Student-Athlete Disclosures of Psychological Distress: Exploring the Experiences of University Coaches and Athletes

by

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Abstract

Student-athletes are noted to be a high-risk population for experiencing psychological distress, and varsity coaches have been identified as support providers for distressed athletes; however, little is known about the interactions between student-athletes and their coaches when athletes disclose psychological distress. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of student-athletes disclosing psychological distress to coaches from the perspectives of both athletes and coaches. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 student-athletes and 15 varsity coaches, and data were analyzed using a thematic analysis. Results indicated that student-athletes faced barriers in disclosing distress and that the involvement of coaches in the disclosure process resulted in either a positive and negative athlete experience, depending on the support coaches provided. Findings provide insight into the role of coaches in supporting distressed student-athletes, how coaches can foster team cultures that support athlete disclosure, and guidelines for effective coach support.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

1 Introduction

The unique environment faced by student-athletes may place these individuals at an increased risk for experiencing psychological distress (Etzel, Watson, Visek, & Maniar, 2006; Moreland, Coxe, & Yang, 2018; Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989). Psychological distress may be defined as "the unique discomforting, emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporary or permanent, to the person" (Ridner, 2004, p. 539). Psychological distress is typically associated with the individual's perceived inability to cope effectively, a change in emotional status, an overwhelming sense of discomfort, an attempt to communicate this discomfort, and the resultant harm (Ridner, 2004). Challenges associated with sexuality (Roper & Halloran, 2007), athletic injury (Putukian, 2015), sexual violence (McCray, 2015), and suicidal ideation have been reported among student-athlete populations (Rao, Asif, Drezner, Toresdahl, & Harmon, 2015). Further, the combined difficulty of being both a student and an athlete may result in some of these individuals developing depressive symptoms (Proctor & Boan-Lenzo, 2010), disordered eating behaviours (Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter, & Reel, 2010), and substance abuse problems (Taylor, Ward, & Hardin, 2017).

To help manage psychological distress, student-athletes often rely on support providers, including university coaches (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). It is well documented that coaches play an integral role in the lives of athletes (Bloom, Falcão, & Caron, 2014; Kim, Bloom, & Bennie, 2016), and the receipt of social support may help athletes maintain their psychological well-being (Hagiwara, Iwatsuki, Isogai, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2017). In addition, coaches have been identified as likely contacts for athletes who are experiencing performance-related issues (Maniar, Curry, Sommers-Flanagan, & Walsh, 2001), and researchers have suggested there is a need to train coaches to better equip them in providing student-athletes with the necessary support to deal with psychological distress (Sebbens, Hassmén, Crisp, & Wensley, 2016; Sherwin, 2017; Storch, Storch, Killiany, & Roberti, 2005). Unfortunately, little is known about coach-athlete interactions when a student-athlete discloses psychological distress, or the effectiveness of coaches in handling these situations. Thus, this research aims to explore how university coaches within U Sports, formerly known as Canadian Interuniversity Sport, handle

the disclosure of student-athlete psychological distress from the perspective of both coaches and athletes, and assess whether coaches feel prepared to provide support to their athletes.

Chapter 2
Review of Literature

2 Review of Literature

For the purposes of this literature review and unless otherwise specified, the terms student-athlete, intercollegiate athlete, and varsity athlete will be used interchangeably to refer to an individual competing at a varsity level of athletic competition while attending university. In addition, the terms university coach, intercollegiate coach, and varsity coach will all be used to refer to a coach who works, either through employment or on a volunteer basis, for an athletics department at a post-secondary institution.

2.1 The Student-Athlete Environment

An early investigation of the university experience and its impact on students' lives identified athletes as a unique subgroup of the student population. Astin (1977) surveyed over 200,000 university students across 300 postsecondary institutions and found that athletic involvement acted as an isolating factor where the training and travel requirements, coupled with athlete-only living arrangements, segregated student-athletes from their non-athlete peers. A subsequent review of literature conducted by Pinkerton et al. (1989) supported these findings and further identified student-athletes as an at-risk group for experiencing psychological distress. Several forms of psychological distress were noted to be present within the student-athlete population, including identity conflict, burnout, eating disorders, and alcohol abuse, while the demands of balancing athletic, academic, and social responsibilities were suggested to contribute to the manifestation of this distress.

Additional literature on student-athlete populations indicates this demographic is unique from their non-athlete peers because of the athlete-specific stressors they must manage (Etzel et al., 2006; Navarro & Malvaso, 2015; Sudano, Collins, & Miles, 2017). Commonly cited stressors include upholding a strong academic standing in order to maintain athletic eligibility (Gayles, 2009; Yang et al., 2007), injury, pressure to achieve athletic success, and conflict with teammates or coaches (Etzel et al., 2006; Proctor & Boan-Lenzo, 2010; Rao et al., 2015; Sudano et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2007). Further, researchers continue to suggest that the time demands and regimented schedules of student-athletes may result in feelings of isolation because these

individuals feel discouraged to expand their social networks outside of their immediate sport environment, and from pursuing additional educational opportunities, such as internships or research projects (Gayles, 2009; Navarro & Malvaso, 2015; Proctor & Boan-Lenzo, 2010). These athlete-specific stressors outline the unique environment that student-athletes must operate within as they manage the pressures of maintaining peak physical shape and performing athletically, while also concerning themselves with their own personal development (Moreland et al., 2018; Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). Consequently, numerous researchers have suggested that the presence of these stressors may lead to student-athletes experiencing psychological distress (Sudano et al., 2017; Watson, 2005; Yang et al., 2007).

The presence of psychological distress within student-athlete populations was noted in an early study conducted by Selby, Weinstein, and Bird (1990) who surveyed 247 American student-athletes across 27 athletic teams and found 25% of male and 37% of female student-athletes reported experiencing at least one traumatic event since their arrival at university. Since then, a publication by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2014a) has outlined various forms of psychological distress faced by student-athletes, including depression, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, and substance abuse. Further, identifying as a sexual minority, sustaining athletic injury, and experiencing relational or sexual violence, were identified as potential antecedents to psychological distress.

2.2 Student-Athlete Psychological Distress

The following section will review the literature on the prevalence of various forms of psychological distress within student-athlete populations. Common outcomes associated with psychological distress, including impaired mental health and alcohol or substance abuse, will be reviewed first, followed by potential antecedents to experiencing psychological distress, such as identifying as a sexual minority or suffering an athletic injury.

2.2.1 Mental Health and Mental Health Disorders

Mental health is defined as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014). When this state of well-being is compromised, it may result in mental health disorders,

which are “a broad range of problems … generally characterized by some combination of abnormal thoughts, emotions, behaviour and relationships with others” (WHO, 2017). Literature surrounding student-athlete mental health disorders focuses largely on depression, suicide, and disordered eating (Chatterton & Petrie, 2013; Reinking & Alexander, 2005; Wolanin, Gross, & Hong, 2015).

2.2.1.1 Depression

Depression is consistently measured in the reviewed literature using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D is a 20-item self-report scale measuring depression symptoms based on how often during the past week a respondent experienced “depressed mood, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, psychomotor retardation, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbance” (Radloff, 1977, p. 386). Items are rated using a 4-point Likert-type scale with scores of 16 or higher (range from 0 to 60) indicating whether the respondent is symptomatic of depression. CES-D scores of 27 or greater suggest an individual has depressive symptoms that are indicative of possible to probable major depressive disorder (Wolanin, Hong, Marks, Panchoo, & Gross, 2016). Unless explicitly stated, the reviewed literature does not differentiate between higher or lower CES-D scores.

As outlined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), major depressive disorder involves experiencing five or more of the following symptoms for a 2-week period of time: depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, significant weight loss, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt, diminished ability to think or concentrate, and recurrent thoughts of death (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). To be classified as major depressive disorder, one of the five experienced symptoms must either be a depressed mood or loss of interest/pleasure (APA, 2013).

Researchers investigating depression in student-athlete populations have commonly cited inconsistent findings regarding the prevalence of the disorder and whether student-athletes are more or less prone to experience depression when compared to other representative populations (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2010; Proctor & Boan-Lenzo, 2010). Two recently published reviews highlight these discrepancies. Wolanin et al. (2015) identified student-athlete

populations as at-risk for increased depressive symptoms when compared to the general population, citing athlete-specific factors such as injury, involuntary career termination, performance expectations, and overtraining as potential causes. Armstrong, Burcin, Bjerke, and Early (2015), however, determined student-athletes to be less likely to suffer from depression when compared to their non-athlete peers, suggesting a protective effect from athletic involvement that provides athletes with better established social networks and greater self-esteem. These discrepant findings may be explained by the use of inconsistent scales to measure depression, and comparisons being made between student-athletes and different sample populations, such as non-athletes and the general public. Regardless, there is generally agreement among researchers that depression is a threat to student-athletes and may be a result of unique stressors and high demands placed on these individuals (Armstrong et al., 2015; Wolanin et al., 2015).

One of the first studies examining the prevalence of student-athlete depression identified that among a sample of 257 American intercollegiate athletes, 21% suffered from depressive symptoms as measured by the CES-D (Yang et al., 2007). Proctor and Boan-Lenzo (2010) followed up on this study and explored the rates of depression among a sample of 56 male student-athletes. Results indicated that 15.6% of participants met the CES-D depressive symptom criterion. Further, a recent study that involved a larger sample of 465 American student-athletes found that 23.7% of participants endorsed depressive symptoms, with 6.3% reporting symptoms indicative of possible to probable major depressive disorder (Wolanin et al., 2016). While collectively these findings indicate discrepancies in the prevalence of student-athlete depression, they suggest that approximately 20% of varsity athletes may suffer from varying degrees of depressive symptoms.

The causes and associated risks for developing depressive symptoms in student-athlete populations have also been an area of interest to researchers (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2010; Wolanin et al., 2016). There currently remains debate in the literature regarding whether or not athletic identity and participation in intercollegiate sport provide a protective or harmful effect to student-athletes developing depressive symptoms (Miller & Hoffman, 2009; Putukian, 2016). However, substantial research findings have found supporting evidence for links between student-athlete depression and suicide (Armstrong et al., 2015; Wolanin et al., 2015), disordered eating (Mazzeo & Espelage, 2005), and injury (Smith & Milliner, 1994; Yang et al., 2007).

2.2.1.2 Suicide and Suicidal Ideation

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011) define suicide as "death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with an intent to die as a result of the behavior" (p. 23), and attempts at suicide as "a non-fatal self-directed potentially injurious behavior with an intent to die as a result of the behavior" (p. 21). Suicidal ideation is defined as "thinking about, considering, or planning suicide" (p. 11).

One of the earliest discussions of athlete suicide was an article by Smith and Millner (1994) that identified common risk factors among five injured athletes who had attempted suicide. The common risk factors identified among the athletes were: having sustained an injury requiring surgery and a long rehabilitation; being replaced by a teammate upon return to sport; and achieving a high level of athletic success prior to injury. While the authors did not specify their method of data collection, both were healthcare practitioners involved in the treatment of the five athletes. Therefore, it is likely that data were collected using a combination of patient histories and the authors' first-hand experiences with each case. The authors suggested that in each case, serious athletic injury acted as a stressor that when combined with the additional three risk factors, prompted the athletes to attempt suicide. Kokotailo and colleagues (1996) conducted a subsequent research study exploring the health risk behaviours of a sample of 271 intercollegiate athletes enrolled at two institutions in the United States using the Health Behaviour Survey (HBS), developed for the purposes of their study. Reported findings indicated that 8.3% of female and 3.7% of male student-athletes had considered suicide within the past 12 months, while 1.9% of females and no males had made an attempt at suicide. Collectively, these findings provide evidence to suggest that suicidal ideation and attempts at suicide occur within student-athlete populations.

In a review of NCAA student-athlete deaths between the years of 2003 and 2012, suicide was identified as the fourth leading cause of death, accounting for the loss of 37 of 477 student-athletes (Rao et al., 2015). Researchers have suggested that athletic injury and student-athletes' perceived inability to meet self-expectations or expectations set by coaches, teammates, and family, were potential risk factors for suicidal ideation (Rao et al., 2015). Despite knowledge that student-athlete suicides continue to occur and researchers suggesting that student-athletes are less likely than their non-athlete peers to seek help when faced with psychological distress

(Armstrong et al., 2015), there remains a lack of knowledge surrounding how interactions occur when student-athletes disclose concerns related to suicide and whether these athletes are provided adequate support during these situations.

2.2.1.3 Disordered Eating and Eating Disorders

The most commonly referenced eating disorders in the literature are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. According to the DSM, anorexia nervosa is categorized based on the presence of "persistent energy intake restriction; intense fear of gaining weight or of becoming fat, or persistent behavior that interferes with weight gain; and a disturbance in self-perceived weight or shape" (APA, 2013, p. 339). Bulimia nervosa involves "recurrent episodes of binge eating, recurrent inappropriate compensatory behaviors to prevent weight gain, and self-evaluation that is unduly influenced by body shape and weight" (APA, 2013, p. 345). The terms disordered eating habits and sub-clinical levels of an eating disorder both refer to what the DSM identifies as "other specified feeding or eating disorders" (APA, 2013, p. 353). This category of eating disorders includes those:

> in which symptoms characteristic of a feeding and eating disorder that cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning predominate but do not meet the full criteria for any of the disorders in the feeding and eating disorders diagnostic class. (APA, 2013, p. 353)

Eating disorders and disordered eating habits are commonly measured in the literature using of the Bulimia Test-Revised (BULIT-R; Thelen, Mintz, & Vander Wal, 1996) and the Questionnaire for Eating Disorder Diagnosis (QEDD; Mintz, O'Halloran, Mulholland, & Schneider, 1997). These measures are based on the eating disorder definitions and criteria outlined in the DSM (APA, 2013).

Early research findings in the field of sport psychology indicated the importance of food and nutrition in the lives of student-athletes, as researchers discussed the relationship between body composition and optimal athletic performance, physiological health concerns that result from improper dieting, differences between genders in perceptions of weight and eating habits, as well as the effect of body image on student-athlete emotional well-being (Selby et al., 1990). Despite these indications of the importance of sufficient food intake and proper nutrition among student-

athletes, Etzel and colleagues (2006) suggested that time constraints and academic stressors faced by these individuals may impact their ability to consume the necessary daily nutritional intake that is required to effectively operate and maintain their health. Further, researchers have suggested that varsity athletes who participate in sports that have a known culture of dieting or place emphasis on leanness and body image, such as gymnastics, wrestling, and rowing, may be at a greater risk for developing disordered eating habits (Chatterton & Petrie, 2013; Reinking & Alexander, 2005). Supportive evidence for the incidence of disordered eating habits among gymnasts was found by Petrie (1993) who conducted a study exploring eating and nutrition behaviours among a sample of 215 female gymnasts at 21 NCAA Division I institutions. Results indicated that 60% of participants had engaged in a form of disordered eating, which Petrie suggested may be a result of the culture of gymnastics combined with societal pressures for females to maintain an ideal body type.

To gain a better understanding of the prevalence of disordered eating among student-athletes, Greenleaf et al. (2009) administered the QEDD and BULIT-R among a sample of 204 female student-athletes participating in various sports. Twenty-five percent of the athletes reported symptoms of disordered eating and 2% were identified as having a clinical eating disorder. Despite the rate of clinical eating disorders being low, the authors warned that the health risks associated with all forms of disordered eating, such as electrolyte imbalance, decreased bone density, and cardiac arrhythmia, are life-threatening and must be recognized and treated appropriately. These findings also supported previous literature that indicated most student-athletes do not meet the definition of a clinical eating disorder, such as anorexia or bulimia, but still suffer from various forms of disordered eating (Etzel et al., 2006).

While the majority of the research on eating disorders in this area has focused on female student-athletes, male student-athletes are also at risk. Men often face societal pressures pertaining to the notions of masculinity, which may result in non-disclosure of unhealthy eating behaviours and a reluctance to seek assistance because of the perceived barriers and stigma associated with having an illness more commonly diagnosed among females (Petrie, Greenleaf, Real, & Carter, 2008). Researchers have identified that clinical eating disorders are rare among male student-athletes; however, weight control behaviours are believed to be more commonplace by comparison to female student-athletes (Chatterton & Petrie, 2013). Among a sample of 732 male student-athletes participating in 17 different sports across all three NCAA divisions, nearly 17% were

categorized as symptomatic or suffering from disordered eating as measured by the QEDD (Chatterton & Petrie, 2013). Disordered eating has also been shown to be associated with additional forms of psychological distress among student-athlete populations, such as depression and substance abuse (Chatterton & Petrie, 2008; Greenleaf et al., 2009; Selby et al., 1990). Collectively, this body of research suggests that disordered eating challenges are a concern to both male and female student-athletes, and a potential indicator of psychological distress.

2.2.2 Alcohol and Substance Abuse

Binge drinking is a term commonly used in the literature on alcohol use and abuse. More recently, controversy surrounding potential negative connotations associated with the term binge drinking have led researchers to adopt the term high-risk drinking (Brenner & Swanik, 2007). As such, in reviewing the literature, the terms binge drinking and high-risk drinking will be used interchangeably to reference the successive consumption of five or more drinks for males, four or more for females, on a single occasion (Nelson & Wechsler, 2001).

Alcohol and substance abuse have long been noted to occur within athlete populations (Astin, 1977; Heyman, 1986). An early study investigating the prevalence of health risk behaviours among a sample of 271 varsity athletes at two universities in the United States determined that roughly 65% of male and 47% of female student-athletes had participated in binge drinking activities within the past 30 days (Kokotailo et al., 1996). Data were collected using the HBS, which was administered at two comparable time points during the spring and fall semesters (Kokotailo et al., 1996). As this area of research has progressed, findings continue to indicate a greater prevalence of alcohol abuse among athletes by comparison to non-athletes, and suggest a relationship between increased alcohol consumption and athletic involvement during university (Musselman & Rutledge, 2010; Vickers et al., 2004).

High-risk drinking is a known public health concern among all university students; however, it is believed to be more prevalent in student-athlete populations (Martens, Dams-O'Connor, & Beck, 2006). Researchers have identified that intercollegiate athletes engage in more frequent episodes of binge drinking, consume greater volumes of alcohol, and experience more negative alcohol-related consequences, such as decreased academic performance, unintentional injury, and non-consensual sexual encounters, than their non-athlete peers (Martens et al., 2006; Nelson & Wechsler, 2001). In a study comparing drinking behaviours between male and female student-

athletes and non-athletes, the prevalence of binge drinking was roughly 10% higher among the student-athlete group (Nelson & Wechsler, 2001). Brenner and Swanik (2007) subsequently conducted a study investigating off-season drinking behaviours and found that among 720 student-athletes, 75% had reported high-risk drinking at least once within the past two weeks. Further, it has been suggested by researchers that the increased prevalence of alcohol abuse in student-athletes may be a contributing factor in the mounting rise of mental health disorders within this population (Neal et al., 2013).

Research focused on drug use among intercollegiate athletes has indicated this population commonly abuses analgesics, and injured athletes are prone to using steroids, supplements, and prescription drugs in an attempt to expedite the rehabilitation process (Nippert & Smith, 2008; Selbey et al., 1990). Due to the controversial nature of using illegal substances, researchers have further suggested that drug use among student-athletes may be largely underreported (Selby et al., 1990). Druckman, Gilli, Klar and Robison (2015) conducted a study using list experiment (Glynn, 2013) and found support for underreported drug use among student-athletes. Findings indicated that among a sample of 1303 varsity athletes, it is likely that upwards of 37% had taken a banned substance, but only 4.9% willingly reported such behaviour when asked on an anonymous survey. Collectively, these findings indicate that alcohol and drug abuse exist among student-athlete populations, and may be indicators of athletes experiencing psychological distress.

2.2.3 Sexual Minorities

Sexual minorities are individuals who do not identify as heterosexual, which may include, but is not limited to, those who self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Savin-Williams, 2001). The majority of research investigating the challenges faced by sexual minorities has been conducted outside of sport contexts. Broadly, these findings have suggested that compared to their heterosexual peers, sexual minority males demonstrate a greater prevalence of depression, panic attacks, and associated psychological distress (Cochran, Greer Sullivan, & Mays, 2003), while also being at a greater risk for illicit drug use (Green & Feinstein, 2012). When comparing sexual minority females to heterosexual females, there is a documented increase of alcohol-related challenges, drug use problems, and a greater prevalence of generalized anxiety disorder among this population (Cochran et al., 2003; Drabble, Midanik, & Trocki, 2005; Green & Feinstein,

2012). In an attempt to explain the increased prevalence of substance use and mental health disorders within these populations, Meyer (2003) suggested the model of minority stress. Minority stress describes how in social environments, stigma and prejudice directed at sexual minorities creates a hostile and stressful climate that forces these individuals to internalize homophobia and conceal their identity, which may result in psychological distress.

In the sport psychology literature, Heyman (1986) was one of the first to discuss challenges faced by sexual minorities and described associated feelings of anxiety, depression, guilt, or confusion often felt by athletes when they acknowledge their sexual preference. Based on his experiences working as a sport psychologist, Heyman argued that an athlete's realization of his or her sexual preference often occurs in either a gradual or sudden progression. While both pose a threat to an athlete's well-being, sudden progressions are described to result in more severe levels of psychological distress and are usually the result of an athlete being under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Heyman also discussed the homophobic environment of sport and how this produces additional pressure for sexual minority athletes to control their behaviours and hide their sexuality. Some athletes were described to have disclosed engaging in sexual behaviours with members of the opposite sex in an effort to avoid suspicion from teammates.

Within intercollegiate athletics, discrimination against sexual minority athletes has been documented to occur through various forms of negative stereotyping, social isolation, and homophobic harassment from teammates, coaches, and the media (Roper & Halloran, 2007). Anderson (2002; 2011) conducted two qualitative interview studies that explored the experiences of sexual minority male student-athletes within university settings. Participants perceived that the climate surrounding sexual minority athletes had improved over time; however, there was still a noted level of homophobia within the sport environment. Using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to guide the analysis process, Anderson (2002; 2011) identified that openly gay athletes were often tolerated by their peers, but not overtly accepted. Further, Anderson noted that nearly all the participants had been exceptional athletes on their respective teams, which was believed to have positively influenced how they were received by their peers.

Additional studies investigating the experiences of sexual minority student-athletes have shown this population to have a higher prevalence of alcohol and drug use, as well as a greater incidence of poor mental health outcomes when compared to their heterosexual athlete and non-

athlete peers (Botswick, Boyd, Hughes, & McCabe, 2010; Kroshus & Davoren, 2016; Veliz, Epstein-Ngo, Zdroik, Boyd, & McCabe, 2016). Researchers have suggested that sexual minorities may resort to self-medicating with drugs and alcohol as a means of managing the pressures associated with being a member of a marginalized demographic within the heteronormative social context of sport, placing them at an increased risk for developing substance abuse problems (Veliz et al., 2016). Efforts made by university student-athletes to conceal their sexual identities have also been associated with the development of depressive symptoms and thoughts of suicide (Fenwick & Simpson, 2017). Further, researchers have noted that no reliable estimate exists regarding the number of university student-athletes who identify as sexual minorities, meaning available services may not be sufficient in supporting this population (Kroshus & Davoren, 2016). These findings collectively suggest that student-athletes who identify as sexual minorities may be at risk for experiencing psychological distress.

2.2.4 Athletic Injury

Injury is common in sport and a risk to all athletes; however, researchers have indicated that treatment often focuses on the physical aspects of rehabilitation and may neglect the associated psychological impacts of injuries (Nippert & Smith, 2008). Injured athletes have been documented to experience various emotional symptoms including diminished self-esteem, guilt, anger, isolation, and humiliation, as well as mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and total mood disturbance (Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997; Nippert & Smith, 2008; Smith 1996; Wadey, Evans, Evans, & Mitchell, 2011). In extreme cases, as described by Heyman (1986), some athletes with severe injuries have experienced existential crisis or an overwhelming sense of loss that draws similarities to individuals who have experienced a death or been diagnosed with terminal illness. While not every athlete responds negatively to injury, researchers have suggested negative injury responses may result in psychological distress, particularly among younger athletes and those who lack adequate social support (Brewer, Linder, & Phelps, 1995).

Preliminary research focused on intercollegiate athletes produced similar findings to that of general athlete populations and identified injury as one of the most influential stressors in the lives of student-athletes (Selby et al., 1990). Elevated levels of stress among student-athletes have subsequently been shown to play a role in how student-athletes respond to injury,

rehabilitation, and return to play (Putukian, 2016). Early findings also forewarned that the psychological impact of injury may be a significant concern to student-athlete well-being (Selby et al., 1990). Brewer (1993) investigated the concerns regarding injury and student-athlete well-being among a sample of 15 injured and 75 uninjured varsity football players using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) and the Beck Depressive Inventory (Beck, 1967). Results from regression analysis indicated that athletic identity was positively associated with depression scores among injured athletes, but negatively associated with depression scores among uninjured athletes. These findings suggest that individuals who have a strong identification with a social role, such as being a student-athlete, may experience depressive reactions in response to negative life events that compromise their identity, such as athletic injury.

As this field of research has progressed, findings continue to support an increased prevalence of psychological distress and negative affective states in injured student-athletes (Tracey, 2003). Researchers have consequently suggested that efforts to treat athletic injury must involve more than simply caring for physical symptoms (Etzel et al., 2006). This suggestion has become increasingly more prevalent as the body of literature on post-injury depression continues to grow. Appaneal and colleagues (2009) determined that clinician-based depression ratings in injured student-athletes exceeded those of healthy athletes at one week post-injury and remained elevated for up to one month. The high prevalence of post-injury depression symptoms among student-athletes has since been supported by additional research (Neal et al., 2013; Wolanin et al., 2015) and findings indicate that different patterns of depression and emotional disturbance may manifest depending on the type of injury sustained (Mainwaring, Bisschop, Comper, Richards, & Hutchinson, 2010). Researchers have also found evidence to suggest that injured student-athletes do in fact develop depressive symptoms post-injury, as opposed to these symptoms being a result of previously existing emotional dysfunction that was exacerbated through the injury process (Roiger, Weidauer, & Kern, 2015). Problematic responses to athletic injury have further been reported to trigger additional psychological distress, such as clinical depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Putukian, 2016). Collectively, this research suggests athletic injury as a potential cause for psychological distress among student-athletes.

2.2.5 Relational and Sexual Violence

Another potential antecedent of psychological distress among student-athletes is relational and sexual violence. Researchers have identified intercollegiate athletes as an at-risk population for involvement in relational and sexual violence (McCray, 2015; Moynihan, Banyard, Arnold, Eckstein, & Stapleton, 2010), and studies have shown that members of certain athletic teams, such as men's football and basketball, as well as male student-athletes in general, are at higher risk for engaging in sexually aggressive behaviours (Humphrey & Khan, 2000; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). Further, females on university campuses are the most common victims of sexual assault (Mellins et al., 2017). These findings indicate that student-athletes, particularly female student-athletes, may be at risk for suffering from relational and sexual violence. To date, the most high-profile case of relational violence between student-athletes occurred at the University of Virginia with the death of lacrosse player, Yeardley Love, who was murdered by her boyfriend, another lacrosse player (McCray, 2015). A review of the literature on the psychological impact of relational and sexual violence indicates victims may suffer from severely impaired mental health outcomes, such as depression, suicidal ideation, and alcohol abuse (Jordan, Campbell, & Follingstad, 2010).

2.2.6 Sleep Disorders and Inadequate Sleep

Sleep disorders and inadequate sleep may result in psychological distress as researchers have found both to be associated with increased levels of stress, self-reported negative moods, physical illness, as well as drug and alcohol use among university student populations (Lund, Reider, Whiting, & Prichard, 2010). Within athlete populations, researchers have noted the importance of sleep in maintaining both physical and psychological well-being, as there is evidence to suggest a link between compromised sleep and decreased athletic performance, mood disturbance, and increased risk for athletic injury (Rosen, Frohm, Kottorp, Fridén, & Heijne, 2017; Savis, 1994). Regarding the relationship between sleep and athletic injury, results from an investigation of sleep levels in high school student-athletes indicated that those who slept on average less than 8 hours a night were 1.7 times more likely to have sustained an injury within the past 21 months (Milewski et al., 2014). These findings are concerning, given the previously outlined negative psychological impact of athletic injury and research suggesting that roughly one third of intercollegiate student-athletes sleep less than 7 hours per night (Ayers,

Pazmino-Cevallos, & Dobose, 2012). Collectively, sleep disorders and inadequate sleep may act as antecedents to psychological distress among student-athlete populations.

2.2.7 Further Challenges among Student-Athletes

Although it is beyond the scope of this literature review, researchers have identified several additional sources of psychological distress among student-athletes including academic pressures (Heyman, 1986; Hwang & Choi, 2016; Pinkerton et al., 1989), social isolation (Pinkerton et al., 1989), overtraining or burnout (Etzel et al., 2006), as well as racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination (Lee & Opio, 2011; NCAA, 2014a). While there is not substantial literature surrounding these issues, it is important to acknowledge that student-athletes may be exposed to various sport and non-sport related stressors that can act as antecedents for psychological distress, and these may be issues that athletes disclose to coaches when seeking support.

2.3 Disclosing Psychological Distress to Coaches

Student-athletes regularly face demands and expectations to maintain a strong academic and athletic standing, while also seeking opportunities for social and personal development (Etzel et al., 2006). These demands, in combination with everyday life challenges, may result in the development of psychological distress as previously outlined. As a method of coping, student-athletes may seek out social support to help manage their psychological distress, and may rely on varsity coaches to provide this support due to the unique dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship.

2.3.1 Coach-Athlete Relationships

In order to achieve performance success in sport, athletes and coaches must develop a mutually dependent relationship (Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006). This relationship is not based solely on the exchange of sport-specific knowledge, but also on athletes' perceived level of responsiveness to the support they receive from a coach and the coach's ability to provide emotional and informational support to athletes when needed (Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Jowett, 2007). As such, healthy coach-athlete relationships require high levels of trust, respect, and care; however, the dynamics of this athletic partnership are delicate and the presence of conflict and external stressors have been shown to hinder an athlete's performance, as well as their psychological well-being (Jowett, 2007; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002).

Several models and theories have been used in the study of coach-athlete relationships to better understand the unique dynamics of this partnership. Two that provide insight as to why athletes may rely on their coach as a form of support during distressing times are the 3+1 C's model (Jowett, 2007; Jowett & Meek, 2000), which was developed specifically within the sport context, and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1988), which has been drawn from the general field of psychology and applied to the study of coach-athlete relationships. Both the 3+1 C's model and attachment theory help contextualize the critical role a coach may play in providing support to an athlete who is struggling with psychological distress.

The 3C's + 1 model, as outlined by Jowett and Cockerill (2002), examines the functioning between a coach and athlete using a relationship perspective, which contends that human behaviours are only understood when considered alongside emotions and cognitions. The original three C's of this model are closeness, co-orientation, and complementarity. Closeness refers to the emotional tone of the relationship and reflects the connection and depth of the attachment between the coach and athlete. Co-orientation involves the shared opinions and views between a coach and athlete, which are established over the course of the athletic partnership through effective communication. Lastly, complementarity is the type of interaction required between a coach and athlete for each to perceive the relationship as being cooperative and effective in attaining athletic performance success and ease of training. Jowett (2007) expanded on this model by introducing a fourth C known as commitment, which pertains to the longevity of the coach-athlete relationship and the desire to maintain this attachment over time and even after career termination.

Using the original 3C's model, Antonini Philippe and Seiler (2006) investigated the quality of coach-athlete relationships among elite-level swimmers and found these relationships to possess "extremely profound and intimate feelings, despite the absence of any familiar [*sic*] or marital relations" (p. 167). The researchers also identified that coaches' communication skills and ability to provide effective social support, which relates to the concept of co-orientation, were paramount in developing both a professional and more personal relationship where the coach demonstrates care for an athletes' collective welfare, interests, and needs. These findings were further supported by Li, Dittmore, and Park (2015) who applied the 3+1 C's model to explore differences in the coach-athlete relationship among Olympic athletes from China and westernized societies. Not only did the results of this study reveal that all participants believed

their coach-athlete relationship played a significant role in influencing their athletic achievements and psychological well-being, but athletes also felt communication was the vital component to creating a stable and harmonious relationship.

The 3+1 C's model has produced valuable knowledge regarding the interdependence and sustainability of the coach-athlete relationship; however, its theoretical perspective and underpinnings have been challenged, with researchers suggesting these limitations be re-examined (Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006). This has led to researchers investigating the coach-athlete relationship from the perspective of attachment theory (Carr, 2012; Davis & Jowett, 2010; 2014). Developed by Bowlby (1969/1982; 1988), attachment theory is a psychological theory of human connection that suggests human beings are innately attuned to connect with one another on an intimate and emotional level through the development of attachment bonds. The process of fostering attachment bonds with an attachment figure begins at infancy with the development of behavioural patterns, known as attachment behavioural systems, which drive an individual to maintain close proximity to care providers for the purpose of attaining a sense of psychological security (Carr, 2012; Synder, Shapiro, & Treleaven, 2012). It is understood that innate attachment behavioural systems are more heavily engaged when an individual is under stress, frightened, fatigued, or ill and subsequently become disengaged when an individual receives comfort from an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Within the context of coach-athlete relationships, coaches are viewed as attachment figures and athletic partnerships are believed to possess the fundamental functions of an attachment bond (Carr, 2012).

Attachment theory has been adopted twice in the work of Davis and Jowett (2010; 2014): first to explore the fit of this theory in relation to the coach-athlete relationship, and second to investigate its implications for athlete well-being. Davis and Jowett (2010) measured athletes' perceptions of attachment using the Components of Attachment Questionnaire (Parish, 2000) and found that athletes viewed their coaches as being able to fulfill basic attachment functions and were likely to turn to their coaches during times of distress for support and security. As such, the authors suggested that since coaches play an instrumental role in the growth and development of their athletes, and are perceived by athletes to fulfill the role of an attachment figure, there is benefit to athletes involving coaches in the various components of their sport endeavours, rather than having them excluded.

Davis and Jowett (2014) conducted a second study and found support for their previous findings that some coach-athlete relationships may develop to where athletes feel comfortable seeking support from coaches for issues related not only to sport, but other facets of their personal lives as well. This study used the Coach-Athlete Attachment Scale (Davis & Jowett, 2013) to measure athletes' perceptions of coach-athlete relationships in terms of secure or insecure attachment styles. An individual with a secure attachment style is described to experience comfort and trust within a relationship, while insecure attachment styles are classified as being either avoidant or anxious (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Individuals with an avoidant attachment style feel discomfort in building close relationships with others and prefer to remain emotionally independent, while those with an anxious attachment style may experience anger or fear of abandonment when they perceive their partner as lacking availability and supportiveness (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Davis and Jowett (2014) found that based on athletes' measured attachment styles, those with an avoidant attachment style had a more difficult time interacting with coaches and learning to rely on their coaches for support, guidance, and instruction, which resulted in greater interpersonal conflict. On the other hand, athletes with a secure attachment style perceived their coaches as being available to provide support and recognized the importance of the coach-athlete relationship, resulting in less interpersonal conflict. Levels of interpersonal conflict were then used to assess athletes' perceptions of well-being, and results indicated that low interpersonal conflict was associated with feelings of positive affect, while high interpersonal conflict was associated with feelings of negative affect. Collectively, these findings indicate that coach-athlete relationships can enhance the well-being of athletes and suggest a benefit to fostering supportive sport environments where athletes are encouraged to openly communicate with coaches when feeling distressed.

Support for the 3+1 C's model and attachment theory has been found in research exploring the development of the relationship between university coaches and varsity student-athletes. Giacobbi, Whitney, Roper, and Butryn (2002) conducted interviews with ten intercollegiate coaches regarding the process of athlete development and found that coaches relied heavily on individual meetings with student-athletes to establish the coach-athlete relationship. Coaches reported that the issues discussed at these meetings did not always relate to sport, but rather to athletes' personal lives, indicating a perceived level of comfort in student-athletes disclosing intimate life details to coaches. Subsequent research has supported these findings and identified

that in caring for student-athletes, the role of varsity coaches involves listening, communicating, and providing support when athletes are faced with conflict or challenges related to sport, academics, and life in general (Knust & Fisher, 2015). Due to the nature of this involvement, coaches and varsity athletes have been found to develop ongoing relationships that continue beyond the athletes' tenure at university, highlighting the lasting influence university coaches have on the lives of student-athletes (Fisher, Bejar, Fynes, & Gearity, 2016).

2.3.2 Coaches as a Source of Social Support

General social support "refers to a network or configuration of personal ties where affect and/or instrumental aid is exchanged" (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984, p. 4). Integral to social support are the elements of personal interaction, emotional caring, enabling recipients to perceive greater control over their environment, and enhancing communication (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). Social support has been categorized to include: emotional support, which pertains to expressions of comfort and caring, as well as the development of trust and an ability to demonstrate empathy and compassion; esteem support, which relates to strengthening an individual's self-esteem and perceived competence; tangible support, which includes concrete forms of assistance such as material possessions or physical interaction with one another; and informational support, which refers to the provision of advice, feedback, or guidance through various means of verbal and non-verbal communication (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Hardy & Crace, 1993; House, 1981; Malecki & Demaray, 2003).

Social support has also been described by Thoits (1984) as a form of coping assistance because receiving emotional, esteem, tangible, and informational support can mitigate one's response to stressful situations. Thoits also noted that effective social support requires both parties to be socially similar and share familiarity with a common environment. These shared commonalities allow for individuals receiving social support to perceive their support providers as being both understanding and empathetic towards their needs. Collectively, the receipt of social support and development of strong relationships with confidants have been shown to result in more positive mental health outcomes (Reich, Lounsbury, Zaid-Muhammad, & Rapkin, 2010) and decrease the risk of experiencing psychological distress upon exposure to significant life stressors (Thoits, 1986).

An important distinction to make when discussing social support is the difference between perceived social support and received social support (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). Perceived social support refers to one's impression that support will be readily available if and when needed, while received social support relates to the actual exchange of support between provider and recipient (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). Perceived and received social support are complementary to one another "in the sense that it is through social support activities (received support) that individuals come to develop a sense of the availability of support (perceived support)" (Bianco & Eklund, 2001, p. 93).

In sport contexts, the topic of social support has been widely studied using the four classifications of emotional, esteem, tangible, and informational support (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Freeman & Rees, 2009). For example, athletes' perceptions of available teammate support are a positive predictor of self-confidence (Freeman & Rees, 2010), and both perceived and received esteem and informational support are associated with improved athletic performance (Freeman & Rees, 2009; Moll, Rees, & Freeman, 2017). Further, literature on the provision of social support to injured athletes suggests that based on the nature of one's relationship with an athlete, they are more or less likely to solicit specific types of social support (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). To elaborate, individuals with more intimate relational ties to an athlete, such as family or friends, often provide emotional support, while informational and tangible support are often provided by those with more distant ties, including coaches and medical professionals (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). This body of literature highlights that athletes' social support networks often include numerous individuals, which researchers believe to be beneficial for increasing athletes' overall satisfaction with their sport environment and positively impacting their athletic performance (Rhind, Jowett, & Lorimer, 2013).

A support provider of particular interest to researchers is the varsity coach. An early study found that 70% of male and female student-athletes turned to coaches as their primary form of support when managing personal challenges affecting their athletic performance (Selby et al., 1990). Maniar and colleagues (2001) subsequently investigated the willingness and preference of student-athletes to seek support when confronted with midseason slumps, return from serious injury, and a desire to perform more optimally. Results from this study indicated that across all scenarios except one, male and female student-athletes preferred seeking support from coaches, rather than family, friends, or mental health and sport professionals, such as athletic trainers,

clinical psychologists, and sport psychologists. The one exception was male student-athletes who indicated a preference for seeking support from family or friends regarding return from injury, with coaches as their second preference. Additional research exploring the role of coaches in providing social support to athletes found that following athletic injury, 68% of a sample of 256 student-athletes relied most heavily on their coach for support (Yang, Peek-Asa, Lowe, Heiden, & Foster, 2010). The authors suggested that coaches were most heavily relied upon because athletes perceived them to be empathetic towards injury, which in turn allowed coaches to provide emotional and informational support that was more readily received by their athletes (Yang et al., 2010). Collectively, findings from these studies indicate that student-athletes prefer to receive support from individuals such as coaches, with whom they can relate and have a shared perspective.

Student-athletes' preferences for receiving social support from coaches as opposed to other support providers is of particular interest because much of the literature has indicated that coaches are often one of the first contacts for varsity athletes who are experiencing psychological distress (Etzel et al., 2006; López & Levy, 2013; Maniar, Chamberlain, & Moore, 2005). This tendency for early contact with coaches has also been noted by researchers investigating the help-seeking behaviours of varsity athletes struggling with disordered eating (Arthur-Camaselle & Baltzell, 2012; Gutgesell, Moreau, & Thompson, 2003; Kroshus, Goldman, Kubzanky, & Austin, 2014). Research findings further indicate that coaches who provide social support to varsity athletes following injury may help minimize the risk of these athletes experiencing associated psychological disturbances (Armstrong et al., 2015, Nippert & Smith, 2008; Putukian, 2016; Wadey et al., 2011). Despite the suggested benefits of student-athletes receiving social support, particularly from varsity coaches, researchers have found that student-athletes may face barriers to accessing support when needed.

2.3.3 Underutilization and Barriers to Accessing Support Services

In an early review of the literature by Pinkerton and colleagues (1989), the authors identified that "although [student-athletes] experience as much or more psychological distress as non-athletes … athletes use professional services less often" (p. 218). The authors believed this was due to athletes denying emotional stress, having a desire to develop independence, and feeling pressure to maintain a team's social norms, since athletic team membership likely exposed student-

athletes to injunctions against seeking support. Recent literature continues to suggest that compared to non-athletes, student-athletes experience heightened levels of psychological distress and are less likely to admit to such challenges and seek professional care because of perceived barriers (Moreland et al., 2018; Sudano et al., 2017).

Underreporting of depressive symptoms among student-athlete populations has led several researchers to suggest that stigma associated with mental health is a primary barrier in accessing support (Beauchemin, 2014; López & Levy, 2013; Yang et al., 2007). There is a strong agreement among researchers that the culture of intercollegiate athletics may prevent student-athletes from admitting they are suffering from psychological distress for fear of being labeled as weak (Proctor & Boan-Lenzo, 2010; Wolanin et al., 2015). University may also be the first time a student-athlete is experiencing psychological distress and as such, they may not have developed effective coping mechanisms to deal with these difficult experiences (Putukian, 2016). The reluctance of student-athletes to access available resources, particularly regarding depression, may further be heightened by the fact that university campuses may not actively address perceived barriers or effectively communicate to students "that feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, and lack of self-worth are not signs of personal weakness" (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009, p. 525), but rather indicative of depression, a medical condition that can effectively be treated.

Additional studies have suggested that student-athletes may not seek help for psychological distress because they perceive professional counsellors as being unable to relate to their specific life challenges and stressors (Kroshus et al., 2014; Watson, 2005). Similar findings were noted in a study interviewing a group of elite divers who explained the reason they were hesitant to seek support was not due to the stigma associated with psychological distress, but rather the available mental health specialists lacked sport-specific knowledge (Coyle, Gorczynski, & Gibson, 2017). Interestingly, these findings come nearly two decades after it was suggested that institutions should prioritize employment of professional support staff who have knowledge of the intercollegiate athletics environment (Broughton & Neyer, 2001).

To address these perceived barriers, researchers have proposed various solutions. One such solution has been to increase the involvement of varsity coaches, since they possess tremendous knowledge of their respective sports (Moreland et al., 2018; Sudano et al., 2017). Further,

coaches' expressed opinions towards help-seeking behaviours have been shown to influence how student-athletes respond when experiencing psychological distress (Moreland et al., 2018; Sudano et al., 2017), and have been identified as having the ability to develop team cultures that combat the stigma associated with athletes seeking help (Breslin, Shannon, Haughey, Donnelly, & Leavey, 2017; Kroshus et al., 2014; Weigand, Cohen, & Merenstein, 2013). As such, it is evident that coaches play an important role in assisting distressed student-athletes and should be a focal point for research on distressed athletes' help-seeking behaviours.

The NCAA (2014a) encourages an increased involvement of coaches in supporting student-athletes' psychological well-being by recommending that coaching staff be present during annual meetings where varsity athletes are informed of their institution's psychological healthcare protocol by a credible support staff member. There is evidence to support the attendance of coaches at these annual meetings with research findings suggesting that continued interaction between coaches and support staff may help normalize the counselling process (López & Levy, 2013), and athletes who have coaches who openly discuss issues pertaining to psychological distress have a reduced risk of developing specific mental health challenges, such as eating disorders (Kroshus et al., 2014). Despite the suggestion to increase the involvement of varsity coaches in supporting psychologically distressed student-athletes and student-athletes' preference for receiving social support from their coaches, researchers have found that coaches may be unaware of the challenges that student-athletes face in accessing support, and ill-prepared to adequately provide athlete with support when needed (Knust & Fisher, 2015; Tracey, 2003).

2.3.4 Negative Influences of Coaches on Student-Athlete Psychological Well-Being

While intercollegiate coaches have the ability to positively influence the lives of student-athletes, if coaches fail to recognize their influence, this may result in adverse effects on the psychological well-being of student-athletes. Selby et al. (1990) documented the potential negative influence of varsity coaches among a sample of 247 male and female student-athletes, where roughly 45% of athletes reported that coach expectations were a significant form of life stress. Subsequent research has suggested that coach influence plays a significant role in creating sport environments and either sustain or hinder student-athletes' psychological well-being by influencing levels of stress, satisfaction, and athletes' perceived overall enjoyment and quality of their varsity athletics experience (Hwang & Choi, 2016; Rhind et al., 2016). The potential for

coaches' influences to hinder student-athletes' psychological well-being has been explored in relation to several areas, including athletic injury response and disordered eating habits.

With regard to athletic injury, Ameri (2012) determined that the motivational climate endorsed by coaches can impact how student-athletes perceive coaches' behaviour towards injured athletes. Findings suggest that an ego-involving motivational climate, where a coach makes judgements about success through normative social comparisons between teammates (Newton, Duda, & Yin, 2000), results in athletes perceiving their coach as lacking concern for injured athletes. This in turn may negatively impact athletes' physical and mental health outcomes because they feel pressure from coaches to continue playing through injury and perceive less sympathy from coaches regarding their injury status. Additional research in the area of coach influence on athletic injury has focused largely on concussion. For example, Baugh, Kroshus, Danesvar, and Stern (2014) found that athletes' perceptions of their coaches' attitudes toward concussion reporting impacted their likelihood of reporting injury. Results from regression analysis indicated that a higher perception of coach support for concussion reporting was significantly associated with fewer undiagnosed concussions. This relationship was later identified to be bidirectional, as athletes who feel pressure from coaches to continue playing after sustaining a concussion are less likely to seek medical attention (Carroll-Alfano, 2017). Collectively, these findings suggest that university coaches should be aware of how their influence can impact student-athletes' psychological well-being, particularly in relation to athletic injury.

This potential negative influence of varsity coaches on athlete psychological well-being has also been shown to impact the risk of student-athletes engaging in disordered eating habits. Rosen and Hough (1988) found that among a sample of 42 varsity female gymnasts, 28 had been told by a coach that they were overweight for optimal athletic performance. Subsequently, 75% of the 28 gymnasts resorted to engaging in active weight-control measures. These findings again highlight the tremendous influence varsity coaches hold within the coach-athlete relationship and indicate the importance of coaches being aware of how their behaviours and style of communication can impact student-athletes' psychological well-being.

As a whole, this body of literature outlines the complex dynamics of coach-athlete relationships and provides insight as to why student-athletes may depend on their coach as a support provider

when experiencing psychological distress. Despite the potential benefits of accessing varsity coach as support providers, this literature also highlights that if coaches fail to acknowledge their influence in the coach-athlete relationship and remain ill-informed about the realities of psychological distress, they may negatively impact athletes' psychological well-being. Thus, it is important to examine the experiences of coaches who have dealt with these types of interactions with their student-athletes to inform better coach education and best practices.

2.4 University Coach Education for Managing Student-Athlete Psychological Distress

The following section will review the literature on varsity coach education related to student-athlete psychological distress to highlight why coaches should be informed on these issues and understand how varsity coaches are currently prepared. The importance of this education will be presented first, followed by a closer look at current coach education and intervention-based research.

The suggestion that varsity coaches be involved in assisting student-athletes who are facing psychological distress is not a recent development, as early research in the 1990's indicated that coaches should be educated about the availability of on-campus resources for managing student-athlete distress (Selby et al., 1990). Further, coaches have been criticized for prioritizing athletic performance over psychological well-being, which has led researchers to strongly advise that varsity coaching staff be knowledgeable on how to support student-athletes and focus equally on their athletics, academics, and personal lives (Broughton & Neyer, 2001; Sherman, Thompson, Dehass, & Wilfert, 2005). Given the current participation rates of roughly 12,000 student-athletes in Canada (U Sports, 2018) and over 460,000 in the United States (NCAA, 2018), the likelihood of a coach encountering at least one student-athlete with psychological distress is a near certainty (Neal et al., 2013). This highlights the importance of coaches being aware of the psychological concerns faced by student-athletes, in addition to having the education and knowledge of potential warning signs, available support, and how to appropriately refer an athlete for help (Etzel et al., 2006).

From an organizational standpoint, the NCAA (2014b) supports research in the area of coach education and suggests that individuals who work directly with student-athletes be provided with role-appropriate training about signs and symptoms of impaired mental health, as well as

behaviours that may indicate psychological distress. Coaches are uniquely positioned to identify at-risk student-athletes because of their frequent and near-daily interaction with one another (Armstrong et al., 2015; NCAA, 2014b; Sebbens et al., 2016). Thus, the NCAA (2014b) recommends that coaches be informed on how to create a positive and accepting team culture; the dangers of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and hazing; the role coaches play in providing support, empathy, and encouragement to student-athletes who must seek professional assistance for personal challenges and distress; and the importance of sleep in relation to both athletic performance and overall well-being.

To gain an understanding of the current role coaches play in supporting student-athletes, Fisher and colleagues (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 NCAA Division I male and female coaches and asked how each coach defines and provides care. Findings indicated that each coach believed in caring for student-athletes from a holistic approach where they provide physical, emotional, athletic, and academic care. Coaches discussed the importance of being responsive to their athletes' needs, which required them to recognize when student-athletes were demonstrating signs of distress. Further, coaches disclosed that they developed their philosophies surrounding student-athlete care from both positive and negative experiences with mentors and role models, as well as their own personal experiences as parents. Coaches did not reference mandated training or educational programs as having informed their knowledge in providing student-athlete care, but did indicate that several institutional factors, such as NCAA sanctioned rules, educational communities, as well as campus and athletic department resources, helped facilitate their care for student-athletes. Coaches also warned that such factors had the potential to hinder their ability to solicit care, making particular reference to NCAA rules that limit the time coaches and athletes may interact, the lack of designated counsellors and psychologists made available to student-athletes, and the emphasis athletic departments place on funding revenue-producing sports, such as football and men's basketball.

Such funding barriers were similarly reported in a previous study, which found that intercollegiate coaches felt a need to advocate for the welfare of their student-athletes, but there existed a hierarchy where revenue-producing sports received priority (Knust & Fisher, 2015). As such, coaches of non-revenue sports were left feeling discouraged about the support and care received by their student-athletes (Knust & Fisher, 2015). Coaches further discussed the difficulties of verbalizing their concerns regarding the lack of focus on student-athlete well-being

because of the delicate position they hold as employees within an athletics department, as well as the stress and exhaustion it adds to their existing coaching responsibilities (Knust & Fisher, 2015). Collectively, results from these studies highlight the substantial and demanding role university coaches play in the lives of student-athletes. As such, researchers suggest that education and training programs be tailored specifically to coaches in order to enhance their effectiveness and cater to coaches' unique role responsibilities (Armstrong et al., 2015). To date, however, there is little research about whether coaches perceive their current training and education to be effective in providing support to distressed varsity athletes.

2.4.1 Current University Coach Education for Managing Athlete Psychological Distress

The following will review the literature regarding educational practices and preparation of coaches in managing various forms of student-athlete psychological distress, including mental health disorders, alcohol or substance abuse problems, sexual minority status, and athletic injury, as well as coaches' roles in preventing relational and sexual violence. Intervention-based research will be reviewed where applicable.

2.4.1.1 Coach Education: Student-Athlete Mental Health Disorders

Handling student-athlete mental health disorders is a concern to varsity coaches who may feel ill-prepared when these situations arise because of the lack of designated training and institutional protocols. A former intercollegiate coach wrote about her experience with student-athlete mental health:

> Most coaches are well prepared to execute the X's and O's of their sport and to motivate their athletes. But dealing with the mental health side of athletics is something you generally have to learn on your own, and often on the fly. That learning curve can be huge. What is the protocol if a student-athlete needs help with mental health issues? There is seemingly a policy for everything academic- and athletics-related, but nothing in place for mental health. (NCAA, 2014a, p. 5)

While coaches may feel there is a lack of resources or training available to them to help student-athletes, researchers have also identified that intervention-based research designed to help improve coach preparation for managing student-athletes' mental health disorders is lacking

(Rice et al., 2016). As such, both the Association for Applied Sports Psychology (AASP) and the NCAA Sport Science Institute have called for further research to help address and identify optimal strategies for responding to student-athlete mental health disorders (Moreland et al., 2018).

Within the United States, research has shown that while most athletic departments have written plans for identifying mental health disorders in student-athletes, these plans are not universally widespread and staffing deficits limit the ability to implement support practices (Kroshus, 2016). Such staffing deficits provide a rationale for educating coaches about student-athlete mental health because their established coach-athlete relationships place them in an optimal position to intervene early (Sebbens et al., 2016). Despite this fact and the suggestion that coaches receive educational training (NCAA, 2014a), a recent review of sport-specific mental health awareness programs conducted by Breslin et al. (2017) found that there existed very few programs adapted to provide educational support and enhance mental health literacy for coaches. This review included three relevant intervention studies that had been tailored to elite and intercollegiate sport settings. The authors argued that providing education and training to influential individuals, such as coaches, is essential to addressing the mental health disorders faced by athletes.

The first intervention study tested an online training program for mental health awareness and referral that was successful at educating student-athletes and improving their referral behaviours (Van Raalte, Andrews, Cornelius, Diehl, & Brewer, 2015). This program, however, was not tested among a sample of coaches and therefore its utility in helping to educate coaches about supporting student-athletes is unknown. Two additional intervention studies involved the implementation of brief mental health awareness workshops for coaches in elite sport settings. Sebbens et al. (2016) reported that a 4-hour program was successful at improving the knowledge of signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety among a sample of 166 coaches and athletic support staff, in addition to improving participants' confidence at intervening and providing support to an individual who may be experiencing a mental health disorder. Similar results were found in the second study, which identified that 184 coaches who received a sport mental health education program had an enhanced knowledge of mental health disorders and greater intention to offer support to somebody with a mental health problem, compared to a control group who received a coaching program with no mental health content (Breslin, Haughey, Donnelly, Kearney, & Prentice, 2017). Collectively, these findings suggest that mental health education

may enhance awareness, referral, and support practices; however, gaining an understanding of both coaches' and athletes' perspectives from real-life disclosures of mental health related issues will provide further insight regarding the effectiveness of current education in being translated to applied settings.

2.4.1.1.1 Depression

Researchers suggest that in order to adequately address the university-wide depression epidemic among student populations, institutions must enforce a collaborative and comprehensive approach where the entire campus community is engaged and working together to address and provide support to affected students (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009). Athletics departments are advised to follow suit, as student-athletes have been identified as a unique at-risk subgroup for depression (Armstrong et al., 2015) and researchers have recommended that all athletic personnel, including coaches, should be educated about awareness, assessment, intervention, screening, and referral for athletes suffering from depression (Weigand et al., 2013; Wolanin et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2007). Despite these suggestions, researchers have identified that most coaches are not equipped to help student-athletes with depression, nor are coaches encouraged to monitor the risk for potentially stressful life events that may lead to depression, such as sustaining athletic injury, being cut from a team, loss of scholarship, or death of a teammate (Etzel et al., 2006; Maniar et al., 2005). As such, there remains a need for identifying optimal assessment practices for coaches and developing evidence-based intervention programs to address student-athlete depression (Wolanin et al., 2015). Increasing our understanding of varsity coaches' current perspectives of available educational resources to manage disclosure of student-athlete depression will assist in addressing these identified gaps in the literature and informing the development of improved training and educational practices.

2.4.1.1.2 Suicide and Suicidal Ideation

Student-athlete suicide remains a poorly understood area; however, it is a preventable cause of death and educating those who have increased contact with student-athletes about warning signs could lead to the prevention of these tragedies (Rao et al., 2015). Suicide-related education should therefore be available to coaches as they are known to be in close proximity and have established relationships with student-athletes (Etzel et al., 2006; Sebbens et al., 2016). Researchers have also suggested that in order to effectively prevent suicide in sport,

collaborative relationships with fluid communication between coaches, athletes, and clinicians must be developed to limit the risk of athletes prematurely taking their own life (Malcolm & Scott, 2012). Considering the limited knowledge surrounding student-athlete suicide and the strong suggestion that coaches may serve a preventative role, developing an understanding of coaches' perspectives on available suicide prevention education will help identify their current level of preparation in preventing such tragedies and assess potential gaps in the training they receive.

2.4.1.1.3 Eating Disorders and Disordered Eating

Researchers suggest educating coaches on the identification and treatment of disordered eating habits so that coaches can support affected athletes and work to prevent sub-clinical behaviours from developing into full-scale clinical eating disorders (Petrie, 1993; Selby et al., 1990). In particular, coaches should be aware of the increased prevalence of disordered eating among female student-athletes and the challenges of detecting symptoms of sub-clinical disordered eating habits (Greenleaf et al., 2009; Reinking & Alexander, 2005). Eating disorder education may act as an intervention strategy where influential members of a student-athlete's support network have the knowledge for early detection, which may increase the likelihood of successfully treating the disorder (Etzel et al., 2006). Since coaches are in regular contact with student-athletes and have the ability to closely monitor their athletes' actions, they are in an excellent position to facilitate this early identification process (Nowicka, Eli, Ng, Apitzsch, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2013; Sherman et al., 2005).

While the research presented above provides support for educating coaches regarding disordered eating, Heffner, Ogles, Gold, Marsden, and Johnson (2003) identified that current educational practices may be deficient. Survey data collected from 303 intercollegiate coaches across a broad range of sports indicated that despite 95% of participants being familiar with symptoms of eating disorders and 47.5% having worked with an athlete who had an eating disorder, only 33% had received any formal training in nutrition and diet. Further, roughly 45% of these coaches tracked weight and assessed the body fat percentages of their athletes, and nearly 30% encouraged their athletes to engage in weight loss activities by either restricting food intake or participating in extra workouts. Such findings are alarming considering the potential influence coaches have on athletes engaging in disordered eating habits (Rosen & Hough, 1988) and suggest that nearly half

of intercollegiate coaches may work with an athlete who is dealing with a form of disordered eating. Sherman and colleagues (2005) conducted a subsequent study surveying 2,894 intercollegiate coaches within the United States, and found that 18% of coaches were unsuccessful at identifying an affected athlete with whom they had coached and over 25% were aware of an athlete with a disordered eating problem, but did not report it. Together, results from these studies suggest that coach education may not be sufficient in preparing coaches to handle the disclosure of student-athlete disordered eating; however, researchers have yet to explore coaches' perceptions of their current educational resources to identify areas where it may be lacking.

The survey used by Sherman and colleagues (2005) also asked how coaches developed their knowledge of disordered eating and what forms of educational training they felt would be most effective for improving their knowledge. Regarding their current eating disorder knowledge, 82% of coaches reported having read about the subject, 51% attended lectures, and 49.2% had watched television programs. 6.3% of coaches reported receiving no relevant training. To improve coaches' knowledge of disordered eating, 83% of participants suggested attending a presentation from a professional speaker, 68% identified working with a consultant, 60% felt the NCAA should provide necessary materials, and 59% indicated a desire for proper referral information. Arthur-Camaselle and Baltzell (2012) furthered this exploration of coach education regarding disordered eating by conducting structured interviews with 16 former female student-athletes who had suffered from various forms of disordered eating, and asked the athletes what educational resources they felt would be beneficial for coaches. Athletes identified a need for coaches to improve their general knowledge of eating disorders, including signs and symptoms, and suggested that coaches be cognizant of not making negative comments about athletes' bodies, learning to intervene and encourage athletes to seek professional aid when appropriate, addressing the issue immediately once the disorder is diagnosed, and offering support to athletes during the recovery process by listening and not passing judgement. Collectively, this body of literature suggests that coaches are often involved when student-athletes are challenged with eating-related disorders; however, their preparation in managing these situations may be inadequate. Researchers to date have yet to seek coaches' perspectives on how they handle the disclosure of student-athletes' eating-related challenges, which may provide additional insight

into where this education has faltered and how educational practices can be improved to better provide for coaches in supporting their student-athletes.

2.4.1.2 Coach Education: Student-Athlete Alcohol and Substance Abuse

Numerous studies have suggested that coaches, along with other members of the student-athlete support system, be aware of the signs and health risks of excessive alcohol consumption and drug use (Etzel et al., 2006; Nelson & Wechsler, 2001; Selby et al., 1990). Researchers believe the most effective way of providing support to student-athletes struggling with alcohol and substance abuse problems is through a systematic support system involving the entire athletic department, with particular involvement of coaches (Martens et al., 2006). Due to coaches' positions of authority and considerable influence on student-athletes, researchers have identified coaches as having the ability to perform necessary intervention and referral-related functions for alcohol and substance abuse problems (Agley, Walker, & Gassman, 2013; Martens et al., 2006).

Alcohol and drug abuse intervention research within varsity athletic settings is limited; however, Agley, Walker, and Gassman (2013) explored coaches' abilities to intervene and refer problem student-athletes by implementing a screening, brief intervention, referral to treatment (SBIRT) and motivational interviewing (MI) program at an intercollegiate athletics department in the United States. This program was designed to address concerns that alcohol and substance abuse training is often tailored to general university populations and may not be sufficient or effective in reaching student-athlete populations. While the pilot study for this intervention program included varsity coaches, it was not specified whether coaches were included in the final experimental group. Regardless, findings suggested that with a minimum of 5 hours of training, non-clinical athletic staff with no prior experience were able to perform sufficient SBIRT/MI skills on actors who represented student-athletes with varying levels of drug and alcohol abuse problems. Such skills included assuring students of confidentiality, assessing progress towards change, eliciting a plan for the future, and emphasizing that the athletics department is always available to help. These findings suggest educating varsity coaches is beneficial to providing support to student-athletes with alcohol or drug-related problems; however, they are limited because this study was conducted in a controlled environment and researchers had actors represent student-athletes. To advance our knowledge regarding how to support student-athletes

with alcohol or substance abuse problems, assessing both athletes' and coaches' perspectives of real-life situations where athletes disclosed such problems is warranted.

2.4.1.3 Coach Education: Supporting Sexual Minority Student-Athletes

Early research findings suggest that in addition to sexual minority student-athletes suffering from substance abuse and mental health challenges, they may feel discouraged to disclose their sexual identity if they perceive their coach or teammates to not be accepting (Kroshus & Davoren, 2016; Veliz et al., 2016). This highlights the importance of providing outlets and developing preventative measures for offering support to sexual minority student-athletes. While most athletics departments have implemented policies for promoting safe and inclusive sport environments, the extent to which these policies meet the needs of sexual minority student-athletes remains uncertain (Kroshus & Davoren, 2016). Further, despite coaches being in a position to act as role models for inclusivity by providing support for sexual minority student-athletes, outwardly demonstrating respect, refraining from using offensive language, and instilling a culture of acceptance among teammates, it is unknown as to whether coaches feel prepared or educated in doing so (Fenwick & Simpson, 2017). As such, assessing the perspectives of both student-athletes and coaches regarding situations where athletes disclosed their sexual identity will address these gaps and provide insight into the level of coach support available to sexual minorities and how coaches can be better educated to provide for all of their athletes, regardless of sexual orientation.

2.4.1.4 Coach Education: Managing Distress Associated with Student-Athlete Athletic Injury

Researchers initially suggested that following injury, student-athletes should seek support outside of their immediate athletic environment because the fear of potentially letting a coach down by disclosing this information may not allow them to authentically express their concerns (Selby et al., 1990). However, as this area of research progressed and a better understanding of the psychological impact of athletic injury was established, researchers suggested developing more comprehensive sport injury management plans that involve coaches to help adequately screen, detect, and support student-athletes with problem responses (Putukian, 2016; Wolanin et al., 2016). The involvement of coaches throughout the injury process is an important component

to these plans because researchers have identified that coaches are often key members of student-athletes' support networks (Etzel et al., 2006).

Further research in this field has focused largely on concussion and has provided results that support the involvement of coaches in preventing psychological distress associated with athletic injury. Since coaches often assume the role of communicating injury protocols to student-athletes and setting the standard for appropriate team behaviour, researchers have identified a need for coaches to be adequately educated in such matters (Kroshus & Baugh, 2016; Kroshus, Daneshvar, Baugh, Nowinski, & Cantu, 2014). Findings suggest that coaches who prioritize concussion education and endorse their support for concussion reporting have developed teams with more sophisticated concussion education strategies and less dangerous reporting-related beliefs (Carroll-Alfano, 2017; Kroshus et al., 2014). These findings collectively support sport-related injury education for coaches since their authority position allows them to develop a culture that accepts support seeking behaviour and combats misconceptions that exit from play following serious injury is a sign of weakness (Carroll-Alfano, 2017); however, researchers have yet to assess whether coaches feel prepared to take on this responsibility.

Currently, the NCAA does not mandate member institutions to provide coaches with concussion education. This was highlighted by Baugh et al. (2015) who conducted surveys of 2880 intercollegiate athletic personnel to assess their current educational backgrounds and knowledge of concussion resources. While results indicated that 92.7% of respondents were knowledgeable of their institution's concussion management plan, the 6.2% of respondents who reported being unsure were all coaches. The remaining 1.1% of athletic personnel reported their institution did not have a concussion plan. Further, the most commonly suggested improvement for concussion education was reported by 39.7% of participants to be coach education. A subsequent study investigating 325 student-athletes' preferred means of concussion education found that 40% of participants wanted information to be relayed by their coaches (Kroshus & Baugh, 2016). Including coaches in educational processes and developing their knowledge of the risks associated with injury is believed by researchers to provide a level of reassurance to athletes that encourages better communication with their coach regarding overall physical and psychological well-being (Kroshus & Baugh, 2016). Despite these findings, no research to date has provided insight into coaches' perceptions of the education they currently receive to support and prevent

injury of student-athletes, or if this education is sufficient for coaches to provide support to athletes who may experience psychological distress following injury.

2.4.1.5 Coach Education: Preventing Student-Athlete Relational and Sexual Violence

Research regarding the education and involvement of coaches in preventing student-athlete sexual violence is scarce. Lyndon et al. (2011) conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of 11 high school soccer, football, and basketball coaches, and found that despite coaches being aware of the behavioural influence they have on athletes, they were ill-equipped to sustain a role in preventing sexual violence because they lacked the skills and understanding surrounding the realities of this subject. As a result, the researchers found that coaches held beliefs that supported victim-blaming mentalities and justified male-athlete sexual aggression. While it is important to acknowledge this research was conducted in a high school setting, Lyndon and colleagues still suggested that all coaches should undergo gender-based sexual aggression training because without it, they may inadvertently be endorsing sexually violent behaviours.

Within the intercollegiate athletics setting, Kroshus, Paskus, and Bell (2018) identified the importance of coach communication in developing both standards for appropriate off-field behaviour and instilling a culture that encourages bystander intervention among student-athlete populations. Using path analysis modeling, the researchers sampled 3,281 university football players and determined that coaches' communicated expectations regarding sexual violence, appropriate treatment of the opposite sex, and the importance of taking action, increased the likelihood that players felt responsible for intervening should they see a teammate engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviours. The researchers also suggested that coaches should outline disciplinary action for both student-athletes involved and those who witness inappropriate off-field behaviour in order to reflect the cost of not intervening. While Kroshus and colleagues proposed coaches be the voice for enforcing these team expectations for sexually appropriate behaviours, they acknowledged that many coaches may need support in effectively communicating this information. As such, the authors suggested that athletic departments be equally involved by providing coaches with an appropriate framework for having these conversations. Collectively, these findings suggest that coach education may play a significant role in preventing relational and sexual violence among student-athletes; however, there remains

a gap in the literature regarding the assessment of education for coaches in providing support to student-athletes who may disclose psychological distress related to a sexually violent incident.

2.4.1.6 Summary: University Coach Education for Managing Athlete Psychological Distress

As a whole, this body of literature suggests there are benefits to educating coaches on the risks and associated factors pertaining to student-athlete psychological distress. Despite these benefits, current education in the areas of mental health disorders, alcohol and substance abuse, sexual minorities, athletic injury, and sexual violence may not be sufficient in preparing university coaches to handle the athlete disclosures related to these issues. Researchers, however, have yet to explore coaches' perceptions of the education they receive and identify how these available resources may be improved to better support distressed student-athletes.

2.5 Research Questions

The review of literature above outlined that intercollegiate student-athletes are an at-risk population for experiencing psychological distress and may rely on university coaches as a form of support. Despite this knowledge, little research has been conducted to investigate the nature of these interactions between coaches and student-athletes who have disclosed psychological distress. Further, while university coaches have long been identified by researchers and sport governing bodies to require proper education in how to manage student-athlete psychological distress, findings suggest that current training and educational resources may not be sufficient or effective in supporting this need. No research, however, has directly explored the perceptions of varsity coaches on this matter and identified what resources they feel would be beneficial in helping them provide support to psychologically distressed student-athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore how university coaches handle the disclosure of student-athlete psychological distress from the perspective of athletes and coaches and, and assess whether coaches feel prepared to provide support to their athletes. This study will address three research questions:

1. What are student-athletes' experiences of disclosing psychological distress to their coaches?

2. What are coaches' experiences of dealing with student-athletes' disclosure of psychological distress?

3. What are coaches' perceptions of the adequacy of the resources available to them to deal with student-athletes' psychological distress?

Chapter 3
Methods

3 Methods

3.1 Paradigmatic Position

This qualitative research study was conducted from a constructivist paradigmatic position because it aimed to understand and (re)construct meaning through participants' own perceptions of reality and lived experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Nicholls, 2009). From a constructivist standpoint, a relativist ontology was assumed, meaning reality is dependent on the individual's existing beliefs and presumptions (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Individuals' perceptions of reality are mentally constructed through interactions with other members of society and may change over time as the individual changes and becomes more informed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). As such, no single construction of reality is more or less "true" than another, rather it is simply more or less informed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher actively participated in the research process, meaning their own perceptions influenced the production of knowledge, and findings were co-created to reflect both the participants' and researcher's lived experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). This process reflects a subjectivist epistemology where the relationship between researcher and participant was interactively linked and findings were created throughout the investigation process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Advocacy and activism are key concepts of the constructivist paradigm, meaning results from this study aimed to inform improvements of future practices (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011).

3.2 Participants

For this study, the researcher recruited 15 student-athletes and 15 university coaches for a total sample size of 30 participants. Recruited athletes were former varsity male and female student-athletes who competed for a Canadian U Sports member institution and participated in at least one sport offered at their respective institution. Former student-athletes were recruited to reduce the risk of compromising or disrupting a current coach-athlete relationship. Student-athletes had each endured a form of psychological distress during their tenure as an intercollegiate athlete and

disclosed this psychological distress to a respective head or assistant university coach. Student-athletes had then relied on the coach as a form of support while managing their distress.

For the purpose of this study, psychological distress was qualified as an emotional response to an event or combination of events, such as, but not limited to, athletic injury, minority discrimination, or teammate conflict, that negatively impacted the student-athletes' overall quality of life. Impaired quality of life included, but was not limited to, poor mental health outcomes, development of an alcohol or substance abuse dependency, or substantially decreased athletic and/or academic performance. Participants self-selected into the study as long as they felt they had experienced psychological distress during their time as a student-athlete and if they disclosed this distress to their coach during their time as a varsity athlete. Table 1 provides a summary of student-athlete participants' descriptive characteristics.

Coaches recruited for this study were current or former university coaches who had acted as support providers to student-athletes who had approached them and disclosed psychological distress. During the recruitment process, the researcher aimed to recruit coach-athlete dyads, meaning targeted coaches were those who worked with the recruited student-athletes. In some cases, however, a student-athlete self-selected into the study and his or her coach was unable or unwilling to participate. In these cases, the student-athlete was not excluded from participating in the study, although this led to a smaller number of coaches for interviews. In order to continue exploring coaches' experiences to answer the research questions for the study, the researcher sought to recruit other coaches (hereupon referred to as a non-dyad coach) who did not have athletes participating in the study. Table 2 provides a summary of coach participants' demographic characteristics. Coaches also provided written descriptions of their coaching experiences, which have been anonymized with identifying information removed, and can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1. Student-athlete demographic information.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sport	Race/Ethnicity	Parent Education	Years of Intercollegiate Sport
Kelsey	27	F	Volleyball	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.	2
Josh	20	M	Baseball	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.	4
Abby	26	F	Soccer	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.	5
Jennifer	30	F	Curling	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.	4
Michelle	24	F	Figure Skating	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.	5
Micah	29	M	Volleyball	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.	5
Britney	22	F	Basketball	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.	2
Andrea	24	F	Rugby	White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.	4
Veronica	22	F	Track & Field	Chinese	Post-Grad.	4
Krista	23	F	Volleyball	White/Caucasian	Other	5
Kerri	24	F	Volleyball	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.	3
Ellen	24	F	Field Hockey	Korean & White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.	3
Leah	24	F	Swimming	White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.	4
Jessica	22	F	Track & Field	White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.	4
Hayley	26	F	Hockey	White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.	4

Table 2. Coach demographic information.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sport	Race/Ethnicity	Level of Education
Amanda	53	F	Volleyball (W)	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.
George	48	M	Soccer (W)	Black	Some College/Uni.
Owen	41	M	Baseball (M)	White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.
Adam	30	M	Rowing (M & W)	White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.
Wayne	39	M	Hockey (M)	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.
Cheryl	43	F	Rugby (W)	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.
Eli	62	M	Football (M)	White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.
Jesse	50	M	Cross-Country/Track & Field (M & F)	Aboriginal/First Nation	Post-Grad.
Aaron	32	M	Baseball (M)	Other (Jewish)	Post-Grad.
Erik	52	M	Volleyball (W)	White/Caucasian	Post-Grad.
Ruben	27	M	Rugby (M)	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.
Luke	35	M	Rugby (M)	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.
Phil	61	M	Golf (M & F)	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.
Mia	27	F	Soccer (W)	White/Caucasian	College/Uni.
Olivia	29	F	Swimming (M & F)	Black	College/Uni.

3.3 Sampling Procedure

Following ethics approval, recruitment of student-athlete participants began first. Athletics departments at U Sports member institutions across Ontario were contacted with an email request (see Appendix B) to forward the study description and consent form (see Appendix C) to former student-athletes via email. In addition, the Student-Athlete Mental Health Initiative (SAMHI) was contacted and provided an information poster (see Appendix D), and asked to share this information on their website and social media platforms. The researcher's contact

information was provided on the poster and interested student-athletes contacted the researcher directly to receive the study description and consent form.

A two-step consent process was used in recruiting student-athlete participants. First, student-athletes were asked to consent to participate in an interview. Second, athletes were asked to consent to contacting and inviting their coach, hereupon referred to as a dyad coach, to participate in the study. Of the 15 student-athlete participants, five consented to contacting and inviting their dyad coach to participate in the study. The remaining ten student-athletes did not feel comfortable including their dyad coach in the study. The five student-athletes who provided consent to invite their dyad coach were given the opportunity to contact their dyad coach directly, of which three chose to do so. The remaining two student-athletes preferred having the researcher contact the dyad coach on their behalf. All dyad coaches were contacted via email (see Appendix E) using the contact information listed on their respective institution's online staff directories, unless the dyad coach was no longer affiliated with the institution, in which case the student-athlete contacted the dyad coach directly and on behalf of the researcher. This process was followed to avoid having the student-athletes disclose the dyad coaches' personal contact information to the researcher without the dyad coaches' consent or knowledge. Of the five contacted dyad coaches, three consented to participate. The remaining two dyad coaches did not respond to initial emails or one-week follow up requests to participate.

A further 12 non-dyad coaches were recruited to participate in the study. A total of 182 non-dyad coaches from institutions across Ontario were contacted via email (see Appendix F) using the contact information provided on their athletics' department websites. No response was received from 128 of the contacted non-dyad coaches. Of the 54 non-dyad coaches who did respond to the email request, 27 were not interested in participating and 27 expressed interest. Twelve non-dyad coaches were then recruited from the candidate pool of 27 interested non-dyad coaches on a first-come-first-serve basis. All dyad and non-dyad coaches who consented to participate in the study were provided with the study information and consent form (see Appendix G). All participants who consented to participate in the study were offered a $10 gift card as compensation.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. This method of data collection was chosen because semi-structured interviews allowed participants greater control and freedom to express

themselves and elaborate on the meanings they associated with their experiences, which in turn provided the interviewer with a deeper understanding of the events (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Interview guides (see Appendix H) containing open-ended and clarifying questions were used to help direct the conversation and maintain a consistent yet flexible structure to each interview (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Prior to each interview, participants completed a demographics form (see Appendix I). Interviews with student-athletes asked about the participants' experiences of disclosing psychological distress to a coach and explored their perceptions of the support received from coaches. On average, audio recordings of student-athlete interviews were 1 hour, 16 minutes, and 49 seconds in length. Coach interviews asked similar questions to gain the coaches' perspectives of supporting student-athletes who disclosed psychological distress and also investigated coaches' perceptions of education and training made available to help prepare coaches for these situations. Audio recordings of coach interviews were an average length of 1 hour, 5 minutes and 24 seconds. Interviews with participants who were able to commute to the University of Toronto took place in-person at a site on campus. The remaining interviews were conducted using Skype, FaceTime, or over the phone. All conducted interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

3.5 Analysis

Interview data was interpreted using a thematic analysis. This process of analysis was used to identify recurring patterns within the data, known as themes, that related to important aspects of the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for this study because of its emphasis on interpretation, flexibility with sample size, and compatibility with a constructivist paradigm. Further, since this was the researcher's first attempt at a qualitative study, thematic analysis was appropriate because it is suggested to be "the first qualitative method of analysis that researchers should learn" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78).

In conducting the analysis, the researcher followed the six-step process of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and producing a report. The researcher began the first step of familiarizing oneself with the data by transcribing each interview and reading each transcript several times. During this process of transcribing and reading, the researcher took preliminary notes of recurring ideas and patterns

that were of interest. Once the researcher had finished transcribing the interviews, they began generating initial codes and used the software *NVivo 12* to better manage this portion of the analysis.

Using *NVivo 12*, sections of transcripts that were of interest to the researcher were highlighted and coded according to the patterns and ideas that had been noted while transcribing interviews, as well as new patterns and ideas that emerged as the researcher continued to read and analyze each transcript. Because thematic analysis is a recursive process, a combined inductive and deductive approach was used to complete the analysis (Patton, 2002). An inductive analysis was used to first generate a preliminary framework of codes and potential themes, followed by a deductive analysis to review and further develop and refine each theme. The deductive approach to analysis was not specifically informed by a previously developed theory, but rather by the preliminary framework of codes generated from the inductive analysis. Data from the student-athlete transcripts were coded first. The codes and preliminary themes that were inductively derived from this portion of the analysis then informed a deductive analysis of the coach transcript data. Examples of inductively derived codes from the student-athlete transcripts that informed the deductive analysis of the coach transcripts included: athlete position on team, coach-athlete relationship, impact of previous psychological distress, barrier to disclosure, and team culture surrounding mental health. Complimentary codes were then grouped together to produce themes and, if necessary, themes that reflected similar content were combined. This process reflected the steps to thematic analysis of searching, reviewing, and naming themes. The researcher identified a parallel structure within the student-athlete and coach transcripts, which reflected a similar timeline between the experiences of both groups of participants. This parallel structure of experiences was used to organize and finalize each theme. Lastly, the researcher completed the thematic analysis by writing the research findings in a final report.

To maintain a high level of methodological rigour and trustworthiness throughout the research process, the researcher employed different strategies to help strengthen the project. The first of these strategies was the use of purposeful sampling to find information-rich cases that satisfied the selection criteria for participants and which provided a diversity of experiences to produce meaningful results (Patton, 2002). Second, to develop a more enriched and robust understanding of the data, member reflection was used by providing participants with a brief report of preliminary themes and findings (see Appendix J) in order to engage participants in the analysis

process and ask for feedback (Smith & McGannon, 2017). The use of member reflections helped explore complimentary and contradictory opinions regarding the researcher's interpretation of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2017) and remained consistent with this study's assumed constructivist paradigmatic position, in particular that findings were co-created by the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). Feedback was received from eight participants, who each expressed agreement with the information provided in the report, and no changes or modifications were offered. As such, the researcher was encouraged to continue with their interpretation and analysis of the data. Third, the researcher conducted thorough interviewing with each participant in an effort to reach data saturation, meaning redundancies in the trends and patterns of the data were noticeable and collection of additional data would not have contributed to an improvement in understanding of the research questions (Carnevale, 2002). Lastly, the researcher engaged in the process of reflexivity, which included discussions with critical friends (i.e., research supervisor and supervisory committee), in order to acknowledge their position relative to the research study and how personal biases impacted the interpretation of data throughout the analysis process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The use of reflexivity is elaborated in greater detail below.

3.6 Reflexive Statement

As a former varsity student-athlete and assistant university coach, I have experienced both sides of managing student-athlete psychological distress. Whether the issue at hand pertained to my own challenges, those of a teammate, or those of my athletes, it was easy to recognize that there is limited training offered to coaches in handling these situations. As a result, there is tremendous variance to the support provided and made available to student-athletes. Collectively, these experiences have informed the development of this research project.

To preface, I had a wonderful experience as a student-athlete and am forever grateful for the opportunities it afforded me. I continue to encourage young athletes to pursue an intercollegiate sport career; however, this is not to say that my time as a student-athlete was perfect or that changes could not be made to improve circumstances for future student-athletes. My personal challenges with psychological distress started at the end of my second competitive season when I began feeling an overwhelming sense of unhappiness. These feelings progressed to a perpetual state of depression during which I was reluctant to admit that supressing my sexual identity was

the root cause of my distress. It was not until my coach reached out and offered his continued support that I gained the confidence to fully disclose my distress to both myself and my coach, and begin taking the necessary steps to improving my psychological well-being.

During my time as a student-athlete, my coach was an integral member of my support network because we interacted every day and had built a relationship founded on trust and respect for one another. While there were other individuals who helped support me through the challenges associated with my distress, I would argue none were more important than my coach. The nature of intercollegiate sport is such that your closest friends are often your teammates, which posed a significant challenge for me because I was afraid that disclosing my sexuality to them would disrupt our team dynamic. Further, I was living in a different country and believed that if I told my parents, they would become concerned and have me return home. As such, I viewed my coach as the only person within my immediate support network with whom I could confide. I have recognized now from having spoken to other student-athletes who struggled with psychological distress that the support my coach provided was far and beyond what most student-athletes receive.

Following my time as a student-athlete, I volunteered as the assistant coach at another university. Through this experience, I was able to build coach-athlete relationships and because I was only a few years older than the athletes, many of them saw me as more of a peer and became comfortable confiding in me. While none of the interactions I had with these athletes met my definition of psychological distress, the issues we discussed were still important and required attention. I had no formal training in how to provide support to these athletes and as such, I drew on my own personal experiences and encouraged each athlete to speak with his or her coach. While some athletes were comfortable doing so, others were not because they felt uncertain as to whether their coach could provide the support they needed. In addition, through being an assistant coach, I had the opportunity to interact with several other varsity coaches. In conversation with these coaches, the topic of supporting student-athletes in distress often came up and I learned that coaches are not necessarily reluctant to help distressed student-athletes, rather they are scared to unintentionally worsen the situation since they have not been properly trained in how to provide support.

While the system of intercollegiate sport is not without its flaws, I still believe it grants student-athletes an invaluable experience where the benefits outweigh the risks. The increasing prevalence of student-athlete psychological distress may be alarming; however, experiencing distress during university is inevitable, regardless of whether a student is an athlete or not. As such, I believe the most effective way to address this concern is to acknowledge the reality of the situation and explore methods of how we can better support student-athletes. Based on my experiences, one area in need of attention is the education and training provided to coaches because for many student-athletes, like myself, the coach may be a primary means of support. It is for these reasons that I chose to explore this research topic with the hopes that my study would help make the future of intercollegiate sport safer for both coaches and student-athletes.

In assuming the role of a researcher operating from a constructivist paradigmatic position, it was important to recognize that my personal experiences biased the way I approached interviews and interpreted participants' reported accounts of psychological distress. Foremost, since I had a positive experience seeking support from my coach, I anticipated that I would feel sad for both athletes and coaches who disclosed having had a less than positive experience. I understood that in such cases my views and opinions regarding this topic were not likely to be shared and that some participants might feel strongly that university coaches should not be involved in the process of supporting student-athletes who disclose psychological distress. Interestingly, regardless of whether a participant had a positive or negative experience, all student-athletes and coaches who I interviewed expressed similar opinions to my own. Regardless, I demonstrated empathic neutrality towards all participants throughout the research process by taking "an empathic stance in interviewing [to seek] vicarious understanding without judgement (neutrality) by showing openness, sensitivity, respect, awareness, and responsiveness" (Patton, 2003, p. 40). This meant that I did not challenge participants' beliefs; rather, I asked questions to gain a better understanding of their experiences and perspectives. Further, it was important to acknowledge that coaches and athletes may be curious about my involvement in this research and ask questions during interviews about my personal experiences. While no such questions were ever asked, I approached each interview with the intent of being honest with participants and sharing my personal experiences with psychological distress.

Prior to conducting interviews or analyzing and interpreting interview data, I acknowledged that I was hoping to find stories where athletes and coaches were able to resolve the athletes'

psychological distress. I also hoped to find that coaches perceived their current educational training to be insufficient in preparing them to manage athletes' distress. These stories would not only validate my own personal experience, but the underlying purpose of my research study as well. I understood, however, that this may not be what I encountered when conducting this research, and that I needed to be open to hearing a diverse range of stories from athletes and coaches, regardless of whether they aligned with my preconceived notions or not. I ultimately encountered stories where athletes' psychological distress was both resolved and not resolved through working with their coaches, and all coaches unanimously agreed that they felt their educational training was insufficient. Interpreting data that reflected multiple perspectives on this subject served to enhance the findings of my research and provided greater insight into the complexity of this topic. In maintaining this process of reflexivity throughout the research study, my supervisory committee acted as critical friends. Through regular meetings, they provided encouragement to examine alternative interpretations of the data, and assisted in developing and refining these interpretations throughout the analysis process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to beginning this research study. During the interview process, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and as such, they could withdraw consent at any time and did not have to respond to any questions should they not want to. In addition, since this study involved the discussion of mental health challenges, the researcher completed a mental health first aid course prior to conducting interviews. This allowed the researcher to recognize potential signs of recurring distress that could have arose during the research process and be confident in referring participants to appropriate support providers if needed. All collected data were kept secure as encrypted files on a password-protected computer. When reporting results, all personal identifying information was removed and coach-athlete dyads were separated so that participants could not identify what their associated partner had said.

It was also important to acknowledge the potential that athletes may disclose abuse by their coach/coaches when discussing psychological distress. While the researcher was aware of the body of literature that discusses sexual misconduct and abuse between coaches and their athletes (Ahmed et al., 2018; Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Volkwein, Schnell, Sherwood, & Livezey, 1997),

this subject was beyond the scope of this project. For the purpose of this study, only situations where coaches acted as an integral form of support to student-athletes in a non-sexual or abusive manner were considered. During each interview, information regarding support resources was made available to each participant for them to access and use at their own discretion.

Chapter 4
Results

4 Results

Overall, the findings from this study present student-athletes' and varsity coaches' perspectives on the barriers faced by athletes in disclosing distress, how coaches are involved in supporting psychologically distressed athletes, and opinions regarding education to better prepare coaches in effectively supporting distressed student-athletes. Data collected from student-athlete and coach participants were analyzed separately, and student-athlete results are presented first.

4.1 Student-Athletes' Experiences Disclosing Psychological Distress to a Coach

Analysis of student-athlete data produced three principle themes that are organized in chronological order to represent the timeline athletes described in disclosing psychological distress to a coach. These themes include: barriers student-athletes faced in disclosing psychological distress, the process of disclosing psychological distress to a coach, and the involvement of coaches following athletes' disclosures of distress. This portion of the analysis aims to answer the first research question, which was to explore student-athletes' experiences of disclosing psychological distress to their coach. Prior to presenting each theme, an overview of the psychological distress experienced by each participant will be provided.

4.1.1 The Psychological Distress Experienced by the Student-Athletes

Each student-athlete described having experienced a unique form of psychological distress that was caused by varying and distinct factors related to their particular circumstance. Despite the unique nature of each participant's distress, these distressing events can be broadly categorized into four groups: athletic injury, life circumstance, teammate conflict, and sexuality. A summary of the descriptions of psychological distress experienced by each student-athlete is provided in Table 3. Descriptions of distress that specify a diagnosis indicate the participant disclosed having sought professional care and received a clinical diagnosis from a licenced professional. Distress that is described as self-reported indicates the participant disclosed they had not sought professional care or obtained a clinical diagnosis from a licensed professional.

Table 3. Description of student-athletes' psychological distress and precipitating events.

Athlete	Sport	Description of Psychological Distress and Precipitating Events
		Athletic Injury
Kelsey	Volleyball	Diagnosed with overtraining syndrome that resulted in self-reported decrease in general mental health
Veronica	Track & Field	Athletic injury resulted in diagnosis of panic attacks and anxiety
Abby	Soccer	Concussion that resulted in self-reported symptoms of depression-anxiety
Kerri	Volleyball	Athletic injury that resulted in self-reported symptoms of depression-anxiety
Ellen	Field Hockey	Multiple successive athletic injuries that resulted in diagnosis of eating disorder and bipolar disorder
		Life Circumstance
Andrea	Rugby	Not receiving award at the coach's discretion exacerbated diagnosed depression
Josh	Baseball	Breakup exacerbated diagnosed depression-anxiety and suicidal ideation
Krista	Volleyball	Self-reported perfectionist tendencies and pressure to attain starting position resulted in diagnosis of depression-anxiety
Jennifer	Curling	Loss of loved one resulted in self-reported alcohol/drug abuse
Leah	Swimming	Various events (i.e. beginning birth control, breakup, intense training) resulted in diagnosis of depression and suicidal ideation
Jessica	Track & Field	High-stress time periods in school exacerbated diagnosed depression-anxiety
		Teammate Conflict
Britney	Basketball	Teammate and coach bullying resulted in self-reported symptoms of eating disorder and decrease in general mental health
Michelle	Figure Skating	Teammate bullying resulted in self-reported decrease in general mental health
Hayley	Hockey	Teammate and coach bullying exacerbated diagnosed depression
		Sexuality
Micah	Volleyball	Homophobic team cultured resulted in self-reported decrease in general mental health

Every student-athlete explained that this had either been their first time experiencing psychological distress, such as when Abby said "when I was really distressed would have been kind of in my third year when I got like a major concussion … and I'd like never experienced anything like that before" (Abby, Athlete, Soccer), or the experience was the first time they had experienced psychological distress of this magnitude, as evidenced by Jennifer who explained "I mean like, I've like suffered losses before, … but never really quite to this extent … and I didn't really know how to handle it" (Jennifer, Athlete, Curling).

4.1.2 Barriers Student-Athletes Faced in Disclosing Psychological Distress

Student-athletes' experiences with psychological distress occurred within an environment that reified traditional cultural norms and ideals of sport, which resulted in participants initially choosing not to disclose their distress, but rather to endure it for a non-specified period of time. This period of non-disclosure was described as being heavily influenced by four factors associated with traditional sport culture that served as barriers to disclosure: poor visibility of psychological distress within sport, the overemphasis and value of athlete toughness, an athlete's relative position on the team, and coach behaviours that encouraged non-disclosure. The majority of athletes' rationales behind choosing non-disclosure was often a combination of multiple factors, but for the sake of clarity, each factor will be described separately below.

4.1.2.1 Barrier One: Poor Visibility of Psychological Distress in Sport

Student-athletes described that psychological distress is not widely discussed within the sport environment, which resulted in distressed athletes feeling isolated and hesitant to disclose their distress to others. This feeling was described well when Veronica said "there was fear in seeking support because like, no one talks about … [athletes] seeking support and I only knew one friend at the time who was in therapy, and she was not having a good experience" (Veronica, Athlete, Track & Field). A similar sentiment was shared by Hayley who explained that she initially chose to manage her clinically diagnosed depression alone because mental illness was not readily spoken about by teammates or coaches. She said "I dealt with like, mild depression previous to my varsity career, but … no one was dealing with [depression] or talking about [depression], so I was just kind of dealing with it on my own" (Hayley, Athlete, Hockey).

Poor visibility surrounding psychological distress was not, however, exclusive to mental illness. For example, Micah described the lack of visibility surrounding sexual minorities and how this impacted him:

> I was the first openly gay team sport athlete at [name of school] on a men's team. … I just didn't know what … it was gonna be like. I was just terrified of what [the response would] be, cause you didn't really know of any [gay] athletes at that time. (Micah, Athlete, Volleyball)

This lack of visibility surrounding psychological distress in sport was a contributing factor to student-athletes' inability to initially recognize or identify that they were experiencing psychological distress. As a result, student-athletes believed they were alone in their experience and this sense of loneliness further discouraged disclosure because athletes were fearful of the unknown, as explained by Leah:

> I was too focused on myself … to realize someone else could possibly feel the pain that I was feeling right now. … Even my [teammates and coaches], like I couldn't. I couldn't tell them what I was feeling cause … I didn't really understand why I was feeling it cause I felt like this is so unjustified. Why would I tell them that I'm feeling like this? … I felt like I had no one to talk to. (Leah, Athlete, Swimming)

Nearly every student-athlete described a feeling of loneliness at some point during the period of non-disclosure, which also instilled a sense that none of the athletes' peers could relate to them. This combination of feeling both alone and that others were unable to relate contributed to student-athletes choosing not to disclose their distress. Abby described this feeling after she began experiencing self-reported symptoms of depression following a concussion:

> Sometimes I kind of, maybe felt alone because like, nobody else was experiencing [concussion], but like, people were always there for me, so I didn't feel like there was any [physical] barrier between me going to get support. It was maybe more just in my head. Like, I'm experiencing this [concussion and] nobody knows how I feel. (Abby, Athlete, Soccer)

Ultimately, the overwhelming sense of isolation that came from experiencing psychological distress within an environment with poor visibility of distress resulted in student-athletes feeling encouraged to make concerned efforts to hide their distress from those around them, including coaches. These efforts varied depending on the type of distress; however, the majority of student-athletes described trying to hide their distress specifically in relation to athletic performance. As one example, Kelsey explained the degree to which she masked the physical pain she was experiencing as a result of her diagnosed overtraining syndrome:

> [My coach] would have had to have been like taking my pulse and my blood pressure after practice. So, I did everything that I could to just sort of grin and bear it. … Perhaps she might have noticed that my performance wasn't as good as it was a few weeks ago, but … I think she would have had to have been a wizard to have picked up on [my distress]. (Kelsey, Athlete, Volleyball)

4.1.2.2 Barrier Two: The Overemphasis and Value of Athlete Toughness

A second factor that encouraged non-disclosure was the heightened emphasis and value that was placed on athletes who are perceived as being tough. This was best reflected when Jessica said "it's just the way that like sport … is kind of constructed. … You like have to have that like toughness and like, not being tough just kind of makes you a lesser athlete" (Jessica, Athlete, Track and Field). This concept of athletic toughness was internalized in student-athletes' identities, such that when they experienced psychological distress, it was perceived as a weakness. This was exhibited when Krista said:

> I've always identified myself as a tough athlete and so, the minute that I had to un-identify with being tough was really difficult because it's now: 'I may be physically tough, but there's something going on mentally that is not allowing me to be tough anymore' … for me it was defeat. (Krista, Athlete, Volleyball)

Due to student-athletes identifying so strongly with being both an athlete and tough, anything that challenged their notions of what it meant to be an athlete was described as being unwelcomed within the sport environment. An example of this was provided when Micah explained the internal struggle he faced being both an athlete and a gay man:

> When I recognized that I was gay, … that was a difficult moment because I was … someone who really identified as an athlete first. … I kind of had these two identities that I thought were mutually exclusive to one another. … My expectation of university level varsity athletics … was that it … wouldn't be an environment that would be conducive for an openly gay guy … and I was right. … It was pretty much … casual homophobia right from the get go. (Micah, Athlete, Volleyball)

The compounding effect of psychological distress being viewed as a weakness and athletes feeling they needed to be tough resulted in student-athletes perceiving there to be stigma surrounding psychological distress. This perceived stigma further discouraged disclosure because it fostered a mentality among athletes where they believed they should be capable of managing psychological distress on their own, otherwise they were no longer a tough athlete. Jessica described the impact of this perceived stigma:

> Sometimes I did kind of worry with my coach and my teammates like about like, stigma. … In my own head sometimes I felt like, oh maybe they don't think like, I'm a tough athlete. Like, I'm not trying hard enough. … that I'm weak like, that I'm not mentally strong. Those kinds of things. … nobody ever said anything like that to me, but it was just kind of like a feeling that I had. (Jessica, Athlete, Track & Field)

Student-athletes' strong desires to maintain the perception of being tough also led many to believe that they would become a burden if they disclosed their distress. For example, Britney explained that she feared burdening her coach by disclosing her self-reported eating disorder and as a result, attempted to manage the situation on her own: "I felt like I had let myself down and I was kind of like, 'I can get over this myself. I don't wanna talk to anyone about it' because I didn't wanna stress out other people with my issues" (Britney, Athlete, Basketball). Several student-athletes shared this sentiment, including Josh, who said "when you're depressed, it's like everybody has a lack of availability and you don't wanna burden them" (Josh, Athlete, Baseball).

In select situations, the emphasis placed on athletes being tough and its influence on non-disclosure was further exemplified by student-athletes who, at the time, were aware of another athlete experiencing severe psychological distress. These student-athletes described comparing relative levels of distress and determining their personal distress as being less severe, which prompted non-disclosure because they felt their less severe cases of distress did not warrant

attention. Kerri described this type of situation with her then-boyfriend who was a national-level athlete suffering from clinically diagnosed depression:

> My boyfriend at the time was actually clinically depressed, so I was, I was aware of that, and that's why I think … I didn't label how I was feeling as in any way depressed cause … I looked at him and how he was doing [and thought] … I don't feel like that. … It was all kind of comparative and I didn't really realize that there's obviously like different levels and degrees [of depression] and like ways of it manifesting. (Kerri, Athlete, Volleyball)

4.1.2.3 Barrier Three: An Athlete's Relative Position on the Team

Student-athletes described the existence of a hierarchy among teammates, regardless of whether they participated in an individual or team sport. At the top of this hierarchy were student-athletes who were described as exceptional performers, starters, or designated team leaders, such as captains. At the bottom of the hierarchy were less established athletes, including first-year student-athletes or bench players. An athlete's relative position in their team's hierarchy, whether at the top or the bottom, was a noted factor that served to discourage student-athletes from disclosing distress.

At the top of the hierarchy, student-athletes who were named team captains described feeling compelled to hide their psychological distress in order to maintain their image of being a strong leader. Andrea described this occurrence when she chose not to disclose to her teammates that she was experiencing a clinically diagnosed episode of depression:

> I don't think at that time I had talked to any of my … current teammates. … I'd tried to keep it away from my team just because of … my role as a captain. I wanted to separate that … to do what I could … for the team and not have [my depression] impact it. (Andrea, Athlete, Rugby)

Other athletes at the top of the hierarchy included those with a starting position on their team. These student-athletes described feeling inherent pressure associated with keeping their position, which encouraged them to endure their distress and not disclose. Krista, a starting setting for her volleyball team, explained:

> I think the real barrier was that I finally had this starting position. … [I put pressure on myself and thought] your teammates need you to run the offence. … You're in this role for a reason. … We need you to do whatever you need to do to … run this [team]. (Krista, Athlete, Volleyball).

In addition, starting position athletes described choosing not to disclose their distress in order to maintain their playing time. They feared that disclosure would result in their coach losing faith in their athletic abilities and subsequently reduced or permanent loss of an opportunity to play. Kerri described:

> I was very surprised that I was starting. … I didn't wanna give that up. I didn't wanna like, have [my coach] lose trust in me or lose faith in like, my ability to play because of the injury… I didn't wanna lose playing time. … I didn't want [my coach] to, to take me off or take me out cause she didn't have confidence in my ability to play … so that's one of the like main, one of the main other reasons why I was hesitant to come forward. (Kerri, Athlete, Volleyball)

This fear that student-athletes associated with losing their position at the top of their team's hierarchy relates back to the previous barrier of athlete toughness by highlighting how student-athletes unknowingly prioritized athletic performance over their own psychological well-being. In each of the described cases, the athlete discounted their own psychological distress in an attempt to preserve others' perceptions that they were worthy and tough enough to hold their position.

There was no indication that as student-athletes advanced through the hierarchy that it necessarily became any easier to disclose their distress. This was evidenced by Micah's experience where he began his intercollegiate career as a bench player and explained "my first two years … I kind of played [my homosexuality] under the radar. I wasn't starting and I wasn't an exceptional player" (Micah, Athlete, Volleyball). Micah ultimately became a starter and despite the power associated with this position, continued to hide his sexual identity for fear of disrupting existing team culture and losing his status as a starter. He explained:

> [I didn't disclose my sexuality sooner because] I wasn't sure what the response would be like … based on the way the guys are. … I don't wanna be the guy that disrupts the culture and like, gets kicked off the team because of this. (Micah, Athlete, Volleyball)

On the lower end of the hierarchy existed second-string student-athletes competing for the position of a starter, underclassmen, and bench players. Second-string athletes were described as being subjected to various forms of harassment and bullying from higher ranking players who held starting positions. Such a power struggle discouraged second-string student-athletes from disclosing their distress for fear of disrupting team dynamics. Michelle described this type of situation when she said:

> I was the second kind of runner-up or second in line for the event … and the older … athlete was, in some aspects, bullying [me]. … I remember when I kind of brought it up to [the other athlete] … she was kind of like … guilt tripping [me into not telling the coach because] … the team [needed] everybody to be on it. (Michelle, Athlete, Figure Skating)

Underclassmen were often identified as being low-ranking among a team's hierarchy largely because they had yet to establish themselves among the team or build strong relationships with the coaches. For example, Britney described how as a rookie player, she was subjected to bullying from a veteran and feared disclosing the resultant distress to the coach:

> I was nervous [to tell the coach] because I was the younger player … and I didn't have as much of a like relationship with [the coach] … and I was kind of afraid that [the coach] wouldn't support me. (Britney, Athlete, Basketball)

Lastly, bench players were a noted sub-group of athletes within the lower tier of a team's hierarchy and often described being hesitant to disclose their distress because they felt less valued among the team and did not want to detract focus from players at the higher end of the hierarchy. Kelsey provided an example of this scenario when she described how as a bench player, she felt discouraged to disclose her distress for fear of being a burden:

> Common teen girl trope of like, I don't want to take up too much space. I don't want to be a bother. … I wasn't a starting player and I thought I had gotten as far as I did by like,

> not rocking the boat. Just working really hard and not, not being a pain in anyone's side, and I didn't wanna be that pain in anyone's side. (Kelsey, Athlete, Volleyball)

4.1.2.4 Barrier Four: Coach Behaviours that Encouraged Non-Disclosure

Student-athletes described interactions where coaches engaged in behaviours that reinforced a culture where athletes felt discouraged to disclose psychological distress. In terms of observed experiences, student-athletes described seeing their coaches interact with teammates in a manner that demonstrated there was a negative outcome from disclosing distress and that coaches were not concerned for the athletes' well-beings. For example, Kerri described that she was hesitant to disclose the extent of her injury to her coach after seeing how her coach responded to other teammates' injury disclosures:

> I had seen with the way [my coach] … dealt with other peoples' injuries. … I had seen other players go forward and say that they were injured and [my coach] always just seemed like, very displeased about it. Like, she just didn't really have time for injuries [so] … I just didn't want to admit that anything was wrong. (Kerri, Athlete, Volleyball)

In addition, student-athletes described observing coach behaviours that perpetuated the value and importance of athletes being tough. These student-athletes explained that tougher athletes who did not disclose distress were treated more favourably by coaches and potentially given greater opportunities to participate on the team. As a result, student-athletes were apprehensive about disclosing psychological distress for fear of losing the chance to compete:

> That's probably where the apprehension [to disclose] came from. Just like in practice … people complaining and [my coach] saying like, 'don't be a baby'. … There was never like a distinct interaction that I was like, 'oh I don't wanna talk to [my coach] about stuff' … it would just be … those perceived things. Like, you would just get less attention, … [coach] makes the relay teams, so you like, wouldn't be considered the same way. … That is what kind of hindered me and like took me so long to tell [the coach]. (Jessica, Athlete, Track & Field)

Further, coaches who failed to take corrective action when teammates acted in an inappropriate manner were perceived by student-athletes to be complacent and accepting of such poor behaviours. As an example, Micah described how he never saw his coach intervene when

teammates engaged in homophobic language, which left him feeling unable to approach his coach for support. He said "[coach] had never stopped the [homophobic] language being talked about before. … She had been in the room privy to it and in some situations contributing to it … and so I didn't feel like I had an ally" (Micah, Athlete, Volleyball).

Coaches' use of language was a commonly noted factor discussed by student-athletes that contributed to why athletes did not disclose psychological distress. Language that was perceived to be insensitive contributed to athletes' feelings of being isolated because it demonstrated a lack of understanding from coaches. Krista explained how she felt frustrated with her coach's verbal reaction to her poor athletic performances because he evidently did not understand the nature of her clinically diagnosed mental illness:

> [My coach would make] comments like, 'you have to stop being so hard on yourself … you need to stop beating yourself up,' or 'you can't show anyone what you're feeling on the court.' … It's just like, well if I could stop it, I would just stop it. Like if I had that option, I would do it. (Krista, Athlete, Volleyball)

Student-athletes also described more personal interactions with coaches that ultimately discouraged them from disclosing psychological distress. Often, such interactions occurred prior to the athletes' principal distressing experience when the athlete approached the coach with a minor issue and received a negative response; consequently, athletes were deterred from engaging their coach in future disclosures. Britney provided an example of this type of situation when her coach responded poorly to a previous injury:

> I've just like never felt like I got support from [my coach] because … I actually broke my pinky and was at physio one day and missed practice. … [My coach] asked the team, 'oh where is Britney,' and [my teammates] were like … 'she's at physio' … [My coach then] laughed at the fact that I was missing practice for something as like, little as a pinky. … When I heard that I was like, okay like, [my coach] doesn't care about me. (Britney, Athlete, Basketball)

In addition, student-athletes described situations where coaches breached confidentiality following a minor disclosure, which resulted in athletes losing trust in their coach and being hesitant to seek future support. For example, Leah described that her coach divulged other

athletes' personal information to her during a previous interaction, which created apprehension in disclosing her clinically diagnosed depression because she did not want this information shared with teammates. She said:

> I did try to go to [my coach] a few times saying that, 'look I feel like really bad, I feel really tired.' … At the time I didn't realize it was depression, but I did look to [my coach] for help and I received [information about teammates] that I wish I didn't know and like thought like, maybe I don't wanna tell [my coach] things because [he's] not someone that I can trust. (Leah, Athlete, Swimming)

4.1.3 The Process of Disclosing Psychological Distress to a Coach

Following the period of non-disclosure, student-athletes decided to disclose their psychological distress to a coach. This decision was ultimately made out of necessity for one reason or another, and was greatly influenced by athletes' perceptions of their coaches' attitudes towards disclosure and their existing coach-athlete relationships. This section will explore student-athletes' rationales behind disclosing psychological distress to coaches and the factors that contributed to the relative ease or difficulty of this disclosure.

4.1.3.1 Initiation of Disclosure: Coach- or Athlete-Instigated

Disclosure of psychological distress occurred under one of two circumstances: either the disclosure was initiated by a coach reaching out to the student-athlete, or the student-athlete initiated disclosure on his or her own accord. The latter was noted to be more common among this sample of student-athletes.

Instances when a coach reached out to the student-athlete were most often the direct result of the coach having noticed that the athlete's athletic performance had decreased or their effort in practice was poor. Student-athletes described appreciating situations when a coach initiated contact because they felt it demonstrated that the coach cared for their well-being and this action provided a gateway for the student-athlete to open up about their distress. Jessica explained:

> I think [I disclosed my depression] just because [my coach] had originally come to me and had like noticed something different [at practice]. … I knew that [coach] understood that it was affecting me in a large way. … It kind of was like, 'okay he does care.' …

> That was like kind of an opening. … I really just needed someone to talk to. (Jessica, Athlete, Track & Field)

When coaches reached out, student-athletes explained that they chose to disclose their psychological distress in these moments because they believed it was the most logical course of action. Athletes felt there was no benefit to creating an excuse once their coach noticed unusual behaviours because that would only delay their receipt of help. Kerri explained:

> I think when [my coach] asked me, I did tell her right away because the fact that she was asking me, meant that she had obviously noticed that I was doing poorly, so to make more excuses … wouldn't've served me well. … I didn't want to like, put forward these excuses to explain in a way my poor playing. (Kerri, Athlete, Volleyball)

In the majority of cases, however, coaches did not approach the student-athlete, which forced these athletes to disclose their distress on their own accord. As previously noted, student-athletes often made efforts to hide their distress from coaches, which in many instances resulted in the unusual behaviours of athletes becoming normalized in the eyes of coaches, rather than signaling to coaches that the athlete was experiencing psychological distress. For example, Josh explained how, due to his recurring patterns of missing practice and underperforming in school, his coaches did not readily react when his distress reached its most critical point. He said:

> The thing was, I was always like that. … I couldn't sleep well, I wasn't like, doing well in school, and this is a thing that like, [the coaches had] seen for a while. So, I guess maybe it was a little bit more normalized. [The coaches] were like, okay this is kind of how he is. (Josh, Athlete, Baseball)

Despite their best efforts, student-athletes explained that hiding their distress was not sustainable and they ultimately felt compelled to make a disclosure. Student-athletes often described having reached a breaking point where they felt they could no longer hide or manage their psychological distress alone and needed to speak up. Veronica explained:

> Experiencing panic attacks and thinking about like, the future, took up too much of my brain space, so I was like, I need to talk to someone about it and … free up that space so I can do other productive things. (Veronica, Athlete, Track & Field)

Alternatively, some student-athletes explained that they felt a need to disclose their psychological distress in order to justify their decrease in athletic performance. Leah explained:

> I wanted to be able to get through [my depression] on my own, but I thought, well maybe I should tell [my coach] that like, I suck at practice today because I [feel depressed]. … I didn't want him to think that I just wasn't trying anymore. (Leah, Athlete, Swimming)

Therefore, athletes' disclosures of their psychological distress to their coaches often seemed to occur in order to explain decreases in their performance, thereby reinforcing the idea that performance outcomes and their ability to perform as an athlete often played a central role in how athletes viewed their self-worth and value in relation to their coaches

4.1.3.1.1 Factors that Facilitated Athlete-Initiated Disclosure

In cases of athlete-initiated disclosure, student-athletes described two factors that facilitated their decision to involve their coach in the disclosure process: how coaches had established team cultures that support disclosure, and athletes' perceptions that varsity coaches are uniquely positioned to warrant their involvement.

4.1.3.1.1.1 Coaches Establishing Team Cultures that Support Disclosure

Some of the student-athletes who engaged in athlete-initiated disclosure explained that their experience disclosing psychological distress was facilitated by their coach having established a team culture where they felt comfortable and encouraged to speak openly. Hayley explained:

> I trusted [my coach]. … She created an environment where I felt comfortable to call her. … I was dealing with [my depression and mania] by myself for as long as I could and the day I called her, I just had had enough. … That day I was like, I need to just, to talk about this cause I'm out of rope here. (Hayley, Athlete, Hockey)

Student-athletes identified three distinct behaviours demonstrated by coaches that helped establish a culture which facilitated disclosure of psychological distress. The first was coaches removing the risk that disclosure would result in an athlete losing playing time or their roster position. Andrea explained "it felt like disclosing would be more beneficial than it would be harmful. … A big part of that was I knew that my spot wasn't going be in jeopardy" (Andrea, Athlete, Rugby).

The second factor was coaches having established and demonstrated supportive relationships with other teammates. Ellen described that she felt more comfortable disclosing distress to her coach because she had heard of positive interactions between her coach and teammates. She said:

> I knew … second hand from other teammates who had more of a relationship with [the coach] that he was a … warm, supportive, a little more emotionally in tuned kind of person. … He just kind of understood someone dealing [with distress]. (Ellen, Athlete, Field Hockey)

The third factor was teams having increased visibility surrounding psychological distress, specifically when coaches spoke openly to the team about psychological distress, and when teams had available support services. Jessica described a situation when an athlete on the team experienced psychological distress, which led to the topic of mental health being discussed as a team. The occurrence of this conversation subsequently improved the team's culture surrounding mental health. She said:

> I never really felt like stigmatized or discriminated against or anything like that. … [The team] had a pretty decent culture around mental health. … It was like actively talked about … and promoted for sure. … There was [a teammate] who … had like a psychosis episode like, while at the track. So, that was obviously something that like started that conversation [about mental health] within the team … and she was very much still accepted by everyone and … nobody was ever like whispering behind her back or talking about it or anything. (Jessica, Athlete, Track and Field)

4.1.3.1.1.2 Unique Position of Varsity Coach Warrants Involvement

Student-athletes also described being inclined to initiate and involve their coach in the disclosure process because they perceived varsity coaches to be in a unique position that warranted their involvement. When seeking support, student-athletes described the importance of speaking with somebody who could empathize with their situation. As such, student-athletes, including Michelle, explained turning to their coaches because the coach was one of the only individuals capable of understanding the lifestyle, expectations, and demands placed on student-athletes:

> [Coaches] see you every day. … They're aware of what time of year it is, and exams, and schedules. They're aware of your training and your daily schedule. They're aware of

> who's friends with who, [so] … you don't have to necessarily give [coaches] all the information. (Michelle, Athlete, Figure Skating)

Due to varsity coaches being heavily involved in determining the training schedules of student-athletes, both parties inherently interacted with one another quite frequently. Given this frequent interaction, student-athletes explained that they felt coaches were in a position where they should be aware of the events taking place in the lives of their athletes in order to provide necessary support. Ellen explained:

> When I first came [to university], obviously the only people I knew were my team. … [You] hope that best case scenario … your coaching staff would be supportive for whatever comes up. That they would have this understanding of their responsibility … [as] the people who … would be most affected by [an athlete's distress] and who have … control to make decisions, … so being open and talking to your coaches is really the only way. (Ellen, Athlete, Field Hockey)

Student-athletes also viewed varsity coaches as leaders with the power to make decisions that could influence the greatest change among individual athletes and the team as a whole. One example of how student-athletes perceived varsity coaches' decision-making power was coaches' abilities to determine whether or not student-athletes could continue participating as intercollegiate athletes and be members of the team. Because coaches recruited each student-athlete and student-athletes held a strong desire to participate in their sport, student-athletes felt a level of responsibility to disclose their distress to the coach out of respect for the individual who had granted them the opportunity to participate. This was described as the reason behind why Kerri disclosed her distress to her coach. She said:

> In order for me to continue playing volleyball … [my coach] was an integral part of that. … It made sense … to tell her because she was the one who had the biggest control over my life at that time. (Kerri, Athlete, Volleyball).

A second example of how student-athletes viewed varsity coaches' decision-making power was their perceived ability to intervene and resolve interpersonal disputes between teammates. Student-athletes whose distress stemmed from bullying often explained disclosing their distress

to the coach because they believed the coach had the ultimate power to make changes that could end teammate disputes. Britney explained:

> I thought [my coach] would have the biggest impact … or like have the biggest ability to actually … change the situation because my captain had spoken previously to the girl on the team [who was bullying me], and nothing changed. So, I thought kind of go to the next level and get the coach. (Britney, Athlete, Basketball)

The third and final way student-athletes discussed varsity coaches' decision-making power was their perceived role as gatekeepers to accessing psychological support services. Student-athletes explained that in order to access support, it was important for their coach to be aware of the situations so that they could facilitate the appropriate connection. Kelsey described this as being the reason why she disclosed distress to her coach and said:

> [My coach] was the gateway to, you know, tapping into whatever resource [I needed] … I knew in the very beginning I would have had to speak up to [my coach] because it was understood that in any injury, big or small, that was how she wanted us to speak with her before we accessed physio. … I remember even a smaller incident … and in order to go speak with [doctors, my coach] … she wanted to know, … so I knew that that was the channel to get any sort of medical treatment. (Kelsey, Athlete, Volleyball)

When discussing coach power in the above cases, student-athletes perceived the power held by coaches was a facilitator to disclosure. As previously noted, however, the power held by coaches can also act as an initial barrier to disclosure when athletes perceive coaches to use this power against them by limiting playing time. This highlights the importance for coaches to acknowledge the power they hold within the coach-athlete relationship as misuse of coach power may unintentionally hinder athletes' abilities to seek help.

A final reason why student-athletes who initiated disclosure chose to involve their coaches was because they feared alarming their parents and viewed their coach as the only adult figure at university with whom they had developed an intimate connection that could support this disclosure. For example, Veronica explained that a family history of mental illness made her apprehensive to contact her parents for support, so she spoke with her coach. She said:

> One of my cousins was, is very depressed and so, he's had trouble … getting his life together, so to speak. And then, my other cousin has experienced like a, a wide range of mental health problems and was like, hospitalized at one point. So, it was definitely something that has … affected my family, so I think because of that, and like seeing [my cousins] … experiences with mental health, I really didn't want to bring it up to my parents, so that's why I think I talked to my coach. (Veronica, Athlete, Track & Field)

4.1.3.2 Coach-Athlete Relationship: The Goldilocks Effect

The coach-athlete relationship was described by student-athletes as being a contributing factor in determining the relative ease of an athlete's experience of disclosing distress. There existed a trend, described here as the Goldilocks effect, where relationships at the extremes of being either too weak or too personal resulted in the student-athletes experiencing more apprehension and hesitancy in disclosing distress to their coach. Coach-athlete relationships, however, in the middle of these extremes were described as being more helpful for facilitating disclosure. Student-athletes were unable to articulate what specifically resulted in the development of a "just right" coach-athlete relationship, but described it as an inherent feeling between coach and athlete where the appropriate level of trust, understanding, closeness, and communication was attained.

Beginning at the lower end of the spectrum, student-athletes with weak coach-athlete relationships described these relationships as lacking sufficient levels of trust, understanding, and relative closeness. Leah described the relationship with her coach where trust and confidentiality had been broken, which resulted in her reluctance to disclose her clinically diagnosed depression. She explained:

> Coach and athlete … there is a level of trust there, and [my coach] would just break all the trust … by saying … this is all the information about everyone whose ever come to talk to me. … I realized I cannot tell this guy anything and when I stopped telling him things, he would get very angry with me and he would demand meetings with my mother. …The fact that … the best year of relationship that I had with my coach was when he wasn't talking to me … says a lot. (Leah, Athlete, Swimming)

Kelsey also described a weaker relationship with her coach, albeit not to the same extent as Leah; however, Kelsey's relationship lacked a certain level of closeness and emotional connection, which made it difficult for her to disclose personal feelings to her coach. She said:

> I would say that [the relationship] was like having a good manager. … [Coach] knows volleyball. She's not a particularly touchy-feely person. … We didn't have the kind of relationship where I would have just gone and talked about feelings with her … in the same way that you wouldn't go into your boss's office and you'd go talk to a co-worker about that kind of stuff. (Kelsey, Athlete, Volleyball)

Some of the factors that were associated with a weaker coach-athlete relationship included being a first-year student-athlete, being injured and subsequently distanced from the team, coaches not being supportive allies, coaches placing more value on athletic performance than on athletes' well-beings, and changes in coaching staff. Interestingly, it was noted that prior to disclosing distress to their coach, student-athletes who had weaker relationships with their coach often rehearsed their conversation with another support provider, such as a teammate, friend, or family member.

On the opposite end of the spectrum were coach-athlete relationships that surpassed being "just right" and had become too personal. These overly personal relationships were ineffective in facilitating an athlete's disclosure of distress because athletes either feared that disclosure would disappoint their coaches or they felt disclosure would permanently disrupt the dynamics of their existing relationship. One factor that was identified as contributing to a relationship that was too close and that hindered disclosure was when a coach and athlete had a longstanding or pre-existing relationship prior to the athlete entering university. For example, Krista explained how having known her coach from a young age made it more difficult for her to disclose her clinically diagnosed depression because she felt her coach had developed a certain perception of her as a mentally tough athlete, and admitting to him that she was suffering from mental illness would disappoint him. She said:

> A lot of it comes from the fact that [my coach] had known me since I was 16 and he had seen me be a tough athlete already. … When it came to that meeting [it felt like] everything that I've portrayed to him for four years has been like, a lie almost. … I remember going to my coach's office and … being like so emotional and so distraught.

> … It was like … admitting defeat almost to my coach who was one of my biggest supporters at the time, and so it was like, a very difficult conversation to have. (Krista, Athlete, Volleyball)

A second factor that led to coach-athlete relationships becoming too close was coaches who attempted to become friends with their athletes, rather than respecting the professional boundary between coach and athlete. This boundary crossing made disclosure more difficult for student-athletes because they feared that their coach would respond in an immature manner and allow the distress to impact their working relationship, rather than viewing the situation from the perspective of a mature adult and being respectful and understanding. Jessica explained:

> I found my university coach … kind of blurred those lines [between coach and friend]. … By the end, I never fully trusted his training. … It also kind of hindered [disclosing my depression] in a way because I didn't wanna … jeopardize that relationship. … I was like, oh I don't want him to see me as like, having problems per say … [and] I didn't want that to become an issue. (Jessica, Athlete, Track & Field)

The third factor was when coaches had built relationships where they considered their student-athletes to be members of their family. This led to disclosure being difficult for these student-athletes because they equated the relationship to that of a parent and their child, where the child may feel apprehensive to disclose distress to their parent for fear of upsetting or burdening the parent. As an example, Jennifer described how the closeness of her relationship with her coach made it very difficult for her to establish a boundary and communicate what she needed as an athlete. At times, she felt the coach relied too heavily on her and in an inappropriate manner. While not abusive, she would have preferred the coach to seek support elsewhere at times. She said:

> [Coach] thought of [his athletes] as, you know, part of his own family. … I think he just felt like he could, you know, talk to me like a family member. … He would come over to my house and pick me up and take me for coffee and just like, tell me about how his marriage was falling apart. … That was hard on me cause I felt like I couldn't say no to him, but it was like, having a really negative impact on me because I was trying to deal with [my distress] myself, and I was like, I can't take on your burden right now, but I can't say no. (Jennifer, Athlete, Curling)

Comfortably within the middle of these extremes was the "just right" coach-athlete relationship, which was described as being a strong yet respectful connection between coach and athlete that helped facilitate an athlete's disclosure of psychological distress. Student-athletes identified various characteristics of coaches that helping foster this type of relationship, such as their ability to listen and prioritizing the holistic development of athletes. Veronica mentioned these characteristics when describing the relationship with her coach. She said:

> [Coach] was like very good at listening to you. … If you had an injury … [you] felt comfortable telling the coach. … In some sports if you have an injury … you don't wanna tell your coach because you don't want something negative to happen … [and] I knew that would never happen with [my coach]. … He like, doesn't just care about your performances in track. … [He] wants to know what's going on in the rest of your life and it's really nice to have one-on-one conversations with him. (Veronica, Athlete, Track and Field)

Further, Veronica also explained that her coach was very deliberate in communicating to his student-athletes that he had previously supported athletes with mental health challenges. As a result, Veronica explained that this encouraged her to approach her coach as a point of contact when she began experiencing her own clinically diagnosed anxiety and panic attacks because she believed her coach would be knowledgeable of support services. She said "[my coach] had disclosed that he had experience with [student-athletes disclosing mental health issues] before and I feel like he would be the one who would know what kind of resources were available" (Veronica, Athlete, Track and Field).

Strong coach-athlete relationships were also described as being established through mutual trust between coach and athlete, which helped facilitate disclosure because the student-athlete was comfortable sharing personal information and knew their coach would respond in an understanding manner. Kerri provided this as a rationale for why she disclosed distress to her coach:

> I think just knowing that like [my coach] trusted me and knew that I was like a hard-working player who would not come forward if something wasn't wrong. Like, if I felt like she doubted me or expected me to make excuses, I think I would've had a lot harder

> time [disclosing]. … The fact that we … already had a pretty well-established relationship enabled me to go forward and speak to her. (Kerri, Athlete, Volleyball)

The last factor that was noted to help student-athletes develop strong relationships with coaches was being identified as leader, such as being named team captain. While this position was previously noted to be a factor that influenced non-disclosure, student-athletes simultaneously explained that the authority associated with a leadership position required that they assume a level of responsibility and maintain open communication with coaches. Abby explained:

> As like the leader, … I had to be open and honest. … Being the captain, [my coach and I] talked a lot more … so I kind of felt comfortable [disclosing distress to him]. … [My coach was] always supportive from the beginning [and] wanted me to go for … captain, so like, we always had a positive relationship. (Abby, Athlete, Soccer)

Andrea, also a team captain, echoed a similar sentiment to Abby and explained how the frequency with which she interacted with her coach helped foster a stronger relationship. Andrea further noted that following the disclosure of her clinically diagnosed depression, she believed the relationship with her coach was actually strengthened. She said:

> I was one of the two captains, so I was probably in [my coach's] office every other day. …We definitely had a close professional relationship. … I felt more comfortable going to him about other things as well that weren't just rugby related [and] … I think [disclosing my depression] strengthened our relationship. … [It] opened the door for, I guess, a deeper relationship that went beyond rugby. (Andrea, Athlete, Rugby)

4.1.3.3 Ease of Disclosure Relative to the Type of Psychological Distress

Student-athletes described experiencing varying forms of psychological distress that ranged from the mental impact of sustaining an athletic injury to suicidal ideation. When asked what types of distress student-athletes believed were easier to disclose to a coach, there was consensus agreement that distress related to tangible issues such as injury or academic struggles was easier to disclose when compared to more invisible forms of distress, including challenges related to mental illness or sexual identity. In particular, any distress that immediately and directly impacted an athlete's ability to perform, specifically athletic injury, was described as being easier to disclose. Andrea best described this relationship when she said:

> There definitely [are] types of psychological distress that are a lot easier [to disclose]. … If you're injured, … I think as an athlete, … that's a lot easier to talk to your coach about … because it's linked to something very physical and you can see it, [so] … coaches understand. [Injury is] in their wheelhouse. … I think the mental health side of things, especially when … there's no real cause to it, … that's something that held me back from disclosing that episode [of depression] to [my coach because] … I couldn't point to anything and say like, oh my cat just died or like, I'm not doing well in school. Like, everything was going completely right and it just happened. (Andrea, Athlete, Rugby)

Similarly, student-athletes described academic challenges as being an easier type of distress to disclose because it is understood that as a student-athlete, one must maintain a certain academic standing. Krista explained:

> There is very much like, an academic standard that all students are held to and then student-athletes are held on top of that standard. … [Academics] intertwines itself within the culture of [university] sport … [which] makes it so much easier to talk about. (Krista, Athlete, Volleyball)

Despite the perceived difference in relative ease of disclosing tangible versus invisible forms of psychological distress, student-athletes further agreed that the coach-athlete relationship could influence this disparity. Stronger coach-athlete relationships were identified as making any form of psychological distress, tangible or invisible, easier for student-athletes to disclose. As such, student-athletes highlighted the benefit of having coaches who fostered team cultures that encouraged open discussion of distress. Jennifer said:

> When you create a culture of safety and … not just physical safety, but like emotional safety where people feel, you know, that they can open up and that anything they say isn't going to be judged or disrespected or … shot down … then you know, the more you work to develop that kind of a culture within the team, … people are more likely to open up about what's wrong … and will do it more quickly. (Jennifer, Athlete, Curling)

Lastly, female student-athletes who worked with male coaches frequently alluded to eating disorders as being a specific type of psychological distress that would be difficult to disclose to a coach. This was commonly associated with the idea that males are unable to fully understand the

societal pressures and challenges faced by females. Veronica said "anything with like eating … would be harder to disclose to your coach. I don't know why, but I think because it's so directly related to how women feel or like see themselves in sports" (Veronica, Athlete, Track & Field).

4.1.4 Involvement of Coaches following Athletes' Disclosures of Distress

After disclosing psychological distress, student-athletes described coaches' reactions to the disclosure and the subsequent support that coaches provided. This section will explore student-athletes' perceptions of coach involvement following disclosures of psychological distress and explore their opinions on what the role of varsity coaches is when supporting distressed athletes.

4.1.4.1 Coach Reactions to Disclosure of Distress

Athletes reported that coaches responded to disclosures of psychological distress in one of two ways. Either coaches demonstrated a high level of understanding and concern, which subsequently resulted in a more positive experience, or the coach was dismissive and failed to validate the athletes' concerns, which resulted in a more negative experience for the athlete. An example of a positive reaction was provided by Ellen who explained her coach's response when she disclosed an injury that subsequently contributed to her decreased mental health. She said:

> [My coach] was supportive in the sense of like, she understood why, you know, an injury can be so [difficult to manage]. … She just kind of helped to like breakdown, you know, the spiraling thoughts that I kind of had of, you know, the anxiety and everything … [She was] very open. Just like reaffirming and, you know, reassuring me things were okay and we'll deal with it. (Ellen, Athlete, Field Hockey)

A second example of a positive coach reaction was Veronica's coach who was described as having provided the following response after Veronica disclosed that she was experiencing panic attacks, which had yet to be clinically diagnosed:

> [Coach] like asked if I was in like a crisis, like would I go home and like try and hurt myself. … He said that I could talk about anything with him and he was there to listen to me. … He talked about other athletes who were experiencing mental health problems and that it's like a totally normal thing. (Veronica, Athlete, Track & Field)

Student-athletes who received positive responses from their coaches following the disclosure of their psychological distress described feeling an overall improvement in their general subjective well-being, highlighted by a sense of relief because they were no longer required to manage their distress alone. Hayley described this feeling when she said:

> I think I was just relieved … to not have to carry that all by myself. …When [the phone call] ended, I was like, okay, you know, this isn't gonna keep going. … It was like a sense of just like sheer relief that, okay, I'm not alone and I'm … gonna be supported moving forward. (Hayley, Athlete, Hockey)

Positive responses were also described to have encouraged student-athletes to seek future support from coaches and shortened the period of non-disclosure. This was exemplified when Jessica explained how her coach's initial response to the disclosure of her clinical depression impacted future disclosures. She said:

> It wasn't necessarily easier to talk about [my depression], but … I felt less like afraid to talk to [my coach] … just cause it was like a positive experience in the first place and he like was receptive. … There was no super negative feedback … [and] he listened, which was nice. (Jessica, Athlete, Track & Field)

Collectively, key factors of coach responses that were positively received by student-athletes included providing reassurance, constructive feedback, normalizing the experience, listening to athletes' concerns, and opening an invitation for ongoing and future communication.

Alternatively, poor or negative coach reactions to the disclosure of psychological distress were described as situations where coaches did not validate the student-athlete's distress or demonstrated a lack of understanding. Such reactions resulted in student-athletes feeling discouraged, demoralized, and embarrassed for having disclosed their distress. Michelle provided an example of a negative coach response following the disclosure that her teammate was bullying her, and explained how her coach's reaction made her feel. She said:

> I just remember kind of getting this brushed off response of, well that was part of being a member of a team. Was that we all had one purpose and that we were all there to support the team. That's where my kind of mental stress came from. ... [I felt] discouraged.

> Defeated. … [My coach] didn't validate the concern. …That's the point where I called my mom afterwards and had a conversation about the possibility of quitting. (Michelle, Athlete Figure Skating)

Just as positive reactions encouraged student-athletes to engage their coaches in future disclosures, the opposite was true when coaches provided a poor first response. Student-athletes who were initially met with resistance from their coach described not wanting to return to their coach when future distress arose. Britney explained her experience when she approached her coach about her teammate's bullying and said:

> [My teammate], she'd literally elbowed me in the face one time and my coach didn't even say anything. … [I asked my coach] 'can you help me with [defending] this play? I'm afraid I'm gonna get hurt during it'. … [My coach] just kind of laughed at me … and she really didn't help me at all. So, I was just kind of like, okay, whatever … and then I just never talked to her again after that. (Britney, Athlete, Basketball)

Noted factors of coach responses that were negatively received by student-athletes included dismissing athletes' concerns, prioritizing the well-being of the team over that of an individual athlete, and shutting down modes of communication.

4.1.4.2 Athletes' Perceptions of Effective Coach Support

The following provides an overview of what student-athletes described as being effective forms of support provision following the disclosures of their psychological distress. To begin, student-athletes described greatly appreciating when coaches assisted them in creating a plan to initiate next steps. Micah explained the benefit of having such a plan when he said:

> [My coach] gave me a plan structure. I think that was an effective way of dealing with [the situation] … because I … was looking at the situation incredibly emotionally and she was able to see the situation through a much more pragmatic and … logic-based mindset. (Micah, Athlete, Volleyball)

Evidently, these plans took on a different shape depending on the psychological distress experienced by the student-athlete; however, common components of creating and maintaining such plans involved coaches listening to and understanding the athlete's distress before

connecting them to appropriate resources, keeping the student-athletes engaged with the team throughout recovery, and providing ongoing and regular communication.

In terms of connecting student-athletes to appropriate resources, athletes acknowledged that in their distressed state it was difficult for them to take the first step in seeking out and accessing appropriate resources. As such, when coaches offered to make the connection on behalf of the student-athlete, athletes described this action as being very helpful. Further, if coaches were unaware of an appropriate resource or how to manage the situation, student-athletes appreciated coaches being honest about their limitations, but also preferred if coaches collaborated with the student-athlete to find such resources. Micah said:

> Even if the coach themselves aren't equipped with the tools to address [the distress], … if my coach … had said to me … 'I'll just be honest with you, I don't really know how to deal with this particularly well, but I'm here with you. … Here's a resource that's really great. If you have any questions we can go over them together'. … That type of thing, would be amazing. … Let the coaches be experts at coaching, but there needs to be a link and they need to be aware of those types of resources and if they're not aware of them, they need to be empowered to search out such types of resources. (Micah, Athlete, Volleyball)

Another effective form of support provision was keeping student-athletes engaged with their team in a capacity that did not worsen their existing distress, but allowed them to maintain their connection to the sport and their teammates. Veronica explained:

> [My coach] was very supportive of the time when I was injured. Another thing that he did was because I couldn't compete and I wasn't really involved in the team, … I was very involved in our team's fundraising … as well as being a captain. … I don't know [if being captain] was like an additional way for him to allow me to still be with the team, [but] that helped. (Veronica, Athlete, Track & Field)

Integral to effective support provision was also having coaches check in with distressed student-athletes on a regular basis. This helped by not only keeping athletes engaged with their sport, but also provided reassurance that they were not alone in managing their distress and helped demonstrate that the coach was concerned for their well-being. Jessica explained "the most

effective [support] was just that [my coach] regularly checked in on me … because that just made me feel like he cared and that like, someone was on my team" (Jessica, Athlete, Track and Field). Student-athletes also explained that it was beneficial to have their coach readily accessible on campus if they needed to speak with them. Andrea explained "we're lucky in that we're one of the few schools that has a full-time women's coach, so he's on campus all day. I can walk by his office … and he … made that accessibility very like, open to everyone" (Andrea, Athlete, Rugby). As noted in this quote, coaches who were identified by their student-athletes as being readily accessible also happened to be full-time employees of either the athletics department or the university.

In addition to helping student-athletes create plans and maintaining regular contact, coaches who demonstrated an understanding of the complex and often slow process of recovery from distress were described by student-athletes as being effectively supportive. This type of understanding was identified as being particularly important when student-athletes were managing mental illness as described by Krista when she said:

> Mental health takes time to deal with, just like physical injuries take time to deal with. You're not gonna heal a blown ankle overnight … just like you're not going to learn how to deal with depression and anxiety overnight. … Treating [mental health] or equating it in similarity to a physical injury helps. It helped me for sure realize that it's not permanent. I'm not gonna be depressed forever. ... Some days are gonna be better than others, just like some days are gonna be better than others when you're coming back from a blown knee. (Krista, Athlete, Volleyball)

Lastly, one of the most important elements to effective support provision was coaches maintaining an athlete's confidentiality throughout the disclosure and support provision process. Such confidentiality helped maintain trust within the coach-athlete relationship, which was described as being an integral reason for why student-athletes confided in their coaches in the first place. Despite Leah's coach having failed to maintain confidentiality, she explained the importance to coaches doing so. She said:

> Confidentiality is extremely important and just to respect that [athlete] … and say like, 'look, I'm not gonna tell this to anyone else. It's no one else's business. … You are

> telling me these things cause you trust me and [I respect that trust]'. (Leah, Athlete, Swimming)

4.1.4.3 Athletes' Perceptions of Ineffective Coach Support

In contrast to effective support provision, ineffective coach support often involved coaches failing to provide adequate ongoing or continued contact and communication throughout an athlete's recovery process. In many instances, coaches responded positively to the initial disclosures of athletes' distress; however, they lacked patience and an ability to acknowledge the gradual and often slow process of recovery, which resulted in student-athletes feeling they had lost the support of their coach and ultimately exacerbated athletes' feelings of distress.

A common example of this type of ineffective support was when student-athletes felt their coaches had ostracized them from the team. For many student-athletes, sport was described as having provided a level of comfort, routine, and security that when taken away by a coach, worsened their situation. Ellen described that without sport, she lost the structure in her life that kept her from falling back into a depressive state. While required to step away from sport to seek professional treatment, Ellen explained that she was promised by the coaching staff that a position on the team would be available upon her return; however, this promise was ultimately not upheld by the coaching staff and Ellen was removed from the team without any formal discussion. Ellen believed this decision was influenced by her diagnosed mental illness and explained why she believed coaches should make an effort to keep athletes experiencing psychological distress involved with their teams. She said:

> [I think it's important to provide athletes with] some sort of involvement with the team. Whether or not that be playing or helping them, but something to keep you within the team because that was an important part of your identity [and] your happiness at that point, which [is] valuable given what you were going through. (Ellen, Athlete, Field Hockey)

Hayley provided a second example of a coach ostracizing an athlete from a team due to diagnosed mental illness and described how this action impacted her psychological well-being:

> In terms of my mental health … it was awful like being away from the team. … That was my friends. … I was already depressed, already traumatized, and already dealing with

> mental health for like three or four years, and then now, like more ostracized, more removed from my social circle, and more devastated than ever. (Hayley, Athlete, Hockey)

Another form of ineffective support involved coaches who were unwilling to modify sport-related requirements, such as practice times, in order to accommodate an athlete's treatment. Athletes' felt this demonstrated that coaches lacked understanding and concern for their well-being by prioritizing athletics first. Ellen explained:

> Tuesday nights was my support group. My main support group that I had been going to for a while. … [I asked my coaches] can I, you know, leave practice early [to go because this is] something I feel like I need to maintain. … [The coaches told me], we need you at practice … [and] weren't open to that. Any of them. (Ellen, Athlete, Field Hockey)

While student-athletes believed coaches who checked in and maintained communication to have provided effective support, those coaches who checked in with too much frequency or who were perceived to have the wrong intentions behind checking in, such as to apply pressure to return to play, were described as having provided ineffective support. Kerri explained:

> [My coach] just became like very frustrated and impatient with me. … Over the course of the summer, she kept on like, like asking me and … hounding me to get back in the gym and start like lifting weights. … [It was] making me feel like I was letting her down or disappointing her because she wasn't very good at like hiding her disdain or her distaste for like injury or like slowness of recovery. (Kerri, Athlete, Volleyball)

Alternatively, coaches who never checked in or followed up with student-athletes following the disclosure of distress were also described as having provided ineffective support. In one instance, Britney explained that her self-reported eating disorder had worsened such that both teammates and the athletic therapist took notice, but the coaches continued to ignore it and say nothing. The issue was then only addressed by the coaches during an exit interview where Britney fabricated an excuse and explained she was quitting the team. Despite having acknowledged Britney's physical appearance (i.e., weight loss), the coaches accepted her excuse and since she was planning to leave the team, cut all ties to communication. Britney explained this interaction when she said:

> The original head coach [said] … 'you look ill, like you don't look healthy. … We wanna make sure that you get like the support that you need'. … I always just played it off and told [my coaches] … I wasn't eating because I was stressed and [they] believed me. … It seemed like [the coach] wanted to get like me help … but then I was … quitting anyway, so like, [they let me] figure it out on my own. (Britney, Athlete, Basketball)

Similarly, coaches who were unavailable to speak with student-athletes when they needed were identified as being unable to provide effective support. While beyond the control of these coaches, this situation frequently coincided with the coach being a part-time employee or volunteer. Josh explained:

> [We] don't have like coaches that are there full-time, that are on salary, that are like always involved because these [coaches] like have jobs. … There's no real like time to like pull them aside and be like, 'hey, this is what's going on'. … They're all like teachers and they have full-time jobs and they're really not available. (Josh, Athlete, Baseball)

Another form of ineffective support involved coaches who failed to respect student-athletes' right to make decisions for themselves. While athletes often appreciated coaches who provided assistance in developing plans for managing their distress, it was important for coaches to provide athletes with a level of autonomy during this process and acknowledge that once in university, student-athletes are technically adults. When coaches did not treat athletes as adults and made attempts to override their decision-making authority, they were perceived to have provided poor support. Leah explained:

> [My coach] several times had called my mom and said like, 'oh, well Leah isn't performing well in the pool … she shouldn't be dating this boy'. [His support] would be in an interfering, demeaning, condescending way. … It seems like [I was] not adult enough. (Leah, Swimming, Athlete)

4.1.4.4 Student-Athletes' Perceptions of the Role of Coaches in Supporting Psychologically Distressed Athletes

Student-athletes shared a consensus agreement that coaches play a role in supporting student-athletes who are experiencing psychological distress. Integral to this role was coaches' abilities

to foster team cultures that provide a supportive environment for athletes in distress. Micah noted the importance of culture setting with particular focus on minority populations. He said:

> Coaches definitely should learn about the impact that they can have on team culture around mental health … and other invisible minorities. … Mental health and homosexuality are … two forms of marginalized communities that have been historically not present [in sport]. … The ethos of capitalistic sport has been built around a notion that is generally anti-LGBTQ … and anti-mental health, … so, you know, resilience, hyper masculinity, heteronormativity, all of that is like, so woven into the fabric of sport … [that] those two communities tend to be quite ostracized and fearful of their position within sport. (Micah, Athlete, Volleyball)

Student-athletes also believed that due to the frequency with which coaches interact with student-athletes, part of their role involved being able to identify student-athletes experiencing psychological distress, offer support, and connect them with appropriate resources. Kerri explained:

> In university, when people are moving away from home for the first time [and] … they don't have the parental support that they're used to, … the coach sees them more than anyone and I think … it's okay for the coach to reach out and ask [if they notice distress]. … It's not [the coach's] job to necessarily fix things, but just to let the player know that like, they are there for them if they do choose to talk to them, or to again, like offer other avenues or suggest that they talk to their counsellors or friends or their parents, and just kind of help them instead of like adding to the stress or making them feel like they're unable to talk to anybody. (Kerri, Athlete, Volleyball)

In sum, student-athletes believed the role of coaches in supporting psychologically distressed student-athletes involved fostering supportive team cultures, identifying distressed athletes, connecting distressed athletes to appropriate support services, and providing ongoing support.

4.2 Coaches' Experiences with Student-Athlete Disclosures of Psychological Distress

Analysis of the coach data produced three principal themes: identifying and overcoming barriers to athlete disclosure, supporting distressed athletes from disclosure onward, and evaluating the

role of coaches in supporting distressed student-athletes. This section of the analysis aims to answer the second and third research questions, which are to explore the experiences of coaches in dealing with student-athletes' disclosures of psychological distress, and to understand coaches' perceptions of current resources available to help them deal with student-athlete distress.

4.2.1 Identifying and Overcoming Barriers to Athlete Disclosure

Coaches unanimously agreed that student-athletes faced barriers that delayed their decisions to come forward and disclose psychological distress. The following section will explore coaches' perceptions of these barriers and the coaching practices they implemented to help overcome them.

4.2.1.1 Barriers to Student-Athletes Disclosing Psychological Distress

Coaches identified five principle barriers that resulted in student-athletes initially choosing not to disclose psychological distress. The first barrier was the emphasis that sport culture places on athletes being tough. Coaches described the notion of athletic toughness as contributing to the stigma surrounding psychological distress and athletes believing that they can handle their distressing situation on their own. Amanda explained:

> In the high-performance world and competitive world, all we do is, you know, teach athletes to … perform under stress and to not show any sign of weakness and to know that they're strong enough to work through it. … We create this sporting world and high-performance world where, how can [athletes] ask for help, right? … They've been indoctrinated in this all throughout [their athletic careers]. … There's not a lot of role-modeling where [athletes] are incredibly vulnerable and ask for help and then succeed … and are thought of as, you know, fantastic for asking for help. It's just such a sign of weakness. (Amanda, Coach, Volleyball)

Adam provided support for Amanda's claim and expanded on this barrier of overemphasizing athletic toughness when he said:

> It's related to cultural values and stigma around needing help or not appearing strong, … especially in the context of athletics where, you know, strength or toughness is valued. …

> There's probably a stigma around that [which is] probably the initial barrier. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

The second identified barrier was the power that coaches hold in determining a student-athletes' opportunity to perform or participate in sport. Coaches acknowledged that this power dynamic creates an environment where student-athletes fear disclosing distress because they believe coaches will take away the athlete's privilege of participating. This barrier was noted to have largely impacted student-athletes with starting positions. Erik explained:

> I think [student-athletes] look at some of the distress they go through and they wonder, will coaches look at it as weakness and so, is it gonna affect my position, my role on the team? … Do I really wanna take this to the coach and then maybe I won't be starting tomorrow, you know, that kind of thing. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

The third barrier related to a student-athlete's position or role on their respective team. Student-athletes who assume more of a supporting role and do not see much playing time were described as being hesitant to disclose distress because they did not feel they were valued members of the team. Alternatively, student-athletes in more contributing roles, such as team captains or starters, may feel obligated to persevere through their distress in order to continue contributing to the team and not allow their distress to interfere. Aaron described the mentality of more contributing student-athletes when faced with this barrier. He said:

> [Student-athletes] all feel a sense of obligation … to the team to perform as best as possible. … They really want to contribute to the team. They really wanna perform their best. … There's obviously internal and external pressures that … I don't wanna let my team down, I don't wanna let my fans down, or … guys are counting on me. (Aaron, Coach, Baseball)

The fourth barrier identified by coaches was getting student-athletes to actually recognize that they are experiencing a form of psychological distress and would benefit from seeking help. Coaches explained that often student-athletes have a hard time articulating to themselves how they are feeling, let alone to a coach. Wayne said:

> The tricky part is for [student-athletes] to then acknowledge [their distress]. … It's an internal battle in admitting to yourself that you're dealing with these things … and then the external barrier … [of who] do I wanna share this with? … When it gets down to it, it's not easy for somebody coming to knock on the coach's door and say 'I can't play, I gotta take some time for myself here. I'm, I'm not, not right'. Nobody likes those times and, you know, unfortunately, it's a tough battle sometimes. (Wayne, Coach, Hockey)

This barrier was often discussed by coaches in association with the fact that for many student-athletes, this was the first time in their lives that they had experienced psychological distress. As such, it was understood why many student-athletes lacked awareness in being able to understand what was happening to them. Phil explained:

> [Student-athletes] can go through a lot of stuff and they can suffer crisis, but they may not know what to do with it. … They haven't been through an experience where this happened [and recognized that they] need to reach out for help. Instead, they'll fall back on their traditional ways … of maybe numbing out. (Phil, Coach, Golf)

The fifth and final barrier, which was discussed by only a few coaches, related to when a student-athlete had previously had a bad experience disclosing psychological distress and seeking help. These negative experiences were described as having discouraged the athlete from being vulnerable and willing to disclose future distress. Erik explained:

> The other challenge or barrier is … [the student-athlete's] past history where they haven't had a good experience when telling somebody. … Maybe there wasn't support or an understanding or listening or a willingness to help. … I've seen [that] a decent amount of times and so, a bit of fear and they waited longer to involve [the coaches] because they're just worried about what the reaction would be. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

4.2.1.2 Overcoming Barriers to Disclosure through Culture Setting

Having acknowledged the barriers that student-athletes faced in disclosing psychological distress, coaches discussed the strategies they used to minimize or overcome these perceived barriers. Collectively, these methods were used to foster team cultures that supported student-athletes psychological well-being and served to encourage disclosure and help-seeking. Coaches

often used these methods in various combinations with one another; however, they will be presented individually for the sake of clarity.

4.2.1.2.1 Barrier One: The Overemphasis of Toughness

As previously noted, the first barrier related to the emphasis sport placed on athletes being tough, which encouraged athletes to try and endure psychological distress alone. To address this barrier, coaches discussed the importance of creating a more balanced approach to their coaching, which involved de-emphasizing performance outcomes and promoting increased value on athletes' personal development and well-being. Amanda explained:

> In the sport world … you're judged by your result, so … right now [athletes' development and well-being are] not valued equally to performance. … I think structurally, we need to re-norm sport and have [these elements] as being equally as important. (Amanda, Coach Volleyball)

Phil explained how he had adapted his program to promote the holistic development of his student-athletes. His approach placed increased emphasis on rest and recovery in order to attain the performance goals desired by his student-athletes. He said:

> The holistic piece for me is just sort of talking about that pyramid. Like, we can do all the work that we want around rugby and … trying to top end some of these performances in athletes, but at the end of the day, if [the student-athletes] don't have their base, being, you know, their mental health, their nutrition, their sleep, then you're not gonna have success. So, unless you look at your program and you look at your athletes from that holistic perspective and make sure that you're providing time for adequate rest and adequate resources to work on the other things in their lives, then you're never gonna be able to get the top end product you want in your sport. (Phil, Coach, Rugby)

4.2.1.2.2 Barrier Two: The Power held by Coaches

The second barrier was the power held by coaches, which made student-athletes apprehensive to disclose distress for fear of losing their opportunity to compete. Coaches spoke to the importance of communication and open discussion in helping to overcome this barrier. Integral to such communication was coaches being forthcoming and honest with student-athletes that disclosure

of distress may, in some cases, require that the athlete step away from their position in order to become healthy. This however, did not mean that following recovery, the athlete would not have an opportunity to earn their position once again. Erik explained:

> All we do every day is just communicate as much as we can to lower the degree of misconceptions, misunderstandings, and feelings of inequity. … It's a real possibility [to lose playing time], but not because a coach is … taking it away from somebody. … One of the things we talk about very quickly with mental health issues is that … there's a process of healing that has to happen. It's the same as the process of dealing with a sprained ankle. You might need to adjust your schedule here because we gotta get some support, … but as soon as they're back up to a hundred percent, well then, their role is back where it was. … You don't lose a starting position … or a role based on an injury [or] a mental health issue. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

Coaches also identified that a second way to overcome this barrier is by developing strong relationships with their student-athletes. Such relationships were described to extend beyond the immediate nature of coaches providing sport-specific feedback and involved coaches showing interest in the personal lives of student-athletes. This process of relationship building was described to help student-athletes recognize that coaches are human and genuinely invested in their athletes' well-being. Jesse described how he approached relationship building with his large team of student-athletes:

> The other thing I've done a lot too to make sure we get to know the athletes is we have a lot of one-on-one meetings. … We do a one-on-one meeting before the seasons starts in cross country. We do a one-on-one meeting at the end of cross, going into their indoor season, and then we have another one-on-one meeting after indoor season before they leave us. And in these one-on-one meetings, we don't just talk about what their running goals are, we talk about what other goals they have moving forward. Whether that's school, whether that's personal goals, so I'll always make them come up with goals outside of running. (Jesse, Coach, Track and Field)

This process of establishing strong relationships with student-athletes further helped to minimize the power differential between coach and athlete because it provided student-athletes with a level

of authority in being involved with decision-making processes that impacted their athletic careers. Luke explained:

> We create an environment where [student-athletes] should feel comfortable asking questions, challenging things, … giving their opinion. … [Through this,] I'm hopefully opening channels that athletes feel comfortable sharing and coming to the coaching staff. (Luke, Coach, Rugby)

Coaches noted, however, that building relationships with student-athletes can be both challenging and time-consuming, and discussed techniques they had employed to minimize the risk of establishing a poor relationship that may inhibit a distressed student-athlete from disclosure. First-year student-athletes were identified by coaches as being particularly at-risk for non-disclosure should they experience psychological distress because coaches often have not had enough time to get to know these athletes. As such, the first relationship building technique used by coaches was to capitalize on existing relationships between teammates, which are often established at a faster pace, to better reach first-year student-athletes. An example of this technique was described by Cheryl who established a communication chain where rookie student-athletes were connected to more senior athletes on the team. She explained:

> We have a leadership group. … So, the team is split up into smaller groups. … There's a big of a chain of command so to speak, so girls they can come to me directly, but they know there's a few other people they can go to for support if it's needed before they come to me. … Often, they'll often reach out to older athletes if they need support or a conversation. (Cheryl, Coach, Rugby)

This process of connecting rookie and senior student-athletes was also described as being beneficial because it empowered senior athletes to keep an eye on younger athletes and speak with the coaches should they notice changes in behaviour or demeanor.

A second technique used by coaches involved staying updated and knowledgeable of current social trends and influences among young people. This practice was described as helping coaches connect better with their student-athletes despite age differences. Coaches explained that today's student-athletes behave differently from when they began their careers, so they employed various methods of learning about today's youth, which included speaking with their own

children, engaging with social media, and accepting the increased involvement of parents. Mia commented on this practice when she said:

> Being kind of updated and with the generation that you're recruiting and that you're working with, right. … You are working with athletes in this day and age now who, you know, maybe they do need to seek a lot of validation … so I educated myself like crazy. (Mia, Coach, Soccer)

The third technique discussed by coaches involved screening student-athletes for psychological distress. This helped coaches identify student-athletes, particularly first-year athletes, who may be at a greater risk for not seeking help should an issue arise. Coaches commented that student-athletes who previously had not experienced distressing life events were more prone to not seeking help. Adam explained:

> One of things that we have as part of novice tryout is just a voluntary disclosure about the hardest thing people have gone through. … Just, you know, blank area for them to fill it out because we've found that people who have been through some sort of fairly serious trauma tend to be very comfortable asking for help and very receptive to operating in an environment where they can ask for help and then work independently on getting better, whereas people who have not been through sort of traumas or difficult situations, have a lot difficulty kind of self-motivating to problem solve. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

4.2.1.2.3 Barrier Three: An Athlete's Position on the Team

The third identified barrier related to a student-athlete's position on their team, where more influential players were hesitant to disclose distress for fear of letting down their coach or teammates, while bench players experienced hesitancy to disclose because they did not feel valued on the team. To overcome this barrier, coaches first discussed providing transparent selection criteria to help dispel any beliefs that certain student-athletes were being treated more favourably than others. Adam explained:

> If you do selection the right way, it's not up to the coach. It's my job when I'm running selection to give the athletes the most transparent view of their own results and how those stack up against the results of others. … The winner should be the person who wins the

> selection event. It shouldn't be someone who I chose. It's the person who performed best on the day. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

In addition, coaches described making efforts to provide all student-athletes with equitable training opportunities. Erik described this process as giving each athlete, regardless of their position on the team, a chance to develop their athletic abilities and receive attention from the coach. He said:

> We don't run from the terms, right. You're a starter, you're a starter. You're an impact player right now, you're an impact player. But our vocabulary is about, okay so she's an impact player today, and she gets her time because she's playing lots, well then Monday is about developing the kids that haven't had the touches on the weekend and so, we will find the same amount of time for you as we did for her. … It will look and feel different, but it's an equal process. It just may not be an identical process. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

Lastly, coaches discussed the importance of providing every student-athlete with a designated role on the team. This practice was done specifically to help student-athletes recognize that regardless of their athletic abilities or competitive contributions, they are still valued members of the team and deserving of the same support. Cheryl explained:

> If you make the team, there's a role for you and through that role, you get your identity. You get your confidence and usually, you're pretty happy. … So, everybody really has a role … or they're looking for that role and we're trying to find that role. Those roles change, but [student-athletes are] held accountable to those roles and I find time to connect with them about those roles and what their future roles can be. (Cheryl, Coach, Rugby)

4.2.1.2.4 Barrier Four: Athletes not Recognizing Psychological Distress

The fourth barrier involved student-athletes' inabilities to recognize when they are experiencing psychological distress and acknowledge that seeking help would be beneficial. Coaches explained that addressing this barrier first required that they emphasize the importance of awareness within their coaching philosophy. Phil explained:

> The key piece of my coaching is awareness. … If something comes up and [my athletes] just like, try to make it go away, I really try to educate them in emotional awareness and literacy around when it comes up. That's something you have to pay attention to. So, I'm always telling them … that if you don't pay attention to what you're feeling … it's gonna go into your blind spot and it's gonna get you in some way. It doesn't go away if you try to make it go away. (Phil, Coach, Golf)

Through teaching student-athletes about awareness, coaches were then able to introduce accountability. Most coaches described teaching their athletes about accountability by explaining to them that, similar to how athletes are expected to maintain their physical health, whether through proper nutrition or injury rehabilitation, they are also expected to work on maintaining their psychological health. Olivia said:

> Being accountable to yourself and your swimming and training is also paying attention to your health and your just, general well-being. … That's something that I try and let [the student-athletes] know early on. … If you stop going to bed on time and you're getting less sleep and that's going to lead to more distress or more anxiety or a more depressive state, then it just kind of spirals and things can get out of hand really quickly, … so when I talk about accountability to themselves and to the team, it's making sure that you kind of stay on top of things from day one. (Olivia, Coach, Swimming)

4.2.1.2.5 Barrier Five: Previous Bad Experiences with Disclosure

The final barrier discussed by coaches was the impact a previous bad experience can have on the likelihood of student-athletes disclosing futures distress. When discussing these instances, coaches often spoke about how many student-athletes come to university having previously worked with coaches who were not understanding or willing to discuss personal topics. It was often in conversations with these coaches that student-athletes had a bad experience and learned to believe that sport is not an environment for talking about their emotions. Phil explained:

> A lot of [student-athletes'] interactions with coaches … in athletics is one of like, basically the message is they gotta suck it up, buttercup. Deal with it. … I can't believe that in 2019 this stuff still goes on, but … a lot of the coaches are what we call transactional coaches. They see things that go on and say "look if you don't perform

> better, you gotta go 50 push-ups". … That type of command and control style, and if they've been exposed to those types of coaches, that's gonna be their view. And so, … if they [don't] feel good about asking the coach about, you know, something technical, … they certainly are not gonna feel comfortable coming to you with something that's very personal to them. (Phil, Coach, Golf)

Coaches acknowledged that overcoming this barrier took time because it required changing athlete's existing perceptions and attitudes. Often this was achieved through coaches repeatedly and outwardly demonstrating that they cared for the well-being of their student-athletes; however, George also explained that he was able to gain the trust of his student-athletes through being upfront and honest about his expectations. He said:

> [You're] dealing with young adults who … played their sport for many years, been exposed to many different coaches and coaching styles, … that can make their own evaluation [of coaches]. … I go upfront … I try to be as genuine as I can about, you know, what my philosophy is, what my style is, so on and so forth, so there aren't any surprises. … [The student-athletes] realize that you care, … you're in it for the right reasons [and] … that lends to that comfort in being able … to come and talk to the coach … knowing that you're not gonna judge them … [and] be able to provide that support that they need. (George, Coach, Soccer)

4.2.1.2.6 Additional Methods of Overcoming Barriers to Disclosure

In addition to the specific methods coaches discussed for addressing the five noted barriers, coaches also described more general methods they used to help foster team cultures that support disclosure. These methods are placed in their own sub-category because they do not target one specific barrier, rather they are applicable to multiple barriers. The first method mentioned by several coaches was adopting and demonstrating an open-door policy. Erik explained:

> It's a bit cliché, but from day one … we try to create the open-door policy. It's one thing to say it, but then you gotta figure out how you can demonstrate it. … If we don't create an environment where [student-athletes] feel comfortable and open and trusting of what we may do or how we may handle [distress], then we may never hear about any of the situations of distress. So therefore, we could put a million programs and support things in

> place, but we may never get to use them cause our athletes may never feel that our environment is the one they want to come to for help. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

A second method discussed by coaches was the use of role-modeling. Cheryl explained the importance of role-modeling when she said:

> I think modeling, role-modeling, is the most powerful tool … as a coach to your athlete. … You are what you do, not what you say you will do. So, if your insisting on balance, and happiness, and health, and doing good in school, and mental health, and you're not taking care of yourself, people know. (Cheryl, Coach, Rugby)

Coaches described various forms of role modeling behaviors, which included being willing to modify sport-related demands, sharing scenarios of psychological distress overcome by other student-athletes, and coaches sharing their own personal stories related to psychological distress. Wayne provided an example of coaches sharing their own personal stories as a way to encourage student-athletes to seek help. He said:

> All my players know about my family situation. … My assistant coach is somebody that had to quit hockey and put his academics aside for a bit because of concussion issues and the symptoms that that gave him. So, he's also been at the forefront with some concussion awareness … and I've been at the forefront with the mental health side of things, sharing my story. (Wayne, Coach, Hockey)

Through such role-modeling behaviours, coaches explained that it helped normalize the experience of distress and opened the door to having conversation with student-athletes about psychological distress. In addition, it helped demonstrate to student-athletes that coaches are available support providers.

Coaches also discussed the importance of proper language use surrounding the topics of psychological distress, help-seeking, and in particular, mental health. They described that it was most effective to use language that equates mental health to physical injury. Not only did this serve to encourage disclosure and subsequent help-seeking, but it also helped reduce stigma. Adam explained:

> The best language around that is the one around treating mental health issues like an injury issue. … Athletes respond very well toward language centered around performance. … If you talk about, kind of, positive mental health as being a performance enhancer, then you can set goals around improving mental health as a way of improving performance. … By turning it a little bit into something that's more openly talked about … you create kind of a framework that [the student-athletes are] familiar with. … They're familiar with how to deal with injuries, they're familiar with how to enhance their performance, and you just make it one more thing that they're working on along with their technique and their fitness. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

Coaches also described talking about mental health as being a skill, similar in nature to any other athletic skill, which must be practiced consistently in order to be mastered. Luke explained this use of language when he said:

> Start talking about mental health as … a skill that needs to be practiced. A skill that you need to be aware of … like any skill, whether it's passing, tackling, things like that, you need to work with someone to help get better. And just trying to … destigmatize a little bit … and just stress that … it's not a sign of anything wrong with you, it's just a sign of you need to work on it with someone. (Luke, Coach, Rugby)

Lastly, coaches acknowledged that addressing the barriers to disclosure faced by student-athletes is more difficult when working alone. For this reason, coaches spoke to the value of having support teams, which often included various specialists and assistant coaches, to increase both the number of individuals with whom student-athletes could seek help and the number of people surveying the student-athletes' behaviours. Amanda explained:

> I just think there's so many barriers [to athletes seeking help], … which is why I've tried really hard to get many different staff involved because you just don't know who's gonna resonate with them and who's gonna be the one that they feel comfortable with. (Amanda, Coach, Volleyball)

To increase the chances that student-athletes would relate to at least one member of the support team, coaches tried to include diverse individuals who fit the demographic of the student-

athletes. For example, Erik explained that because he is a male coach working with female student-athletes, he always employs a female assistant coach. He said:

> It doesn't matter how long I do this, I can never sit in a room and talk to my athlete and say, I actually know what it feels like to be in your shoes, period. I can't do that. … I think it's really critical from a technical point of view, tactical point of view, and a holistic student-athlete and person point of view, if I don't have a middle manager, assistant coach in place that has more of those credentials, then I'm gonna have a really tough time truly supporting the athlete and helping them develop. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

4.2.2 Supporting Distressed Athletes from Disclosure Onward

The following section will explore coaches' involvement in the process of identifying or learning of psychological distress and providing ongoing support. In addition, it will explore factors that influenced how coaches provided support.

4.2.2.1 Facilitators and Barriers to Identifying Distress in Student-Athletes

In terms of facilitators to identifying distress, coaches described often being able to recognize that student-athletes were experiencing distress and chose to initiate contact with the student-athlete, rather than waiting for the athlete to approach them. Common signs that student-athletes were experiencing distress included missing practices, isolation from the team, noticeable changes in personality or behaviour, and poor athletic performance. Mia explained:

> They're missing practice. They look out of it. They're zoned out. They're not responding to emails. … If I see, you know, student is not completing their study hall hours, or they're not responding to, you know, the casual check in's that I shoot my players … it's kind of a red flag for me to say like 'let's meet up for coffee and see if there's something more going on'. (Mia, Coach, Soccer)

At times, however, coaches explained that they learned of student-athletes' distress through word of mouth from other teammates. Eli said:

> In most cases, … what I get is second-hand information. … I hear about, you know, that this person is dealing with some issues … and I may hear it from the players, the other teammates, and then I will call the guy in. (Eli, Coach, Football)

Once coaches recognized or learned that an athlete was potentially experiencing psychological distress, they often consulted their coaching staff or other appropriate stakeholders before confronting the student-athlete. This was done as a way for coaches to not only confirm that others had also noticed the unusual behaviour of the athlete in question, but to develop an appropriate plan of action for speaking with the athlete. Amanda explained her process of collaboration with her coaching staff and said:

> There might be a discussion … within the staff. Like, is there something? Did you notice? Was that just me? I don't know? And then trying to figure out what might be the most impactful way to nudge [the student-athlete] towards … help. (Amanda, Coach, Volleyball)

In some cases, this plan of action would not involve the head coaches speaking directly with the athlete, but rather having a teammate or assistant coach who had a stronger existing relationship speak with the distressed athlete.

Coaches also noted that demographic factors can influence whether or not student-athletes are more likely to require that a coach initiate conversation. Some of these demographic factors more commonly associated with coaches confronting the athletes included being male, a visible minority, or of a lower socioeconomic status. Due to the influence of these demographic factors, coaches described keeping a closer eye on these student-athletes. Mia said:

> Those players, I keep sort of a special watch on because I know they've got other things going on and demographics … [or] economic status play a piece into [non-disclosure] as well. … I've got players everywhere. From, you know, the richest parts of [name of city], to the players whose parents own condos downtown, to players who commute from, you know, rough areas. … So, those players, … they're definitely a little bit closer kept on my radar than the others I'd say. (Mia, Coach, Soccer)

In regards to barriers, coaches noted various factors that made it more difficult for them to identify student-athletes in distress, including having a poor relationship with the distressed student-athlete. Poor relationships often occurred when the athletes in question were in their first year since coaches had yet to understand these individuals' personalities. Ruben explained the challenges he faced in identifying distress among two first-year student-athletes. He said:

> I think if I had more consistent touch points, then maybe I could've identified the issues ahead of time, but [the student-athletes] were both sort of first-year students … [and] the incidents happened fairly early on in the season, so I didn't know them that well. Kind of hard to tell, you know, what's normal for this person? What's not? (Ruben, Coach, Rugby)

Further, student-athletes who had sustained an injury were also described to have developed weaker relationships with coaches. In these cases, coaches identified that it was more difficult to identify distress because the injury had limited the frequency of interactions between coach and athlete. Luke described this occurrence with one of his injured student-athletes. He said:

> I wouldn't say I had a great relationship with [the student-athlete]. … He was a player that was injured a lot … and was injured sort of the first month or six weeks of the season, so I didn't get a chance to really get to know him because I wasn't engaging with him as much. … If they're not playing, I'm not speaking with them as regularly. (Luke, Coach, Rugby)

Coaches also acknowledged that university in general is a stressful environment and they found it difficult to distinguish regular stress associated with being a student from more significant psychological distress. As a result, there were instances when coaches chose not to address a student-athlete's behaviour because they did not want to overreact to the situation. Adam explained this challenge and how retrospectively, it was often apparent that the student-athlete was experiencing distress. He said:

> In hindsight I would say it's obvious, but looking at somebody in practice who's, let's say, tired and not sleeping, well … knowing that that's coming from a place where that athlete might be struggling with a mental health issue, versus knowing whether or not

> that athlete might just struggle with time management and has been putting themselves late because they didn't bother studying … can be very difficult. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

Lastly, coaches identified various structural and logistical barriers, which led to more difficulty in recognizing student-athletes in distress. Examples of such barriers included the size of a team, coaches being part-time or volunteer staff, and competitive season not being year-round. Luke described some of these more structural challenges when he said:

> I have fifty guys on the team, so being able to connect with all fifty day-in and day-out can be very challenging. … You only have so much time during a training session. … The other piece is like, none of us on our coaching staff, or rugby anyway, are full-time. … I'm lucky because I do work at the university, so I have a little bit more time to check in with the guys away from the rugby field. (Luke, Coach, Rugby)

4.2.2.2 Types of Psychological Distress Student-Athletes are more Comfortable Disclosing

Coaches explained that student-athletes disclosed a wide variety of distressing events; however, coaches largely agreed that student-athletes seemed more comfortable disclosing distress of a tangible nature, such as injury, when compared to distress that is of invisible nature, such as mental illness. Further, more tangible forms of distress happened to impact athletes' abilities to compete or perform more directly, which coaches also believed created more ease surrounding disclosure. Phil explained:

> The comfort level would generally be as [the distress] relates to [the athlete's] sport, you know, their ability to deliver on the ice, on the field, on the golf course. … Because you're the coach, you're the subject expert … and so, when it's connected to their sport, they're way more comfortable. (Phil, Coach, Golf)

Coaches also noted that conversations about more intangible forms of psychological distress were becoming more commonplace. Coaches commented on how societal trends have contributed to athletes speaking more openly about challenges related to sexuality and mental health. Erik explained this observation when he said:

> The kids these days surprise me with how much better they are at sharing than five years ago. Ten years ago. Fifteen years ago. … There just seems to be so much less taboo stuff these days. … The way that our culture has gone, and information and the education in schools … everything from sexuality to mental health … I am blown away about how upfront, blunt, and willing to share about topics that, you know, again, when I started coaching, … they were behind the scenes and behind the curtains, … which [was] to our detriment at that time. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

4.2.2.3 Why Coaches Believe they are Involved in the Disclosure Process

Coaches cited various reasons for why they believed student-athletes chose to involve them in the disclosure process, which largely centered on the fact that sport is a major component in the lives of student-athletes and coaches play an influential role in athletes' sporting lives. As such, coaches believed there were many sport-related reasons behind why student-athletes had involved them, which included, but were not limited to, explaining poor athletic performances or missed practices, coaches having the authority to determine whether student-athletes will continue to participate on a team, and coaches having a greater understanding of the dynamics of the student-athlete lifestyle. Coaches also cited their unique relationship with student-athletes as being a principle reason why they were likely involved in the disclosure of psychological distress. As Adam explained, coaches interact so regularly with student-athletes that they often become the athletes' closest and most trusted authority figure at university. He said:

> There's probably still gonna be [athletes] who feel most comfortable talking to me or another coach about personal mental health issues and that might be because we have a personal connection they don't have with other people on campus. … I might be one of the people [student-athletes] see most often on campus. … I might be one of the more accessible authority figures, especially in their first or second year. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

In addition, coaches explained how their role in sport demanded that they provide instruction and guidance to student-athletes, which may translate to athletes perceiving that coaches can also provide such instruction and guidance when it comes to distressing situations. Luke explained:

> [Student-athletes] come to a coach because they know the coach will tell them what to do. … At the end of the day, part of our job … is telling players how to perform or how to play, so I think they see that [as] … if I go to the coach [with distress], the coach will tell me where to go and what to do. (Luke, Coach, Rugby)

Ruben provided support for Luke's statement and added that student-athletes understand coaches to have the greatest influence in affecting change within the sport environment. That is, if athletes link their experiences of distress to their sport, they will often involve the coach because they perceive coaches as their best option for finding a solution. Ruben said:

> It's just that perception of like, [the coach is] in charge of what's happening and … if I take this to the coach, that's what's going to solve this problem. … It's a lot easier to sort of go … to who's in charge and explain like, this is the situation, … what are my next steps. … I think it's really just trying to get to the person who can affect the most change within the group. (Ruben, Coach, Rugby)

Further, coaches explained how the dynamics of their relationship with student-athletes can sometimes lend to them being the first person notified of psychological distress, even before the athlete's own parents. Coaches believed that student-athletes elected to notify the coach first because university is an opportunity for these athletes to transition into their adult lives and involving their parents could threaten their autonomy and sense of adulthood. As such, coaches are viewed as optimal individuals to involve because they are trusted to provide a more neutral opinion. Olivia explained:

> You see your coach more than like anyone else and they do play like, a pretty huge role in your day to day life, so a lot of times [student-athletes] don't want to go to their parents. They don't wanna worry their parents kind of thing, … but they feel comfortable enough that they can come talk to [the coach] and they know I'm not gonna go call their parents or … spread it around. … Sometimes they just want somebody who's not their best friend … [and] not a parent that they know they can trust. … Someone who knows them and knows their characteristics and how they … function on a daily basis. (Olivia, Coach, Swimming)

Beyond the coach-athlete relationship, coaches also believed that student-athletes involved them in the disclosure process because of the team culture they had fostered. Many coaches discussed how they promoted an open-door policy, which meant they were available to student-athletes when needed. As a result, coaches described feeling a sense of obligation or responsibility in being involved because that was the promise they had made to their athletes. Eli explained:

> The one thing that we did when we recruited these kids was we told them … 'our door is open. If you're going through something, you need to come and talk to us'. … Some of these guys live quite a ways away from home and I'm the, you know, the closest person that they might have … [who] they can talk to. … That's the nature of being a coach. (Eli, Coach, Football)

Finally, coaches also believed that in some cases, student-athletes chose to involve coaches in the disclosure because they had previously observed or heard from teammates who had sought support from the coach. If the teammates reported a positive experience, it likely encouraged other student-athletes to follow suit. Amanda described this as having been the likely reason why one of her student-athletes had chosen to disclose psychological distress to her. She said:

> There were other [student-athletes] in her cohort … that are good friends of hers to this day [who] also had some physical issues … and so, we did all we could to help them as well. … So, I think it was possible that shared experiences by peers and the observations … perhaps, you know, she perceived that there was a genuine caring about her as a human being. (Amanda, Coach, Volleyball)

4.2.2.4 Coaches' Initial Responses to Athletes' Disclosures

When student-athletes initially disclosed psychological distress to coaches, there was a common process by which the coaches responded and reacted to the situation. This process will be presented in a stepwise manner; however, it is noted that not every incidence of disclosure required that each step be carried out in this precise order. The first step involved coaches listening to the student-athlete explain their situation and how they were feeling. Adam described this process when he said:

> The most important thing is to listen to what they're saying. … Allow them to disclose the problem and explain what's going on with them, and to be patient during the process

> while they do that cause it may probably take them some time … to fully get everything out or say everything they need to say. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

After gaining an understanding of the athlete's distress, coaches often provided the student-athlete with reassurance to help the athlete understand that what they are experiencing is normal and happens to many individuals. Wayne explained why he provides reassurance and said:

> Trying to be reassuring that they're not the only one's out there. I think that's one of the big things with mental health issues is that you tend to kind of question yourself as to why me, why's it happening to me, I shouldn't be dealing with these things right now, I got everything going for me, why's it happening. So, I think the first reaction I always have it to be very reassuring. (Wayne, Coach, Hockey)

If necessary, coaches engaged student-athletes in follow-up questions to better understand the severity and specific details of the distress. The need for asking questions was dependent on the student-athlete's initial willingness to open up about the situation and provide enough detail for the coach to initiate next steps. Olivia described her questioning process and said:

> When an athlete comes to me, my first question is, do they wanna talk about it? And if they don't wanna talk about it with me, do they have somebody to talk to. … Then we kind of just go from there. … Figuring out what level they're on in terms of their distress and if it's something that they just need someone to talk to, or they need someone above me to talk to, or is it a, we need to go to the hospital kind of thing. (Olivia, Coach, Swimming)

Some coaches explained that during this process of learning about the student-athletes distress, it was helpful for them to paraphrase what the athlete was saying. Not only did this approach provide the coach with clarity surrounding the situation, but it also demonstrated that they were listening.

As previously noted in Olivia's quote above, coaches intuitively engaged in a triaging process where they determined the severity of the student-athlete's distress and whether or not it was outside of their realm of expertise. If coaches felt they were not equipped to provide the necessary support to the student-athlete, they explained to the athlete that they were not qualified

to handle this situation in its entirety. After coaches outlined their professional boundaries, the final step in the process of responding to a student-athlete's disclosure of psychological distress was to connect them with appropriate support services. Aaron described this final step in the process. He said:

> My approach is pretty much do whatever I can to get [student-athletes] the resources that they need. … I recognize that I'm not an expert in this field, but I also recognize that as a coach, … I'm certainly a trusted figure … and I have an intimate relationship with my players. … From there, I view my role as … the middle man to connect them with the people who are best suited to support them. I of course offer … my unwavering support, … but that can only go so far when you've got student-athletes who have mental health challenges. I recognize that you need the professional to really equip them with tools to get through the challenges they're facing. (Aaron, Coach, Baseball)

4.2.2.5 Support Provided by Coaches Following Athletes' Disclosures

Support provided by coaches varied depending on the specific situation and type of psychological distress faced by each student-athlete; however, there were noted commonalities in the types of support provided that coaches found to be effective. In many cases, coaches explained that they support distressed student-athletes by working with them to create a plan of action, as described by Cheryl when she said:

> We make sure we have a plan in place. So okay, [the student-athlete] voiced some sort of concern, whatever the severity of it is, and then we'll have a plan in place. … This is what we're doing for the next steps. The next step might be meeting with me again, depending on if I'm, you know, qualified to have the conversation, or we'll set up an appointment potentially with … a counsellor that works for our varsity athletes. (Cheryl, Coach, Rugby)

When creating this plan, coaches found that it was beneficial to involve student-athletes in the decision-making process and have them contribute to planning next step. This provided student-athletes with some accountability and control in their recovery process. Phil explained how he involved student-athletes in the planning process. He said:

> There's always like, what are you doing to move forward? To get resolution. To solve this. … So, there's usually an action [the student-athletes] need to take … and I pose it as an invitation. What's the commitment you're gonna make around the action that's gonna move you forward. (Phil, Coach, Golf)

In addition to creating a plan of action, coaches explained the importance of keeping themselves available to chat with distressed student-athletes when needed. As noted, some instances of athlete distress did not require professional support, but rather that the athlete have an opportunity to speak with somebody. As such, it was important that coaches be willing and able to schedule times to sit down with the student-athlete and help them work through their distress. In some of these cases, however, coaches explained that it was helpful to connect the distressed student-athlete with a teammate who had previously experienced the same or similar form of distress. Teammates were viewed as good support providers because there is a high level of relatability between themselves and the athlete. Adam explained his process of connecting teammates with one another. He said:

> On a big team like ours, there's always a second, a third, or fourth-year student I can refer [the student-athlete] to who came to me two or three years previously and said they were having the exact same issue. … Setting up that mentorship relationship is really important and I think that can sometimes be sort of the easiest … [form of support that] they feel most comfortable accessing. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

Alternatively, in cases where coaches believed professional support was required, they would connect student-athletes to appropriate support. Coaches noted that it was beneficial for them to make appointments on behalf of the student-athletes to help overcome athletes' initial fear of doing so. Luke described this process when he said:

> I ask [student-athletes], you know, if they would like me to help them get in touch with someone. … If they say yes, then I generally, I'll call one of the counsellors. … I'll tell them who I am and … then who the athlete is and try to actually schedule [the athlete] an appointment … to create a bit of accountability, so that they know that there's an appointment set up. … I think the hardest thing for [student-athletes] to do often is to make that initial appointment, so … for me to call and … sort of set it up for them, it

> becomes a lot easier. All they have to do is kind of turn up. … That's been successful. (Luke, Coach, Rugby)

Erik provided support for Luke's statement and explained that he takes one step further in offering to physically take the student-athlete to their first appointment. He said:

> The process we espouse to is we go with them to the support. … We'll ask them, 'would you prefer to go directly by yourself or would you like us to be the middle man connector here', and I would suggest to you that over ninety percent of them are happy with us to be the connector and we've found that that's a higher rate of success for people to reach out to the next level. … I'll walk across the street with them to our mental health counsellor and sit in the waiting room while they have their first appointment. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

Regardless of the severity of the psychological distress, there were several forms of support that coaches felt were universally beneficial when working with distressed student-athletes. One such form of support involved coaches being willing to modify sport-related demands or requirements, such as training, to accommodate the athlete's needs. Adam explained:

> It then kind of becomes like a management piece. … You kind of try to figure out a little bit of what helps keep them on track and maybe sometimes that's certain goals in and around practice. … Like you would have with an injury where they might have to sit out certain portions of certain things or just there's gonna have to be adaptations to practice or training to be made to accommodate whatever situation that you're dealing with. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

In addition, several coaches spoke to the benefit of keeping distressed student-athlete involved with their teams. Coaches recognized how student-athletes' identities are often wrapped up in sport and losing that social connection with their teammates can in fact worsen their situation. Ruben explained that as a coach, he is willing to keep distressed student-athletes involved for the sake of maintaining their well-being. He said:

> If we're providing an outlet for somebody that gives them the social support they need and that they're not gonna get elsewhere, then … we will look the other way if [the

> athlete has to miss practices due to their distress]. … At some level, I'm willing to sacrifice the standards of an individual's, I'll say on-field contribution to the team, if I feel that it's providing a service that they really need to stay healthy. … [I] do my best to empower them to feel as though they have control… [and] that they're supported by the team. … They're still welcome to be a part of [the team] even if it's a reduced capacity or even if it means sort of changing their role from being a participant to … some kind of manager. (Ruben, Coach, Rugby)

Integral to all coaches' philosophies of effective support provision was checking in with distressed student-athletes throughout their recovery process. Jesse explained the importance of following up with distressed student-athletes when he said:

> Stay on top of things and follow up with [the student-athlete] until you know … that things are working themselves out. … It's important that you just don't leave it be because chances are athletes, student-athletes, are not always very good at following up with the help that they need and so, I think as a coach, it's your responsibility to help them make sure they get the help that they need. (Jesse, Coach, Track and Field)

Coaches discussed that the frequency with which they checked in with distressed student-athletes was dependant on the situation and largely influenced by their relationship with the athlete. This meant that coaches often knew which athletes desired more frequent contact versus those who preferred less frequent interactions based simply off of the day to day interactions between coach and athlete. In some instances, particularly among first-year student-athletes where coaches had a less developed relationship, they would ask the student-athlete directly how frequently they would like the coach to check in. George explained this delicate balance of determining the appropriate frequency with which to interact with distressed student-athletes. He said:

> You don't wanna be intrusive … or too nosy, or too overbearing. … What's that middle ground that … you're gonna take … that's not gonna offend the athlete… [but that's also] showing enough care or concern. (George, Coach, Soccer)

Lastly, coaches acknowledged that while providing support, it was important to maintain the athlete's anonymity and respect the sensitivity of the situation. In particular, coaches explained

that without consent, they would not share personal information with teammates because distressed student-athletes often felt embarrassed should their peers learn of their situation.

4.2.2.6 Impact of Previous Distress on Coaches' Support Provision

The large majority of coaches described having known other individuals, often close relatives or loved ones, whose experiences with psychological distress impacted how they approached situations involving distressed student-athletes. These coaches explained that their personal experiences had taught them not to overlook unusual behaviours among student-athletes and to question whether other factors could be contributing to student-athletes' distress. George said:

> You bring [past experience] with your coaching and experience. … As soon as you're a coach and you see [psychological distress] happening … it changes you and you don't really toy around anymore cause you realize how serious it could be … or the impact that it can have on the athlete, so … better to air the side of caution. … I always try to think about, is there something more to this? … It's not just that [student-athletes are] acting out, … it [usually] has something to do with some other stressor that they're dealing with in their life … rather than [assuming] they're just, you know, trouble makers. (George, Coach, Soccer)

Owen echoed George's sentiment and explained that in the hype of competition and sport, it can be easy for coaches to forget the demands being placed on student-athletes and how these may be impacting their psychological well-being. He explained:

> It just probably makes me stop and think a little bit. … Not assume that everybody's fine. … When you're caught up in competition and in the moment, that can alter things a little bit, but I think in general, I'm pretty objective and try to be circumspect. (Owen, Coach, Baseball)

Personal experiences with psychological distress were also described by coaches to have increased their awareness surrounding the presence and impact of such issues, as well as enhancing their ability to empathize with distressed student-athletes. For example, Wayne explained how witnessing his brother's experience with mental illness helped him to better understand the distress that student-athletes experienced. He said:

> I know the pain. I know the pain on my brother's face. … I know the pain on my dad not just understanding what the heck's going on. … It's not because you go see a psychologist that you're gonna fix the depression. It might be a step, but I understand that battle. … The big thing is understanding how to deal with people's emotions. … Dealing with my brother, I think it's just [opened my eyes] to the struggle. I mean, if there was a magic thing that my brother could've taken to get himself out of the struggle, he would've done it. It just wasn't easy and … it opens my eyes into understanding that it's not easy. (Wayne, Coach, Hockey)

Lastly, coaches explained how previous experiences helped them improve their abilities to support distressed student-athletes and manage the personal impact these situations can have on the coach. Jesse explained:

> It's also for you to learn to cope with the situation as well, like try to not take things too personal. Try to be there for the athlete. … I think that I've learned to cope with situations a lot better by being through certain situations. … Try not to break down and like, be there for the athlete cause they need your support. They need you to just listen. (Jesse, Coach, Track and Field)

4.2.3 Evaluating the Role of Coaches in Supporting Distressed Student-Athletes

The following will explore coaches' opinions on what they believe their role should be in supporting distressed student-athletes, in addition to their current level of preparation in assuming this role, and the education and resources needed to assist coaches in assuming this role.

4.2.3.1 Today's Coaches' Role in Supporting Distressed Athletes

Coaches acknowledged that their roles and responsibilities in supporting student-athletes have evolved. They described a style of coaching, often referred to as 'traditional' or 'old-school' coaching, which previously dominated the ideology of what was required of a coach, but has since become outdated and insufficient. A more traditional style of coaching entailed that coaches were not responsible for providing guidance or support to athletes on anything outside of

sport-specific instruction. Currently, however, that was not how coaches viewed their role in the lives of athletes, particularly within intercollegiate sport. Jesse explained:

> The old-time coaches, the coach that was here before, like he had a hard time with that. When personal situations happened, he didn't wanna be involved in [athletes'] personal situations. He thought it was up to them to deal with their personal situation. … Seeing that in the past, it's definitely got me to see like, no, that's not true. Part of your responsibility [as a coach] isn't just giving [athletes] workouts or being there for them at workouts, but you're also here to help them with stuff outside of their running. (Jesse, Coach, Track and Field)

Coaches unanimously agreed that they view their role as requiring that they support student-athletes in their personal lives outside of sport, which included situations when student-athletes were experiencing psychological distress. Wayne described this responsibility of varsity coaches:

> I think now a days, there's more of a role of a bit of a counsellor as a coach, and a bit of a friend and a mentor. … Your job is to coach [and] to take care of your athletes. If you see [psychologically distressing] stuff, you need to be welcoming … [and] supportive no matter what type of personality you [have as a coach]. … We're leaders in front of our student-athletes. (Wayne, Coach, Hockey).

In supporting psychologically distressed student-athletes, coaches largely agreed that their responsibilities are threefold. First, it is their role to provide an environment that facilitates disclosure of distress. Second, it is the responsibility of the coach to connect student-athletes with appropriate resources, and third, it is their duty to support student-athletes in their help-seeking behaviours and broadly help monitor this process. Adam provided a good overview of coaches' perceptions of their role in supporting distressed student-athletes and said:

> The right thing is always listening and … giving [student-athletes] a forum and a comfortable environment in which they can disclose an issue that's bothering them. … It is important that if it's a large enough crisis, that they get referred to appropriate help. … It's not my job and it shouldn't be expected of me in my job to be the solution for everybody, especially for more serious problems, but it's important that I'm educated

> enough on how to direct people to that solution or where they can find that solution or that next step along that pathway. (Adam, Coach, Rowing)

Despite most coaches explaining that they currently assumed the role outlined above, they highlighted that as of yet, there are no clear guidelines outlining the boundaries of their responsibilities. As such, coaches described feeling concerned about not knowing how much or how little support they should be providing distressed student-athletes. Ruben explained:

> [I would like to have] a clear understanding of like, this is exactly where your responsibilities lie, so if [a student-athlete] comes to you, … these are the steps that you have to take and that gives you an idea of, you know, making sure that you meet all the minimum requirements, and that allows you to kind of draw that line for yourself of like, this is above and beyond. (Ruben, Coach, Rugby)

4.2.3.2 Coaches' Perceptions of their Level of Preparedness in Supporting Psychologically Distressed Student-Athletes

Having identified and acknowledged their role in providing support to student-athletes in distress, coaches commented on their current perceptions of how well prepared they felt in assuming this role. Each coach described being at a different stage in their feelings of preparedness, but they unanimously agreed that more could be done to improve their level of preparation. Perceptions of preparedness were also noted to contingent on various factors including, but not limited to, the form of psychological distress, coaches' relationships with distressed student-athletes, and whether coaches' institutions had a system of resources in place.

In regards to the types of distress that coaches felt more or less prepared to handle, most coaches felt comfortable supporting student-athletes through challenges with athletic injury, academic challenges, and minor mental health concerns. Alternatively, many coaches admitted to feeling much less prepared in handling emergency situations, particularly when a student-athlete was an immediate risk to themselves. Aaron explained:

> I feel like I have a relationship with my players that … equips me to talk about, you know, certain basic anxieties or mental stressors, … [but] any and all situations, like if someone came to me with an extreme case … that they were contemplating self-harm,

> that type of thing, I wouldn't say I would feel like I'd be prepared to address that myself. (Aaron, Coach, Baseball)

In terms of coaches' relationships with distressed student-athletes, the majority of coaches explained that they often felt better prepared to approach situations when a more senior athlete was experiencing distress, rather than an underclassman. This was due to the fact that coaches often had established relationships with senior student-athletes. Jesse described this difference:

> Depends on the individual. … If it's a first-year athlete who I don't know too well, it's harder for me to approach the situation cause I'm not sure I know everything about that person, but if it's an upper year athlete, I feel more comfortable like, saying things directly. (Jesse, Coach, Track and Field)

Coaches also acknowledged that they felt better prepared when their institution provided resources or had a system in place that enabled coaches to connect distressed student-athletes with support. The availability of these resources was noted to have increased dramatically over recent years; however, coaches believed resources were still lacking in the sense that there are often more student-athletes in need than there are available resources. Erik described the benefit of having these resources:

> Now that we have resources in place for me to actually refer, I [can] sit in the room on that initial disclosure feeling extremely comfortable and confident to listen. When I felt in trouble, was when I was willing to listen, I was willing to learn and understand, but I felt completely at a loss [because] I didn't have a resource to send [student-athletes] to, and that's when I felt like I wasn't doing my job as a coach. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

Another noted factor that played into coaches' feeling of preparedness was lived experience working on the job as a varsity coach because it allowed coaches better understand the life circumstances and demands placed on athletes that may influence their psychological well-being. Amanda explained how with experience, coaches come to see particular instances of distress more frequently and learn how best to handle these situations. She said "there are things where … I'm more prepared for than others because I think experientially I've [seen it before] and I have connections with the support, so I can have an immediate response" (Amanda, Coach, Volleyball). Further, with greater experience, coaches came to understand that being prepared

involves acknowledging that you are never fully prepared. Never being fully prepared did not mean that coaches were unable to provide adequate support to student-athletes, but rather that coaches understood that new or unfamiliar forms of distress would inevitably arise. George explained:

> For as long as you coach, … there's always gonna be a new situation or something that pops up that you haven't had to deal with before, … so a lot of it is just, unfortunately, just on the job learning and experience. … You can educate and you can read all your textbooks, … but the real world, the real job is gonna cause you different challenges … and you're hoping through your education that you're prepared, but some things are still gonna come at you from left field. (George, Coach, Soccer)

George's statement underscored the relationship between experience and education in helping coaches feel prepared to handle student-athletes' psychological distress. This sentiment was shared by all coaches who unanimously agreed that education is an absolute must, particularly for younger coaches. While younger university coaches were identified as having an inherent advantage in their ability to relate with student-athletes due to the smaller age gap, they inevitably lacked experience. While experience cannot be substituted for in younger coaches, it can be supplement with education, as noted by Cheryl:

> [There should be a resource] so that coaches feel, especially younger coaches that don't have as much experience, [because] I couldn't imagine being 25 and doing this now, … [so] sort of a resource they can go to … in moments of stress for them … to help their athletes. (Cheryl, Coach, Rugby)

Regardless of a one's relative experience, coaches unanimously agreed that they would all benefit from additional education. Coaches explained that they would like to reach a point in their preparation where they are certain that they are helping their student-athletes to their fullest abilities and not engaging in any behaviours that may unintentionally worsen the situation. Adam explained this sentiment when he said "it's important that I'm educated enough to especially not do anything that might harm that person" (Adam, Coach, Rowing).

4.2.3.3 Coach Education: Current Status and Future Improvements

When asked about the education coaches had currently received in relation to psychological distress and supporting distressed student-athletes, there was a noted lack of consistency in the materials and content covered by each coach, as well as how much education each coach had completed. The majority of coaches had received some level of education, whether it was mandated by their respective institution or completed on a voluntary basis. Few coaches claimed to have completed no formal training or education, while some coaches specified that they had received a portion of their current education from sitting in on workshops or seminars designed specifically for their student-athletes. Despite the noted inconsistencies in current coach education, there was consensus agreement that existing education related to supporting student-athletes experiencing psychological distress had been beneficial to coaches; however, it was not sufficient in preparing coaches. Mia explained:

> I believe [education is] beneficial. I don't believe it's sufficient [and] I think that there's a lot more that could be implemented into coaching programs. … If you're coaching at the university level and you're focusing on developing the whole student, … [you should] have a decent amount of experience and some [education] to go along with that. (Mia, Coach, Soccer)

Considering the perceived insufficiencies with existing coach education, coaches unanimously agreed that more robust education was needed to adequately prepare coaches in handling the psychological well-being of student-athletes. Coaches highlighted that providing student-athletes with psychological support has become an inherent part of being a varsity coach and without proper education, coaches are ill-prepared. Olivia provided insight on this issue when she said:

> Dealing with physical injuries and illnesses is so much easier and so much more black and white than dealing with the mental ones, so I think education is key and I think we definitely need more of it. … I really think coaches should have some sort of course or something to help them through because … it ends up being a big part of your job and I think a lot of coaches just go into it completely blind and unprepared. (Olivia, Coach, Swimming)

Further, considering that with or without sufficient education, coaches are already providing support to distressed athletes, coaches unanimously agreed that all coaches involved in university sport across Canada should complete education related to supporting student-athletes experiencing psychological distress. Coaches provided numerous suggestions of content or topic areas for such coach education that they felt would be important in developing their abilities to support distressed student-athletes. The most common suggestions included: signs and symptoms of psychological distress, effective language and communication when discussing psychological distress, appropriate responses to athlete disclosures of distress, and techniques for minimizing stigma. In regards to minimizing stigma, several coaches also expressed a desire to learn how to create team cultures that encouraged disclosure. Phil explained:

> I would want to see better training on how to create an atmosphere or relationship with your student-athletes where they would feel … open and safe to say 'hey coach, I'd like to talk to you or talk to somebody else'. (Phil, Coach, Golf)

As noted in Phil's statement, several coaches also identified a desire for education on how to build effective relationships with student-athletes. Not only did coaches believe this would facilitate student-athletes' disclosures of distress to coaches, but it would also improve coaches' abilities to have conversations with athletes who are exhibiting behaviours that may indicate they are in distress. Wayne explained the importance of such relationships when he said:

> It's being able to recognize signs and it's also being comfortable in opening that discussion up. … Having that relationship with them that will allow to go into the more difficult questions in approaching them and saying 'listen, I'm here trying to care for and looking for the best interests of yourself. We're noticing some signs here'. … If you don't have that type of relationship with your players, then it becomes harder to bring it at the forefront and help these kids out. (Wayne, Coach, Hockey)

Given the diversity of psychological distress faced by student-athletes, coaches also felt it would be important for education to prepare coaches in how to triage or assess the severity of specific situations. Olivia explained why this skill is needed in coach education, particularly when it comes to life threatening situations. She said:

> [One] major thing that I feel everyone should learn … is learning how to identify crisis and learning kind of what the different levels are and being more comfortable with that. … I've had to deal with athletes and self-harm or suicidal thoughts and … I feel like a lot of people haven't dealt with that or don't know what to do. … Learning to recognize what's an immediate threat versus what is still a severe threat, but not immediate … would put a lot of people at ease because until it happens, … it's not something you ever think about. (Olivia, Coach, Swimming)

A final common suggestion for the content of coach education was including societal trends among today's youth. This suggestion was made by coaches because they felt such information helps improve their abilities to relate and better understand their student-athletes. Further, by maintaining their knowledge of such trends, coaches explained that they felt better prepared to handle the distress of student-athletes because they were not shocked to learn that young people were engaging in particular behaviours or activities. Erik explained why it is important for coaches to have such information:

> As a coach, … [it's important that I'm] updating myself on the thinking, the trends, and the environment of an 18-year old today because when I started coaching, I was twenty years old and I had a pretty good handle on what my athletes were doing and thinking cause they were [close to my age]. Today, I have no idea unless I go and ask and find out. I think coaching today needs more of that. (Erik, Coach, Volleyball)

In addition to the suggestions for specific educational content, coaches also believed that in order to optimize future coach education, it would be ideal to have such education presented in a sport-specific context. Coaches believed this would enhance buy-in, improve engagement, and help to more accurately reflect the nuances and unique challenges associated with sport. While coaches did not believe such education needed to be tailored uniquely to each sport, they thought perhaps individual and team sport coaches would benefit from education tailored specifically to the dynamics of these sub-categories of sport. Further, coaches of single gendered teams suggested that coach education be made gender-specific to address the differences between how male and female athletes handle psychological distress. Luke explained the rationale behind why he believed such education should be gender specific:

> I think it should be slightly tailored to coaches that deal predominantly with male sports and then coaches that deal predominantly with female sports cause I do think there's a difference there. … I do know anecdotally that [females], they're a little bit more willing to talk and to open up … and ask questions and seek out resources. Where I think … there's a bit of that masculinity culture where like, you have to be tough … and I think it does take … a longer time to sort of peel back … the layers on a male athlete. I think it's getting better, but I think that idea of mental health … being like a weakness is more prevalent in males. (Luke, Coach, Rugby)

Luke's claims were supported by Mia who is a female coach working with female student-athletes. She explained:

> I think there's a big difference in coaching the female and coaching the male athlete, right. Like, the way that I support a female athlete, I may have no idea how to support a male athlete in the same situation. … The beauty of being a female coach and coaching female athletes is that they wanna talk. … I've yet to come across, like I maybe have one or two players where I might have to give a couple extra pushes, [but they] … want to tell me what's going on. (Mia, Coach, Soccer)

Lastly, coaches highlighted that in order for coach education to be effective, there must be institutional support provided by athletics departments. Without such institutional support to reinforce ongoing and continued coach education, coaches will likely not prioritize their time to seek out educational opportunities, as expressed by Eli:

> You're just too busy to do that type of thing. And even though I would really like to, … there's people above me that have taken the program. … I think it would be helpful if I could know this stuff, but sometimes it's not very practical given the other demands that we have here. (Eli, Coach, Football)

Cheryl similarly noted the importance of having institutional support and providing coaches with mandated opportunities to receive education because without it, the onus to complete education falls on the coaches and many do not prioritize the psychological well-being of their student-athletes. She said:

> There has to be a platform cause coaches will always say they're busy. They're not that busy. I'm a coach, so I know there's time for this stuff. … Time's bullshit. It's just an excuse cause you can't be bothered. You don't think it's important, so guess what? Your athletes don't think it's important. (Cheryl, Coach, Rugby)

Coaches even noted that the intercollegiate sport setting may be the most optimal environment for enforcing such coach education because of the existing infrastructure and access to information. Amanda expressed this thought when she said:

> I think in the university setting, it is the place where it has to happen. … [Education] has to be a priority cause we are, first off, universities are probably the highest employers of full-time coaches, and they have the research and the evidence and the information that can get translated, … so you have this instant access. … If we're not gonna do it, nobody will. (Amanda, Coach, Volleyball)

While beyond the scope of the present study, it is important to note that the topic of coach education was brought up in discussions with each student-athlete participant. The perspectives of the student-athletes corroborated the perspectives of the coaches, as athletes believed it would be beneficial for coaches to receive education related to supporting distressed student-athletes, given that coaches are currently engaging in such practices with or without proper training. Student-athletes suggested similar topic areas for coach education and agreed that effective implementation of such education would require support from athletics departments. Further, athletes felt it was necessary for coaches to be knowledgeable on this topic given that university is a period that often coincides with the age of onset for many mental health challenges in young adults.

4.2.3.4 Providing Coaches with their own Support Resources

While interviews with coaches focused primarily on how coaches provided support to student-athletes, coaches did comment on the potential benefits of having their own support resources for psychological well-being. Most every coach acknowledged that the availability of such resources would be helpful as explained by Luke:

> I've sort of heard anecdotally like, most counsellors or psychologists and stuff have their own psychologists … to talk about all the stuff … because they're hearing so much and

> … I think the same would be true [for coaches] … going through these situations. … I think it would be really beneficial to have an outlet. (Luke, Coach, Rugby)

Coaches explained, however, that tending to their own psychological well-being is not a practice that is engrained within the culture of sport, as highlighted when Jesse said "I think [coaches are] pressured to get things done and not take time for ourselves and it would be cool to have a course or have resources to show [coaches] how to take care of yourself" (Jesse, Coach, Track and Field). While not a universal practice, coaches acknowledged that when they do tend to their own psychological well-being, they in turn are able to provide better support to their student-athletes. Further, in situations when the outcome of a coach supporting a distressed student-athlete was poor, coaches described feeling guilty and expressed a potential benefit to having had access to their own support resources. For example, Mia described how a student-athlete she recruited died by suicide shortly before arriving on campus. She explained how this event impacted her psychological well-being:

> Going back to my own experience of, you know, that recruit taking her life, … that was something for me that I'm thinking like 'oh man did I miss something? … Was there a flag that I didn't see?'. … You kind of ask yourself [these questions and] put yourself in all these scenarios. … The what ifs. (Mia, Coach, Soccer)

Coaches also explained that in situations when student-athletes have confided solely in the coach, it can be challenging for the coach to possess such knowledge without having their own outlet to privately discuss the situation. George explained this type of situation and said:

> It was a cultural thing, right, where … [the athlete] didn't want to necessarily admit [the distress] to her parents … because how it would be viewed. …[So,] sometimes from that standpoint, if [the athlete's] … confiding in the coach, but then maybe they don't want the coach to go and tell anybody … how do you then, you know, provide that type of confidentiality … to the student-athlete that's … shared that information with you [while taking care of yourself]. (George, Coach, Soccer)

Lastly, while many coaches acknowledged there would be benefit to having such resources made available, they highlighted that they would prefer such resources not to be affiliated with their

respective institution. Wayne explained the rationale behind this request as he feared potential negative repercussions should his superiors learn that he was accessing such services:

> I think one of the key things that could help the coaches is provide them with resources that are external from the university cause I guarantee you that as a coach, if I'm starting to feel anxious and I'm starting to take a couple days here and there, … I'm not sure I wanna call the [name of university] services even though they tell me that they're not gonna tell anybody. I would be fearful for my job. Whereas, if I have numbers that I can call that are externals, … that I have total anonymity, I think that would help to seeking out some personal help when [coaches] need it. (Wayne, Coach, Hockey)

Chapter 5
Discussion

5 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of student-athletes disclosing psychological distress to a coach from the perspectives of both student-athletes and coaches. Findings of this study identified perceived barriers that discourage athlete disclosure and suggest that coaches have the ability to minimize or overcome these barriers through fostering supportive team cultures. The results also outlined optimal practices for coaches in providing support to distressed student-athletes, and identified that effective support provision involves the development of appropriate coach-athlete relationships, positive responses to athletes' initial disclosures of distress, and offering various forms of both immediate and long-term support. Lastly, the findings suggest coaches play a specific role in supporting psychologically distressed student-athletes and identified gaps within existing education and institutional support that prohibit coaches from assuming this role in its entirety. Considering the present study's findings in relation to those of previous research, this study provides practical insight into future applied practices for preparing varsity coaches to better support the psychological well-being of student-athletes.

5.1 Identifying and Addressing the Barriers Student-Athletes Face in Disclosing Psychological Distress to Coaches

In total, nine barriers to disclosing psychological distress were identified by both student-athletes and coaches; however, several of these barriers had overlapping qualities. For example, 'low visibility of psychological distress' was similar to 'athletes not recognizing psychological distress', and 'coach behaviours that encouraged non-disclosure' shared similarities to 'bad previous experiences'. Overall, there appeared to be five barriers identified across the athletes' and coaches' experiences that were distinct and unique: emphasis on athlete toughness, power of coaches, athlete's position on a team, poor visibility and understanding of psychological distress, and previous bad experiences with disclosure. A brief overview of each barrier is presented in relation to previous research, followed by applied implications of how coaches may address these barriers.

Student-athlete and coach participants in this study identified that the emphasis within sport culture on athletes exhibiting toughness was a principle barrier to disclosure. Both groups of participants explained that sport's value on toughness has contributed to stigma surrounding disclosure and help-seeking behaviours because athletes perceive such behaviours to signify weakness. The presence of this barrier is consistent with previous research among both elite athlete (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012) and student-athlete populations (Proctor & Boan-Lenzo, 2010; Wolanin et al., 2015), suggesting that athletes continue to place high value on demonstrations of athletic toughness and perceive the sport environment as unwelcoming of psychological weakness.

There is more limited research that has explicitly identified the barriers of coach power and an athlete's position on a team as factors that contribute to non-disclosure; as such, these findings build on previous studies and make a novel contribution to the literature. In relation to the disclosure of mental health challenges specifically, Bauman (2016) noted that loss of playing time is a likely factor that discouraged elite athletes from disclosing mental health challenges, while Pinkerton and colleagues (1989) suggested that student-athletes may be less inclined to seek support due to perceived pressure in maintaining teams' social norms. In addition, research pertaining to the disclosure of concussion suggests that athletes may choose not to disclose for fear of letting down coaches (Kerr et al., 2014) or teammates (Chrisman, Quitiquit, & Rivara, 2013). Participants discussed each of these factors in the current research when describing the barriers of coach power and an athlete's position on a team, therefore supporting previous suggestions. The current findings suggest that student-athletes fear disclosure will result in loss of playing time, disruption of team dynamics, and letting down coaches or teammates because of both the power dynamics between coach and athlete, as well as the hierarchies that are established amongst teams that are based on one's athletic abilities. To elaborate, student-athletes who are given the opportunity to compete by their coach may face dual pressures not to disclose distress for fear of disappointing their coach and losing playing time, as well as letting down their teammates who hold expectations for them to perform. Alternatively, student-athletes who are not given the opportunity to compete may feel pressured not to disclose distress because they perceive themselves as less valued members of the team, meaning they are not worthy of the attention associated with disclosure, and disclosure may delay their chances of the coach affording them the opportunity to compete.

Poor visibility and understanding of psychological distress have previously been noted as factors contributing to the lack of help-seeking behaviours among elite athletes, because these athletes possessed low mental health literacy and were unable to recognize when their mental health challenges warranted seeking help (Gulliver et al., 2012). Subsequent research has continued to highlight that poor knowledge surrounding symptoms of psychological distress related to concussion (Kerr et al., 2014) and athletic injury (Putukian, 2016) influence athletes' poor help-seeking behaviours. Collectively, these findings help to explain in part why most student-athletes in this study endured a period of non-disclosure as they were likely unable to acknowledge that they were experiencing psychological distress worthy of disclosure. Further, these findings suggest that greater awareness surrounding psychological distress in intercollegiate sport is warranted to help expedite student-athletes' abilities to disclose distress and seek help.

In regards to the fifth barrier of previous bad experiences with disclosure, several researchers have highlighted how previous experiences with disclosure and help-seeking factor into the likelihood of athletes seeking future help, suggesting that only if athletes' previous experiences are positive will they continue to engage in such behaviours (Gulliver et al., 2012; Moreland et al., 2018). Additional research focused on concussion reporting provides further support for this barrier; for example, athletes who have been blamed by coaches about the impact their concussion reporting behaviours will have on the team are less inclined to disclose future concussions (Kerr et al., 2014). Student-athletes' personal accounts of disclosure in the present study provided further evidence for the influence previous experiences have on the likelihood of future disclosures as those athletes whose experienced a negative coach response described being unwilling to seek future help from their coach, while the opposite trend was true for student-athletes who received a positive coach response. Taken together, this body of research underscores the significance that previous experiences have on student-athletes' disclosure behaviours and suggests the importance of coaches receiving athletes' disclosures in a positive manner.

In addition to identifying barriers to disclosure, findings from this study provide insight into how coaches may actively work to minimize and overcome such barriers through effective culture setting. There is a large body of research suggesting that coaches have the ability to foster team cultures that combat barriers to disclosure and encourage help-seeking behaviours among student-athletes (Breslin et al., 2017; Kroshus et al., 2014; Weigand et al, 2013); however, there

is a paucity of literature that provides examples or guidelines into how coaches can do so successfully. As such, the current findings provide a novel contribution to the existing body of literature by suggesting coaching practices used by varsity coaches to establish team cultures that successfully facilitated athlete disclosures of distress and addressed perceived barriers to disclosure. Table 4 provides a summary of these coaching practices in relation to the specific barriers that may be addressed; however, it is important to note that coaches in the present study also employed four additional overarching techniques that served as broader efforts to address multiple barriers at once. These supplemental coaching practices included: establishing and demonstrating an open-door policy, role modeling behaviours that support positive psychological well-being, using appropriate and non-discriminatory language when discussing athletes' psychological health and well-being, and building a diverse coaching and support staff.

The coaching practices used to minimize barriers to disclosure reflect several principles of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT). According to SCT, there is a reciprocal relationship between an individual (e.g., student-athlete), their environment (e.g., coach, teammates, university sport setting), and their behaviours (e.g., disclosing psychological distress). As such, individuals learn how to behave in a social context and gain confidence in their behaviours through engaging with their environment and observing the actions of those around them. Through the positive and negative feedback of others' responses to their behaviours, individuals learn what behaviours are valued within their given environment and learn to repeat those behaviours that are positively reinforced. Based on this behavioural learning process, SCT highlights the significance of observational learning and suggests that individuals will selectively model their own actions in an effort to gain social acceptance within a group (Bandura, 1989).

Table 4. Coaching practices that address barriers to athlete disclosures of distress.

Specific Barriers to Disclosure	Specific Coaching Practices
Emphasis on Athlete Toughness	• Adopt and demonstrate a holistic coaching philosophy that places increased emphasis on athlete development and well-being (i.e. sleep, nutrition, academics, etc.)
Power of Coach	• Verbally communicate that help-seeking may require athletes to step away from sport temporarily, but that athletes will have an opportunity to return following recovery • Develop coach-athlete relationships founded on trust, openness, and reciprocal communication with athletes
Athlete's Position on a Team	• Provide transparent selection criteria • Provide equitable training opportunities to all athletes • Assign all athletes a valued role on the team
Poor Visibility & Understanding of Psychological Distress	• Teach athletes awareness surrounding their mental and psychological well-being • Enforce accountability such that athletes understand they are responsible for managing their own holistic well-being • Share personal experiences with psychological distress and/or mental health challenges
Previous Bad Experience with Disclosure	• Verbally communicate coaching expectations to athletes • Engage with all athletes in an empathetic and compassionate manner when distressing situations arise
Global Coaching Practices	
• Establish and demonstrate an open-door policy • Role model behaviours that support positive psychological well-being • Use appropriate and non-discriminatory language when discussing athletes' psychological health and well-being • Build a diverse coaching and support staff	

Within the context of intercollegiate sport, coaches are identified leaders whose expressed attitudes and opinions can influence what actions become normative behaviours amongst their teams (Moreland et al., 2018; Sudano et al., 2017). Researchers have identified that athletes perceive coaches to be the most important stakeholders for exhibiting positive attitudes towards help-seeking when compared to family, friends, and teammates (Gulliver et al., 2012). As such, it is theoretically consistent with SCT to assume that student-athletes will model their own help-

seeking behaviours based on those of their coaches. Therefore, the present research findings suggest that coaches have the ability to address barriers faced by student-athletes in disclosing psychological distress through fostering team cultures that support disclosure and help-seeking. In order to do so, findings from this study suggest that coaches must acknowledge their positions as leaders within the intercollegiate sport environment, monitor and role model their own behaviours to reflect the desired culture, and engage with student-athletes in a manner that supports help-seeking. Given that this study did not explicitly set out to explore how coaches foster team cultures that support disclosure, future research is warranted to gain a better understanding of how current coaches have already established such cultures and for intervention research to test the implementation of these coaching practices.

Lastly, in discussions with student-athletes surrounding the support of their psychological well-being, participants' stories nearly always centered on sport performance and a need to support athlete well-being in order to facilitate their return to sport, rather than focusing on their return to a healthy and stable life. This was evidenced by various behaviours described by student-athletes, such as their decisions to disclose psychological distress to their coaches in order to explain poor performances, and it was also reflected in elements associated with the barriers to disclosure, such as the emphasis on athlete toughness and the power of coaches. These findings reflect contemporary research exploring performance narratives within sport, which argues that athletes immersed within elite sport cultures internalize an identity where they understand performance outcomes and winning as the most important objectives in their lives (Douglas & Careless, 2006). When elite athletes' lives cease to align with this performance narrative, such as when student-athletes in the current study were removed from sport due to psychological distress, athletes experience what is described as narrative wreckage where life traumas threaten their mental health and development (Douglas & Careless, 2009). Given the potentially detrimental nature of performance narratives, researchers suggest that stakeholders in sport, including coaches, should work to support different narratives and adopt a multifaceted approach to defining success in sport in order to challenge traditional sport culture norms and sustaining the long-term well-being of athletes (Carless & Douglass, 2012). Findings from the current study support these recommendations, suggesting that the use of alternative narratives may support coaches' efforts in minimizing barriers to student-athlete disclosure of distress, such as the

emphasis on athlete toughness, and help coaches in the process of fostering team cultures that are supportive of athlete disclosures.

5.2 How Coaches can Engage in Effective Support Provision for Psychologically Distressed Student-Athletes

Consistent with Thoits's (1984) description of social support as a form of coping assistance, this study provided evidence to suggest that when support providers (i.e., coaches) provide effective social support to support receivers (i.e., psychologically distressed student-athletes), the support receivers' responses to stressful situations (i.e., psychological distress) can be mitigated. Further, this study supported Thoits's (1984) claim that provision of effective social support requires both support providers and receivers to share familiarity with a common environment, as evidenced by student-athletes choosing coaches as support providers because of their extensive knowledge and understanding of the intercollegiate sport setting. Results from this study also highlighted that the principle forms of social support provided by coaches to distressed student-athletes can be classified as emotional (e.g., providing reassurance, developing coach-athlete relationships), tangible (e.g., regular in-person meetings), and informational (e.g., developing management plans, connecting athletes with professional resources). Interestingly, previous research has suggested that athletes most often receive emotional support from individuals with whom they share more intimate connections, such as family and friends, while tangible and informational support are provided by those with more distant relational ties, such as coaches (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). In light of this previous research, the current findings suggest that student-athletes in this study developed intimate connections with coaches that resembled those between athletes and family or friends, and this in turn facilitated coaches' abilities to provide distressed athletes with the emotional support necessary to manage their distress. As such, this research suggests that effective coach support involves establishing appropriate coach-athlete relationships.

In regards to coach-athlete relationships, this study highlighted characteristics associated with these relationships that enabled coaches to provide effective support. The characteristics identified as being necessary for establishing an effective coach-athlete relationship included: trust, confidentiality, understanding, closeness/emotional connectedness, communication, and emphasis on athlete well-being over athletic performance. Several of these characteristics have

previously been identified in models exploring the dynamics of coach-athlete relationships, including the 3C's + 1 model, which identified closeness and co-orientation (i.e., communication) as important components to the relationship (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). Further research has singled-out communication as one of the most important factors in fostering effective coach-athlete relationships (Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Li et al., 2015), and underscored the importance of maintaining athlete privacy since breaching confidentiality is noted to discourage athletes from continuing to engage in help-seeking behaviours (Gulliver et al., 2012). In light of previous research, the present findings continue to highlight the importance of coaches possessing strong communication and interpersonal skills, suggesting that coaches should seek opportunities for developing these skills, perhaps through working with mental performance consultants (e.g., Durand-Bush & DesClouds, 2018). These findings also highlighted that both coaches and student-athletes who established effective coach-athlete relationships had difficulty articulating the level of each characteristic that fostered the effective relationship, describing the process as naturally occurring. As such, future research should seek to better understand the nature of this naturally occurring coach-athlete relationship.

Findings from this study also identified optimal support provision practices for coaches in relation to the initial response to an athlete's disclosure of distress and subsequent supportive behaviours. To the researcher's knowledge, this study is the first to provide an overview of effective behaviours coaches should engage in when responding to student-athletes' initial disclosures of distress, as well as subsequent support provision actions coaches should employ. A summary of these support provision practices is provided in Table 5 and is organized based on a timeline of initial disclosure, early support, and long-term support provision.

The effectiveness of the support practices outlined in Table 5 should be validated in future research. However, one support practice in particular poses immediate concerns related to feasibility for implementation: findings from student-athlete interviews highlighted that having a coach readily available on campus for as-needed communication helped to enable effective support provision, which informed the third suggestion under the heading of long-term support provision. Unfortunately, given the current landscape of Canadian intercollegiate sport where many head and assistant coaches are employed on a part-time basis or work as volunteers, it seems unlikely that all student-athletes will have regular access to a coach on campus. Therefore,

alternative support measures should be explored for student-athletes who do not have regular on-campus access to a full-time employed coach.

Table 5. Effective support practices for coaches assisting distressed student-athletes.

Timeline	Suggested Support Practices
Initial Response to Disclosure	• Listen to athlete describe their concern(s) o Paraphrase what the athlete is saying • Provide reassurance to athlete • Ask follow-up or probing questions (if needed) • Triage the severity of the distress • Connect athlete with appropriate professional resources (if needed)

Early Support Provision	• Assist athlete in creating plan to manage distress
	  o Engage athlete in this process to show support for their autonomy and support accountability
	• Connect athlete with professional resources
	  o Offer to schedule appointment/make connection on the athlete's behalf
	  o Offer to take athlete to initial meeting

Long-Term Support Provision	• Keep athlete engaged with the team • Check in with athlete on consistent basis • Make yourself readily available for as-needed communication • Modify sport-related demands • Maintain athlete confidentiality • Demonstrate patience and understanding in regards to the slow process of recovery

5.3 The Role of Coaches in Supporting Distressed Student-Athletes

Findings from this research provided the perspectives of two integral stakeholders, student-athletes and coaches, on the role of coaches in supporting psychologically distressed student-athletes. Both coaches and student-athletes agreed that the role of coaches involves acting as leader/role model, observer, information provider, and supporter by engaging in the following behavioural practices: 1) fostering team cultures that are supportive of disclosure and help-seeking, 2) identifying student-athletes who may be experiencing distress, 3) connecting distressed student-athletes with appropriate resources, and 4) providing consistent and ongoing support to distressed student-athletes. The latter three behavioural components associated with

this role are consistent with suggestions from previous literature (Etzel et al., 2006; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018); however, there is limited research explicitly calling for culture setting as part of coaches' responsibilities in supporting the psychological well-being of student-athletes. Mental health best practices developed by the NCAA (2017), however, outline that coaches play a role in fostering team cultures that support student-athlete help-seeking, and researchers have recently called for greater stakeholder engagement in changing help-seeking norms within sport by facilitating more supportive cultures (Moreland et al., 2018). Further, researchers have identified coaches' abilities to influence positive team cultures in relation to sexual identities (Fenwick & Simpson, 2017), concussion reporting (Carroll-Alfano, 2017; Kroshus et al., 2014), and sexual violence (Kroshus et al., 2018), which are all identified antecedents to student-athletes experiencing psychological distress. Taken together, these findings provide substantial evidence to support culture setting as an integral behavioural component to the role of varsity coaches in supporting distressed student-athletes.

There is a large body of literature suggesting that varsity coaches be provided with education to help in supporting distressed student-athletes (Armstrong et al., 2015; Etzel et al., 2006; Selby et al., 1990). Despite nearly three decades of research advocating for increased coach education, the present study highlighted that university coaches in Canada currently receive varied and limited education on this topic. In addition, the bulk of this literature suggests that coach education focus on the signs and symptoms of specific forms of distress, as well as informing coaches of professional resources to connect student-athletes (Etzel et al., 2006); however, findings from this research suggest such education may be limited in scope. While coaches acknowledged that education pertaining to signs, symptoms, and referral was beneficial, they believed education on how to foster supportive team cultures and coach-athlete relationships that facilitate disclosure was lacking and in need.

This research also highlighted that coaches perceive male and female student-athletes to manage psychological distress differently, which suggests important implications for developing effective coach education. In particular, findings from this research suggest that male student-athletes in general may be more hesitant to disclose distress, and that female student-athletes participating on single-gendered teams and working with a male coach may also experience more hesitancy with disclosure when compared to those who work with a female coach. Previous research supports the first finding, suggesting that male athletes may be less likely to seek help

because they perceive help-seeking as a weakness that challenges their masculinity and threatens their social standing among peers, while females have more favourable perceptions of help-seeking and a better ability to articulate their distress (Gulliver et al., 2012; Moreland et al., 2018). In considering these findings, a short-term suggestion for addressing the noted gender differences in relation to disclosure is for all coaching staff to be composed of at least one male and one female coach. It is important to acknowledge, however, that as the landscape of gender in sport continues to evolve, having both male and female coaches on staff may not be sufficient in addressing the needs of all student-athletes. Given that the impact of gender on disclosure was beyond the scope of this study, future research should explore how coaches can foster team cultures that overcome the perceived gender barrier and support athletes' disclosure of distress regardless of gender identities.

In addition to providing education to coaches, findings from this research suggest that varsity coaches cannot be assumed to be able to support distressed student-athletes without support from their respective institutions. Calls for greater institutional support have previously been noted in research pertaining to sexual violence, suggesting that athletics departments should provide coaches with frameworks for appropriate conduct and communication to foster more positive team cultures surrounding sexual conduct (Kroshus et al., 2018). Findings from the present study highlight that institutions have focused primarily on providing professional resources to support the well-being of student-athletes, which have been beneficial; however, they may not be sufficient. Therefore, this research suggests two areas that institutions should consider increasing support for varsity coaches. The first is to allocate designated time for coach training, as findings from this research suggest that without designated time, coaches who do not prioritize the psychological well-being of their student-athletes will perceive themselves as too busy and will not take the time to complete voluntary educational training. Second, findings suggest that coaches would benefit from having their own resources on-hand to support their own psychological well-being. These resources are suggested to be housed external to athletics departments, so coaches may access them without fear of negative repercussion from utilizing a resource affiliated with their place of employment. Coaches currently employed by U Sports institutions are likely to have mental health benefits covered by their health care plans; however, coaches from the present study described being unaware or unwilling to access these resources. Future research may seek to explore facilitators and barriers to coaches accessing support

services, as it is theoretically consistent with SCT to suggest that if coaches, the leaders within the intercollegiate sport environment, are known to be actively engaged in managing their own psychological well-being, student-athletes may in turn be encouraged to follow suit. Alternatively, if coaches are not engaged in managing their respective psychological well-being, there is a disconnect in the messaging to student-athletes and athletes may be less inclined to access support or recognize the importance of sustaining their own psychological well-being.

Lastly, findings from this research highlighted the lack of boundaries in terms of how coaches should support student-athletes. While this study suggests there is potential for tremendous benefit in having coaches involved in the process of supporting distressed student-athletes, there are risks that coaches may overstep boundaries, given that their roles have yet to be defined and appropriate guidelines developed regarding the provision of psychological support to athletes. This identified lack of boundaries may help to explain why the majority of coaches in this study felt they were not fully prepared to support distressed student-athletes under all potential circumstances. To the researcher's knowledge, there is yet to be research exploring such boundaries within coach-athlete relationships in the university setting; however, Biaggio and colleagues (1997) have explored this dynamic within faculty-student relationships. Similar to the coach-athlete relationships described in the present study, faculty-student relationships have been found to involve the faculty member playing various dynamic and overlapping roles within the lives of students, which results in the development of dual relationships. As such, it is suggested that faculty members adopt the following guidelines in order to establish ethical relationships: acknowledge their positions of power within the relationship, develop a framework for evaluating their relationships with students, and establish climates that sustain ethical relationships with students. Further, Biaggio and colleagues (1997) highlighted how role modeling by faculty members may influence future behaviours of students, which mirrors previously discussed implications from the present study in suggesting that based on SCT, role modeling of coaches may influence disclosure and help-seeking behaviours of student-athletes. Considering the similarities between the findings of the present study and the work of Biaggio and colleagues (1997), future research should explore the development of guidelines within the context of university coach-athlete relationships in order to help establish clearer roles and responsibilities for coaches in providing support to athletes, and safeguarding the well-being of both parties.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of this study included the measures the researcher took to ensure greater methodological rigour, which included the use of member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2017), purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), and continued engagement in reflexivity throughout the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Collectively, these measures contributed to upholding the researcher's paradigmatic position over the course of the study.

Limitations of the present study pertained largely to recruitment and the inclusion criteria of participants. First, this study originally aimed to recruit coach-athlete dyads based on Moreland and colleagues' (2018) suggestion for more research exploring dyadic perspectives of mental health service utilization to better understand how key stakeholders' attitudes influence student-athletes' use of these services. The researcher employed several suggested methods to enhance the likelihood of recruiting dyads, such as conducting separate interviews with members of the same dyad, providing debriefing information following data collection (i.e. opportunity for off-record conversation with the researcher following completion of interviews and member reflections), and informing participants that their data would remain confidential (Wittenborn, Dolbin-MacNab, & Keiley, 2013); however, only three dyads were successfully recruited, which forced the researcher to abandon this approach. The principle reason why recruitment of dyads was unsuccessful was due to student-athletes not being comfortable having their coaches contacted because their experiences with disclosing psychological distress had resulted in a damaged coach-athlete relationship. This finding, coupled with the fact that relatively few coaches who were contacted about the study were interested in participating (27 interested out of 182 contacted), suggests that coaches may not be engaging in positive support practices when faced with student-athletes' disclosures of psychological distress or that coaches may not feel it is their responsibility to be involved in the disclosure process.

To address this limitation and enhance the likelihood of recruiting dyads, future researchers should acknowledge that the design of the present study resulted in gatekeeper bias (Groger, Mayberry, & Straker, 1999) since student-athletes had to provide consent before the coach could be contacted. To prevent gatekeeper bias, researchers have recommended making personal contact with both dyad members and providing each with their own specific recruitment materials to limit the risk of gatekeepers inaccurately describing the study (Wittenborn et al.,

2013). While the researcher in the present study did provide student-athletes with an email template to minimize the risk of inaccurate communication of study details, making personal contact with coaches and providing recruitment materials without an athlete's consent would be a breach of ethical conduct and disregard the sensitivity surrounding the discussion of this topic. As such, it is recommended that future researchers focus on protecting internal confidentiality when recruiting coach-athlete dyads. This means that efforts are made to minimize the risk of dyads easily identifying one another in published information and from sharing information with one another (Ummel & Achille, 2016). Ensuring greater confidentiality may improve the likelihood of coaches agreeing to participate. Researchers should also communicate to participants that despite efforts to uphold confidentiality, there will always be a risk of participants identifying the other member of a dyad (Ummel & Achille, 2016). Future researchers interested in exploring the coach-athlete dyad perspective should consider these limitations to recruitment.

A second limitation of this study was the inclusion of only former student-athletes, rather than current student-athletes, because the experiences of former student-athletes may not accurately reflect current trends within today's intercollegiate sport environment. Despite the limitations associated with this inclusion criteria, the decision to recruit former student-athletes was made as an effort to protect the integrity of current coach-athlete relationships. Further, the average age of student-athlete participants was 24 years and the youngest participant was 20 years of age, which falls within the majority age range for Canadian university students, that being 17 to 24 years (Statistics Canada, 2010).

A third limitation of the current research was that twelve of the fifteen recruited coaches agreed to participate in the study by responding to cold call email invitation, suggesting that they already had a vested interest in supporting the well-being of student-athletes. As such, these coaches had often already developed methods for addressing the psychological needs of their athletes, which may not provide an accurate reflection of the opinions and attitudes of the majority of university coaches in Canada.

When considering the above limitation, it is important to consider how results may have been impacted had the researcher obtained the perspectives of coaches who did not agree to participate. While the researcher achieved redundancy in the data collected from coaches,

maximum variation was likely not attained (Groger et al., 1999) given that coaches with contrasting or different views on the topic of supporting psychologically distressed student-athletes were not interviewed. This may include coaches who do not believe it is their responsibility to be involved in athletes' disclosures of distress, coaches who do not believe their experiences are relevant to the present study, or coaches who do not feel that they currently provide an adequate standard of care to distressed athletes. Data collected from these coaches may have provided additional insight into coaches' perspectives of their behavioural role in supporting distressed athletes and the resources (e.g., education) necessary for coaches to feel prepared in assuming such a role; however, it is also possible that the perspectives of these coaches may align with those of the coaches who did participate. Future research should seek to sample varsity coaches with a wide variety of experiences and perspectives on the topic of supporting student-athletes who disclose psychological distress in order to gain a more representative view of the current climate within Canadian intercollegiate sport.

Chapter 6
Conclusion

6 Conclusion

Student-athletes represent a unique sub-population of university students where the additional pressures of participating in intercollegiate sport may place these individuals at an increased risk for experiencing psychological distress (Etzel et al., 2006; Navarro & Malvaso, 2015; Sudano et al., 2017). Varsity athletes have been found to experience mental health concerns, such as depression (Wolanin et al., 2015), disordered eating (Greenleaf et at., 2009), and substance abuse (Musselman & Rutledge, 2010), while challenges associated with athletic injury (Putukian, 2016), sexual violence (McCray, 2015), and sexual identity (Kroshus & Davoren, 2016) have been linked to that impaired psychological well-being of these athletes. When experiencing psychological distress, student-athletes have been found to rely on support providers, including varsity coaches (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001). Given that coaches interact with student-athletes on a frequent basis, researchers have suggested that coaches be provided with appropriate education to better prepare them in supporting distressed student-athletes (Sebbens et al., 2016). Given that there is limited research exploring the interactions between coaches and student-athletes when athletes disclose psychological distress to their coach, the purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of student-athletes disclosing psychological distress to a coach from the perspectives of both student-athletes and coaches. This research addressed the following research questions: (a) What are student-athletes' experiences of disclosing psychological distress to their coaches? (b) What are coaches' experiences of dealing with student-athletes' disclosures of psychological distress? (c) What are coaches' perceptions of the adequacy of the resources available to them to deal with student-athletes' psychological distress?

In conducting this study, the researcher adopted a constructivist paradigmatic position (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, and 15 student-athlete and 15 varsity coach participants (total $N = 30$) were recruited through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Interview data were analyzed using a thematic analysis.

Overall, results from this research determined that participants shared parallel experiences in student-athletes' disclosures of distress. The process of disclosure followed a similar timeline,

beginning with a period of non-disclosure that was influenced by perceived barriers, followed by the precise moment of disclosure, and ending with the subsequent support provided by coaches. Findings suggested that through effective culture setting, coaches may have the ability to minimize the barriers that discourage student-athletes from disclosing distress. Further, findings identified optimal practices for how coaches should respond to athletes' initial disclosures of distress and provide appropriate support following this disclosure. Lastly, this research suggested that varsity coaches should engage in the following behavioural practices to support the psychological well-being of student-athletes: 1) foster team cultures that are supportive of disclosure and help-seeking, 2) identify student-athletes who may be experiencing distress, 3) connect distressed student-athletes to appropriate resources, 4) provide consistent and ongoing support to distressed student-athletes.

This research study addressed a gap in the literature surrounding our understanding of how student-athletes and coaches interact when athletes disclose psychological distress. Findings provide valuable insight regarding the preparation of university coaches in effectively handling student-athletes' disclosures of psychological distress, while also providing insight into how coach education can be improved and institutions better engaged to support coaches in their role of supporting distressed varsity athletes. Findings also advance our understanding of Canadian varsity student-athletes and coaches, a largely under-represented population within the existing literature. These findings may be applied to support the pillar of U Sports's strategic plan to elevate the student-athlete experience through providing professional development opportunities for university coaches and improving the support services available to student-athletes.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1. Summary of coach participants' coaching experience.

Pseudonym	Summary of Coaching Experience
Amanda	• 30 years of university volleyball • Level 4 NCCP • Ontario and national team coach experience since 1991
George	• Coaching since 1990 • Coaches all levels from mini soccer to university
Owen	• Coaching in 2nd year at [name of institution]
Adam	• Coached as a volunteer since 2007, professionally since 2015 • Coached at [name of rowing club] and [name of institution] • Several appearances at Under-23 and Senior World Championships
Wayne	• High school coach 2012-2015 • Club coach 2009-2010 • U Sports assistant coach 2011-12 • U Sports head coach 2015-present
Cheryl	• Team Canada, U Sports, provincial, club, and high school coach • Coaching since ~1998
Eli	• 7 years head coach (U Sports) • 9 years as professional assistant coach • 20 years assistant coach in NCAA
Jesse	• Level 3 NCCP • 23 years coaching at the university level
Aaron	• 8 years of university coaching • 6 years of U-18 coaching • Level 2 NCCP
Erik	• 30 years of coaching university • National and some international experience
Ruben	• 10 years of experience across high school, provincial, club, and university

Luke	• 10+ years of experience at university level • World Rugby Level 3 certification in progress
Phil	• Coached at the university level for 4 years (2 as assistant, 2 as head coach) • Coached golfers and executives for ~5 years
Mia	• 8 years overall coaching experience within club and university • 5 years at university level as both assistant and head coach • National B License Trained Status (Certificate)
Olivia	• Coaching swimming for the past 10 years • Currently a level 3 trained coach

Appendix B

INITIAL CONTACT – EMAIL TO ATHLETICS DEPARTMENT

Dear [name of institution] Athletics Department,

My name is James and I am a master's student in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto. I am conducting research with former student-athletes and am reaching out to U Sports member institutions to share information about this research. The purpose of this research is to examine the interactions between student-athletes and their coaches when the student-athlete experienced psychological distress and disclosed this distress to their coach.

I am looking for former student-athletes to complete interviews. We are hoping to recruit 15 student-athletes to participate in this study. All interview responses are confidential and participation is completely voluntary. Each participant will receive a $10 Tim Hortons gift card for participating in an interview.

During the interview I will ask questions about the participants' experiences of disclosing psychological distress to a coach and explore their perceptions of the support received from coaches. Following interviews with the former student-athletes, I will contact each athlete's respective coaches and ask to interview the coach in order to gain their perspective of managing the disclosure of the student-athlete's psychological distress.

If you are willing to help, please let me know. I can send you an information letter that can be forwarded to former student-athletes, perhaps via an alumni listserv. My information will be included and student-athletes can contact me if they wish to organize an interview.

I would also be happy to share the results of the study with you once it is completed. Hopefully we will have information about how coaches provide support to distressed student-athletes and can begin to create guidelines or educational resources to better prepare coaches in managing these situations. For more information about this study, you can contact myself, the primary investigator: James Bissett at x.xxxxxxx@utoronto.ca or (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

Thank you,

James Bissett

Appendix C

STUDENT-ATHLETE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW
INFORMATION LETTER & CONSENT FORM
University Coach Responses to Student-Athlete Psychological Distress

Primary Investigator
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Study overview:
You are invited to participate in a research study about student-athletes' experiences of disclosing psychological distress to their coach. The purpose of this study is to explore how coaches handle the disclosure of student-athlete psychological distress from the perspective of both the coach and the athlete, and to assess whether coaches feel prepared to provide support to distressed student-athletes.

What is involved in the study?
We are asking former student-athletes who have experienced psychological distress, disclosed this distress to a coach, and relied on their coach as a support provider to participate in an interview. The interview will be tape-recorded and will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. During the interview we will ask questions about your experience of disclosing psychological distress to a coach and explore your perceptions of the support received from your coach. The focus of this study is not on instances of coach abuse that contributed to psychological distress.

With your consent, your coach will also be interviewed separately on the same topic. If your former university coach is currently employed at a U Sports member institution, the primary investigator will contact the coach with your given consent. If the coach is no longer an employee at a U Sports member institution, the primary investigator asks that you contact the coach on their behalf. The primary investigator will provide you with e-mail templates to communicate with the coach. If your coach does not consent to participate, this will not impact your participation in the research study. Further, you may choose to consent to contacting your coach without participating in an interview yourself. In this case, please provide only your signed consent to the second section of the consent form.

To participate in an interview, you must be a former student-athlete who competed for a U Sports member institution and participated in at least one of the twelve U Sports sanctioned sports. You may self-select into the study so long as you deem your experience caused psychological distress during your time as a student-athlete, disclosed this distress to your coach, and sought support from your coach in managing this distress. Psychological distress qualifies as an emotional response to an event or combination of events, such as, but not limited to, athletic

injury, minority discrimination, or teammate conflict, that negatively impacted your overall quality of life. Impaired quality of life may include, but is not limited to, significantly decreased academic and/or athletic performance, poor mental health, or development of a substance abuse problem. If you choose to participate in an interview, we highly recommend that you be comfortable speaking openly about your experience dealing with psychological distress. You will receive a $10 Tim Horton's gift card for your participation.

What are the benefits of this study? Are there any risks?
We believe this study will provide important information about the preparation of coaches to provide support to distressed student-athletes. We hope the information from this study will help us to develop training and educational practices to improve university coaches' ability to manage these situations and improve overall student-athlete well-being.

Discussing your experience with psychological distress could pose some psychological or emotional discomfort during the interview. You do not have to answer any questions that are uncomfortable, and you are free to refuse to answer any questions during the interview. In the event that you would like to further discuss any feelings regarding the topics in the interviews, you may wish to contact support services (see attached Support Services).

Your answers during the interviews will be confidential; we will not share your answers to the interview questions with your coach, and we will not share your coach's answers with you in order to maintain confidentiality. Your identity will only be known by the primary investigator of the research study and we will assign a 'false name' (a pseudonym) to your interview once it is completed so that you cannot be identified.

In addition to assigning a pseudonym, participant confidentiality will be maintained by removing all personal identifying information and separating coach-athlete dyad responses when reporting results. Despite these efforts to maintain confidentiality, the investigator cannot guarantee participant confidentiality. Due to the high-profile nature of athletic careers, there is a potential risk that the inclusion of select information from participant responses may result in the participant being identifiable.

It is also important to acknowledge the potential that athletes or coaches may disclose coach-athlete abuse when discussing psychological distress. The focus of this study is not on instances of coach abuse that contributed to psychological distress; however, if a participant does disclose abuse, information regarding support resources will be provided to the participant for them to access and use at their own discretion (see attached Support Services). In the event that a student-athlete or a coach reports abuse, it is not the investigator's duty to report because none of the study participants are minors. However, if the reported abuse involves a coach who is currently employed at a university, the investigator will be required to report to the respective Athletics Department.

Participation in this study is voluntary. There will be no negative consequences if you or your former university coach do not participate. If you wish to participate, but your coach does not want to participate, that is fine – you can still participate in an interview even if your coach does not want to do an interview. You can stop the interview at any time, and you can withdraw from

the study for any reason up until the data is analyzed (two months after your interview is completed). If you would like to withdraw from the study, you can contact the primary investigator, James Bissett (xxx xxx-xxxx, email: x.xxxxxxx@mail.utoronto.ca).

What will happen with the information we provide?
Interviews will be typed and held at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. Only the researcher and his thesis supervisor, Dr. Katherine Tamminen (email: xxxx.xxxx@utoronto.ca) will have access to this information. The information is kept for five years, after which it will be destroyed. Once we have completed the study, the primary investigator will present the results at a conference. They may also write a paper, which will be published in an academic journal. If the results are presented at a conference or in a paper, no one will be identified by name. Participant quotes will be presented with an assigned pseudonym and all identifying information will be removed. A summary of the results and copies of any resulting publications will be provided at your request.

The research study you are participating in may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

If you have questions about this study, or about the information used for research purposes, you may contact James Bissett, who is a master's student at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education, as well as the primary investigator for this study (xxx xxx-xxxx, or email: x.xxxxxxx@mail.utoronto.ca). You may also contact the Office of Research Ethics at xxxxxx.xxxxxx@utoronto.ca or xxx xxx-xxxx if you have questions regarding your rights as a participant.

Consent:
By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in an interview for this study.

Name: _____ Signature: _____
Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

By signing below, I agree to contacting and inviting my former university coach to participate in this research study. Should the coach no longer be employed at a U Sports member institution, I agree to contact the coach on behalf of the researcher. I agree to contact my coach using the approved methods outlined in the research protocol, including the use of the Research Ethics

Board approved script. I understand that should the coach not consent to participate in the study, I will still be eligible to participate in an interview. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

Name: _____ Signature: _____
Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Appendix D

University Coach Responses to Student-Athlete Psychological Distress

Research Study

ARE YOU:

- A former Canadian varsity student-athlete

DO YOU:

- Self-identify as having experienced psychological distress during your time as a student-athlete (e.g. mental health challenges, athletic injury, challenges with sexuality, abuse/bullying etc.)

DID YOU:

- Disclose this distress to a university coach (head coach, assistant, or volunteer) and seek their support in managing this distress

If you can answer yes to all the questions above, please consider participating in a research interview. We are interested in learning about student-athletes' experiences of disclosing psychological distress to their coach.

THE INTERVIEW:

- 45-60 minutes
- 100% confidential
- $10 Tim Horton's gift card for participation
- Asks about your experience in disclosing psychological distress to a coach and your perceptions of the support you received

Contact James at x.xxxxxxx@mail.utoronto.ca if you are interested or have questions.

This research is being conducted as a Master's thesis for the partial completion of a graduate degree in the Department of Exercise Sciences at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Katherine Tamminen. The research has been reviewed and approved by the Health Sciences Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto (file #36382).

Appendix E

INITIAL CONTACT – EMAIL TO DYAD COACHES

Dear [name of Coach],

My name is James and I am a master's student in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto. I am conducting research with former student-athletes and their coaches to examine the interactions between student-athletes and their coaches when the student-athlete experienced psychological distress and disclosed this distress to their coach.

A former student-athlete of yours has given me permission to contact and invite you to participate in this study. This student-athlete explains they experienced psychological distress, disclosed this information to you, and relied on you for support during the process of managing their distress. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and if you wish not to participate, this will not affect the participation of the former student-athlete. Should you be willing to participate, I am asking to have you complete an interview. All interview responses are confidential. Each participant will receive a $10 Tim Hortons gift card for participating in an interview.

During the interview I will ask questions about your perspective of managing the disclosure of the student-athlete's psychological distress and how you provided support. This interview will also investigate your perceptions of current educational resources and training made available to you to help manage these situations.

If you are willing to participate, please let me know. I will send you an information letter providing further details regarding the study. My information will be included and you can contact me if you wish to organize an interview.

I would also be happy to share the results of the study with you once it is completed. Hopefully we will have information about how coaches provide support to distressed student-athletes and can begin to create guidelines or educational resources to better prepare coaches in managing these situations. For more information about this study, you can contact myself, the primary investigator: James Bissett at x.xxxxxxx@utoronto.ca or (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

Thank you,

James Bissett

Appendix F

INITIAL CONTACT – EMAIL TO NON-DYAD COACHES

Dear [name of Coach],

My name is James and I am a master's student in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto. I am conducting research with university coaches and am reaching out to ask if you would be interested in participating. The purpose of this research is to examine the interactions between coaches and their student-athletes when the student-athlete experienced psychological distress and disclosed this distress to their coach.

I am looking for varsity coaches who have acted as support providers to distressed student-athletes to complete interviews. All interview responses are confidential and participation is completely voluntary. Each participant will receive a $10 Tim Hortons gift card for participating in an interview.

During the interview I will ask questions about your experiences of managing the disclosure of student-athletes' psychological distress and how you provided support. This interview will also investigate your perceptions of current educational resources and training made available to you to help manage these situations.

If you are willing to participate, please let me know. I will send you an information letter providing further details regarding the study. My information will be included and you can contact me if you wish to organize an interview.

I would also be happy to share the results of the study with you once it is completed. Hopefully we will have information about how coaches provide support to distressed student-athletes and can begin to create guidelines or educational resources to better prepare coaches in managing these situations. For more information about this study, you can contact myself, the primary investigator: James Bissett at x.xxxxxxx@utoronto.ca or (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

Thank you,

James Bissett

Appendix G

COACH INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW
INFORMATION LETTER & CONSENT FORM
University Coach Responses to Student-Athlete Psychological Distress

Primary Investigator
James Bissett
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T: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E: x.xxxxxxx@mail.utoronto.ca

Faculty Supervisor & Co-Investigator
Dr. Katherine Tamminen
University of Toronto
Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Ed.
100 Devonshire Place
Toronto, ON M5S 2C9
T: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E: xxxx.xxxx@utoronto.ca

Study overview:
You are invited to participate in a research study about university coaches' experiences of supporting student-athletes with psychological distress. The purpose of this study is to explore how coaches handle the disclosure of student-athlete psychological distress from the perspective of both the coach and the athlete, and to assess whether coaches feel prepared to provide support to distressed student-athletes.

What is involved in the study?
We are asking university coaches who were approached by a student-athlete(s) who experienced psychological distress and provided support to this student-athlete(s) to participate in an interview. The interview will be tape-recorded and will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. During the interview we will ask questions about your experiences of managing the disclosure of student-athletes' psychological distress and how you provided support. This interview will also investigate your perceptions of current educational resources and training made available to you to help manage these situations.

Student-athlete psychological distress qualifies as an emotional response to an event or combination of events, such as, but not limited to, athletic injury, minority discrimination, or teammate conflict, that negatively impacted the athlete's overall quality of life. Impaired quality of life may include, but is not limited to, significantly decreased academic and/or athletic performance, poor mental health, or development of a substance abuse problem. If you choose to participate in an interview, we highly recommend that you be comfortable speaking openly about your experience working with a distressed student-athlete. You will receive a $10 Tim Horton's gift card for your participation.

This study aims to interview pairs of student-athletes and coaches who worked together in the process of managing the student-athlete's psychological distress. You will be informed by the primary investigator if you are being invited to participate in this study through the recommendation of a former student-athlete or not. In the case that you have been recommended for interviewing by a former student-athlete, your participation in the study will not impact the participation of the former student-athlete to any extent.

What are the benefits of this study? Are there any risks?
We believe this study will provide important information about the preparation of coaches to provide support to distressed student-athletes. We hope the information from this study will help us to develop training and educational practices to improve university coaches' ability to manage these situations and improve overall student-athlete well-being.

Discussing your experience with supporting psychologically distressed student-athletes could pose some psychological or emotional discomfort during the interview. You do not have to answer any questions that are uncomfortable, and you are free to refuse to answer any questions during the interview. In the event that you would like to further discuss any feelings regarding the topics in the interviews, you may wish to contact support services (see attached Support Services).

Your answers during the interviews will be confidential. If your former student-athlete is a study participant, we will not share your answers to the interview questions with the student-athlete and we will not share your student-athlete's answers with you in order to maintain confidentiality. Your identity will only be known by the primary investigator of the research study and we will assign a 'false name' (a pseudonym) to your interview once it is completed so that you cannot be identified.

In addition to assigning a pseudonym, participant confidentiality will be maintained by removing all personal identifying information and separating coach-athlete dyad responses when reporting results. Despite these efforts to maintain confidentiality, the investigator cannot guarantee participant confidentiality. Due to the high-profile nature of athletic careers, there is a potential risk that the inclusion of select information from participant responses may result in the participant being identifiable.

It is also important to acknowledge the potential that athletes or coaches may disclose coach-athlete abuse when discussing psychological distress. The focus of this study is not on instances of coach abuse that contributed to psychological distress; however, if a participant does disclose abuse, information regarding support resources will be provided to the participant for them to access and use at their own discretion (see attached Support Services). In the event that a student-athlete or a coach reports abuse, it is not the investigator's duty to report because none of the study participants are minors. However, if the reported abuse involves a coach who is currently employed at a university, the investigator will be required to report to the respective Athletics Department.

Participation in this study is voluntary. There will be no negative consequences if you do not participate. You can stop the interview at any time, and you can withdraw from the study for any reason up until the data is analyzed (two months after your interview is completed). If you would like to withdraw from the study, you can contact the primary investigator, James Bissett (xxx xxx-xxxx, email: x.xxxxxxx@mail.utoronto.ca).

What will happen with the information we provide?

Interviews will be typed and held at the University of Toronto in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education. Only the researcher and his thesis supervisor, Dr. Katherine Tamminen (email: xxxx.xxxx@utoronto.ca) will have access to this information. The information is kept for five years, after which it will be destroyed. Once we have completed the study, the primary investigator will present the results at a conference. They may also write a paper, which will be published in an academic journal. If the results are presented at a conference or in a paper, no one will be identified by name. Participant quotes will be presented with an assigned pseudonym and all identifying information will be removed. A summary of the results and copies of any resulting publications will be provided at your request.

The research study you are participating in may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

If you have questions about this study, or about the information used for research purposes, you may contact James Bissett, who is a master's student at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education, as well as the primary investigator for this study (xxx xxx-xxxx, or email: x.xxxxxxx@mail.utoronto.ca). You may also contact the Office of Research Ethics at xxxxxx.xxxxxx@utoronto.ca or xxx xxx-xxxx if you have questions regarding your rights as a participant.

Consent:
By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in an interview for this study.

Name: _____ Signature: _____
Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Appendix H

Interview Guides

Student-Athlete Interview

For the purpose of this interview, I am interested in learning about your experience as a student-athlete disclosing psychological distress to your coach and relying on your coach as a form of support. I am interested in your personal experience so please know that there are no right or wrong answers. If you do not feel comfortable answering any questions, this is completely acceptable and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. Your information will remain confidential and a pseudonym will be used to protect your anonymity. I would also like to remind you that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw consent at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Background Information
    a. Tell me about your journey in sport?
        i. Who were your biggest supporters throughout your athletic career?
        ii. How have they supported you?
    b. Can you tell me about your experience as a student-athlete?
        i. What sport did you play?
        ii. How long were you involved in this sport?

2. Psychological Distress
    a. Can you describe the psychological distress you endured as a student-athlete?
        i. In your opinion, what may have caused this distress?
        ii. How did it impact your overall quality of life? (ex. academic and athletic performance, relationships with teammates, friends, family)
        iii. Had you experienced psychological distress prior to university? If yes, what factors do you believe resulted in this distress?
        iv. Do you know of anybody else who has struggled with mental health challenges or psychological distress?

3. Coach Support
    a. Can you tell me about the nature of your relationship with your coach?

    b. Can you describe the timeline leading up to speaking with your coach about your distress?
        i. Did you talk to anybody else first? Use other available services/resources?
        ii. Were any of your efforts to get help rejected or negative?
        iii. Did you feel hesitant or perceive there to be barriers in reaching out to other forms of support?
        iv. Did previous experiences make you hesitant or nervous to speak with your coach?

    c. Can you tell me about the process of disclosing psychological distress to your coach?

i. When did you start to consider telling your coach about the situation?
ii. How were you feeling when considering whether to tell your coach?
iii. How did you come to decide that you would tell your coach about your psychological distress?
iv. Can you tell me about what happened when you told your coach? Where was it? When did you tell him/her? (ex. after practice, competition)
v. Can you take me through the conversation you had with your coach when you told him/her? What did you say? What did he/she say?
vi. How did that conversation end? What happened next?

d. How did your coach provide support during this time?
    i. What was their level of involvement in your recovery process? Do you wish they had been more or less involved?

e. What did you find effective about the support you received? Ineffective?
    i. Are there any forms of education or training you think all coaches should receive to improve their support providing abilities?

f. Why did you choose your coach as a form of support?
    i. Do you feel this choice was made out of necessity or because you wanted to?
    ii. Did you seek out additional forms of support after your coach?
    iii. Do you believe there are types of psychological distress that student-athletes may be more or less likely to bring to their coaches? (ex. feeling depressed because of injury vs. having been assaulted)
    iv. Do you believe there are certain elements of your relationship with your coach that led you to seeking support from them?

4. Wrap Up
    a. Is there any information or details we discussed today that you would not like for me to mention should they come up while interviewing your coach?
        Above question only asked if the student-athlete interview takes place before coach interview and if student-athlete's coach has consented to the study.

    b. Is there anything else that you would like me to know?

Coach Interview (With athlete dyad)

For the purpose of this interview, I am interested in learning about your experience as a coach providing support to (insert student-athlete's name) while they were facing significant psychological distress. In addition, I would like to learn about the education and training you have received in helping distressed student-athletes and your thoughts on coach education and training resources that are currently made available. I am interested in your personal experience so please know that there are no right or wrong answers. If you do not feel comfortable answering any questions, this is completely acceptable and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. Your information will remain confidential and a pseudonym will be used to protect your anonymity. I would also like to remind you that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw consent at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Background Information
    a. Can you tell me about how you got involved in coaching at a university level?
        i. What sport do you coach?
        ii. If you could describe your coaching in three words, what would they be?
        iii. What are some highlights or moments you're most proud of from your time as a coach?
    b. Tell me a bit about yourself outside of coaching.
        i. What's your family situation like?
    c. Can you tell me about your relationship with _____ (SA name)?
    d. What was your understanding of the psychological distress faced by _____ (SA name)?

2. Providing Support
    a. Can you describe how _____ (SA name) approached you to disclose their challenges with psychological distress?
        i. Can you tell me about what happened when _____ (SA name) told you? Where was it? When did he/she tell you? (ex. after practice, competition)
        ii. Can you take me through the conversation you had with _____ (SA name)? What did you say? What did he/she say?
        iii. How did that conversation end? What happened next?
        iv. Why do you believe _____ (SA name) approached you for support? Do you believe they approached you out of necessity or because they wanted to?
        v. Is it hard to notice signs of distress? Why?
        vi. Do you believe there are barriers for student-athletes in accessing other support services?

    b. How did you then proceed to provide support?
        i. What was the extent of your involvement as a support provider? Do you wish you had been more or less involved?

    c. Upon reflection, what do you feel you did well in providing support? Is there anything you might have changed?

d. What prior training or education, if any, did you receive that helped you in supporting _____ (SA name)?
    i. In the moment, did you feel prepared to handle this situation?
    ii. Do you know of other individuals who have struggled with mental health challenges or psychological distress? (ex. friends, family members, spouse etc.)
    Before asking the above question, inform participant that for confidentiality purposes, they must not include in their answer any names or identifying information about specific individuals.
    iii. Do you think these prior experiences shaped how you handled this situation?

e. Can you tell me about your approach to coaching?
    i. Do you have coaching philosophies? If so, can you tell me about them?
    ii. How did this impact the way you supported _____ (SA name)?
    iii. Do you believe your approach to coaching lends to having student-athletes feel comfortable disclosing psychological distress to you?
    iv. Do you believe there are types of psychological distress that student-athletes may be more or less comfortable disclosing to a coach? (ex. feeling depressed because of injury vs. having been assaulted)
    v. Would you provide different support to more "contributing" athletes on your team?

3. Future Coach Education/Training Resources
    a. What mandated education or training do you currently receive to help you manage situations where a student-athlete discloses psychological distress?
        i. Do you believe this training/education is beneficial and/or sufficient?
        ii. Do you currently feel prepared to handle all situations that may arise involving student-athletes' psychological distress?

    b. What additional educational or training resources would you find beneficial that you currently do not have access to?
        i. What education/training do you think all university coaches should complete and have access to? Would these be sport-specific?

    c. Do you believe resources designed to help coaches' well-being would be helpful in providing support to your student-athletes?

4. Wrap Up
    a. Is there any information or details we discussed today that you would not like for me to mention should they come up while interviewing _____ (SA name)?
        Above question only asked if the coach interview takes place before student-athlete interview.

    b. Is there anything else that you would like me to know?

Non-Dyad Coach Interview

For the purpose of this interview, I am interested in learning about your experiences as a coach providing support to student-athletes who have disclosed psychological distress to you. In addition, I would like to learn about the education and training you have received in helping distressed student-athletes and your thoughts on coach education and training resources that are currently made available. I am interested in your personal experience so please know that there are no right or wrong answers. If you do not feel comfortable answering any questions, this is completely acceptable and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. Your information will remain confidential and a pseudonym will be used to protect your anonymity. I would also like to remind you that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw consent at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Background Information
    a. Can you tell me about how you got involved in coaching at a university level?
        i. What sport do you coach?
        ii. If you could describe your coaching in three words, what would they be?
        iii. What are some highlights or moments you're most proud of from your time as a coach?
    b. Tell me a bit about yourself outside of coaching.
        i. What's your family situation like?

2. Providing Support
    a. Can you describe your general approach to providing support to student-athletes who disclose psychological distress?
        i. Where and when do these conversations often take place?
        ii. Can you take me through these conversations? What do the athletes often say? What do you say in response?
        iii. How do these conversations often end? What happens next?
        iv. Is it hard to notice signs of distress? Why?

    b. Why do you believe your athletes come to you for support? Is it out of necessity or because they want to?
        i. Do you believe there are barriers for student-athletes in accessing other support services?

    c. What is the extent of your involvement when providing support?

    d. What prior training or education have you received that helped you in supporting distressed student-athletes?
        i. In these moments, did you feel prepared to handle the situation?
        ii. Do you know of other individuals who have struggled with mental health challenges or psychological distress? (ex. friends, family members, spouse etc.)

Before asking the above question, inform participant that for confidentiality purposes, they must not include in their answer any names or identifying information about specific individuals.

iii. Do you think these prior experiences shaped how you handled this situation?

e. Can you tell me about your approach to coaching?
   i. Do you have coaching philosophies? If so, can you tell me about them?
   ii. How did this impact the way you support distressed student-athletes?
   iii. Do you believe your approach to coaching lends to having student-athletes feel comfortable disclosing psychological distress to you?
   iv. Do you believe there are types of psychological distress that student-athletes may be more or less comfortable disclosing to a coach? (ex. feeling depressed because of injury vs. having been assaulted)
   v. Would you provide different support to more "contributing" athletes on your team?

3. Future Coach Education/Training Resources
   a. What mandated education or training do you currently receive to help you manage situations where a student-athlete discloses psychological distress?
      i. Do you believe this training/education is beneficial and/or sufficient?
      ii. Do you currently feel prepared to handle all situations that may arise involving student-athletes' psychological distress?

   b. What additional educational or training resources would you find beneficial that you currently do not have access to?
      i. What education/training do you think all university coaches should complete and have access to? Would these be sport-specific?

   c. Do you believe resources designed to help coaches' well-being would be helpful in providing support to your student-athletes?

4. Wrap Up
   a. Is there anything else that you would like me to know?

Appendix I

Participant Demographics Forms

Student-Athlete Demographics

1. What is your gender? M / F / other / prefer not to answer
2. Please indicate your age: _____
3. Based on these categories from the Canadian Census, how do you describe yourself?
   - ☐ White/Caucasian
   - ☐ Chinese
   - ☐ Japanese
   - ☐ Korean
   - ☐ Aboriginal/First Nation (e.g., North American Indian, Metis, Inuit)
   - ☐ Filipino
   - ☐ South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Punjabi, Sri Lankan)
   - ☐ South East Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Indonesian, Vietamese)
   - ☐ Black (e.g., Africian, Haitian, Jamaican, Somali)
   - ☐ West Asian/Middle East (e.g., Afgani, Arab, Indian)
   - ☐ Other (please specify): _____
4. Please indicate the highest level of parent education?
   - ☐ Some high school
   - ☐ Completed high school
   - ☐ Some college/university
   - ☐ Completed college/university
   - ☐ Other accreditation/diploma/certificate
   - ☐ Post-graduate (Masters, PhD, MD, etc.)

5. What sport(s) did you play in University? _____

6. How many years did you participate in intercollegiate sport? (Including redshirt years)

   1 2 3 4 5 6+

Coach Demographics

1. What is your gender? M / F / other / prefer not to answer
2. Please indicate your age: _____
3. Please indicate your level of education (check one)
   - ☐ Some high school
   - ☐ Completed high school
   - ☐ Some college/university
   - ☐ Completed college/university
   - ☐ Other accreditation/diploma/certificate
   - ☐ Post-graduate (Masters, PhD, MD, etc.)
4. Based on these categories from the Canadian Census, how do you describe yourself?
   - ☐ White/Caucasian
   - ☐ Chinese
   - ☐ Japanese
   - ☐ Korean
   - ☐ Aboriginal/First Nation (e.g., North American Indian, Metis, Inuit)
   - ☐ Filipino
   - ☐ South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Punjabi, Sri Lankan)
   - ☐ South East Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Indonesian, Vietamese)
   - ☐ Black (e.g., African, Haitian, Jamaican, Somali)
   - ☐ West Asian/Middle East (e.g., Afgani, Arab, Indian)
   - ☐ Other (please specify):_____
5. What intercollegiate sport did you coach? _____
6. Briefly describe your coaching experience (e.g. years coaching, level of coaching etc.)

_____
_____

Appendix J

Student-Athlete Psychological Distress Research Project Brief

Exploring student-athletes' experiences of disclosing psychological distress varsity coaches.

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Summary of Project

Based on an understanding that the unique environmental stressors faced by student-athletes may increase their risk for experiencing psychological distress, and that coaches are integral support providers who may be involved in athletes' disclosures of this distress, the present study aimed to explore the experiences of student-athletes disclosing psychological distress to a coach from the perspectives of both student-athletes and coaches.

The goal of this research supports *U Sports*'s strategic plan pillar of elevating the student-athlete experience through providing professional development opportunities for university coaches and improving the support services available to student-athletes.

Project Details

15 student-athletes and 15 varsity coaches completed semi-structured interviews exploring their respective experiences with athletes' disclosures of psychological distress. Interview data were then analyzed for recurring patterns. Preliminary findings are presented below.

Preliminary Findings

Barriers to Disclosure: student-athletes faced barriers (listed below) that discouraged disclosure; however, coaches have the ability to minimize the effect of these barriers through fostering team cultures that support athlete disclosure and help-seeking behaviours.

1. Emphasis on Athlete Toughness: athletes felt pressured to be perceived as "tough" and thought disclosing distress would signify weakness.
2. Power of Coach: athletes feared disclosing distress to a coach would result in loss of playing time or opportunities to compete.
3. Athlete's Position on a Team: hierarchies existed within teams such that top tier athletes (i.e. starters, team captains) feared that disclosure would disappoint their teammates or tarnish their reputations, while lower tiered athletes (i.e. bench players, first-year athletes) did not feel they are valued enough members of the team to warrant disclosure.
4. Poor Visibility & Understanding of Distress: student-athletes had poor mental health literacy, resulting in an inability to successfully recognize or identify when they were experiencing psychological distress.
5. Previous Bad Experiences: student-athletes had previous bad experiences disclosing distress to coaches or counsellors, which discouraged them from future disclosures.

Coach-Athlete Relationship: Effective coach-athlete relationships greatly facilitated athletes' abilities to disclose distress; however, relationships that were too weak or too personal acted as inhibitors. Participants had difficulty articulating what resulted in a "just right" coach-athlete relationship, but identified that it incorporated the following characteristics: trust, confidentiality, understanding, closeness/emotional connectedness, communication, and emphasis on athlete well-being over athletic performance.

Easier vs. Harder Types of Distress to Disclose: Distress resulting from a more tangible source (i.e. athletic injury, academic troubles) was described as being easier to disclose when compared to distress caused by more invisible sources (i.e. sexuality, mental illness); however, as of late, student-athletes are becoming more comfortable disclosing psychological distress stemming from invisible sources.

Effective Coach Support: The table below summarizes best practices for coach support.

Timeline	Suggested Support Practices for Coach
Initial Response to Disclosure	• Listen to athlete describe their concern(s) • Provide reassurance to athlete • Ask follow-up or probing questions (if needed) • Triage the severity of the distress • Connect athlete with appropriate professional resources (if needed)

Early Support Provision	• Assist athlete in creating plan to manage distress
	  ○ Engage athlete during this process to show support for their autonomy and support accountability
	• Connect athlete with professional resources
	  ○ Offer to schedule appointment/make connection on the athlete's behalf
	  ○ Offer to take athlete to initial meeting

Long-Term Support Provision	• Keep athlete engage with the team • Check in with athlete on consistent basis • Make yourself readily available for as-needed communication • Modify sport-related demands • Maintain athlete confidentiality • Demonstrate patience and understanding in regards to the slow process of recovery

The Role of University Coaches in Supporting Distressed Student-Athletes: Findings suggest that the role of coaches in supporting distressed athletes involves: 1) fostering team cultures that are supportive of disclosure and help seeking, 2) identifying student-athletes who may be experiencing distress, 3) connecting distressed student-athletes to appropriate resources, and 4) providing consistent and ongoing support to distressed student-athletes.

To assist coaches in assuming this role, future coach education needs to focus more on providing coaches with the tools to foster supportive team cultures, and athletics departments need to increase their support by allocating time for department-wide coach education and providing coaches with their own mental health support resources.

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