

Wellbeing of athletes and participants

Much more attention is now being paid to athletes and other sports participants physical and mental wellbeing. Wellbeing is often subjective and varies with context and over time, so in addition to general policies and guidance, improving and maintaining wellbeing usually requires tailored approaches.

What we're seeing

Athlete wellbeing in the spotlight

Simone Biles' and Naomi Osaka's recent withdrawals from top level competitions have highlighted the mental health pressures elite athletes face. And it isn't just an issue facing women in sport.¹ Controversies about the treatment of athletes, staff and officials have also led to actions to improve wellbeing across all areas of sport and active recreation.² Women and girls in sport face added pressures of having to look and dress in certain ways, which can damage their health.³ Transgender and non-binary people may not participate due to worries about discrimination.⁴ Racism also remains a problem.⁵

More inclusiveness needed in the fitness sector too

The fitness industry has been criticised for not providing activities that are more joyful and accessible for beginners, and more inclusive of all bodies and ages.⁶

Guidance

Guidance, tool kits and programmes to help coaches and organisations recognise those in distress or at risk, and how to look after athlete and participant wellbeing are becoming more common.⁷ NZ examples include Balance is Better, the HPSNZ WHISPA initiative, and ACC's SportSmart.⁹

Overquantifying wellbeing

A big challenge with the concept of "wellbeing" is that it is hard to define. People have different perspectives, and it is often a subjective rather than an objective assessment. That hasn't stopped the growth in apps, wearable devices, and monitoring services that quantify a range of factors linked to wellbeing – such as physical activity, sleep, diet, and moods.^{10,11} This may lead to wellbeing becoming too narrowly prescribed, involving checklist approaches and not taking account of individual and cultural definitions.

Creating a "culture of health"

Wellbeing programmes are now common in organisations, but research shows that they may not be very effective.¹² One factor contributing to this is that the programmes may just be about vouchers for gyms or yoga, or lunch time meditation sessions. What is required is for wellbeing to be part of a broader "culture of health" within organisations. Initiatives also need to be tailored to individual and cultural needs.¹³

A culture of health includes support from leadership at all levels, shared values, and systems for reinforcing healthy behaviours.

In NZ, it is essential to incorporate Māori perspectives and approaches to wellbeing. Context is critical when considering wellbeing.¹⁴

Potential implications

Create

- Work and leisure environments that take a broader perspective on performance and enjoyment

Relate

- People relate better to tailored approaches, rather than "one size fits all"

Consume

- Use of technologies to not just measure wellbeing components but to support holistic approaches

Degrade

- Perceptions that athletes just need to 'harden up' fade away

Connect

- People connect more to values and culture, not statistics & metrics

Define

- Wellbeing is a collective issue not just an individual state

More information (links)

¹ [Mental health in sport is finally having its moment](#)

² [Elite sport and mental health: The disturbing issue we can no longer ignore](#)

³ [Elite athlete health revelations tip of the iceberg](#)

⁴ [Weighing up the emotional side of the transgender debate](#)

⁵ [Racism in sport: why it comes to the surface when teams lose](#)

⁶ [What the fitness industry doesn't understand](#)

⁷ [Mental health in community sports toolkit](#)

⁸ [Inclusion of transgender participants in community sport](#)

⁹ [ACC SportSmart](#)

¹⁰ [The 16 best health & wellness Apps of 2021, according to experts](#)

¹¹ [Wellness monitoring](#)

¹² [Why workplace wellness programs don't work](#)

¹³ [Defining culture of health: Beyond workplace wellness](#)

¹⁴ [Providing a Māori perspective on wellbeing](#)