

Mental Health in Professional Rugby (2017)

The recent tragic death, in Australia, of one of professional rugby's greats (along with the deaths of a number of other players around the globe), has brought the issues around transiting out of the professional game and into "life after sport" to the foreground.

These issues include not only leaving sportsmen having to make, often ill or uninformed, decisions about alternative careers, but they also increase the possibility of the existence of anxiety and / or depression that generally accompanies the making of life-changing choices.

The word "transition" itself presupposes stages that include denial, anger and bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance. Varying degrees of anxiety tend to accompany these stages which, if left unaddressed, may feed into feelings of depression to the point of despair. This cycle is often exacerbated in those engaged in combat sports, such as rugby.

Anxiety is a condition experienced by almost everyone throughout life. When presenting at a manageable level, it can act as a great motivator and facilitate achievement of one's goals. However, excessive anxiety results in **debilitation, loss of self-esteem, fear of trusting one's own judgement, feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to cope, as well as fatigue.**

Other signs of anxiety include: **sleeplessness, generalized agitation, mood swings, and excessive worry.** Sometimes full-blown panic attacks ensue, as can depression.

Assistance with anxiety, however, is available to those who require it. Indeed, symptoms of anxiety are so common that many psychologists deal with it on a daily basis.

Similarly, depression tends to be a condition very misunderstood by lay people. It is often seen as being simply a state of generalized "sadness". Untrained "helpers", therefore, frequently attempt to buck or cheer up those suffering from it. When these tactics do not work, they give up trying to assist and end up blaming and / or criticising the person living with depression for being merely "self-indulgent". These responses can leave the depressed person feeling even more **lonely, isolated and abandoned**, thereby exacerbating the condition. Repression and ignoring of symptoms can also occur. For example, in professional rugby, these uninformed responses can be particularly dangerous, as team players tend to be easily influenced and team environments are notoriously highly pressurized ones. This can

result in others “ganging up” against players not seemingly pulling their weight – which worsens the situation rather than alleviating it.

Professionally-speaking, symptoms of depression include **lowered mood, disinterest in activities previously experienced as being pleasurable, and outbursts of anger** that may cause the uninformed to believe the person is being even more self-indulgent. As the condition worsens, **apathy** tends to set in and a lack of interest in anything at all may occur.

Both anxiety and depression involve alterations in **brain chemistry** that may require specific medication to correct. It is generally preferable for medication to be given in conjunction with other forms of informed therapeutic intervention – which could even include career guidance counselling.

Again and as is often the case with many professional sporting codes, it is well known within professional rugby circles that players experience difficulties surrounding the transiting out of the game once they have entered into it. Life after sport can appear to represent **loss** e.g. of camaraderie, institutionalized support structures, financial security, recognition and meaning in general – especially in cases of those with little experience of individualized career paths. This leaves many players vulnerable to life’s uncertainties.

Awareness of the above should include awareness that many players, therefore, begin to experience symptoms of anxiety and / or depression well before the actual time arrives for transition out of the game. This may, furthermore, be exacerbated not only by negative experiences surrounding traumatic injuries undergone during their careers, but also as a result of the enormous amount of physical energy required to sustain being able to play the game, season after season. Gradual **depletion of energy**, which also may result in the chipping away of **resilience** factors, adds to the above-mentioned vulnerability.

Ideally, players should be able to count upon the support of family, friends, colleagues, fellow team members and those involved in the administration of their unions. However, the availability of informed, professional support should also be factored into the equation – especially as regards early identification of symptoms of anxiety and / or depression. Early presented symptoms may include **heightened levels of frustration, concentration loss, disturbed sleep patterns, difficulty in regaining or maintaining energy levels, irritability**, or alterations in normal, **self-regulating behaviours** such as changes in **appetite** or those that may even lead to the abuse of and reliance upon substances such as **alcohol and**

drugs (prescribed or recreational). Informed monitoring of players should, therefore, be taking place as early identification of these symptoms, resulting in early application of appropriate treatment interventions, should assist with reduction in the **thoughts of death (and even eventual suicide)** that many players experience as a consequence of anxiety or depression.

Players, coaches, administrators, medical personnel and ex-players, alike should, ideally, be far more aware of the availability of professional help re dealing with the issues being described here. Anyone involved in the sport (currently or even previously) who notices any manifestations of the symptoms and / or issues mentioned here, can also contact organizations such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG telephone number: 011 234 4837 or the emergency helpline number: 0800121314), the team's medical practitioners, or health professionals involved in private practice or elsewhere, if preferred.

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