

# Acting on Doping: An Empirical Investigation of Protective Factors against Doping Vulnerability

## Tier 2

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Athletes cite stressors stemming from underperformance, injury recovery, and social pressures as important factors for considering the use of doping. Nevertheless, research in this area remains limited and more empirical evidence is needed to characterise sport-specific stressors that increase doping vulnerability. It is equally important to identify positive athlete characteristics that can buffer the effects of stressors on doping vulnerability and, therefore, protect athletes from doping – an area that is also significantly underdeveloped in doping social science research. The proposed project will identify and characterise sport-specific stressors contributing to doping vulnerability among athletes, to include exploring their impact, frequency, severity, timing, and duration. Additionally, it seeks to investigate how psychological flexibility moderates the relationship between these stressors and doping vulnerability, thereby protecting athletes from doping.

Our research is underpinned by the latest theoretical models and empirical research on sport-specific stressors (Sport SAM; McLoughlin et al., 2022) and psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2011), the target of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT-based; Dawson & Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020) psychological interventions, and will address the following research questions: (a) How are sport-specific stressors and their frequency, severity, timing, and duration associated with doping vulnerability?; (b) Which sport-specific stressors are more likely to increase doping vulnerability among athletes from different sports, levels of sport, and socio-demographic backgrounds?; (c) Does psychological flexibility mitigate the effects of sport-specific stressors on doping vulnerability?

Investigating sport-specific stressors provides crucial context for doping vulnerability, thus the project findings can inform tailored anti-doping education programmes targeting specific stressors prevalent across different sports and athlete demographics. Integrating strategies that enhance psychological flexibility enriches the effectiveness of education initiatives, such that programmes will equip athletes with tailored coping mechanisms and values-based decision-making skills, fortifying them against the vulnerabilities identified in their respective sporting environments.