

8-8-2022

## Exploration in Mental Performance for Division 1 SEC College Football Student Athletes

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### NSUWorks Citation

Alex Burgdorf. 2022. *Exploration in Mental Performance for Division 1 SEC College Football Student Athletes*. Capstone. Nova Southeastern University. Retrieved from NSUWorks, . (76)  
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## Introduction

•Based on the 2019 National College Health Assessment survey from the American College Health Association (ACHA) consisting of 67,972 participants, 27.8% of college students reported anxiety, and 20.2% reported experiencing depression which negatively affected their academic performance (Moreland et.al 2018). While this study did not specifically analyze athletes, the numbers create concern. The added rigors of practice, training and name, image, and likeness (NIL) create a unique opportunity to examine the mental health of a student athlete. Considering these responses by students, a short survey was designed to gather information about athlete's mental health and readiness for their day on and off the field.

## Site Description

### University of Tennessee Football Program

- Division 1 College football program.
- Public University located in Knoxville, Tennessee
- Member of the Southeastern Conference (SEC)
- Target population: student athletes ages 18-23 years old
- All student athletes were members of the football program.

## Summary of Needs Assessment

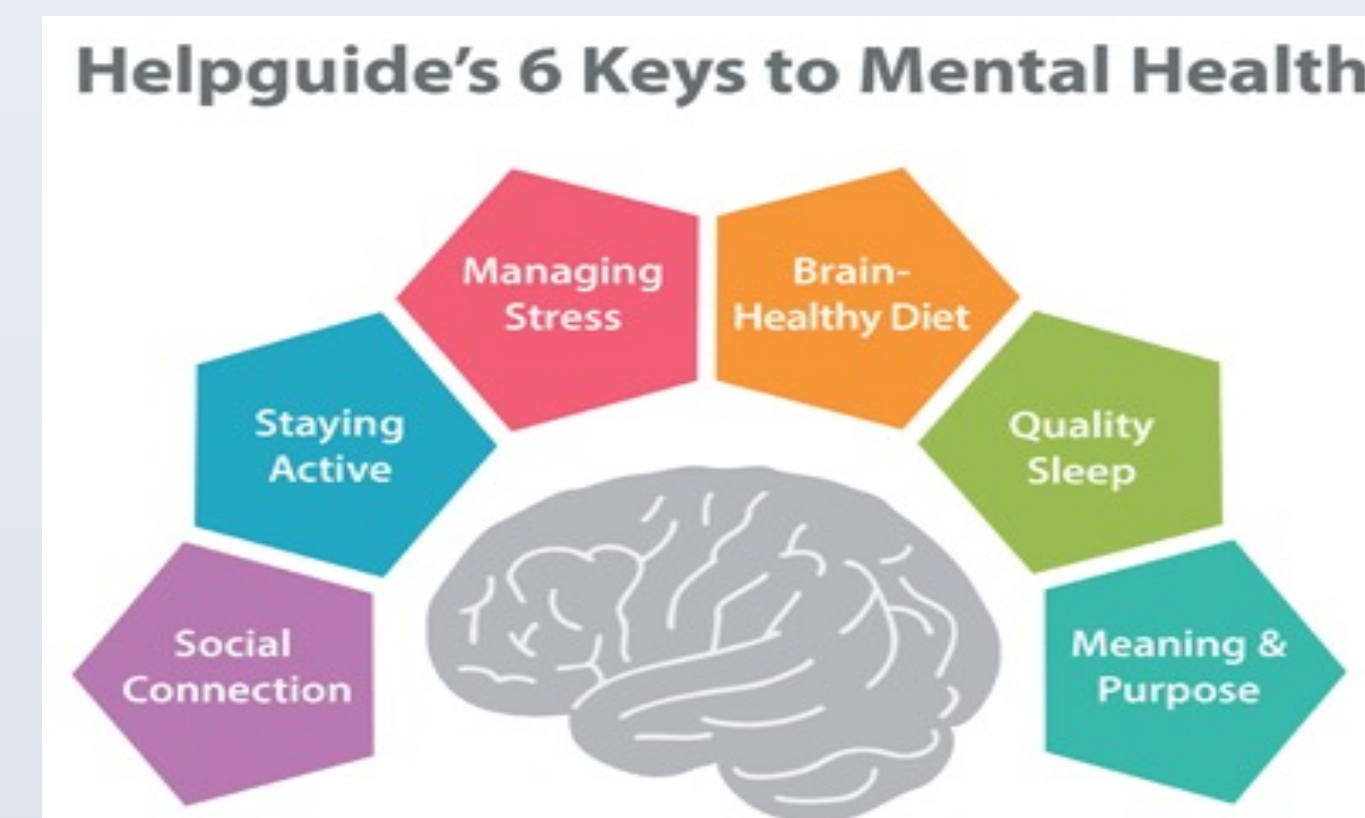
Following observation and discussion with my capstone site mentor, the needs identified at this site include:

- Increased access to mental health screening and evaluation for student athletes.
- Individualized mental health programs for athletes who stated they did not feel recovered for class and practice.
- Education to the training staff on the importance of mental health screenings each year that the athletes are in the program.
- A licensed OT on staff to assist in the gathering, analysis and presentation of mental health data.

## Literature Review Summary

Unfortunately, mental health intervention research in sports is scarce. The pressure elite athletes face warrant greater need for mental health education and intervention. Preparing the athletes for competition is important but giving athletes the tools to address their mental health so they can move on to live a fulfilling and healthy life after sports should be a priority.

- “There is a need for various actors to provide more effective strategies to overcome the stigma that surrounds mental illness, increase mental health literacy in the athlete/coach community, and address athlete-specific barriers to seeking treatment for mental illness” (Castadelli-Maia et.al 2019, p. 708).



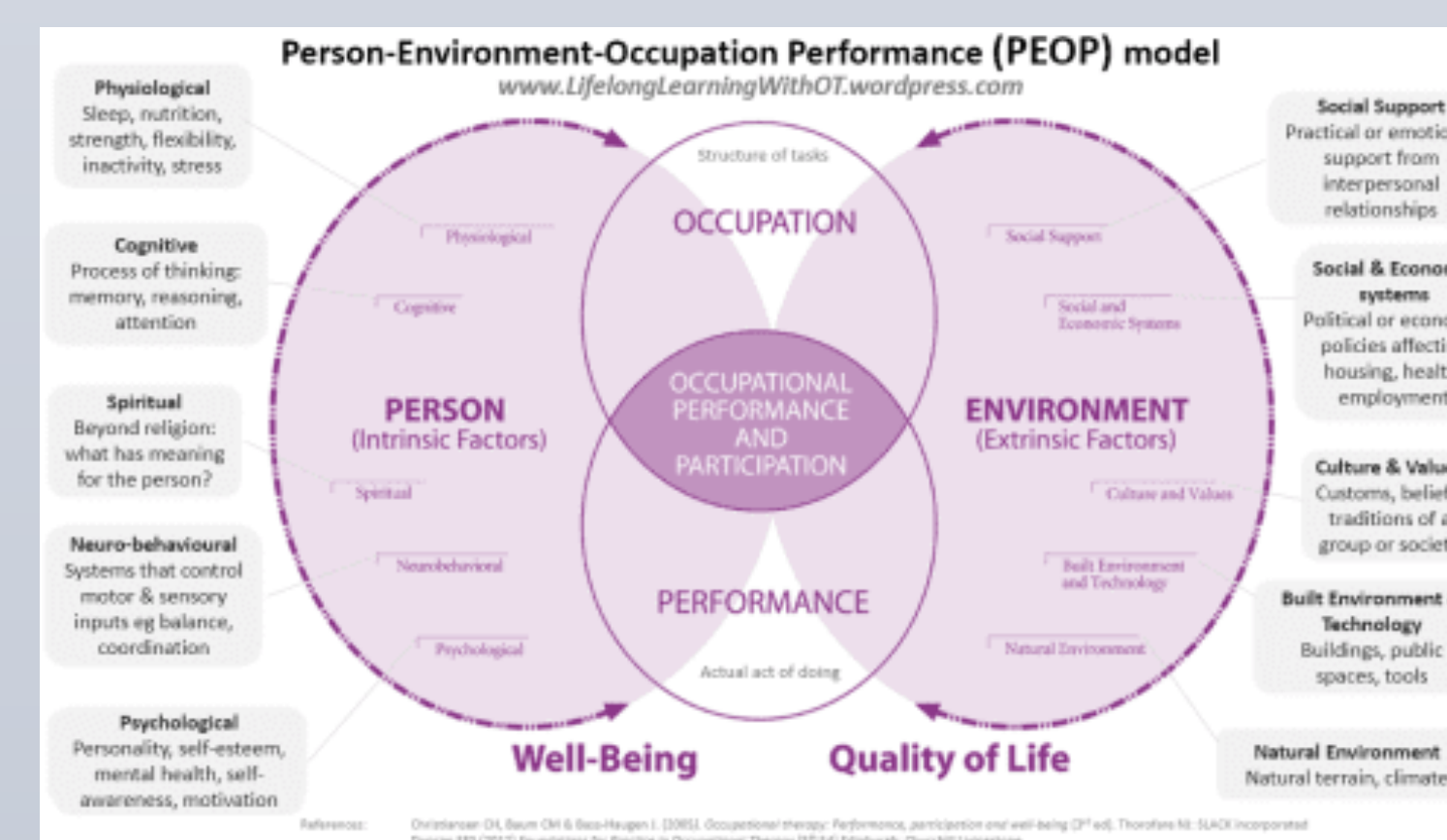
Smith, M. (2021). Building Better Mental Health. <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/building-better-mental-health.htm>

## Capstone Project Description

A 6-question survey was created to examine the mental health and mental performance of Division 1 college football players. This survey incorporated the framework of Occupational Therapy and emphasized important aspects of the MOHO and the PEOP in a way that targeted college athletes.

### Program Goals

1. Individualize mental health plans for student-athletes who felt they were not prepared for their class schedule and the next day of practice and training.
2. To advocate for a licensed occupational therapist to be added to the medical staff for a major Division 1 sport.
3. To provide reliable and relevant information to the coaches and training staff regarding the player's mental health and recovery



The Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance (PEOP) model. In C. H. Christiansen, C. M. Baum, & J. D. Bass (Eds.), Occupational therapy: Performance, participation, and well-being (4th ed., pp. 49-56). Thorofare, NJ: SLACK Incorporated

### Program Outcomes:

- o After mental health education was provided and individualized intervention plans were completed, student athletes reported increased productivity, mood and felt better rested the following day.

### Limitations for this project included:

- o Amount of time allotted for individual mental health coaching and awareness
- o Coach/training staff willingness to allow a new voice to talk to the athletes
- o The stigma surrounding mental health in athletics

71 of the 122 athletes surveyed said they felt mentally drained post-practice

Mental health education and intervention were provided

Of those 71 athletes, 56 of them stated that they felt increased productivity, better focus during their classes and felt rested for the next day of practice and class

## Learning Objectives Achieved

1. Design individualized mental performance and recovery programs for Division 1 College Football Athletes.
2. Advocate for the addition of a licensed Occupational Therapist on a training staff.
3. Discuss the stigma of mental health in college athletics.



Elmira College Athletics (2021). <https://athletics.elmira.edu/sports/2020/5/1/mental-health-awareness-and-resources.aspx?path=general>

## Implications for OT

The addition of a licensed occupational therapist to a training staff can be beneficial for these reasons:

- Provide mental health intervention to allow for optimal performance both on and off the field.
- Continued education and advocacy for mental health intervention for high level athletes could help change the stigma surrounding mental health in sports.

## REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my mentor Dr. Mariana D'Amico EdD, OTR/L, FAOTA for her help in designing and implementing the survey to the athletes here at Tennessee and for her support the entire semester.

I would also like to thank my mentor here at Tennessee, Rhett Brooks. His support throughout the duration of the Capstone was incredible and I wish him and the program nothing but the best moving forward.

References Available Upon Request