

Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation

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ALLIANCE

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Players Federation

mind
for better mental health

Rugby Players' Association – Lift the Weight

Project at a glance

- The Rugby Players' Association (RPA) asked nine players to share their experiences of mental health.
- They built an online hub featuring videos of the players, plus practical information on mental health and where to get support.
- The campaign encouraged three times the previous number of players to use the RPA's counselling service.

The challenge

Professional rugby players face many challenges in their working and personal life. They can include intense pressure to perform, constant media scrutiny and meeting fans' high expectations. Many rugby players must also balance having young families alongside the considerable travel that is part of being a professional rugby player.

This pressure can contribute to mental health problems. And despite more elite sportspeople speaking out on mental health, there's still stigma around talking about it.



The response

The RPA launched their confidential counselling service in 2008, accompanied by interviews with two players about their mental health.

“This generated interest – but we felt we needed to do more,” says Caroline Humpherson, the RPA’s senior development manager.

“We wanted to raise awareness of our counselling service, and mental health in general, with our members. We also wanted to create an environment where players could feel OK just putting their hand up and saying ‘Actually, things aren’t OK with me’.”

Caroline says that, whatever initiatives the RPA runs, the starting point is always listening to members. Therefore, they put players’ voices right at the heart of the campaign through case study videos.

“Right from the start we knew we didn’t just want to talk to one player,” says Caroline.

“Everyone has different experiences. Mental health also covers a lot of different topics and we wanted a wide range of members to say ‘OK, I get that’. So we talked to nine players in the end. They were amazing: so open and honest.”

In the powerful videos, players talk about everything from dealing with long-term injury to coping with stress and depression. Some also open up about how mental health can affect relationships and how they cope.

Offering support

The videos were officially launched as part of the RPA’s Lift the Weight campaign in 2017.

“We named it ‘Lift the Weight’ because rugby is an environment where you’ve got to show strength and resilience on the field,” says Caroline.

“Sometimes, with mental health, taking the weight off your shoulders is important.”

Accompanying the videos on the RPA’s online hub is plenty of information about mental health, organisations that offer support, and videos from doctors on effective strategies players can use.



Promoting inclusivity and acceptance

In 2018 the RPA introduced the second part of their campaign, focused on inclusivity and acceptance in rugby.

“Allowing yourself to be yourself at work is a huge part of good mental health,” says Caroline.

“We wanted to ensure we were creating an environment that let players be the best versions of themselves. That means accepting everybody whatever their sexuality, their faith, or if they’re battling an illness.

“It’s OK to be open about these things, and it’s OK to talk about it.”

The results

The results have been incredibly positive.

“In the three months before launching the campaign, three players had contacted the confidential counselling service,” says Caroline.

“Then, in the three months directly after, there were 18. In that condensed amount of time you can see there’s an impact. Now we’re averaging around 50 players a season. It’s been amazing.”

She adds that the Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation has been a key inspiration for the campaign.

“We all know we have to do something to support mental health around sport,” she says.

“The Charter means we can learn from what other organisations are doing and see what’s effective.”

“I got to a place where I was desperate”

“I’d wake up in the morning and be devastated that I’d woken up. I very, very much wanted to die and not to live anymore. It was really tough because I didn’t want to admit that I was struggling. I got to a place where I was desperate.

“As soon as I had the conversation [about mental health with my parents] I felt I had a little bit of a weight off my shoulders. It was only when I had these conversations that I saw other people had exactly the same experiences. I began to realise it’s not as shameful, as isolating or abnormal as I thought it was. That in itself brought hope.”

Scrum half Jono Kitto talking about his experiences for the Lift the Weight campaign.

For more information, visit...

<https://therpa.co.uk/lift-the-weight/>

