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Study shines spotlight on protecting mental health of elite cricketers

We don't like cricket. We love it. This love for the sport though, comes at a price. Cricket is one of the world's most demanding sport. Extensive travel and time away from home, different formats, and constant pressure to improve match statistics. The demands and challenges within cricket expose players to the risk of mental-ill health – specifically, anxiety and depression.

In view of these unique set of challenges and demands, researchers at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in collaboration with the South African Cricketers' Association set out to determine the prevalence of anxiety/depression symptoms in current professional South African cricketers and identify which factors contribute or protect professional players from symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The study surveyed 177 professional cricketers in South Africa and used a popular tool among researchers to assess symptoms of anxiety/depression known as the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). The prevalence of anxiety/depression symptoms was 59%, which is higher than in other elite sports (ranging from 21% to 48%).

The study also discovered that cricketers competing at a higher divisional level, contracted for more than two years, or played overseas in their last offseason had a higher chance of developing symptoms of anxiety/depression, while cricketers making productive use of their spare time in the offseason and contracted for 2 years had a 70% lower probability of developing symptoms of anxiety/depression.

Dr Sharief Hendricks, senior lecture at UCT's Division of Physiological Sciences and president of the South African Sports Medicine Association, said the findings suggest that short-term (one-year) contracts may not offer players stability, placing them at risk of experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression. In contrast, based on the findings Hendricks and colleagues concluded that "longer-term contracts (more than two years), may also manifest into symptoms of anxiety and depression because players may feel they have fully committed to one team for an extended period, thereby potentially missing out on other opportunities. In other words, longer-term contracts (more than two years) do not offer players flexibility. In contrast to one-year and two-year plus contracts, two-year contracts afford players stability and flexibility, which positively affects their mental health".

How players use their off-season seems to be a key contributing factor for symptoms of anxiety/depression too, said Hendricks. "Playing overseas in the last offseason increased the potential for anxiety and depression symptoms, while players that made productive use of their spare time in the offseason had a lower chance of experiencing anxiety/depression symptoms. From a general periodization perspective, the off-season should be viewed as a window of opportunity for players to recover and "rebuild" for the start of the following season."

Hendricks said: "During the off-season, a significant decrease or complete cessation of team training is observed to allow players to physically rebuild and recondition for the upcoming season. Psychologically, the off-season provides players with the opportunity to reflect and reset. It is a period to spend meaningful time away from the sport and engage in other activities of interest."

Writing in a top international sports medicine journal, *Research in Sports Medicine*, Hendricks noted that players that use their spare time productively in the offseason might be healthier mentally going into the new competitive season than players that did not.

"Cricketers that choose to play overseas during the off-season forfeit the benefits of decompressing, detaching and preparing for the upcoming season, which may have a compound effect on player's anxiety/depressive symptoms if not properly managed. In addition to losing the benefits of an off-season, they also carry the physical and mental burden of playing another competitive season before their next competitive season. In effect, it is three competitive seasons without any significant rest and recovery away from the sport. Furthermore, while playing overseas, cricketers may not have access to their normal social support mechanisms, negatively impacting their mental health further."

Hendricks said the findings highlight the importance of time off from cricket to do other meaningful activities and establishing a work-life balance to protect against developing symptoms of anxiety and depression during the season. "With that said, should players wish to play overseas during their off-season, mechanisms to monitor and manage player psychological load (in addition to the typically monitored and managed physical training load) should be in place throughout the year."

Finally, to be put the findings in context, Hendricks noted that anxiety/depression symptoms may be a natural, and even healthy, response to elite sport career-related stresses. The highlighted the need for researchers and practitioners to be cognizant of this "natural" variation in mental health symptoms, which are non-clinical and therefore require mental health support – compared to an actual psychiatric disorder, which will require psychiatric care.

[Access the study.](#)



Dr Sharief Hendricks

Photo: Je'nine May

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