



Mental Health Awareness Week

THIS WEEK, THE LONDON & SOUTH EAST
REGIONAL TEAM ARE TALKING ALL THINGS
MENTAL HEALTH, BOTH ON AND OFF THE
COURT.

Net-Stress

How stress can affect a netballer and what can be done to reduce ill-effects

This week is Mental Health Awareness Week and for our first blog post we take a look at stress. This is a term we all use often, but what do we actually mean by 'stress' and is it taken too lightly? With circa 40% of visits to GPs being for conditions relating to mental health (1), it is something that can affect us all from the most carefree to those with a propensity to worry more than others.

Perhaps most important thing to remember when we consider stress, is that it isn't just a state of mind. Advising someone to 'just relax' or to 'snap out of it' is not good advice. Stress is a biological response that an individual undergoes when circumstances challenge them. This can occur at any time – at work, with family or on the netball court. As soon as you are 'out of your comfort zone' there are challenges to face and the human brain will react.

The Health & Safety Executive describes it as 'an adverse reaction' (2) so whilst there are ways you can channel stress, you should not be encouraged to consider it a good thing by your coach! For netballers, it will be interesting to note that the British Medical Association defines stress as 'any interference that disturbs a person's healthy mental and physical well-being' (3) so whilst stress is definitely a mental health problem, there are detrimental physical effects too. During the Covid-19 pandemic some of us have been more active or less active than usual, but most of us will have found that having our netball training and matches removed so suddenly will have had both physical and mental consequences from feeling lethargic, to bored, to anxious – yes we may be netball-obsessed but this is a biological reaction – it's stress, and it is real.

Netballers are an enormously diverse mix of people of all different backgrounds and therefore no two netballers are the same, and their propensity to feel stress and their reactions are just as diverse. Just as some Goal Attacks are perfectly comfortable taking long-range penalty shots in the dying seconds of the game, others will find this a cause of stress that affects both their mental and physical ability to score that goal. This week, consider your team mates. You may feel that the situation – being kept away from your team without your regular netball activities – is a cause of great stress to you but be considerate of those who are enjoying the time with their families and have a chat, share in their happiness because they might miss that when we're all back to it. You may find that you are enjoying an extended time away from the court and are using it to relax and take your mind off the constant demands of netball for as long as you can – consider your team mate who relies on netball to get out of the house and maintain good mental health. Some of us are finding some relief with a run around the block but there are others who feel too stressed to get changed and leave the house. Your reason for relaxation could be a cause of her stress – or your cause of stress may be really helping your coach to clear her mind! There is no right and wrong here – nobody chooses to feel the way they do (remember, it's biological!) and all parties can help each other this Mental Health Awareness Week and beyond by talking to each other. Share your happiness and share your burden, either way you will feel better.

Whilst all of us experience stress in different ways and to different degrees, it can be both harmful and useful. As netballers, we are all performers, and netballers need a degree of stress in order to perform well. Even against a weaker opponent, a complete lack of stress will remove the motivation for you to perform well. How often has your coach remarked that 'you are playing down to their level, play your own game!?' The difference is that you have chosen to take part in that netball match and have a desire to succeed (junior coaches will recognise the young girl who doesn't really

want to be there as she simply hasn't got the motivation to perform) and these situations tend to be those in which stress becomes a motivator – a positive thing. However, the period of social restrictions we have recently experienced has been imposed upon us and those of us used to being around team mates taking part in netball activity, whether training, matches, coaching, officiating, spectating, Walking Netballers, U11 Bee Netballers, Back to Netballers and Volunteers have had not only a degree of our liberty but also our netball, the sport we love, taken away without the element of choice – so for a lot of people this is definitely a harmful stress.

We have seen the popularity of online netball challenges recently, often ingenious ways to challenge someone to get up and do something netball-related. Making this positive choice can help to convert the harmful stress into helpful stress. However, there are many whose reaction to the stress prevents them from wanting to, or even actually being able to, perform on camera or find the motivation to take part. Be considerate of each individual's unique experience of stress in a time when nothing seems certain, and especially during Mental Health Awareness week. Whilst the netball community is a large, loving and understanding family of friends and strangers alike, many people will find themselves either without anyone to talk to at all about their increased stress without their netball, or trying to explain it to a non-netballer – and nobody but a netballer appreciates what we have in this sport, so levels of stress can be exacerbated when you find the listening ear unsympathetic. It is perhaps the most important time you will ever have in your life to maintain regular contact with your team mates, even if you haven't been especially close to them. Remember too that many of your team mates will be worried about other people too, especially if they have vulnerable relatives. Make time for a chat, not just because we haven't got our regular netball but because we're a team and we are 'here if you need' for each other.

We are now several weeks into the pandemic and it is perhaps useful that Mental Health Awareness Week falls upon us now so that we can draw attention to how stress can affect ourselves and our fellow netballers. Over a prolonged period – and we are already into one of those – of harmful stress, the often overlooked or dismissed mental health problem of stress can have very real physical effects which may manifest now to cause potential problems when we eventually return to our courts. The immune system will be weaker, which can lead to high blood pressure and increased fatigue – regardless of fitness – as well as leading to more long-lasting mental health problems like depression. You should speak to your coach if you feel that certain situations in training may cause you to react in a different way to that which you may have before we ceased netball activities. From fitness to emotional changes, there will be both physical and mental stresses to consider as well as vulnerability to picking up infection and losing the motivation to take part, all factors borne of stress.

There are a number of strategies you can employ in order to reduce stress. All of us will experience stress so rather than trying to avoid it altogether, we can use a degree of stress as a motivator as mentioned previously – set yourself and your team mates some challenges. Alleviate the fear of losing that shooting touch with a target-based challenge. Ask for a footwork or ball skill drill from your – or another – coach. Ask to borrow a netball from a local club – we have heard some lovely stories of coaches throwing balls and training equipment into people's back gardens. Get others involved remotely but be respectful if they prefer not to, they may have their own strategies to reduce the ill-effects of their own stressful experiences. Apart from the physical things, make sure you take some time to relax, especially regular breaks. If you feel 'things are getting on top of you' then stop, take a break, don't think about those causes of stress and when you feel ready, form a plan on how to prioritise and deal with the causes before launching straight back into it. Take the opportunity to improve your lifestyle – perhaps becoming healthier in your diet or habits –

get enough exercise without becoming obsessed by your regime (don't swap one stress for another!) and definitely make sure you are getting enough sleep, and with regularity.

There are public support networks available for people who prefer to speak confidentially to a stranger, including your GP and the Citizen's Advice Bureau. Keeping a stress diary can help you to identify patterns and causes of stress which may then help you to reduce the effects by forming a new strategy.

It's always a good idea to talk about how you are, but in these times of great fear and uncertainty it is also a vital tool to reduce stress. Remember it's a biological reaction – it isn't just you and it isn't all in your head – so make yourself available and approachable for your team mates to talk to you about their stress, and don't forget that you are an important part of one of the biggest and best support networks in the world – you're a netballer, and we're all "here if you need".

1. Mind, 2018, 40 per cent of all GP appointments about mental health, 18th May 2020, <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/40-per-cent-of-all-gp-appointments-about-mental-health/>

2. Illustrated Medical Dictionary, BMA ISBN-10: 9780241317716
ISBN-13: 978-0241317716

3. <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg424.pdf>