

An interview with Dr Alys Cole-King

Dr Rich Neil finds out more about wellbeing, resourcefulness and emotional resilience.

Introduction

Dr Alys Cole-King was an invited keynote speaker at BASES Conference 2014 at St. George's Park. The aim of her talk was to share the evidence-base for the inextricable link between emotional and physical factors and to share latest thinking on the importance of wellbeing, resourcefulness and resilience and how to increase and maintain peak emotional health as well as physical performance. Rich caught up with Alys after the conference.

What is resilience and why is it important?

The World Health Organisation definition of emotional wellbeing describes it having been achieved when 'someone feels good so they can reach their full potential and is able to cope with the normal stresses of daily life, work productively and fruitfully and still be able to join in with their family, work and community.' Life has become increasingly stressful and more so now than ever we all need to ensure we develop great emotional wellbeing, resilience and resourcefulness. Some people complain that they don't have time to invest in their wellbeing, including citing no time to take regular exercise. They definitely don't have time to be ill!

Developing better emotional resilience is about learning coping skills, developing emotional and social support to facilitate the ability to be able to 'bounce back' to a previous state of normal functioning following a stressful event.

People with positive wellbeing, resilience and a good support system are likely to have fewer health problems, and great morale can fundamentally improve someone's ability to cope with health issues or life events. Exercise is now recognised as an effective treatment for many different physical illnesses and there is emerging evidence showing that exercise is also a treatment for depression.

How is Connecting with People involved?

In addition to my role as a Consultant Liaison Psychiatrist I also work with a number of colleagues to run a not-for-profit social enterprise called Connecting with People. This organisation tries to put research findings in clinical practice. Connecting with People have developed a really robust approach to building emotional resilience and resourcefulness, suicide prevention, compassion in the NHS and mental health awareness suitable across sectors. My co-founders at Connecting with People, Gavin Peake-Jones, Bob Mann and Sian Peake-Jones have been hugely influential in that their professional backgrounds in strategy, culture change, social policy and IT have been vitally important to creating the Connecting with People approach and resources. People don't usually consider that they can strategically increase their wellbeing and resilience. Connecting with People has developed bite-sized training to do this. It enhances emotional literacy to debunk myths associated with emotional problems and barriers to seeking help. We also promote the importance of early intervention and the value of connectedness and relationships. We emphasise that emotional resilience isn't the same as 'mental toughness' - far from it! Seeking support if required may be the bravest thing someone ever does.

Can you train people to become more resilient?

Yes - you can increase awareness in how people can increase their resilience by adopting certain styles of attitudes, behaviours, emotional regulation, coping styles and by adopting daily habits. Once people understand how they can build and maintain their emotional resilience they can be encouraged to create and commit to a personal plan of how they will do so.

We also increase understanding of positive ways to cope with stress or emotional distress, show people how they can make a personal plan of how they will build their resilience - including ways people can access further support if they ever need help in the future. Athletes and sports and exercise scientists are familiar with training for a sporting event but how much time and energy is spent building wellbeing and emotional resilience? By working with them to create personal plans, then it is ensuring time is allocated to such development.

Our approach is underpinned by the theories of planned intent often used in public health. These say that people are more likely to carry out an activity if they have considered their options, selected what is best for them and rehearsed what they will do and when they will do it. The key to encouraging people to take regular exercise is to help them make the link to feeling good as well as the long-term benefits.

Most importantly people need to choose a physical activity they enjoy, that suits their level of mobility and fitness and that they commit to embedding in their daily routine. Training someone to become more resilient is not dissimilar to all aspects of sports training. People can learn from their life as a professional and elite athlete or as someone who is part of the team supporting them. Professional athletes understand that pushing themselves at 100% of their capacity 100% of the time results in little or no long-term performance gain. They build time to 'recharge' into their training routines. We need to take the same approach when developing and maintain emotional wellbeing and resilience.

How relevant is emotional resilience for athletes and their support staff?

Building emotional wellbeing and resilience is not just a good idea - it may save your life one day! Poor emotional health and wellbeing are as great a risk factor for early deaths as smoking and obesity. Our emotional health not only predicts the onset of heart disease it also influences recovery from heart attacks independently of other risk factors. Emotional factors have been identified to affect genetic material and so the impact of stress that goes unattended and untreated can potentially have long lasting effects. Psychological distress is also a risk factor for stroke, and mental illness also increases the risk of cancer.

Emerging evidence suggests that improving mental wellbeing can contribute substantially to improving physical health, reducing morbidity and mortality. For example, a meta-analysis found that positive mental well-being including positive affect such as a positive mood or happiness and positive trait-like dispositions such as hopefulness, optimism and a sense of humour were significantly associated with reduced cardiovascular mortality in healthy populations, and with reduced death rates in patients with renal failure.

Other studies have also shown that mental wellbeing can extend survival in cancer and renal disease. Conversely, negative affective styles such as anxiety and hostility have been shown to predict increased risk for illness and mortality. Stress and mental health issues are the most common reason to be off work in high pressure workplaces. They are the second biggest occupational health problem in the UK after musculoskeletal problems.

Good mental health awareness is vital for coaches and athletic support staff, because mental health problems are more common than previously thought. Researchers in Denmark have identified a community prevalence rate of 1 in 3 people rather than the commonly quoted 1 in 4 people with a mental health problem.

This is especially relevant as 75% of mental illness starts in people under 25 years old.

You've been involved with a number of international campaigns; can you tell us more about these?

We undertake promotional activity to tackle stigma around mental health and have led several international multimedia campaigns. We recently led the 2013 World Suicide Prevention Day (WSPD) initiative focusing on tackling stigma. Our bespoke WSPD page includes a new 3 minute film called 'Breaking down the stigma of suicide' www.connectingwithpeople.org/wspd. We also developed free online self-help resources and promote a public health approach to building wellbeing and resilience. Our 2014 U Can Cope 'I pledge to develop my wellbeing and emotional resilience & encourage those around me to do the same' campaign secured over 350,000 supporters, including the professional Cricketers Association www.connectingwithpeople.org/changeday14

Our current campaign and one that we are delighted that BASES is generously supporting is the #StartTheConversation campaign "I pledge to start a conversation about preventing suicide in my organisation." Suicidal thoughts usually start because people feel overwhelmed by their problems or their situation. This can happen to absolutely anyone. People can find it hard to see a way out. It is not that they necessarily want their life to end; it is that they cannot cope with their emotional or physical pain any more.

The stigma of suicide is still a major barrier to people seeking and providing support. Tackling stigma saves lives. Suicidal thoughts are far more common than people realise but we just don't talk about them. Stigma makes it embarrassing or frightening to tell another person, but this is absolutely critical to getting help. Our belief is that emotional distress, and tragically, suicide, still affects and takes far too many lives. We felt that responsibility for people with suicidal thoughts was seen to lie with specialist mental health services and others were more nervous to get involved. However, we knew that early intervention from a colleague, friend, compassionate health provider or caregiver could make a real difference to saving lives.

What are your ambitions regarding developing emotional resilience in sport?

Our goal is that everyone should build their wellbeing, resourcefulness and resilience. We hope that all adults will have a basic and compassionate level of suicide awareness, that the stigma of suicide will be eradicated, that everyone will have made a personal plan to maintain their wellbeing and be able to safely self-manage acute distress by having a 'ready-made' safety plan to fall back on should they ever become suicidal. Additionally, all adults need a basic level of mental health awareness and those in positions of authority or responsibility will be able to identify people around them who are experiencing mental health issues and know exactly how best to respond. Our goal is that sporting organisations recognise and invest in the emotional wellbeing and resilience of players with the same degree of professionalism as they do for physical health, skills and fitness levels.

We are also particularly interested in developing emotional resilience and resourcefulness in the context of dealing with the emotional challenges of recovering from injury. The emotional wellbeing of people competing in elite sport maybe sometimes neglected during periods of injury and return to peak performance following injury.

How would you summarise?

- Mind/body are inextricably linked so we all need to invest in wellbeing
- Mental health problems can affect anyone
- We can all help to eradicate stigma
- Suicide is preventable and we all have a role
- There is always hope and everyone needs to know where to find support
- Recovering from injury can be a particularly challenging time emotionally
- Developing strategies and techniques for developing and maintaining emotional resilience and resourcefulness. ■

Dr Rich Neil: On behalf of BASES and as Chair of this invited keynote, I would like to thank Alys for taking the time to share her fantastic work with the BASES community. For further information, I strongly recommend you follow Alys on twitter (@AlysColeKing) and visit the Connecting with People website and resource (<http://www.connectingwithpeople.org> and <http://www.nspa.org.uk/members/connecting-with-people/>).



Dr Alys Cole-King

Alys is a Consultant Liaison Psychiatrist at the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board and the Director and Co-Founder of the Connecting with People Programme. Alys also sits on the All Party Parliamentary Group for Suicide and Self-harm Prevention and is the Royal College of Psychiatrists spokesperson on suicide and self-harm and sits on their Patient Safety Working Group.



Dr Rich Neil

Rich is a Reader in Sport Psychology at Cardiff Metropolitan University. He is also a BASES accredited and Chartered sport and exercise scientist, BPS Chartered Psychologist, and a HCPC registered practitioner.

First published in *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, Issue 44, Summer 2015. Published by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences - www.bases.org.uk