

# **A Management Framework of the Chinese Elite Athletes' Mental Health**

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# ***Current Research Status of Mental Health among Chinese Athletes***

There has been increased attention on the mental health of Chinese elite athletes during the last 10 years. Chinese sport psychology researchers have explored the mental health of Chinese elite athletes and preliminary evidence has been established via quantitative (e.g., Yang, 2015) and qualitative studies (e.g., Yan, 2020).

# **Current Management Status of Mental Health among Chinese Athletes**

Given the scale and numbers of elite athletes in China, currently there seems to be a dearth of systematic research on the management of mental health among Chinese elite athletes. **A major concern is that there are only a small number of athletes' mental health management work had been specifically carried out at the national and provincial elite sport training centers in China.**

**We need to develop a sport training center-based mental health management framework for Chinese athletes**

## ***Features of the Chinese sport system***

**The sport training system and environments for Chinese athletes are different from their Western counterparts that all of the elite athletes in China training and living in government-fully funded and centrally managed sport training centers (Si, Duan, Li, & Jiang, 2011).**

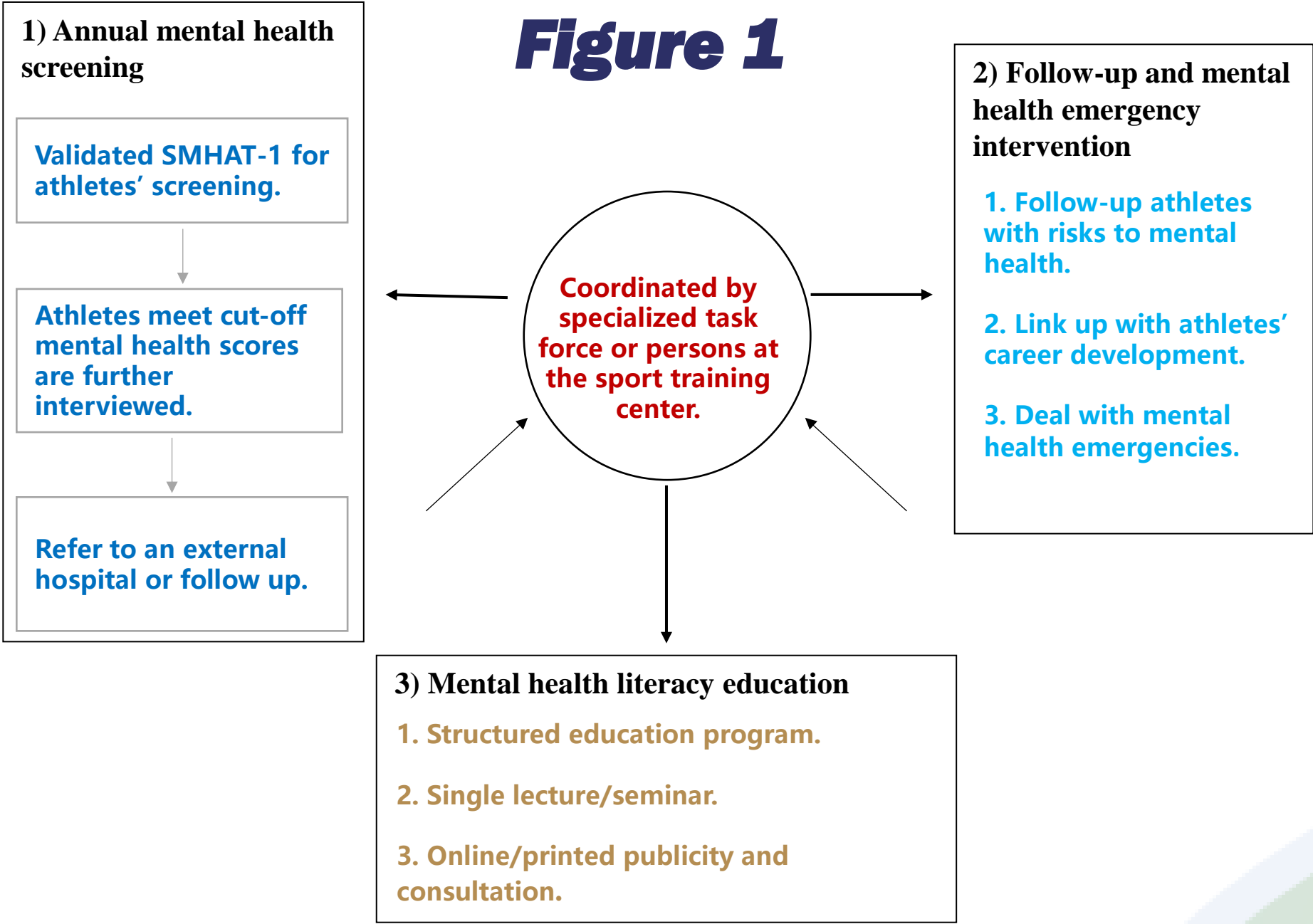
**There is usually a research or science and technology department within each of the Chinese national and provincial sport training centers and it includes sports psychology or psychological counseling professionals.**

1. Considering the aims and structures of the existing mental health services and management recommended by the IOC (Reardon et al., 2019);
2. Taking the unique working mechanism of Chinese sport system into consideration;

**Our research team proposed a sport training center-based mental health management framework for Chinese elite athletes.**



# Figure 1



# Annual Mental Health Screening

## 1) Annual mental health screening

Validated SMHAT-1 for athletes' screening.

Athletes meet cut-off mental health scores are further interviewed.

Refer to an external hospital or follow up.

**Step 1:** Screening all training center-based athletes with validated SMHAT-1

**Step 2:** For athletes with negative mental health indicators exceed a certain threshold, follow-up interviews need to be conducted. Based on a standardized protocol, two psychological professionals then interview athletes meet certain cut-off values and further assess the mental health status of athletes, independently.

**Step 3:** For those athletes who are assessed as high risk, the mental health team should advise the center's management to refer the athlete to an external partner-hospital for further diagnosis and treatment. For athletes with moderate levels of mental health risk, the mental health team will follow up with them for 4 weeks.

## ***Example***

The G provincial sport training centre (with 800 athletes), located at South China. Annual mental health screening has been done in 2021 – 2024.

The mental health team consists of one full-time centre-based psychology consultant and three part-time certified sport psychology consultants, with one part-time professional serving as the leader of the team. There are also two interns who were pursuing master's degrees in sport psychology under the supervision of team leader.

The G sports training centre also has a taskforce for elite athletes' career development planning which consists of two part-time psychology counsellors.



# ***Follow-Up and Mental Health Emergency Intervention***

***First***, for those athletes with mental health symptoms that are below the clinical standard after screening, the mental health team need to work closely with coaches, team medical and other support staff to meet the requirements of follow-up support.

***Second***, for those athletes who are diagnosed with mental health disorders (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder, and eating disorder), great efforts should be made when they return to the sport training centers from psychiatric consultation at external partner-hospitals.

**2) Follow-up and mental health emergency intervention**

**1. Follow-up athletes with risks to mental health.**

**2. Link up with athletes' career development.**

**3. Deal with mental health emergencies.**



## **Example**

For athletes with moderate-level mental health risks at the sports training center, our mental health team continued to follow up with them for 4 weeks. We provided consultation and observational assessments at least once per week, and at the same time gathering feedback from coaches and team medical staff. Specifically, the mental health symptoms for two-thirds of the athletes with moderate level of mental health risk gradually disappeared after 4 weeks of follow-up intervention. For another one-third of athletes, their mental health symptoms did not disappear but at the same time did not get worse, and therefore they were continuously monitored to prevent the conditions getting worse.

The high mental health risk athletes who were diagnosed with mental health disorders by the external partner-hospital, received treatments from hospital psychiatrists. Then, they were released from the hospitals and returned to the sports training center for four weeks without having to join scheduled regular training of their teams or competitions if any. The mental health team at sports training center continued to maintain their communication with the hospital psychiatrists concerning these athletes.

# **Mental Health Literacy Education**

## **Example**

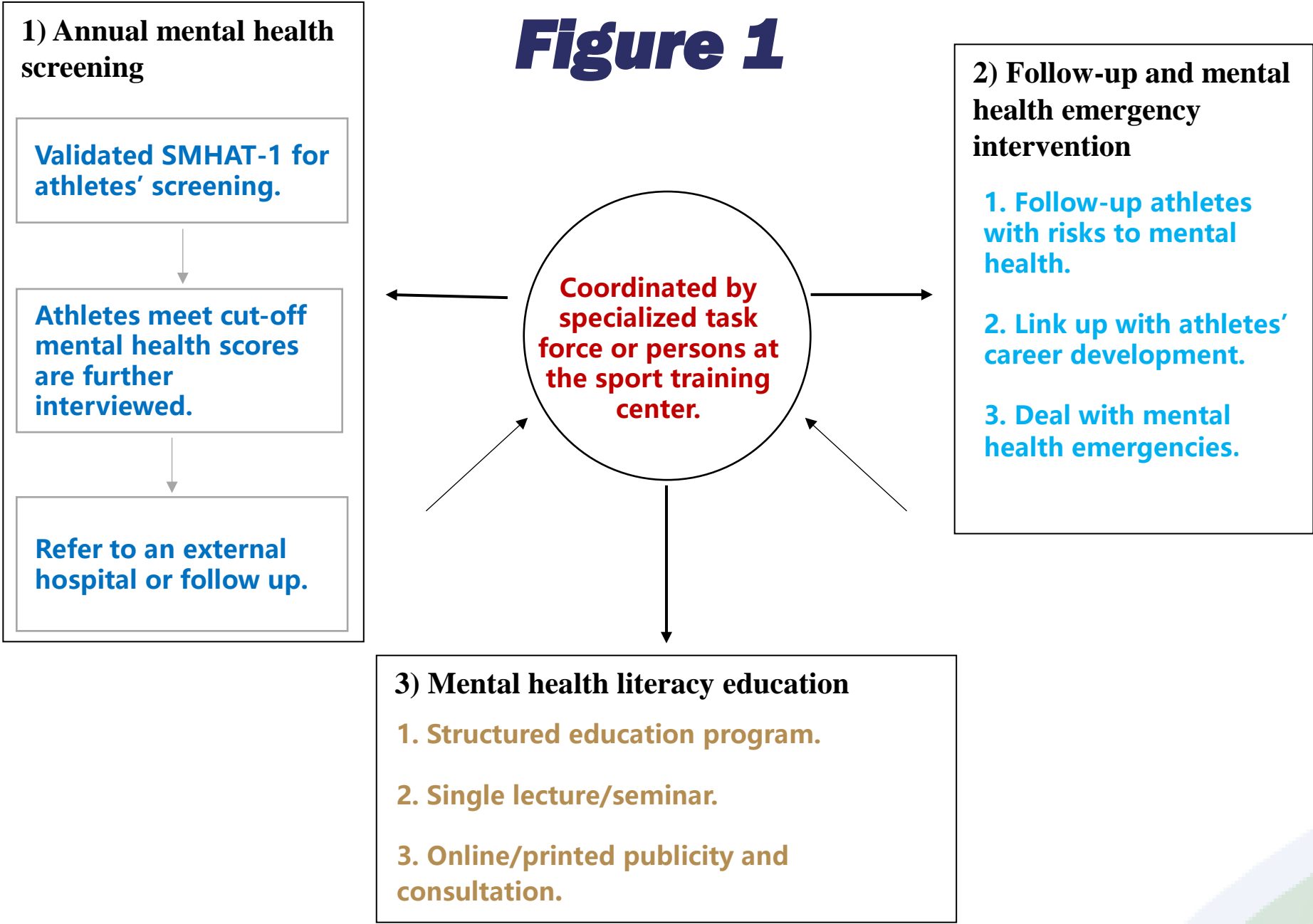
**Our team conducted a mental health literacy intervention for elite athletes at H province in the winter training period from December 2019 to January 2020. It should be noted that this is an independent training without mental health screening. A total of 60 elite badminton and table tennis athletes (35 males and 25 females) were recruited.**

**The design of randomized controlled trial was used and the intervention lasted eight weeks with one 120-minute training session per week. Findings demonstrated that the intervention significantly improved athletes' mental health literacy, help-seeking attitudes and intentions, as well as reduced stigma in both post-intervention and follow-up tests. Although there were no significant intervention effects on athletes' help-seeking behaviors at both post- and follow-up tests, this demonstrates that the center-based mental health literacy interventions for Chinese elite athletes is feasible and can be integrated into the management framework.**

### **3) Mental health literacy education**

- 1. Structured education program.**
- 2. Single lecture/seminar.**
- 3. Online/printed publicity and consultation.**

# Figure 1



# Conclusion

- 1. We introduced our recently developed mental health management framework for Chinese athletes.**
- 2. We have also preliminarily applied this framework at two provincial level high-performance sport training centers with satisfactory results.**
- 3. Future studies should consider expanding the scale of implementation, nationwide, at an increasing number of sport training centers to test its feasibility and effectiveness in different contexts.**