian Thorpe winning an Olympic medal while struggling with anxiety or depression). Nevertheless, that does not mean that problems should be ignored as experiencing chronic issues will likely still negatively impact many areas of athletes' lives (e.g. Ian Thorpe struggled with retirement from sport, Simone Biles still scared to do gymnastics).

D. People with a mental illness cannot be good friends or teammates.

Explanation: People who have a mental illness can be just as good a friend or teammate as someone who does not have a mental illness.

E. Everyone with a mental health problem will get better if they only have the willpower to do so.

Explanation: Mental health problems can happen to everyone. Although willpower is important, recovering from a mental health problem is not only a question of willpower. Mental health is a complex phenomenon that is impacted by a number of factors including, biological factors (e.g. genetics), stressful or traumatic life events, lifestyle, and long-lasting health conditions (e.g. chronic disease).

F. If you find out that one of your teammates or friends is having difficulties with their mental health, it is better to ignore it.

Explanation: Mental health problems should never be ignored. If you see someone in your environment who is struggling, it is important to reach out to them in an understanding and non-judgemental manner and help them find the professional support they need.

Closing activity 1.2:

Many people do not know about the realities of mental illness and so they continue to believe myths.
Each person can help to debunk myths about mental health by speaking out the reality.



Activity 1.3: WHICH FAMOUS ATHLETES LIVED WITH MENTAL ILLNESS? (20 – 25 min)

Purpose:

- To reduce the stigma of mental illness.
- To help student athletes understand that the presence of mental illness does not mean a person cannot be successful in dual career (i. e., sport and studies or work).

Instructions:

Individual version

“From the following list of famous athletes select one and do a quick research on this athlete:

- *What are her/his greatest athletic achievements?*
- *What can you find about his/her mental health challenges?”*

Group version

Divide student athletes in groups of 3-4. Assign each group one famous athlete from the following list. Give them instructions: *“You will do a quick research about this athlete. By searching for information about this athlete try to find out:*

- *What are her/his greatest athletic achievements?*
 - *What can you find about his/her mental health challenges?*
- After working in a smaller group, you will present your findings to the whole group.”*

List of athletes:

Simone Biles
Ian Thorpe
David Beckham
Michael Phelps
Serena Williams
Lindsey Vonn

Closing activity 1.2:

There exist plenty of examples of athletes who are capable of performing at a high level, even when experiencing mental problems (e.g. Simone Biles and Ian Thorpe winning an Olympic medal while struggling with anxiety or depression).

Nevertheless, that does not mean that problems should be ignored as experiencing chronic issues will likely still negatively impact many areas of athletes' lives (e.g. Ian Thorpe struggled with retirement from sport, Simone Biles still scared to do gymnastics).



II. MENTAL HEALTH AND DUAL CAREER

Introduction:

Mental health is a state of positive functioning and well-being, whereby you can fulfill your own potential and cope with the normal stressors of your life, such as competitions, exams, or any other challenging situations. Therefore, mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders. Both, mental health and mental disorders are not something fixed. It's natural to go through ups and downs in your life. Sometimes you bounce right back when you're feeling down. Other times, you may need the help and support of others to maintain your mental health or recover from mental disorders.

Just like physical health, mental health can change and is affected by many different factors. Some of these factors may not be under a person's control (e.g. loss of a relative, genetics), but there are lots of things people can do to promote their mental health.

Following a dual 'sport and study' career carries many potential benefits and may actually contribute to good mental health and well-being. Engaging in a dual career can provide you with a good balance in life. A number of benefits have been associated with a dual career, such as strong planning skills, wider social networks, and broader career perspectives. Together these can contribute to good mental health, well-being, and resilience in student-athletes.

In general, student-athletes show similar or even slightly better mental health and higher resilience compared to non-athletic peers and athletes who are not studying. However, many student athletes experience mental health problems and research shows that percentage of athletes who experience symptoms of mental ill-health is actually very similar to the general population. Around 25 % of student-athletes report moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression. That means that if you feel anxious or depressed, you're definitely not alone!

Learning outcomes, major learning intentions

After this section, the student athletes will be able to:

- Understand that mental health and wellbeing depend on various factors.
- Understand how a dual career can contribute to good mental health and well-being.
- Identify protective and risk factors their dual career represent to their mental health and wellbeing.
- Have a set of things and behaviours that enhance their sense of wellbeing.

Activities (structure):

Activity 2.1: Dual career and my mental health

Activity 2.2: My wellbeing list

Preparation (for group version):



1. Get to know with the topic by reading the introduction and other sources about dual career and mental health.
2. Prepare the environment: you will need a classroom or a similar room for this workshop.
3. Prepare the materials.

Materials required:

- Computer, projector
- Working sheet 1, Number of copies: ____ (Nb of students) + ____ (Nb of groups) = ____
- Post-it papers
- Pencils

Activity 2.1: DUAL CAREER AND MENTAL HEALTH (45 min)

Purpose of the activity:

- To understand how dual career can impact mental health.
- To identify positive and negative influences of dual career on mental health and wellbeing.

Instructions:

Individual version

Working sheet 1

Group version

First, start with individual activity, based on **Working sheet 1**.

After the student athletes finish their individual work, they come together in groups of 4 and discuss the dual career factors they identified as positive and negative in terms of their effect on their mental health and well-being. As a group, they fill out the table based on the factors they identified.

The whole group comes together and reports the outcomes of their work.

Closing activity 2.1:

Following a dual 'sport and study' career can have many potential benefits for student athletes' mental health and well-being.

On the other hand, some aspects of dual career can act as a barrier to optimum mental health and wellbeing. It is important to recognize these factors. By knowing and anticipating them in advance we can take actions to prevent our mental health and wellbeing.



Working sheet 1:

Think about your dual career, i. e. the combination of sport and study. How does it affect your mental health? By using the following chart, think about the aspects of your dual career that raise your mental health and wellbeing, and the aspects, that have a negative impact on your mental health and wellbeing. Fill out the table.

Domain	What elevates my mental health and wellbeing?	What decreases my mental health and wellbeing?
School (my education)		
Sport (my athletic career)		
Combination of school and sport		



Activity 2.2: TAKING CARE OF MY MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING (30 min)

Purpose of the activity:

- To identify strategies that support and enhance student athletes' mental health and wellbeing.

Instructions:

Individual version

"Think about the day to day (possibly small) things that helps you keep healthy, experience positive emotions, and/or have a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Make a list of these activities/things. Could you think about implementing them in your everyday dual career life? Which ones could you use more?"

Group version

Start with individual activity. Instructions: *"Think about the day-to-day (possibly small) things that help you keep healthy, experience positive emotions, and/or have a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Make a list of these activities/things."*

After completing the individual exercise, invite student athletes to join groups of three to four. Encourage them to share their lists of things that promote their wellbeing with other members of the group. Ask them to create posts with all the ideas and place their post on a wall collage to highlight all the different things we can do to keep healthy.

Closing activity 2.2:

Reinforce that we all can do things and/or activities in our life that helps our physical and emotional health.

Dual career can be very time and energy-demanding, therefore it is important to remind ourselves to regularly perform activities and implement things that enable us to stay physically and mentally healthy.



III. SEEKING HELP

Introduction:

Sometimes we can experience extreme distress that seems unbearable and we cannot solve it on our own. That's when it is important to seek help and support. Seeking help is a sign of courage and inner strength that you are ready to face adversity. It's great if you know and are able to seek help. With the support of an expert, you can break the vicious cycle of hardship and learn to live differently.

When dealing with mental health problems it's important to reach out for adequate support as soon as possible. Unfortunately, many athletes may still try to hide it from others. This can, for example, be out of stigma or fear of negative consequences (e.g. deselection).

Seeking help and finding support for mental health problems or mental illness can be difficult. Sometimes it is hard to tell when someone is having mental health problems, and people who are experiencing a mental illness may not always be aware of what's going on. Also, the stigma of mental illness can prevent people to seek help.

The symptoms of common mental disorders can overlap with natural reactions to training or performance demands. For example, fatigue and bad mood can be symptoms of overtraining but also of depression. Similarly, weight preoccupation and strict weight control can be part of certain sports but are linked with eating disorders as well. In those types of cases, it is important for coaches, athletes, and others not to rush to conclusions, and consult a clinical sport psychologist.

When people know that they will not be stigmatized, and when they know where to go for help, they are more likely to seek help. Early intervention is important and increases the chances of recovery.

Learning outcomes, major learning intentions

After this section, the student athletes will be able to:

- Understand that sometimes support is needed in order to successfully deal with adversities and mental health issues.
- Become aware that stigma can act as a barrier to people seeking help for mental illness.
- Identify support networks in student athletes dual career environments relevant to mental health.

Activities (structure):

Activity 3.1: **Getting help**

Activity 3.2: **Identifying sources of support**



Preparation (for group version):

1. Get to know with the topic by reading the introduction.
2. Find and list organized sources of mental health support in your country.
3. Prepare the environment: you will need a classroom or a similar room for this workshop.
4. Prepare the materials.

Materials required:

- Computer, projector

Activity 3.1: GETTING HELP (30 - 45 min)**Purpose of the activity:**

- To identify possible sources of support when dealing with mental health issues.

Instructions:**Individual version**

“Read the following scenarios and think about what to do in such situations.”

Group version

Ask students to arrange themselves into groups of three to four. They need to read the scenarios and discuss about what to do in such situations.

When they have finished discussing the scenarios, they come back together and discuss as a whole group. The educator leads the discussion by asking the following questions:

- Were there any disagreements in the groups about what was best to do?
- Which was the scenario most likely to actually happen out of those you discussed?

SCENARIOS:

- A. Your teammate seems really down and talks about dropping out of sport.
- B. Your friend at sport is on a diet and is visibly losing weight. He/she is getting really skinny and never seems to eat. He/she still thinks he/she is too fat and feels ashamed of being in revealing clothing.
- C. You are constantly worried about school and find yourself having difficulties falling asleep or waking up at night. Because of worries, you face difficulties to keep concentrated at school and trainings.

Closing activity 3.1:

Hiding your problems may cause them to develop into more serious conditions, which are more difficult to treat.

Contrary, being open about your problems may help you directly (talking can help), may help people around you to better understand your situation and may be a starting point of receiving the necessary support.

It's a good idea to anticipate potential student disclosures and to be prepared to deal properly with these situations.

If you see someone in your environment who is struggling, it is important to reach out to them in an understanding and non-judgemental manner and help them find the professional support they need.

Activity 3.2: IDENTIFYING SOURCES OF SUPPORT (30 min)

Purpose of the activity:

- To identify possible sources of support when dealing with mental health issues.
- To better understand one's own perceptions and beliefs about seeking support when dealing with mental health issues.

Instructions:

Individual version

“Think about the following questions and try to answer them with yourself:

- *Seeking help and support when we need it is considered to be normal. However, how do you feel about seeking help when dealing with difficult issues? Are you inclined to ask for help and support in such situations? Why (not)?*
- *If you (would) need support in this moment – where would you seek for it?*
- *If your best teammate or friend would need help with dealing with mental health issues – what would you recommend to him/her? Where would you advise him/her to seek help?”*



Group version

First, participants do individual work. Instructions:

“Think about the following questions and try to answer them with yourself:

- Seeking help and support when we need it is considered to be normal. However, how do you feel about seeking help when dealing with difficult issues? Are you inclined to ask for help and support in such situations? Why (not)?
- If you (would) need support in this moment – where would you seek for it?
- If your best teammate or friend would need help with dealing with mental health issues – what would you recommend to him/her? Where would you advise him/her to seek help?”

The individual task is followed by a group activity. Instructions:

“In groups of three discuss the last question. As a group, try to identify as many sources of support within:

- Your educational institution,
- Your sport organization,
- Elsewhere.”

Closing activity 3.2:

Mental health problems should never be ignored. Seeking help is a sign of courage and inner strength that you are ready to face adversity.

If you see someone in your environment who is struggling, it is important to reach out to them in an understanding and non-judgemental manner and help them find the professional support they need.

Close the activity with references to national mental health support services. Example for Slovenia: <https://www.tosemjaz.net/poisci-pomoc/>



NEED MORE INFORMATION?

This output was developed as part of the Erasmus+ Sport project “Dual Careers for Mental Health” (DC4MH).

...Are you interested in using this Mental Health Literacy handbook in practice?

...Curious about the other tools we developed on dual career and mental health?

Please consult our DC4MH website, DC4MH socials, and/or contact prof. dr. Koen De Brandt of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

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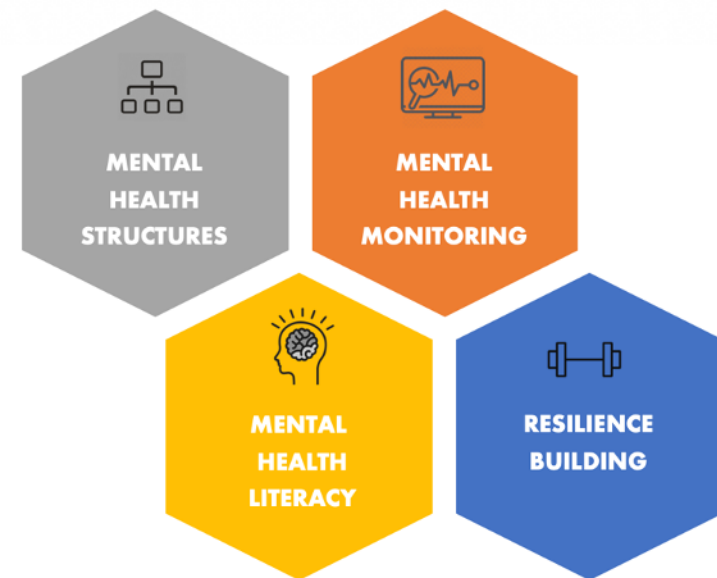
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DUAL CAREERS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

DC4MH aims to optimize mental health services within European Dual Career (DC) 'elite sports and education' organizations.

DC4MH focuses on the development, implementation and evaluation of research-based recommendations and tools in 4 areas.



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