

Abuse in gymnastics: Delivery of online group therapy using Focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

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In the summer of 2020, the world of gymnastics was rocked by the release of the documentary Athlete A. It quickly became apparent that gymnasts in the UK had also experienced similar abuse at the hands of their coaches and that their allegations had equally been ignored by British Gymnastics. Many elite gymnasts broke their silence and openly discussed the emotional and physical abuse that they had experienced. Consequently, The British Athlete Commission (BAC) with the NSPCC launched an independent helpline for gymnasts to report the abuse that they had received after it became apparent that British Gymnastics had been woefully inadequate in acting upon the complaints received, and they were no longer trusted.

It became evident that these gymnasts needed psychological support. This paper details the applied work with BAC to deliver online group therapy sessions for those gymnasts who could benefit from psychological support. The therapy sessions were designed in line with the principles of Focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (FACT), a brief intervention. The aim of FACT is to focus on fusion, experiential avoidance and unworkable action, leaving behind the more traditional DSM diagnostic approach. Thus, the primary aim was to focus on active intervention with the principle that one small change can create a domino effect and be the catalyst for meaningful psychological transformation.

This method ensured we could work with as many people as possible, and FACT facilitated designing a programme based on delivering three sessions to each group. In order to be able to participate in a group, each participant was identified by BAC as being someone who may benefit from the group sessions. Each group's membership was carefully considered to ensure a degree of homogeneity. Each group had a maximum of eight participants and was facilitated by two psychologists. Since November 2020, 74 people have attended the groups.

Overall, the programme has been extremely successful, and endorses the effectiveness of FACT as an efficacious method of delivering meaningful psychological support for abused gymnasts evidenced by participant and psychologist evaluations. The sessions helped participants to understand that they are not alone, and that they were not responsible for the abuse they received. Moreover, the online delivery increased the accessibility of the psychological support. Given the prevalence of damaging behaviour in sport this programme has extensive relevance to practitioners supporting abused athletes.