

It's good to talk...

A week in the life of an Applied Sport Psychologist

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AT TIMES I have to pinch myself at the people, places and situations I am lucky enough to experience in my average working week. In reality my weeks rarely feel average and the variety of portfolio work I do is part of the fun. I have been a CPsychol for almost 12 years and have worked for the English Institute of Sport (EIS) for almost 10 years (champagne flutes are being prepared for September 2015). Prior to joining the EIS I lectured at St Mary's University for six years in conjunction with working with various NGBs. My current role in the EIS is very different from the role I wrote about prior to London 2012. I wrote a book chapter entitled 'Sweet Dreams are Made of These' which detailed my journey from a Korfball playing psychology undergraduate to having a nerve-tingling role at the Iconic London Games. My current role is multi-strand and is an unplanned evolution after a decade of delivering sport psychology on the international stage.

Let's start with Monday. Apologies, let me throw in a Wednesday to the equation. The welcome and necessary stability in my current week is the injury psychology role I do for the Intensive Rehabilitation Unit (IRU) at Bisham Abbey. I am there every Monday and Wednesday. The residential unit has up to three athletes a week who are supported by an interdisciplinary team consisting of physiotherapy, strength and conditioning, physiology, nutrition, soft tissue therapist, administrator, doctor and me. The IRU is jointly funded by the British Olympic Association and the EIS. The service is available to any athlete that is

eligible for the Olympic Games or that utilises EIS services. This multi-disciplinary residential service aims to provide timely, intensive rehabilitation to complement and add value to an athlete's recovery from surgery and/or injury. My role on a Monday is to formulate a psychological messaging strategy for the team to implement during the week. This is then followed up by a one-hour session on the Wednesday in which I will provide the appropriate intervention to enable the change necessary for the athlete to maximise their rehabilitation.

I arrive at the IRU on Monday morning where my first job is to write the discharge summary for the athletes from the week before. If the athlete is currently working with a psychologist in their sport; I will with the athlete's permission; have communicated with the psychologist prior to the admission and will aim to debrief the psychologist on departure. The discharge summary goes to personnel identified by the athlete. I discuss the content of the discharge summary at the end of the individual session I have with the athlete on Wednesday and gain their consent for what I will write. This process ensures that I work within the British Psychological Society guidelines on confidentiality and also am able to provide support to the athlete and their support staff as they transition back into the sport. This is a key part of the process of the IRU. I write the discharge summary on Monday as I can then gain input from the rest of the team at the IRU of observable changes. Following this I will start the process of case formulation around the athletes for the forthcoming week.

The formulation process is two-fold. Prior to their arrival at the IRU the athletes are asked to complete a five-question psychology screening tool which has been developed by myself with the support of colleagues both within and out with the EIS. Some of the questions have emerged from research within the EIS on one-session change; others focus on areas such as existing coping strategies, perception of threat and of pain. Alongside this data gathering direction will be sought from psychologists who are already working with the athlete. In addition to this medical information is provided from the referring doctor/physiotherapist. The second part of the formulation is in its infancy and is a 45-minute screening meeting with each athlete. The purpose of the session is to explore the presenting situation in more depth and to provide the IRU team and athlete with a psychological direction of focus for the week. Following this I will partake in the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) planning meeting in which the key aims for the week will be established. This process enables the team to have a common focus and a common language to support the athlete. This is invaluable.

Being the IRU sport psychologist is only part of the role I do for the EIS. In addition to this I technically line manage four sport psychologists. Two of these are based at Bisham Abbey so when possible I arrange a monthly formal catch up or a coffee/corridor conversation with them on a Monday. The technical line management job I do is more akin to a 'coaching/supportive' role as opposed to a traditional management role. Nonetheless understanding and educating them on the systems, processes and idiosyncrasies of the EIS is a part of my role. As part of peer supervision we have a monthly case study meeting, in which a psychologist is able to bring a case to a one-hour meeting. The only thing we discuss in this hour is the case, in order not to be side-tracked by true but irrelevant issues. Other EIS psychologists who may be in Bisham on a

Monday are welcome to join us. In the formal monthly meetings we will discuss objectives, projects, sticky issues, success stories and also remember to connect as human beings. Increasingly as a sport psychologist in my work with athletes, coaches and colleagues the importance of being a human being first is evident. This may seem obvious but as a neophyte sport psychologists I know that my need for professional boundaries and credibility made me struggle with levels of disclosure and to be myself.

So to jump from Monday to Wednesday, I've not forgotten Tuesday. On a Wednesday I will arrive at Bisham in time to be briefed by the IRU team on where the athletes are at. I will then have one hour appointments with each athlete in which I work predominantly from an Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT) perspective. Alongside ACT I also use mindfulness techniques and other second wave therapies and also following training use some of the third wave therapies including less conscious techniques such as tapping/EFT. The main aim of my interventions is to enable athletes to process thoughts, feelings and experiences in order for them to move forward in their rehabilitation in a valued direction. Through experience I have found that athletes can be 'stuck' in their rehabilitation process as they have not processed and/or challenged thoughts, beliefs, emotions and experiences. In addition many athletes arrive at the IRU in a state of threat due to their injury and other life experiences and moving them through this state of threat and into a perceived state of safety is a key component of the work done in the IRU. I have found the work by Gordon Turnbull on Trauma and Steven Porges on the Polyvagal Theory in conjunction with the work done by the psychologists who worked in the unit before me have been key to me formulating my work. Following the three sessions on Wednesday morning; with the permission of the athletes; I update the rest of the IRU team on key messaging strategies for the remainder of the week and other

pertinent issues. Confidentiality is vital and I discuss with the athlete what they feel would be helpful for the rest of the IRU team to know and how we will communicate that. From my experience over the last two to three years I have found that many athletes arrive at the IRU ready to change, keen to share concerns and committed to progress. It is a privilege to work with them and the IRU team. I will be presenting at the Fortius International Sports Injury Conference in October 2015 to highlight this work.

I started with by describing the structure of Mondays and Wednesdays for me as these are the two consistent days in my week. The rest of the week differs depending on the time of the year. Another role I do which started following the London 2012 Games is act as part of the Learning Support Team (LST) for the Elite Coach Apprentice Programme (ECAP) run by UK Sport. The ECAP programme is run over a series of eight workshops over two years in which 12 coaches identified by their NGBs follow a development programme involving workshops, master coaches and mentors. I, alongside two colleagues from UK Sport and three colleagues from the worlds of coaching, organisational psychology, executive coaching and leadership development plan, deliver and review the workshops. In terms of my week this means from September to May I am away on residential workshop for three days and two nights. The workshops traditionally run from Tuesday to Thursday so on those weeks I will be in a hotel somewhere in the country. The structure of the workshops begins with the LST meeting late afternoon on the Tuesday to finalise the content and delivery of the workshop. I have found both the planning and delivery aspect to be part of my CPD as I learn from experienced coach developers about the skills of influencing, change, leadership, self-regulation, coaching philosophy and value identification. The planning meetings ensure that there is a flow to the workshop and that our knowledge of the coaches and the topics is up to date and current. Following the plan-

ning meeting there may be informal discussions with the coaches and then we will all meet for dinner. The workshop will be then run for the next two days and will be a mixture of experiential experiences, concept/theory education, observations and presentations. This role is an opportunity to support and develop coaches across the system and is a natural extension of the coach development work a sport psychologist may do when immersed in a sport. Specific strengths I bring to this role include my knowledge of how to use the Insights Discovery Tool in sport, pressure training, solution focused influencing/nudges, ACT and the work on superstrengths. The credit for my knowledge of these goes to colleagues across the EIS who have been at the forefront of work especially on superstrengths and nudges in the sporting landscape. Peer learning cpd is a major strength of the collective nature of the EIS psychology team and something I am grateful for. Without doubt I have developed by being part of the LST on ECAP not least by improving my own influencing and delivery skills and increasing my understanding of behavioural change. Being away from home is part of being a sport psychologist. I have always being mindful of finding the balance between work and home. I am always considered when I respond to requests to be away from home and have also never feared others perceiving that I am not always busy. Family, friends, sport, fun, a glass of malbec and holidays are important to me. I try when possible to ensure there is only one six in the day.

On another Tuesday when not delivering on ECAP I can be found as I am today on a train to Weymouth. I technically line manage the EIS psychologist in sailing and so I aim to travel to Weymouth or another suitable location (Southampton Airport, for example) for a face-to-face meeting with the psychologist. Visibly supporting staff is strength of the EIS and being able to have contact with the psychologist; the other support staff in the sport and key stakeholders is an important

part of my role. The meetings are a combination of technical focus, project discussions, objective and workload balance not forgetting discussing highlights and good work. Mark Bawden; the former head of psychology for the EIS; always promoted the sharing of good news in his request to ring him with good stuff and so I make sure that we unpick successes. This is a theme across all my work and I am quick to pick up on the use of the word 'just'. When I hear it I know this is my cue to unpick how the person delivered in that situation. Long train journeys are an opportunity compared to time spent in the car and I try to take the train as much as possible. The solitude of the train enables me to get into admin fever. I always aim to stay on top of emails and endeavour to reply to emails as soon as possible. So Tuesday are either a day to start ECAP delivery, meet staff I line manage or sometimes I work in the UK Sport offices in central London on some of the national psychology projects I work on. More about that later.

Back to Wednesdays. Five to six times a year on a Wednesday I travel from Bisham to various sites (more overnight stays!) to run the delivery of the psychology component of the Front Line 2 Start Line Programme. (FL2SL). This programme is jointly run by Help for Heroes, UK Sport and the British Paralympic Association (BPA) and aims to transition identified athletes from the military to world class performance programmes. A key to the success of this programme has been understanding where people come from, knowing the power of a group collectively experiencing a process and ensuring that coaches and other key personnel feel part of the journey. This has been an unexpected and rewarding role for me. A bonus of this work was my role in being the psychologist for the GB team at The Invictus Games in 2014. This role was a great opportunity to be back in the Olympic park doing immersed and reactive performance psychology on the big stage.

Other Thursdays are an opportunity for me to spend time on the internal EIS duties I have. The technical lead team have face to face or conference calls one Thursday a month in which we plan the strategy for the service and review and reflect on how staff are performing. Wellbeing is an important consideration across the high performance system and I lead a working group on psychological well-being. This involves explore processes internally and externally of how this can be promoted. Alongside this in conjunction with an EIS doctor I support the mental health referral process that the EIS runs. This has led me to attend meetings about mental health with other key stakeholders including the formation of the Mental Health Charter for Sport. I am also part of the steering group for the Mental Health in Sport conference run by The Maudsley. Other roles I do national for the EIS include managing the relationship with Insights Learning & Development Ltd. We have used Insights Discovery as a personality tool in the EIS since 2007. In conjunction with Insights Ltd I arrange accreditation for staff and also manage the use of the tool across the EIS. I am also the point of contact for the British Psychological Society and provide guidance on practitioners working towards Stage 2 and also on processes and guidelines. I am also drawn into various ad hoc activities across the EIS from educating Strength and Conditioning coaches about effective feedback, to facilitating team building days for various teams within the EIS to running mediation sessions. All these can seem a far cry from traditional sport psychology but all encompass understanding the mind and behaviour change. I also use Thursdays as an opportunity to catch up with EIS staff that are based in London so we will arrange line management meetings in the big smoke. The harder times as a line manager are when employees' status changes and supporting and managing staff through this challenging time is an important part of my role. This is where being part of a wider EIS team of both psychologists

and practitioners is invaluable. This really helps me to be able to make the staff member feel valued, supported in a challenging and uncertain time. The collective strength of being in an organisation which values people is powerful. I also use Thursdays as an opportunity to have meetings with people who have contacted me for Stage 2 supervision or who are interested in becoming sport psychologist.

On Fridays I try to work from home. I am not full-time with the EIS so Fridays are my day to do a mixture of private work and EIS work. I value having private clients in order to continue to do direct performance enhancing sport psychology. I see private clients at the St Mary's University Clinic in Teddington; which ironically is where I was based for 10 years both as a lecturer and for the EIS. I always aim to rent a room to do individual work. Clients are referred to me through a variety of paths and I enjoy the range and diversity of clients I see. I work with Olympians, professional athletes and aspiring juniors (and their parents). In addition to private clients I also do some visiting lecturing for universities across London and I am able to fit this into my working week due to the flexible nature of my work. I enjoy lecturing and also value staying connected to academia. I reserve Fridays to do British Psychological Society Stage 2 assessor work, as I find this work requires dedicated uninterrupted time.

I very rarely work weekends any more. Working at weekends was a large part of my work either in the early years or when travelling with teams but the nature of my current role does not require this. I do miss the excitement of travelling to competition with teams, and doing this vicariously through staff I line manage is not quite the same.

My current working week provides me with a blend which suits me at present. The psychology of injury work links directly back to my MSc dissertation and my skill in this area was developed through years of working alongside the medical teams especially in athletics. Supporting coaches in their development is the logical way to have a wider impact. Having the skills to help wounded warriors in their next steps is surprising, rewarding and an education. Whilst technically line managing psychologist enables me to help them make their own mistakes not mine. There was no long-term plan to arrive at this stage. I am mindful that I may have been lucky along the way. For aspiring sport psychologist I would advise that you gain real clarity on what your philosophy is, build up a good network of colleagues and peers, reflect on what you do well and do that a lot and go in search of experiences and opportunities. Oh and remember that we are all humans! My luck comes from my understanding of the sporting landscape and my applied knowledge of performance psychology and all the good people I've met along the way. I enjoy the variety and flexibility of no week being the same. I am the sport psychologist with portfolio and that works right now.

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