

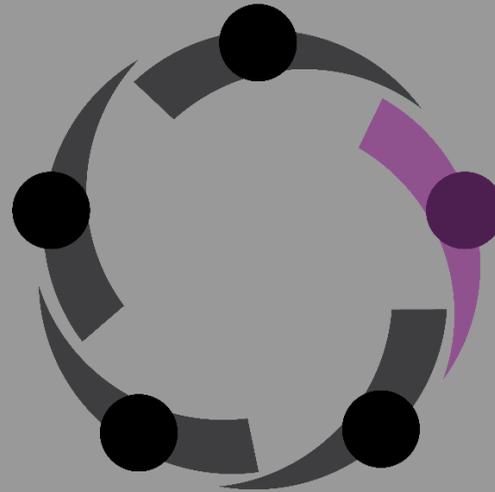
2021 SAMHI Varsity Mental Health Coordinator Project

Conducted by Tess Armstrong

Brock University/Community Researchers

Centre for Sport Capacity

ISMÉA
initiative en santé
mentale pour
étudiants-athlètes



SAMHI
student-athlete
mental health
initiative



COMMUNITY RESEARCHERS

Community Improvement Research Program

Community Researchers is a nonprofit research organization which provides community-minded research students and graduates with opportunities to undertake important projects. This research project was part of the Summer 2021 Community Improvement Research Program. Nonprofits, charities, and other organizations submitted applications for projects which were reviewed by an independent panel of evaluators. Complimentary research projects were awarded to multiple applicants and studies were undertaken by research students and graduates, with support from their academic institutions. All researchers participated in a four-part training program developed by Community Researchers.

Project Overview

This research project was implemented on behalf of Student Athlete Mental Health Initiative (SAMHI). The main purpose was developed in collaboration with key stakeholders from SAMHI during initial needs assessment meetings. The project aims to examine the role of varsity mental health service providers, by articulating the problem and need, uncovering the drivers and barriers to implementation, and demonstrating the benefits of the services provided.

The three main objectives of the project are as follows:

- To determine how & why the role/service was implemented.
- To identify the barriers to the implementation of this role/service.
- To analyze the outcomes of implementing this role/service



Research methodology

Type of research project	In-depth interviews & qualitative analysis
Interview sampling method	Purposeful sampling (participants were contacts of SAMHI)
Interview sample size	3 participants
Interview sampling period	June through August, 2021
Lead researcher	Tess Armstrong
Supporting academic institution	Centre for Sport Capacity Brock University
Supporting faculty	Dr. Corliss Bean

Demographic Information

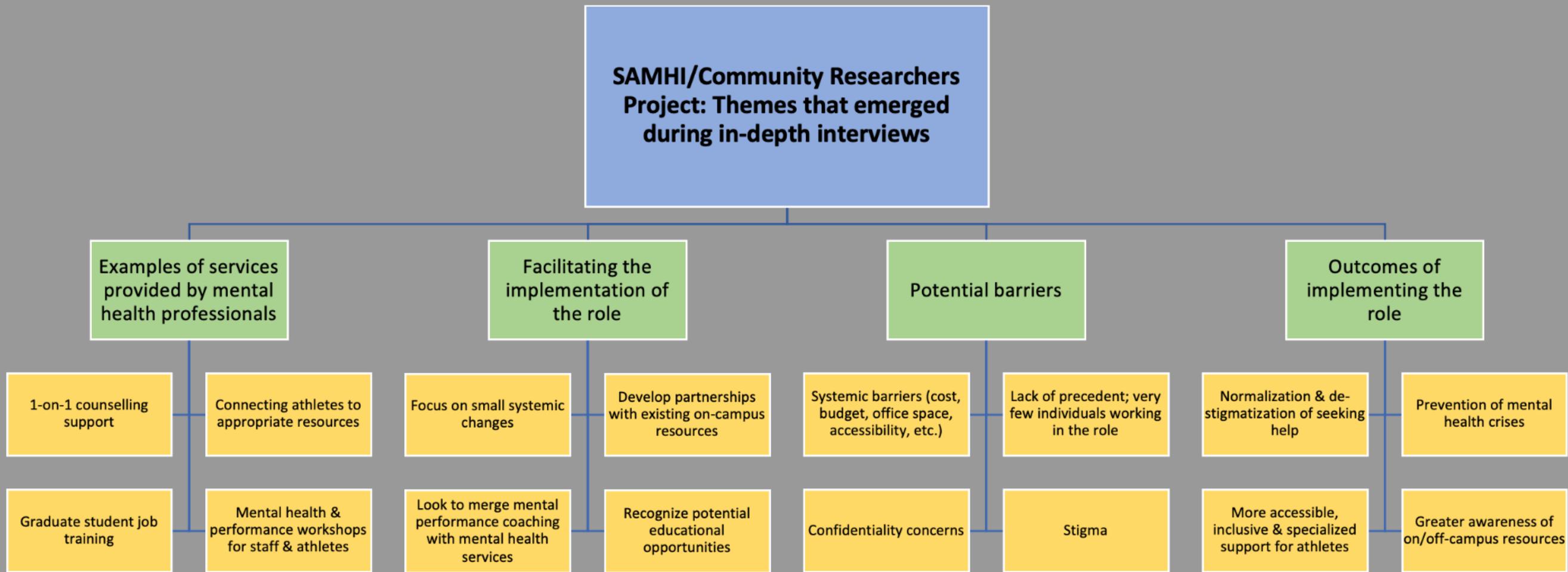
Three participants were interviewed by phone or video chat. Their roles in Canadian Universities are the following;

1. Professor of Kinesiology
 2. Varsity Mental Health Coordinator and Counselor
 3. Varsity Mental Performance/Counselling Support Staff
- All participants are employed by Canadian Universities, and help student athletes access mental health resources.
 - 2 participants have backgrounds in clinical psychology as well as mental performance coaching, and are designated to provide both these services to student athletes.
 - 1 participant is a university professor, and has acted as a liaison between student athletes and on-campus resources - simultaneously conducting research with the student athlete population.
 - All participants have a background in athletics, as coaches, or athletes themselves.



Highlights

The figure below details the highlights of the in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews were conducted via phone & video chat, with three professionals who work with student athletes in Canadian Universities. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed closely using a thematic approach. Themes were developed inductively through the participants' responses to the questions posed by the researcher. An interview guide was developed prior to the interviews, to direct the conversation and consider the objectives of the project (as stated in the Project Overview).



Findings

Overview of services that are currently provided/can be provided

- 1 on 1 counselling for student athletes
 - Designated role of a mental health coordinator allows for a timely follow-up process
 - Free to student athletes (comparable to athletic therapy, training, etc.)

“All our athletes, the athletes here can access one on one counselling, but then I'm also able to do mental performance for two of our teams as well.” - Participant 2

- Providing athletic therapists, coaches, and trainers with tools & information to direct athletes to on-campus mental health resources
 - Facilitation of various workshops (mental health first aid, sensitivity training, stress management, etc.)
 - Off & on-campus partnerships allow for a wider variety of resources (ex: Mental Health First Aid certifications, student wellness initiatives)
- Connecting student athletes to the appropriate resources
 - Utilizing the stepped-care model
 - This includes mental health resources, and other resources (academic advising, health care, etc.)
- Graduate student job training and research projects on the topic of student athlete mental health;
 - Examining at the effectiveness of certain workshops
 - Anonymous surveys can allow for coaches and administration to see where there may be a need for support
 - Training for mental performance coaching



- Mental Performance Coaching
 - Developing transferable life skills
 - Stress & anxiety management techniques
 - Maintaining motivation
 - Mental performance coaching can assist in preventing mental health crises in athletes

“They want us to be working with groups and teams, I mean, and individuals to help them to optimize performance. And, and so that's, that's great. I mean, we can do that, we can help them all hopefully have a positive sport experience. Help them to learn transferable life skills, right? Whether it's time and energy management, stress management, imagery, communication, attentional control, self talk, all the things that we teach athletes really can help us in our lives.” - Participant 3

Recommendations to facilitate the implementation of the role

- Focus on smaller systemic changes to start paving the way for the role to be introduced
 - Ex: Implementing mental health screening (akin to the preseason physical examinations)
 - Support student-led initiatives (such as SAMHI's campus teams)
 - Develop partnerships with on-campus counselling services and off-campus resources to ensure athletes can easily access support

“One of the best practices, and something we tried to put in place starting last year, or talk about putting in place I should say, is pre-season mental health screening. Alright, so both the NCAA and U-Sports recommend this.” - Participant 1

- Liaise with existing resources or “bridging the gap”
 - Building relationships with on-campus counselling services to designate specific services for athletes
 - Ex: One participant, a registered psychologist, was working with on-campus counselling services prior to providing mental performance coaching and mental health support to student athletes

“A part of what we do is make people more and more aware of the resources that are there.” - Participant 1

- Recognizing the opportunity for education
 - Employing graduate student interns and trainees
 - Providing coaches, athletic therapists & trainers with training opportunities (Mental Health First Aid, Information Sessions regarding on-campus resources, etc.)
 - Providing workshops to athletes (Time-management, mental performance, dealing with stress, etc.)
 - Research opportunities: pre & post-season mental health surveys (to inform decisions regarding future services for athletes)



"We want to get our coaches trained and feel more confident in certain things, and just having that kind of like, the mental, you know, mental skills or ability to even just deal with that kind of stuff. But also the competence to have the hard conversations." - Participant 3

- Advocate for athlete mental health via mental performance
 - The value of mental performance coaching has been seen by athletics administration at OttawaU and UBC
 - The role of the mental performance coach can shift to also provide mental health services, if the person filling the role is qualified
 - Merging mental performance coaching with mental health services might help to address the cost barrier

"Mental performance coaching has opened the door to athletes coming in to talk about life and, or mental health. So that's incredibly powerful, it's needed. So I think we can do some early detection, sometimes, and we can provide some psychoeducation."- Participant 2

Significant barriers to implementing the role

- Structural Barriers
 - Cost/budget & Access to resources
 - Ethical considerations about confidentiality and privacy
 - Logistics of being able to provide efficient mental health services that cater to all student athletes (which in itself is a very diverse population)

“No matter what the intentions of my department are, you know, this small group of staff that is like so passionate and wanting to give athletes the best, there's still the bigger you know, institution that this- like massive university with boards and, you know, all these other big penny-pushers and stuff. I think it was that stuff, like I don't have the background in, and I'm not the one that can make those calls.” - Participant 2

➤ Lack of precedent

- As the individual occupying a role providing mental health services to student athletes, having to develop the position & carve out space within the athletics department
- There is a need to continuously advocate for the role (especially if the position is part-time or contract)
- Continuously developing relationships with coaches/athletes/therapists/trainers
- Need to developing HR-related job skills to

➤ Athlete hesitancy

- Needing to generating consistent buy-in from new athletes and coaches
- Sustaining the services under high rates of turnover
- Stigma around athletes accessing mental health
- General time constraints
- Confidentiality considerations
 - Regardless of policy, athletes may feel worried that whatever they disclose may be passed along to coaches, trainers, therapists, and/or teammates

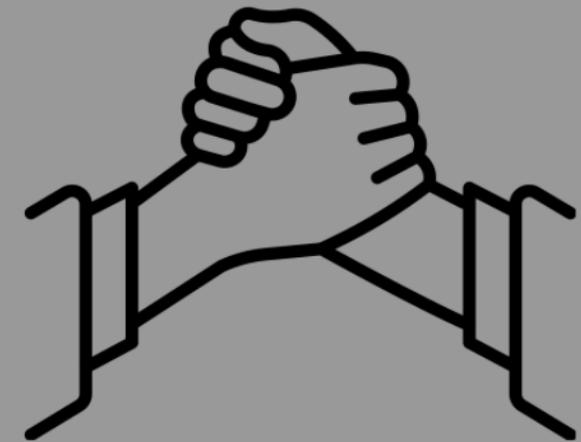
“So I do think that probably one of the biggest barriers was a lack of understanding and awareness. Also, I think sport culture, there's some embedded barriers ... You know what I'm going to say, right, like, the need to toughen up and keep quiet and just push through, pushing through physical pain that's not injury pain is this something that all athletes do” - Participant 3

Outcomes of implementing the role/services

- Normalizing & de-stigmatizing seeking help
 - Going to counselling or therapy is as accepted as going to an athletic therapy appointment
 - Word-of-mouth has increased athlete buy-in

"I think we've done a great job of normalizing mental health support in this high performance environment just by having the role exist" - Participant 2

- Prevention of mental health crises
 - Mental performance strategies have helped to equip athletes with preventative tools
- More accessible, specialized and inclusive support for athletes
 - Athletes may feel more inclined to use the services if they are designated for them
- Coaches and athletics staff are better equipped to support athletes who may be struggling with their mental health
- Greater awareness of on/off-campus resources
- Better overall experience for student athletes
 - Greater athletic and academic success



"When I think of when I first started, I found that there were more maybe, kind of like, crises because, you know, it wasn't really kids who I knew, it was just like, the waves that were kind of coming up. But now it's like, you know, I'm hoping anyway, - it just seems like there's less of that because, you know, there's kids who are actually just getting the help that they kind of need over the year. And, you know, it's not like- it's just kind of surprising- it's like they're being proactive about it. They're coming in and saying things like "I'm noticing I'm a bit off" or "I'm feeling sad" or- they're doing that way before it gets to any kind of emergency." - Participant 2

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

- Athletes learned new coping skills and ways to stay connected with teammates
- Athletes experiencing different types of stressors
 - Anxiety regarding getting sick
 - Mourning the loss of a season
 - Unrealistic fitness expectations
 - Experiencing isolation
- ZOOM and Teams as a more accessible platform for counselling
- Athletes have gained a new perspective on the importance of mental health
- Post-secondary institutions will likely be looking to invest more in student mental health post-pandemic

“There were amazing things happening to support mental wellness, where teams were doing their zooms, having movie nights together and strength and conditioning coaches leading the workshop or workout, and us too as practitioners, we came up with really creative interventions, putting our heads together. So I think there was a surge initially, and then the longer as we all know this went on... and that's not fair, some people were initially absolutely struggling, so all along, there've been people that have struggled for various reasons, I don't mean to diminish that. There was also this surge. And then as it goes on, I think um, we saw, we saw more and more uncertainty. And with that came fatigue, because people, you know, and so how does that affect student athletes? For some, it became harder to train. They were isolated, shockingly so, right?” - Participant 3

Significant Quotes from Participants

Additional comments on potential services & their outcomes:

"That's kind of what's called this stepped-care model, it's quite quickly figuring out with a student what it is they need, and then helping to match them to where they can get it." - Participant 3

"In the summers I create resources or, you know, create policies or procedures for us, and various things, and I tried different things- it's a different part of my grant which is kind of nice to do." - Participant 2

"When we do reach out to students, one of the reasons we reach out to students is for some of the research we're doing, so it might not be providing mental health resources." - Participant 1

Additional comments on the student athlete population:

"They're high performance athletes, but they're also students and young people, you know, they have things going on outside of sports. And the conversation goes between performance and maybe nothing related to performance." - Participant 2

"And I think the student athlete population goes through so much. And they're really kind of often, not a forgotten population, but it's just sometimes the physical, I guess, like priorities take over for a lot of- like budgets in the schools. And some of the things again that get neglected are like, you know, just like their mental health support." - Participant 2

"To realize that the world that athletes work in is so unique, and suddenly- they have different stressors than other undergrads right? You know, they're, they're traveling. And they're training as much as a full time job sometimes, while they're at a super competitive University, where they're expected to get certain grades in order to stay in, if they're not free." - Participant 3

Additional comments on implementing the role:

“So what's good about it is the athletics department saw the need. So they put the ask out there. So right there, I think from an organizational perspective, it's easier when an organization says, "Oh, we have a gap we have to fill it" versus us trying to sell it.” - Participant 3

“Yeah, there was a sports science manager, who worked in conjunction with one of the athletic directors said, we think there's a need, we would like- we know that, um they knew that I was on staff at the Counselling Center, um, I'd worked with one of them indirectly through the national sport organization. And so they just said, we... it's like, they knew that mentally, they saw the value in mental performance.” - Participant 3

“What I say to the (graduate student) trainees is, you know, being genuine and professional and open, when you meet anybody associated with athletics, that's, that's a win, right? So you see, you meet a new assistant coach, when you go to watch a game, and they're not even associated with that team. But you have an interaction with them that hopefully is engaging and curious and professional, as I say, people remember that. And then in three months, when one of their athletes is hurting and needs some support, they go to that person, right?” - Participant 3

Additional comments on barriers:

(Regarding pre-season mental health assessment) “But then the question is, okay, where does this data go? Right? If we're assessing your mobility, then I as a coach, fine. I could say this person has a dislocated shoulder, I need to know that, or concussion history. Should I know that this person is on a self reported scale reaching the threshold for clinical depression, right, it doesn't mean they're depressed. It doesn't mean it's not a real diagnosis, it's not a diagnosis at all, like, should I have that information? Who has it? What do you do with it? And that's a great question.” - Participant 1

“Another obvious barrier is always going to be cost and accessibility of resources.” - Participant 1

Additional comments on the pandemic:

“I had to go, and I still am, like, completely virtual. Like, that was new. I mean, I never really did that. It wasn't something I was really like, as a practitioner, it wasn't something I was really using, like online therapy, but I'm really glad that it happened because it's now really normalized that, you know, usually, in the summer my sessions go down quite a bit, because I'm only now seeing like Ottawa, local athletes, where everyone else would be maybe going home. But now, because of the telehealth option, we've totally normalized this over the last two summers. I mean, anybody can just get therapy.” - Participant 2

Conclusion

Based on the findings within the in-depth interviews, below are some concluding recommendations for implementing a varsity mental health coordinator/service provider at post-secondary institutions:

1. To address systemic & organizational barriers, start implementing smaller changes within the organization (student led support groups, seek out professional development opportunities for coaches & trainers & therapists, look into the possibility of preseason mental health screening to assess student athlete needs, etc.). These small changes may assist in paving the way for someone to one day occupy the role of a varsity mental health coordinator.
2. Continue to dismantle the stigmatization of seeking support. Recruit students to assist in doing so on-campus, provide workshops, and support & advertise research that is occurring within this field. These actions may help post-secondary institutions to recognize the need and see the value in providing student athletes with mental health support.
3. Although the fields of mental performance and mental health are different, uplift and advocate for individuals who are capable and qualified to provide both services (two participants originally started working with athletes in a mental performance capacity - which then transitioned to offering both mental performance coaching and mental health counselling).
4. Consider what a job description of a varsity mental health coordinator may include - look to develop an ideal model that can be generalized across Canadian post-secondary institutions.
5. Recognize existing resources as a major facilitator to implementation. Developing a partnership with on-campus counselling services might lead to specialized support for student athletes.

