

Introduction

Athletes experience stress, pressure, and performance anxiety that can negatively impact mental well-being. Research highlights that burnout, fear of failure, and perfectionism are common in youth athletes and are often overlooked (Gustafsson et al., 2011).

This doctoral capstone project addressed a critical gap experienced first-hand related to limited mental health resources in youth sports. Mental health resources more commonly available at the collegiate athletic level. A needs assessment occurred in collaboration with a local softball and baseball training facility to assess mental health resource needs among youth athletes. Findings revealed that 31 athletes ages 8-18 years could benefit from mental health support. The program Flow Forward was designed to bridge the gap in mental health support services using a holistic, client-centered occupational therapy (OT) approach.

Project Description

Flow Forward is a four-week, occupation-centered program designed to promote mental health wellness, emotional well-being, and peak performance routines. The program used the Kawa Model of Occupational Therapy to explore the youth athletes' strengths, needs, and supports. Each week addressed a specific theme:

- **Week 1 - Understanding Your Flow:** Introduction to the Kawa Model; athletes created individual Kawa diagrams as an assessment tool to represent their life and softball journey
- **Week 2 - Targeting Your Rocks:** Focused on exploring personal challenges, reframing negative thoughts and identifying coping tools to manage challenges
- **Week 3 - Using Your Driftwood:** Focused on exploring personal strengths, confidence, motivation, and “your why”
- **Week 4 - Flow As You Go:** Integrated pre/post-game routines using sustainable OT tools with application beyond the program

The program embodies OTD curricular threads and core values of:

- **Aloha** - Creating a safe and athlete-centered space that supports meaningful engagement in sport and daily life.
- **Kuleana** - Encouraging athletes to set goals and peak performance routines.
- **Pono** - Fostering self-awareness and reflection, supporting athletes to recognize strengths and challenges in sports and daily life.
- **Kokua** - Promoting teamwork, collaboration, problem solving and peer support.
- **Laulima** - Engaging athletes in group interventions and community building.

Purpose/Aims

This doctoral capstone designed and implemented the Flow Forward program, a four-week occupation-centered mental-health group for youth athletes. Grounded in the Kawa Model of Occupational Therapy, the program addressed the growing need for mental health support and aimed to help youth athletes strengthen their well-being, to participate more meaningfully in sports and everyday life.

Primary Project Aims:

1. Apply knowledge and skills addressing evidence-based OT practices through integration of current mental health research, sports performance psychology, and OT practice in the program I deliver.
2. Utilize a holistic approach and professional communication and collaboration skills throughout program implementation.
3. Create a portfolio of materials used in the program to provide sustainable resources for future athletes at the site.



Methods

A structured, occupation-based approach guided project development and integration following the OT process (evaluation, planning, implementation, outcomes).

Planning & Development:

- Conducted a needs assessment with site, community partners, youth athletes, and reviewed current literature.
- Applied the Kawa Model as an assessment tool for athletes.
- Weekly themes followed an intentional progression.
- Data was collected through pre/post surveys, verbal feedback/discussion, facilitator observation notes, and reflective written responses.

Implementation:

- The group consisted of 31 youth softball athletes.
- There were 16 girls in the 8–12-year group and 15 girls in the 13+ year group.
- Four 60-minute group sessions were conducted at a local softball training facility.
- Ongoing weekly adaptation occurred using participant feedback and reflection forms to ensure program relevance and sustainability.

Results/Outcomes

Key Outcomes:

- **Program Sustainability:** Multiple athletes, parents, and coaches requested future sessions and expressed willingness to pay for continued participation. Clear community support and potential for sustainability evident.
- **Real-Life Application:** Athletes shared examples of using the OT strategies in both practice, games, and everyday life.
- **High Engagement:** There was consistent attendance, participation, and enthusiasm across both age groups.
- **Positive Post-Survey Feedback:** Most athletes reported higher confidence and emotional regulation per survey ratings.

Qualitative Feedback Highlights:

- “I wish the program was longer, I don’t want it to end! Can we do more sessions?”
- “I shared what I learned and showed all of the tools you gave me to my teammates!”
- “Before each game, I practice my tools from Flow Forward.”

Discussion

The Flow Forward program effectively addressed a critical gap in athlete mental health through an occupation-based approach to mental health wellness. The program demonstrated the significant and unique role of OT’s in holistically supporting mental well-being through meaningful occupation (participation in sport). Through the integration of the Kawa Model of Occupational Therapy, athletes reported improvement with self-awareness and application of OT strategies beyond the program. There was excellent engagement and positive feedback from participants, parents, and coaches. The community site expressed interest in program continuation and sustainability. The program highlighted the important role of OT and increased community awareness of the contribution of OT to mental well being in youth athletes.

Limitations and Opportunities for Improvement:

- Limited/short program duration (4 weeks).
- Small sport/position-specific sample (youth softball pitchers).
- Future directions include incorporating parent/coach education, extending the program length, and expanding the program to additional youth athletes.

References

