

What do we mean by mental wellbeing?

My name is Niamh Murphy and I work in the south-east of Ireland, and I'm going to do my best to not speak too quickly. People always say that Irish people talk too quickly, so I'll do my best. So a little bit about me, first of all. I work in a third-level institution and my specialism is public health and physical activity. That's my day job, but my passion lies in sport and physical activity generally, so I'm a participant myself, an ex-athlete. I currently do some triathlon. I coach some young people, and really what I'm going to say today about the whole area of mental health and wellbeing is very much born out of my own experience as much as my research. So I'm very much going to focus on the practical part of the value of sport for wellbeing. [00:58]

The whole notion of wellbeing, I'm not going to spend too long talking about definitions of what I understand or what we could understand by mental health. It's easy to get bogged down in all of that. There's no one single definition, but it encompasses a sense of feeling good about ourselves, an ability to deal with the ups and downs of life or a feeling of connection with the people around us and the places around us and having a sense of control and a sense of purpose within our lives. And it doesn't mean that we feel happy all the time. It doesn't mean that hard things won't come our way. But, hopefully, physical activity and sport, I firmly believe, can help us to navigate the difficulties that we do face in life and to really get the most out of what we do in our life. [01:51]

How can sports and physical activity help?

I'll just start with this little quote. Marcus O'Sullivan is a very famous Irish runner. He is the only person in the world to have run more than 100 sub-four-minute miles on the track. Very famous guy. He was interviewed just recently and said "Everyone spends too much time on the athletic procedure and doesn't take enough time to consider the environment, the attitude, the psychological approach." And when we're talking about mental wellbeing and sport, I really do feel that it is about the environment that we create for the people that we work with, be they young people, or at any age. A good friend of mine, who's a coach, always starts off anything he does in coaching with this little quote, saying "If I want to coach Ann athletics, I need to know athletics but I need to know Ann". And I think most importantly, I need to know Ann. Get to know the individual and sometimes, especially with maybe young people who are 14 or 15 or 16, they might feel awkward about that and it doesn't mean we necessarily need to spend a lot of time getting to know them, but generating that sense of belonging so that they feel like they genuinely are a valued member of the group. I think that can really go a long way. Here's just some pictures of our group and it's a mixed group of different ages, boys and girls. I do a lot, at this time of year, of cross country running in Irish weather – plenty of rain, plenty of muck and it's not always easy. But once the atmosphere is there it doesn't matter about the weather. So, in small ways, trying to foster the connection, the chances to talk to each other and I like having a group of mixed ages and abilities and I think it works really, really well. People look out for each other a little bit and connect with each other during sessions. [03:53]

So in terms of some sure tips and tricks, I just have loads of Es here and loads of Fs. And the Fs, of course, fun, fun, fun, as much as possible. And it doesn't matter what age we're dealing with, my philosophy is that we try to keep people involved and the way we do that is we make people feel happy and engaged. I think that realising that this particular sport is, in especially something like athletics, which can be very individual based, you know, it's not the end of the world if you have a bad race. It doesn't matter. It doesn't make us think differently about you; you're still a great person and it's not winning or performing well – what the



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definition is of performing well is something we could chat about. So really trying to empower them and teach them about why we're doing certain things and trying to learn as we go. We try and treat everybody equally; it doesn't matter if they're the gold medal winning individual in the group or they're a beginner and have never run before. It does not matter. And making sure that that pervades down into everything that we actually do in the session. And it's challenging. I coach the group with my husband, Noel, so we're always kind of reflecting in with ourselves on the philosophy and making sure that we are genuinely walking the walk as well as talking the talk. And that's not always easy. I'm not for one minute saying it is, because we're part-time coaches. It isn't always easy. But just even to keep on checking in with oneself about this, and that it is just edging forward – it's not about being perfect all the time. [05:43]

I'll just kind of mention that the group that I'm talking about here, I really do think that high performance and a good environment can happily co-exist. I've got a couple of pictures here from the group and many of our athletes have progressed through the junior ranks and have represented Ireland and further in major championships, and that's super – it's really great within the group. The pictures that you see and the athletes who are on them, none of them – if you had gone to them at the age of 12 or 13, there is no way that anybody would've picked them out as the future high performers in our group. And they've been wonderful, they join our group every time they come home. They're now living in the States and many other places and they come back and they join in again. The girl at the top happens to be my daughter. But they get the ethos and I just think that it's really important in that sense. Being involved and giving back is really rewarding for everybody. [06:46]

So I know that Hanna and Lone are going to talk later on about the ABCs of mental health, and I really like this model, I think it's great. You know, doing something, being active in a group and belonging. So if there is one thing, it would be belonging. That is the one word I will leave you with. [07:07]