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Research summary

Clowes, H., Lindsay, P., Fawcett, L. and Knowles, Z. R. (2015) 'Experiences of the pre and post retirement period of female elite artistic gymnasts: An exploratory study', Sport and Exercise Psychology Review, 11(2).

Purpose and participants

Gymnasts represent a vulnerable group when looking at negative transitional experiences with the study aiming to explore the retirement experiences of eight female, former elite artistic gymnasts. A key focus was on the coping strategies employed, the relationships the gymnasts had with others in their social support network and the impact of retirement on identity.

Methods

Retrospective, semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcripts were analysed through content analysis, and represented via pen profiles.

Findings

The organisational structure of high level gymnastics means that the elite level is reached at an early age. This can lead to the development of only one identity, that of a gymnast, especially as gymnasts are encouraged to only focus on their sport. As such pre-retirement planning emerged as fundamental to the quality of the retirement transition. Keeping in contact with sport was the most frequently cited coping strategy. Social support networks adjusted pre- to post-retirement, identifying parents and partners as the consistent members of these networks across the transition.

Conclusions

Findings provide formative recommendations to enhance the post-career education within current lifestyle management programmes, and for the design of a transitional support programme for gymnasts. The study findings may be of relevance for policy and practice in elite sport transitions more generally.