

# Understanding the Psychological Load and Successful Coping of Rugby Union Players in the English Professional Game

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Final report of 'Psychological Load and Coping in Rugby' project\* commissioned by Professional Game Board Sports Science Advisory group (Premiership Rugby Limited, Rugby Football Union and Rugby Players Association).

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## \*Please reference as:

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 01 While considerable understanding exists regarding the physical load undertaken in the professional game and the impact on player welfare, no research has explored the psychological load experienced in, or away from, the rugby workplace.
- 02 Exploring psychological load and successful coping is salient given the recent emphasis on the 'Duty of Care'<sup>1</sup> of stakeholders in the UK to protect and promote the mental health and wellbeing of their elite athletes, and the ongoing RFU/PRL/RPA Mental Health Review of the Professional Men's and Elite Women's game.
- 03 Evidence also suggests the way in which an individual copes with the demands of being an athlete (in and away from their sport) not only impacts their mental health and wellbeing, but also influences performance<sup>2 3</sup>.
- 04 Through two work packages<sup>4</sup> this project used a robust, validated scientific methodology to examine the psychological load professional rugby union players experienced over a competitive season, the subsequent influence of the rugby club environment, and the strategies used to successfully cope to sustain a state of positive mental wellbeing.
- 05 The original findings show that:
  - a) Increases in psychological load led to decreases in mental wellbeing, perceptions of the rugby environment and satisfaction with performance. The culture and environment of the rugby club, and their leader's behaviours within this context play a significant role in enhancing player mental wellbeing;
  - b) Mental wellbeing is in line with normative values reported in other occupational workplaces, although the perceived degree of psychological safety is lower;
  - c) The extent to which players operate successfully and safely within their professional rugby environment lies in the ability to be mentally resilient, through the adoption of effective coping strategies (e.g., focusing on the task at hand, seeking support);
  - d) Players competing in the English Premiership face demands from sources inside (rugby load) and outside (life load) of the sport;
  - e) The impact of rugby and life load upon mental wellbeing is greatest at the end of the season; Mental wellbeing is related to player perceptions of their performance;
  - f) Academy players reported the lowest mental wellbeing and greatest difficulties with the rugby environment. Injured players reported greater psychological load, lower mental wellbeing and highest burnout symptoms.

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<sup>1</sup> Grey-Thompson, T. (2017). *Duty of care in sport: Independent report to Government*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, UK Government.

<sup>2</sup> Lazarus, R. S. (2000). How emotions influence performance in competitive sports. *The Sport Psychologist*, 14, 229-252.

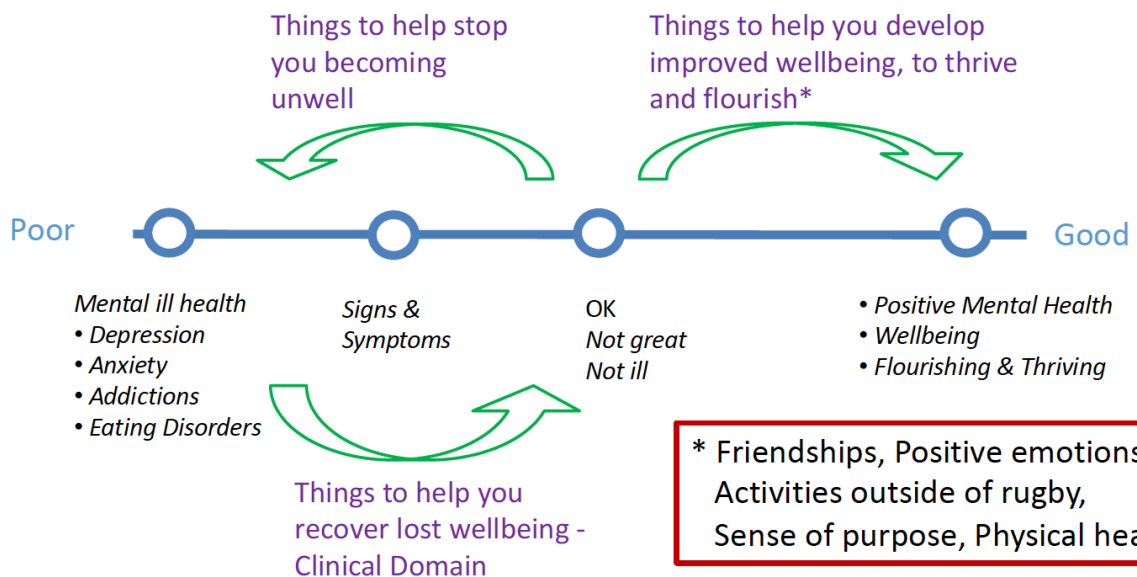
<sup>3</sup> Lavalley, D. (2019). Engagement in sport career transition planning enhances performance. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 24, 1-8.

<sup>4</sup> Work Package 1: Surveying psychological load and successful coping over time (2017-18 Season); Work Package 2: The impact of the workplace environment on successful coping and mental wellbeing (2018-19 Season)

# PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 06 The project findings have implications for all stakeholders in Premiership Rugby, including those responsible for the management and administration of the English professional game, the associations supporting the player workforce, and the rugby and medical staff/practitioners operating within the respective professional club environments. The findings also have implications for the mental health and wellbeing of other (non-player) groups not directly considered in this project - including coaches and support staff in the club environments.
- 07 The project recommendations are mapped against the three areas of Rugby's Mental Health Continuum identified in the RFU/PRL/RPA Mental Health Review of the Professional Men's and Elite Women's game:
- Things to help you recover lost wellbeing – the Clinical Domain.
  - Things to help stop you becoming unwell.
  - Things to help you develop improved wellbeing, to thrive and flourish.

## Rugby's Mental Health Continuum



**Specifically, in relation to project findings a) and b):**

- *Support the development of wellbeing provisions and pathways to enable better working practices and healthy organisational environments:* Stakeholders have a duty of care towards those within their sphere of influence. Continuous improvement of working practices and organisational environments are required within professional rugby union clubs to manage the degree of psychological load which players are exposed too and in order to protect mental wellbeing, overall welfare, and facilitate effective performance.

*Responsibility – PGB, Medical Advisory Group, RFU/PRL/RPA Mental Health Review Group, Mental Health Leads, Directors of Rugby, Senior (Sports) Psychologists working with Coaches/Performance Directors.*

*Work in Progress – RFU/PRL/RPA Mental Health Review, including: Mental health support pathways and funding of those pathways, introduction of Club Mental Health Leads, Mental Wellbeing Monitoring and peer to peer support e.g. Mental Health First Aid training.*

**In relation to project finding c):**

- *Train players to cope:* Educate players to cope with the rugby load experienced via use of resilience (high challenge/high support mind-set), practical (recovery/rehabilitation), and emotional (promoting social support networks) focused strategies.

*Responsibility – PGB Medical Advisory Group, RFU/PRL/RPA Mental Health Review Group, PGB Personal Development Group (Welfare Education Strategy), focus for RPA Development Managers and RPA Gain Line programme, Club Mental Health Leads, Senior (Sports) Psychologists in team environments.*

*Work in Progress – via PDG Welfare Education Strategy e.g. RPA Mental Health Team Talks and Mental Health Review Group investigating resilience training programmes.*

**In relation to project finding d):**

- *Develop life skills:* Existing education programmes should target the development of life skill competencies (managing finances, work-life balance, career transitions) to assist players in coping with the life load encountered away from the rugby environment.

*Responsibility – PGB Personal Development Group (Focus for RPA Development Managers and RPA Gain Line programme), PGB Player Performance Group (via Academy Performance Review).*

*Work in progress – Financial Awareness sessions, RPA Financial Awareness Handbook for players, RPA Time Management sessions, Career transition management (via RPA Development Managers and RPA Transition Manager e.g. 1 to 1 work with players and Transition Talks series), Annual RPA Academy Induction Day.*

**In relation to project finding e):**

- **Provide tailored breaks to counter fatigue:** Player mental wellbeing should continue to be considered on an individual basis. Awareness/support is particularly required at the end of season due to the accumulated mental fatigue reported<sup>5</sup> from the range of rugby and non-rugby sources, and impact on performance. To sustain wellbeing and offset accumulated mental fatigue, rest/recovery 'breaks' should be scheduled within the training week and across the season and tailored to individual circumstances.

*Responsibility – Rest: PGB and Sports Science Advisory Group; Awareness of accumulated fatigue: focus for Club staff and RPA Development Managers.*

*Work in progress - PGB endorsed mandatory minimum mid and end of season rest periods within agreed season structure, post-tournament rest for EPS players.*

**In relation to project finding f):**

- **Support academy players:** This group are at greater risk to threats to their wellbeing and require suitable assistance to learn to successfully cope with the psychological load faced from transitioning into, and operating in, a senior professional environment.

*Responsibility – Focus for PGB Player Performance Group (via Academy Performance Review criteria) and PGB Personal Development Group; Club Academy Staff, RPA Development Managers, Senior (Sports) Psychologists and Club Mental Health Leads.*

*Work in progress – Annual RPA Academy Induction Day, ongoing 1 to 1 support from Club Academy Staff and RPA Development Managers, development of wellbeing monitoring process to include at risk groups.*

- **Support injured players:** Injured players are also a potential 'at risk' group requiring ongoing, appropriate, psychological and organisational support to enhance mental wellbeing and facilitate return to play.

*Responsibility – PGB Medical Advisory Group, Focus for Club Mental Health Lead, Club Coaching/Medical staff, Senior (Sports) Psychologists and RPA Development Managers.*

*Work in progress - RPA Long Term Injured Player Support Programme, PGB Medical Advisory Group review of long-term injured player support, development of wellbeing monitoring process to include at risk groups.*

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<sup>5</sup> Indicators of mental fatigue = Psychological load; Psychological load perceived as threatening to ability to perform as a player and to cope with everyday life; and, symptoms associated with burnout.