



Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance

The Flexible Mind

Ross G. White · Andrew Bethell
Lewis Charnock · Stephen Leckey
Victoria Penpraze

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Praise for *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance*

“Our ability to learn, unlearn and relearn is one of the biggest differences in forming high performance cultures. The authors offer us a rich supply of research, tips and techniques to speed and facilitate this process. This book is an invaluable resource.”

—Damian Hughes, *Visiting Professor of Organisational Psychology and Change, author and co-host of The High Performance Podcast*

“Psychological flexibility is thundering into sport and mental performance coaching because it opens up new and effective ways to think about training, toughness, competition, and life balance. *The Flexible Mind* leaves no stone unturned in its honest, thorough, and skillful application of the model to that most human of all human behaviors: organized athletic competition. I learned something on almost every page. Highly recommended.”

—Steven C. Hayes, *Foundation Professor of Psychology, University of Nevada, Reno and originator of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or Training*

“This is an important book: accessible, practical but with real substance. It distils one of the fastest growing models of how humans react to their situation and tailors it beautifully to the needs of athletes and their coaches. In a world of individual, gimmicky ideas, its expert authors bring you real science applied to real performance and well-being issues.”

—Dr Ray Owen, *Consultant Clinical & Health Psychologist, Author of Facing the Storm & Living with Enemy*

“This is an essential guide for anyone coaching athletes towards excellence. Grounded in the latest behavioural science and based on a powerful behavioural change model, this ground-breaking, practical, and clearly presented programme will help athletes to develop resilience and achieve peak performance in the high-pressure context of elite sport. I cannot recommend this book enough.”

—Dr Mike Sinclair, *Consultant Counselling Psychologist, Clinical Director of City Psychology Group, and co-author of Mindfulness for Busy People, The Little ACT Workbook, The Little Depression Workbook and The Little Anxiety Workbook*

“This book provides a comprehensive toolbox of evidence-based insights driving elevated athletic performance. However, the benefits are not limited to athletes. Rather, this exceptional text simultaneously opens the door to enhanced outcomes across a range of personal and professional settings. If you’re looking to take your game to a new level in any key area of life, this is your ticket!”

—Bradford Cooper, *PhD, CEO of US Corporate Wellness, Co-Founder of Catalyst Coaching Institute, Host of Catalyst Health, Wellness & Performance Coaching Podcast*

“An essential read for anyone in the field of sports psychology. Whether you work with professional or amateur athletes, you’ll find many practical tools within these pages that you can instantly start using for good results. If you’re keen to improve not only the mental health of athletes, but also their performance under pressure, and their life satisfaction outside the sport, this book is for you!”

—Dr Russ Harris, *Author of The Happiness Trap and ACT Made Simple*

“*The Flexible Mind*...a book I wish I had when I was doing my training nearly 20 years ago! A great blend of empiricism and application of ACT with athletes to promote both performance and wellbeing. This book will provide practitioners with the needed guidance as they hone their craft in promoting psychological flexibility.”

—Jonah Oliver, *National Performance Psychology Lead, Australian Institute of Sport*

“If you are interested in improving athletes’ wellbeing and performance then this book is an absolute must buy. It is scientifically solid, intensely practical and at the cutting edge of innovation, providing you with a comprehensive manual with a step-by-step guide for delivering *The Flexible Mind* approach. This book is a game changer.”

—Joe Oliver, *founder of Contextual Consulting and author of The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Self-Esteem*

“Using key concepts and practices from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy/ Training, *The Flexible Mind* approach has the power to enhance sporting performance AND optimise wellbeing - it’s literally a win-win for elite athletes! This practitioner’s guide will bring the reader up to speed with the approach and help supercharge their practice.”

—Dr Mary Welford, *author of Compassionate Mind Guide to Building Self Confidence, Compassion Focused Therapy for Dummies and The Kindness Workbook*

“*The Flexible Mind* comes at a timely point in the world of high performance. By drawing on the work of reputable practitioners and a rigorous evidence base, this book provides a novel approach to developing and sustaining an optimal balance between performance excellence, mental health and wellbeing. An authoritative resource to usher-in the ‘WExeLLence’ era of high performance.”

—Dr Chris Hartley, *HCPC Sport & Exercise Psychologist,
Lecturer at the University of Stirling*

“The book provides cutting edge, up to date coverage of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy/Training concepts and practical innovations using accessible language, metaphors and illustrations. Evidence supporting the innovations is presented in clear and digestible ways, and skills are provided in each chapter to help athletes excel not only their performance but their wellbeing also. I highly recommend this excellent book.”

—Louise McHugh, *Professor of Psychology, University College Dublin,
Peer reviewed ACT Trainer*

“This is a comprehensive resource for both experts and beginners in work with athletes. The writers creatively yet deliberately offer an approach that is user-friendly. They bring to life Acceptance and Commitment Training processes that athletes will embrace. Everyone working with athletes should read this book. If you care about the wellbeing and performance of athletes, then get started on the journey towards ‘WExeLLence’ with *The Flexible Mind!*”

—Dr Rosco Kasujja, *Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, Makerere University*

“*The Flexible Mind* is built from evidence-based processes, it is clear in its rationale, and it offers the practitioner a concrete and engaging program to use in their work. Any person wishing to positively impact both the performance and the wellbeing of their athletes should look no further than this book. In fact, I am convinced that acceptance-based interventions in sport are going to grow in stature in the coming years, and I think this book will be at the forefront of that growth.”

—Dr Nic Hooper, *Senior Lecturer of Psychology,
and author of The Unbreakable Student*

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1

The *Flexible Mind* Approach: What Is It, and What Does It Offer?

'Change how you see, and see how you change.'
—Zen Proverb

What might an athlete need to sacrifice to achieve his/her dreams? Time ... Energy ... Self-interest for the sake of their team ... Friendships ... Relationships ... Their education ... Proximity to family support? The list can be long. But what might be the accumulative effect of these sacrifices on the athlete's emotional wellbeing? Anxiety ... Depression ... Grief ... Trauma? The purpose of this book is to outline the *Flexible Mind* approach that has been jointly developed by sports and exercise practitioners, along with mental health practitioners with the aim of simultaneously enhancing an athlete's performance, whilst safe-guarding the emotional wellbeing of that athlete. This approach is based on the stark reality that factors specific to the sporting context can be an important determinant of mental health, and an athlete's mental health can in turn impact on sporting performance.

In a nutshell: This chapter explores key concepts relevant to athletes' performance and wellbeing, highlights the importance of context and proposes new ways of working.

The hope for this book is that its pages will acquire ruffled edges, the odd coffee cup stain and the scribbled annotations of the reader. This is because the book is intended as an active document, which incorporates and builds on the experiences and expertise of the reader. Across the 11 chapters of this book, important concepts relevant to the *Flexible Mind* approach are comprehensively explained, and strategies and techniques that practitioners can use to help athletes experience the benefits of the approach are presented. This will hopefully foster an air of excitement about the potential value that the *Flexible Mind* approach can offer and the impact that it can have within sporting environments.

As the quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, this book will endeavour to explain the *Flexible Mind* approach in such a way that it can be understood and therefore delivered effectively. It isn't a particularly complex strategy, but offering clarity on how a *Flexible Mind* approach can deliver positive changes in wellbeing and performance is important. A common criticism of scientific research, especially in this field, is that it is full of jargon and it is often a difficult read. This complexity can create a gap between research and applied practice. In other words—what is concluded in research may not meaningfully inform what is actioned on the ground or in the changing room. The *Flexible Mind* approach is intended to act as a break from these frustrations, as it is written in a lively and engaging manner. This does not mean the *Flexible Mind* approach underplays the significance of scientific evidence. On the contrary, the initial chapters of this book focus a lot on relevant theories and research, and research evidence is referenced throughout the book. The *Flexible Mind* approach recognises that sound research evidence forms the foundation of effective practice.

In the service of describing the *Flexible Mind* in an inviting and accessible way, a number of characters will appear throughout this book to assist the reader on their learning journey. Their inclusion is intended to provide different voices and perspectives on the themes and topics discussed and to bring the content of the book to life. Without further adieu, let's meet the team (Fig. 1.1).

What a squad! For this team, winning is about presenting the *Flexible Mind* approach in a way that can be clearly understood and then actioned. Like any team, if it is to be successful, the characters must have clearly

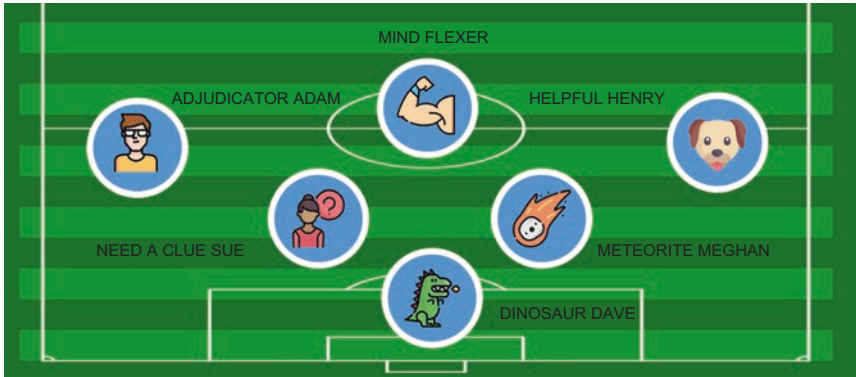


Fig. 1.1 The *Flexible Mind* team

defined roles and perform these roles effectively. The different roles of the characters are highlighted in Fig. 1.2.

The Road to *WExceLLence*

The *Flexible Mind* approach is novel in its ambition to help athletes to both perform well and feel well. To help capture the reciprocal relationship between mental *wellbeing* and performance *excellence*, this book introduces a new concept referred to as *WExceLLence* to highlight the dual importance of both mental health *and* performance-related (technical, tactical and physical) factors. *WExceLLence* is defined as a disposition that affords athletes opportunities to develop and sustain an optimal balance between performance excellence and mental health and wellbeing. To help illustrate some of the challenges that might arise on the road to *WExceLLence*, a motorsport analogy will be employed.

Figure 1.3 shows a race car that has entered the pits. Members of the pit crew are working on the front tyres. Within this analogy the tyre on the left (i.e. *Tyre 1*) represents performance excellence, and the tyre on the right (i.e. *Tyre 2*) represents mental health and wellbeing. These tyres highlight the dual importance of both performance-related and mental health factors, with respect to how the driver (the athlete) moves forward.



DINOSAUR DAVE

A bit of a nightmare in goal. He is a bit stuck in his ways, he embodies that old fashioned view that is closed to most aspects of sports psychology support. The reader will find him making outdated and questionable comments.



METEORITE MEGHAN

Meghan really sures up the defence. She offers a critical, evidence based view of ideas and concepts that are important to the *Flexible Mind* approach. She often follows comments from Dinosaur Dave, putting him in his place.



NEED A CLUE SUE

Sometimes a little hesitant on the ball, Sue is not quite sure of herself. She plays an important role in bringing to life some of the doubts or concerns that the reader may have about delivering aspects of the *Flexible Mind* approach.



ADJUDICATOR ADAM

A really intelligent player, who has a great understanding of the *Flexible Mind* approach. Adam will often pop up at the end of chapters, to help practitioners assess whether an athlete has sufficiently understood key topics and processes.



HELPFUL HENRY

He will run all day and is always looking to help out his teammates. Henry will point the reader in the direction of additional resources that will complement some of the concepts within the *Flexible Mind* approach.



MIND FLEXER

A focal point for any practitioners wishing to deliver this approach. The Mind Flexer will offer information and advice for implementing strategies and techniques for helping athletes to develop *psychological flexibility*.

Fig. 1.2 The characters' roles

An important issue to flag is that traditionally the focus of those working on one particular tyre may not have extended sufficiently well to the other tyre. This may have served to limit understanding about important processes relevant to both tyres. The *Flexible Mind* approach aims to circumvent this. It is an approach that can be used by those working on

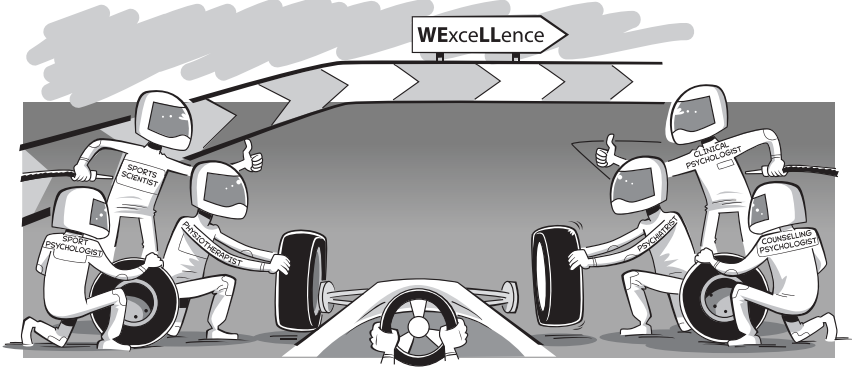


Fig. 1.3 The *Flexible Mind* pit crew

either type. As such, it is intended to help break down the ‘siloes’ nature of the work that different professionals do to support athletes, so that the twin ambitions of supporting wellbeing and performance excellence can be realised. *WExceLLence* as a concept helps to capture this holistic focus of the *Flexible Mind* approach. The pit crew need to find ways of working collaboratively to ensure that their collective efforts help the athlete along the road to *WExceLLence*.

Introducing *Tyre 1*

Tyre 1 on the left (i.e. sports-specific factors) is used to represent a range of factors that are particular to the sporting context (including coaching relationships, training routines, tactics, technical, sleep and nutrition) that impact on performance. Traditionally, issues relating to *Tyre 1* have been attended to by a pit crew that consists of a range of practitioners (including head coaches, assistant coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, sport scientists, sport and exercise psychologists, physiotherapists, medics, nutritionists and data analysts). These factors that influence performance can include those intrinsic to the athlete such as anthropometric (e.g. muscle mass or size), physiological (e.g. oxygen utilisation, lactate buffering, peak strength or power output), psychological (e.g. arousal management and motivation) and genetic factors (e.g. height)

(Tucker and Collins 2012). They can also include extrinsic determinants of performance such as tactical (e.g. set-piece and phase play, ball velocity and placement in cricket bowling and tennis serve), technical (e.g. accuracy of pass under pressure and body position in rugby tackling), nutritional (e.g. hydration and protein intake), environmental (e.g. humidity, altitude and competition calendar) and elements of opportunity (Bishop and Girard 2013). To ensure superior sporting performance, the relative importance of these factors may differ depending on the type of sport. For example, technical and tactical aspects may be more important in a team sport compared with endurance running, where physiological attributes, such as the maximal rate of oxygen uptake, lactate threshold and running economy, would be more important factors to determine success (Bishop and Girard 2013; Zambom-Ferraresi et al. 2018).



DINOSAUR DAVE

Don't you just have to train more to perform better in sport? Train harder, get better, right?!



METEORITE MEGHAN

It's widely recognised in research that superior sporting performance is a more complex and nuanced combination of the factors mentioned above (Joyner, 2019; Vaeyans et al., 2009), rather than simply lots of training or, as described by Ericsson et al. (1993), '10000 hours of deliberate practice'.

These factors, including the training dose, place a demand/load on the athlete, and there are risks to the athlete and their performance capacity

with poor load management. The International Olympic Committee provided advice through two 2016 consensus statements about the importance of understanding, monitoring and manipulating the load on the athlete to ensure conditions for best performance and reduce the risk of injury/illness or overtraining syndrome development (Schwellnus et al. 2016; Soligard et al. 2016). Athletes in the present day are ‘out-comed’ to within an inch of their lives. It is not uncommon practice for athletes to be monitored via a surplus of 25 metrics for the physical and mental readiness to train on a daily basis (Bourdon et al. 2017). Monitoring the demands on the athlete is recommended, and many of the practitioners associated with sport-specific factors of *Tyre 1* implement systematic assessment and analysis of both the training dose and the athlete’s physiological and perceived responses to this dose (Nielsen et al. 2019). These can incorporate measures of load which are external to the athlete, for example, time motion analysis, training/competition time, and frequency and internal measures, such as heart rate variability, sleep, session rating of perceived exertion and mood (Soligard et al. 2016). Poor load management can include excessively high training and competition demand, insufficient recovery, as well as interaction with other factors such as environment, daily life needs and non-sport stressors. There are challenges related to all, or any, of the factors associated with *Tyre 1* at various points along the trajectory of the athlete’s development, for example, injury, saturated competition calendar, travel and jet lag, training camps, or family life event, and the practitioners (i.e. pit crew) will be able to support the athlete in the management of these challenges.

Introducing *Tyre 2*

The work of the pit crew focusing on *Tyre 1* is clearly important. However, concerns have been expressed about ‘performance’ being prioritised over the ‘person’ and the impact that this might have on the mental health and wellbeing of the athlete (Ringland 2016). This brings the focus neatly to *Tyre 2* (i.e. mental health and wellbeing) which has tended to receive comparatively less attention than *Tyre 1*. The maintenance of *Tyre 2* requires the involvement of different pit crew members potentially

including psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, counsellors, cognitive behavioural therapists, and so on. The work of these different types of mental health professionals can focus on *mental disorders*. Mental disorders are conditions that impact on a person's thoughts, behaviour and mood to such an extent that it affects his/her functioning and their ability to relate to other people. Mental disorders tend to be diagnosed by medically trained professionals using diagnostic criteria that are listed in resources such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association 2013) or the *International Classification of Disease* (ICD-10, WHO 1993). Data indicates that around one billion people (16% of the global population) are experiencing mental disorders at any point in time across the world (Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network 2016). The most common mental disorder worldwide is depression (also referred to as Major Depressive Disorder) (Liu et al. 2020). Anxiety disorders (such as Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety, Phobias, etc.) are the second most prevalent type of mental disorder (Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network 2016). There is also a range of less frequently occurring mental disorders (e.g. substance use disorders, bipolar affective disorder, conduct disorder and different forms of psychosis) that vary in terms of symptoms and severity. Some mental disorders (such as depression, anxiety disorders and eating disorders) tend to occur more frequently in females, whilst others (such as substance use disorders, conduct disorder and different forms of psychosis) are more common in males (Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network 2016). The fact that over 800,000 people die by suicide each year reflects the scale of mental health difficulties faced by people across the globe (Naghavi 2019).

Importantly, *mental health* has been defined, not merely as the absence of mental disorders, but instead as 'a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community' (WHO 2014). In recent decades there has been growing interest in the concept of *subjective wellbeing* (SWB) which refers to a person's appraisal of their psychological, emotional and social wellbeing (Keyes 2002). It has been proposed that levels of subjective wellbeing can be separate but related to levels of mental disorders (Westerhof and Keyes

2010). People who have high levels of subjective wellbeing are said to be *flourishing*, whilst those with low levels of subjective wellbeing are described as *languishing* (Westerhof and Keyes 2010). The ‘take-home’ message here is that those working on *Tyre 2* are principally concerned with treating mental disorders if and when these occur, promoting people’s levels of subjective wellbeing, and exploring ways of helping people to regulate their emotional experience so that the development of disorders can be prevented.

Historically, understanding about how mental health and sporting performance were associated with each other was limited. The *Mental Health Model* (MHM, Morgan 1985) proposed that there was a direct relationship between sport performance and mental health—the higher the level of mental health problems, then the lower the standard of performance. Although there is in general good support for this view, MacIntyre et al. (2017) highlighted the need for a more nuanced approach that recognised the potential impact that organisational stressors relating to the sporting environment and sport-related factors (e.g. injury and difficult transitions out of sport) can have on mental health. In recent years, the mental health and wellbeing of sport performers has received much-needed public and academic attention (Rice et al. 2016; Ingle 2019). For example, consensus statements and UK Government policy have highlighted that the mental health and wellbeing of sport performers should be a key consideration for researchers and clinicians (Schinke et al. 2018; Henriksen et al. 2020; Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport 2018; Chang et al. 2020).



DINOSAUR DAVE

What have athletes got to feel depressed about? They are living the dream, aren't they?



METEORITE MEGHAN

Research has highlighted that symptoms of psychological distress are common among sport performers (Reardon et al., 2019). It is recognised that aspects of competitive sport can contribute to poor mental health e.g. injury, overtraining, and an unrelenting pressure to perform (Rice et al., 2016; Chang et al., 2020). A recent meta-analysis (a review of existing research studies that have focused on a particular topic) commissioned by the International Olympic Committee reported rates of psychological distress among sport performers ranging from 19% for alcohol misuse to 34% for symptoms of anxiety and depression (Gouttebauge et al., 2019). Sport performers have been critical of the mental health and wellbeing support that has been made available to them during their careers (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Conn, 2017).

So unlike Dave suggests, athletes do experience challenging times that can contribute to poor mental health and performance. It has been argued that sporting environments can indeed magnify these symptoms, as they can be typically aggressive, competitive climates (Richardson et al. 2004), and athletes may be forced to demonstrate ‘macho’ behaviours in order to survive socially within the organisation. In such contexts, engaging in psychological work where athletes are afforded opportunities to reflect on their thoughts and feelings may be mischaracterised as being a sign of weakness. The culture of a sporting organisation is predominantly dictated by coaches, and their opinions about the value of forms of support can significantly influence other people around them. This is particularly the case regarding sport psychology. The tone set by the coaches is therefore of paramount importance to the long-term psychological development in athletes. It is not uncommon for elite coaches to view themselves as unofficial sport psychologists (Brown and Potrac 2009). Unfortunately, there have been instances of coaches dismissing the contribution of sport psychology consultants as being “‘mumbo jumbo’ and just about relaxation training in the locker room” (Johnson et al. 2011, p. 315). These perceptions of the role of psychology in sport can be damaging, as coaches are so instrumental in establishing the expectations of people around them. Sport and performance psychologists wishing to work within elite sport settings need to be prepared for the demands of maintaining relationships and welcoming input from different stakeholders in a performance

enhancement setting (McCalla and Fitzpatrick 2016). In turn, coaches, and support staff more generally, need to be open to the role that psychological practitioners can bring to both performance and wellbeing.

Key Considerations in Delivering the *Flexible Mind* Approach

Receiving support from pit crew members to adequately support *Tyre 1* and *Tyre 2* is clearly important for the journey towards *WExceLLence*. But the ultimate responsibility for driving the process forward rests with the athlete (the driver). In the absence of the athlete's willingness to respond flexibly to his/her context, all the efforts of the pit crew may be in vain. This motorsport analogy will be referenced a number of times throughout the book. The driver, the track and the pit crew will all be discussed at various points to illustrate efforts to develop and/or sustain *WExceLLence*. The illustration provided in Fig. 1.3 highlights that a range of different professionals are involved in the 'pit crew' that support athletes. This gives rise to a number of important questions posed by Need a Clue Sue below.



NEED A CLUE SUE

Who can benefit from reading this book?

Various stakeholders including, but not limited to, sport and exercise psychologists, certified mental performance consultants, nutritionists, sport scientists, strength and conditioning coaches, assistant coaches, specialist coaches, head coaches, physiotherapists, medics, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, counsellors, CBT therapists may find the material in the book interesting and relevant. Essentially, the hope is that anyone

who is involved in supporting an athlete or sports teams will get new insights from the book. Although focused on sport, the material discussed in this book will also be relevant and informative for other high-performance environments such as those within businesses and organisations. This book is written in such a way as to support practitioners in delivering the *Flexible Mind* approach. This then raises another important question ...



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Okay, so I am one of those people that could benefit from reading this book, but can I actually deliver the *Flexible Mind* approach?

Practitioners have a duty of care towards athletes that they are supporting. It is important that practitioners are adequately qualified and competent to deliver interventions for the particular purpose that they have been consulted. The division of labour between different specialisms in the support of athletes has at times been a contentious issue with heated debates, both within and between specialisms, about what qualifies someone to deliver particular forms of intervention. The *Flexible Mind* approach eschews these debates by targeting a process called *psychological flexibility* that transcends divides between specialisms such as sport science, sport and exercise psychology, and mental health. The authors of this book recommend that the *Flexible Mind* approach should be delivered by practitioners who have at a minimum a postgraduate degree in a form of applied psychology (e.g. sport and exercise psychology, clinical psychology, counselling psychology, etc.). This will help provide the requisite knowledge of psychological processes for intervention delivery. As such, practitioner psychologists (such as sport and exercise psychologists, clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists, etc.) will be well placed to deliver the

intervention. We will be adopting the term ‘practitioner’ throughout the text, to collectively describe these various professions. It will, however, be important for these practitioners to seek appropriate supervision for delivering the intervention (more about this later).

There is a range of ‘warning lights’ that practitioners should be alert to which should signal when issues need to be escalated and specialist consultation is required. Warning lights include a sustained period of low mood, acute distress/trauma, complicated grief, psychosis, suicidal ideation/intent and/or addictions. If such issues arise, then urgent support should be sought from a mental health professional.

Sport-specific factors that would meet criteria for ‘warning lights’ would include the following: (1) physical injury will necessitate the involvement of experts in the physical management and rehabilitation of the injury, (2) sustained performance decrement will require the involvement of the head/assistant and/or strength and conditioning coaches, (3) weight loss/weight gain will require consultation with the nutritionist, strength and conditioning coaches and (4) competition anxiety would benefit from specialist input from sport psychology. A guiding principle of the *Flexible Mind* approach is that the athlete should be empowered to drive the process forward—the athlete can be well placed to notice sources of *pull* or *drag* on one or both of the tyres that facilitate the journey towards *WExceLLence*. However, it may be that the athlete has only limited insight into the issues that might be impacting performance and/or mental health. In such circumstances, it may be that members of the support team need to compassionately assist the athlete to avail of support.



DINOSAUR DAVE

So why should I employ this *Flexible Mind* approach? There are lots of different approaches out there, what makes this one the right one to enhance wellbeing and performance?

This is actually one of Dave's more rational comments, as he really does have a point. There are after all a number of different psychological interventions at the disposal of practitioners that may prove valuable for athletes. The remainder of this chapter will seek to provide a justification for the *Flexible Mind* approach by critically reflecting on key psychological concepts that have been focused on to date and proposing an alternative way forward. The scientific literature has thrown up a plethora of psychological characteristics that have been purported to predict career success in professional sport. For example, goal commitment, engagement in problem-focused coping behaviours and social support seeking differentiated youth players who successfully progressed into professional football and those who did not (Holt and Mitchell 2006). However, amongst these psychological qualities, there is one that has received disproportionate amounts of attention—*mental toughness* (MT).

Mental Toughness: Contribution and Contention

So, what exactly is *mental toughness*? Despite the prominence of this term within performance environments, the answer to this question remains somewhat unclear. The construct has been described as an 'umbrella' term and linked to a number of positive psychological concepts. This has led to the blurring of conceptual lines, fuelling a debate on the discreteness of the term. In the shadow of this uncertainty, two concepts that have been employed as synonyms for MT are: *Grit* and *Resilience*. However, researchers within the field have made clear distinctions between each of these concepts.



METEORITE MEGHAN

Resilience relates to an individual's reactions to risk and stress (Luthar et al., 2006). MT not only accounts for behaviours associated with these demands, it also includes the proactive tendencies of individuals to seek out challenges for personal growth. Thus mental toughness, unlike resilience, captures both proactive and reactive experiences (Lin et al., 2017; Gucciardi, 2017). MT is therefore argued to be more than just resilience. The concept of *grit* has also been likened to MT, however there are important differences between the constructs. Grit is concerned primarily with a singular goal and its associated behaviours (Duckworth, 2016), whereas MT encompasses multiple, and potentially conflicting goals (Gucciardi, 2017). MT is bigger than grit.

In this next section, definitions of MT will be explored, in a quest to explore what exactly it means to be mentally tough. There will be a summary of the research findings relating to how MT impacts on performance and how it may or may not play a role in developing a *Flexible Mind*. There will also be a critical reflection on some of the limitations associated with how MT has been understood and addressed to date.

If you were to write a tweet (#FlexibleMind) defining *mental toughness*, how would you use your 280 characters? Grab your mobile phone or a piece of paper and have a go at producing your own definition.

MT has been described as an umbrella term that encapsulates many positive psychological attributes. When reflecting on the research, there is a clear theme that suggests MT enables athletes to manage a wide range of stressors. Stress or 'pressure' is an unavoidable aspect of sporting performance; it is part of the experience of performing. Unlike the old adage suggests, pressure is not just for tyres! Whether it's taking a penalty kick to get a team back into a football match, facing a fast bowler in the last over of play in the first day of a cricket test-match, or a putt to win a two ball match-play in golf, important questions are frequently asked of athletes' 'bottle'—that is his/her ability to handle stress. There are a wide range of potential stressors that athletes must cope with if they are to perform optimally. These stressors can be self-generated—based on the 'chatter' that the athlete's mind might generate about what's at stake,

and whether he/she can deliver. These stressors can also be externally generated—expectations communicated from teammates, ‘sledging’ from opponents, spectators’ efforts to distract the athlete, and so on. Stressors can also be physical (e.g. injury and pain) and environmental (weather and altitude) in nature. MT has been proposed as a quality that separates those who can cope with stressors and those whose performance falters.



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Early attempts at defining MT highlighted its ability to allow players to cope and perform better than their opponents (Jones, 2002). As research progressed, Gucciardi, Gordon and Dimock (2009) suggested that MT can be understood as ‘a collection of values, attitudes, behaviours, and emotions that enable athletes to persevere and overcome any obstacle, adversity, or pressure experienced, but also to maintain concentration and motivation when things are going well to consistently achieve their goals’ (p.191). Similarly, Clough and Strycharczyk (2012) stated that MT enables athletes to manage obstacles, distractions, pressure and adversity from a wide range of stressors. Most recently, understanding has evolved to regard MT as a state-like psychological resource that is purposeful, flexible, and efficient (Gucciardi, 2017).

The sheer number of different definitions has made conceptualising MT problematic, but there are two main schools of thought. Drawing on Kobasa’s (1979) *Hardiness Theory*, Clough et al. (2002) suggested that MT comprises of 4C’s: *Challenge, Commitment, Control and Confidence*. *Challenge* denotes the extent to which we view change as an opportunity for self-development, and not as threat. *Commitment* reflects how we set and respond to goals and how well we stick at things and see things through. *Control* consists of emotional-control and life-control—the former indicates how in control of our emotions we are and how much of them we show; are we poker-faced or do we wear our heart on our sleeve? Life-control, on the other hand, represents the tendency with which we feel we can influence our own life and the world around us or how much we feel puppeted or controlled by others. The final component of *mental toughness, confidence*, is also divided into two sub-components: *confidence*