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Research Category

Community Health / Policy

Abstract Title

Adolescent Girls' Experiences of Mental Health and Recovery Following Sports-related Concussions

Authors

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Will they participate in the poster presentation at CHRD?

Yes

What is their name?

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Background

Research increasingly suggests that concussion may be associated with mental health difficulties. While concussion management focuses on early and gradual return to activity, some adolescents may experience persistent mental health symptoms even after their physical symptoms have resolved. Because literature often conflates sex and gender, there is limited understanding of how gendered expectations and social contexts shape recovery experiences among adolescent girls.

Objective

To explore how adolescent girls in Winnipeg and the surrounding area experience mental health and recovery following their first sport-related concussion, focusing on their return-to-sport journey.

Methods

Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight adolescent girls in Winnipeg, Manitoba, following their first sport-related concussion. Interviews explored how gendered expectations and social environments influenced emotional experiences, coping, and return-to-sport decisions. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results

Five interconnected themes captured the social, emotional, and identity-related challenges experienced during recovery. First, participants described balancing support and pressure, as coaches and peers encouraged recovery while also creating expectations to return to sport. Second, participants experienced emotional difficulties, including sadness, frustration, anger, and fatigue, often intensified by peer comparisons and isolation. Third, concussion disrupted participants' athletic identities, as sport was central to their sense of self. Fourth, gender-related barriers shaped recovery, with dismissive comments, teasing, and differences in recognition from boys and male coaches contributing to perceptions that girls' concussions were taken less seriously. Finally, participants navigated uncertainty and competing pressures, balancing their desire to return to sport with physical limitations and concerns for their health and safety.

Conclusion

Concussion disrupted adolescent girls' athletic identity, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging. Recovery was shaped by personal pressure to return to sport and gender-based perceptions of injury. Concussion care should recognize the social and gendered factors influencing girls' participation, mental health, and recovery.