

Why it is important to understand mental health and the positive effect you can have as a coach

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I discuss the importance of understanding mental health. How developing your personable skills is just as, if not more important than improving the technical skill you teach. I share a pivotal moment for me as a coach and how one relationship has totally shaped how I teach today.

In June 2010 whilst coaching Boxing for a youth charity, I met a young lady who would change the way I coach forever. I noticed a bandage on her forearm and instantly made a very uneducated assumption. At the time I knew very little about mental health and assuming this young lady was “seeking attention” was the first thing that sprung to mind. I guess I became a product of my environment as a teenager. I grew up in south east London and had two circles of friends growing up. I had a group of friends that were very into football and the violence that sometimes comes hand in hand and a group of friends that got caught up in gang activity. Both environments did not allow me to learn and understand empathy. Both being very ‘alpha male’ dominated, I had to portray the same behaviour to not seem weak and then become a victim. I remember self-harming coming up in conversation with my friends’ older siblings and hearing things being said like; “She is just attention seeking” or “If she wanted to kill herself, she would”.

Now having grown up and made some better choices with my friendship groups and education, my mind was a little more open. When I took some time after a Boxing session to speak to this young lady I was totally intrigued. I was intrigued by how conscious she was about her self-harming and making sure it was covered so nobody could see. I was intrigued by her lack of engagement with the group and how she almost seemed like she was being forced to take part in the activity. Most of all I was intrigued by story, and how events from her childhood had impacted her so severely

Over the next few years I broke down many barriers with this young person and managed to help her in many ways. More importantly, she taught me many things. She taught me that every person I coach is different. She taught me that there are many types of self-harm and everyone that does it has a reason why. The most important lesson I learnt from this young person was that to be the best coach I can be I need to improve my knowledge in different areas. I needed to not concentrate so much on coaching technical skill and strength and conditioning but more importantly I needed to understand the people I am coaching better.

This took me on a journey of education. I went on training to become a youth worker, I went on many different courses and workshops based on mental health. I then become a tutor on the subject and delivered training on behalf of a nationwide mental health charity. I spoke at the Houses of Parliament on several occasions about the positive impact sport can have on those that are dealing with issues around mental health. I pushed and pushed on this subject because I felt it was something that would make me a better coach. And it did.

You see, we all have a mental health. We have all, at times been anxious or depressed or thought terrible things. The difference being how you deal with the state of mind at the time. I now consult other organisations on working with young people and their mental health and work with NGB's to better educate their coaches on the matter. I do this because of how important I believe it is. If you understand your athlete better and have a relationship with them, they will perform better. They will trust you more, you will know their moods and when you should push them and when you shouldn't. You will understand what motivates them. You could recognise signs of an eating disorder or signs of depression and anxiety. It made perfect sense to me a decade ago and it amazes me that more sports coaches haven't taken the initiative to educate themselves.

Whether you succeed or not is irrelevant, there is no such thing. Making the unknown, known is what is important. – Georgia O’Keeffe

Tips

1) Building a relationship

Being a dictator or a figure of authority will not get the best from your athletes. You have created a barrier where trust cannot work. Understand your athlete. Get to know them. Where do they live? Who do they live with? Do they work? What is their financial situation? Are they in a relationship? These are all outside factors that could affect performance at any level.

Once you have developed this relationship you will better understand your athlete. They might also trust you much more. They might approach you to tell you how for the last 10 years they have been the sole career for their mother who suffers with bi polar, and that it has started to have a negative effect on their mental well-being.

2) Educate yourself

As a coach you should never stop learning. If you do, then other coaches around you have a head start. Get a head start on 95% of other coaches. Read books, watch videos, volunteer at a youth charity, go on training courses and work with people who have ill mental health. Learn! You are not an experienced coach if you have coached one type of athlete.

3) Understand where to refer

If you are concerned about a student or athlete, please understand who can help them. Remember your job is as a sports coach. You are not an expert in mental health and should not be giving out advice. Listen to them, understand them but do not give opinion.

Now another thing I want to touch on is [emotional intelligence](#). What is it? And Why is it important?

Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and control your own emotions and the emotions of those around you. Also, to manage your relationships accordingly. Understand empathy and how much of an important tool that can be for breaking down barriers. Maybe share, where appropriate your own experiences to show you have been through something similar. This helps to build trust and relationships. Remember this next time your athlete is telling you they feel a certain way. If they are telling you they are tired and you know it’s not quite true, what is it they are really trying to say?

If they are totally under performing and it is out of character, are they just “having a bad day”.

As Catherine Baker says in the [ConnectedCoaches Emotional Intelligence video series](#): **Emotions drive thoughts, thoughts drive behaviour, and behaviour drives performance and outcomes.**

I am going to finish with one final thought. Something I have touch on in [previous blogs](#). I want you all to think back to your favourite ever coach. Were they your favourite because they had more knowledge than other coaches? Were they your favourite because they were a great athlete themselves? Or what it that they knew how to motive you. They managed to get the best out of you because you have built a strong relationship with them and don’t want to let them down, you want to perform your best and make them proud.

People don’t learn from people they don’t like – The late Rita Pierson

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