

## Prevalence of Common Mental Health Issues Among Elite Runners in Kenya: A Desktop Review

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### Abstract

The study employed a desk-top review to investigate the prevalence, causes, and coping mechanisms of common mental health issues among elite athletes in Kenya. Focusing on anxiety, depression, sleep-related problems, alcohol misuse, and eating disorders, the review examined literature on athletes training in Elgeyo Marakwet, Nandi, Uasin Gishu, Laikipia, and Kajiado counties. Using the biopsychosocial model, the study explored the interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors affecting mental health. The findings are expected to inform policy development, enhance support structures, and foster a culturally sensitive approach to mental health in elite sports. By addressing stigma and promoting holistic well-being, the review aims to safeguard athletes' mental health and ensure sustainable participation in competitive sports. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions to support elite athletes in managing mental health challenges effectively.

**Keywords:** *Elite athletes, mental health, anxiety, depression, sleep-related problems*

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### 1. Background of the study

Mental health plays a crucial role in an individual's overall well-being, affecting their ability to cope with stress, work productively, and contribute to society. Among elite athletes, particularly runners, mental health is increasingly recognized as a critical factor influencing performance and overall quality of life. The prevalence of mental health disorders among elite athletes has become a significant concern, with conditions such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, alcohol misuse, and eating disorders reported at high rates (Gouttebarger et al., 2017). Despite the known physical benefits of regular exercise, research indicates that elite athletes may be at heightened risk of mental health issues due to the unique pressures of competitive sports.

Studies suggest that elite athletes face intense psychological demands, including performance expectations, rigorous training schedules, injury risks, and career transitions, which can

contribute to mental health challenges (Reardon et al., 2019). The highly competitive environment, coupled with social and cultural stigmas around mental health, often discourages athletes from seeking help (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). Moreover, elite athletes in Kenya frequently live in training camps away from their families, limiting their access to essential social support structures (Rice et al., 2016). The lack of mental health resources and awareness further exacerbates the issue, leaving many athletes vulnerable to psychological distress.

Kenyan athletes have long dominated the global stage in long-distance running, winning major international events such as the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, and World Championships. Their success has significantly contributed to Kenya's global reputation, national pride, and economic growth. However, the pressure to uphold these achievements can be overwhelming, with expectations from coaches, sponsors, and the public often creating significant mental strain. Media scrutiny and social media criticism add to the burden, as highlighted by renowned athletes such as Eliud Kipchoge, who attributed a poor performance to sleep deprivation caused by online pressure (Rotich, 2024).

Despite Kenya's dominance in athletics, research on the mental health of elite Kenyan athletes remains limited. While global studies have extensively examined mental health in sports, there is a gap in understanding the prevalence and impact of these issues among Kenyan athletes. This review sought to address this gap by investigating the prevalence of common mental health issues among elite athletes in Kenya, examining the factors contributing to these challenges, and exploring coping mechanisms used by athletes. The findings may provide insights into the mental health landscape of Kenyan elite athletes and inform policies aimed at improving mental health awareness, support systems, and interventions tailored to the unique needs of this population.

### **1.1 Common Mental Health Issues and Sports Participation among Elite Athletes**

Mental health issues are increasingly recognized as a major concern among elite athletes, including runners. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) categorizes common mental health disorders in athletes to include anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, and substance abuse. These conditions can significantly impact an athlete's performance, well-being, and long-term career sustainability. Despite Kenya's dominance in long-distance running, research on the prevalence and impact of mental health issues among elite Kenyan athletes remains limited. This article reviews existing literature on common mental health challenges and their relationship with sports participation, particularly among elite athletes.

#### ***Anxiety***

Anxiety disorders are highly prevalent in elite sports and have been shown to significantly impact athletes. The immense pressure to perform, fear of failure, and rigorous training regimens contribute to elevated anxiety levels among athletes (Reardon et al., 2019; Hagele et al., 2020; Gucciardi et al., 2020). Elite athletes often experience pre-competition nervousness, which, when excessive, can lead to performance decline and long-term psychological distress (Smith, 2009). Additionally, the hyper-competitive nature of athletics and early specialization in sports can exacerbate anxiety symptoms (Gül et al., 2019; Norton et al., 2016).

Recent research highlights the interplay between anxiety and other factors affecting elite athletes, such as injury prevention and recovery (Johnson et al., 2023), performance impacts

(Meyer et al., 2022), and the effectiveness of anxiety-reduction interventions (Lee et al., 2021). Maladaptive perfectionism where athletes set unrealistically high expectations for themselves—, has also been linked to heightened anxiety and decreased overall well-being (Stoeber et al., 2014).

### ***Depression***

Depression is a significant concern among elite athletes, often resulting from the physical and psychological demands of high-performance sports. Factors such as unrealistic expectations, social isolation, and the exhaustive nature of training contribute to depressive symptoms in athletes (Reardon et al., 2019; Hägele et al., 2020; Gucciardi et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2016). Research suggests that female athletes may experience a higher risk of depression due to additional pressures related to body image, societal expectations, and social media scrutiny (Jones et al., 2019; Weissman et al., 2020).

Studies have identified key risk factors for depression among elite athletes, including personality traits, maladaptive coping strategies, and lack of social support systems (O'Connor et al., 2022). Effective treatment approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), antidepressant medication, and exercise-based interventions, have been explored for their potential benefits in managing depression among elite athletes (Williams et al., 2023).

### ***Sleep Disturbances***

Quality sleep is essential for athletic performance, recovery, and overall well-being, yet sleep disturbances are commonly reported among elite runners. Factors such as pre-competition anxiety, travel-related disruptions, and competition-related stress contribute to irregular sleep patterns, negatively impacting an athlete's performance, mood, and recovery (Reardon et al., 2019; Gouttebarga et al., 2019; Engebretsen et al., 2018).

Recent studies have established a direct correlation between sleep quality and athletic performance, with findings indicating that poor sleep increases injury risks and hinders optimal performance (Kim et al., 2022). Strategies aimed at improving sleep among elite athletes, such as sleep hygiene education and the implementation of sleep monitoring technologies, have demonstrated positive effects on sleep quality and overall mental health (Taylor et al., 2021).

### ***Eating Disorders***

Disordered eating behaviors are prevalent among elite athletes, primarily due to the pressure to maintain an optimal weight and physique. In endurance sports like long-distance running, where body weight is directly linked to performance, athletes are at an increased risk of developing eating disorders (Kervin et al., 2018). Female athletes are particularly vulnerable due to societal beauty standards and the pressure to achieve a lean physique (Jones et al., 2019; Weissman et al., 2020).

Research has identified multiple risk factors contributing to eating disorders among elite athletes, including personality traits, body image dissatisfaction, and coaching practices that emphasize weight control (Brown et al., 2023). Effective prevention and treatment programs emphasize a multidisciplinary approach involving medical, psychological, and nutritional professionals (Martin et al., 2022). Addressing eating disorders in elite runners is crucial, as prolonged disordered eating can lead to severe physical and mental health consequences.

### ***Substance Abuse***

Substance abuse, including alcohol and performance-enhancing drugs, is a growing concern among elite athletes. Many athletes turn to substances as a coping mechanism for stress, performance anxiety, and physical pain (Gulliver et al., 2012). The use of alcohol and illicit drugs can have severe consequences on both athletic performance and mental health, often leading to disciplinary actions, career disruptions, and long-term health complications.

Recent studies have assessed the prevalence of substance abuse among elite runners (Smith et al., 2021), explored contributing factors (Davis et al., 2022), and examined the effectiveness of prevention and rehabilitation programs (Johnson et al., 2023). Social support, peer influence, and educational interventions have been identified as critical components in preventing substance misuse among elite athletes (Kelly et al., 2008).

## **2. Methodology**

The study employed a desktop review approach, which was deemed appropriate for obtaining and analyzing existing data on mental health issues among elite athletes. This method was chosen for its versatility, efficiency, and ability to synthesize relevant information from various sources without the need for direct field data collection.

### ***2.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria***

The desktop review focused on secondary data retrieved from peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy documents, and institutional publications related to mental health in elite athletes. Key sources included reports from the Anti-Doping Agency of Kenya (ADAK), the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and previous studies conducted on elite training camps in Kenya. The five counties examined Elgeyo Marakwet, Nandi, Uasin Gishu, Laikipia, and Kajiado were selected due to their prominence in hosting elite training camps and their significant contribution to Kenya's long-distance running success.

### ***2.2 Data Collection Process***

Data was collected by systematically reviewing literature from credible online databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and institutional repositories. Specific keywords such as "mental health in elite athletes," "psychosocial factors in sports," "elite training camps in Kenya," and "athlete well-being" guided the search. Additionally, reports and statistics from ADAK, the Ministry of Sports, Culture and Heritage, and the IOC provided contextual insights.

### ***2.3 Data Analysis***

The collected data was analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns, trends, and key findings related to the prevalence, causes, and coping mechanisms of mental health issues among elite athletes. Descriptive statistics from secondary sources, including mean values, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were synthesized to provide quantitative insights. Qualitative data, such as expert opinions and policy recommendations, were categorized into emerging themes for further discussion.

## ***2.4 Validity and Reliability***

To ensure validity, the study relied on authoritative sources, prioritizing peer-reviewed literature and official reports. Reliability was maintained by cross-referencing multiple sources and applying a systematic approach to data selection and analysis. The IOC Sport Mental Health Assessment Tool 1 (SMHAT-1) was reviewed as a benchmark for assessing mental health in elite athletes, ensuring alignment with international standards.

## ***2.5 Ethical Considerations***

As a desktop review, the study adhered to ethical guidelines by correctly citing all sources and ensuring that data was used responsibly. Confidentiality and anonymity of individuals mentioned in secondary sources were maintained. The findings were synthesized objectively, without manipulation or misinterpretation of data.

## ***2.6 Dissemination of Findings***

The research findings will be disseminated through academic publications, policy briefs, and online platforms accessible to sports organizations, mental health practitioners, and policymakers. The study aims to inform evidence-based interventions for improving the mental well-being of elite athletes in Kenya and beyond.

## **3. Findings from Case Studies of Athletes**

The findings from the literature review highlight a significant concern regarding mental health issues among elite athletes. Despite the physical and psychological resilience required for elite sports, athletes remain highly susceptible to conditions such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, and substance abuse. These issues can negatively impact both performance and overall well-being.

### ***3.1 Prevalence and Impact of Mental Health Issues on Elite Runners***

The reviewed studies demonstrate that mental health disorders are widespread in elite athletics, with anxiety and depression being the most frequently reported conditions. The pressure to consistently perform at peak levels, meet societal and sponsor expectations, and cope with intense training regimens contributes to the heightened prevalence of these conditions. While elite runners, especially in Kenya, are often celebrated for their endurance and mental toughness, these very factors may contribute to underreporting and inadequate treatment of mental health issues.

One critical observation is the bidirectional relationship between mental health and sports participation. While physical activity is often recommended as a means to improve mental health, the professionalization of sports introduces unique stressors that can exacerbate psychological distress. Kenyan elite runners, many of whom train from an early age with aspirations of international success, face immense pressure that may elevate their risk for developing anxiety, depression, or disordered eating patterns.

### ***3.2 Interrelation of Mental Health Issues in Elite Running***

The mental health conditions experienced by elite runners are deeply interconnected, creating a complex web of challenges that can significantly impact both performance and overall well-being. Anxiety and sleep disturbances, for instance, often reinforce each other, as the



nervousness associated with pre-competition stress and the relentless demands of high performance can lead to chronic sleep deprivation. This, in turn, disrupts recovery processes and impairs cognitive function, further exacerbating anxiety symptoms.

Similarly, depression and substance abuse frequently co-exist, with athletes struggling with depressive symptoms sometimes resorting to alcohol or drugs as a means of coping with their emotional distress. This reliance on substances not only deteriorates mental and physical health but also negatively affects training and competitive performance. Another critical issue is the prevalence of eating disorders, particularly in distance running, where maintaining an optimal body weight is often linked to performance success. The pressure to achieve and sustain a lean physique can drive athletes toward restrictive eating behaviors, which may result in fatigue, hormonal imbalances, and an increased risk of injury. Collectively, these interrelated mental health concerns illustrate the urgent need for holistic support systems that address the unique psychological demands of elite runners.

### ***3.3 The Kenyan Context and Gaps in Research***

Despite Kenya's global dominance in long-distance running, research on the prevalence and impact of mental health issues among its elite runners remains limited. Most available studies focus on Western athletes, with few addressing the unique socio-cultural and economic factors influencing Kenyan runners. In Kenya, running is often viewed as a pathway out of poverty, adding layer of stress for athletes who see success as not only a personal achievement but also a means of supporting their families.

Additionally, cultural perceptions surrounding mental health may contribute to stigma and reluctance to seek help. Unlike physical injuries, mental health issues are often misunderstood or dismissed as a lack of mental toughness. This perception can discourage runners from acknowledging their struggles and seeking appropriate interventions.

### ***3.4 Practical Implications for Elite Athletes and Sports Management***

The findings from this desktop review highlight the critical need for increased mental health awareness and support systems within the athletic community. Coaches, team managers, and sports organizations should prioritize mental health education, equipping athletes with the knowledge to recognize early signs of distress and ensuring they have access to counseling services. Given the unique pressures faced by elite athletes, interventions must be tailored to address both performance-related stress and overall well-being.

Strategies such as resilience training and mindfulness practices may play a crucial role in mitigating anxiety and depression. Additionally, policy and institutional support are essential, with national and international athletics bodies needing to implement measures that promote mental health, facilitate access to mental health professionals, and integrate psychological well-being into training programs. Furthermore, there is a clear need for more empirical research focused on Kenyan elite athletes to quantify the prevalence of mental health challenges and develop culturally appropriate interventions that address their specific needs.

## **4. Conclusion**

Mental health issues among elite runners are complex, multifaceted, and significantly impact performance and career longevity. While sports participation offers physical and psychological

benefits, the pressures of elite competition introduce substantial risks for anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, and substance abuse. Given the prominence of Kenyan runners in global athletics, addressing these issues is critical for ensuring their well-being and sustained success. Further research and targeted interventions will be essential in bridging the existing knowledge gap and fostering a healthier sporting environment.

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