

Group Proposal

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Introduction to Group Work

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Group Proposal

Throughout my entire athletic career, spanning from the ages of 6 to 22, I heard coaches talking about mental toughness. Mental toughness was much more than playing your hardest when you were tired or pushing yourself to do extra shooting drills after practice. What I learned was that mental toughness meant avoiding the trainer when you were hurt, hiding injuries that could keep you from playing, and continuing to play no matter how your body was feeling.

This attitude permeates athletic culture. Athletes are trained from the beginning of their careers to bury anything that could prevent them from being able to participate. That philosophy bleeds into other parts of their lives, including mental health. Breaking into this population to better understand the variety of difficulties they face can be complicated because of athletes' tendency to underreport symptoms (Martinsen & Sundgot-Borgen, 2013). Along with the years of physical training, they have also been psychologically trained to mask their pain.

Due to this training, it is important for athletes to receive the mental health care that they need. College athletes are especially at risk. There is a tremendous amount of pressure on college athletes to play through any difficulties, because their tuition often relies on their performance. Along with this pressure, their transition out of sports can be incredibly difficult. After retirement from athletics, athletes may experience identity crisis, loss of self-worth, decrease in self-esteem, decline of life satisfaction, emotional problems, alcohol and drug abuse, problems building new relationships, occupational troubles, and physical difficulties such as injuries and dietary problems (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004).

The development of group therapy services for college athletes who have completed their final season of college athletics and who are preparing to graduate from college would be beneficial for athletes in any sport. These services would be available to the athletes throughout

their transition out of sports. The group would focus on the difficulties traditionally experienced by athletes going through this challenging transition. Taking advantage of their years of athletic training, the group services would be stylized like a typical athletic practice.

Literature Review

Before one can understand the necessity and significance of the creation of group psychotherapy services for college athletes transitioning out of sports, they must have a firm grasp on the current literature regarding the topic. Understanding the effects of the transition and the possible barriers to services are the most important pieces.

Effects of the Transition

As stated previously, athletes may experience a variety of negative effects during their transition out of sports. These symptoms do not impact just one facet of their lives. They may experience difficulties at the psychological, physical, psychosocial, and occupational levels of their lives (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004). Overall, many athletes often describe feelings of emptiness in their lives (Stephan, 2003).

Psychological difficulties.

Some of the psychological difficulties include confusion, grief, feelings of failure, depression, isolation, identity crisis, loss of self-worth, decrease of self-esteem, decline of life satisfaction, emotional problems, feelings of unaccomplished athletic goals, and alcohol and drug abuse” (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016). Many of these problems relate back to the loss of status related to no longer being a student athlete (Stephan, 2003). It is not uncommon to hear a former college athlete admit to missing the roar of the crowd or hearing their student section chanting their name. No longer possessing the social status of a college athlete can be the precipitant for lowered self-esteem and self-worth.

Physical difficulties.

“Physical difficulties include injuries and health problems, problems with detraining, and dietary problems” (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004, p.48). Many athletes have been training their bodies for years and can “never visualize a life without training and competing” (Stephan, 2003). This makes understanding how to exercise outside of sports difficult and can sometimes lead to eating disorders (Leonard & Schimmel, 2016). Most athletes receive little to no nutritional advice upon the completion of their sport and do not adjust their eating patterns to their new lifestyle.

Psychosocial difficulties.

“Retirement from sports and adaptation to post-sports career life may be accompanied by difficulties at the psychosocial level, including social and cultural loneliness, deficiency of social contacts, and problems with building new relationships outside of sports” (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004, p.48). College athletes often spend 4 or more years of their life with the same coaching staff and many of the same teammates. They are supported and protected by these individuals in the athletic environment. The absence of these social supports and finding new social circles can be incredibly challenging for athletes.

Occupational difficulties.

Coping with the demands of a normal working life can be difficult for athletes. “The physical skills that athletes have perfected for so long may now seem useless and they have to learn all over again to be competent at something new” (Stephan, 2003, p.356). Athletes have spent their life perfecting skills-shooting a basketball through a hoop, hitting a baseball with a bat, kicking a football- that do not assist them in their new occupational realms. “Career

termination beings a transition from an exciting existence oriented toward adrenaline rush to a more sedentary professional style of life” (Stephan, 2003, p.356).

Challenges

When contemplating the creation of a group therapy services to assist athletes during the tough transition out of college sports, there are several important challenges to overcome.

Athletes and stigma.

One of the unique challenges in working with this population is the strong stigma associated with help seeking behaviors. As stated earlier, athletes are trained to mask any problem issues that may impact their sports performance. This is commonly referred to as the athletic culture of silence. Unfortunately, this culture of silence also includes mental health issues. “Athletes often treat emotional distress in a manner similar to the ways in which physical distress is dealt with-emotional pain is ‘shaken off’” (Lopez & Levy, 2013, p.19).

Compared to their peers, college athletes underutilize mental health services (Watson, 2006). This underutilization ties directly to help seeking stigma in athletes. One study “indicated that athletes reported significantly higher levels of stigma compared to nonathlete peers” (Kaier, Cromer, Johnson, Strunk, & Davis, 2015, p.735). The environment in which the athlete is in supports this stigma. Student athletes receive all of the help and support that they need from the athletic department and become “encapsulated and dependent on athletic department services” (Lopez & Levy, 2013, p.19). This department in turn communicates an emphasis on keeping issues inside the athletic department. “Within the social circles of athletes, it is more socially accepted to remain reliant on these internally provided services and thus, student athletes end up failing to seek out resources beyond the confines of the athletic department” (Lopez & Levy,

2013, p.19). Overcoming this secrecy and stigma would be absolutely necessary in order to begin group therapy services.

Coaches' support.

Coaches have a formidable and influential role in the lives of their athletes. Their lack of support could be a major barrier to the group. "Coaches have such power and influence with their athletes that prevention programs for athletes are unlikely to work without the support of coaches" (Yager & Powers, 2007, p.376). Working with coaches to support a healthy transition out of athletics is vital to the success of the therapy group. If coaches can understand their power, they can be a mighty ally. "It is important for coaches to recognize the power and influence they have with athletes, and that this power and influence can be helpful or harmful" (Yager & Powers, 2007, p.377). Having this hugely influential person in the athlete's life support the group program could be the key to overcoming the athlete's help seeking stigma. They do not have to be a barrier. Rather, collaboration with coaches could result in a new supporter of group services for college athletes.

The Curriculum

Prior to the First Session

Before the group begins, the facilitator will establish a relationship with the athletic department of the college or university in which the athletes in the group are students. As discussed previously, helping the coach understand the importance of the group and why their support is vital will contribute to the long term success of the group service. If possible, it will also be important for the athletes to know the facilitator in some capacity. Having the coaches introduce the facilitator to the athletes would be an excellent way for the athletes to clearly see the coach's support of the group.

Along with the establishment of relationships, the facilitator will meet with each group member before the initial session. This meeting will not be an intake interview which “has been shown to have little value in predicting subsequent group behavior” (Yalom, & Leszcz, 2005, p.262). Instead, the facilitator will present the athlete with a mock, pre-recorded group session. This will allow the athlete to gain understanding of what a group session is like and allow them to ask any questions they may have for the facilitator.

Session 1: Breaking the Ice and Establishing Rules

The first session will have 2 main goals- breaking the ice and establishing group rules.

0-5 minutes.

Before either activity begins the facilitator will discuss the importance of confidentiality with the group. The facilitator will emphasize that for the group to be successful all members must work to maintain confidentiality.

5-25 minutes.

The facilitator will begin by explaining the purpose of the group. He or she will briefly share some of the literature about the difficulties college athletes face during their transition out of sports. The facilitator will also explain that each session will have an overall theme, but that that does not mean they are not allowed to bring up topics pertinent to them at that time.

Following the introduction of the group, each group member will introduce themselves. They will be instructed to share their name and in which sport or sports they participated.

25-40 minutes.

The facilitator will invite the group to develop their own rules by which the group will abide. Upon volunteering a rule, the group member will be asked to explain why that rule is

important to them. If at the end of their list they neglect to include respecting fellow group members, the facilitator will add it.

Once their list of rules is established they will be invited to share their personal goals for their experience in the group. Each member will be asked to share their goal and why they feel it is important for them to achieve.

40-55 minutes.

At this time, the group will begin their first ice breaker activity. Each member will receive a Human Scavenger Hunt worksheet (Appendix A). They will be given 15 minutes to find a group member who can write their name down for each statement. They are not allowed to use their own name, and they are only allowed to use each group member twice.

55-65 minutes.

Every session will include a “water break”. During their water break healthy drinks and snacks will be provided.

65-80 minutes.

After the conclusion of the “water break” the next ice breaker activity will begin. The group will be given 15 minutes to build the tallest tower they can using dry spaghetti noodles and mini marshmallows (Appendix B). This activity will provide the facilitator with valuable information about the differing roles of the group members while also allowing them to continue to get to know each other.

80-90 minutes.

The final 10 minutes will be used to process the ice breaker activities and allow group members to ask any lingering questions about the process.

Session 2: Identity

Research has found that throughout elite sport transitions, those athletes with the strongest athletic identities experience the most negative side effects (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014). It is this author's hypothesis that college athletes have a much stronger athletic identity than professional athletes, and therefore; their transition out of sport is even more difficult. "The possession of a strong and exclusive level of athletic identity found to be associated with the restricted development of a multi-dimensional self, adjustment difficulties following retirement from sport, post-injury emotional distress, social isolation, and delays in career maturity" (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014, p.7). Because of the correlation between strong athletic identity and a more difficult transition, the second group session would be dedicated to this topic.

0-5 minutes (warm up).

Moving forward from this session, the first 5 minutes of the group will be the warm up time. Group members are invited to give the group updates or discuss to a topic of their choosing. This terminology will be used, along with "water breaks", to remind athletes of the practice settings they have been in their entire athletic careers and to increase comfort in the therapy setting.

5-15 minutes.

The facilitator will introduce the group topic of Identity for the session. Group members will receive the Who Am I? worksheet (Appendix C). They will be asked to write their name in the middle circle. Then, they are to write 1 part of their identity in each circle. Their only restriction is that they cannot use any sport related aspects of their identity. This exercise is meant to help them begin to understand the other facets of their identities. It is important for the

facilitator to recognize that this may be a difficult task for many of the athletes, and if they are to be given additional time if needed.

15-55 minutes.

Group members will process their completion of the worksheet. This discussion should include their fears related to the development of their new identities, why these parts of their identities are important to them, and what it was like for them to describe themselves without including their athletic identities.

55-65 minutes.

The group will have 10 minutes for their “water break”. Healthy drinks and snacks will be provided.

65-85 minutes.

The facilitator will now invite the group members to discuss their athletic identities and what they have meant in their lives up to this point. Group members should also share how the transition has been like for them so far, and how they think they will continue to change.

85-90 minutes (cool down).

From this session forward the last 5 minutes of the group will be called the “cool down”. Again, the terminology and placement within the timing of the group is meant to make the athletes feel relaxed and remind them of an athletic practice. During the cool down the group will share what their experience of the group session and what they felt they achieved. The facilitator will also summarize the topic of the group for that particular session.

Session 3: Self-Esteem

As mentioned previously, feelings of failure, loss of self-worth, decrease of self-esteem, decline of life satisfaction, and feelings of unaccomplished athletic goals may all occur during

the athlete's transition out of sports. (Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004; Leonard & Schimmel, 2016). The loss of this central part of their identity can leave the athlete feeling like they have nothing left. Nurturing the athletes' self-esteem outside of the athletic environment is a valuable step for the group.

0-5 minutes (warm up).

The group is welcome to discuss any topic of their choosing during this warm up period.

5-30 minutes.

The facilitator will introduce the topic of Self-Esteem to the group. He or she will then present each member of the group with the Identification of Healthy Beliefs worksheet (Appendix D). As a group, they will read the paragraph at the top of the front side of the worksheet. After reading the paragraph they will complete the opposite side of the worksheet on their own. The facilitator should remind the athletes that their healthy and unhealthy beliefs should be about themselves.

30-55 minutes.

The group will process their completion of the Identification of Healthy Beliefs worksheet. This discussion should include a thorough examination of both the athletes' healthy and unhealthy beliefs, including times in the past when they have experienced those thoughts. It is also important to discuss the relationship between the athletes' self-esteem and athletics.

55-65 minutes.

The group will have 10 minutes for their "water break". Healthy drinks and snacks will be provided.

65-75 minutes.

The group members will be presented with the Self-Esteem from A-Z worksheet (Appendix E). The athletes will read the paragraph at the top of the page together and then complete the worksheet on their own.

75-85 minutes.

All of the group members will share their completed worksheets. If they are unable to come up with positive qualities for any of the letters, the other group members will be asked to come up with a word for that group member. The group should also process what it was like for them to complete the worksheet.

85-90 (cool down).

During the cool down the group will share what today's group experience was like for them and what they accomplished. The facilitator will also summarize the group topic.

Session 4: Coping Skills

Along with the links between a strong athletic identity and the other negative effects already discussed, it has been found that a strong athletic identity often results in maladaptive coping skills at the time of the transition (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997). Individuals with high scores in athletic identity reported an increased use of denial, mental disengagement, and venting of emotions at the time of retirement than those with a weaker athletic identity (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997). This research supported link between maladaptive coping and strong athletic identity makes the group topic of Coping Skills an especially important one.

0-5 minutes (warm up).

The group is welcome to discuss any topic of their choosing during this warm up period.

5- 20 minutes.

The facilitator will introduce the topic of Coping Skills to the group. He or she will then present the group with the Unhealthy Go-To Coping Skills worksheet (Appendix F). They will read the paragraph at the top of the worksheet together, and then they will complete the worksheet independently.

20-55 minutes.

The athletes will now process the completion of the worksheet. This process should include discussion of the athletes' go-to coping skills, explanation of times when these skills have been ineffective, and what it was like for them to complete the worksheet.

55-65 (water break).

Healthy drinks and snacks will be provided during this 10 minute "water break".

65-85 minutes.

After the "water break" the facilitator will present the group with the Developing Alternative Healthy Coping Skills worksheet (Appendix G). The group will work together to identify alternative coping skills to replace those they shared with the group earlier. Members will be encouraged to share personal experiences and assist their fellow group members will developing possible ideas.

85-90 minutes (cool down).

For the "cool down" portion of this group session the group members will be asked what important ideas they took away from their group session and what the overall experience was like for them. The facilitator will also summarize the group topic for that session.

Session 5: Alcohol and Substance Abuse

During this session, which will mark the midway point of the group, there will be 2 main topics of discussion- personal goals and the group topic for that day. At the beginning of the session the facilitator will invite the group members to discuss the progress they have made with the personal goals they created during the initial group session. After this discussion the group will move on to the group topic for the day.

Alcohol and Substance Abuse is a very important topic for this group. One study found that in a group of 262 healthy college athletes “there were 21 percent who reported alcohol use and problems associated with its use” (Miller, Miller, Verhegge, Linville, & Pumariega, 2002, p.45). Alcohol, substances, and maladaptive coping strategies can make a dangerous cocktail for the student athlete transitioning out of sports.

0-5 minutes (warm up).

The athletes are invited to choose any topic they would like to discuss.

5-20 minutes.

The facilitator will ask each group member to remind the group of the goals they created in the first session. They will be asked to share the progress they have made with their goal and what difficulties they have faced so far.

20-65 minutes.

The facilitator will introduce the Alcohol and Substance Abuse topic. He or she will then use the Addiction Discussion Questions (Appendix H) to lead a group discussion about their alcohol and drug abuse. Only questions 1, 4, and 6 should be discussed with the group. It is important for the facilitator to remind the group that they are in a safe, judgment free zone in

order for the athletes to feel comfortable discussing these questions. The discussion should lead the group to have a better understanding of the way in which they use drugs and alcohol.

65-75 minutes (water break).

Healthy snacks and drinks will be provided during the “water break”.

75-85 minutes.

At this time the facilitator will ask the group to explore what it was like for them to discuss the topic of alcohol and substance abuse. This is an important part of the group session. As discussed previously, athletes come from a culture of silence where issues of alcohol and substance abuse may be concealed. Processing what their experience was like discussing an issue that may be kept hidden in a college athletic department will be a valuable experience of personal growth for the athletes.

85-90 minutes (cool down).

The facilitator will remind the group that they are halfway done with their group therapy sessions. She or he should ask them to share their current feelings concerning the group being at the midway point.

Session 6: Social Supports

One of the most difficult parts of the transition process for college athletes is the loss of social supports, especially those athletes who compete in team sports. Many athletes spend most of their day with their coaches and teammates. They are accustomed to always having a group of individuals ready and willing to help them. Once individuals are no longer on the team or a participant in the sport, they may feel they no longer have any social supports.

0-5 minutes (warm up).

The group is invited to talk about a topic of their choosing.

5-30 minutes.

The facilitator will introduce the Social Supports topic for the group session. He or she will then distribute the My Support System worksheet (Appendix I). After the facilitator explains how to complete the worksheet, the group members will fill it out on their own.

30-65 minutes.

The group will process their completion of the worksheet. The facilitator should facilitate a thorough discussion of who the athletes chose to include and not include and why certain individuals will be important social supports in their future.

65-75 minutes (water break).

During the “water break” healthy snacks and drinks will be provided for the athletes.

75-85 minutes.

Group members will discuss how the loss of athletic supports in their life will impact them. While discussing those supports they feel they are losing, they should be asked to refer back to their worksheet and identify individuals who may help to fill that void.

85-90 minutes (cool down).

The facilitator will summarize the topic of the group and ask the group members about their experience in session today.

Session 7: Social Supports Part 2

Because the various negative effects college athletes may experience during their transition out of sports, having a strong support system is pertinent. Due to this pertinence, a second session with the topic of Social Supports is included in the curriculum.

0-5 minutes (warm up).

Group members are free to select a topic to discuss,

5-25 minutes.

The facilitator will reiterate the importance of the topic Social Supports for the group members going through their transition out of sports. He or she will then introduce the Taking Control of Your Circles worksheet (Appendix J). The group members will complete the worksheet independently.

25-65 minutes.

Group members will share their answers to each of the questions on the worksheet. The facilitator will encourage the members to explain their answers and share important information about them. The facilitator should emphasize the highlighted question on the worksheet and ask the group members to give suggestions to one another on how they could improve their interpersonal interactions.

65-75 minutes (water break).

Healthy snacks and drinks will be provided at this time.

75-85 minutes.

The group will process their completion of the worksheet. Prompting the group members to share how they feel their circle will change after they graduate is an important task for the facilitator.

85-90 (cool down).

The facilitator will summarize the topic of the group. The athletes will then share their current feelings about how the group went and what they thought was the most important takeaway.

Session 8: Feelings of Loss

Many athletes feel a sense of loss and confusion during their transition out of sports (Stephan, 2003). It is essential for the facilitator to normalize these feelings. This session will be the least psychoeducational of the group sessions, instead focusing on processing the grief they may be feeling.

0-5 minutes (warm up).

Group members are invited to discuss a topic of their choosing.

5-65 minutes.

The facilitator will introduce the topic by asking the group to share some the ways in which they are grieving over the completion of their athletic career. After initiating the conversation the facilitator should step back and allow the group members to facilitate.

65-75 minutes (water break).

Healthy snacks and drinks are served at this time.

75-85 minutes.

What was it like for the athletes to share such strong feelings with the other group members? The processing of this question is important. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) state that, “the evocation and expression of raw affect is not sufficient: it has to be transformed into a corrective emotional experience.” (p.28).

85-90 minutes (cool down).

The facilitator summarizes the group’s topic and invites group members to share how they are feeling at the conclusion of the group session.

Session 9: Universality

“Many individuals enter therapy with the disquieting thought that they are unique in their wretchedness, that they alone have certain frightening or unacceptable problems, thoughts, impulses, and fantasies” (Yalom, & Leszcz, 2005, p.6). It is through the discovery of the fallacy of those thoughts, and the uncovering of a sense of universality, that individuals can let go of some of their shame. For this session, the facilitator will bring in former college athletes from the same college or university and allow them to share their stories and interact with the group. This makes it clear to the athlete that while they may go through some difficult times, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

0-5 minutes (warm up).

The group members may choose any topic to discuss.

5-65 minutes.

The guest or guests will be the facilitator of this portion of the group. Prior to the session, they should be instructed to share some of their difficulties during their transition out of sports. Interaction among the group members and the guest speaker should be encouraged. Once again the facilitator should recede into the background and allow the social microcosm of the group to work.

65-75 minutes (water break).

Healthy snacks and drinks are served. The guest speakers will depart during this break.

75-85 minutes.

The group should process what it felt like to hear from former college athletes who experienced struggles during their transition. The facilitator should also ask the members to compare and contrast their transition experience so far with the speaker’s experience.

85-90 minutes (cool down).

The facilitator will summarize the group session topic. Group members will also be asked to share how they are feeling about the upcoming final session.

Session 10: Group Wrap Up**0-5 minutes (warm up).**

The facilitator will invite the group to discuss any topic of their choosing.

5-45 minutes.

The facilitator will ask each group member to share the progress they made on their personal goal. Group members should also be asked to share what the process of making this goal and working to complete it was like for them.

45-65 minutes.

Group members should be invited to express any fears that they have now that the group is ending. It is especially important to discuss any remaining fears about their transition.

65-75 minutes.

At this time, a meal will be provided for the group members.

75-90 minutes.

The facilitator will thank the group members for their honesty and commitment throughout the group therapy program. He or she will then summarize the topics that they discussed. Finally, the group members will be invited to share their feelings about the conclusion of the group.

Personal Reflection

College athletes transitioning out of sports is a topic very close to my heart. I have a great deal of interest in researching and designing interventions for this population, because I was once

in their position. My personal experience fits into the mold described by the literature. As an athlete with an extremely strong athletic identity, I faced many difficulties during my transition. It was one of the hardest times of my life, and I have yet to fully discover my identity outside of the sport I loved for so long. It is important to me to find a way to supply transitioning student athletes with the support, guidance, and help that I desperately need at that time.

While this group curriculum is simply a class assignment, it is something that I would absolutely like to facilitate. In the future, I envision myself working with my alma mater to create this type of group for their student athletes. Were it to be successful I would like to research its effectiveness and attempt to teach counselors and psychologists around the country how to implement the curriculum.

Conclusion

As you can see, a psychotherapy group designed for college athletes transitioning out of sports is desperately needed. The group outlined in this paper pinpoints interventions based on the negative side effects present in the research literature. The group is also designed to be a comfortable fit for student athletes, designed in a way that is reminiscent of their time in collegiate sports. In order to measure the effectiveness of this design, it would be necessary to conduct follow up interviews with the athletes. If possible it would be beneficial to meet with group members once every 2 months for 1 year after their transition. This would supply the author with longitudinal data about the effectiveness of the group.

Even with all of this information, some individuals may still be asking why resources should be spent on counseling student athletes. The answer to this question lies in their athletic identities. These individuals have spent years of their life training to be the best. Many of them are some of the most focused, dedicated, intelligent individuals you could hope to meet. Their

identities are based on doing everything they can to give the greatest performance possible. For this reason it is important for them to learn to take their passion and transfer it to others aspects of their life. Everyone benefits from the having the heart of an athlete on their professional team.

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