

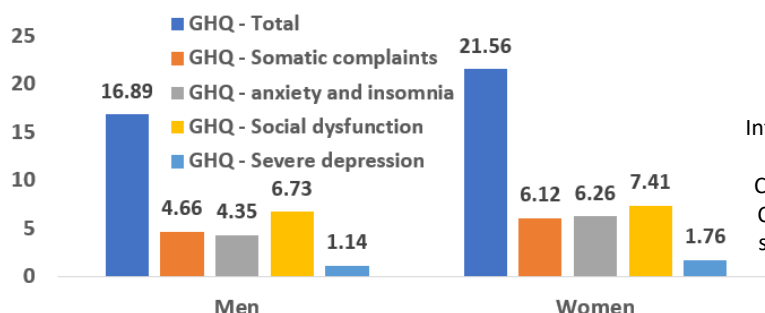
Why do women elite athletes experience higher rates of mental health symptoms?

Louisa Rutherford (Clinical Researcher)

Mental health concerns around women **Olympic athletes** received a substantial amount of BBC news coverage ¹. This was in part due to the Tokyo Olympic Games but **awareness** in this area is generally **increasing**.

Similar to the general population, women elite athletes experience **higher rates of mental health symptoms (MHS)** compared to men ³

Measures of MHS in men and women elite athletes using the General Health Questionnaire ³



International Olympic Committee Consensus statement

“IOC is committed to **improve the mental health of elite athletes** recognising that doing so will **reduce suffering and improve quality of life.**” ²

Although higher rates of mental health symptoms have been established for women, the factors contributing to this are unclear. **Body image concerns** and a **range of adverse life events** such as **financial hardship and discrimination** have been postulated as contributors to mental health symptoms. ³

Gender differences in mental health symptoms and risk factors in Australian elite athletes ³

Objective

❖ To examine **differences between the two genders** in factors contributing to mental health symptoms and how these symptoms are reported

Methods

- Cross-sectional observational study of adult athletes
- Assessments including measures of mental health and adverse life events
- Evaluation of group differences across a range of scores, gender-stratified bootstrapped linear regression and meta-regression on measures where gender differences were observed

Results

- ✓ Women athletes reported **higher rates of adverse life events**, and **lower rates of mental well-being**.
- ✓ No differences were observed in general psychological distress, or life satisfaction in the two genders.
- ✓ Other factors had more gender-specific involvement e.g., **body dissatisfaction** was associated with **anxiety in men but depression in women**.

Experience of negative life events in men and women elite athletes ³



Our thoughts:

- **Higher rates of adverse life events** probably contribute to higher rates of mental health symptoms in women, but the **overall picture is more complex**, with different factors having different effects to each gender.
- The current research suggests that the current gender-neutral screening tools perhaps do not capture experiences of men and women in enough detail.
- In the future, experiences of **gender diverse athletes** will need to be considered.

References

1. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/57982665>
2. Reardon CL, Hainline B, Aron CM, et al. Mental health in elite athletes: International Olympic Committee consensus statement (2019). Br J Sports Med 2019;53:557-699
3. Walton CC, Rice S, Gao CX, Butterworth M, Clements M, Purcell R. Gender differences in mental health symptoms and risk factors in Australian elite athletes. BMJ Open Sport and Exercise Medicine . 2021; 7:e000984. doi:10.1136/bmjsem-2020-000984