

The Psychosocial Effects of Doping: an Athlete's Addiction to Success

Doping and the Athlete's Addiction to Success

The NHS website defines addiction as 'not having control over doing, taking or using something to the point where it could be harmful to you'¹ and this becomes applicable to high-level athletes when their urge to succeed causes them harm. They become so in need of 'doing' success that they may damage their physical and mental health, or use unethical and deceitful methods in order to fulfil their need to succeed. These deceitful methods may often take the shape of using Performance-enhancing drugs to gain an advantage against others in competition, otherwise referred to as doping. Doping is no new issue, however, the prevalence of it may be as high as ever with estimates suggesting 14-39% of elite athletes dope in some form.² The physical effects are well established and known, however the damage doping causes to the athlete does not stop there. Just like a person who may be addicted to alcohol, the athlete who is addicted to success will suffer beyond their physical health with both their mental and social health being impaired. This begs the question why are athletes who are caught doping treated with disgust and a lack of empathy when it is well established these views towards an addict of other kinds are outdated and immoral?

Doping and an Athlete's Mental Health

It is starting to become well-established within society today that addicts should be treated with empathy, and their addiction be treated as a medical condition. This is not only due to the physical injury that can be caused through an addiction to drugs or alcohol, for example, but also due to the mental health challenges addicts face. Shame and guilt often floods the athlete's conscious when doping, with these views being perpetuated by the media in high-profile cases. This constant damage to an athlete's self-worth can present through depression. This coupled with elite-level athletes having a higher levels depression, it is not surprising that doping could cause or amplify these symptoms.³ The damage to an athlete's mental health does not just start at being caught, paranoia and anxiety can cloud an athlete's life as they may be in constant fear of being caught and the implications of this. This is where

another parallel is drawn with addicts. The majority of drug addicts hide their substance addiction from their families, out of fear of stigma and disappointment for example. ⁴This lingering fear of being caught can wear down an athlete causing anxiety-like symptoms and damaging their day-to-day life.

The Social Damage Doping Causes

Once an athlete has been caught doping it often leads to outrage, within specific sporting communities or larger international audiences, leading to shame and guilt not only in the athlete but also within the athlete's friends and family. This can lead to the relationships between the athlete and their friends and family worsening, with some situations leading to relationships being cut off. Lance Armstrong, who infamously was caught doping in cycling, discussed these issues referring to the trust of his son being lost and the scandal affecting his mother with it 'taking a toll on her life'.⁵ This damage inflicted on relationships can take a long time, and a lot of effort, to resolve and can lead to the athlete feeling isolated. This isolation and loneliness during a time where their own life may be under scrutiny online, may further damage their mental health. ⁶

Changing the viewpoint

The current viewpoint of the 'doping' athlete is one of outrage, disappointment and negative stigma. This is due to the breakage of trust that the public and sport have in the athlete competing fairly. There is by no means any part of this where I believe elite sport should not be competed in a clean and fair manner, and I believe that doping athletes should be reprimanded and rehabilitated. However, the treatment of doping athletes should be in another manner than the current norm. This is due to the damage that doping, and being caught, does to the athlete's mental and social health. The harm caused to the athlete by doping is far more than just physical, and any suggestion of it being so comes from an outdated and unempathetic view. An athlete using doping as a means to reach their addiction to success should be viewed with the same compassion and understanding as a patient stealing to meet their substance addiction. Next time you hear of, or come across, an athlete doping I hope you consider the difficulties the athlete faces and act in a considerate sensitive manner.

Word count 745

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