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Social anxiety and its implications for adolescent athletes

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Abstract

This study examines the scientific studies on the concept of social anxiety and its implications on adolescent athletes, and examines the effects of this situation on sports, physical activity and the changes it causes in participation in sports activities, based on the effects of social anxiety on people. Nervousness, pressure, and stress are common in sports. Some athletes prepare for this experience prior to big events. They may develop strategies that improve their focus while under pressure or may find that a boost in adrenaline enhances their performance. This approach is ideal when stress levels are moderate and within the athlete's tolerance. But when nervousness intensifies beyond a window of tolerance to heightened levels of anxiety, athletic performance can decline. Considering the limitations of the existing literature, our study examines the social anxiety experienced by adolescent athletes and its effects by reviewing scientific studies that have been presented in a wide spectrum.

Keywords: Adolescent athletes, social anxiety, athletic performance

Introduction

Social anxiety symptoms including avoidance of social situations are often detrimental to a child's normal functioning (Bernstein *et al.*, 2008; Kasper, 1998) [3, 13]. Moreover, potential consequences of social anxiety later on in life include a negative influence on academic and occupational performance, a lower quality of life and impaired social functioning (Stein & Stein, 2008) [27]. Early identification and treatment can significantly reduce this disorder's negative consequences and thus, research involving children and adolescents is of great importance (Erath *et al.*, 2007) [5].

Social anxiety involves marked and persistent fear of one or more social situations. Social anxiety disorder is common among youth, often emerging during adolescence (Beesdo *et al.*, 2009) [2] and is associated with low rates of recovery and significant impairments in social functioning e.g., (Keller, 2006) [14].

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a common illness characterized by excessive concern about situations in which one might be subject to the scrutiny of others and appear anxious or have an inordinate fear that one's actions or words might appear foolish or embarrassing (Keller, 2006) [14]. Social anxiety disorder is a common mental health disorder among adolescents that impairs social functioning and contributes to the development of other psychological disorders (Merikangas *et al.*, 2009) [20].

Individuals with social anxiety disorder are typically shy when meeting new people, quiet in groups, and withdrawn in unfamiliar social settings. When they interact with others, they might or might not show overt evidence of discomfort (e.g., blushing, not making eye contact), but invariably experience intense emotional or physical symptoms, or both (e.g., fear, heart racing, sweating, trembling, trouble concentrating). They crave the company of others, but shun social situations for fear of being found out as unlikable, stupid, or boring. Accordingly, they avoid speaking in public, expressing opinions, or even fraternising with peers; in some situations, this can lead to such individuals being mistakenly labelled as snobs (Stein & Stein, 2008) [27]. People with social anxiety disorder are typified by low self-esteem and high self-criticism (Cox *et al.*, 2004) [4], and as detailed below, often have depressive symptoms.

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The specific fear of urinating in public restrooms (paruresis, or so-called shy bladder syndrome) can be regarded as a discrete, relatively rare subtype of social anxiety disorder (Vythilingum *et al.*, 2002) ^[29]. Also, people with social anxiety disorder fear and avoid the scrutiny of others. The concern in such situations is that the individual will say or do something that will result in embarrassment or humiliation. These concerns can be so pronounced that the individual shuns most interpersonal encounters, or endures such situations only with intense discomfort (Stein & Stein, 2008) ^[27].

Even at subclinical levels, youth with elevated levels of social anxiety demonstrate impaired peer relations (e.g., (Greca & Lopez, 1998; Inderbitzen-Nolan & Walters, 2000) ^[9, 12], impaired social skills, and comorbid psychological disorders (Essau *et al.*, 1999) ^[6]. For example, socially anxious adolescents have fewer and poorer quality friendships and demonstrate delays and/or impairments in their romantic relationships (e.g., (Glickman & La Greca, 2004; Hebert *et al.*, 2013; La Greca & Harrison, 2005) ^[8, 11, 15].

Adolescent athletes and social anxiety

The focus of this literature review is social anxiety and its implications for adolescent aged 12-18 whose individual athletes. The research question is what are the implications for adolescent athletes living with social anxiety? To answer this question, I am going to examine, with the use of literature, the diagnostic criteria for social anxiety, implications for living with social anxiety, and treatment options for social anxiety.

Participation in athletic activities frequently starts early in life through organized opportunities in school and community leagues. Parents may influence whether a socially reticent child participates in such activities. Parental encouragement may provide opportunities for repeated exposure to feared situations, resulting in a reduction in social anxiety around participating in sports for the child. Conversely, parental pressure to perform well at sports may lead to greater concern about performance or fears of being negatively evaluated in such situations (Norton *et al.*, 2000) ^[24].

Theoretically, a developmental peak in social anxiety symptoms is hypothesized in mid-adolescence, which is supported by some but not all studies (Hale *et al.*, 2009; Nelemans *et al.*, 2014; Van Oort *et al.*, 2009) ^[10, 22, 28]. Furthermore, many studies suggest higher levels of social anxiety symptoms in adolescent girls compared with boys, which has been attributed, for example, to girls showing higher vigilance toward potential threat than boys and girls experiencing higher levels of parental overprotection compared with boys (Monsma *et al.*, 2006; Nelemans *et al.*, 2019) ^[21, 23].

Adolescence, that is, the period of life between approximately 12 and 18 years of age (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004) ^[17], is a critical phase for the development of anxiety symptoms, and social anxiety symptoms in particular. Social anxiety involves a marked and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others.

Sport as a general resistance resource against social anxiety

Organised sport offers an unambiguous social context thanks to its rules of play and facilitates learning through peer modelling and relationships with other social agents (Smith, 2003) ^[26]. (Larson, 2000; Livingston *et al.*, 2017) ^[16, 18] claims that adolescents' positive development could be encouraged

by "appealing images of adulthood" organised sport is an ideal context that includes adult role models representing the ideals of sport, such as fairness and discipline.

To conclude, this longitudinal study underlines the positive effect of sport practice as buffer against social anxiety symptoms in children, but only in the case of team sport. Findings suggest a possible interaction between the mental and social effects of sport on social anxiety. This is due to the differing results relating to team and individual sport modes. Sport engagement in general remains nonetheless a positive factor in a child's physical and mental development, as has been documented in various studies and reports (Annemarie S. & Seiler, 2011) ^[11].

Nervousness, pressure, and stress are common in sports. Some athletes prepare for this experience prior to big events. They may develop strategies that improve their focus while under pressure or may find that a boost in adrenaline enhances their performance. This approach is ideal when stress levels are moderate and within the athlete's tolerance. But when nervousness intensifies beyond a window of tolerance to heightened levels of anxiety, athletic performance can decline (Sarah Farris, 2024) ^[25].

Sport is indeed recognised as contributing to a child's social development where children learn to interact with peers, respect rules, cooperate with others and acquire other skills useful for everyday life (Smith, 2003) ^[26]. (McGee *et al.*, 2006) ^[19], investigation was specifically based on this premise. Their findings included an association between participation in sports and self-reported strengths and higher levels of attachment to parents, peers and school during adolescence. In addition to increased attachment, an increase in self-perceived competencies was ascertained. In a study focusing on structured leisure activities, Fletcher *et al.* (Fletcher *et al.*, 2003) ^[7] observed a positive effect of sports activities on children's psychosocial maturity and social competence.

Conclusion

If individuals with elevated social anxiety avoid engaging in physical activities or sport activities, the social and occupational interference of social anxiety disorder may further compound health problems. Furthermore, these potential health issues could create physical conditions that the socially anxious individual believes are being negatively evaluated by others.

For example, an individual who is sedentary due to social anxiety surrounding physical activities or athletics, might fear that others are negatively evaluating their physique, body size or shape, or physical endurance (e.g., perspiration and shortness of breath after a mild activity). As well, avoidance of physical activity or sport activities situations would create a negative cycle wherein the socially anxious person avoids athletic situations, leading to diminished physical capacities and decreased skills that would, in turn, diminish future performances and amplify fears of negative evaluation by others (Norton *et al.*, 2000) ^[24].

Fear and avoidance of these situations should be assessed with the socially anxious client, and treatment protocols may need to incorporate components designed to reduce such fears, as active lifestyles hold many physical and psychological benefits. Indeed, as noted earlier, some cognitive-behavioral treatments for social anxiety have adapted exposures incorporating sport and physical activity (Norton *et al.*, 2000) ^[24].

This study examines the scientific studies on the concept of social anxiety and its effects on adolescent athletes, and

examines the effects of this situation on sports, physical activity and the changes it causes in participation in sports activities, based on the effects of social anxiety on people. Although this literature review examined social anxiety in adolescent athletes, this literature review indicates that further research is needed on the assessment associated with social anxiety in athletes and across different types of sports for those who suffer from social anxiety.

Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between social anxiety and sports activity in adolescents, and the limitations of this study should also be taken into consideration.

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