REACHING OUT: HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOURS AMONG PROFESSIONAL MALE ICE

HOCKEY ATHLETES

by

Kaitlin Louise Crawford

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Reaching Out: Help-seeking Behaviours of Professional Male Ice Hockey Athletes

Submitted by Kaitlin Louise Crawford in partial fulfillment of the requirements for:

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Examining Committee:

Dr. Mark Beauchamp, UBC Kinesiology
Supervisor

Dr. Laura Hurd, UBC Kinesiology
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. Brian Wilson, UBC Kinesiology
Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

In the last decade, a number of former National Hockey League (NHL) players died by suicide and overdose. In response to these tragic deaths, the NHL initiated several community-level mental health awareness initiatives (e.g., Hockey Talks). However, less is known about the current state of mental health and wellbeing support for the athletes who work and play in professional ice hockey leagues. Help-seeking is an integral first step for individuals and athletes to access the care and support they need to cope and manage their mental health and other stressors. To date, there have been no studies that have examined help-seeking behaviours and processes in professional male ice hockey. A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 19 current and recently retired (retired within 5 years of interview) professional male ice hockey was conducted to explore their experiences with help-seeking over the course of their respective careers. To contextual the athletes' help-seeking experiences participants described different *stressors* they encountered at the three major phases of their careers (1) pre-professional, (2) professional, and (3) following retirement. Four main higher-order themes were identified in relation to help-seeking experiences among ice hockey athletes. First, *barriers to help-seeking* describes elements that prevented or restricted athletes from engaging in help-seeking. Second, *facilitators to help-seeking* describe elements that encouraged or enabled potential help-seeking. Third, *sources of support* correspond to the different individuals and programs that participants sought help from or were offered support over the course of their careers. Finally, the different *coping strategies and self-management techniques* that athletes used, either individually or with their sources of support, are outlined. Findings suggest that help-seeking is a developmental process that is informed by cultural aspects of professional ice hockey.

Lay Summary

Professional male ice hockey athletes were interviewed to gain an understanding of their experiences with asking for help as well as instances in which they may have been reluctant to seek help. The findings indicate that professional male athletes encounter many different stressors over the course of their careers, that occur at the pre-professional level and persist into retirement. With respect to help-seeking, athletes described how different barriers, facilitators, sources of support, and coping strategies influenced their help-seeking behaviours. Athletes pointed to different intra-individual factors, interpersonal level factors, and cultural factors that may either promote or restrict their capacity to ask for help during their hockey careers.

Preface

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (H19-00777). A version of this work will be submitted for publication. I conceptualized, designed and carried out this research with the support of my supervisor, Dr. Mark Beauchamp. I was responsible for developing the research questions, participant recruitment, data collection/interviews, transcription, analysis, document write up, and thesis preparation. Dr. Laura Hurd, and Dr. Brian Wilson are committee members on this thesis. The committee members provided guidance, comments, and feedback on the study design, literature review, data interpretation, and final thesis document.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Glossary

American Hockey League (AHL): The AHL is the primary development league for the National Hockey League (NHL). Each of the 31 NHL teams have one affiliate team that competes in the AHL. According to the AHL Official Website "in the AHL, player development is a top priority" (AHL, 2020). The AHL and the Professional Hockey Players' Association have a series of development rules in place that ensures that the majority of athletes that compete in the league must have played fewer than 260 professional games in any of the major professional leagues (AHL, NHL, or European elite leagues). A total of 88% NHL athletes that competed in the 2018-2019 season were graduates of the AHL (AHL, 2019).

Canadian Hockey League (CHL): The CHL is made up of three regional leagues across Canada and the United States. The three leagues that make up the CHL include the Ontario Hockey League, Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, and the Western Hockey League. The majority of players that go on to play in the NHL come from the CHL (CHL, 2020). According to the League's (2020), website the CHL is the "world's largest development hockey league" with 52 Canadian teams representing nine provinces and eight American teams across five states competing.

East Coast Hockey League (ECHL): The ECHL is a premier 'AA' hockey league. During the 2019-2020 ice hockey season, 25 of the 31 NHL teams had affiliate teams that competed in the ECHL (ECHL, 2020). In total 676 players who have competed in the ECHL have gone on to play in the NHL (ECHL, 2020). The ECHL has also been called the Colonial Hockey League, the United Hockey League, and the Central Hockey League.

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA): NCAA Division 1 ice hockey is one of the two most common routes that North American ice hockey players take before competing at the professional level. Only amateur athletes are eligible to compete in the NCAA Division 1 (NCAA Eligibility Center, 2019). Ice hockey athletes that have held a professional contract or played in one of the major junior hockey leagues (i.e., CHL) are ineligible to compete in the NCAA. All 60 NCAA Division 1 universities that have an ice hockey team are based in the United States (NCAA, 2020).

National Hockey League (NHL): The NHL is the foremost professional ice hockey league in the world. The NHL consists of 31 teams that are based in both the United States and Canada (NHL, 2020).

National Hockey League Players' Association (NHLPA): According to the NHLPA's website their primary role is to "act as the collective bargaining unit on behalf of the players, but also assists and manages in areas such as marketing, licensing, pension, insurance and communications." (NHLPA, 2020b). The NHLPA provides support by assisting with agent certification, salary arbitration, player grievances, player working condition, player safety initiatives, and player grievances (NHLPA, 2020b).

Ontario Hockey League (OHL): The OHL is one of the three leagues that make up the CHL. There are currently 20 teams in the OHL that are all based in the Canadian province of Ontario ([OHL](#), 2020).

Professional Hockey Players' Association (PHPA): The PHPA is a collective bargaining representative for all professional hockey players within the AHL and ECHL ([PHPA](#), 2020). The PHPA is certified under the US National Labor Relations Board. According to the PHPA's website "the primary function of the PHPA is to negotiate player benefits by way of the Collective Bargaining Agreement". These benefits include health and welfare benefits, training camp allowances, travel and trade relocation expenses, daily per diem, housing allowances, playoff shares, licensing rights, revenue-sharing, and Membership Assistance Programs.

Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL): The QMJHL is one of the three leagues that make up the CHL. The QMJHL consists of 18 teams across the Canadian provinces of Quebec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward County. The QMJHL is also referred to as La Ligue De Hockey Junior Majeur Du Québec (LHJMQ) ([QMJHL](#), 2020).

Western Hockey League (WHL): The WHL is one of the three leagues that make up the CHL. The WHL consists of 17 teams across the Canadian provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba as well as five teams based in the U.S. states of Oregon and Washington ([WHL](#), 2020a). In total 22 teams compete in the WHL.

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I would first like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Mark Beauchamp for his continued support and guidance throughout the duration of my Masters degree. Thank you for making asking for help so easy. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Laura Hurd and Dr. Brian Wilson for their feedback and support throughout this process.

I would also like to thank members of the Psychology of Exercise, Health, and Physical Activity Lab for being the greatest cheerleaders.

Thank you to my friends and family for the support, love, and patience.

Dedication

To those who ask
And to those who listen.

Chapter One: Introduction

Based on a survey from 2012, Statistics Canada reported that 10% of Canadians experienced a mental health-related problem in the previous year (Statistics Canada, 2013). That proportion rises to one in three when Canadians are asked if they have experienced a mental health problem over the course of their lifetime (Government of Canada, 2017). The incidence of mental health problems rises considerably during late adolescence and reaches its peak during early adulthood (age 20-24) (Beauchamp, Puterman, & Lubans, 2018). The average onset of mental illness in young adults also coincides with the average age of peak performance in many elite athletes' careers (Allen & Hopkins, 2015). Ice hockey athletes begin to enter into professional leagues at age 18 (Herbison, Martin, & Sarkar, 2019). Some research indicates that the prevalence of mental health problems in athletes is comparable to the rates seen in the general population (Rice et al., 2016). Research with elite athletes from the United Kingdom and Australia shows that close to one in two athletes experience symptomology of a mental health problem including depression, anxiety, panic disorder, eating disorders, and general psychological distress (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018; Gulliver, Griffiths, Mackinnon, Batterham, & Stanimirovic, 2015). In many cases, sport involvement can act as a protective factor against adverse mental health concerns. However, some research suggests that athletes are at a higher risk of developing a mental health-related problem, given the pressures and demands of elite sport (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018).

Over the last decade, the media has covered several stories that highlight prominent professional athletes' personal struggles with mental health. Some of the athletes who shared their stories include the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Kevin Love (2018), Women's National Basketball Association's Liz Cambage (2019), National Hockey League's (NHL) Robin

Lehner (2019), and the National Football League's (NFL) Gerald McGrath (2018). These high-profile athletes utilized online and social media outlets to share their emotional and raw stories in the hopes of raising awareness and reducing mental health stigma. Their testimonies highlight the distinct challenges that the sport context creates for professional athletes and the many stressors that the professional sport environment and culture often amplify (Cambage, 2019; Lehner, 2019; Love, 2018; McGrath, 2018). Each of these athletes described the positive impact that *reaching out for help* had on their ability to cope with mental health issues, as well as the dramatic impact seeking help had on their everyday lives (Cambage, 2019; Lehner, 2019; Love, 2018; McGrath, 2018). Professional sport leagues, like the NBA and the NFL, have taken notice and are beginning to instill policies that mandate that each team must have a mental health professional on their full-time staff (Graziano, 2019; Shama, 2019). Many believe this policy change is in direct response to the bravery and vulnerability of athletes like Kevin Love and Gerald McGrath sharing their stories with the world and emphasizing the importance of utilizing professional resources to help cope with daily stressors and perform at the highest levels of competition (Graziano, 2019; Shama, 2019).

In this section, I identify the key literature related to my study. I begin with background information on the professional sport environment and mental health within the professional sport context. I then outline the role of help-seeking in sport and the available literature that points to some of the common social psychological and socio-contextual barriers that sometimes inhibit athletes from seeking out support, such as the role of masculinity, stigma, mental health awareness, and professional hockey culture. Finally, I address the current support services available in professional hockey.

1.1 The professional sport environment

A range of terms are used to describe elite-level sport. It is important to differentiate between levels of competition because of the different demands, contextual factors, and environmental conditions that are unique to each level of play. Researchers have begun to distinguish elite from super-elite athletes (Rees et al., 2016). Rees et al. (2016) identified athletes who achieved the highest level of success in their sport (e.g., Olympic Gold Medal or World Championship) as representing the 'super-elite' athlete. Within this framework, 'elite' athletes were characterized as athletes who compete at the international level but may not have reached the highest level of achievement.

There are many professional ice hockey leagues around the globe; however, it is widely acknowledged that the NHL is the most prestigious professional league in the world. In addition to competing in the NHL, professional ice hockey athletes are also eligible to compete at the Winter Olympics and World Championships. Based on Rees et al.'s (2016) criteria, professional ice hockey athletes who have won gold at the Olympic Games or World Championships or athletes who have won the Stanley Cup would be considered super-elite. Further, athletes who have not won gold or the Stanley Cup but have competed internationally or compete in the NHL would be categorized as elite athletes.

Parcels (2002) investigated the likelihood of being drafted and playing in the NHL relative to the trajectories of a sample of 30,000 minor hockey players from Ontario, Canada. Of the 30,000 players, 48 (0.16%) were drafted to the NHL, and of those 48, only 32 (0.1%) went on to play in at least one NHL game (Parcels, 2002). These statistics highlight the ultra-competitive reality of playing professional ice hockey in the NHL and how the opportunity of

competing at the highest level is something that is reserved for a small percentage of 'super-elite' athletes.

For this thesis, I consider professional male ice hockey athletes to fit within the super-elite categorization. 'Super-elite' athletes experience a unique set of pressures, expectations, and demands relative to athletes that compete at other elite levels. The athletes who compete in professional ice hockey work in a highly competitive results-driven industry, in which they act as both the worker and the product. NHL professional ice hockey athletes compete in a grueling 82 game regular season, with the possibility of playing up to an additional 28 playoff games. The demands and pressures on this population are distinct from those who compete at other elite levels including major junior, collegiate, or semi-professional. The organizational sport environment has the potential to significantly impact not only performance but athlete well-being (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Many aspects of the sport environment that help foster high-level performance (e.g., intense training programs, extensive travel schedules), can also create barriers for athletes seeking out help (Bauman, 2016).

When considering the accessibility of support resources for professional athletes several factors are important to consider. Individual-level, interpersonal, and even organizational infrastructure may play into the likelihood of athletes seeking out a support resource. Individual-level factors that may influence an athletes' help-seeking within the team environment include self-stigma (Gulliver, Christensen, & Griffiths, 2010; Wahto, Swift, & Whipple, 2016), internalized gender conflict (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012), and self-compassion (Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018). Important interpersonal dynamics among team members that may influence the help-seeking behaviour of athletes include role assignment (e.g., starters, non-starters, captain), hierarchical status (e.g., veteran, rookie) (Benson, Evans, & Eys,

2015), coach-athlete relationships (Davis & Jowett, 2014), parental influence (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen & 2012a; Herbison et al., 2019; Wood, Harrison, & Kucharska, 2017), spousal influence (Wood et al., 2017), and teammate to teammate support (Leprince, D'Arripe-Longueville, & Doron, 2018). There is limited research on the impacts of organizational infrastructure on help-seeking behaviours. Ito-Alpturer and Uslu (2010) explored how both the privacy and accessibility of university counselling services influenced college students' help-seeking intentions and attitudes. It is unknown how the organizational infrastructure, including the characteristics of professional ice hockey environments (e.g., arenas, rinks, locker rooms), may influence the help-seeking behaviours of athletes.

In a commentary on organizational psychology in sport, Wagstaff (2019) pointed to the failings of sport organizations' "(a) duty of care to protect and support the mental wellbeing of its employees and members, and (b) ethical obligation to create performance environments which facilitate individual and group flourishing" (p. 135). To date, research examining team environments has focused on outcomes like group cohesion (Evans & Eys, 2015), satisfaction (Evans & Eys, 2015), interpersonal emotional regulation (Palmateer & Taminnen, 2018; Tamminen et al., 2019) and performance (Benson, Evans, & Eys, 2015). Limited research is available that aims to connect the team environment and the individual wellness/well-being of team members.

As the level of competition rises, so too does the level of expectation on athletes. The demands of a professional sport training and competition workload expose athletes to a variety of stressors. These include physical injury (McKay, Tufts, Shaffer, & Meeuwisse, 2014; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), burnout (Fagundes, Albuquerque, de Andrade, André Gustavo Pereira, & Teoldo da Costa, 2019), financial insecurity (Fry, Bloyce, & Prtichard, 2014; Roderick, 2012),

media scrutiny (Waymer & Bradley, 2018), retirement (Rice et al., 2016), and performance pressure (Rice et al., 2016; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) among others. Many of these stressors further deter professional athletes from seeking help as many athletes feel as though reaching out will jeopardize their employment, status, and future opportunities (Bauman, 2016; Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012; Rice et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2017).

1.2 Mental health in (super-) elite sport

Henriksen and colleagues (2019) published a report outlining a series of recommendations to help guide sport organizations and sport psychology research to improve the delivery of mental health resources and policies in high-performance sport settings (Henriksen et al., 2019). The propositions highlighted the importance of mental health as a key contribution to a "culture of excellence" (Henriksen et al., 2019, p. 2), as well as the importance of acknowledging the unique stressors that sport presents. The authors recognized that the sport-environment can both act as a protective or exacerbating factor with regard to athlete mental health.

As part of their list of recommendations, the authors encouraged sport organizations to make efforts to create environments that incentivize help-seeking behaviours and work to eliminate barriers that prevent athletes from accessing professional supports (Henriksen et al., 2019). Once the appropriate resources and policies are set in place by a sport organization the responsibility typically shifts to the individual athlete to then access these resources on their own (Bauman, 2016; Henriksen et al., 2019). Given the recommendations by Henriksen et al. (2019), there is a need for accessible resources but also a distinct need to address how mental health is approached and supported within the super-elite sport context.

1.3 The role of help-seeking in sport

In my Masters thesis research, I explored the help-seeking behaviours of professional male ice hockey athletes. Help-seeking behaviours are defined as any attempt to access external support and assistance to cope with personal-emotional, mental, physical, or wellness related problems (Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994). Despite the prevalence of mental health concerns among elite athletes (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018; Gulliver et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2007), when compared to their non-athlete counterparts they are less likely to engage in help-seeking behaviours (Watson, 2005). In other settings (e.g. education), help-seeking often results in positive outcomes, such as lower rates of distress (Tracey, Sherry, & Keitel, 1986).

As part of the World Health Organization's World Mental Health Survey Initiative, a report was published outlining data on patterns of delay and failure to seek treatment following the first onset of mental disorders in 15 different countries (Wang et al., 2007). With respect to the North American context, this report revealed that the median delay in years to accessing treatment for anxiety disorders was 23.0 years, 4.0 years for mood disorders, and 13.0 years for substance use disorder in the USA (Wang et al., 2007). Unfortunately, no data on Canadians were included in this study. Help-seeking is most effective when individuals access support when problems first arise (Almed, Baker & Corbett, 2017; de Girolamo, Dagani, Purcell, Cocchi, & McGorry, 2012). Early professional intervention can help diminish the severity of the problem and reduce the possibility of comorbidity (de Girolamo et al., 2012). When help-seeking is not exercised early, individuals are more prone to developing unhealthy coping strategies and subsequent adverse emotional outcomes (DeBate, Gatto & Rafal, 2018). Seeking help, particularly from professional sources (i.e., counsellor, psychiatrist, doctor, psychologist) is a

vital step to help with the prevention, identification, and treatment of mental disorders (Gulliver, Griffiths, Christensen, & Brewer, 2012b).

With respect to the specific context of professional sport, Wood, Harrison, and Kucharsha (2017) interviewed seven men with professional football (soccer) playing experience on their experiences with mental health difficulties and help-seeking. The interviews revealed that the need to survive was the most common barrier to seeking help (Wood et al., 2017). The footballers reported internalized narratives of trying to cope with the demands of their sport environment and do whatever was possible to keep their place in the professional football world. Furthermore, the participants spoke of the dehumanizing nature of their sport environment, and how this led them to feel as though they were a commodity, and not deserving of individualized mental health care (Wood et al., 2017). Working in a hyper-competitive performance-based environment required them to act and perform without displaying signs of vulnerability or struggle (Wood et al., 2017). Therefore, rather than seeking help from professional, competent resources, the professional athletes interviewed spoke of coping mechanisms that relied on escaping their reality through drugs, alcohol, and sex (Wood et al., 2017).

1.4 Masculinity in elite sport

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the patterns of behaviour and expectations that contribute to men's dominance over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity can be expressed in multiple forms and depending on the context and social environment certain masculinities are privileged over others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Sport is a prime setting in which men learn the values, practices, and rules of manhood (Messner, 1992). Messner (1992) asserted that sport is a gendered institution, which serves many purposes, including the assertion of men's dominance over women, providing a setting in which boys are socialized into

men, and a site for men to reaffirm hegemonic forms of masculinity through the policing of one another. Sport, and specifically violent sports like hockey, often support forms of male dominance that value skill, aggression, physical strength, and force (Weinstein, Smith, & Wiesenthal, 1995).

Men are more likely than women to stigmatize professional psychological help-seeking (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). These findings are further exacerbated in male-dominated industries like sport and even further intensified when one looks at combat or contact sports, like ice hockey, where traditional masculine characteristics like strength, toughness, power, stoicism, and aggression are revered (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Messner 1992; Robidoux, 2001). Men who strongly identify with their athlete identity report stronger adherence to masculine gender norms, such as self-reliance (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). A heightened identification with one's athletic identity can create internal conflict and result in male athletes being more reluctant to seek out professional psychological help (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010; Steinfeldt & Steinhfeldt, 2012; Steinfeldt et al., 2009). In general, athletes that identify more strongly with their athletic identity report more negative attitudes towards help-seeking (Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019).

1.5 Stigmatization of mental health and illness

Overwhelmingly, researchers examining help-seeking cite stigma as one of the most common and most severe barriers to athletes accessing support for mental and emotional problems (Barnard 2016; Bauman, 2016; Bird, Chow, & Cooper, 2018; DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gucciardi, Hanton, & Fleming, 2017; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Wood et al., 2017). Stigma is defined as the possession of a profoundly discrediting attribute that reduces the individual to a lesser version of themselves (Goffman, 1963). Goffman (1963) distinguished between three

types of stigma; abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigma of race, nation and religion. Stigma is one of the major barriers that prevents individuals from accessing professional help in order to receive adequate diagnosis and treatment for their mental health needs (Clement et al., 2015; Uphill, Sly, & Swain, 2016).

Further, stigma is differentiated into general public stigmatization and self-stigmatization. As it relates to help-seeking and mental health, *public stigma* refers to outside parties directly or indirectly expressing intolerance, discrimination, and negative affect toward help-seeking and mental health in general (Bird et al., 2018; DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014). In the sport context, these outside parties can include coaches, sport organizations, teammates, parents, sports media, and others (Bauman, 2016). Alternatively, *self-stigma* encompasses the stigmatization of oneself (DeeLenardo & Terrion, 2014) and involves "the internalization of public stigma" (Bird et al., 2016, p. 2). Wahto and colleagues (2016) revealed a relationship between public stigma and athlete attitudes towards seeking help, with self-stigma mediating this relationship. This finding highlights the effects of public stigma on downstream self-stigma.

General public stigmatization of mental illness serves as a significant barrier for athletes accessing resources (Bird et al., 2018; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Wood et al., 2017). Those labelled as 'mentally ill' often carry the burden of being marked as individually flawed (Bauman, 2016; Bird et al., 2018). This label threatens the character of the athlete and denotes them with undesirable attributes like being weak, lazy, or sick (Gucciardi et al., 2017; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Wood et al., 2017). Other examples of public stigma include the perception that one may use their mental health as a crutch or an excuse in order to mask a lack of talent, ability, work ethic, or dedication (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014).

In sport, the needs of the collective, or the team, are most often prioritized above the individual (Messner, 1992). The diagnosis of a mental illness or, in more extreme cases, the possibility of requiring time away from the team to recover or undergo treatment (i.e., psychiatric or other forms of rehabilitation) takes athletes away from their commitment to the team. Athletes in this position run the risk of being regarded as an athlete who places their own needs ahead of the group (Messner, 1992). To avoid such contentious positions, athletes often self-stigmatize, which drives them to dismiss the seriousness of their personal issues and carry the burden of their mental health alone and without proper support (Bird et al., 2018). Self-stigmatization may also lead an athlete to live in denial. Athletes reported that should they take action to receive professional help, that action would solidify the reality that there is something inherently 'wrong' with them, and therefore classify them as shamefully 'mentally weak' (Bird et al., 2018). Further, athletes often fear how their mental health status will negatively impact their opportunities in sport, including a reduction in playing time, status, or standing (Gulliver et al., 2012a; Rice et al., 2016). Interestingly, researchers found that athletes anticipated that those who sought help for performance-related issues would experience less public and self-stigma compared to those seeking help for mental health-related problems (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012a). This finding highlights the idea that one's performance, and therefore contributions to team success, is a less self-serving reason to seek help. Seeking help for performance demonstrates a commitment to not only your own success but also to the team as a whole.

1.6 Mental health awareness campaigns

Mental health awareness campaigns like Canada's *Bell Let's Talk Day* aims "to build a Canada free of the stigma around mental illness" (Bell Canada, 2015). The Bell Let's Talk

campaign emphasizes that the best way to reduce stigma is to encourage people to engage in an open conversation about mental health and illness. Launched in 2011, for one day each year, Bell Canada donates five cents for every call, texts, social media posts, and in its campaign emphasizes its core message through the hashtag #BellLetsTalk (Bell Canada, 2015). The campaign has recorded over one billion online interactions using the hashtag and raised over 100 million dollars towards mental health initiatives (Bell Canada, 2020). Through the awareness and funds raised, Bell Canada has reported that their initiative has been able to support 3.4 million Canadians gain access to mental health services (Bell Canada, 2020).

Immediately, following the campaign in 2012, there was a spike in mental health service utilization among Canadian youth aged 18-24; however, this spike was temporary and plateaued over time and was far more prominent among females than males (Booth, Allen, Bray Jenkyn, Li, & Shariff, 2018). The Bell Let's Talk campaign does appear to have had an immediate impact on public mental health-related help-seeking. However, it is unclear how effective mental health awareness campaigns are at creating long-term changes to help-seeking and mental health service utilization (Booth et al., 2018).

Similar to the Bell Let's Talk campaign, several NHL teams have instituted their own mental health awareness initiatives. In 2013, the Vancouver Canucks implemented the Hockey Talks initiative in response to the suicide of former player Rick Rypien. Throughout the 2019/2020 NHL hockey season, 15 teams hosted a Hockey Talks mental health awareness night as a means of raising funds for mental health programming, raising awareness, reducing stigma, and educating fans about mental health resources (Vancouver Canucks, 2019).

Poor mental health literacy and awareness of mental health are often noted as significant barriers for athletes seeking help (Gucciardi et al., 2017; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Wood et al.,

2017). Without strong mental health literacy athletes, coaches, and sport organizations are ill-equipped to notice mental illness symptomology and other common effects of mental health on the mind and body. Even if an athlete has the awareness that they may need to help manage and cope with their mental health problems, many do not know when and where to access professional resources (Bird et al., 2018; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Gulliver et al., 2012b; Wood et al., 2017). The importance of mental health literacy and awareness was highlighted by Barnard (2016), who attributed the rise in student-athlete help-seeking rates to athletic departments taking the time to educate their athletes and draw awareness to common mental health problems.

1.7 Cultural context: Professional ice hockey

Ice hockey is often described as a predominantly white, traditional, hyper-masculine, and conservative sport (Macdonald, 2014; Robidoux, 2001). Many researchers and journalists have critiqued the hyper-aggressive tradition of professional ice hockey (Smith, Stuart, Colbenson, & Kronebusch, 2000; Tjøndaal, 2016). Despite advances in head injury research and the growing evidence for the connection between chronic traumatic encephalopathy and concussions (Maroon et al., 2015) debates continue to unfold around whether or not fighting should be outlawed in the NHL (Kale, 2012). The argument in favour of keeping fighting in the game may stem from a belief that toughness and aggression are integral values in the game of hockey (Tjønndal, 2016). Research has yet to investigate the extent to which these cultural values influence attitudes around mental health and help-seeking in professional ice hockey.

The sport of ice hockey plays a cultural and symbolic role in Canadian life. Some of the social issues that are discussed in both the ice hockey research literature and broader media include player safety (Smart & Ellenwood, 2019; Whyno, 2019), racism in hockey (Valentine, 2012; Valji & Lajoie, 2019), sexualized violence (Fogel, 2014; Kennedy, 2006; Fleury &

McLellan Day, 2009), coach abuse of athletes (Kaplan & Wyshynski, 2019; Strong, 2019), and homophobia (MacDonald, 2014; Wong, 2017). These social issues are beginning to receive more mainstream attention, and many believe a shift is starting to take place in the NHL, and the game of ice hockey more generally, towards a more progressive and socially conscious sport culture (Knoll, 2019).

The high-profile status of professional athletes in general, and professional ice hockey players in particular, often makes research with this population difficult. Gaining access to this population can be challenging, and therefore research with male professional ice hockey athletes has been limited. Most of the research to date using data from professional ice hockey athletes have focused on injury (Bloch, Klein, & Luig, 2017; McKay et al., 2014), and concussions (Hännine et al., 2017; Hutchison, Comper, Meeuwisse, & Echemendia, 2015a; Hutchison, Comper, Meeuwisse, & Echemendia, 2015b). The majority of the work in head injury has focused on the prevention and assessment of head trauma (Echemendia et al., 2016; Echemendia et al., 2020). Despite the connection between psychological and emotional disturbances and injury, and head injury in particular, research has been limited on the psychological and emotional well-being of professional male ice hockey athletes (Maroon et al., 2015).

The importance of social support has been established in the professional ice hockey literature (Camiré, 2016; Herbison et al., 2019). Todd, Bhalerao, Vu, Soklardidis, and Cusimano (2018) conducted a qualitative investigation that explored how psychiatric symptoms of concussions disrupt the identity of ice hockey players as well as provoke the onset of mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress. The authors highlighted that athletes who received appropriate medical and social support cope better with their concussion symptoms and reconstruct their identity post-concussion more easily.

1.8 Mental health support services in professional ice hockey

There is currently no research available on the mental health support services available to professional male ice hockey athletes that play in the NHL. The NHL is involved with many community-level mental health awareness campaigns like Hockey Talks and Foundry BC (Burg, 2018); however, little is made public about the mental health support services that are available to athletes competing in the NHL.

One key support network for athletes in the NHL is the National Hockey League Players' Association (NHLPA). According to the NHLPA's website, their primary role is "to act as a collective bargaining unit on behalf of the players" (NHLPA, 2020b). The NHLPA also lists supporting player grievances, professional development, and improving working conditions and creating player safety initiatives as domains for which they provide oversight. Programs that are made public on their website include Collective Bargaining Agreement, Rookie Orientation Program, Concussion Protocol and Education, and Universal Declaration of Players Rights. The Rookie Orientation Program is a three-day training program that aims to "enhance players' life skills" and covers topics like finance, personal marketing, and sensitivity training (NHLPA, 2020a). The NHL and NHLPA's Concussion Evaluation and Management Protocol outlines concussion education, testing, identification, evaluation, and management for the entire league that the individual NHL organizations are expected to follow. Finally, the Universal Declaration of Players Rights outlines several workers' rights and with particular interest to this study, the "promotion of physical health, mental health, and social wellbeing" (NHLPA, 2020a).

The latest version of the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the NHL and the NHLPA entered the public record on February 15, 2013, and is effective until September 15, 2022 (National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association, 2013).

The document covers topics and issues ranging from workers' rights, player contract procedures, salary arbitration, league schedule, discipline for on-ice and off-ice conduct, pension plans, and many others (National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association, 2013). The 540-page document makes no mention of athlete mental health or wellbeing.

The document does acknowledge the existence of the NHL/NHLPA Substance Abuse and Behavioral Health program, which is purported to oversee any instances of substance abuse, behavioural, and domestic issues. While not mentioned explicitly in the document, the program reportedly has a confidential hotline that is accessible to all the athletes to report instances of substance abuse (Blackburn, 2019). A third-party evaluator has reviewed the program; however, the results of that review have not been made public (National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association, 2013). NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman has described the program in a recent press conference as "credible and effective" (Sportsnet, 2019).

In light of recent allegations of abusive coaching practices in the NHL, the league has spoken publicly about new policies and programs they are developing to address coach misconduct (Blackburn, 2019).

The Commissioner of the NHL, Gary Bettman, in a recent press conference (NHL Public Relations, 2019), stated that the league is in the process of creating an education program in partnership with the NHLPA and the NHL Coaches' Association that will be mandatory for all NHL coaches and management personnel. The program will cover topics like locker room culture, bystander intervention, anti-harassment, anti-hazing, and anti-bullying practices (NHL Public Relations, 2019). The NHL is also creating another confidential hotline that will allow NHL personnel to anonymously report instances of misconduct that will be formally investigated by the league (NHL Public Relations, 2019). Although information is not generally made public

about what mental health and support services are provided by individual teams, it should be noted that outside of the Substance Abuse and Behavioral Health program the NHL/NHLPA do not provide any *formal* mental health services for its athletes.

1.9 Other key sources of support for professional athletes

Many figures play a wide range of roles in supporting professional athletes in the NHL and other professional leagues such as the American Hockey League (AHL) or East Coast Hockey League (ECHL) (Rees et al., 2016). For the purposes of this study, I am is interested in whom the athletes access for support and whether they look to professional (e.g., psychiatrist, doctor, sport psychologist) or non-professional (e.g., teammate, coach, partner, parents) resources. Similarly, little is known about whether or not athletes prefer to reach out for support from personnel and services within their sport organizations (e.g., team appointed doctor, team appointed sport psychologist, current head coach) or from sources that operate outside their team.

1.10 Study rationale and justification

To date, research has been limited with respect to professional athletes and help-seeking behaviour. Much of the available research on help-seeking focuses on student-athletes and elite youth athletes (Barnard, 2016; Bird et al., 2018; DeBate et al., 2018; Delenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010; Steinfeldt et al., 2009; Wahto et al., 2016; Watson, 2005). For this study, I hope to expand upon the qualitative work in help-seeking in professional sport (Wood et al., 2017) and focus on a major sport in the North American context; ice hockey. This study is unique, and in contrast to previous studies on help-seeking in sport, as it is the first to focus exclusively on the lived experiences of professional male ice hockey athletes.

This study explored the lived experiences, understanding, and perceptions of help-seeking within professional men's ice hockey. This study examined factors that lead professional athletes to engage in help-seeking (i.e., facilitators) as well as those factors that inhibit athletes (i.e., barriers) from seeking help. The second goal of this research will be to better understand athletes' perceptions of how the team environment influences if/when they seek help, for what issues they seek help, and from whom they seek help (i.e., professional vs. nonprofessional sources; internal vs. external sources). The intra-individual, interpersonal, and organizational aspects of the team environment were also considered. The final goal of this research was to identify patterns and trends of help-seeking across all phases of the participants' hockey careers, spanning from minor hockey to their current experience at the professional level and even into retirement.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived barriers and facilitators to engaging in help-seeking behaviours among professional male ice hockey athletes?

2. What characteristics or structures within the team environment are conducive and/or restrictive to athletes seeking help?

3. To what extent do the help-seeking behaviours of professional male ice hockey players evolve over their hockey careers?

I sought to provide a nuanced account of athletes' experiences with help-seeking within the highly competitive professional sport environment. This research adds to the growing body of literature that focuses on the mental health and wellbeing of professional athletes (Grainger, Neville, Ditroilo, & Comfort, 2020; Wood et al., 2017). This study provides further insight into

the help-seeking experiences of professional athletes more generally, and men's ice hockey athletes in particular.

1.11 Theoretical approach

Critical interpretivism is concerned with how meanings, values, behaviours, and beliefs are made through social interaction (Beal, 2002). The critical interpretivist standpoint considers a phenomenon such as help-seeking to hold "no inherent meaning... rather meanings are generated through human interaction and are negotiated over time" (Beal, 2002, p. 354). In this study, I was particularly interested in the meanings and interpretations that athletes give to their help-seeking experiences or their help-avoidance experiences.

Beal (2002) outlined a structure/agency dynamic which contrasts cultural and social constraints against human choice and will. This dynamic is a useful framework to explore the extent to which seeking help is perceived to be an individual responsibility versus the extent to which it is the responsibility of professional sport organizations/teams to provide the requisite support and resources. Critical interpretivism is concerned with how power operates, and how "subordinate groups consent to the dominant groups' ideologies" (Beal, 2002, p. 357). The research questions for this study point to how the structural aspects of professional ice hockey, such as the league, management, coaches, and the culture of hockey at large, inhibit help-seeking. Critical interpretivism allows the researcher to make sense of the ways in which athletes may or may not feel pressured by their organization and how this pressure contributes to their help-seeking behaviours. Through this process, it is essential to acknowledge how athletes and other figures in professional ice hockey negotiate and even resist power structures within professional ice hockey.

Through this study I hoped to uncover athlete perceptions of help-seeking norms in professional ice hockey. Norms and expectations within cultures are considered natural, or perhaps taken for granted (Neuman, 2011). Critical interpretivism provides an ideal framework to both acknowledge the meanings individual athletes give to their help-seeking behaviours, while simultaneously employing a critical lens to examine the underlying structures and powers at play.

Chapter Two: Methods

2.1 Participants

In total 19 current and recently retired professional ice hockey athletes participated in the study. Athlete's that were holding a contract in a professional ice hockey league (e.g., NHL, AHL, ECHL, or European league), at the time of the interviews, were eligible to partake in the study. Additionally, athletes that were recently retired from a professional league within the last five years were also eligible to participate. Athletes who were retired for more than five years were not eligible as the goal of this research was to capture a contemporary depiction of help-seeking in the current climate of professional ice hockey. Participants ranged in age from 24-42 with an average age of 31.47 years (see Table 2.1). Participants varied in the number of years of experience in professional ice hockey from 1-18 years, with an average of 10.2 years. At the time the interviews were conducted, seven of the participants were retired from professional ice hockey and the other 12 participants held a professional contract in either the AHL, NHL, or a European professional league (see Table 2.1). All 19 participants held a high school diploma. In addition, 3 participants held a bachelor's degree, and one held a master's degree. The majority of the participants were married (n=10), six participants were single, three were in common-law relationships, and one was divorced. All participants were born in North America, with 13 being born in Canada, and 6 in the United States. Finally, 17 of the participants identified as white/Caucasian, and 2 identified as Other.

For the purposes of this study, all 19 participants were interviewed on their experiences with help-seeking at the pre-professional stage, professional stage, and, if applicable, at the retirement stage of their ice hockey careers. Of the 19 participants included in the study 13 played junior ice hockey and the other 6 played college hockey at the pre-professional stage of

their careers. Eighteen participants played in the NHL, 19 played in the AHL, and eight

participants played in the ECHL, or the formerly known United Hockey League, at some point

during their professional careers. Finally, 11 out of the 19 participants experienced playing in

one of the professional European leagues at some point in their professional careers.

Table 2.1 Participant demographics

Demographic characteristic	Participant (*n=19*)
Age	
24-30	9
31-42	10
Professional Experience in Years	
1-5 years	3
4-10 years	8
10+ years	8
Current Professional or Retired	
Current	12
Retired	7
Highest Level of Education Obtained	
High School Diploma	15
Bachelor's Degree	3
Master's Degree	1
Marital Status	
Married	10
Single	6
Common-Law	3
Divorced	1
Country of Birth	
Canada	13
United States of America	6
Ethnicity	
White	17
Other	2

2.2 Sampling Considerations

In their analysis of sample-size characteristics associated with theme emergence in

qualitative research, Guest et al. (2006) found that after 12 interviews researchers began to see

consistent and recurring themes. Beyond 12 interviews, it was less common for new

undiscovered themes and patterns to arise from the participants' narratives. Based on the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2019) the relevance and quality of themes, in relation to the research questions, were taken into consideration when considering the final sample size. Given that my sample was a fairly homogenous group, as the pool of eligible professional athletes is already so narrow, the participants share similar values and experiences (Guest et al., 2006). Consistent with critical interpretivist research, the goal of the study was to conduct 15-20 in-depth interviews with rigour, complexity, and relatedness to the established research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Smith & McGannon, 2017; Tracy, 2010). Data saturation has consistently been regarded as an often-unchallenged standard for rationalizing interview sample size in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2019) critiqued the taken-for-granted notion that data saturation is appropriate for all forms of qualitative design and inquiry. Researchers have advocated for a range of different sample sizes in the name of data achieving saturation; ranging from (but not limited to) 6-16 (Guest et al., 2006; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Picariello, Ali, Foubister, & Chalder, 2017). In the current research, a sample size of n = 19 was considered appropriate for thematic analysis in this investigation.

2.3 Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of British Columbia's Research Ethics Board on June 21, 2019. Purposive sampling was used to recruit eligible participants to partake in the study (Bryman, 2015). All 19 participants were recruited through the assistance of NHL and AHL gatekeepers, who at the time worked in both leagues. These gatekeepers offered to assist in connecting me with players in their respective organizations. Gatekeepers were asked to distribute an electronic information flyer (see Appendix C) to potential participants that included

a summary of the study, a general timeline, participation expectations, and my contact information. The gatekeepers also agreed to provide introductions to 'points of contact' (e.g., athletic trainers) in the NHL and AHL as a means of reaching as many different athletes from different teams as possible. Potential participants then independently reached out to me directly to take part in their own time and without the influence of the gatekeeper. The gatekeepers played an essential role in gaining access to this elite population. Researchers interested in exploring professional ice hockey have often been met with considerable resistance (Allain, 2014; Robidoux, 2001). Both Robidoux (2001) and Allain (2014), who studied the AHL and Canadian Hockey League (CHL), respectively, expressed how the culture of hockey is suspicious towards outsiders. Therefore, having support from cultural insiders was essential to enable recruitment.

After potential participants expressed interest in the study they were sent a copy of the participant information letter and consent form (see Appendix D) so that they could review the document and ask any questions before scheduling an interview. In addition, if requested, participants were sent a copy of the interview guide prior to scheduling an interview. At the beginning of each interview, I went through the consent form (see Appendix D) with the participant and addressed any questions or concerns they had before the interview began. All participants provided informed consent which was documented in writing by participants if the interview was conducted in person, or verbally, if the interview was conducted over the phone (see Appendix D). Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, along with their data, should they choose (Tracy, 2010). Finally, participants were encouraged to ask questions and request clarification with any aspect of the study, at every step of the process.

After obtaining written or verbal informed consent, each participant completed one semi-structured interview individually. The majority of interviews took place over the phone (n=18), and one interview was conducted in person at a private, mutually convenient, and agreed upon location. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent using the *Voice Memos* app on a password protected iPad. All interviews were then transcribed verbatim using *Express Scribe Software*. The interviews ranged from 39 minutes to 95 minutes in length, with an average time of 57 minutes. There was a combined total of 17 hours and 54 minutes of interview time, which yielded a total of 369 single-spaced pages of transcripts. After approximately twelve interviews I began to notice similarities and patterns between the interviews.

While some have pointed to the benefits of in-person interviews (Smith & Sparkes, 2016), a growing body of research suggests that, when structured and considered appropriately, interviews over the phone have their own benefits (Salmons, 2015). Given the secrecy and suspicion towards researchers that is common among professional ice hockey organizations, Allain (2014) recommended conducting interviews outside the working environments (e.g., rink, arena). Utilizing phone interviews allowed access to athletes that would otherwise not be possible due to geographical distance or scheduling conflicts. During phone interviews, reading body language is not possible, so as the interviewer, I relied heavily on extracting context through vocal cues like volume, intonation, and changes in the pace of speech. Additionally, speaking over the phone potentially eased the discomfort or potential embarrassment that may be evoked by speaking on the topics of mental health and help-seeking (Salmons, 2015).

The interview guide (i.e., the set of questions to be asked during the interview) was grounded in previous research conducted on help-seeking behaviours and rooted in a life-history interviewing framework (see Section 2.4). Participants were encouraged to speak openly about

their experiences with help-seeking in both their general day-to-day lives, as well as elaborate on their experiences with help-seeking throughout their competitive hockey careers. Participants were asked to describe instances in which they asked for help and to recall times in which they neglected to seek out help for various personal and/or emotional problems. They were asked to explain the extent to which they felt support within their professional ice hockey organizations and to identify key people that they felt were instrumental in supporting their wellbeing. Participants were asked to outline the extent to which the professional sport environment and professional ice hockey culture influenced their willingness to ask for help.

2.4 Semi-structured life-history interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to address the proposed research questions. As this study was concerned with exploring athletes' experiences with seeking help, as well as the meanings they ascribed to help-seeking, interviewing provided the most flexibility and freedom for both the researcher and participants to engage with the topic (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). The goal of the interviews was to help "provide detailed and complex insight into people's decisions, values, motivations, beliefs, perceptions, feelings and emotions" concerning help-seeking (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p. 108). The interviews followed a semi-structured format. The semi-structured interview approach allowed me to prepare a detailed interview guide while maintaining flexibility and an openness to allow the interviewee the freedom to share unforeseen insights that I may not have considered *a priori* (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

In combination with the semi-structured interviewing method, a life history interview approach was also incorporated. Jessee (2019) defined the life history interview as "a common means of documenting an individual's account of their life" (p. 426). The use of life history narratives served two main purposes. First, given that the interviews required male athletes to

reflect on a potentially sensitive topic (namely help seeking), using life history narratives provided an opportunity to develop rapport between the interviewer and interviewee (Hurd Clarke, 2003). Conversations pertaining to help-seeking, mental health, and well-being are not common points of conversation in the culture of professional ice hockey. To combat the anticipated ambivalence towards the topic of help-seeking, the goal was to situate the athletes' relationship to help-seeking within a narrative that hopefully spanned their hockey career, including early childhood. The second goal of the life history interview method was to address the research questions strategically. As I was interested in discovering the extent to which athletes' attitudes towards help-seeking evolved over time, I designed a series of questions that invited participants to reflect on their experiences starting in minor hockey and finally arriving at their current experience as a professional or retired athlete. This journey through the participants' life histories was valuable to understand if and how athletes established meanings about help-seeking early on in their lives, and if this had any bearing on their current help-seeking behaviours.

Life history interviewing has the potential to uncover vital formative experiences that reveal how people change and develop over time (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Typical life history interviews take place over multiple interviews (Hurd Clarke, 2003); however, due to the logistical restrictions of time and access to participants, I was not able (in this study) to conduct multiple interviews with the same participant. Through the interviews, I hoped to gain a better understanding of how the culture of professional ice hockey contributes to athlete behaviour. By inviting the participants to share their stories and personal narratives I believed that, together with the participants, we were able to illuminate the various ways the hyper-competitive culture of professional ice hockey created meanings and values around mental health and the

ramifications those meanings and values had for athletes' behaviours. By examining the personal experiences of athletes asking for help or refraining from asking for help, I was able to uncover some of the nuances that helped shape decisions these athletes made to seek support throughout their lives.

Having the athletes describe their lived experiences in their own words, helped me to understand why in some instances, athletes sought help, and in others, they did not, as well as who they sought help from and why they were attracted to that particular source of support. The interview questions (see Appendix E) were designed to be open-ended in order to allow the participant to speak about what was meaningful, what they experienced, and that of which they were knowledgeable (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The flexible nature of the semi-structured interview process allowed me to adapt the questions based on the direction taken by the interviewee (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The in-depth interviews were structured in a way that encouraged the athletes to reflect upon the trajectory of their hockey careers, their personal experiences with asking for help, and the underlying processes that either facilitated or inhibited their intentions, attitudes, and behaviours. Through the use of this method, I was able to explore how athletes personally experienced help-seeking, how their environments facilitated or inhibited help-seeking, and how athletes perceived issues of mental health and wellness in the professional ice hockey culture (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

2.5 Data analysis

Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcripts. Thematic analysis was deemed best suited for addressing my research questions within my theoretical framework, as this study was concerned with "identifying patterns of meaning" (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016, p.191). I was interested

in uncovering the experience of athletes seeking help, but also to better understand the underlying processes and structures that influence why an athlete seeks, or does not seek, help. Thematic analysis was used to rigourously organize, evaluate, and interpret the data while remaining transparent throughout the process (Tracy, 2010). I used NVivo 12 software throughout the analysis process.

I followed the seven steps of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and colleagues (2016). The process started with *familiarization,* which involved immersing myself in the data and beginning to informally take notes and begin generating initial meaning from the transcripts (Braun et al., 2016). Second, the purpose of the *coding* stage was to lay the preliminary foundation for later theme development by undertaking a series of close readings of the transcripts. During the close readings of the text, I went through the transcripts on a line by line basis and tagged the text with semantic codes and latent codes. Semantic codes captured explicit descriptions of participants' statements, and latent codes described the underlying and implicit meanings of the participants' comments. I continued to create new codes until they offered a detailed and representative description of the transcripts (Braun et al., 2016). Following the coding phase, I began the *theme development* stage. Theme development involved grouping similar codes together. During this stage the goal was to move beyond merely describing the transcripts by offering a more interpretative analysis of the data based on the study's research questions. Stage five, *refinement*, involved reviewing the data to ensure that the codes were not taken out of context or misinterpreted. At the refinement stage I often returned to the original transcripts and repeated the *coding* and *theme development* stage. Eventually themes were synthesized to ensure they were representative of the data, without being redundant. During the *naming* stage I aimed to define and describe each group of codes as a way of capturing the

overarching themes and patterns within the data. In addition, at this phase of the analysis I created the division between higher-order themes, sub-themes, and facets nested within the subthemes. Finally, the *write-up* phase (as reflected in this thesis manuscript) was integral to the analysis and was not treated as a separate process. The goal of the *write-up* phase was to present the themes in a light that best reflected the data while still addressing my proposed research questions (Braun et al., 2016). My goal was to allow the data to speak for itself, while also providing critical discussion of the findings.

The goal of the analysis was to ensure that it was "rigorous, deliberative, and reflexive" (Braun et al., 2016, p. 202). The analysis sought to reflect the critical interpretivist perspective, outlined in the above theoretical section. Also, the critical interpretivist lens allowed the opportunity to point out potential contradictions or inconsistencies within the data. I wanted to account for the nuanced and complex psychological and social meanings that athletes constructed around help-seeking behaviours (Braun et al., 2016; Tracy, 2010).

2.6 Risks and mitigation

Potential risks to participants included mild psychological distress. Given that the interview guide asked participants to recall their own experiences with help-seeking for a range of factors, participants often recalled personal life experiences that were sensitive in nature. These risks were mitigated by upholding the psychological wellbeing of the participants at all times. At the beginning of the interview, participants were informed that they were free to withdraw at any time. Participants were also informed that they were free to refuse to respond to any of the questions without explanation.

Athletes were invited to speak about their own experiences, however, whenever they were hesitant to share personal experiences, I tried to shift the perspective away from the

individual participant and invited them to reflect on the experience of ice hockey athletes in general. This tactic served as a way of shifting the focus off the individual who may have felt uncomfortable sharing their own experiences. Asking the participants to respond hypothetically or from a third-party perspective allowed for more detailed or forthcoming testimonies. With that said, I have several years of experience working in the mental health and wellness fields, and I was confident in my ability to put participants at ease while maintaining my primary professional role as a researcher. Based on the level of detail and deeply personal testimonies athletes shared with me during the interviews, I believe for the most part I was able to put the participants at ease and empowered them to share to the extent that they were comfortable.

I have received training in crisis intervention, suicide risk assessment, and collaborative safety planning from the Vancouver Crisis Centre, UBC Wellness Centre, and through the Guidance Studies program from UBC's Faculty of Education. I have over six years of work and volunteer experience in the mental health and wellness field. Given the sensitive issues that came up during the interviews (e.g., mental health, substance use) I was well situated to conduct the interviews with professionalism and tact. Although no critical incidents took place during the interviews, some participants expressed previous experiences with suicidal ideation. I conducted a brief risk assessment with those participants to evaluate whether the risks were imminent or acute (I have received extensive training in providing this risk assessment protocol from the Vancouver Crisis Centre). None of the participants expressed current suicidal ideation or at-risk behaviour. I confirmed that these participants were connected to a professional source of support (i.e., mental health professional or doctor) and offered a list of national and provincial crisis hotline phone numbers in Canada and the United States (see Appendix F). As it was outside the

scope of study and my mental health training, I did not provide mental health services to any of

the participants.

2.7 Anonymity

Preserving participant anonymity is essential to sound ethical research practice. Ensuring

participants' anonymity was essential not only to building rapport but also created a safe

environment for them to share their experiences. Professional athletes are faced with a unique set

of barriers that make the prospect of participating in research potentially threatening. Many of

the participants in this study are considered public figures, and therefore, it was likely that some

of the information they shared could be identifiable to other readers. In particular, parts of the

interview guide (see Appendix E) and the life history methodology invited athletes to reflect

chronologically upon experiences across their hockey careers from pre-professional through to

their experiences at the professional ranks. In order to safeguard the participants' anonymity all

names were replaced with pseudonyms and dates, organizations, events, places, and other

identifiable information (e.g., specific injuries) was removed (Bryman & Bell, 2016). All

participants were provided with a copy of their transcripts to review and approve. This step

allowed participants to confirm that the data were representative of their experience and that the

de-identification of personal information was sufficiently completed. These steps were essential

to preserving the anonymity of the participants.

2.8 Outsider status

The research community has been met with much suspicion from the ice hockey

community (Allain 2014; Robidoux 2001). Researchers have described the professional ice

hockey community as intentionally secretive and unwelcoming to outsiders (Allain 2014;

Robidoux 2001). My outsider status could potentially be further pronounced given my age and

gender. Given that I am close in age to the average NHL athlete this had the potential to generate

questions regarding my credibility (Allain, 2014). Other female researchers who have studied

men's elite hockey have encountered resistance from cultural insiders (Allain, 2014). The world

of professional sport is slowly becoming more inclusive of women however paying close

attention to impression management helped combat potential ambivalence (Allain, 2014; Hurd

Clarke, 2002). Being mindful of my presentation and preparation before and during the

interviews, and in all interactions with gatekeepers and participants, was key to establishing my

credibility and professionalism (Allain, 2014; Hurd Clarke, 2003; Mikecz 2012).

2.9 Rigour

Tracy (2010) stated that high-quality qualitative research must be rigourous. Rigour is

marked by the richness and the appropriate use of the theoretical constructs, data, sample,

methods, and analysis. Richness is dependent on depth and complexity related to these factors,

while appropriateness is dependent on the face validity or how reasonable the chosen constructs,

methods, and analyses are to the established research questions and goals of the study (Smith &

McGannon, 2017).

Smith and McGannon (2017) built upon the rigour criteria set by Tracy (2010) and

defined rigour as "a maker of excellence sought through method" (p. 103). To facilitate the

rigour and overall quality of this study I utilized two techniques outlined by Smith and

McGannon (2017). These corresponded to the use of *member checking* and *critical friends*.

Member checking involved incorporating the expertise of the participants in the analysis of the

data by giving them an opportunity to validate the transcripts (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Engagement with participants not only honoured the collaborative nature of the research but also

contributed to the integrity and trustworthiness of the data and analyses. Allowing participants to

highlight potential inconsistencies that arose from my transcriptions also aligned with the critical

interpretivist perspective, by acknowledging multiple meanings of the human experience

captured in the interview data (Beal, 2001; Smith & McGannon, 2017).

One approach that has been widely used to achieve rigour is the use of inter-rater

reliability whereby two or more researchers independently code the data, and then come together

to form a consensus regarding the codes that are created. A substantive critique of this process is

that coming to an agreement does not necessarily confer greater reliability/rigour (Smith &

McGannon, 2017). An alternative method in the coding of qualitative data is the use of "critical

friends" (Smith & McGannon, 2017, p. 113). By involving three colleagues to assist with the

data analysis process, the goal was to conduct "a process of critical dialogue between people,

with researchers giving voice to their interpretations in relation to other people who listen and

offer critical feedback" (Smith & McGannon, 2017, p. 113). The goal of the dialogue was to

encourage reflection, exploration, diverse explanations and interpretations of the data which

aligned with the critical interpretivist lens of this proposed study.

2.10 Researcher reflexivity

A key tenet to fortifying a quality study is prioritizing the sincerity and authenticity of the

research from its inception to the final edits. Sincerity is best achieved through the practice of

ongoing self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Tracy, 2010). Self-reflexive practice

requires the researcher to be in constant conversation with themselves regarding their motives,

goals, biases, knowledge gaps, and social position (Tracy, 2010). My position as a white female

researcher affords a number of privileges and potential biases that may influence the

methodology, procedure, analysis, or write up of this project. Additionally, my previous

experience as a competitive athlete also presents several biases that may influence how I

perceive or respond to the participants and interpret the data. I used a research diary as a tool to reflect throughout the interviewing process, address potential biases that could potentially arise, and to aid in the data analysis process (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Below, is an excerpt from my research diary that illustrates some of my reflections during the data analysis process.

May 26, 2020

Met with a labmate over Zoom today to get another set of eyes on my data. He was very helpful and encouraged me to continue to simplify my data before I dive into mapping out the data. He thinks I need to spend more time refining my current themes before I move along. He also showed me that I can create mind maps using the NVivo software program, which is cool, and potentially a complete waste of my $50 purchase of colourful sharpies and post-its. We talked about letting go of the minutia of the data and starting to look at this thing a little more globally. I think I am so concerned about not missing any of the really rich detail that the interviews captured by painting broad stokes with "themes" or "sub-themes". But I guess my job isn't to share the hockey player tell-all but more to capture rhythms and patterns. He also encouraged me to not get caught up in reference counts.

I am still feeling uncertain that I am not going to find anything and that I have gone about things the wrong way and that I may never finish this project. I feel like the detailed nature at which I coded the data is coming back to be a real pain because I feel like I may have missed some of the broader more overarching ideas. But I am trying to remain positive and remember that it isn't over, this is iterative, and that it is always easier to condense than it is to go the other way. Or maybe it's not. I don't know anymore. Starting to feel a little nervous. Got to keep trucking along"

My brother and father are currently employed as a video coach and associate coach, respectively, in the NHL. Both have previous experience working on coaching staffs in the AHL as well. Given their knowledge of professional ice hockey organizations, both agreed to be gatekeepers, to introduce me to the relevant 'points of contact' within different organizations.

Athletes who were being coached by my father or brother, at the time of conducting the study, were not eligible to take part in the study, but former athletes were eligible. Given that professional athletes are often a challenging demographic to gain research access, the support of my family members as gatekeepers was essential to the success of the project. Their primary

role of the gatekeepers was to introduce me to the relevant points of contact and share information about the study with potential participants. No information regarding individuals' participation or lack of participation was shared with any of the involved gatekeepers.

2.11 Ice hockey context

In order to contextualize the accounts of the athletes that are presented later in this thesis, in the following section I provide a brief overview of the broad organizational structure of ice-hockey in North America. This is done, in particular, for readers who may not be familiar with the way in which professional ice-hockey is organized (globally), and the different trajectories that athletes can follow to become a professional player at the highest level (i.e., NHL). This is done to explain the language that participants used in relation to factors such as 'the draft', being 'sent down', 'sent up', as well as the meanings attributed to playing at different levels.

2.11.1 Player career paths and trajectories

The two most common routes to professional ice hockey, for North American athletes, involve playing at a level called 'major junior' in the CHL or playing university-level ice hockey in the United States at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 level. To provide some context for this study, I described the most common routes athletes take to reach the NHL below. First, I outline the junior ice hockey and college ice hockey context. I then explain how athletes then advance to professional hockey either through the NHL draft or by other means. Finally, I provide a general synopsis of how athletes are can move between the three major North American professional ice hockey leagues.

2.11.2 Pre-professional ice hockey

The typical trajectory of people embarking on a career in professional ice hockey begins in minor hockey. BC Hockey (2019) divides the divisions based on age beginning with Pre-

Novice (ages 5 and 6), Novice (ages 7 and 8), Atom (ages 9 and 10), Pee Wee (ages 11 and 12), and Bantam (ages 13 and 14), and Midget (ages 15-17). Most of the participants in this study played minor hockey locally or near their homes and lived with their immediate family during this time. In British Columbia, minor hockey typically spans from ages 6 to 17.

Following minor ice hockey, the most talented athletes decide whether they want to play junior ice hockey or collegiate ice hockey. To play major junior hockey in the CHL, which includes the Western Hockey League (WHL), Ontario Hockey League (OHL), and Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL) (see page vii Glossary of Terms), athletes need to be drafted at the Bantam level. Athletes who have completed their under-14 year in Bantam are eligible to be drafted (WHL, 2020b). In some instances, athletes who are not selected in the Bantam Draft can 'try out' for junior teams and be selected through that process; however, this is a less common path. Athletes are eligible to compete in the CHL after they complete their under-15 year in Bantam (WHL, 2020b). Athletes are eligible to play in the CHL for 4 seasons, however, there are rules regulating the number of athletes a team can have on their roster that are at 20 years of age and competing in their final year of eligibility.

Alternatively, the next most common way North American athletes progress to the NHL is through the NCAA. Athletes who opt to follow the college ice hockey route typically spend more time in the minor hockey system. They may go on to play Midget hockey, and then tier 2 junior hockey in Canada. Many American ice hockey athletes, who go on to the professional ranks, played high school ice hockey and/or played for the Under-18 USA National Team. Only athletes who are certified amateurs are eligible to compete in the NCAA (NCAA, 2020). Ice hockey athletes who have signed a contract in the CHL or competed in a single competition for a CHL team are ineligible to compete in the NCAA (College Hockey Inc., 2019). NCAA ice

hockey athletes are eligible to compete for four years while enrolled as a student at their respective university.

Finally, athletes that are European are also eligible to be drafted into the NHL once they are 18 years of age. Before European athletes are drafted into the NHL they are often scouted and then invited or drafted to play in one of the three CHL leagues; the OHL, QMJHL, or the WHL. Similarly, some European players may come to North America to play college hockey in the NCAA. Lastly, many European ice hockey athletes remain in their native countries and play professional ice hockey in one of the major European professional ice hockey leagues until they are drafted into the NHL and begin their North American professional careers in the ECHL, AHL or NHL.

2.11.3 Professional ice hockey

The most common direct route to the NHL and professional ice hockey in North America is through the NHL Entry Draft. The NHL Entry Draft is an annual event in which all 31 NHL teams take turns to select prospects from all across the world (National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association, 2013). The NHL Entry Draft consists of seven rounds and each team is granted one selection in each round. In order to be eligible for the NHL Entry Draft prospective athletes must be 18 years of age by September 15th in any year of the draft. Prospective athletes must not have played a game of professional hockey in North America or held a contract with any professional team at any time in North America (National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association, 2013). After a player is drafted, his contractual rights remain the property of the drafting team for two to four years. If a player has not been offered an NHL contract within that two- to four-year period, they are free to sign with any professional organization. After the draft, most athletes are free to return to their junior

or college team. However, in some cases, athletes immediately sign a contract and join their NHL team's roster or the roster of one of their development teams. Athletes can play nine NHL games before they lose their eligibility to return to their junior team. College athletes cannot compete in any professional ice hockey games after they are drafted without losing their NCAA eligibility (NCAA 2020). Athletes who are not selected in the NHL Entry Draft can also 'try out' for an NHL team and in some cases join the team's roster and sign an entry-level contract.

NHL teams can only have 23 active players on their roster at any given time (National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association, 2013). Therefore, each NHL team has two affiliate teams that act as development teams for the main NHL organization. Each NHL team has one affiliate team in the AHL and one affiliate team in the ECHL. The AHL team is the second tier of professional ice hockey leagues in North America and the ECHL is the third tier. As noted in the transcript excerpts below, it is common for athletes to be moved between the three leagues. In particular, young players who hold an entry-level contract can be moved between all three of the professional leagues (NHL, AHL, and ECHL) with no restrictions (National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association, 2013). Athletes who are not signed to an entry-level contract can continue to be moved between the NHL, AHL, and ECHL unless their contract stipulates otherwise. In the interview excerpts, in the Results section, participants often referred to movement between the NHL, AHL, and ECHL as being "sent up" or "sent down".

2.12 Stress and help-seeking

In order to contextualize and understand athletes' help-seeking behaviours, it is important to understand the various factors or stressors that provided the basis for athletes' subsequent help-seeking behaviours. Lazarus (1999) highlighted that it is important to consider not only the

input (i.e., stressor) and the output (i.e., response or reaction to the stressor) but also the experience of stress. For the purposes of this project it is important to address the stressors an athlete encounters and an athlete's experience of stress as it contextualizes the help-seeking behaviours of the participants. For this project a stressor was defined as any mental, emotional, physical, or wellness related problem that the participants experienced, and identified as being *stressful*, during their ice hockey career.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984), defined stress as a process in which the "relationship between the person and the environment is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 19). Lazarus (1966) distinguished appraisals into two major categories that correspond to primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisals are concerned with discerning what is at stake and secondary appraisals are concerned with discerning whether or not the individual has the resources to cope with the appraised stress. Help-seeking is one way that a person (or athlete) may cope with the various stressors they have encountered, particularly when the level of stress outweighs the individual's resources to cope with that stress.

The athletes interviewed for this study were asked to reflect upon times they felt they needed help during their pre-professional, professional, and if applicable, retirement phases of their ice hockey careers. Athletes reflected upon the various stressors they experienced, their experiences of coping with stress, as well as the different coping strategies they used. Participants often reflected on their experiences with various stressors and the coinciding emotions they experienced (i.e., anxious, angry, sad). Participants sometimes described how they sought help during these stressful periods of their careers or they described how they avoided seeking help during these stressful periods. Sport psychology researchers have been

particularly interested in exploring the ways in which athletes manage stress for the benefit of their sport performance or injury prevention (Britton, Kavanagh, & Polman, 2019, Dos Santos et al., 2020; Ivarsson et al., 2017; Lavallée & Flint, 1996; Rumbold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2011); however less research has been dedicated to exploring the relationship between athletes' experiences of stress and their help-seeking behaviour.

Chapter Three: Findings

The data analytic procedures resulted in the emergence of 41 subthemes that were subsumed within five higher-order themes that were repeated over the three career phases and therefore totalling 15 higher-order themes. Specifically, findings are presented in relation to the various stressors that participants reported experiencing over the course of their respective playing careers. These stressors provided critical context related to athletes' engagement in, or disengagement from, help-seeking behaviours. Themes are then presented in relation to the various facilitators and barriers that participants described, the various sources of social support, as well as the coping strategies and self-management techniques that participants used. These findings are presented below.

3.1 Stressors

Exploring the personal and professional stressors that male ice hockey athletes encountered throughout their careers helps to contextualize the help-seeking process. Through the interview process athletes were queried about their experiences with stress and stressors throughout the three major phases of their careers (i.e., pre-professional, professional, and retirement), along with their experiences of asking for help (or not) in order to deal with those stressors. Stressors, for the purposes of this study, are defined as any mental, emotional, physical, or wellness related life event, obstacle, or issue that the participants experienced, and identified as being *stressful*, during their hockey career. Stressors for the pre-professional (minor, junior, and college) and professional stages are conceptualized within two lower-order themes; *on-ice stressors* and *off-ice stressors*. *On-ice stressors* refer to issues and events that occurred within the hockey environment or closely connected to their athletic pursuits. Participants also spoke about issues and events that occurred outside of the hockey environment, or issues they

encountered that were unrelated to their role as an ice hockey athlete. This category of stressors is referred to as *off-ice stressors*. All stressors that were described during the retirement career stage were grouped into one single category. Retired athletes no longer compete in their sport, and therefore dividing the stressors into on-ice and off-ice categories was no longer applicable.

3.2 Stressors during pre-professional ice hockey

3.2.1 On-ice stressors during pre-professional ice hockey

The most frequently mentioned on-ice stressors included issues pertaining to mental performance, transitioning to a new league, getting traded, navigating junior and college offers, and managing the hyper-competitive environment of junior and college hockey in particular (see Table 3.2.1). The participants spoke about how mental performance included performance anxiety, regulating emotions, building and maintaining confidence, and managing both internal and external pressures and expectations. Jeff described his unique experience of managing the pressure of playing junior hockey in his hometown,

> *"I would say once I started playing [in junior city] the majority of people that would come watch games knew who I was and knew me beforehand so there was quite a bit of pressure both like, you know, during games, and at the rink you're a little bit under a microscope but then away from the rink too. When you go and you know whether you're just going to watch, you know a sibling's hockey game or something like that, there's a lot of people who knew who you were." [Jeff]*

Transitioning to a new league and beginning their careers in the WHL, OHL, QMJHL, or NCAA brought anxieties to participants about living in a new city, integrating with new teammates, adapting to the level of play, and making a positive impression on a new coaching staff. All made distinct comments about the transition experience from minor ice hockey to junior and college levels. Getting traded between junior teams was a frequently mentioned stressor. Getting traded was considered stressful because athletes had to adapt to a new team, city, and billet family. Managing junior and college offers, going undrafted at the junior level, or

not getting recruited by highly touted college programs were also noted as common stressors

during this career phase.

Navigating the decision between choosing to play at the junior level versus the college

level was another commonly reported career decision. For many of the participants, this decision

was one of their first major career decisions. Joey reflected on his decision to play college

hockey as well as his experience transitioning to life as a student-athlete.

> *"My kids have started to play hockey and they definitely said "oh, we'll be going to college too" or they're still like… obviously I'm biased because I've been there, but I played a long time and talked to a lot of guys on both sides of the path and a lot of guys have played Junior versus those that played college just based on the experience, the friends, the bond, the opportunity, it's just a different field. We don't have billets, you're not babysat. You're dropped off… you're expected to become a man the day you're dropped off and figure life out on your own. It's pretty cool."*
> *[Joey]*

Most participants identified competing in a hyper-competitive environment of pre-

professional ice hockey to be a commonly encountered stressor at this stage of their

careers. Participants often commented on how the purpose of pre-professional ice hockey

was to prepare the athletes for a career at the professional level. Participants described

being in constant competition with their teammates for playing time, draft picks, and coach

attention. In addition, the competition between teams created pressures to perform at a

consistently high level. Two participants described being cut from teams to be an

adversity that was difficult to overcome. One participant described how he was in

competition with another athlete and, in the end, was the last cut athlete before the team

announced their final roster.

Table 3.2.1 On-ice stressors during pre-professional ice hockey

Stressor	References	Number of Participants	Exemplar quotes
Mental performance	15	8	"There was quite a bit of pressure both like during games at the rink you're a little bit under a microscope." [Jeff]
Transition to new league	14	4	"So, it really gave- it was definitely a big learning curve, making the adjustment from juniors to college." [Ian]
Hazing	13	1	"I was fighting them and stuff like that and that's why they did stupid stuff like key my car and stuff like that." [Trent]
Trade	7	4	"I actually went and approached the owners... asked them if I could be traded." [Eric]
Hyper-competitive environment	7	4	"So, you kind of have to buy in or they ship you out and bring some new kids in." [Owen]
Junior and college offers	5	4	"I was recruited went on a couple of visits and ended up not getting an offer." [Mick]
Coach-athlete relationship	5	3	"You know you're gonna have coaches that like you or don't like you, and that creates challenges." [Joey]
Individual performance	5	3	"I just, forgot how to play hockey, and I just didn't enjoy it anymore." [Brent]
Relationship with teammate(s)	4	3	"As a rookie in the OHL at that time like 15 or 16 years ago it was difficult as far as blending in with the older guys." [Jax]
Team performance	3	3	"It was the second year of expansion when I got there so things were kinda, we weren't winning too often" [Brian]
Injury	2	1	"I got hurt very early on too, I blew out my shoulder." [Trent]
Commute	1	1	"Two hours each way so I had to get home at like 1 am and go to school the next morning at 8." [Mick]
Concussion or head injury	1	1	"I've taken many hits to the head. I was hit a lot…I would play it off, pack right up go to the bench." [Quinn]

3.2.2 Off-ice stressors during pre-professional ice hockey

The three most frequently mentioned off-ice stressors experienced by the participants during pre-professional ice hockey were living away from home, finding balance in their lives,

and mental health (see Table 3.2.2). Mental health concerns were the most frequently mentioned off-ice stressors athletes encountered over the course of their pre-professional ice hockey experience. With respect to mental health, participants discussed both formal diagnoses they received from medical or mental health professionals as well as experiences with mental health that were not formally diagnosed. As the researcher, I felt it was most appropriate to mirror the language the participants used in the analysis and write up. My goal was not to make assumptions or inappropriately label the participants' experience with mental health and substance use but to reflect the language the participants used to describe their own experiences.

Participants recalled experiencing mental health and illness related issues during their time in minor, junior, and college hockey. Some also described their experience of living with a diagnosed mental health disorder while others recalled their experience managing mental health related symptoms like anxiety, low mood, or feelings of isolation. For the purposes of this project the stressor of *mental health* encompasses the ongoing experience of mental health and mental health related symptoms that participants coped with at all stages of their careers. It is important to distinguish between instances whereby mental health was reported to be a stressor rather than those instances in which it was reported to be an outcome of the stress process. Participants often recalled their experiences with mental health and mental health symptoms to be relevant examples of stressors during their pre-professional careers (and beyond) that they felt either compelled or reluctant to ask for help. For example, Brian recalled his experience with mental health during his time playing junior hockey.

> *"I was exhausted. I was. I ended up dropping out of university…I could've done anything and I just—for me unfortunately I pulled out and I was exhausted all day because I couldn't sleep all night and I didn't understand anything about anxiety or mental health or depression but certainly was not living to my fullest." [Brian]*

Brian illustrated how his experience with mental health and mental health related symptoms impacted his wellbeing. He also highlighted how due to his lack of mental health awareness and literacy he did not seek out help for these symptoms. Despite Brian's reluctance to seek help, his experience with mental health during his pre-professional career was remembered to be a period of stress and adversity.

In addition, some participants described how their suicidal ideation or substance use was itself an ongoing experience that required professional resource intervention. When asked to recall a time during Jax's pre-professional career that he felt he needed to seek help he recalled his experience with mental health and suicidal ideation.

> *"I never once was like yeah I want to fucking kill myself. I never-- I always just sort of like yeah you know I'm fine. I just sort of like sucked it up. I mean I definitely should have been in therapy. I should've been doing a number of different things, but I was producing on the ice and it was like looking like I was gonna earn myself a pro contract and so...yeah. But I was getting suicidal thoughts from the time I was 12. It's not like it was new, but it was getting worse." [Jax]*

Jax illustrated how his mental health had been a pre-existing issue before he arrived at junior and how during this phase of his career it progressively declined. Jax's experience of coping with mental health was a stressor in and of itself, and the ongoing nature and decline of his mental wellbeing is what eventually propelled him to seek professional support during his junior career.

It is important to highlight that given how integrated the athletes' lives were with their sport these on-ice and off-ice stressors can often overlap. An example of this can be seen in with the stressor of transition to a new league or getting traded to a new team. Starting on a new team can involve a host of different stresses and anxieties like trying to impress a new coach or

Table 3.2.2 Off-ice stressors during pre-professional ice hockey

Stressor	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quotation
Mental health	28	7	"You know I even went through a stage where I was so depressed." [Brent]
Balance	15	9	"I believed throughout junior there was three S's: school, social, and sport—you wanna be successful; pick two." [Colin]
Living away from home/homesickness	13	10	"I remember getting dropped off by my parents and being extremely homesick that first month." [Eric]
Problems with billets	8	3	"My first billet in [second OHL city] wanted to have sex with me" [Jax]
Criminal or disciplinary behaviour	7	2	"I got caught smoking weed." [Ian]
Problems with romantic partners	6	3	"It actually just became super, mentally and verbally abusive and how terrible a person I am." [Mick]
Ostracization/bullying	5	2	"You get relentlessly teased about stuff like that, for your entire childhood, so you become a teenager and then it's like you realize 'hey, this is kind of fucked up!'" [Wes]
Body image	2	1	"Everybody your whole life has just been all over you for your body type, and yeah it's a lot to deal with as a kid." [Wes]
Parents' divorce	2	1	"I think even for myself, probably, at that age was naïve to the fact that you still think like, your parents are you know flawless and they don't make mistakes and trying to understand why they're doing this so." [Jeff]

integrate with new teammates. It can also take an athlete away from his community, family, and

friends which can result in loneliness and homesickness. Another example that came up in the

interviews was with respect to criminal and disciplinary behaviour. During his junior ice hockey experience Jax recalled being charged with a criminal offence. Despite the fact that the criminal charge was unrelated to his position on the team, his behaviour had consequences on his hockey career. Jax was disciplined both internally by his own junior organization, and externally by the local police and court system. This disciplinary action negatively impacted his position on the team in terms of playing time, his relationship with the organization, as well as his reputation in the larger hockey community. This intersection between one's off-ice behaviour having on-ice consequences is illustrated by the following excerpt from the participant Jax:

> *"Police were calling my coach about me so they knew. I got charged with a criminal offence and basically everyone found out in my life like my agent had to call the NHL team [that drafted me] and let them know I was in jail so I had to turn myself in. I had to be away from my team for a day so around that time pretty much anything I had thought I was kind of like hiding or whatever, basically like came to light like through this experience". [Jax]*

In the quote one can see how an off-ice event with no connection to the player's team or athletic pursuits resulted in damaging Jax's on-ice opportunities and reputation. This example highlights how integrated pre-professional ice hockey athletes' personal lives are with their sport.

A few of the stressors listed in Table 3.2.1 and Table 3.2.2 are unique to the pre-professional experience. The stressors that only appeared during the pre-professional phase were hazing, problems with billets, parents' divorce, body image, and bullying. However, for the most part stressors that participants encountered in the early stages of their careers were stressors that they expected to encounter once they entered into the professional ranks. What one can see in the following section is that as the participants progressed further along in their athletic careers the majority of stressors did not disappear, instead they intensified and multiplied into new unencountered stressors. For these reasons, the pre-professional ice hockey phase in a professional athletes' career appears to be a crucial period in which male athletes have the

opportunity to learn, practice, and begin to integrate help-seeking behaviours sooner rather than later.

3.3 Stressors during professional ice hockey

3.3.1 On-ice stressors during professional ice hockey

Similar, to the experiences of ice hockey athletes in pre-professional levels professional male athletes experience stressors both on and off the ice. The most frequently mentioned on-ice stressors reported by the participants were transitioning from junior or college hockey to professional ice hockey, mental performance, coping with the hyper-competitive professional sport environment, and managing contracts and finances (see Table 3.3.1). Transitioning from junior or college hockey was similar to the transition to junior or college. Transitioning to a new league or team required players to adapt to the higher level of play, move to new cities and surroundings, learn to live independently (e.g., not living in college residences or with billets), integrate with a new team, and adjust to the new day-to-day reality of being a professional athlete. One of the unique aspects that the athletes described when discussing their transition from junior or college to the professional ranks was learning to manage the amount of downtime they were unaccustomed to and unprepared for. Owen described his experience with adjusting to a new day-to-day reality of being a professional athlete.

> *"You get to pro and all of a sudden, you're 22 years old now, and it's not about living on a meal card and having everything structured. You have practice in the morning, you get a bunch of money which you think is a lot at the time, when you're 22 years old, you're living with your three buddies, you have life at your fingertips I suppose. You can pretty much do whatever you want all day, and all you have to do is show up to the rink the next day. So, it was a tough transition, just for the sake of everything you learned structure-wise in university and just being good with your time. If you're not fully committed hockey-wise at all times and trying to further your career, you can definitely get sucked into whether it's drinking a lot, or just socializing a lot, or sleeping a lot, and just develop a lot of bad habits. Especially, for the first time in your life you have some money." [Owen]*

Many of the participants interviewed struggled in similar ways to Owen and often described this period of their careers as one that produced a lot of boredom, loneliness, lack of purpose, and lack of direction. As Owen highlighted, many participants noted how they had to learn to build structured routines in order to manage potentially unhealthy distractions like partying, alcohol, drugs, and video games.

As the level of play intensified in professional ice hockey participants noted a rise in the demands on their mental performance. Many highlighted the necessity of mastering the mental side of their on-ice performance by learning to mitigate the pressures of the business of professional sport.

> *"As I get older, I realize that you know playing at this level—the difference between [NHL hockey] versus say the AHL is like 95% mental and 5% physical. You've got to be in the right mindset to play at this level." [Kurt]*

Joey described how the pressures that cause athletes to be anxious or down often stemmed from self-criticism:

> *"I mean, that's another thing, that guys are really hard on themselves. If you weren't you probably wouldn't be here. So, I mean, if you're not playing well, your biggest critic's usually yourself, right?" [Joey]*

Participants frequently reported self-criticism to be a common stressor associated with their mental performance.

Participants often commented on dealing with the hyper-competitive environment of professional sports. The results-driven nature of professional sport was one they often found to be ruthless and highly demanding. Athletes described the high stakes competition not only between them and their opponents but also between themselves and their own teammates. Jeff described the tension that comes from constantly being in competition with the people around you.

"You're competing with the person next to you and you know, and then obviously people on the other teams, so it was, yeah there's a lot of good things about it but it's a high stress environment that I think a lot of people don't understand I guess" [Jeff].

Athletes consistently competed against their teammates for playing time, a place on the roster, contracts, coach and management attention. The key distinction most players emphasized between the hyper-competitive nature of junior and college hockey and professional ice hockey was the high stakes that come with playing sport at the highest level and competing against other athletes that are the best at what they do. Athletes described how the room for error both on the ice and off the ice was minimal. Mick described the nature of the competition in professional ice hockey by saying:

"That's definitely an interesting dynamic for sure, and like I've said I haven't really worked any other jobs in the corporate world or anything, but I can picture it being the same and also different. I've seen in athletics especially the stakes are just so much higher than the sense of nothing's really guaranteed like the next day there's no guarantee of ice time or anything like that." [Mick]

The pressure Mick described was reported to be constant and unyielding, with no room for complacency. A main contributor to the high-stakes nature of the high-pressure environment of professional ice hockey is the stress that negotiating contracts and managing finances creates for athletes at the top level. Athletes are in constant pursuit of their next contract. Contracts are not only the documents that indicate the salaries that athletes earn, but contracts also provide a symbolic hierarchy that can identify their place in an organization. This hierarchy was illustrated by Nate:

"So, at the same time this is going on while I'm trying to keep climbing and I'm trying to get a good contract. I've played out my entry-level deal and I got a new deal, which was a two-year kind of "prove it" deal, before I sign a big contract." [Nate]

Players felt an immense sense of pressure to make the most of income opportunities. Many

participants commented on how they understood that their longevity as a professional athlete was

uncertain and finite. Many athletes forwent completing post-secondary education in order to

capitalize on the opportunity to play professionally and earn a professional athlete salary. Kurt

explained his mindsight when it came to his current financial motivation:

> *"But again, you know it's one of those things I'm 30, chances are I won't play in the
> NHL much past 35. So, you know [I need to] put my head down and deal with this for
> five years and make as much money as I can and then you know go from there."*
> *[Kurt]*

Table 3.3.1 On-ice stressors during professional ice hockey

Stressor	References	Number of Participants	Exemplar quotes
Transition to new league	60	17	"It was just one of those things where, you never really settled or… it feels very… the lifestyle was getting old for me at that time, as much as the dream was awesome playing all those NHL games." [Sam]
Injury	53	9	"During those first couple of years, I was doing pretty well in the American league. I felt like I was getting better, I was improving, I had a few call-ups… but I was always injured." [Sam]
Mental performance	46	15	"I stopped evaluating myself as a person and like if I'm enjoying life based on the game I had last night, or the practice I had like you know I'm a competitive guy I expect to do my best. But that doesn't define me as a person. Took a lot of years to really truly get over that phase" [Brent]
Hyper-competitive environment	39	15	"Everybody's worried about themselves as opposed to just pulling the ropes in the same direction… everybody is worried about call-ups, or contracts. It becomes a little more 'every man for themselves.'" [Joey]
Concussion or head injury	39	7	"I'm not going to lie. I've done some stupid shit. I think I've got close to a hundred professional bare-knuckle fights.

			I've probably had countless concussions where I just haven't told anyone and played through it." [Kurt]
Individual performance	37	8	"I struggled a bit and next thing you know, right after Christmas I'm at minus 25, I'm struggling and nobody's really helping me. Like, I don't know what to do." [Gabe]
Finances, contracts, and job security	36	13	"I was on a two year contract [once], every other time I was on a one year contract everywhere I was, so there's… there's-- I mean I think that in itself is high stress because you're always worried about next year--constant negotiations throughout the year, so that side of things." [Jeff]
Trade	23	9	"I don't know it's been an interesting week as well. You know? All the ranges of emotion. It's been a legitimate grieving process at times. It's unique.
Coach-athlete relationship	20	11	"I experienced probably two coaches who didn't like how I played, so then now I'm playing less. I'm being benched sometimes. I'm not getting along with them, etc. So, it was rough." [Nate]
Sent up-down between ECHL-AHL-NHL	19	10	"You never know where you're going to be at any given day. Like one day you could be in the East Coast playing in the middle of nowhere and then a couple hours later you could be on a plane flying to the West Coast to play somewhere else. So, it's very unexpecting and it's always tough to schedule things. So, if—family coming down or anything that's always tough to schedule because you never know where you might be so I think that's basically the biggest adjustment, is the uncertainty." [Nick]
Retirement	11	5	"When your career is done, it's like what do you do with yourself? I think that's kind of a constant source of anxiety for all the guys in the league." [Kurt]
Team performance	9	3	"And then we had a shitty, shitty loss in the last game. We blew a big lead. And uh, you know, it was a tough way to finish that season." [Colin]

New coach/management staff	5	4	"So, it was like tough because we kept switching coaches and GMs and stuff. There was—it was just like trying to impress a new coach or trying to get to know a new coach, or trying to get the feel of the new GM." [Nate]
Illness	5	2	"I go right to the hospital and check myself in, and they do all these tests on me and can't figure out what the hell is wrong with me and it was like a miracle, one of our team doctors actually recognized the symptoms that I had." [Trent]
Relationship with teammate(s)	4	2	"I think there is the pressure to kind of fit in and everyone feels it whether they admit it or not. I think we as humans we all seem like we want to feel like we belong, feel like we fit in." [Mick]
Burnout	3	3	"I was very tired and everything. So, it just kind of got in a lull like I was lethargic waking up every morning." [Nick]
Team relocation	2	2	"The affiliate team for the [NHL team] moved from [AHL city 1] to [AHL city 2] after my first season." [Eric]
Media attention	2	1	"I don't think that [NHL city] was healthy for me at this point, if that makes any sense… [because of] the constant attention and media." [Wes]
Poor team management	2	1	"It was a weird situation where everyone kind of knew that it wasn't a well-run organization, or things were being done wrong, but… but no one really did anything about it." [Jeff]
Relationship with General Manager	1	1	"And then the new GM he didn't like me very much either." [Leo]

3.3.2 Off-ice stressors during professional ice hockey

The most frequently disclosed off-ice stressors that the participants described when recounting their past or current experience in professional ice hockey were finding a work-life balance, mental health, substance use, and problems with romantic partners (see Table 3.3.2).

Over half of the participants discussed the challenge of fostering a healthy work-life balance. Participants often discussed how finding time and space in their lives for interests and passions outside of ice hockey was important to finding a sustainable balance. Participants also spoke about the difficulty of finding ways to acknowledge and honour not only their sense of self as a professional athlete but also their sense of identity away from the rink. Players spoke at length about how difficult it was to separate their work lives from their lives outside the rink. Athletes like Eric spoke to how it was important for them to interact with people outside of the hockey world. Participants reported that constantly "talking shop", especially when away from the work environment, was overwhelming and unhelpful and instead Eric made conscious efforts to surround himself with people who were not from the hockey world.

> *"When you're just around the same type of people, your constant focus is on that one thing. Whereas I was able to be around people with different interests and get away from the game a little bit." [Eric].*

Similarly, participants also spoke to how striking a balance between their identity as a hockey player and as a person was easily lost in the day-to-day "grind" of professional sport. In a job that is all-consuming and entirely based on results, players often felt as though their chances at success and a long career were dependent on their ability to sacrifice all other aspects of their lives in pursuit of their dreams to play professional ice hockey; a dream most of them reported having since early childhood. Not only did the sacrifice seem necessary to the participants but the sacrifice was also a sense of pride, as described by Sam, Colin, and Wes.

> *"It was really just trying to make your dream happen, sacrificing a lot of things to do it. Luckily, for me, it ended up working out okay. It wasn't, you know, you always wish it could have lasted longer or gone better, but in general it was worth it." [Sam]*

> *"I think to be a pro athlete, you get to a point where your sport and what you do does mean the entire world to you. And in the big picture of perspective, it is a bit*

superficial and it's a bit simple minded but, you can't get to a high level unless you actually believe that the world depends on you stopping a puck." [Colin]

"I've had different people there for me in different instances. I'm not saying that I actively am trying to keep things fresh in my life, but I've always prioritized hockey over personal relationships." [Wes]

Jeff spoke to how balancing work and home life can be a challenge.

"I mean it's got to be tough right? Because especially with a spouse in pro sport, like, they're doing all the moves and they're with you in it every day. But like you said you know, being able to leave it at the door when you come home so you can be present, and you know, the husband and the dad. It's a lot to balance." [Jeff]

Mental health and substance use are stressors that participants described as part of their professional ice hockey experience. Under the mental health umbrella participants described experiences with anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, loneliness, panic attacks, homesickness, and suicidal ideation. Similar to the section about the stressor of mental health at the pre-professional level, when recalling stressors they encountered at the professional level participants also described the experience of mental health (e.g., feeling anxious, depressed, lonely). Experiences with loneliness were the most commonly reported mental health related issues that participants faced during professional ice hockey. Participants reported how the professional athlete lifestyle often required them to be away from friends and family for extended periods of time. Trent described how playing professional ice hockey in Europe created feelings of isolation and loneliness.

"I would say my first year was definitely the hardest. I was dating my now wife at the time… [she] was in her senior year at college so I was over in Europe alone. You know, at this point I'm a grown man, I found that across the ocean…[with the] time change and everything and being by yourself and being around a bunch of people that don't speak the same language as you, it's tough, especially around the holidays… the holiday time, that first year was really, really tough." [Trent]

The experience of loneliness for Trent was something he described as a primary stressor during this stage of his career.

On the more extreme end of the mental health spectrum Kurt described his struggles with

suicidal ideation as a professional athlete playing in the NHL:

> *"You know I haven't told many people this probably, just [my wife] and a sport psych I was working with. But I had a few suicidal thoughts just to escape [my anxiety]…You know it wasn't so much like I was plotting something or anything like that. I would drive to the rink some days… and I remember just kind of like letting the steering wheel go sometimes and being like you know I wonder what it would feel like to just put this in the ditch, wrap this around a pole and kind of like escape this feeling, and get out of this. Luckily, I never did which I'm very thankful for." [Kurt]*

The experience of having suicidal thoughts was described by Kurt to be both alarming and

distressing in and of itself. These ongoing experiences with suicidal ideation and anxiety

were a severe stressor for Kurt to cope with and eventually lead him to seek professional

help. Kurt later explained how he was formally diagnosed with a mental health disorder

and continues to cope and manage his symptoms daily with the help of mental health

professionals and doctors. Overall, the range of mental health related stressors that

professional ice hockey athletes faced was diverse and specific to the individual

experience.

Many participants commented on their own experiences of substance use during their

current or past professional ice hockey career, as well as witnessing the substance use of their

teammates. Participants often connected substance use and adjusting to the professional ice

hockey lifestyle. Many of the participants described how they themselves or those around them

began to experiment and became dependent on drugs and alcohol in order to cope with the

growing demands of professional ice hockey, and as a response to the amount of downtime they

suddenly had. Eric described how alcohol and drugs became a part of the social culture during

his time in the AHL and how this substance use became problematic for a few of his teammates:

> *"Yeah and then you go for lunch and add that time to lunch, generally you'd have a couple beers at lunch and then go home, take a nap, and then go back out for dinner.*

Depending on the schedule, you'd probably have some more beers, and that was just, kind of your normal day-to-day routine...Depending on your personality, it led to more drinking or to other things, you know, drugs and things like that, that a lot of players—not a lot, but players that I grew up with and played with...I think at the time, drinking was just- it was just accepted, I think. It was just, kinda... you know, the way things were? But the drugs, for the most part, the players that did them were very quiet about doing them...And the players that I played with, when I found out later on that they were doing them, I was with them a lot! And I was quite surprised that they were doing them and that it became an issue... to the point where they needed help and they needed to go into treatment." [Eric]

Other participants also highlighted how drinking, partying, and in some cases, drugs became a part of their teams' social culture. Brent described how in an effort to fit in and be included in social events he found himself struggling to find a balance with his alcohol consumption:

"I mean I never was a big boozer when I was with [my first NHL team]. Like you know I socially drank, and I'd have some nights with the boys... But when I got traded to [my second NHL team] it's a lot more of a party scene and just the atmosphere with the team I'm on, you know, definitely a different culture. I still only drink maybe once a week max. But, I kind of learned pretty quickly, controlling alcohol was something I struggled with. Like I didn't drink often but when I did it wasn't like I only had one beer you know." [Brent]

Brent reported that his substance use was in part a way to socialize with teammates and feel included. However, he described how it later evolved into an issue he chose to address.

Table 3.3.2 Off-ice stressors during professional ice hockey

Stressor	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Balance	44	11	"I think it's probably the same thing for athletes, pro athletes—it's hard to dissociate the hockey players from the person…It's all one, but it should be two." [Gabe]
Mental health	42	11	"Yeah so let's say around 4 or 5 years ago I started having some issues with anxiety and panic attacks, and anxiety disorder. I was diagnosed GAD, generalized anxiety." [Kurt]
Substance use	40	8	"I kind of learned pretty quickly, controlling alcohol was something I struggled with. Like I didn't drink often

			but when I did it wasn't like I only had one beer you know." [Brent]
Problems with romantic partners	18	5	"I had a girlfriend that I was dating for a while and we broke up over my [first] American Hockey League season. So that was tough." [Nate]
Family issues	4	4	"My wife had just had our first child in that summer, so it was kind of our first year of… of going through a season with a kid at home and just getting used to you know, a little less sleep and all that stuff." [Jeff]
Criminal & disciplinary behaviour	3	2	"I've been suspended over [an incident] and I've been reprimanded for any number of activities." [Wes]
Problems with union	2	1	"I played in the NHL and I can't purchase the health insurance, it's crazy. It's just crazy." [Leo]

3.4 Stressors during retirement

Four stressors were identified during the interviews among retired ice hockey athletes. These stressors include adjusting to life after hockey, mental health, physical health, and substance use (see Table 3.4). Adjusting to life after hockey was the most common stressor. Many participants highlighted the sense of loss that accompanies the end of their playing careers. Participants described stress associated with retiring to come from the loss of employment, loss of income, loss of identity, and loss of purpose. This sense of loss during retirement was expressed by Gabe:

> *"To me, that's where I struggled the most, because with me, I'm a hockey player. I'm not [Gabe]…That's all I did, all my life, and growing up. That's all I know. I went to school, I did other stuff, but in my mind, I was a hockey player and I've always been a hockey player, and that's what I did for a living, that's what I focus and think about 24/7. You know I have kids; I love my kids, I love spending time with them, but I'm there and not there at times. I've always thought about the game, how I could get better. I had to deal with injuries, I had to do [physical] rehab, I had to train, and make sure I got ready for [training] camps, and I always had expectations for myself. Setting goals, the next contract, this, and that. And when I was done playing… now what? Where do I go from there, right?" [Gabe].*

Gabe described how one positive aspect of retirement was the opportunity to spend more consistent time with his children. However, once Gabe retired the pace and intensity of the professional athlete lifestyle came to a halt and he struggled to redefine his identity and find meaning in his life. Other retired participants also described how leaving the sport as an athlete required them to discover or rediscover other aspects of their identities and skill sets in order to find employment and purpose in the new stage of their lives.

Table 3.4.1 Stressors during retirement

Stressor	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Adjusting to life after hockey	18	6	"Just trying to realistically, I still love to play hockey, get up in the morning, go to the rink, make the most of it, work hard, and then all of a sudden when it's over it's like say bye- bye go home to deal with my shit." [Owen]
Physical health	5	2	"So, fast forward to today and ending my career on concussions and stuff, and having one of the biggest symptoms out of all of my concussions being like… I have huge problems with my eyes and stuff, like I wear glasses, I never used to wear glasses, ever since my last concussion." [Trent]
Mental health	1	1	"I think that with all the I mean Carcillo, and I guess Greg Johnson just committed suicide last week, an ex-player, like there's still has to be more and there has to be I don't know who's going to pay for it but there needs to be more help after hockey."
Substance use	1	1	"Yeah I mean it's just I don't think there's a good enough support system for when guys retire. I think you're seeing more and more cases of guys having issues with alcohol and drugs who are even currently playing. I don't think they take the use of straight narcotics seriously enough." [Kurt]

3.5 Higher-order themes related to help-seeking

Four higher-order themes related to help-seeking were identified as contributing to the athletes' help-seeking process. The four themes included (1) barriers to help-seeking, (2) facilitators of help-seeking, (3) sources of support, and (4) coping strategies and self-management techniques. All four of the higher-order themes were identified in each of the three career phases examined in this study. Within each of the high-order themes are subthemes and specific facets within each subtheme. The four higher-order themes are presented below in relation to the three major career phases that correspond to (1) pre-professional ice hockey (i.e., minor, junior, and college ice hockey) (see Figure 3.5.1), (2) professional ice hockey (see Figure 3.5.2), and (3) retirement (see Figure 3.5.3).

Within the first higher-order theme athletes identified different *barriers* to seeking help for mental, emotional, physical, or wellness related problems that they encountered throughout their career. Three subthemes emerged in relation to barriers that inhibited athletes from engaging in help-seeking. These include a) intra-individual factors, b) interpersonal factors, and c) cultural factors. Intra-individual factors correspond to internally driven or self-perpetuating barriers to help-seeking. All thoughts, feelings, perceptions, beliefs, and biases that hindered help-seeking were categorized as an intra-individual barrier. Interpersonal factors included any barriers to help-seeking that were connected to the quality of the supportive relationship and the quality of the support itself. The quality of the support relationship referred to the level of rapport, the strength of the working alliance, and the connection between the athlete and the resource they chose to access. The quality of the support referred to the perceived efficacy, effectiveness, and applicability of the support methods, treatment, or techniques the source of support used and provided to the participant. Finally, cultural factors include the structures,

norms, and systems within teams, organizations, and the larger sport community that were reported to impede help-seeking among participants.

The second higher-order theme is *facilitators* of help-seeking. Within each of the three career stages, three subthemes were generated to capture facilitation patterns. The three facilitator subthemes mirror the themes developed for the help-seeking barriers and include a) intra-individual factors, b) interpersonal factors, and c) cultural factors. Intra-individual factors focus on internally driven or self-perpetuating facilitators involved in help-seeking. Any individually held thoughts, feelings, perceptions, beliefs, and biases that encouraged help-seeking were categorized as an intra-individual barrier. Interpersonal factors refer to the relationship between the participant and the specific resource or source of support from whom they sought help or had access. Interpersonal facilitators of help-seeking include the quality of the support relationship and the quality of the support methods or techniques. Finally, cultural factors correspond to the systems, norms, and structures within the organization, league, union, and/or larger sport community that helped to normalize and encourage their athletes to access support and resources.

The third help-seeking theme that was generated corresponded to the sources of support that participants encountered. Sources of support included individuals or resources that participants had access to through their organization and those they sought out independently. To preserve anonymity sources of support were typically referred to by their role in the participant's life (e.g., family, friend) or job position (e.g., coach, mental health professional). For all three career stages, sources of support were categorized into two subthemes; (1) internal sources of support and (2) external sources of support. Internal sources of support refer to resources that were employed by the sport organization or league in which the athletes competed

(see Figures 3.5.1, 3.5.2, and 3.5.3). External sources of support relate to all resources that were separate and unaffiliated with the sport organization or league with which the participant was associated (see Figures 3.5.1, 3.5.2, and 3.5.3).

The final help-seeking theme relates to *coping strategies and self-management techniques*. Coping strategies and self-management techniques refer to the different skills and treatments the participants were exposed to through their own research or through the sources of support from whom they sought help. The five major subthemes within coping strategies and self-management techniques included (1) psychological support, (2) mental skills training (3) lifestyle factors (4) personal and professional development, (5) physical and performance support (see Figures 3.5.1, 3.5.2, and 3.5.3). Psychological support techniques included any strategies that were directly implemented to improve the mental or psychological health of the athletes. Mental skills training refers to any mental performance-related strategies that the athletes received. These techniques are typically rooted in sport or performance psychology. These techniques were typically administered by mental health professionals. Lifestyle factors referred to any adjustment to the athletes' daily life or daily functioning that had the potential to impact their general wellbeing. Personal and professional development refers to any education or career-related development in which the athletes engaged. Physical and performance support encompasses any techniques or methods the athletes used to directly improve their physical health or on-ice skills for performance-related goals.

Figure 3.5.1 Help-seeking themes during pre-professional ice hockey

Barriers:

Intra-individual factors: Self-reliance, Protecting the athlete identity, Mental and physical health awareness & literacy

Interpersonal factors: Poor quality of support relationship, Poor quality of resources

Cultural factors: Learning the culture of silence & suspicion, Prioritizing performance over wellness, Poor availability & access to resources

Facilitators:

Intra-individual factors: Individual characteristics & personality, Individual responsibility & motivation to change

Interpersonal factors: High quality of resources, High quality of support relationships

Cultural factors: Prioritizing wellness, Supportive & progressive environments, Team first mentality, Available & accessible resources

Sources of support:

Internal supports: Billets, Coach, General manager, Junior organization, NHL general manager, Religious figure, School professional, Sport psychologist, Teammate, Youth hockey coach

External supports: Agent, Family member, Family doctor, Friend, Partner, School Professionals, Sport psychologist, Suicide hotline

Coping strategies and self-management techniques:

Psychological supports: Peer-to-peer support, Pharmaceutical interventions

Mental skills training: Emotion regulation techniques, Self-talk, Visualization

Lifestyle factors: Routine

Personal & professional development: Financial literacy

Physical & performance support: On-ice development

65

Figure 3.5.2 Help-seeking themes during professional ice hockey

Barriers

Intra-individual factors
- Lack of mental health awareness & literacy
- Protecting the athlete identity
- Self-reliance
- Age & immaturity
- Family obligations

Interpersonal factors
- Poor quality of support relationship
- Poor quality of resources

Cultural factors
- Poor availability & access to resources
- The business of performance & winning
- Culture of silence & suspicion
- Instability of role
- Hierarchy constraints

Facilitators

Intra-individual factors
- Individual characteristics & personality
- Individual responsibility & motivation to change
- Individual growth & maturity
- Awareness & literacy

Interpersonal factors
- High quality of support relationship
- High quality of resources

Cultural factors
- Available & accessible resources
- Hockey & sport culture shift
- Progressive & supportive environments
- Prioritizing wellness
- Team first mentality
- Hierarchy advantages
- Separation between work & support

Help-seeking

Sources of support

Internal supports
- Coach
- Consultant
- Equipment staff
- General manager
- Massage therapist
- Medical staff/athletic training staff
- Mental health professional
- Mental skills coach & sport psychologist
- Religious figure
- Scout
- Strength & conditioning staff
- Substance use specialist
- Team doctor
- Teammate
- The organization
- The leagues (AHL, NHL)
- The unions (PHPA, NHLPA)

External supports
- Agent
- Billets
- Family member
- Former player
- Friend
- Medical professional
- Mental health professional
- Partner
- Past coaches
- Previous teammate
- Sport psychologist
- Substance use treatment

Coping strategies and self-management techniques

Psychological supports
- Exercise
- Group counselling
- Peer-to-peer support
- Pharmaceutical intervention
- Self-help
- Talk therapy

Mental skills training
- Goal setting
- Journaling
- Mindfulness
- Self-reflection
- Visualization

Lifestyle factors
- Establishing & following a routine
- Meditation
- Experiencing nature

Personal & professional development
- Career & education development

Physical & performance support
- Physiotherapy
- Video analysis

Figure 3.5.3 Help-seeking themes during retirement

Poor quality of support resources → Interpersonal factors

Available & accessible resources → Cultural factors

Interpersonal factors, Cultural factors → Barriers

Individual responsibility & motivation to change → Intra-individual factors

High quality of resources → Interpersonal factors

Intra-individual factors, Interpersonal factors → Facilitators

Barriers, Facilitators → **Help-seeking**

Help-seeking ← Sources of support ← Internal supports
- NHLPA
- PHPA

Sources of support ← External supports
- Concussion specialists
- Family members
- Lawyer
- Partner
- Previous teammates
- Psychiatrist

Help-seeking ← Coping strategies and self-management techniques

Psychological supports
- Cognitive behavioural therapy
- Pharmaceutical interventions
- Talk therapy

Mental skills training → Goal setting

Lifestyle factors → Living a sober lifestyle

Personal & professional development → Life after hockey programs

Physical & performance support → Concussion treatment

67

3.6 Help-seeking barriers during pre-professional ice hockey

The barriers that participants encountered at the preprofessional phase of their careers are presented in three major subthemes in Table 3.6.1 below. These subthemes include a) intra-individual factors, b) interpersonal factors, and c) cultural factors. Self-reliance, protecting the athlete identity and a lack of mental and physical health awareness and literacy were noted by participants to be intra-individual barriers to help-seeking during pre-professional ice hockey. Interpersonal factors that created barriers to help-seeking included poor quality of the support relationships and poor quality of the resources themselves. Finally, cultural factors within the organization, team, and larger hockey community that were noted by participants to create barriers to help-seeking were the culture of silence and suspicion, prioritizing performance over wellness, and poor availability and access to resources.

Table 3.6.1 Barriers to help-seeking during pre-professional ice hockey

Subthemes	Facet	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Intra-individual factors	• Self-reliance	17	8	"And then kinda went to college, at that point you're delusional and you feel like you can do everything by yourself." [Quinn]
	• Protecting the athlete identity	10	4	"So, like if I do well in school and I work hard at hockey and in the gym like who the fuck are you to tell me not to like do all these other things." [Jax]
	• Lack of mental and physical health awareness and literacy	4	2	"Battling depression wasn't common back then, I didn't know what that word meant. I just knew I wasn't happy." [Brian]

Interpersonal factors	• Poor quality of support relationship	9	6	"I had met with a school counsellor a couple times, didn't end up feeling super comfortable so kinda pulled away from that." [Mick]
	• Poor quality of resources	6	3	"So, I met this guy and it just didn't help at all, it made things worse." [Brent]
Cultural factors	• Learning the culture of silence & suspicion	15	6	"It was just that's information that if it got into the coach's hands or the wrong person, it would definitely be an issue." [Sam]
	• Priority on winning and performance	5	4	"The physical piece I, we always had great medical care so if I had an injury or anything like that I would definitely ask for help." [Quinn]
	• Poor availability & access to resources	2	1	"I also was never presented any from what I can remember like I might be wrong but I can't remember being offered up any sort of emotional, psychological support." [Jax]

3.6.1 Intra-individual barriers during pre-professional ice hockey

Self-reliance

Self-reliance has been used as a measure of conformity to masculine gender norms in previous research with male collegiate athletes (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Parent and Moradi (2009), who developed the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory, define self-reliance as an "aversion to asking for assistance" (p. 176). Building on this definition, self-reliance as a help-seeking barrier reflects an athletes' desire, need, or preference to handle on- and off-ice obstacles independently and without outside support. Athletes described self-reliance not only as a tendency or choice but also as a character trait or as an aspect of their personality. For example, Sam described self-reliance as an aspect of his personality:

"For me it came from just not wanting to bother people in general. And that's just my personality…You know, you get through it. And that's what I did, and I was fine." [Sam]

Relying on oneself, for Sam, was an integrated part of his character and also a behaviour

that he perceived as key to his success as an athlete.

In addition, many of the participants described a sense of pride and accomplishment

that came with their ability to conceal both physical and emotional pain from others.

Quinn described how his work ethic was used as a way to mask concussion symptoms:

Quinn: Again, specifically with hockey and the injuries, this is probably a little bit before the whole concussion thing, where you got your bell rung, we kinda just dealt with it. I remember not feeling right for stretches of time but just kinda going about my business. I felt like I could do the bare minimum in a hustle type way so I could kind of hide it, but if I could go back now with what people know about the effects of brain trauma I would've liked to kick my younger self in the ass and say something.

Interviewer: So yeah at that time you're probably thinking this is something that I'm not feeling 100%, but as long as I'm working hard no one's really going to notice?

Quinn: Yes, exactly. I think the work ethic was the biggest thing where that was apparent to the coaching staff, to the administrators, to even the faculty in the classrooms. So, it could show signs of blinding. I feel like you could get the benefit of the doubt, so I was good at that. That was definitely something that was instilled in me. I like to work hard and yeah, probably overworking in a lot of situations. [Quinn]

Quinn's work ethic was not only used as a tool to win over coaches and college faculty but was

also used as a way to overcompensate and fend off suspicions of his head injury. Self-reliance

was not only a barrier to help-seeking but was also a survival tactic that many participants also

believed would help them ascend to the highest level of professional ice hockey. Similarly,

Brian described how he felt as though there were people around him who were available to help

but instead, he relied on himself to cope with feelings of depression:

"Were there amazing people involved in that community, my coaches, and in the school? Absolutely. Did I take advantage of it? No. I was pretty good at faking it, like I said, nobody would know." [Brian]

Jax described how during his junior experience he began struggling with addiction to drugs and alcohol and his mental health. Jax also described how his self-reliance made him reluctant to get help even when it was presented to him, which was a pattern that continued throughout his professional career.

> *"I know that there was a number of times I went into the coaches' office and they were like how's your head? Where you at? I never once was like yeah, I want to fucking kill myself. I never, I always just sort of like yeah you know 'I'm fine'. I just sort of like sucked it up… I don't think they realized I was suffering. But I do know that if you were to ask them, they knew I was a complete animal, like I would party all the time. Because I put off this image that I was like a party animal that I was a loving everything…Like I never went to one of them and was like yeah well like I know it looks like I'm having fun and like I joke around but like I don't really wanna do coke and I don't want smoke weed every day and I'm really depressed and I'm really sad and I have absolutely no idea how to live my life." [Jax]*

Jax's highlighted how his (in)ability to cope with his mental health and addiction was due to his own efforts. Jax's ability to create a 'party animal' image helped to create a shield from suspicion and concern from others, despite how desperate he may have been to change his behaviour and escape his internal battle.

Protecting the athlete identity

Protecting the athlete identity refers to how athletes were reluctant to engage in help-seeking because of their connection to their image, status, identity, and responsibilities as an athlete. Jax, for example, described how the prioritization of his athletic pursuits over his mental health and wellness held him back from seeking help with his addiction during junior.

> *"I know that if I took care of my school and worked hard at hockey then in my own mind it made sense to like go party. Like I could let myself…like I earned it- yeah. So, like if I do well in school, and I work hard at hockey and in the gym like who the fuck are you to tell me not to like do all these other things…I did amazing on the ice. I mean I don't know how well I could've done because I was by this time probably drinking, smoking pot, like I was smoking pot pretty much every day I was drinking probably like anywhere from like three to seven days a week. And I was doing cocaine, probably like you know I didn't have much money but anytime I could kind*

of like scrape together some cash I would go buy coke and just rip through it... I didn't give a fuck at this point. I just I was like if I'm gonna score goals, what are they gonna say to me?" [Jax]

Jax was able to justify his reckless behaviour to himself and others due to his sustained performance on the ice.

"I'm a kind of guy that like I literally I never missed [practice]. I've had two times where I slept in and been late for hockey things and those have been in sobriety. I've never missed a practice... When I was around my teams, I was never late for anything I would fucking go sleep in my car outside of the rink at night so I would wake in my car and walk into the rink." [Jax]

Not only was Jax able to excel on the ice, but he was also able to sustain his responsibilities to the team. Jax went to great lengths, such as sleeping in his car outside the arena, to ensure that his substance use did not jeopardize his commitment to his coaches, teammates, and organization. Jax protected his athletic identity by remaining punctual and accountable to his team. As a result, Jax was able to mask his reckless behaviour and divert others' suspicion that he was in need of support.

Lack of mental and physical health awareness and literacy

Finally, a lack of individual mental and physical health awareness and literacy restricted athletes from seeking the support they may want and need. A lack of mental and physical health awareness and literacy prevented some athletes from recognizing signs and symptoms in themselves and others. Some athletes pointed to how they lacked awareness but also how society in general typically neglects to raise awareness around key issues like mental health and head injuries.

3.6.2 Interpersonal barriers during pre-professional ice hockey

Poor quality of support relationship

The quality of support relationships and the quality of the support itself may restrict initial help-seeking as well as ongoing help-seeking. The importance of the working alliance or therapeutic alliance between patient and health provider has been a topic of interest across a range of helping professions. These include life coaching (Graßmann, Schölmerich, & Schermuly, 2020), medicine (Trevino, Maciejewski, Epstein, & Prigerson, 2015), education (Rogers, 2014) and clinical psychology (Murphy & Hutton, 2017). Strong working alliances have been connected to improved treatment outcomes (Graßmann et al., 2020; Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011; Trevino et al., 2015) and treatment adherence (Haug et al., 2016).

A weak relationship and lack of rapport with a support source was identified by participants as a deterrent from pursuing initial help-seeking as well as from continued help-seeking. Further, many participants noted that poor relationships and experiences with support figures in the past went on to negatively impact their likelihood to seek help from completely different support figures later in their careers. A lack of rapport, a lack of trust, or feelings of judgement and discomfort with support resources were identified as characteristics of poor support relationships. Mick described his first and only session with a college counsellor:

> *"When I was going to the counsellor at school, or whatnot, it was almost like when I was talking it kinda felt like I was being judged or something like that." [Mick]*

Mick's discomfort in the first session with the college counsellor unfortunately lead him to not return for a follow-up session with that counsellor or with a different college counsellor. Mick went on to describe how it took many years after this encounter to give help-seeking from a professional source another chance.

Poor quality of resources

Along with the quality of the relationship, the quality of the support itself was highlighted as a potential barrier to help-seeking. Poor quality of support encompasses a lack of competence

by the support figure, a lack of engagement or connection with the treatment methodology, or the perception that the treatment or support was unhelpful or not facilitating the desired outcome (e.g., improved on-ice performance). Brent described how the framework of one sport psychologist from whom he sought help did not address his concerns in a way that resonated with him:

> *"I kind of learned for myself at least, is that you go into the room and meet this sport psychologist, and it's so like hockey oriented or sport oriented. My issues weren't related to hockey at all. It's not about stopping the puck, it's about where my mind was at. They're like 'do these breathing exercises while you're in the net'. Like 'do these pre-game rituals'. You know all this stuff. It became like a huge checklist, instead of just having fun. That just doesn't work for me." [Brent]*

 Brent captured how the disconnect between his needs and goals and the approach used by the sport psychologist. Regardless of the competence of the sport psychologist, to Brent this support was not helpful and appeared detrimental to his performance. He described how "it just didn't help at all. It made things worse" *[Brent]*.

3.6.3. Cultural barriers during pre-professional ice hockey

Learning the culture of silence and suspicion

Learning the culture of silence and suspicion refers to the process by which participants came to understand that help-seeking was not only an unaccepted behaviour but also potentially dangerous to their careers. Some participants spoke to their need to constantly be on guard and to manage other peoples' perceptions of them and their behaviour. Mick described how seeking help from coaches could potentially lead to unwanted questions.

> *"It was kinda easier than reaching out more whether it be through the school provided services or kinda coaching stuff because it was almost kinda like saying I'm going through this or I'm struggling with this and they'd kind of be like "well, what else are you struggling with?" [Mick]*

Mick described how he chose to lie to the college counsellor about his suicidal ideation out of fear of it getting back to his team.

> *"I think they probably asked [about suicide]. I probably lied…I think at that point I kinda understood the repercussions of saying yes, what followed that. And that would have affected hockey and everything." [Mick]*

Mick learned to minimize his problems in an effort to not jeopardize his future in the sport.

Similarly, Brian commented on how the power dynamics within a team made it so young players at the junior level do not feel comfortable seeking help internally.

> *"You don't want to be vulnerable around your teammates, you certainly don't want to be vulnerable in front of the coaches who are in a position of authority over you, that's just the power dynamics of the relationship and yeah." [Brian]*

Brian and Mick referred to the lack of control related to their own hockey careers and future hockey opportunities and how by not asking for help within their junior organization or college team they felt they were better able to manage the perceptions that others had of them.

Prioritizing performance over wellness

The hyper-competitive environment of pre-professional ice hockey was described by several participants as a form of preparation for their future in professional ice hockey. Participants described the results-driven industry of pre-professional ice hockey as a time when young athletes are taught to set high standards for their on-ice performance and are exposed to some of the demands they will encounter later on if they move on to the professional ranks. Many of the participants recognized that their individual and team on-ice results were more often prioritized over their individual well-being. This acceptance of winning at all costs was reported to create barriers that prevented athletes from seeking help. As a retired NHL player, Gabe described his observations of the "high-performance" minor and junior hockey system today in which his own children are currently involved:

"I look at the schedule, I'm like "that is ridiculous!" To me, it's crazy. With all we know now… we need to put them through the grind—why? We're in 2019. Yes, back in the '70s, that's what we did—hard training, two-a-days, this and that. Now, kids, we know more about nutrition, about sleep—I have thoughts about sleep, they do a camp where kids, they go to bed at 11, they gotta get up at 6:30 the next day and expect them to get their best…Right, and we would ask them, well… "we can't babysit them", "we gotta make it hard on them", "we look at how they succeed and how they work." I'm not saying you can't do training, you can do two or three trainings in one day, if you want, but allow them to nap, allow them to sleep at night, and let them recover a little bit. That's what I think. That's kind of the… the older mentality. Even though we know all the studies and everything—everybody talks about that—and even then, they'll have conferences where they talk about nutrition and about rest. Yet, their camp is just loaded… Jam-packed yea, but seminar after seminar and they go there, and they go there. There's no time to rest or sleep." [Gabe]

Gabe critiqued how elite minor hockey organizations cling to old ways of thinking, or the "old school mentality". Gabe believed that despite the effort to prepare young athletes to perform at the highest level, organizations were not setting an example for these young men to take care of their bodies and minds. Gabe expressed how he believed this overemphasis on high-volume training would have a detrimental impact on performance over the long-term. Based on this finding, there appears to be a disconnect between performance and wellness which begins at the youth level and likely carries over as the level of play rises.

Poor availability and access to resources

Participants pointed to how the lack of availability and access to resources, and in particular mental health and wellness resources, created barriers to engaging in help-seeking behaviour. Jax described how he was never presented with options for support during his time playing junior hockey.

"Throughout my junior career…I never went forward and said like somethings wrong. I also was never presented with any, from what I can remember. I might be wrong but I can't remember being offered up any sort of emotional, psychological support." [Jax]

Jax highlighted that creating opportunities for help-seeking is a shared responsibility between the individual and their team. However, Jax did not recall being presented with resources and therefore never sought help within his junior organization.

3.7 Help-seeking barriers during professional ice hockey

The identified help-seeking barriers during professional ice hockey were divided into three subthemes, namely a) intra-individual factors, b) interpersonal factors, and c) cultural factors (see Table 3.7). Intra-individual factors that were reported to create barriers to help-seeking during professional ice hockey included protecting the athlete identity, self-reliance, a lack of mental and physical health awareness and literacy, age and maturity, and familial obligations. Poor quality of support relationships and the poor quality of resources represented interpersonal barriers that emerged that impeded help-seeking. Finally, cultural barriers to help-seeking within the organization, league, or larger ice hockey community included a culture of silence and suspicion, poor availability and access to resources, instability of role, the business of winning and performance, and hierarchy constraints.

Table 3.7.1 Barriers to help-seeking during professional ice hockey

Subtheme	Facet	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Intra-individual factors	• Protecting the athlete identity	49	13	"I mean I think it definitely does. Anytime like I even go into the pharmacy to pick up my prescription like you know I'll get a bunch of people stop and shake my hand and be like I'm a huge fan and I'm like shit. I don't really want you to see me in here." [Kurt]

	• Self-reliance	44	15	"I think that resiliency… was always my strength. Just kinda like, "what can I do today to make this dream come true, or make happen?" And, while it was frustrating at times, I think that like, within myself, I just knew that I could do it if I just kept battling through." [Sam]
	• Lack of mental and physical health awareness & literacy	8	4	"I really didn't know what was going on either, at that point. So, if I didn't, then nobody else did. I didn't really seek out any help because I didn't know what the hell was going on anyways." [Owen]
	• Age and immaturity	4	3	"Like in the American league, everyone's so young it's tough to really go and talk to them." [Ian]
	• Family obligations	1	1	"I'm home with my spouse or I- you know I have a kid and stuff, so things get a little more hectic outside the games. You don't have as much time to be dwelling on it." [Joey]
Interpersonal factors	• Poor quality of support relationship	26	8	"I didn't get anything out of it and I didn't really trust her. I don't know, something weird. Just a weird feeling, nothing she did or whatever, just a weird feeling I didn't trust her and just didn't feel right to me." [Joey]

	• Poor quality of resources	17	8	"I've used multiple sport psychologists and I actually haven't had any success with any of them. I probably used three to four different ones and given them some time and effort into it. I always put everything into you know I'm an all-in kind of guy. If anything, it just (laughs) it really honestly just made things worse." [Brent]
Cultural factors	• Culture of silence and suspicion	96	18	"Yeah like mental coach but none of us ever trusted them because they were hired by the team and stuff. So, we're like 'they're just spies'". [Nate]
	• Poor availability and access to resources	38	13	"It sucks that and its tough that you end the season in April and then before you know it its September and they haven't reached out, they haven't tried to get me any help, and at this point I was still kind of going through the stage of 'Am I okay? Am I not okay?'"
	• Instability of role	28	10	"Again, I have two years of post-secondary my wife and I do quite well financially. Do we make— are we superstars who aren't going to have a work a day of our lives after hockey, like no. Unfortunately, that's not the situation we're in. I'm not willing to jeopardize future potential earnings and the financial stability of my family and my

				children, at this point." [Kurt]
	• The business of winning and performance	28	15	"I mean, I just… a coach's job is to win, and if he thinks that someone is not gonna help them win… I think you're… then putting yourself at risk." [Joey]
	• Hierarchy constraints	14	8	"Yea, because let's face it, if I'm not playing, I'm out, just scratched, the coaching staff they don't worry about me." [Gabe]

3.7.1 Intra-individual barriers during professional ice hockey

Protecting the athlete identity

Similar to what was reported at the pre-professional level, participants identified protecting one's athlete identity to be a barrier to help-seeking at the professional level. Related to the example provided in the pre-professional section above, participant Jax, described how he continued to use his status as an athlete and his commitment to his sport as a way to minimize and rationalize his destructive behaviour to himself and others.

Jax recalled a time when he admitted himself into a rehabilitation facility for the first time and he was able to use his position and status as a professional athlete to adjust the prescribed treatment plan.

> *"Jax: So, I had told them. I'm going to come back as a day patient but I need to start working out again, because I'm a professional hockey player and this is what I need to do. That was like my front.*

Interviewer: Yeah, this is taking away from my work…
Jax: Yeah, I knew that like. I'm like I'm just gonna like see the process out I'm going to do the whole thing. Just so that I can show my parents that I completed it. I always wanted to stop doing drugs, but I wanted to keep drinking. I went back to my hockey season and I didn't do anything that they taught me. I never went to AA meetings; I didn't get a sponsor. I didn't work the steps. I went back to [second NHL city]. I almost made [the NHL team] out of training camp. I stayed dry for probably 2 months. And then started drinking again at the end of camp."

For Jax, his professional obligations and his obligation to his health and to his family were in conflict, and in this instance his identity as a professional athlete was prioritized over his mental and physical health. Jax was able to leverage his professional athlete status to step away from treatment early while still appeasing the concerns of his family temporarily.

Many participants described the prototypical image of an athlete as someone who was in control of their emotions, invincible, and a role model to others. Some athletes perceived the professional athlete image and status as something worth protecting. For example, Nick described how the prototypical athlete image and, in particular, the pressure he felt to be a role model in the hockey community impacted his help-seeking behaviour:

"Yeah, I think so. I think it affects quite a bit, just being a person that has quite a few eyes on you at all times. Just you could never do wrong because it's amplified. So I think that seeing all the kids that you help and all the people you do help and your day-to-day life I think it does affect you and it might be tough for you to ask for help just because you don't want other people to know. So, I think that would be very tough." [Nick]

Kurt described how he believed his employability was dependent on his 'tough guy' persona that he cultivated throughout his career:

"No, I never spoke about [my mental health] to anyone before that conversation. Didn't want to. In my whole career I've kind of, I've been a very physical player. I've fought a lot. In the minors especially. I was just trying to fight everyone, to make a name for myself. My first couple years I was in the NHL I was fighting anyone to make a name for myself. I didn't wanna, you don't want to show any vulnerability or weakness. I think it sort of played into that macho image I had sort of cultivated." [Kurt]

Owen described how the professional athlete identity created a false sense of superiority and invincibility:

> "It's easy to find help I just that it's hard for the person that needs the help to actually want to get it. Do you know what I mean? Because you do think that I'm in the NHL, I'm a professional baseball player, or whatever it is, 'Look at me. I'm above.' Not that I'm above people but like "I'm invincible." It does happen, I think. It's a fine line." [Owen]

Participants reported consistently trying to minimize the presence of stressors and obstacles they faced throughout their careers. Some participants reported feeling like they had very little adversity in their lives and that they had limited experience with needing to ask for help. In contrast, some of the athletes challenged the notion that professional ice hockey athletes do not face adversity and commented on how they felt pressure to minimize the hardships they encounter. Mick articulated this contradiction.

> "As an athlete there's usually pressure to be like—you're kind of like—especially now like as a pro playing professionally and stuff like but even in college like, "Oh you're an athlete. You're a good hockey player. Your life is great." You know? Like at times I felt like I wasn't allowed to have other issues in my life, even though I am human and do have those like it was almost a feeling of like "well, you're on a full scholarship and you are one of the better players on the team and stuff". So, the pressure of holding that image and just having that image of what people expected that to be. I think that was kind of a deterrent as well, because I felt like the minute I lost that perception or the minute I lost that identity that I almost didn't know exactly what my identity was because so much of it is 'a hockey player' even though I know I am more than that." [Mick]

Like Mick, many of the athletes struggled to find a balance between being grateful for the opportunity to do a job many can only dream about, while also acknowledging the stressors and demands their job required. Further, many participants struggled to acknowledge that they deserved to, and were entitled to ask for help despite their privileged position.

Self-reliance

Similar to the experience of the athletes during their pre-professional careers, the desire to rely on oneself was common among participants during their professional careers. The participants spoke extensively about how dealing with obstacles was a personal responsibility and how it was up to the individual if they sought help or not. Joey highlighted the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their own issues, by stating:

> *"Like I said, it's all based on whether or not you wanna ask for help. It's a big boys' game, big boys' league, and if you're gonna ask I think there is help, but… you know, there's a lot on everyone's plates and they recognize when things aren't going well for certain guys and the team, and stuff like that. I mean, you want to help and make sure they're more than happy to find you the time and help you need. I just think it all, just by an individual case-by-case basis." [Joey]*

Joey highlighted that regardless of the individual's access to resources, it is ultimately up to the individual to act.

Relying on oneself and not seeking help from others was described by Mick as a point of pride.

> *"But then I know it's hard for me to open up about it, so yeah not a ton of people but at the same time like, I don't want that to inspire who I am, in the sense of like I don't want anyone to feel bad for me or like worrying about me, you know what I mean, I wanna be who I am now I don't wanna really be who I was then, or anything like that. So yeah I am comfortable talking about it and opening up about it but I don't think I'm quick to do that." [Mick]*

Like Mick, for many of the participants, self-reliance was not only a point of pride and personal responsibility but also a survival tactic. For these 19 men, their childhood dream of playing ice hockey professionally became a reality and became theirs to protect and theirs to lose. For many, their self-reliance was a key factor in their ascension to the highest level of play.

> *"I think that resiliency was always my strength. Just kinda like, 'what can I do today to make this dream come true, or make happen?' And, while it was frustrating at times, I think that like, within myself, I just knew that I could do it if I just kept battling through." [Sam]*

For Sam, he felt the weight of the responsibility and pressure to see his childhood dream realized. To seek help was at times equated with relinquishing control of his progress and accomplishments. Sam attributed his ability to battle through obstacles alone as a key factor to his success. For many, becoming entirely self-reliant was reported as a means of survival in a cut-throat industry.

Lack of mental and physical health literacy and awareness

A lack of individual mental and physical health awareness and literacy was reported to impede many participants' ability to ask for help. Some participants disclosed that they were ill-equipped to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental and physical health-related problems. Some athletes described not having the ability to recognize their need for help and were unaware of potential avenues of support. Nate described how following a concussion he entered what he described as a very dark, lonely, and isolated period:

> *"I don't think people knew how dark it was I didn't really want to say how dark it was. But it was dark. Maybe I just thought it'd get better. I don't know. I have no idea. I don't know. So, yeah it was tough…I don't know I really don't know. It's tough to really remember exactly what was going on and stuff but I don't know what would've really improved it. I don't really have the answer." [Nate]*

During the interview Nate described how he continued to struggle to articulate how he felt during his concussion recovery. Similarly, Sam highlighted how his lack of knowledge about different strategies a support resource may utilize in their treatments or sessions and different types of support left him feeling frustrated and underserved by the support that he was receiving from a mental skills coach.

> *"So… that was frustrating for me… And again, my family was supporting me, and the mental skills coach was… a support system, but… I don't know if I've ever received the support that I… that I now know is available." [Sam]*

Sam spoke about how he was unable to articulate the type of support he needed until it was presented to him as an option. Later in his career, Sam received different types of support, like life coaching, that aligned more with his goals and needs.

Age and maturity

Athletes identified being young and immature as a barrier to help-seeking. Many of the athletes noted that young athletes, in general, were reluctant to seek help for a few different reasons. Young athletes lack the perspective and experience of older more mature athletes to seek help. Younger athletes were reported to be intimidated by their new surroundings and were generally less knowledgeable and aware of the available resources and their potential benefits.

Familial obligations

One participant described how maturing into the role of husband and father created new barriers to help-seeking as a professional ice hockey athlete.

> *"I'm home with my spouse or I- you know I have a kid and stuff, so things get a little more hectic outside the games. You don't have as much time to be dwelling on it."*
> *[Joey]*

The demands outside the arena for Joey created time constraints to seek help. Joey described how (at the time of the interview) he was in a place in his career where he felt like he had the tools cope with the day-to-day demands of the job and if he were to continue to seek help and invest more time into his help-seeking it would take away from the time he was able to spend with his family.

3.7.2 Interpersonal barriers during professional ice hockey

Poor quality of support relationships

The quality of the support relationship was identified by many participants as a barrier to help-seeking at the professional level. Participants reported that a lack of trust, rapport,

relatability, and sincerity all negatively impacted the quality of the relationship they had with support resources with whom they had access. Ian recounted his first one-on-one interaction with a team sport psychologist:

> *"He starts talking to me. He's like, 'so how are you doing?] I'm like, 'um… not bad actually.' I've pretty much been over the hump of being frustrated and annoyed of losing, and stuff wasn't going great. I'm doing everything I can, I play hockey for a living, it's frustrating that we're losing, but I think at this point I just felt like something's out of my control and I just wasn't playing much. But it was what it was. I always come into the rink every day, like I had a good mindset at this point, where I was like, 'just come to the rink and I'm going to do my stuff, I'm going to be a good teammate. Frustrated that we're losing but, whatever, it is what it is.' And then, he just started like, prying at me. Like, 'well it's gotta be pretty frustrating, you know, you're in the NHL, not even a year and a half ago, and now you're down here [in the AHL] and you're not playing, you're on a bad team. How's that make you feel?' I was like like, what!?" [Ian]*

Ian left this meeting feeling exposed and judged by the sport psychologist. This initial encounter that Ian described with the team's sport psychologist highlights how the poor quality of the relationship deterred him from continuing to seek help from this individual. Additionally, Ian's encounter with the sport psychologist severed any potential relationship and rapport to be built between him and this potential source of support.

Poor quality of resources

Support that was perceived to be ineffective and of poor quality deterred some participants from utilizing sources of support. Sam described how his team in Europe has recently added a mental skills coach to their staff.

> *"My team this year added a… mental coach. Now, I asked him what that means, and I wasn't given a clear answer… Last year, they did not have any service like that. But they added a resource this year, and as I said, 'what service do you provide?' and he said, "oh, I'm going off of your personality test and we're gonna meet one-on-one next week to decide." So, it doesn't sound like it's what I'm looking for, exactly, but fortunately I might have other resources to work with that are helpful for me." [Sam]*

Sam articulated how his needs and the services that the mental skills coach was able to provide did not align. For Sam, the strategies used by the new mental skills coach did not align with his goals and needs and therefore he anticipated the quality of the resource would not be up to his standards. Sam did not find working with the mental skills coach to be useful and therefore chose to not seek further help from this source of support.

3.7.3 Cultural barriers during professional ice hockey

Culture of silence and suspicion

As the stakes and level of play intensify during professional hockey, the level of suspicion and subsequent reluctance around mental health and wellness also increases, and may even intensify. During the transition from pre-professional to professional ice hockey many participants reported the importance of learning and adapting to the professional ice hockey culture. For many of the participants, they described the culture as something that is rooted in the 'old school mentality', where dominant ideals of masculinity triumph. Most participants reported how dialogue around mental health and wellness were stigmatized and little was done to normalize help-seeking. Most participants explained how they feared losing their jobs. As a way to mitigate their job insecurity participants described feeling pressured to follow the restrictive rules of the 'older school mentality'. Many of the participants discussed the suspicion and borderline paranoia they felt with respect to gossip and perceptions that other people, and in particular those in power (e.g., coaches, management), had of them. Participants described how they felt suspicious of support resources (e.g., sport psychologist, athletic therapist, team doctor) that their organizations employed because they were unsure whether they could trust these individuals with personal issues. The paranoia they felt prevented them from trusting personnel

within their respective organizations. Joey described how his silence and suspicion was

rationalized as an asset and strategy for his survival in the NHL,

> *"Like if you slip up and you say something… it's gonna be misinterpreted, you know. Sometimes you say things that sound completely different than you mean, like if there's somebody that's a neutral party that's only worried about you, well then you don't have to worry about that. But if you can't be yourself and ask for help, and you're just thinking 'okay, how am I gonna word this'—as soon as you start thinking that, it's well, why are you even doing it? Because as soon as you say the wrong thing… it might put you in a bad spot or you know, change somebody's perception of the way you think even though it could be wrong." [Joey]*

Sam commented on how confiding in people within the organization was risky.

> *"You never know, you're taking a risk, like is this person trustworthy? Is he talking to the team? Or if I say something about the coach, are they gonna rat me out?" [Sam]*

Both Sam and Joey described how they constantly self-policed their conversations with other

members of their organization. They both feared that information they shared with one person

might be misinterpreted and/or shared with other parties without their permission.

For many of the participants, being labelled as a 'difficult' player or someone who required

a lot of attention could have serious negative consequences for their careers and employability.

> *"Yeah, no, this was an internal battle. Believing. You know, never wanting to be the guy that's complaining or, saying you need something. Especially in the minor leagues, because they don't always have the resources that big clubs have." [Sam]*

To Sam, asking for help was often equated with complaining. Complaining or requiring extra

attention was regarded by Sam and many of the other participants as a character flaw and

something that others would regard poorly.

Kurt explained that in his experience it was advantageous to exercise caution when seeking

help within professional organizations for sensitive issues like mental health.

> *"I think there was positives and negatives to kind of keeping [my mental health] a secret. But hockey is I think its honestly as a league it's still kind of a bit of a*

dinosaur in terms of inclusivity and stuff like that. Even when it comes to mental health." [Kurt]

Kurt commented on the prevalence of mental health stigma in the NHL. As an athlete with a diagnosed mental illness Kurt found it best to keep his mental health a secret and chose to be very selective about those with whom he shared this information.

Many of the participants questioned whether conversations they had with key sources of support within their organization would be kept confidential. However, some players' fear and suspicion around confidentiality within their organizations were based on negative past experiences with staff members, and advice they had received from teammates. Nate recalled how older teammates urged him to be cautious when trusting potential sources of support within the organization.

> *"And I mean as a young guy coming in a lot of the older guys will say don't trust anyone. That's not the best environment to be in but it's true though. A guy with loose lips and that's what happens. I mean there's a lot of people in a locker room and yeah you want to keep things tight to the chest a lot of times." [Nate]*

Nate trusted his older teammates' advice and chose to be extremely guarded around staff members. Nate also referred to sport psychologists and mental skills coaches as "spies", whose role was to gather confidential information from players and then report back to coaches and management.

Similarly, Ian described an instance when he was warned by fellow teammates about the questionable conduct of the team's sport psychologist:

> *"I didn't particularly trust him, doesn't seem like a ton of people trust him. Like, he wasn't like a guy- you could talk to him, but like, you weren't gonna start spilling out all your feelings and dark secrets, or how exactly what you were feeling... I just didn't have that trust factor with him, where I could really speak my mind. I don't know what it was, but there were rumours going around that whatever you said to them was likely gonna get back...into the brass" [Ian]*

Confidentiality between the sport psychologist and the athletes had not been honoured in the past

and the players continued to feel that the supports available to them were not designed to serve

them, but instead designed to serve the coaches and management.

Poor availability and access to resources

Poor availability and access to resources were identified by participants as a significant

barrier to help-seeking. Most participants struggled to identify and recall basic information

about available resources. For example, many of the participants noted that the NHLPA offered

a hotline for players who needed support. However, when asked basic questions related to the

purpose of the hotline, who answered the hotline, and when the hotline was available for calls

few participants were able to provide such details. Nate's response below was typical of most

participants' discussion of the support services offered by the NHLPA and NHL.

> *"But I mean there's programs in place for anything. Like you can call and get help I
> know that. The PA is I mean I think that it's kept quiet again I don't know because
> I've never really made any of the calls. But I haven't heard any whisperings of
> anything and I'm sure it happens a lot, so that's probably good." [Nate]*

Nate described how it was uncommon to hear about other players' experiences with the NHL

and NHLPA's resources. However, as Nate pointed out, the lack of information sharing could

also be a positive indication of the confidentiality of these programs or could highlight the

stigma athletes felt around help-seeking.

Owen commented on how organizations tend to underestimate the amount of work that is

needed to make resources accessible to the athletes.

> *"I honestly feel like clubs and the league and stuff I know that they pump a lot of
> money in resources into helping, but they also need to bring more in. Like they need
> to be—I'm not pushing on people—but it needs to be really easy for people to get
> help and not like "oh we're going to have a meeting at the beginning of the year.
> And here's the phone number if you need help." [Owen]*

For Owen, the organizations he was a part of during his professional career did not put enough effort into making resources easy to access. In particular, Owen and other participants commented on how players were not given basic information about how the resources operated and the purposes of the available resources. In many organizations the onus was reported to fall on the individual to take initiative and inquire about resources, which for many may not be something they are particularly confident or comfortable doing.

Instability of role and risk

Instability of role and risk captures how athletes felt like a major barrier to help-seeking stemmed from their concerns about job security, financial security, or risk to their position on the team (e.g., taken off the roster, being sent down to the AHL/ECHL). Many of the participants specified how seeking help within their organizations was a potential risk to their place on their current teams, but also their employability in the future. Many of the participants believed that if they were to ask for help for any number of issues related to their physical, mental, or emotional wellbeing they would be putting themselves in jeopardy of being sent down to a lower league, being taken off the roster (i.e., healthy scratch), and could negatively impact their ability to re-sign with their current team or secure a contract with a new organization in the future. Colin described how the financial stability of professional athletes depended on their ability to draw as little attention to themselves as possible.

> *"I think in today's game especially, there are more amazing resources than ever within the teams, and you'd like to ensure that these players feel as comfortable as they should. You know, opening up about anything in their lives, but understanding the world of pro sports and the millions and millions of dollars at stake, my guess is that most guys would have somewhat of a guard up before they share with anyone in the world—let alone your organization being the first person they feel comfortable with." [Colin]*

Trent explained how he rationalized his resistance to seeking help during his professional career.

> *"I mean who knows how many [concussions] I've really had, especially in the NHL, right? Like you take a big hit, you don't say anything because if you say something then you have a guy right below you that's waiting to take your job, you know? So, if I do, I don't come out of the game, you know what I mean? [Trent]*

For Trent, not asking for help was one way for him to better protect his job security.

Mick also described how early on in his career he equated not asking for help or not requiring assistance from his organization as a way to improve his standing within the organization and avoid the potential of being penalized (i.e., traded).

> *"I think at times if you're struggling it almost feels like it's a weakness even though it's not, so you don't really wanna portray that or have that shown because you want to be at your best and if you kind of almost took that information out... the fear is the change in persona or perception that someone might have on you. I think that's a huge fear, especially like you said, things happen so fast in pro hockey to where you can get traded or anything, that you want to be at your best at all times." [Mick]*

Like Brent, Mick equated needing help or requesting a resource with putting himself at risk of being perceived as a liability. The risk of asking for help for many of the participants did not out-weight the potential benefits of receiving help, because their jobs, income, and status were too valuable to compromise.

The business of winning and performance

Participants reported that the hyper-competitive climate intensified once athletes began their professional careers. Many participants stated how they were aware that professional ice hockey is a results-driven industry that was primarily focused on on-ice performance. Participants described that the focus on results, statistics, and performance created barriers for players who may need support, especially if this support was not performance-related. In addition, Gabe highlighted how a coach may be limited in their capacity to support their players due to their own intense demands.

"It's a business. I totally get it. It's a business and people are getting paid…[based] on winning and losing. I believe—maybe I'm stupid to think that, but I believe that the problem is we judge the quality of the coach or the GM on peak success. That puts a lot of pressure on them, and a lot of decisions we'll make will be affected by how the team's doing. So, I don't think they can't be really… who they want to be, at times. If that makes sense." [Gabe]

Gabe suspected that despite a coach's desire to form close bonds or connections with their players, forming those types of relationships may not always be realistic or in a coach's best interest. Gabe highlighted how not only are the athletes under tremendous pressure, but coaches also experience pressures which may restrict the type of support they can offer their athletes.

Sam stated that "for seven or eight years or whatever I did end up playing [professionally], no one really cares about you, they just care about your performance, and whether you can play hockey or not". Sam expressed that some of the organizations he had played for treated him as a commodity rather than as a person. Prioritizing the business side of the sport over the well-being of its athletes was reported to create barriers for participants who required support. In particular, many participants expressed that they did not feel entitled to non-hockey or non-performance-related support within the workplace. However, in contrast, participants like Brent chose to accept the reality of the workplace by stating:

"I honestly don't go to [the coaching staff] for anything. Just because my job is to stop the puck and you know I like to think I'm doing that pretty well, so I don't think they have anything to talk to me about. Obviously, like I watch video and talk to my goalie coach, but other than that I don't really have any issues. I just kind of go with the flow, and I try to be a leader and work super hard, so they never have to really say anything to me. That's kind of how I like it." [Brent]

From Brent's perspective, bringing non-sport related issues to the organization was inappropriate and something that he was uninterested in exploring. Further, he believed that keeping his personal life separate from his work life was in his best interest professionally.

Hierarchy constraints

93

Hierarchy constraints refer to how one's place or rank within the team impacts an athlete's capacity to ask for help. Status on a professional ice hockey team is typically assigned based on the amount of money the player earns, playing time, years of experience, and position on a team roster. On an ice hockey roster players are typically ranked numerically by 'lines'. Each team typically has four offensive lines, three defensive lines or pairings, and two goalies (one starter and one back up). For example, a high-status offensive player would typically play on one of the top two lines and a low-ranking player would play on the third or fourth line or be the back-up goalie. For the most part, participants agreed that rookie players and low-status players experience more significant barriers to help-seeking than veteran or high-status players. Rookie and low-status players were described by participants as athletes who possessed less credibility, less value, and represented those who were easier for organizations to replace. Some participants explained that organizations would invest more resources into higher-earning or higher-ranking players because it was in their best interest to protect their financial investments in these players and because these players typically produce superior on-ice results (e.g., points, goals).

Overall, most of the participants agreed that younger players who were new to a professional league would be tentative to ask for help from the organization. Joey explained why a player who is new to professional ice hockey might be hesitant to ask for help.

> *"I mean, at the beginning of your career you don't wanna say- you don't wanna get… you wanna keep all the negative attention away. So, you don't ask for help, you don't ask for favours, you just want to fly under the radar and do your job." [Joey]*

Joey pointed to the rookie players' lack of comfort with the organization and lack of credibility to be the key reasons why they might not engage in help-seeking. Participants believed that low-status players were dispensable compared to high-status players on an NHL roster.

Nick offered a slightly different perspective as to why young players who are new to the league might be less likely to ask for help.

> *"Coming up from junior it's a new experience it's something that's all new to you and you might be a bit tentative going to ask for help because you don't know them very well. You don't know what they might say to someone else but being with the organization for as long as I have, I'm comfortable with going to whoever I need for help."*

Nick explained that the reason younger and newer players might be more tentative to ask for help has more to do with a lack of rapport and trust between the athlete and their organization.

3.8 Help-seeking barriers during retirement

Two subthemes were generated with respect to help-seeking barriers at the retirement phase of a professional ice hockey athlete's career (see Table 3.8.1). Interpersonal factors such as the poor quality of support resources and cultural factors like the poor availability and access to resources for retired players were noted as potential barriers to help-seeking during retirement.

Table 3.8.1 Barriers to help-seeking during retirement

Subtheme	Facet	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Interpersonal factors	• Poor quality of support resources	1	1	"You can talk to your parents and stuff like that but as long as they're your parents they're going to help you as much as possible but sometimes you can't—you take it all with a grain of salt, right?" [Owen]
Cultural factors	• Poor availability & access to resources	4	3	"I don't know who's going to pay for it but there needs to be more help after hockey." [Owen]

3.8.1 Intra-individual barriers during retirement

Poor quality of support resources

The quality of support relationships was the only theme that emerged related to potential interpersonal barriers during the retirement phase of an ice hockey athlete's career (see Table 3.8.1). For the most part, the retired participants reported far fewer barriers to help-seeking once they finished playing professional ice hockey. Owen noted that once he was forced to retire due to injury, he made it a priority to get support for his ongoing physical and mental concussion symptoms. He commented on how relying on sources of support like family and friends might not always be the best option.

> *"You can talk to your parents and stuff like that but as long as they're your parents they're going to help you as much as possible but sometimes you can't—you take it all with a grain of salt, right? You think that you're probably better than you actually are."* [Owen]

Owen highlighted how he sought professional sources of support to help with his concussion recovery. He noted that as well-intentioned as his parents were, they did not always offer the most objective and unbiased support. Given the severity of Owen's concussion symptoms he recognized that he needed support from professional and competent resources who were trained to address his mental and physical health concerns.

3.8.2 Cultural barriers during retirement

Poor availability and access to resources

Availability and access to resources was a cultural barrier to help-seeking for retired professional ice hockey athletes (see Table 3.8.1). Mostly, the retired participants highlighted the lack of support available to retired hockey players by the leagues and unions. Participants pointed to the need for support with respect to addiction, financial planning, mental health, as well as support for athletes to transition into new careers.

> *"I don't know who's going to pay for it but there needs to be more help after hockey… I mean to take the [the NHL's and NHLPA's] side there are thousands and thousands of retired players like if I need to help every one of them out there's just*

not enough money to do it and not enough resources. And how is one person need it
more than another. I honestly don't know how you could go about it or whatnot."
[Owen]

Owen acknowledged the need for support for retired athletes. However, he also recognized the

lack of funds and resources will continue to be a major barrier for any potential future programs

for retired ice hockey athletes.

3.9 Help-seeking facilitators during pre-professional ice hockey

Participants noted three subthemes when identifying potential facilitators of help-seeking

during the pre-professional phase of an ice hockey athletes' career. These subthemes include a)

intra-individual, b) interpersonal, and c) cultural factors within the organization, league, or larger

ice hockey community. Intra-individual factors that participants identified as potential

facilitators of help-seeking included individual characteristics and personality traits and an

individual's responsibility and motivation to change. The quality of the support relationship and

the quality of the support resources themselves were noted by participants as interpersonal

factors that facilitated help-seeking. Finally, cultural factors within the organization, league, and

larger hockey community that were reported to help facilitate help-seeking at the pre-

professional level were having available and accessible resources, being a part of a supportive

and progressive environment, and a motivation to improve individually in order to benefit the

larger group.

Table 3.9.1 Facilitators to help-seeking during pre-professional hockey

Subtheme	Facet	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Intra-individual factors	• Individual characteristics and personality	3	2	"I like to think I'm a pretty… well, first off, I'm like pretty outgoing and not typically afraid to go ask for help." [Nate]

	• Individual responsibility and motivation to change	1	1	"I may have been reluctant to do it, it was kind of just like, "well, this is the time where you gotta man up and just go deal with it. Ask for advice." Deal with it, ask for advice, you're not really helping yourself by not asking for advice." [Ian]
Interpersonal factors	• High quality of support relationship	23	12	"In junior hockey your team basically the people you trust like you know you can go to them as people that are always going to be there because you live with them. You they have to be there for you, so I think that was a big thing with us is you grow close very fast."
	• High quality of resources	3	3	"Just the advice he gave me, I found it was easy to apply and it was easy to execute." [Leo]
Cultural factors	• Available and accessible resources	13	7	"She was just always sort of around and we had like a good rapport with the team. And the guys were always, and myself I don't know how other guys were but there was constant communication." [Jax]
	• Supportive & progressive environments	10	6	"I think for the most part they were people that I trusted, that if there was anything that I needed they were there to help and I truly felt that way." [Eric]
	• Team first mentality	2	2	"I got kicked out of the game and my team just had a bunch of penalty minutes to kill off and I was, I think I was sitting in the stands after the game or during the game and I was just thinking like, I was being pretty hard on myself and what the hell am I doing? I got to figure this out, so I… that's when I kind of made the decision." [Leo]

3.9.1 Intra-individual factors during pre-professional ice hockey

Individual characteristics and personality

Some participants identified that their own individual characteristics and personalities

were a factor in their capacity to ask for help (see Table 3.9.1). Some participants commented on

how they viewed being open-minded, outgoing, and confident to be connected with the ability to

ask for help. Some participants drew a link between one's character traits and their help-seeking

behaviour. This connection was something that was reported to be inherent or unique to the

individual as opposed to something that was on account of other interpersonal or cultural factors.

Individual responsibility and motivation to change

One participant noted that their help-seeking was connected to their desire to take

responsibility over their life and career (see Table 3.9.1). Ian stated that during college he

violated a campus policy and was worried that the violation would be reported back to his coach.

Ian decided that rather than waiting for the coach to find out through the college security he took

it upon himself to disclose the incident to his coach. Ian stated that:

> *"I think one of the biggest—not really a lesson I learned, but just maybe from advice
> or through other people's experiences, is it's probably best not to let stuff--best not
> to let coach find out on his own or other people find something out that you did bad,
> and hear it from second-hand, through the cops, or someone else…I may have been
> reluctant to do it, it was kind of just like, 'well, this is the time where you gotta man
> up and just go deal with it. Ask for advice.' Deal with it, ask for advice, you're not
> really helping yourself by not asking for advice." [Ian]*

For Ian in order to avoid his coach learning of the incident second-hand he chose to take

responsibility for his actions and seek support from his coach. He also equated his decision to

disclose the police incident to his coach as being an expression of his masculinity by "manning

up". Manning up in this circumstance was being able to take responsibility for his actions and seek advice from a coach.

3.9.2 Interpersonal factors during pre-professional ice hockey

High quality of the support relationship

A high-quality relationship with the person providing the support or resource was specified as a key facilitator to engage in initial help-seeking as well as ongoing help-seeking by most of the participants (see Table 3.9.1). Relationships were considered high in quality when participants felt the source of support was trustworthy, relatable, familiar, approachable, and when the source of support expressed genuine interest in them. For example, during junior and college some participants felt like their teammates were a key source of support because they felt like teammates were easy to relate to and were going through similar life experiences. Mick described how it was particularly easy to relate to his teammates.

> *"But I'd say more my teammates were my biggest support, mostly because of the academic perspective and academic component of the experience that you have during NCAA. That being through a lot of similar classes or the same classes or having classes with teammates, it definitely made it easier in terms of having to talk to them or ask them for help." [Mick]*

Having similar life experiences at this career stage was reported to be a facilitator of help-seeking between teammates during college.

Jax described how a high school counsellor expressed a genuine interest in his development which made him feel like he could seek help from her when needed.

> *"I remember the school guidance counsellor was cool because I think she was respected the fact that I was a good student and that I cared about the school and that you know I was respectful of the other people and I wasn't like for the most part not like one of those guys who were just basically like trying to sleep with all the other girls in school…She was just always sort of around and she had like a good rapport with the team. The guys were always, and myself I don't know how the other guys were but there was constant communication." [Jax]*

Jax felt like this source of support was genuinely invested in him as a student, athlete, and person. This interest helped facilitate Jax's help-seeking with the high school guidance counsellor. Jax also commented on how this high school counsellor made an effort to connect with other members of his team which again help improved the rapport between the guidance counsellor and team members.

High quality of resources

Some participants noted that when the support they received during minor, junior, and college was high in quality they were more likely to continue to use this source of support as a resource (see Table 3.9.1). Support was considered high in quality when the resources or strategies they were being exposed to or taught were effective, engaging, and easy to implement. Leo described how a sport psychologist he met during his junior years provided support that was "easy to apply and it easy to execute". Similarly, Sam commented on how his college team had a religious leader who made himself available to athletes to meet one-on-one, in groups, and also held optional church services that the athletes could attend. Sam explained how the priest would make the spiritual content he was delivering relatable and applicable to the student-athletes' everyday lives. Sam stated that:

> *"It was a really easy way of relating scripture or relating those themes or thoughts to our everyday lives. So, that was easier than a sort of traditional religious service, or conversation with a priest". [Sam]*

From Sam's perspective the priest's ability to create a safe and engaging space helped encourage Sam to continue seeking help from this source of support during college.

3.9.3 Cultural factors during pre-professional ice hockey

Available and accessible to resources

Having resources that are readily available and easy to access was noted as a key cultural facilitator of help-seeking among pre-professional ice hockey athletes (see Table 3.9.1). Simply being offered a resource or given information about available resources improved the participants' likelihood of utilizing those resources. Sam explained how, as a student-athlete playing ice hockey in the NCAA, he felt as though he was exposed to specialized resources which made it easier for him to seek help when he needed it. Sam discussed how accessing resources as a student-athlete was easier than accessing resources as a non-student-athlete.

> *"I feel like if I were just a student who... didn't have the bond and the resources that I had with you know, any medical issue or fitness or whatever. Just the resources are so different. I really felt like I was a part of something...I think all of this would have been a lot more on me if I wasn't an athlete, to seek out support. Maybe I would have used other resources, like academic advisor or you know, their resources. There are medical services on campus that you can use, but… those are sometimes intimidating, because there's a process… you're one of the 14,000 students instead of one of 25 guys on the hockey team. It just feels a little bit different." [Sam]*

For Sam, being a student-athlete facilitated his help-seeking because of the extended resources that he was able to access. Sam highlighted that non-student athletes did not have access to the same resources as the student-athletes. For example, Sam described how his team had a priest on staff who worked exclusively with the ice hockey team.

Leo, however, relied less on the resources presented to him as a junior ice hockey athlete and instead sought help through social media outlets. Leo was introduced to a sport psychologist via Twitter. Leo explained how he was able to easily access this source of support using social media.

> *"Yeah, I literally just came across him on Twitter and I followed him and yeah, and then I sent him a message asking if I could have his email and he said yes and I sent him an email and we exchanged a few emails back and forth…I had been following him on Twitter for a little while at that point, so that's when I made the decision to reach out to him" [Leo]*

The accessibility of the internet and social media allowed Leo to access a sport psychologist he otherwise would not have had access to, due to geographical distance.

Supportive and progressive environments

Participants noted that being on teams that were generally supportive of the personal and professional development of their athletes helped create an environment where athletes felt more comfortable to ask for help (see Table 3.9.1). Further, pre-professional athletes that played for organizations that were described as progressive, particularly with respect to mental health and wellness, were environments participants felt more comfortable seeking help within. Eric described how his junior organization created a safe environment for him to seek help.

> *"[The organization] never put me in a bad situation or a harmful situation off the ice or on the ice in terms of, they never asked me to do something that was out of my element—an event, or an appearance, or things like that—but they always gave us… they put us in a position to succeed more than anything…I think for the most part they were people that I trusted, that if there was anything that I needed they were there to help and I truly felt that way." [Eric]*

Eric highlighted how he felt protected by the organization and expressed that he felt they would always operate in his best interests. In the above quote, Eric explained how because he trusted his junior organization, he felt comfortable to seek help when needed.

Outside of the team environment four of the participants stressed that they were able to play junior hockey locally and therefore were able to live at home during this early stage of their careers. These participants emphasized how being able to remain close to parents, extended family, and childhood friends was essential to their development, but also helped facilitate their capacity to seek help during this early stage of their careers. Colin explained how his experience of living at home while playing junior helped him maintain established connections with friends and family.

"I lived at home, in fact, we billeted with two other players and I essentially stayed all 3 years of junior living at home, until I began playing pro. So, for me, it was a great experience I got to share with family and friends, I got to keep my high school friendships, rather than most guys who leave at 16, or 17 and they don't… really maintain a strong connection to family and friends in their hometown. So, I was able to have both family and friends that I grew with until I was 19, when I left…it allowed me to learn from every hurdle, and I think, being able to come home and talk to my parents, who always had great perspective, sharing it with my friends who were going to the same, similar things." [Colin]

Colin highlighted how having the opportunity to live at home during junior allowed him to remain within an environment that was not only familiar but supportive during the early phase of his career.

Team first mentality

Two participants recounted how their desire to help their teams succeed facilitated their help-seeking for personal issues during pre-professional ice hockey (see Table 3.9.1). Leo explained the incident that led him to contact a sport psychologist for support.

"I was getting really frustrated, I was getting really frustrated because I seemed to build up this kind of temper on this ice and I was taking bad penalties and I felt bad because I was putting the team down a player a lot and I thought I could… and so I actually reached out to someone to get some help…We played a game and I took a bad penalty and then I got pissed and then I took another bad penalty and I did something, and I got kicked out of the game. My team just had a bunch of penalty minutes to kill off and I think I was sitting in the stands after the game or during the game and I was just thinking like, I was being pretty hard on myself, like what the hell am I doing? I have got to figure this out, so I… that's when I kinda made the decision [to get support]." [Leo]

Leo recalled how his behaviour and anger on the ice had begun to negatively impact his team's performance (i.e., by taking excessive penalties). Leo highlighted in the quote above how his on-ice behaviour created feelings of guilt because he had put his team in a difficult situation during a game. This event was the catalyst for Leo to seek help from a sport psychologist. For Leo, seeking help was a way for him to help his team and was not motivated by his own individual needs or goals. Leo described how he viewed his anger

and tough-guy persona on the ice as an asset to his individual on-ice performance and

addressing his anger on the ice was solely for the benefit of his team.

Similarly, Quinn recalled a situation in which he felt he needed to step in and seek

support on behalf of a teammate.

> *"I remember there being an issue with one of our teammates in our class and I asked [the team chaplain] how to deal with it. There was one [teammate] who had a big issue with drinking…it was pretty detrimental to him and it was starting to wear away at the fabric of the team." [Quinn]*

For Quinn his teammates' drinking was not only a problem for his teammate individually, but it

was also beginning to negatively shift the dynamics of his team. As captain of his college team

Quinn decided to not only look out for his teammate but also his team as a whole and sought

help from the team chaplain on strategies to support his teammate. Quinn and Leo's decisions to

seek help were motivated by their desire to prioritize their teams' needs. Based on these

examples it appears that seeking help on behalf of the team as opposed to on behalf of oneself

was interpreted as a more acceptable and even noble reason to seek help.

3.10 Help-seeking facilitators during professional ice hockey

Three subthemes emerged that described athletes' help-seeking facilitators during

professional ice hockey. These included a) intra-individual factors, b) interpersonal factors, and

c) cultural factors within the organization, league, or larger hockey community. Individual

motivation and responsibility to change, an individual's characteristics and personality,

individual growth and maturity, and individual mental and physical health awareness and literacy

were noted as facilitators to help-seeking at the professional level. The quality of the support

relationship and the quality of the support resources were identified to be interpersonal factors

that facilitated help-seeking at the professional career phase. Finally, cultural factors such as the

availability and access to resources, shifting hockey culture, progressive and supportive

environments, prioritizing wellness, team first mentality, hierarchy advantages, and a separation

between work and support were highlighted by participants as facilitators to help-seeking at the

professional ice hockey level.

Table 3.10.1 Facilitators to help-seeking during professional ice hockey

Subtheme	Facet	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Intra-individual factors	• Individual motivation and responsibility to change	50	10	"I just think you're not developing, you're growing at the rate you're expected to, and then you look to the next thing to try and get better. You look for any edge to get ahead." [Joey]
	• Individual characteristics & personality	27	11	"I think it's just that I really value this, and it may be… um… really, I might be very unique in this, in thinking that this is important? Uh, you may ask a team, 'hey, we have this resource" and no one might show up.'" [Sam]
	• Individual growth and maturity	17	10	"I think when you're young, you think it's a sign of weakness or that, but as you get older and more confident in who you are as a person you don't mind asking for help if you know it's gonna benefit you in the long run. That's kinda- it comes with maturity, I think. [Eric]

	• Individual mental health awareness and literacy	2	2	"Having an understanding of the different methods… of not like, psychology or coaching, but… I don't know, just perspective training. I guess that's under the realm of coaching, um… I don't know, it's tough to look back now and say what would have helped me seek out help." [Sam]
Interpersonal factors	• High quality of support relationship	94	17	"Yeah, no I think it's absolutely almost like a weight off your shoulder, knowing that I have a resource that I can go to and feel comfortable with and I know will be honest with me and open and genuine." [Mick]
	• High quality of resources	40	13	"And then performance wise, look at my career from 0X-0X I went from phasing out of pro hockey to being the best defenseman in the American league and eventually make the NHL again." [Brian]
Cultural factors	• Available and accessible resources	75	15	"And I think that playing pro hockey there's a lot of tools and a lot of resources that they have for us so we can use for that." [Nick]
	• Hockey culture shift	49	14	"I think it's part of the culture that the new game is becoming an open door, coaching policies, and they want guys asking for help, and they want guys seeking advice and trying to learn. I think it's… really socially acceptable, now." [Joey]

	• Progressive and support environment	30	10	"Yes. Like, the GM, the coaches need to say to the team, "This is work that we think is valuable, and us finding out you're doing this—if you do or not—does not matter." You know? Stuff like that. It's… "This is for you only, and it's a resource because we think it's valuable." [Sam]
	• Prioritizing wellness	19	11	"I think that if you could communicate with them and treat them like- like people—because obviously they are, they're not just, you know, hockey players. They're people first." [Eric]
	• Team first mentality	13	7	"You always everyone to be at your best because when you're at your best it makes other people around you better. So, if you're bringing yourself down or a teammate down it can only worsen or effect the team. So, I think that being at your best and being able to reach out and get the resources that you need is helps you and helps the team in the long run." [Nick]
	• Hierarchy advantages	13	6	"Well, I think… the higher end guys or whatnot, the guys that are the best will think, they should be the most comfortable because they know that they're the safest." [Joey]

	• Separation between work and support	11	7	"I think the right environment. So, I would meet the team consultant at a Starbucks and away from people, away from my teammates, away from the rink. I think that was important because it was like, no one's listening through the door, you know? [Sam]

3.10.1 Intra-individual factors during professional ice hockey

Motivation and responsibility to change and evolve

Many participants pointed to their own intrinsic desire and motivation to change and evolve as a key facilitator to help-seeking as a professional athlete (see Table 3.10.1). The participants highlighted how for professional athletes to remain at the top of their game they were required to constantly improve and evolve. Some athletes like Kurt made the connection between their mental health and performance. Kurt stated that "I think I started to realize that if I wanted to perform well on the ice, I needed to be healthy off the ice first. That sort of became my focus". For Kurt, his mental health became his priority once he recognized the impact it could have on his performance. Further Kurt highlighted:

> "As I get older, I realize that you know playing at this level—the difference between [the NHL] and say the AHL is like 95% mental and 5% physical. You've got to be in the right mindset to play at this level. I think at this level I think you know having someone you can talk to would definitely help." [Kurt]

As Kurt stated, athletes who may not deal with the level of mental health concerns that he reported struggling with, could still benefit from seeking support for their own wellness and mental performance.

For Brent, addressing his substance use and seeking help from a sponsor was partially motivated by his goals as a professional athlete. Brent stated that:

> *"It's just like I don't know I think there's different types of like alcoholism, but you know maybe I didn't need to do that, but I just felt if I want to be the best athlete in the National Hockey League I don't want to live like this anymore…it got to the level where I was like 'man I don't like the person I am becoming. I don't like the decisions I'm making. I just want to like cut this out'". [Brent]*

For Brent, his substance use and partying no longer aligned with his goals as a professional athlete, and as a result of this tension, he made the decision to seek help in order to find more balance in his life.

Outside of the performance benefits that seeking support may provide professional athletes, some participants noted that a desire for personal development was a facilitator to seek help. Sam explained that his motivation to seek help was to better understand himself as a person and search for a purpose outside of his sport.

> *"So, how do I look for outlets in my life where I can at least point towards something, or think about something that gives me energy and excites me, and helps me feel more like myself…So, I think that's when I got the point where I was like, this is what I've been missing this whole time. During those early years, especially how could I have made productive use of the time I had? But also helped me grow and understand myself in a way where I could have dealt with the issues and the stressors probably, you know, not too differently but in a way that would have been more productive." [Sam]*

Sam was interested in finding meaning and purpose in his life both within and outside the game of hockey and seeking support from a professional resource helped facilitate this goal.

Finally, similar to the experiences of participants in their pre-professional hockey careers many felt like the actual act of seeking support and getting help was an individual responsibility. Many participants noted that they believed it was up to the individual

athlete to take initiative and seek help, and not rely on others or their organizations to make resource utilization mandatory.

Individual characteristics and personality

Over half of the participants considered personality and individual characteristics to be an important help-seeking facilitator at the professional level (see Table 3.10.1). Participants reported that particular personality traits and characteristics that facilitated help-seeking included, open-mindedness, curiosity, self-confidence, humility, and extraversion. Colin explained how his help-seeking behaviour was closely linked to his character.

> *"For me, one of my biggest things that I would actually tell people is that, the fact that I can ask for help or work with different people or open up with where I'm at. It is actually a sign that I have a ton of confidence that I'm in a growth mindset…For me, I believe in asking for help. So, for me, I never really felt like I couldn't do it."* [Colin]

For Colin, help-seeking was seen as a strength and something that he continued to see as a valuable part of his personality and belief system.

Individual growth and maturity

Participants identified that their individual growth and maturity was a key help-seeking facilitator during their professional ice hockey careers (see Table 3.10.1). Many participants stated that as they matured and grew as a person their comfort level with asking for help increased. Kurt explained how his growth and maturity impacted his capacity to ask for help.

> *"You know I'm not sure (sighs) if I could attribute that to anything but just becoming older and more mature and more of a man and an adult and being comfortable with who I am, and [my mental illness] doesn't define me. It's just something that I deal with. Like I tell myself or tell young guys in hockey about it. To me it's no different than having asthma or diabetes. It's just something I take four pills for a day and like it's not who I am it's just a piece of me. I think my comfort level of getting help is can mainly be attributed to just you know being more comfortable as a grown man."* [Kurt]

For Kurt, his growth and maturity allowed him to accept his mental health diagnosis. In addition, as he aged, Kurt began to take it upon himself to destigmatize the topic of mental health with younger players on his team.

Mental and physical health awareness and literacy

A few participants reported that an increased awareness of mental health, physical health, and general wellness helped improve their capacity to ask for help (see Table 3.10.1). For Sam, learning and educating himself on the different options and purposes of different resources was reported to help him ask for help.

> *"I think like, having an understanding and maybe—because I didn't study this type of work in school but having an understanding of the different methods of not like, psychology, or coaching, but I don't know, just perspective training? I guess that's under the realm of coaching, um… I don't know, it's tough to look back now and say what would have helped me seek out help." [Sam]*

Sam highlighted how his understanding of different support resources and different support strategies helped him become better equipped to seek the type of support that best suited his goals and concerns.

3.10.2 Interpersonal facilitators during professional ice hockey

High quality support relationships

Participants identified high-quality relationships with support resources as a key facilitator to help-seeking at the professional level (see Table 3.10.1). The quality of the relationship between the athlete and the resource was described as being dependent on the level of trust, comfort, and rapport within the relationship. Some participants also highlighted how sources of support who were nonjudgmental and expressed an interest in them as people helped establish a strong working alliance. Mick described how his initial visit with a team consultant helped establish a strong connection.

"I think for myself, personally it was just kinda like… she made me feel immediately comfortable… It was just a safe space for me to kinda say something that I was feeling or thinking that I might not be able to voice really elsewhere. My mental and everything like that it was really, I guess it was really comforting to be able to have them as a resource and have somebody there who I guess didn't feel judgmental, didn't feel kind of condescending as if she was talking to you or talking at you I should say, she was more talking with you, just having a genuine conversation. She was able to kind of give a different perspective of something that I maybe wasn't able to see." [Mick]

Having a resource who showed a genuine interest and took time to build a safe environment helped Mick continue to return for more sessions with the same consultant.

For Brian the quality of the relationship was dependent on the source of support empathizing and intently listening to him. Brian explained that:

"Everybody who's had a family member or close friends or grandma, you can call, you leave the conversation feeling listened to, truly listened to, you know when someone's thinking in their head how to fix your or they're telling a story in their head cause you don't… it's a light listening. For me, I just try to be there, like I said, you know when you're with that person and you're like… and you feel it, it's different. I'm not explaining this very well." [Brian]

Brian distinguished that often sources of support addressed his problems with solutions and problem-solving techniques, but neglected to empathize with him. Brian valued someone who listened and allowed him the space to express his emotions.

High quality of resources

Distinct form the quality of the relationship, many participants cited the quality of the resource to be an important facilitator to help-seeking during professional ice hockey. The quality of the resource was often described as efficacious, effective, and applicable (see Table 3.10.1). For many of the athletes interviewed they also judged the quality of the support they received on observable improvements to their physical, emotional, or mental wellbeing. For Brent the progress he observed since seeking help for his substance use helped facilitate on-going support seeking.

"I haven't even thought about having a drink since I stopped…You know like if thought I was going to be kind of a career back up maybe like they'd—I mean it's bigger than just hockey though. There's just so many benefits of the decisions I made, and you know I started to see them. It's crazy, I'm already down like 4% body fat in three weeks of not boozing. And like my energy is so much higher. My moods are more consistent. I'm only a few weeks in but, it's just like I can just think this is the right decision for me at least right. But who knows, just trying to not drink today." [Brent]

For Brent seeing the improvements to his to both his mental and physical health facilitated his ongoing and continued utilization of substance use resources.

For some athletes the quality of the resource was measured by the credentials and reputation of the support resource. As Nate noted, "if you need a knee specialist or a head specialist, they're gonna give you the top five in the world… [the organization] is gonna send you the best, if it's available". Having the opportunity to be treated by the best doctors and surgeons helped put Nate at ease and encouraged him to seek and accept help from medical professionals.

3.10.3 Cultural factors during professional ice hockey

Available and accessible resources

For many of the participants, having resources within their organization, team, and larger ice hockey community that were readily available and easy to access helped facilitate help-seeking (see Table 3.10.1). Many participants also noted having access to a diverse array of support options helped facilitate help-seeking. Having different options allowed the athletes to find the resource that was best suited for their needs and goals. Sam highlighted how a one-size-fits-all method of providing support to athletes was not an effective means of facilitating help-seeking.

"Even if it is just a case-by-case thing, it's not a weekly meeting, at least the player knows that there's someone there they can talk to if they get to that point where they feel like they need it…there's no rule, and they're clear about how we can do this

however you want, whatever best suits your needs. [They'll] make it work. For me, that was every week, or every other week depending on travel schedule because I valued the work." [Sam]

Sam outlined how the flexibility of the resources made them more approachable and accessible. Many participants were more likely to utilize resources that were accommodating to their demanding schedules.

According to a few participants, some professional ice hockey organizations mandated that their athletes seek support from specific resources. Nick described how his organization recognized the potential challenges for new first-year players and therefore mandated that each first-year athlete meet regularly with a psychologist. Nick explained how "just because we were the younger players and I think [seeing the psychologist regularly] helped us a lot. It gave us a different look and it helped us especially living on your own". Mandating weekly psychologist sessions for new players in this instance helped the athletes engage with a resource they might have otherwise been reluctant to explore. Luckily, Nick was able to develop a strong rapport with the psychologist which allowed for a more positive and helpful experience. However, mandating athletes to engage with support resources may not always be positively accepted. Another participant, Ian, did not find it helpful when he was mandated by his organization to meet with a sport psychologist.

Hockey culture shift

Many participants cited a shift in hockey and sport culture was a key facilitator to help-seeking at the professional ice hockey level (see Table 3.10.1). Participants described this cultural shift in ice hockey to be connected to increased mental health awareness, increased concussion and head trauma awareness, along with a general shift away from more traditional and conservative ways of thinking in ice hockey. Campaigns like #BellLetsTalk and the work

that is being done to raise awareness around head trauma and CTE were examples athletes used to highlight the progress that is being made in the general public but also in the ice hockey community.

One particular moment that several participants pointed to as evidence of this shift towards greater acceptance and awareness of mental health and addiction in hockey was NHL goaltender Robin Lehner's speech at the 2019 NHL Awards. At the 2019 NHL Awards, Robin Lehner won the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy which honours the NHL player "who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey" (NHL.com, 2019, para 1). In his acceptance speech for the award Lehner said, "I took that first step, got help, and that was life-changing for me, and something we got to keep pushing for. We have to end the stigma. I'm not ashamed to say I'm mentally ill, but that doesn't mean mentally weak" (Loung, 2019). Many participants took this speech as a sign that the NHL and the sport of hockey were moving towards normalizing and destigmatizing mental health. Nick described the shift he had begun to see as in the NHL.

> *"Like you see the things that have happened recently. Like just that people might need something like the Robin Lehner story or some others. And you see that the resources that they've gotten and the NHL's been able to provide for them, and I think it's something that will continue to happen. I don't think it'll be something that that'll ever be frowned upon or something that they'll be mad about because they're there. They wanna help people just as much as you need it." [Nick]*

Like Nick, participant Kurt referenced this speech as "ground-breaking" and described how "proud" he was of his fellow athlete. Kurt further acknowledged that in order to further breakdown the stigma and remove barriers for athletes to seek help for mental health "we need more guys coming forward and talking about [mental health] openly".

Retired and veteran players that were interviewed often commented on how they recognized changes and improvements in professional ice hockey compared to when they began

their careers. Gabe commented on how he observed the transition towards a more aware and

progressive ice hockey culture.

> *"It's changed quite a bit. I think it's changing, and I think the younger generation are more aware of that. I think my generation, it was like, you just had to follow the rules. 'That's what it is'. 'That's how it's been done', and 'we're going to keep going like this'. That was kind of the older mentality… I can sense it's way more open and guys feel more comfortable, there's a lot of resources, and I think it's changing. Can it be better? I still think it could be better, where guys feel like they can be themselves." [Gabe]*

Gabe noticed a distinction between the league he started in, the league he left, and the

league he remains involved in today. For him, the shift was marked by players having

more autonomy and more of a voice in their organizations. He also commented on how

there is more effort made, now, to make players feel comfortable using the resources that

are available to them. While he acknowledged that there is still room for improvement, to

him, the progress was encouraging.

Progressive and supportive environments

Professional athletes also identified progressive and supportive environments both within

their organizations, families, and communities as potential facilitators to help-seeking (see Table

3.10.1). Environments that encouraged help-seeking and promoted mental and physical health

were cited by the participants as catalysts in their decisions to ask for help. One's family or

home life was particularly important to many of the participants' help-seeking. Participants

often referred to how family members and partners encouraged them to seek out formal or

professional forms of help. Sam described how his partner encouraged him to seek help from

resources within his organization.

> *"I didn't really want to do it, to be honest. My girlfriend at the time, my now-wife, kinda urged me to do it…she could probably, I mean, we're married now, so—she probably had a good feeling for what I was going through. You could tell like, she*

even said 'just try it once and if you don't like it, just be honest and say you don't think this is gonna serve you well'". [Sam]

Like Sam, Leo and Kurt described a similar experience with their partners.

"Actually, yeah I was a little reluctant and my fiancée kinda said, 'I really think you should consider talking to someone' so I mean she kinda pushed pretty hard." [Leo]

"The first person I actually openly talked to about what I thought I was feeling and was feeling was my then-fiancée, I guess. I kind of had a bit of a breakdown, I was going through a rough patch and she was the one who convinced me to get help." [Kurt]

All three participants pointed out how they had been reluctant to seek help within their respective organizations, but their partners encouraged them to seek help despite their apprehension.

Athletes also described how they looked for cues from other members of their teams before asking for help within their organizations. Participants determined the acceptability of help-seeking with their organizations based on conversations with, and the actions of, their teammates, coaches, management, and other staff members (e.g., medical staff). Leo described how he "asked one of my buddies who I'm really close with about the [team's resource], and he's like 'Oh yeah, they're the best, they're the real deal…because it seemed like it to me'". Leo relied on his teammate's experience with the team resource as a way to decipher whether or not this person was trustworthy and worth exploring as a legitimate source of support.

Beyond one's teammates Nate described how one of his past NHL organizations made an effort to create an environment where athletes felt empowered to seek help from the resources on staff.

"I think [my old team] does everything right, I think. So, the team consultant, I have trust in and the organization, I just love it. I love how they run everything. The consultant's a big part of that…I think the organization is a good example of that. I

think the GM is awesome. He's progressive in the right ways, I think. I have both trust in him and even I almost feel like I could talk to the GM openly, candidly, because I trust him as a person... And I just think that the fact that I trust the organization in general kind of made it easy [to ask for help]." [Nate]

In line with the comments made by Nate, Sam described what organizations can do and express to their players in order to support their likelihood to utilize internal sources of support.

"Well, and I think I also wanna say that I think the team needs to support it...Like, the GM, the coaches need to say to the team, 'this is work that we think is valuable, and us finding out you're doing this, if you do or not does not matter.' You know? Stuff like that. It's 'this is for you only, and it's a resource because we think it's valuable.' That would be simple enough." [Sam]

For both Sam and Nate when management, coaches, and organization champion the resources offered it helped facilitate the uptake of those resources. When people in positions of power took the time to create safe environments and openly endorsed resources participants reported being more likely to utilize those resources.

Prioritizing wellness

Participants revealed that when their organizations prioritized athletes' wellness, they were more likely to seek support internally (see Table 3.10.1). Wes explained that his previous team offered resources that were willing to support him beyond his on-ice performance.

"There was one day when the consultant came into the room and gave a presentation. Not really a presentation just an introduction. Said what she'd be doing with the team, and...she just said that she was there you know if anybody wanted to talk about anything hockey, not-hockey related she was a resource there for us to vent." [Wes]

Knowing that there was a resource who not only wanted to support the athletes with on-ice issues but also issues pertaining to their personal lives was regarded as refreshing.

Team first mentality

119

Seeking help was regarded as acceptable and even noble by many participants if it was motivated by a desire to help your team (see Table 3.10.1). Nick described how organizations were more likely to normalize athletes seeking help for the betterment of the team over seeking help to address an individual problem.

> *"It helps out the team it helps out all the players around you. You always want everyone to be at your best because when you're at your best it makes other people around you better. So, if you're bringing yourself down or a teammate down it can only worsen or affect the team. So, I think that being at your best and being able to reach out and get the resources that you need is helps you and helps the team in the long run." [Nick]*

Team sport athletes learn to put the group's needs ahead of their individual needs (Messner, 1992). In most circumstances the participants were hesitant to seek help out of fear of being labelled selfish or demanding by their teams. However, based on experiences like Nick's, help-seeking that was motivated by a team first mentality was less stigmatized. As Nick described, seeking help was one way that a team member could help improve their individual performance on the ice, and therefore ultimately benefit their team's performance.

Brent considered his decision to seek support with his substance use as something that demonstrated his commitment to his team.

> *"I mean at the end of the day if I'm playing lights out in net that's the biggest thing. You know I can be the best party friend ever, but if I'm not getting the job done then you know that's not fun for anybody. So, I'm just trying to do my job." [Brent]*

Brent disclosed that he was initially nervous to disclose his sobriety to his teammates. He eventually confided in his teammates about his sobriety because he believed that they would respect his decision to seek help as it would directly benefit the team's performance. For Brent, seeking help for his substance use was a way for him to prove his dedication to his work and to his team's success.

Hierarchy advantages

Participants outlined how certain hierarchical positions within an organization helped facilitate help-seeking. For the most part, participants speculated that veteran players and high-status players were more likely to feel comfortable asking for help. Jeff described how being a veteran player at the professional level facilitated help-seeking.

> *"I don't know if it's because the longer you play you have a bit of a resume to back you up and that you feel more comfortable…then as you get older and build trust within you know. Whether you've been coached by them before or been there at the organization I think there's a bit of word of mouth and trust factor that once you've been around longer you can maybe open yourself up a bit". [Jeff]*

Jeff described how veteran players had more time to build their credibility and reputations as players which allowed them to feel more comfortable seeking help within their organizations.

For the most part participants agreed that high-status players experienced fewer barriers when asking for help. Joey explained that high-status players would be more comfortable asking for help because they were the "safest". Further, Joey highlighted how teams "need those guys to win or perform, so you got to do everything you can to help them out". High-status players are far less likely to be sent down to the AHL, removed from the roster (i.e., healthy scratch), or traded. However, this was a point of contention with one particular player who thought that low-status players might be more willing to ask for help out of necessity. The participant contended with the idea that low-status players would be more likely to do whatever it took to remain on the roster and avoid getting sent down or traded and therefore would be more likely to seek support.

Separation between workplace and support

The final cultural factor that participants reported facilitating help-seeking among professional ice hockey athletes was providing a separation between the workplace and support resources (see Table 3.10.1). Many players noted how creating some distance, both physically

and structurally, created a greater sense of comfort, confidentiality, and anonymity. Many

participants expressed feeling uncomfortable and unsafe seeking help at the arena or within their

physical work environment. Many made an effort to connect and meet with their support

resources either at neutral locations (e.g., coffee shop), private offices, or over the phone. For

many participants finding support outside the arena meant seeking resources that were

completely disconnected from their organizations. Sam explained how meeting a resource "away

from people, away from my teammates, away from the rink. I think that was important because it

was like, no one's listening through the door, you know?" Meeting resources at a separate

location was a way to combat the culture of silence and suspicion by removing some of the

concern that the athlete's anonymity or confidentiality could be compromised.

3.11 Help-seeking facilitators to help-seeking during retirement

Two subthemes were generated to describe the facilitators to help-seeking during

retirement. First, intra-individual factors like the motivation and responsibility to change were

identified as potential facilitators to help-seeking during retirement. Second, interpersonal

factors like high quality resources were reported to help facilitate help-seeking during retirement.

Table 3.11.1 Facilitators to help-seeking during retirement

Subtheme	Facet	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Intra-individual factors	• Motivation and responsibility to change	1	1	"It was just finally after so long of having enough of not feeling good, that I went and started to seek some help and it's been an uphill battle from there but at least things are getting a lot better." [Owen]
Interpersonal factors	• High quality of resources	2	1	"So then I just go talk to the guy and then we kind of break it down from the start, go back and then you kind of

				go through somethings and then realize "holy shit you know what this is a gift I need to do this." And then after a while it kind of starts to get better." [Owen]

3.11.1 Intra-individual factors during retirement

Motivation and responsibility to change and evolve

One participant attributed his help-seeking behaviour during retirement to be connected to his desire to change and improve his physical and mental health (see Table 3.11.1). Owen's help-seeking during retirement was facilitated by his desire to change and take control of his concussion recovery. He described how, "it was just finally after so long of having enough of not feeling good, that I went and started to seek some help, and it's been an uphill battle from there but at least things are getting a lot better".

3.11.2 Interpersonal factors during retirement

High quality of resources

A few participants noted a key facilitator to seeking help during retirement was the quality of the available resources (see Table 3.11.1). Owen's recognition of the progress and improvements he saw with respect to his mental and physical health encouraged him to continue to invest time and energy into the treatment and support he was receiving. Owen commented:

> *"So then I just go talk to the [psychiatrist] and then we kind of break it down from the start, go back, and then you kind of go through somethings and then realize 'holy shit you know what this is a gift I need to do this'. And then after a while it kind of starts to get better with the right medications and the support system and then obviously getting sober is a big thing too. I haven't done anything in over a year and a half so that is also a big thing that helped with all the concussion symptoms and mental whatever it is." [Owen]*

The recognition of improvements in his mental and physical health motivated and facilitated Owen's ongoing investment in the treatments he was receiving.

3.12 Sources of support during pre-professional ice hockey

3.12.1 Internal supports during pre-professional ice hockey

Internal supports referred to sources of support available to athletes within their team or organization. Internal sources of support include all hockey operations personnel (e.g., management, owners, coaches, scouts, and player development, medical staff (i.e., athletic trainer, team doctor, physiotherapist, massage therapist), and internal psychological supports (i.e., mental skills coach, sport psychologist, psychologist). In Table 3.12.1 all the internal supports that were identified by the participants are listed along with the reference counts.

One source of support that was unique to the pre-professional ice hockey experience corresponded to participants' billets. Billets are typically families or adults that are hired by junior hockey organizations to host athletes whose families live elsewhere. They are typically compensated by the team and are expected to provide the players with housing and food, however in some instances billets support players by doing laundry, driving them to practice and games, and providing emotional support.

Table 3.12.1 Internal sources of support during pre-professional ice hockey

Source of support	References	Number of participants
Coach	43	12
Teammates	25	9
Billets	20	6
Religious leader	18	2
School professional	4	2
Junior organization (as a whole)	3	3
General manager	2	1
Sport psychologist	2	1
NHL general manager	1	1

Most participants cited coaches as an internal source of support at the pre-professional level. Participants received support from head coaches, assistant coaches, skills coaches, goalie coaches, and video coaches. For the most part, athletes typically commented on the support they received from head coaches because they hold the most power and influence over their pre-professional experience. During junior and college athletes primarily relied on their coaches for performance-related support. At the pre-professional stage having a coach who was invested in the athlete's development, instilled confidence, and prepared the athlete to perform at the next level was seen as an asset to their development. However, other participants like Eric referred to their junior coach as a "father figure", who stepped into the role of caring for him and helping him adjust to his first time living away from home.

Teammates were also a frequently cited as a source of support at the pre-professional level. Older teammates on a junior or college team acted as role models and mentors both on and off the ice were often remembered to be especially influential sources of support during this early phase of the participants' careers. Nick recalled how older teammates on his junior team helped him make the transition to junior hockey.

> *"The older guys on the team they've already lived away from home for a couple of years and that always helps so it helps when they're bringing you out to keep your mind off of being away from home, things like that. I think that was something that made the transition so easy from living at home for all those years to being able to live away." [Nick]*

Teammates at this phase of the participants' careers are typically closer in age, than in pro where the age gap between teammates was more dispersed. During the pre-professional phase, participants commented on how teammates went to high school or university together and had similar schedules and priorities which made it easier to relate and connect to them. Staying connected to teammates becomes more challenging in professional ice

hockey as players typically have more responsibilities outside of the rink, like partners or families.

3.12.2 External supports during pre-professional ice hockey

External supports included anyone who was not directly affiliated with the team or organization (see Table 3.12.2). During the pre-professional phase participants most frequently named family members as sources of support. Parents were the most common source of support, but participants also mentioned siblings and extended family as important figures of support. Parents were reported to provide support by checking in while they were away, acting as a sounding board to help sort through obstacles, as well as being supportive of their hockey careers by driving them to practice and attending games. Contrary to the over-involved and hyper-competitive ice hockey parent stereotype, Quinn's relationship with his parents provided an alternative narrative.

> *"[My parents] do really encourage us, there was definitely times of authority, the rules were clear but I never felt pressured. My parents didn't play hockey, specifically within the hockey realm. I felt like that was my playhouse, like just to create, have fun. I never felt like I really needed to meet someone else's expectation and it really felt like freedom"* [Quinn]

For Quinn his parents provided a constant source of support without ever creating added pressures or expectations.

Friends, and specifically, non-hockey related friends were cited as a key source of support during pre-professional ice hockey. Eric highlighted the importance of having relationships and connections outside of the rink.

> *"I had a good 4 friends that I never played hockey with, that were school friends. You know, even when you think you're doing well, they keep you grounded and able to focus on other things other than hockey. When you're just around the same type of people, your constant focus is on that one thing, whereas I was able to be around people with different interests and get away from the game a little bit."* [Eric]

Remaining connected to friends that were not teammates allowed Eric to take a break from the sport and also created a sense of identity that was not solely rooted in his athletic endeavours. Eric's school friends allowed him to continue to explore other interests and keep him grounded throughout his pre-professional ice hockey career.

Table 3.12.2 External supports during pre-professional ice hockey

Source of support	References	Number of participants
Family	38	17
Friend	12	7
School professional	5	4
Agent	4	3
Partner	4	3
Medical professional	2	2
Sport psychologist	2	2
Suicide hot line	1	1

3.13 Sources of support during professional ice hockey

3.13.1 Internal supports during professional ice hockey

At the professional level many members of an ice hockey organization were cited as a source of support (see Table 3.13.1). However, a key distinction between the pre-professional and professional phase was the range of different supports that were accessible to the athletes on a day-to-day basis. Teammates and coaches remained the most prominent figures of support at the professional level. Just like the pre-professional phase, participants highlighted the role of older more veteran teammates as key sources of support during their transition from junior and college to the professional ranks. Older teammates were cited as being role models, mentors, and even protectors in their first years of playing professionally. Gabe recalled his relationship with a veteran player.

> *"They paired me with an older [defenceman], right away, right from the get-go at camp. The older guy just came to me and just made me feel comfortable right away and he told me, 'don't worry, if someone touches you, I'm there for you.' He's kind*

of a tougher guy. So, I felt comfortable. Like if someone would just look at me, he would come right around and he's very protective of me, and I think it really helped me settle in." [Gabe]

Gabe felt safe on the ice, due to this veteran teammate's presence. This protection also allowed Gabe to feel safe and comfortable off the ice. The veteran player showed a special interest in making Gabe feel like a valued part of the team that deserved his respect and protection.

Participants described their relationships with coaches in various terms. Participants' opinions of their coaches varied greatly, but the coach-athlete relationship was often highlighted as a key element of their well-being at work. Coaches that were able to invest individualized time and energy into their athletes were more often regarded as a viable source of support. Goalie coaches in particular were often figures with whom athletes developed meaningful relationships. Goalie coaches hold a specialized position on the coaching staff and are typically only responsible for a few athletes. One participant described his relationship with his goalie coaches, which was unique to other coach-athlete relationships.

"For me the goalie coach is someone that I talk to every day. Someone that watches me very closely every day. So just going to him and he can always tell like if you're tired or if somethings off. And even times where he's just telling you to relax. Like you just need those times when you need to be told that like "take a deep breath"...So, I think that's he's one of the biggest people that I know the goalies go and talk to, like so he's been a help for us." [Nick]

Several participants described how some coaches had an 'open door policy'. An open-door policy referred to coaches that invited their players to seek them out for support or conversation. Participants discussed how, in most circumstances, the 'open door policy' was a term used by coaching staffs to signal to athletes that it was acceptable to seek their help. However, the parameters of the 'open door policy' were not always outlined by the respective coaching staff, and therefore sometimes the participants were unsure whether this open door

policy was reserved for on-ice issues or if they were being encouraged to speak with their coaches about off-ice issues as well.

Team medical staff members were typically enlisted for physical health support (e.g., injuries or illness) by participants. However, in some instances because of the strong rapport, familiarity, and amount of time the athletes spend with the medical staff, these people also provided mental, emotional, and psychological support to the athletes. Ian described how his team's massage therapist served as the team's main source of mental and emotional support. Ian described the massage therapist as "a great guy, who cared a lot for the players and he was the guy that the guys went to. Just to talk about shit…like the [team's] sport psych was irrelevant. This was our psychiatrist, basically, and he did a really good job at it". In this example, qualifications were reported to be "irrelevant" to the athletes, who preferred to seek emotional support from a massage therapist with whom they felt connected and safe.

With respect to more formal psychological supports, participants reported that some teams hired sport psychologists, mental skills coaches, substance use specialists, psychologists, counsellors, religious figures, and other consultants to support player welfare on both part-time and full-time bases. These sources of support addressed a range of on- and off-ice stressors with their athlete clients. Players also identified the leagues (i.e., AHL, NHL) and the unions (i.e., Professional Hockey Players' Association (PHPA), NHLPA) as a potential source of support for players with serious problems pertaining to mental health and addiction.

Table 3.13.1 Internal sources of support professional ice hockey

Source of support	References	Number of participants
Teammates	47	17
Coach	45	13
Consultant	25	8
Medical/ athletic trainers	23	7
NHLPA	21	10

PHPA	14	5
General manager	13	9
NHL (the league)	13	6
Mental skills coach & sport psychologist	14	3
The organization as a whole	11	7
Mental health professional	8	2
Strength and conditioning coach	8	5
Team doctor	5	3
Massage therapist	5	1
Equipment manager	3	2
Scout	2	2
Religious leader	1	1
Substance abuse specialist	1	1
AHL (the league)	1	1

3.13.2 External supports during professional ice hockey

Family members, and parents in particular, continued to be considered key sources of support for the participants during their professional ice hockey experience (see Table 3.13.2). However, participants reported that their partners became a far more prominent and central source of support at this stage. As mentioned previously, partners created supportive environments where the athletes felt encouraged to reach out for support and ultimately facilitated help-seeking. For many of the athletes, partners were the only consistent and constant source of support they received outside of the workplace. Most of the participants did not live and work near family and friends during the ice hockey season, and therefore, for many, partners became the primary source of support throughout each season, move, or trade. Quinn reflected on the importance of a solid support system away from the arena.

> *"The emotional support that I felt with my parents and the relationship that I had with my wife…I felt that support all the way through. It is really the backbone. I had those support systems in place. I don't know where a player with all the hardships of professional sports everyone goes through at times and if you don't have that foundation, I don't know where you would turn." [Quinn]*

External supports like mental health professionals, doctors, and substance use specialists were often employed at the expense of the athletes in order to avoid relying on the supports provided by the organization. Players who were determined to avoid potential issues with confidentiality were more likely to seek professional support outside of their organization. For many participants going outside their team created a safer environment for them to be transparent and candid with their source of support. In some cases, the competencies of the internal supports may not meet the athletes' particular needs and as a result they sought help elsewhere. For example, one participant explained how a team doctor had cleared him to play despite his disclosure of severe pain and discomfort. With the help of his agent, the participant sought medical attention from an external surgeon for a second opinion on his injury. Through this second-opinion, Nate learned that he required immediate lower body surgery. Athletes sought out external supports to ensure confidentiality and as a means to receive the best support possible.

Table 3.13.2 External supports during professional ice hockey

Source of support	References	Number of participants
Family	48	15
Partner	33	12
Sport psychologist	13	6
Previous teammate	11	3
Substance abuse specialist	11	2
Friends	8	6
Former players	8	3
Mental health professional	8	2
Agent	6	5
Billets (from junior)	6	1
Past coaches	6	1
Medical professional	3	2

3.14 Sources of support during retirement

3.14.1 Internal supports during retirement

Once players retired from professional ice hockey the only (and infrequently) reported resources that players accessed were the NHLPA and the PHPA (see Table 3.14.1). Jeff described how his relationship with the NHLPA and PHPA as a retired athlete was mostly based on receiving regular newsletters and information about his pension.   For the most part, retired athletes did not cite either union as a source of support that they actively sought help from during their retirement.

Table 3.14.1 Internal supports during retirement

Source of support	References	Number of participants
NHLPA	1	1
PHPA	1	1

3.14.2 External supports during retirement

Participants who had retired from professional ice hockey typically referenced external resources as the key sources of support at this stage of their lives. Consistent with the two previous phases, family members and partners continued to be key sources of support during retirement (see Table 3.14.2). Based on the individual needs of the retired athlete, some participants explained how they began to invest lots of time and money in their concussion treatment. Retired participants hired psychiatrists to manage the psychological symptoms, along with concussion specialists to aid in some of the vestibular and more physical symptoms. Finally, one participant utilized his lawyer as a means of connecting him to other relevant resources.

Table 3.14.2 External supports during retirement

Source of support	References	Number of participants
Partner	8	8
Psychiatrist	4	1
Concussion specialists	3	2
Family	2	1
Lawyer	2	1

3.15 Coping strategies and self-management techniques during pre-professional ice hockey

When discussing the coping strategies and self-management techniques that participants used during the pre-professional phase of their ice hockey careers five subthemes were generated (see Table 3.15.1). The five subthemes that were created included psychological support, mental skills training, lifestyle factors, personal and professional development, and physical and performance-related support. Psychological supports that participants were exposed to included peer-to-peer support and pharmaceutical interventions. The three mental skills that participants reported using were emotion regulation strategies, self-talk, and visualization. Participants stated that establishing a routine was a lifestyle factor they adopted. Improving their financial literacy was a strategy they used for personal and professional development. Participants' on-ice development was the one form of physical and performance-related support that was cited.

Table 3.15.1 Coping strategies and self-management techniques during pre-professional ice hockey

Subtheme	Strategy or technique	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Psychological support	• Peer-to-peer support	1	1	"The senior class—they were very helpful in helping guide us, and in a lot of ways acted as mentors." [Ian]
	• Pharmaceutical interventions	1	1	"I've only had a brief period of experience on medication and I didn't enjoy it so I don't take it." [Jax]

Mental skills training	• Emotion regulation	1	1	"You put that mark on your…it's a reminder that nothing's more important than the task at hand" [Leo]
	• Self-talk	1	1	"You know how not to dwell on that... you know just how you can self-talk and visualization and stuff like that." [Jeff]
	• Visualization	1	1	"You know how not to dwell on that… you know just how you can self-talk and visualization and stuff like that." [Jeff]
Lifestyle factors	• Establishing and following routine	3	3	"In university everything is so structured with classes in the mornings and practice and then classes at night. And then you're living in the dorms for the first year, so you have meal plans, and everything is kind of put together." [Owen]
Personal & professional development	Financial literacy	1	1	"We have seminars with these guys… trying to help them understand their financial issues or things like that." [Jeff]
Physical & performance supports	• On-ice development	1	1	"We had a lot of opportunity to kind of develop as players." [Ian]

3.15.1 Psychological Support

Participants noted that peer-to-peer support and pharmaceutical interventions for mental illness were coping strategies and self-management techniques they were exposed to during the pre-professional phase of their ice hockey careers (see Table 3.15.1). Ian described how his college team implemented a peer-to-peer support program with incoming first-year athletes and more senior players.

"The senior class they were very helpful in helping guide us, and in a lot of ways acted as mentors. They had the exact same number of seniors as we had freshmen, and each one of them kinda took one of us under their wing." [Ian]

The participant was unsure whether or not this was a formal system implemented by the coaching staff or something that naturally occurred. Regardless, the participant regarded it as a key support technique that helped ease the transition to college.

3.15.2 Mental skills training

During pre-professional ice hockey, many participants who sought performance-related help and were taught to utilize mental skills (see Table 3.15.1). These techniques were most often taught by a sport psychologist. Emotion regulation, self-talk, and visualization were three mental skills that participants reported being introduced to by sources of support. Leo described how his sport psychologist introduced him to an emotion regulation technique, by stating:

"He just kinda gave me this little thing to do where you put like a little something on your stick so when you have a bad shift or something pisses you off, you get back to the bench and you put that mark on your stick somewhere where you see it when you sit down and then when you see that mark, it's a reminder that nothing's more important than the task at hand. So what is the task? The task is to win the game, so are you going to help win the game if you freak out or do something stupid? Or are you going to put your team down at that point." [Leo]

This technique helped Leo manage his temper on the ice during competition. This technique encouraged Leo to redirect his anger and helped him remain on task throughout competition.

3.15.3 Lifestyle factors

One lifestyle factor was identified as a coping strategy and self-management technique at the pre-professional career phase. Specifically, establishing and following a routine was described by three participants as a strategy to help ease the transition from living at home to living with billets or on a college campus. Kurt described how following a prescribed routine helped him adapt to life as a college student-athlete.

"I think moving away from home kind of taught me how to grow up much quicker than if I had stayed at home. I had to learn how to cook for myself and you even more importantly gotta stick to a schedule, a very regimented schedule, in terms of class, schoolwork. You know we were very strict about practice and working out. College hockey is known for that, it's extremely work out and practice intensive. And I think that having that responsibility really helped grow and develop." [Kurt]

Learning to balance multiple responsibilities like academics and athletics was often described as a stressor at the pre-professional phase. According to Kurt, his routine gave him structure and guidance to mature as a person and as a student-athlete during this transitional period of his life.

3.15.4 Personal and professional development

The one example of a personal and professional development resource that participants were introduced to, during the pre-professional stage of their ice hockey careers, included financial literacy (see Table 3.15.1). Some junior organizations were reported to implement financial literacy workshops for their athletes. The workshops were designed to prepare athletes for the financial issues they might encounter in professional ice hockey. Financial issues were a commonly reported stressor among professional ice hockey athletes. Improving the financial literacy of pre-professional athletes appears to be one way that ice hockey organizations might mitigate future financial stress.

3.15.5 Physical and performance support

One participant cited on-ice development to be key to his athletic development (see Table 3.15.1). Kurt spoke specifically about how college hockey was a time to prepare both mentally and physically to play at the professional level.

"I think I wasn't physically mature or ready to play at a super high level when I went to college. But I spent so much time working out and you know you're kind of protected a little bit in terms of when you can leave college or how long you have you know you have a full four years if you want to grow and develop and mature. And it just kind of offers you a little more kind of room to grow in that regard." [Kurt]

The opportunities to develop skills on the ice and get accustomed to the intensity and demands of professional ice hockey in a controlled and structured environment was cited as the main purpose of an athlete's on-ice and physical development at the pre-professional stage.

3.16 Coping strategies and self-management techniques during professional ice hockey

Five coping and self-management technique subthemes during professional ice hockey were identified. These included psychological supports, mental skills training, lifestyle factors, personal and professional development, and physical and performance support (see Table 3.16.1). Pharmaceutical interventions, self-help, exercise, talk therapy, meditation, group counselling, and embracing nature were identified as psychological coping strategies and self-management techniques. Mental skills training included journaling, mindfulness, visualization, goal setting, and self-reflection. Developing and establishing routines, experiencing nature, and meditation were lifestyle factors that participants adopted. Career and education development reflected a salient means of supporting athletes' personal and professional development. Video analysis and physiotherapy were identified as physical and performance-related supports.

Table 3.16.1 Coping strategies and self-management techniques during professional ice hockey

Subtheme	Strategy or technique	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Psychological support	• Pharmaceutical interventions	11	3	"I went on it was called the drug name was "cipralex" that's the brand name, that's the escitalopram." [Kurt]
	• Self-help	7	6	"I remember sitting on at the kitchen table on the computer Youtube-ing videos on how to regain confidence and things like that." [Jeff]

	• Exercise	3	2	"I have a home gym, I really enjoy my working out, and it's always been kind of a release for me now that I can sort of realize that." [Kurt]
	• Talk therapy	2	2	"I think there needs to be an emphasis on that, just talking about it is huge." [Kurt]
	• Group counseling	1	1	"I asked the coach to do something, to get somebody in the room to talk to us about [shared trauma] and he did. He had a counsellor come talk to us." [Quinn]
Mental skills training	• Journaling	6	2	"Write things down, I just keep a journal. After games I write good things, bad things, how I felt, what I did before to prepare." [Joey]
	• Mindfulness	4	1	"We have like a pilot program, like a mindfulness class, where it was just about where your headspace is, and you know, we sorted through feelings and thoughts and we talked." [Wes]
	• Visualization	3	2	"I spent time visualizing and working on things like that and I feel like it really works." [Joey]
	• Goal setting	2	2	"Understanding how to set goals, and understanding the difference between being in the process, and being absorbed in the results." [Colin]

	• Self-reflection	1	1	"He provided strategies, from introspection, from self-reflection on where I was—for example, for start of season, evaluating on a score of 10, different areas of my life and games. Revisiting those rankings later in the summer or later in the season." [Colin]
Lifestyle factors	• Establishing and following a routine	3	3	"To be able to have that routine or build more of a routine I guess, would definitely, I think that's kind of my goal and that's kind of how I realized that I need to implement that right from the get-go I guess as a person and as an athlete." [Mick]
	• Meditation	2	1	"Yeah, someone suggested the headspace app a little while back for me so I use the headspace app at least three or four times a week." [Leo]
	• Experiencing nature	1	1	"I liked being outside and stuff, just walking around was better than just sitting around." [Nate]
Personal & professional development	• Career & education development	2	2	"I'd tell [the team consultant], "I want to read books, I want to learn more about what else there is for me to do after hockey." [Sam]
Physical & performance support	• Video analysis	3	1	"I just like to watch film and you kinda learn that way." [Joey]
	• Physiotherapy	1	1	"I did this physiotherapy I liked." [Nate]

3.16.1 Psychological Support

Psychological support techniques were often provided by mental health professionals and sometimes performed individually. Group counselling, pharmaceutical interventions, and talk therapy were typically guided or administered by mental health professionals like counsellors, psychologists, and psychiatrists (see Table 3.16.1). Self-help techniques were coping strategies and self-management techniques that athletes utilized independently. Quinn described an incident on one of his professional teams where a teammate was gruesomely injured during competition. Quinn requested that the team hire a counsellor to do a single group counselling session to help the team process and recover from witnessing such a traumatic injury. Quinn described the benefits that this type of support had on the team.

> *"I think it was the ability for the room to be able to voice their own concerns with it. And like there was a safe space to verbalize our feelings as opposed to bottling them up, yeah because there's really no answers in that type of situations, there's nothing to figure out." [Quinn]*

From Quinn's perspective the group counselling session was a positive experience and allowed the team to move forward following such an intense event.

3.16.2 Mental skills training

Goal setting, journaling, mindfulness training, self-reflection, and visualization were all mental skills training techniques and strategies the athletes mentioned being a part of their mental performance support (see Table 3.16.1). Mental skills focused primarily on mental performance and improving on-ice performance. Wes explained how his professional organization introduced a mindfulness training program for the athletes.

> *"We have like a pilot program, like a mindfulness class, where it was just about where your headspace is, and you know, we sorted through feelings and thoughts and we talked and we were hockey players that were communicating on a level beyond you know what to do in the locker room, and it wasn't everybody but it was*

the people that needed it and the people that were important to the process of it."
[Wes]

Wes described this program as "revolutionary" for him and his performance. Wes also acknowledged that not all his teammates were as invested in the program. Wes and his teammates' experience with the program highlighted the diverse needs and interests of athletes particularly when it came to mental skills training and the potential for different techniques to resonate differently with different athletes.

3.16.3 Lifestyle factors

Lifestyle factors were typically aspects of the participant's lifestyle that they sought to introduce or change in order to better cope with the various stressors they encountered at the professional level. Establishing and following a routine, meditation, and experiencing nature were described by participants as three lifestyle coping strategies that helped them manage stress. Establishing and following a routine was highlighted by three participants as an important strategy to deal with the transition from junior and college ice hockey to professional ice hockey. In particular, many participants commented on how they were surprised by the amount of downtime they had once they began their professional careers. Without a structured and regimented routine some athletes developed unhealthy habits like drinking, partying, and playing video games excessively. Also related to lifestyle, Nate described how when he was recovering from a serious concussion, he found it difficult to cope with the isolation and physical symptoms. Getting outside and interacting with nature was one way that he coped with this injury and the stress of the concussion. Similarly, Leo was introduced to a meditation app as a way to cope with daily stressors.

3.16.4 Personal and professional development

Participants' experience with personal and professional development came in the form of career development and education (see Table 3.16.1). Sam described how part of his work with a team consultant was to explore potential graduate-level education and to continue to develop skills and competencies that would ideally help prepare him for a career outside of ice hockey once he retired. Sam described his conversations with the team consultant about his personal and professional development.

> *"I wanna read books, I wanna learn more about what else there is for me to do after hockey. Every week or two weeks we'd read books, and I would stimulate my mind and think about what gives me energy, what excites me. That was part of the whole doing a Masters program and what I would wanna do it in. That's what led to that."* *[Sam]*

At the time of the interview Sam was completing an online Masters program. For Sam, continuing to develop skills away from the ice was important for his future career prospects and cultivated an identity away from his professional ice hockey career.

3.16.5 Physical and performance support

Physiotherapy and watching game film were the two physical and performance-related supports that participants mentioned (see Table 3.16.1). Nate commented that during his concussion recovery the highlight of his days was being able to get out of the house for his physiotherapy appointments. Physiotherapy provided a sense of routine as well as a purpose during a time he described as dark and disheartening.

Watching game film for Joey allowed him the opportunity to dissect and critically analyze his on-ice performance.

> *"Video is a good tool to really understand and see the proof when they show you clips and stuff like that. So, I think that's definitely good, just getting a sentiment to kind of keep you honest and help you understand where you are and what things are going right, what things aren't maybe going right."* *[Joey]*

Video provides a visual and unbiased tool to address any area of potential improvement on the ice as well as a tool to help build confidence and provide reassurance.

3.17 Coping strategies and self-management techniques during retirement

Four subthemes were generated with respect to coping strategies and self-management techniques during retirement. These included a) psychological supports, b) mental skills training, and c) lifestyle factors, and d) physical and performance supports (see Table 3.17.1). Cognitive behavioural therapy, pharmaceutical interventions, and talk therapy were the three psychological supports that were identified by participants. Goal setting was the one mental skills training technique that was identified. Living a sober lifestyle was described by Owen as a way to better manage post-concussion symptoms in retirement. Post-concussion treatments were noted as a physical- and performance-related support that athletes accessed.

Table 3.17.1 Coping strategies and self-management techniques during retirement

Subtheme	Strategy or technique	References	Number of participants	Exemplar quote
Psychological support	• Cognitive behavioural therapy	6	1	"So, another thing that I started doing was going to CBT." [Trent]
	• Pharmaceutical interventions	2	2	"And then after a while it kind of starts to get better with the right medications." [Owen]
	• Talk therapy	2	1	"At first it's just meant to sit down and talk to somebody and tell them exactly what's going on because and then they might actually know what I'm talking about." [Owen]
Mental skills training	• Goal setting	1	1	"The biggest thing was realistically just talking to somebody that knows what's going on, putting me in sort

				of plan that there is some sort of an end goal." [Owen]
Lifestyle factors	• Living a sober lifestyle	1	1	"Then obviously getting sober is a big thing too. I haven't done anything in over a year and a half." [Owen]
Physical & performance supports	• Post-concussion treatment	7	2	"I have a good enough system around here now where I'm getting treatment three times a week for some vestibular work and some physical work and ocular shift left as well." [Owen]

3.17.1 Psychological support

Participants cited cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), pharmaceutical interventions, sobriety, and talk therapy as forms of psychological self-management techniques and coping strategies (see Table 3.17.1). Trent described how CBT was incorporated as part of his post-concussion treatment.

> *"Little tips and tricks and stuff that he'd have for me like limiting the stress and.., talking about how much stress really impacts me and what it does to my head. Trying to do things where I don't have to use my brain to its full capacity all the time. He got me to use the remind app on my phone… Instead of trying to remember and think of all those things, so now what I do is every little thing I have to do or supposed to do I enter in my phone. I have this whole list of reminders. I immediately take it off my brain and I just kind of like put it in my phone, you know what I mean?"[Trent]*

Trent viewed CBT as a tool to help improve his general quality of life, address the psychological implications of his post-concussion symptoms, and manage stress.

3.17.2 Mental skills training

Owen described how setting goals was an important step in his adjustment to life as a retired athlete (see Table 3.17.1). Creating a plan for his concussion recovery and creating goals helped provide structure and purpose once Owen transitioned into retirement. His concussion

recovery plan helped him map out key milestones and goals for his physical and mental health. Setting goals during retirement helped Owen find purpose in a life outside professional sport.

3.17.3 Lifestyle factors

Owen described how living a sober lifestyle (see Table 3.17.1) was a key mechanism that has allowed him to adapt to life as a retired athlete. Living a sober lifestyle was also a way for him to manage his ongoing concussion symptoms. Owen described how after he began practicing sobriety, he noticed significant improvements in many of his concussion-related symptoms.

3.17.4 Physical and performance support

Post-concussion treatment was a form of physical support that two athletes utilized in their retirement (see Table 3.17.1). Both Trent and Owen continued to use vestibular rehabilitation as a technique to manage and mitigate their post-concussion symptoms. Trent experimented with his diet and hyperbaric chamber therapy to incorporate natural treatments into his post-concussion treatment. These techniques aim to support Owen and Trent's brain and ocular health.

Chapter Four: Discussion

The overall purpose of this study was to explore current and recently retired professional male ice hockey athletes' help-seeking behaviours. Nineteen participants reflected on their experiences with help-seeking over the course of their respective ice hockey careers. The specific goals of the study were threefold. First, I sought to identify different barriers and facilitators of help-seeking that ice hockey athletes encountered through the three major stages of their careers: (1) pre-professional, (2) professional, and if applicable, (3) retirement. Second, I aimed to identify environmental and cultural factors that were either restrictive or conducive to their capacity to seek help within their sport organizations and teams. The final goal of the study was to get a sense of how participants' help-seeking behaviours changed and evolved over the course of their hockey careers. I created five higher-order themes to encapsulate the process of help-seeking among professional ice hockey athletes. These corresponded to (1) *stressors*, (2) *barriers* to help-seeking, (3) *facilitators* of help-seeking, (4) *sources of support*, and (5) *coping strategies and self-management techniques*. All five components appeared during each of the abovementioned career phases (pre-professional, professional, and retirement), totalling 15 higher-order themes. I identified 41 subthemes and 182 facets nested within the subthemes across the three career phases.

The findings of this study build upon previous research on athlete help-seeking, mental health, and well-being. The first significant finding corresponds to how ice hockey culture, as described by the participants, foundationally impacts help-seeking among professional ice hockey athletes. The second major finding of the paper focuses on how help-seeking follows a developmental process that changes and evolves across the entire trajectory of the participants' ice hockey careers. Another significant finding of the study was the connection between the

different stressors athletes encounter and the sources of support they seek out. Next, the amalgamation of intra-individual, interpersonal, and cultural factors create barriers for professional ice hockey athletes to seek support. Similarly, many factors facilitate help-seeking at the individual-level, interpersonal, and cultural levels, in which facilitators often inversely mirrored help-seeking barriers. This research provides novel insights into professional athletes' experiences with help-seeking, which has the potential to directly inform applied practice, opportunities for knowledge translation, and future research. These are discussed in the following sections alongside a reflection of the study's strengths and limitations in relation to the research design, methodology, and sample.

4.1 Cultural basis for help-seeking behaviours among professional male ice hockey athletes

"You come to the rink everyday put a smile on your face, and as soon as you leave you go back and crawl in your hole." (Owen, 34, retired)

Based on the findings, cultural factors within ice hockey organizations and the broader ice hockey community were reported to contribute to the help-seeking behaviours of the participants across all three career phases. For the most part, the participants described ice hockey culture as conservative and traditional, as well as stigmatizing towards mental health and help-seeking. Based on the findings, how the participants interpreted stigma was specific and unique to the ice hockey context and subculture. Further, athletes in this study identified tensions between two competing perspectives; these corresponded to the "old school mentality" that holds more traditional and conservative values and the "new school mentality" which holds more progressive values. Finally, tensions between collectivist and individualistic perspectives in ice hockey were reported to impact help-seeking norms. These tensions also appeared to impact professional athletes' actual help-seeking behaviours.

4.1.1 Forms of stigma in ice hockey culture

"Who the fuck wants to admit that they're mentally ill?" [Jax]

Most research, to date, that has examined barriers to help-seeking among athletes has focused on the role of both self-stigma and public stigma (Barnard 2016; Bauman, 2016; Bird et al., 2018; DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gucciardi et al., 2017; Gulliver et al., 2010; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Wood et al., 2017; Wahto et al., 2016). This study aimed to move beyond merely identifying stigma as a singular barrier to help-seeking that athletes encountered and instead provide a nuanced description of stigma and how it operates in the unique context of ice hockey. The participants identified and described many structures, beliefs, and norms that created stigmatizing attitudes about help-seeking within ice hockey culture. In many ways, stigma operated as the foundation for many of the other intra-individual, interpersonal, and cultural barriers.

Intra-individual barriers like self-reliance and protecting the athlete identity reflect a form of self-stigma or internalized stigma. The participants described their capacity to take care of themselves, not complain, and conceal physical and emotional pain to be aligned with culturally understood ideas about what it means to be a "good hockey player", both on and off the ice. Previous research with male collegiate (American) football athletes addressed the relationship between identification with one's athletic identity and conformity to traditional masculine gender norms like self-reliance (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Athletes that strongly identify with their athletic identity tend to conform more strongly to traditional gender norms and hold stigmatizing attitudes towards help-seeking (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). In ice hockey, self-reliance was described to be a desirable character trait that demonstrated the participants' abilities to be self-sufficient and independent. Ice hockey players described learning to rely on themselves and were

rewarded when they are not dependent on others' support. An athlete who seeks help is no longer considered self-sufficient and therefore deviates from the "good hockey player" ideal.

In a similar vein, participants' desire to protect their athlete identity and live up to the expectations and prototypical image of an ice hockey player were reported to restrict help-seeking actions. This finding is consistent with previous work that drew connections between stigmatizing attitudes towards help-seeking and athletic identity among male collegiate athletes (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010; Steinfeldt & Steinhfeldt, 2012; Steinfeldt et al., 2009). Being seen as competent, resilient, and independent was closely tied to the participants' identification with their ice hockey athlete identity. Seeking help was often synonymously referred to as complaining. This involved highlighting how, rather than viewing help-seeking as an adaptive coping strategy, participants stigmatized seeking help as they felt it would compromise their image as a "good" and valuable asset to their team.

Participants also discussed how they perceived different forms of public stigma within their interpersonal relationships and within the culture of the organizations that employed them. Participants reported that a poor quality relationship with a support resource was a substantive barrier to help-seeking. When participants felt shamed or judged by sources of support (e.g., guidance counsellor, sport psychologist), they rarely sought help from those resources again. The working alliance and its impact on treatment effectiveness and treatment utilization has been well researched in helping fields like life coaching (Graßmann et al., 2020), clinical psychology (Haug et al., 2016; Horvath et al., 2011; Murphy & Hutton, 2017), medicine (Trevino et al., 2015), and education (Rogers, 2015)

Help-seeking barriers at the cultural level that stemmed from stigma included the culture of silence and suspicion, instability of one's role, and the importance of prioritizing performance.

At the pre-professional level, participants commented on how they began to learn within their junior organizations, college teams, and broader ice hockey community that mental health and help-seeking were stigmatized. Help-seeking avoidance was one way that the participants demonstrated their compliance with the ice hockey cultural norms. Consistent with previous research with ice hockey players, this study identified that mental and physical toughness and stoicism were ideal ice hockey player traits (Macdonald, 2014; Robidoux, 2002; Smith et al., 2000; Tjønndal, 2016). Participants in this study believed that a "good" hockey player did not complain or draw unnecessary attention to themselves, and always put their team first. Similar to the results of a study conducted with professional footballers (soccer players) (Wood et al., 2017), stigmatizing messages about mental health and help-seeking continued to pervade as the participants advanced to the professional ranks. Participants in this study avoided seeking help because they thought they would be rewarded (e.g., more playing time) for being self-sufficient, or at the very least, would protect themselves from demotion (e.g., getting traded or sent down). Participants believed that athletes who did not need help were more valuable to an organization because they were never a burden to their team and were more reliable on the ice.

The stigma around mental health topics was also reported to breed suspicion within ice hockey organizations. Participants were taught (by other players) to be wary of team personnel. Participants' feared their opportunities and job security would be compromised if general managers or coaches learned of their struggles or need for help. This finding is consistent with other research on professional athletes (Wood et al., 2017), young elite athletes (Gulliver et al., 2012), and collegiate athletes (Watson, 2005). Within this study, ice hockey athletes' fear and suspicion towards members of their organizations contradict many of the traditional teachings of men's sport, emphasizing a sense of brotherhood (Messner, 1992; Robidoux, 2002). This study's

findings highlight that often ice hockey athletes' experiences do not resemble a brotherhood of unquestioned support from their teammates, coaches, and management, but rather an environment that (on occasions) isolates athletes and requires them to take care of themselves.

4.1.2. Tensions between "old school" and "new school" cultural values

"I think honestly, as a league, it's still kind of a bit of a dinosaur." [Kurt]

Participants described a connection between their help-seeking behaviours and the cultural beliefs and values of their ice hockey organization, the ice hockey community, and the ice hockey culture at large. Participants often described how ice hockey values and beliefs were based off of an "old school mentality". The "old school mentality" was largely described as a belief system that upheld many of the traditional and conservative values that demanded that athletes be tough, stoic, unemotional, and self-sufficient. The "old school mentality" was consistent with previous researchers' depiction of hegemonic masculinity in hockey (MacDonald, 2014; Robidoux, 2002; Tjønndal, 2016; Weinstein et al., 1995). In contrast, some participants also highlighted that ice hockey culture is currently undergoing a transformation and many of the younger generation coaches and managers are adopting a "new school mentality" that is rooted in more progressive values.

The "old school mentality" that athletes described in this project was a culture that not only stigmatized mental health and help-seeking but neglected to acknowledge the connection between athlete well-being and performance (Chang et al., 2020; Schinke et al., 2018). Based on this finding, it appears that ice hockey organizations often neglect to invest in resources that support athletes' mental health in the same way they would invest in resources that support their physical health. As previously discussed in Chapter One, the current Collective Bargaining Agreement published by the NHL and NHLPA does not mention mental health, wellness, or

athlete well-being once in the 540-page document (National Hockey League and the National Hockey League Players' Association, 2013). Unlike other professional North American leagues like the NBA and NFL, the NHL does not have a policy that requires its organizations to have a mental health professional on staff (Graziano, 2019; Shapiro, 2019). Participants expressed that the resources provided by their organization were at the discretion of those in power (i.e., owners, general managers). Teams that operated from an "old school" framework were less likely to hire mental health professionals and value mental health and wellness resources as a viable investment in their team and athletes.

In contrast, it appeared that organizations that held more progressive attitudes towards mental health tended to hire either mental health professionals or consultants whose role centred around supporting athletes' well-being. These "new school" organizations were described to have people in positions of power, like general managers and head coaches, that saw the value in providing their athletes with access to mental health and wellness-related resources. Further, participants also explained how some general managers and head coaches made an effort to directly support their athletes with both on-ice and off-ice issues. The "new school mentality" aligns with Bissset, Kroshus, and Hebard's (2020) exploration of the coaches' role in promoting athlete mental health. According to Bisset and colleagues (2020), coaches should primarily be concerned with cultivating a culture that recognizes the importance of mental health, facilitates athlete help-seeking, and supports athletes who require mental health care.

The results of this study illuminated a tension between the "old school" ice hockey culture and an emerging "new school" culture. In particular, retired and more veteran participants highlighted how they had noticed a shift towards a more progressive culture in professional ice hockey compared to when they started their careers. Previous research with

student-athletes also noted a similar trend with North American college athletic departments becoming more open to conversations about mental health and providing more resources for student-athletes (Barnard, 2016). Other professional sports like Rugby League have experienced similar trends. Rugby League made a concerted effort to improve player welfare, for both current and retired athletes. Rugby League has also promoted programs like State of Mind Sport, Time to Change campaign, and the Samaritans targeted at destigmatizing mental health and PAPYRUS, which focused on suicide prevention (Souter, Lewis, & Serrant, 2018).

4.1.3 Individualistic and collectivist perspectives in ice hockey culture

"'I want you guys to know that I'm not bailing on this team. I want to be with you guys, but you know I have a priority to take care of myself and get healthy.'" [Kurt]

The findings of this study suggest that both collectivism and individualism play a complex (and sometimes contrasting) role in professional male ice hockey athletes' help-seeking behaviours. Participants addressed how individualistic and collectivist values acted as both barriers *and* facilitators to help-seeking. Previous research has explored individualism and collectivism in terms of their capacity to explain help-seeking behaviours and mental health stigma (Byrow, Pajak, McMahon, Rajouria, & Nickerson, 2019; Helmes & Gallou, 2014). For example, it has been suggested that collectivist cultures rely more heavily on social networks or communities for support (e.g., family) when compared to more individualistic cultures (Brewer & Chen, 2007). In contrast, however, groups (and societies) that possess collectivist values tend to hold more stigmatizing attitudes towards mental illness than those that hold more individualistic values (Papadopoulos, Foster, & Caldwell, 2013). Byrow et al. (2016) reported that among refugee men, from collectivist cultures, help-seeking for mental health problems was likely influenced by group norms and beliefs which tended to stigmatize health seeking in particular. More individualistic cultures tend to value individual autonomy and individual agency

(Brewer & Chen, 2007; Tata & Leong, 1994). In such instances, Komissarouk and Nadler (2014) suggested that the pursuit of individual goals and achievement superseded a reliance on others for help. As a result, those with more individualistic values may be more likely to cope independently, but conversely may also be devoid of the social supports that can exist within collectivist cultures, societies, and social groups. When taken together, the findings of this study both align with and diverge from previous research by suggesting that individualism and collectivism operate as counter-acting cultural value systems that influence participants' help-seeking in distinct ways (Byrow et al., 2016; Chen, 1995; Papadopoulos et al., 2013).

Social identity theory and self-categorization theory provide useful frameworks to understand behaviours in the sports domain (Rees, Haslam, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2015). Rees et al. (2015) emphasized that a group's response and management of stress is rooted in their social identity and self-categorizing processes. With respect to help-seeking, athletes who perceive that they belong and strongly identify with their teams are more likely to receive and offer help to other group members (Rees et al., 2015). The athletes that participated in this study highlighted a stronger sense of community with their teams at the pre-professional level and how they relied on teammates and coaches at this stage of their career. At the pre-professional level most of the participants were at a similar stage of life as their teammates and therefore shared a lot of common interests, struggles, and social networks. Teammates typically attended classes with teammates (in the college context), going to social events together, and dealing with similar obstacles like academic stress and relationships with partners. At the pre-professional stage participants generally found it easier to identify with their teammates, which helped facilitate teammate-to-teammate help-seeking.

Participants noticed a shift from a collectivistic team culture to a more individualistic one when they transitioned from pre-professional to professional ice hockey. When participants reached the professional leagues, they often described how teammates were at different life stages and therefore they had less in common with them and spent less time together. For example, it was more challenging, especially as a new player, to identify with older veteran players who may be married with children. Also, as the stakes got higher at the professional level participants often expressed how the competition between teammates and the battle for attention from coaches and management sharply intensified. The competition between teammates greatly shifts and the use of teammates and coaches as sources of emotional support declines. At the professional level, athletes are under tremendous pressure to survive and advance their careers. Participants often adopted a more individualistic mentality at the professional level and relied on sources of support outside their organization (e.g., partners, family, independently contracted sport psychologists). Adopting a more individualistic perspective has also been identified as a survival tactic among professional athletes from other sports like soccer (Wood et al., 2017).

From a performance perspective, team sports, like ice hockey, are highly interdependent, and to be successful, athletes must work together (McEwan & Beauchamp, 2014). The participants discussed how they often had to balance prioritizing their team's performance with their individual performance. These pursuits must again be considered alongside a professional organization's need to be successful both on the ice and in business. Other research investigating team sports culture has identified that the group's needs should be placed ahead of the individual athlete (Messner, 1992; Robidoux, 2002). Messner (1992) posited that athletes who put their personal needs ahead of the group risked being labelled selfish or not a "team player". Participants would often minimize or dismiss their hardships or personal problems for fear of

being assigned similar labels. Brewer and Chen (2007) posited that individuals often feel guilt, shame, and anxiety when they fail to fulfill group obligations or their duty to the group. Previous research has highlighted the pressures athletes at all levels feel to live up to their role as a team member (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Rice et al., 2016). One participant in this study highlighted an experience where he chose to miss a series of games to seek treatment for his serious mental health concerns. This athlete described feeling tremendous guilt and shame for not fulfilling his commitment to the team and letting his teammates down. In this instance, the participant's individual needs were placed ahead of his obligation to his team. This athlete operated against many of the barriers that were identified in this study and previous research.

In contrast, participants described how in some circumstances seeking help could be seen as a way to meet individual needs *and* as a means to benefit the team as a whole. This idea resembles familiar sports tropes like "the whole is greater than the sum of its part" or "you are only as strong as your weakest player". Participants in this study expressed that they felt less guilt and shame when seeking help from a team first mentality, or as a way to help their team. Under these circumstances the collectivistic desire to fulfill team obligations (e.g., winning ice hockey games) aligned with the athlete's need to seek support for individualistic needs (e.g., support for performance anxiety). Social identity theory may be a useful framework for understanding why seeking help for group-based motivations was less stigmatized than seeking help for purely individualistic purposes. Previous research that has drawn from social identity theory suggests that strong identification and self-categorization with a group encourages individuals to make decisions that benefit the ingroup (Rees et al., 2015; Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1975). Seeking help when it aligns with group goals could strengthen one's group identification, and therefore reduce the stigma attached to the behaviour.

4.2 The developmental process of help-seeking among ice-hockey athletes

"I just don't think you know that when you're growing up as a kid and you're just blind because you love [playing hockey]… and when you get to pro, there's a lot of head games and a lot of mental aspects where you need to be strong." [Wes]

Based on the findings, ice hockey athletes' help-seeking process follows a developmental trajectory that begins in minor hockey and evolves as athletes move on to professional ice hockey, and then eventually transition out of professional sport and into retirement. This study's life-history interviewing approach encouraged participants to reflect on their help-seeking experiences throughout all three career phases. Most of the participants naturally recounted their careers in chronological order with each season and the team they were playing for acting as memory landmarks. Once the interviews were complete, and data analysis began, it became clear that it would be most representative to present the data in a way that reflected the participants' narrative style. Life history interviews have been utilized in sport psychology research with athletes on eating disorders (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012), sport and disability (Allan, Blair, Latimer-Cheung, & Côté, 2019; Day, 2013), and sport retirement (Douglas & Carless, 2009). To my knowledge, life history interviewing has not yet been used in research exploring athlete mental health or help-seeking.

The results of this study were separated into three major career phases, namely (a) pre-professional, (b) professional, and (c) retirement. This resembles Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model that maps out different transitions that athletes go through at the athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and education/vocational level. Wylleman et al.'s (2008) developmental model has been used to explore the transition of first-year junior ice hockey athletes (Bruner, Munroe- Chandler, & Spink, 2008). Previous researchers have also developed an empirical career model for Canadian NHL players that spans four stages of an

NHL athlete's professional career (Battochio & Stambulova, 2019; Battochio, Stambulova, & Schinke, 2016). While this study highlights many similar career stages, the findings of this study are presented across only three stages as a way to provide context to the participants' experiences and to compare how help-seeking evolves over the course of an ice hockey athlete's entire career.

A key event that all of the participants experienced during the pre-professional phase was the transition to play junior ice hockey in the CHL or college ice hockey in the NCAA. This transition came with a lot of new changes and challenges as most participants moved away from home for the first time and either lived in college dorms or with billets. When participants were living at home, parents and other family members were overwhelmingly cited as the primary sources of support. Once participants moved away from home to play junior or college, other support figures became more prominent (e.g., billets, coaches, teammates, partners). These findings, with respect to primary sources of support, were also reflected in previous research (Bruner et al., 2008; Wylleham et al., 2004). Junior and college ice hockey was commonly described as a stage designed to prepare young ice hockey athletes for professional ice hockey. The experience of being a junior and college ice hockey player often simulated some of the sport-related obstacles that professional ice hockey athletes encountered, like coach-athlete relationships, trades, travel, hyper-competitive environments, and injuries. Other stressors like hazing or problems with billets were unique to the pre-professional experience. At the pre-professional stage, participants first encountered off-ice stressors like experiences with mental health, substance use, and issues with romantic relationships. Bruner et al. (2008) also highlighted similar on-ice and off-ice issues that junior ice hockey athletes face.

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that as the level of play intensified, so did the intensity and severity of the stressors that the participants encountered. Battochio et al.'s (2016) NHL career model centred around individual and team performance-related demands. Each of this model's career stages were characterized by the athletes' overarching performance goals for that period of their career (Battochio et al., 2016). A unique finding of the current study is that participants described a shift in their expectations of professional ice hockey over the course of their careers. At the pre-professional stage participants were primarily focused on achieving their "dream" of playing in the NHL. Once the transition to professional ice hockey happened, this dream was quickly sullied (for many) and replaced with the often-harsh reality of the professional athlete lifestyle and the business of professional sport. Playing ice hockey professionally involves coping with many unforeseen challenges and unglamorous aspects that include challenging coach-athlete relationships, finding a work-life balance, living away from friends and family, job insecurity, getting sent up and down between the NHL, AHL, and ECHL, and frequent moves to new cities and new teams. As pressures on and off the ice heighten, the goal quickly shifts from making it to the NHL to *surviving* in the NHL long enough to have a prosperous career, which, if they are among the fortunate few, will take them to their late thirties. Battochio et al. (2016) also captured the intensity and hypercompetitive demands of professional NHL players on the ice. Help-seeking under this intense pressure becomes complex and even risky, as the participants reported feeling like their careers were always at risk.

If pre-professional ice hockey was reported to center around the development of athletes for careers in professional ice hockey, professional ice hockey was described by participants to be centred around the *commodification of athletes for the business of professional ice hockey*. As such, barriers to help-seeking, particularly at the cultural level, evolved to reflect this shift to a

business model. Participants quickly learned that their value to a professional organization was primarily underpinned by their performance and production on the ice. Participants expressed how athletes with high-status (e.g., high point scorer, expensive contract, or seasoned veteran) faced fewer barriers to seeking help than low-status players. In addition, participants noted that age and maturity were facilitators to help-seeking. Many participants indicated that they felt more confident and comfortable to ask for help as they aged and matured. Similarly, veteran status within the professional ice hockey world gave them more prestige and, therefore, permission to seek support. Battochio et al. (2016) also identified the value placed on veteran players over rookies. Players new to the league were concerned with making good impressions and building their on-ice resumes. Athletes who were new to professional hockey were reported to be less likely to seek help internally (within their respective organizations) as they were more likely to get sent down to the lower leagues or to get traded than an established veteran player. This study builds upon Battochio et al.'s (2016) NHL career model and addresses how their current career stage demands might impact athlete help-seeking. Specifically, participants described how, unless a player was a top scorer or a well-established veteran, they were likely motivated to *not* seek help in order to avoid been labelled as a high-maintenance player or a complainer.

Some participants believed that because of mental health awareness campaigns like #BellLet'sTalk, younger generations of ice hockey athletes have higher mental health literacy than any previous generation. Participants expressed that these shifting societal trends would facilitate younger athletes' help-seeking in general. Similar connections were made by Bird et al. (2018) who discussed how student-athletes now utilize more college campus resources compared to previous generations. However, this idea contradicts the idea that younger athletes and

particularly those who are new to the league avoid seeking help out of fear of damaging their already fragile career prospects. While younger athletes may have more exposure to mental health awareness campaigns and mental health literacy education, participants still considered young and new professional athletes to be a vulnerable group. These two contradicting beliefs hopefully illuminate sport organizations' need to continue finding safe and unique ways to promote help-seeking among athletes at all career stages.

Other researchers have also captured a similar snapshot of the intensity and hyper-competitive nature of professional ice hockey and the different stressors that athletes encounter during their professional careers (Battochio et al., 2016; Camiré, 2016; Herbison et al., 2019; Robidoux, 2002). However, what is unique about this particular investigation is that it captures the connection between the stage of an ice hockey athletes' career and how the pressures, expectations, and stakes tied to that stage inform their help-seeking behaviours. Overall, this study highlights the importance of providing professional supports for athletes at all career stages. Previous research has focused on how retired athletes are particularly vulnerable and how supports are needed to help ease the transition from professional sport to retirement (Aston et al., 2020; Brown, Webb, Robinson, & Cotgreave, 2018; Caron, Bloom, Johnstson, & Sabiston, 2013). However, this study's findings emphasize the need for high-quality professional support for professional athletes who are currently playing, as well as those looking to transition to retirement.

4.3 Stressors and sources of support

"With all the hardships of professional sports…if you don't have that foundation I don't know where you would turn." (Quinn, 36, retired)

Participants reported that they encountered stressors both *on-ice,* or on account of their ice hockey involvement, and stressors that existed *off-ice,* or external to their ice hockey

161

involvement. These findings are consistent with previous research that explored common stressors among athletes at all levels (Battochio et al., 2016; Bruner et al., 2008; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Fletcher, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Neil, 2012; Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993; Noblet & Gifford, 2002; Hatteberg, 2020; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Thelwell, Weston, & Greenlees, 2007). Previous research on stressors among sport performers has primarily focused on the organizational or competitive stressors that athletes encounter like individual and team performance, coach-athlete relationships, injuries, relationships with teammates, and managing the competitive demands of high-level sport (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012, Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2012; Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012; Hanton et al., 2005; Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2009; Wood et al., 2017). Some researchers have also considered the personal stressors that impact athletes lives outside of their sport involvement, like issues related to home life, romantic relationships, and academic stress (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Gould et al., 1993; Lu, Hsu, Chan, Cheen, & Kao, 2012; Noblet & Gifford, 2002; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Thelwell et al., 2007). A major finding of this study was the importance of acknowledging both sport-related and non-sport-related sources of stress when considering the help-seeking of professional ice hockey athletes.

With respect to the ice hockey context, researchers have conducted some work that explored different stressors that ice hockey athletes face. Previous research on ice hockey athlete stressors have focused on the transition from minor ice hockey to the OHL (Bruner et al., 2008), the unique stressors of an NHL captain (Camiré, 2016), performance-related demands at all stages of an NHL player's careers (Battochio et al., 2016), and the stressors experienced by undrafted NHL players (Herbison et al., 2019). This study, to my knowledge, is the first study to explore the connection between stressors and help-seeking of ice hockey athletes. The study

uniquely focuses on the connection between the type of stressor that an athlete faced and the resource or person they went to for support.

Based on the findings of the present study, participants were more likely to seek support for on-ice stressors from internal sources of support and seek help for off-ice stressors from external support sources. Participants described that maintaining a separation between one's personal life and workplace was essential to their success at work and protecting their employment. Despite understanding that often off-ice issues had consequences for on-ice performance and vice versa, athletes often felt uncomfortable seeking support for personal problems within their workplace, even if the organization had those types of resources in place. The athletes who did have experiences bringing off-ice issues to the attention of internal sources of support often stated that it was typically done in secret. Athletes would take great precautions to ensure that whoever they were confiding in (e.g., psychologist, consultant, team doctor) would respect their privacy and would often choose to meet with the resource at a location away from the arena.

Participants often expressed their lack of trust in personnel within their professional organizations. In particular, participants described how they were incredibly reluctant to confide in team-appointed sport psychologists, mental skills coaches, and even team doctors. One participant referred to sport psychologists as "spies" who were loyal to the coaches and management and hired to gather personal information from the athletes and report this information back to coaches and management. This mistrust highlights the need for sport psychologists and other consultants to explicitly outline who they serve as the client and establish strict confidentiality policies with their athletes (Collins et al., 1999; Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001; Stapleton, Hankes, Hays, & Parham, 2010). Some participants sought

professional support outside of their organizations even though their organizations had professionals on staff that they could use free of charge. Participants sought help from independently contracted professionals as a way to protect their confidentiality, particularly when they were addressing mental health and substance use issues. Based on previous negative experiences with professionals who broke their confidence, several participants learned that off-ice stressors were best addressed with off-ice support sources.

These findings highlight the incredibly important role that off-ice sources of support play in supporting ice hockey athletes with mental health, wellness, and other off-ice stressors. In particular, parents and partners (more so at the professional level) were key figures who provided emotional support to athletes. Partners were unique sources of support because they also acted as conduits, and often played an instrumental role in their partners accessing support from professional resources. For example, spouses were reported to play a crucial role in shifting male athletes' attitudes towards help-seeking and encouraged their athlete partners to seek help from professional resources. Jones (2016) revealed that married athletes tend to be more receptive to help than their single athlete counterparts. Other research has also noted that female figures (e.g., female partners and mothers) were key emotional support figures (Jones, 2016; Wood et al., 2017).

Participants identified coaches as the most commonly mentioned internal source of support. However, this relationship was often complex. Participants also frequently noted that coach-athlete relationships were a common source of stress. Participants were most likely to utilize coaches as sources of support for on-ice issues like performance. However, some participants described their relationship with certain coaches to be extremely supportive, and that they sought help from their coach for both on-ice and off-ice related issues. Previous research

has pointed to the potential for youth coaches of adolescent male athletes to act as key sources of mental health support (Brown, Deane, Vella, & Liddle, 2017; Swann et al., 2018). However, this study may be the first to specifically explore the professional ice hockey coach's role in their athletes' help-seeking. Participants often commented that each coach was different in their approach and willingness to support athletes. Athletes were typically open and willing to seek support from such coaches that presented themselves as a resource or advertised having an "open door policy".

4.4 Barriers to help-seeking in ice hockey

"For the seven or eight years or whatever I did end up playing [in the AHL & NHL] no one really cares about you, they just care about your performance, and whether you can play hockey." [Sam]

Barriers to help-seeking were categorized into three subthemes: intra-individual, interpersonal, and cultural factors. This study found that at the pre-professional level intra-individual level barriers included self-reliance protecting the athlete identity, and a lack of mental and physical health awareness and literacy were barriers to help-seeking. Next, at the interpersonal level, poor quality of resources and weak relationships from critical figures were identified as barriers to help-seeking. Finally, at the cultural level, some athletes reported participating in a culture that did not value athlete mental health and well-being and a culture that bred suspicion and promoted silence. Athlete help-seeking was further restricted because participants perceived that their organizations prioritized winning and performance above their wellness, and noted that the availability and access to resources was often lacking. The barriers that were identified at the pre-professional level were, for the most part, in alignment with previous research exploring help-seeking among youth and collegiate athletes (DeLenardo & Terrion, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Watson, 2005; Wahto et al., 2016)

Limited research has been published about different barriers to help-seeking that professional athletes encounter. Wood and colleagues (2017) explored barriers to help-seeking among seven current and retired professional footballers (soccer) with mental health difficulties. Similar to the Wood et al. (2017) study with professional footballers, the current study found that survival in the hyper-competitive professional sport environment, poor mental health literacy, and internalized forms of stigma were barriers to help-seeking among professional ice hockey athletes. At the intra-individual level, barriers that have not previously been identified included self-reliance, a desire to protect one's athlete identity, a lack of mental and physical health awareness and literacy, age and maturity, and familial obligations. At the interpersonal level, barriers to help-seeking included poor quality resources and weak working alliances. Finally, participants reported that cultural barriers included the sport's culture that promoted silence and suspicion around help-seeking and mental health, poor availability and access to resources, job insecurity, the business of wining and performance, and finally, being a younger or newer player or player with low-status typically created added barriers to help-seeking.

During retirement, participating athletes identified poor quality of support resources and poor accessibility to resources to be barriers to help-seeking. Previous studies have determined that dissatisfaction with medical supports during retirement discouraged retired athletes from help-seeking (Drawer & Fuller, 2002). Similar to Drawer and Fuller's (2002) findings, this current study also found that participants were less likely to utilize low quality resources. Jewett, Kerr, and Tamminen (2019) reported that a lack of availability and accessibility of resources was a barrier to help-seeking among retired collegiate athletes. Professional ice hockey athletes have access to an array of exclusive resources like a team doctor, athletic therapists, strength and conditioning coaches, and sport psychologists that are provided by the professional organizations

166

that are no longer made available to retired or alumni athletes. The lack of accessible resources was a significant barrier for retired professional ice hockey athletes who might be in particular need of support.

4.5 Facilitating help-seeking in ice hockey

"People [within the organization] recognize that we are more than 'come workout, skate, leave.' We are human and they do realize that. I think [the organization] has done a tremendous job from top to bottom." [Mick]

Participants in this study identified several intra-individual, interpersonal, and cultural factors that helped facilitate help-seeking at the pre-professional, professional, and retirement phases of their careers. Previous studies that explored facilitators of help-seeking for mental health problems have primarily focused on young elite athletes and student-athletes (Barnard, 2016; Bird et al., 2018; Gulliver et al., 2012a). Limited research has focused on help-seeking facilitators among professional and retired professional athletes. This study highlights several facilitators to help-seeking at the professional level. At the intra-individual level, participants highlighted individual motivation and responsibility, personality, maturity, and awareness as facilitators to help-seeking. They also identified interpersonal factors like high quality resources and high quality support relationships as facilitators of help-seeking. Finally, participants noted cultural factors like access to resources, shifting sports culture, progressive environments, prioritizing wellness, team first mentality, hierarchy advantages, and separation between the workplace and support networks facilitated help-seeking. Retired athlete help-seeking was facilitated by an individual motivation to change behaviour and by having access to high quality resources.

Facilitators to help-seeking were often the inverse of equivalent barriers or merely the absence of barriers. For example, participants considered a poor quality supportive relationship a

barrier to seeking help and considered a high quality supportive relationship a facilitator of help-seeking. Similarly, the culture of silence and suspicion rooted in a conservative and traditionalist ice hockey culture was considered a barrier to help-seeking, however, a shift towards a more progressive ice hockey culture was considered a facilitator to help-seeking. It appears that by simply removing barriers you may inevitably incentivize or facilitate help-seeking and vice versa.

Finding ways to remove help-seeking barriers at the individual, interpersonal, and cultural level may be a way for sport organizations to promote help-seeking as an adaptive coping mechanism. Research to date has been inconclusive about what interventions and approaches are most effective at improving actual help-seeking behaviours (Gulliver et al., 2012b; Kauer, Mangan, & Sanci, 2014). Most interventions to date have focused on help-seeking attitudes or intentions, while a few have measured actual behaviour change (Mathur Gaiha, Sunil, Kumar, & Menon, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2012b; Kauer et al., 2014; Lubman, Cheetham, Berridge, & McKay-Brown, 2017). Further, most interventions target stigma and mental health literacy as the primary means of improving help-seeking intentions, attitudes, and behaviours. While this study also highlights the importance of removing stigma and improving mental health literacy, participants reported other factors like instituting strict confidentiality agreements between athletes and professionals to facilitate ongoing resource utilization to be highly important as well.

This study expands on previous help-seeking literature and provides an in-depth analysis of how interpersonal factors, like the quality of the support relationship and the quality of the resources, can impact an athlete's capacity and motivation to seek help. One of the key pillars of a high-quality support relationship that participants described was the degree of trust they had in

a source of support. Sources of support who upheld a strict confidentiality agreement were resources that were highly utilized and valued by the participants. Sources of support who did not honour confidentiality were dismissed as viable resources and even undermined participants' trust in future sources of support they may encounter. The importance of preserving confidentiality to facilitate help-seeking was echoed in previous research in counselling (Clark, Hudson, Dunstan, & Clark, 2018; Lukito Setiawan, 2006).

Issues with confidentiality were not only identified at the interpersonal level, but they were also identified at the cultural level. The participants described how when their sport organization explicitly defined who the resources served as the client, they felt more secure utilizing those in-house resources. Previous research has also identified the importance of identifying who the resource's client is within a sport organization (Collins et al., 1999; Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001; Stapleton, Hankes, Hays, & Parham, 2010). Particularly with team resources that are privy to sensitive information like sport psychologists, team therapists, or team doctors, members of the sport organization need to agree that the athletes are the client and that all information they share will be kept confidential. These parameters are of particular importance with team sanctioned sport psychologists as much of their service is not offered in confidential spaces, and is instead provided on road trips, at practice, or in other public spaces. Inhabiting team public spaces helps sport psychologists build rapport with their athletes (Andersen et al., 2001; Stapleton et al., 2010); however, it does complicate their capacity to uphold confidentiality at all times. Having flexible access to team resources was important to the participants, but their privacy and emotional safety was central to their ability to trust and ultimately utilize the resource. Sport organizations need to work with their athletes and

consultants to ensure that athletes can easily access professional supports without compromising their privacy.

4.6 Opportunities for practical application, knowledge translation, and future research

The findings of this study provide several potential avenues for practical application, knowledge translation, and future research. This study's findings shed light on the barriers and facilitators of help-seeking among professional ice hockey athletes. Based on the testimonies of 19 current and recently retired professional ice hockey players, this study has the potential to provide valuable insights into ways in which sport organizations can remove barriers for athletes and create environments that facilitate athlete help-seeking. Further, this study can inform best practices for sport organizations to structure their resources and inform the types of supports they offer to their athletes. Further avenues for potential future research are also discussed in this section.

Sport organizations are in a position to create environments and cultures that view help-seeking as an integral part of their athletes' well-being. The normalization and de-stigmatization of help-seeking at all ice hockey levels represents a key focus to apply this study's findings. Changes in the perceptions and understanding of help-seeking at the individual, interpersonal, and cultural levels have the potential to remove barriers for athletes seeking support for a host of different reasons (Gorczynski et al., 2020). Other researchers from areas like sport medicine and sport psychology have pointed to the importance of shifting sport culture with respect to topics like head injury (Murray, Murrary, & Robson, 2015), mental health (Gorczynski et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2019; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018), and athlete harassment and abuse (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Professional athletes also have considerable potential to act as effective role models of behaviour change (Armour & Duncombe, 2012). In the United

Kingdom, a recent media campaign has used athletes' testimonies to destigmatize mental health and illness (https://therpa.co.uk/lifttheweight/). The NHL has the potential to reduce the stigma and continue to normalize help-seeking for the sake of their own athletes and employees, and as a means of setting an example to the larger ice hockey community.

Much of the previous work on psychological support for athletes has focused on youth and collegiate athletes (Barnard, 2016; Bird et al., 2018; Debate et al., 2018; Gulliver et al., 2012a; Steinfeldt et al., 2009; Wahto et al., 2016; Watson, 2005) or athletes who are entering or adjusting to retirement from their chosen sport (Drawer & Fuller, 2002; Jewett et al., 2019). Based on the findings of this study, the needs of professional athletes are equally if not more severe and diverse. Ice hockey athletes and athletes in general, could benefit from receiving ongoing support at all stages of their careers, beginning at the youth and pre-professional stages, through to their experience at the professional level, and into retirement. Given the diversity of stressors that professional ice hockey athletes encounter, sport organizations should develop a support network that reflects their athletes' diverse needs. The support networks should offer diverse types of available professionals who can both (a) direct individuals to appropriate interpersonal resources/supports, as well as (b) implement different (intra-individual) coping strategies and self-management techniques with the athletes. It is in the best interest of sport organizations to acknowledge the potential impact mental health and well-being have on their athletes and normalize help-seeking for mental health resources in the same way they would normalize help-seeking for a physical injury.

Participants identified confidentiality as both a barrier and a facilitator to help-seeking, particularly with resources within their sport organization. Based on these findings, sport organizations can better facilitate their athletes' resource utilization by prioritizing and

safeguarding their privacy and ensuring that all team sanctioned resources institute and uphold strict confidentiality agreements. Previous research has also identified that a lack of defined relationships between athletes, coaches, management, and team consultants (e.g., team doctor, sport psychologist, athletic therapist) detracted from the capacity for resources to provide adequate support to the athletes (Anderssen et al., 2001; Collins et al., 1999). Collins et al. (1999) recommended that clarification around the parameters of confidentiality, role conflict, and ultimately who the support resource (e.g., team doctor, sport psychologist) serves as the client needs to be explicit and discussed with all the relevant organization members. Similarly, mental health or wellness-related programs introduced by any league or player union (i.e., NHL, NHLPA, PHPA) would also benefit from incorporating parameters around athlete confidentiality into its policies.

This study's findings revealed that ice hockey athletes utilized a mix of formal and informal and internal and external sources of support. External sources of support provided emotional support to the athletes and acted as conduits between athletes and formal sources of support. Sport organizations can equip established support sources like partners, parents, billets, strength and conditioning coaches, medical trainers, and coaches with tools to communicate with their athletes on mental health and wellness topics. These sources of support are in a unique position as they have pre-existing relationships and well-established rapport with the athletes. They are also well-positioned to detect changes in athletes' emotional states due to their proximity and consistent access (Bisett, Kroshus, & Hebard, 2020; Lopes Dos Santos et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2016). Sport organizations can provide these sources of support with the necessary training to detect mental health warning signs and information to refer their athletes to appropriate resources.

Teammate-to-teammate relationships could provide another potential opportunity to facilitate help-seeking and further support athlete mental health and well-being within ice hockey organizations (Cho, Yi Tan, & Lee, 2020; Leprince et al., 2018). Previous research with collegiate athletes has found that when athletes are positively mentored by a more experienced teammate they tend to report being more personally satisfied with their performance and feel more integrated with their teams (Hoffman & Loughead, 2016). Peer-to-peer support programs could help create supportive relationships between younger players and veteran players, or newly retired athletes with other retired athletes. Beyond mentorship, general peer-to-peer support programs could take on a communal coping model (Leprince et al., 2018). The participants in this study shared many similar stressors at all stages of their careers. Communal coping provides a potential framework for athletes to collectively cope with shared stressors (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998; Leprince et al., 2018). Integrating mentorship programs, peer-to-peer support programs, or communal coping strategies within a sport organization could be a cost-effective and productive means to promote help-seeking behaviours and cultivate supportive environments.

This research study builds upon previous work on athlete mental health and help-seeking and provides several future research opportunities. These findings show that help-seeking is a critical coping technique that can benefit individual athletes and their teams. Little is known about the role of sport organization leaders, like coaches, managers, and directors, on athlete help-seeking and resource utilization. Future research should investigate the mechanisms through which professional sport coaches, managers, and directors might optimally support athlete help-seeking. Sport organization leaders, like coaches, managers, and directors, are uniquely positioned to impact athlete help-seeking as they have the power to hire support

resources and shift the culture within their organizations. Future research should focus on coaches' and managers' perceptions of athlete help-seeking and how their position as leaders within their organizations can help remove barriers and facilitate athlete help-seeking. Comparing athletes' perceptions of how acceptable and accessible help-seeking is within their organizations against the perceptions of sport coaches and management could shed light on the potential gaps between help-seeking culture on sport teams and the perceptions and actual help-seeking behaviours of the athletes.

Few interventions have targeted athlete help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2012b), and none have investigated professional athletes' help-seeking. One potential intervention could implement an educational program for key internal sources of support that interact with athletes consistently. Coaches, equipment managers, athletic trainers, and strength and conditioning coaches could take part in an educational program that provides training on identifying and detecting common mental health symptoms or warning signs, teach empathic listening, and referral skills. The intervention would then seek to see if educating key sources of support in athletes' lives improves athlete help-seeking and resource uptake. A similar intervention could also be designed to educate external sources of support like family members and partners in the same way. The extent to which sources of support like coaches, athletic trainers, family members, and partners could potentially facilitate athlete help-seeking has never been investigated through an intervention-based research design.

4.7 Strengths and limitations

Although there is a growing body of research in the sport psychology field exploring athlete mental health, well-being, and help-seeking, a small section of that research has focused on professional athletes' experiences. Qualitative research in this area has been limited due to

174

challenges in accessing professional athletes as research participants. Research with professional ice hockey athletes in particular has been scarce because the ice hockey community reportedly views the research and academic community as outsiders, and therefore untrustworthy (Macdonald, 2014; Robidoux, 2002). With this in mind, a major strength of this qualitative investigation of professional ice hockey athletes' help-seeking was that it features a sizeable sample (n=19) of both current professional ice hockey athletes (n=12) and recently retired (n=7) professional ice hockey athletes. The sample size was achieved through the generosity of gatekeepers who work in professional ice hockey, which further emphasizes the importance of developing and establishing rapport with the professional ice hockey community in order to facilitate future research with this population.

During the recruiting process, conversations around anonymity were most prominent. Preserving participant anonymity was integral to the project's ethical integrity and a central means of building rapport with both gatekeepers and participants. Given the participants' high-profile status, many of the testimonies and narratives that participants shared were deeply personal and, therefore, easily identifiable. Consequently, I de-identified a significant percentage of the interview transcripts altogether to protect the participants' identities. Although some of the participants' testimonies were removed from the data to preserve their anonymity, the candidness of the interviews coloured the data with depth and complexity. The participants' willingness to share and divulge deeply personal experiences provided a small peek into a world and lifestyle that is largely missing from the academic literature.

I conducted 18 of the 19 interviews over the phone. Utilizing phone interviews awarded this project with a number of advantages, however, there are a few limitations to phone interviews that need to be acknowledged. Phone interviews as mentioned earlier allowed

professional athletes from all over North America and Europe to participate. Further, given the sensitive nature of mental health and help-seeking topics, conducting interviews over the phone gave the participants an added sense of security. Participants were also able to have complete control over their location during the interview, which allowed them to have added autonomy and privacy. In addition, issues with dropped calls and sound quality were frequent during the interviews, which created challenges during the transcription process. While in-person interviews provide the interviewer with the opportunity to consider physical cues and body language in their interpretation, I believe the advantages of phone interviews mitigated the absence of in-person connection.

A limitation of the study corresponds to the relative homogeneity of the sample. Specifically, there was an absence of non-North American born athletes in the sample, and in particular European-born players. According to QuantHockey (2020) European born players make up 27.8% of the athletes competing in the NHL. While players of all nationalities and backgrounds were invited to participate no European born athletes elected to take part. The results of this study are therefore not representative of the full composition of NHL athletes. Without the testimonies from European born ice hockey players the thesis is unable to shed light on the experiences of this sub-group of athletes and, in particular, how European players' developmental and cultural experiences might diverge from (or align with) their North American counterparts. Ogden and Edwards (2016) conducted a study exploring major differences in the Canadian versus Swedish male ice hockey systems and the different pathways that athletes follow throughout their careers. Some of the differences the authors highlight include differences with respect to early sport specialization, talent identification and development, coaching provision, and sport governance. One key distinction between the two ice hockey development

systems is in Sweden they operate under an "open system" in which athletes are free to choose which clubs or teams they play for regardless of where they live in the country. In Canada young athletes face more restrictions on where they can play youth or elite ice hockey, based on their place of residence or which CHL team drafts them (Ogden & Edwards, 2016). Canada's closed system often creates barriers for athletes who do not have access to quality coaching and proper facilities in their area, or for athletes who do not get scouted and drafted at an early age. Another key difference is that Swedish youth ice hockey focuses on skill development and fun while the Canadian system focuses more on game systems, winning, and competitive play during youth ice hockey (Ogden & Edwards, 2016). Little is known culturally about the meanings and understanding of help-seeking among European men and how they may differ from North Americans. European athletes are far from a homogenous group, and it would be expected that there would be notable differences across European athletes, to the same extent that the participants in this study reported a range of life experiences. Overall, the present study offers a more homogenous view of the North American professional ice hockey athletes experience with respect to help-seeking.

A second limitation of the study corresponds to the lack of ethnic diversity among the sample. The overwhelming majority of participants in this study identified as white/Caucasian, with the sample lacking representation from minority groups (although 2 participants identified their ethnicity as 'other' they would not be considered a racialized minority by most standards). As such, this research provides a somewhat restricted perspective of the professional athlete experience. While athletes of all backgrounds were informed of and encouraged to partake in the study anonymity issues may have been a barrier for minority athletes to participate. The percentage of non-white athletes in the NHL is extremely small, with some reports indicating

that less than 5% of the NHL's athletes are non-white (Bernstein, 2020). This fact could have deterred non-white athletes to volunteer as their identities would have been challenging to protect. Addressing systemic racism and the underrepresentation and treatment of Black, Indigenous, and POC athletes is a conversation that is currently in the foreground in professional ice hockey. Recently, a group of current and retired NHL athletes have created the Hockey Diversity Alliance, whose mission is "to eradicate racism and intolerance in hockey" (Hockey Diversity Alliance, 2020). It is important that future research exploring ice hockey find ways to remove barriers for BIPOC athletes to participate as their experiences and stories are widely underrepresented.

Another limitation of the study was with respect to the interview methodology. Participants took part in only one interview at one point in time, which deviates from the life history framework. Life history interviewing often involves conducting multiple interviews at different time points (Jessee, 2019). Without conducting additional interviews, there was no opportunity to use information from the first interview to design a more customized subsequent interview guide. A second more pointed interview would have provided valuable detail about each participants' experiences with help-seeking throughout their ice hockey careers and their perceptions of how help-seeking fits into the culture of their sport. This project sought to conduct interviews with a larger sample (n=19) instead of conducting multiple interviews with a much smaller sample. Overall, I believe I achieved an impactful level of depth after one interview with each participant, and I was still able to meet the desired goals and purposes of this project.

4.8 Concluding remarks

To my knowledge, this study represents the first investigation of the help-seeking behaviours of professional ice hockey athletes. The findings from this study address important

gaps in the help-seeking literature. The help-seeking process among professional male ice hockey athletes is made up of the stressors they face, barriers and facilitators to help-seeking that they encounter, the sources of support they have access to, and the different coping strategies and self-management techniques they utilize. The goal of this project was to explore help-seeking over the course of the participants' ice hockey careers, spanning three major career phases, including (1) pre-professional, (2) professional, and (3) retirement. The participants' help-seeking experiences revealed that athlete help-seeking followed a developmental trend that began at the pre-professional stage and evolved as athletes progressed to the professional stage, and eventually transitioned into retirement. The participants reported that help-seeking among ice hockey athletes was a highly stigmatized behaviour and the way stigma was experienced by the participants was unique to the ice hockey context and culture. A connection emerged between how participants typically addressed off-ice stressors with external sources of support, and on-ice stressors with internal sources of support. Participants also identified several barriers and facilitators to help-seeking as an ice hockey athlete. Cultivating team environments that respected athletes' privacy and viewed asking for help as an adaptive coping method rather than a series of complaints were identified as important considerations for sport organizations looking to remove barriers to help-seeking for their athletes. Future research that explores the role of sport organization personnel on athlete help-seeking is needed. The development, implementation, and evaluation of interventions designed to support and promote athlete help-seeking represents a particularly important and timely area for future work.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Timeline

Ethics Approval: May 2019

Recruitment: June-July 2019

Data Collection: July-September 2019

Transcription: October- December 2019

Written Research Proposal: February 2020

Thesis proposal presentation: March 2020

Data analysis: March-April 2020

Written Thesis Document: July 2020

Defend Thesis: August 2020

Help-seeking Behaviour in Professional Sport

Month Day, Year
Mr. John Doe
National Hockey League Organization

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to request permission to circulate information regarding my research study within your organization. I am currently enrolled in the Master's program in Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, BC) and am in the process of conducting my Master's Thesis study. The study is entitled <u>Help-Seeking Behaviours in Professional Sport.</u>

I hope that your organization will support my recruitment of professional athletes from the National Hockey League to complete one semi-structured interview (see attached Recruitment Flyer). The interview will cover a range of topics pertaining to the experiences of athletes accessing help and support over the course of their lives and hockey careers. Athletes who are interested in participating will be sent an information letter and consent form (see attached).

If approval is granted, athlete participants will complete one interview either in person, over the phone, or via video-conferencing (e.g., Skype) at a time that works for them. With the participants' consent all interviews will be audio-recorded to aid in the data analysis process. The interview process should take approximately one hour to complete. The transcripts from the interviews will be analysed for the thesis project and individual results of this study will remain anonymous. All identifying information will be removed and all names will be replaced by pseudonyms, including the name of any organization. Should you or the participants be interested, a summary of the results will be made available upon request. No costs will be incurred by either your organization or the individual participants.

Your approval to approach athletes for their voluntary involvement in this study will be greatly appreciated. I will follow up with a telephone call next week and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at that time. You may contact me by email (███████████████) or phone at (██████████). Please also feel welcome to contact the principal investigator, Dr. Mark Beauchamp, by email (████████████████████) or phone (████ ██████).

Sincerely,
Kaitlin Crawford
University of British Columbia | Vancouver Campus
Faculty of Education | School of Kinesiology
309-2125 Main Mall | Vancouver, BC | V6T 1Z4 Canada

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

We want to hear about your experiences with seeking help and support as a professional athlete!

A team from the School of Kinesiology at UBC are conducting a study on the help-seeking behaviours of professional male athletes.

The study involves <u>one one-on-one interview session</u> with a student investigator (Kaitlin Crawford):

- **The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked to tell us about your experiences with help and support seeking in your life and across your hockey career.**
- **The interview will take place on the phone, over video-conferencing (Skype), or in person at a convenient private location.**

We are looking to speak to <u>male athletes</u> who currently hold a contract with a professional hockey organization or have retired within the last 5 years. You must be able to <u>understand and speak English</u>.

If you are interested or would like more information, please contact the student investigator (Kaitlin Crawford, MA Candidate) at _____ca or _____.
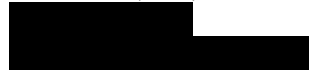
Help-seeking Behaviour in Professional Sport:
Participant Letter of Information/Consent

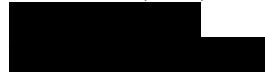|			
Principal Investigator	Dr. Mark Beauchamp School of Kinesiology University of British Columbia Vancouver, BC, Canada ██████████	**Student Investigator**	Kaitlin Crawford School of Kinesiology University of British Columbia Vancouver, BC, Canada ██████████
Co-Investigator	Dr. Brian Wilson School of Kinesiology University of British Columbia Vancouver, BC, Canada ██████████	**Co-Investigator**	Dr. Laura Hurd Clarke School of Kinesiology University of British Columbia Vancouver, BC, Canada ██████████
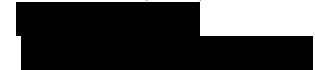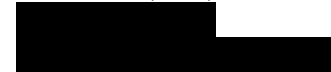
Purpose of the Study:
Our goal is to develop a detailed understanding of the experiences of professional male athletes with help-seeking in their daily lives, as well as throughout their professional athletic careers. Help-seeking behaviour is defined as any attempt to gain support for a range of mental, emotional, or physical problems. Help-seeking can be provided by either formal (counsellor, doctor, psychologist, etc.) or informal (i.e., family, coaches, teammates, etc.) sources, and this study aims to explore both avenues. Throughout this study help-seeking may also be referred to as "seeking support" or simply "asking for help". The purpose of the study will be to develop an understanding of factors that contribute to athletes seeking help (for a variety of issues) as well as barriers. This study also seeks to understand how team climate and other organizational factors within professional sport impact the help seeking behaviours of athletes. Using a semi-structured interview methodology, this study will gather information on the help-seeking behaviours used by male professional athletes. This study has the potential to inform future initiatives aimed at de-stigmatizing help-seeking and improving resources available to professional athletes.

Procedures Involved in the Study:
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview with Kaitlin Crawford (this study forms the basis of her Masters thesis). This interview will be conducted either in person, over the phone, or via video-conferencing (e.g., Skype). During this session, you will be asked a series of open-ended questions regarding your experiences of seeking help throughout your athletic career. The interview session will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. The interview will be audio recorded for future analysis of your responses. The interviewer will also take notes during the interviews to help with the analysis of your responses.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:
The interview will cover a range of factors related to help-seeking and therefore issues of a sensitive nature may arise. You will be free to discuss or not discuss any topics as you see fit. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, and you do not have to give any

reason why you chose to not answer a particular question. You can continue being in the study if you do not answer all the questions, and you can withdraw at any time from the study without experiencing any negative consequences. The interviewer will answer any questions you many have (either during the interview, or by email or phone), and you can take a break during the interview session if you so wish.

In the event that a participant discloses to the interviewer that they have plans to harm themselves or others the researcher will need to direct him to the relevant health professional/clinician within their sports organization (e.g., team doctor), the relevant health service providers within their geographical region (e.g., crisis lines), or the corresponding players' association (e.g., NHLPA). As researchers, we do not provide mental health services, however, we will direct you to the relevant support services.

Potential Benefits:
This will be the first study to explore help-seeking behaviours of professional ice hockey athletes. You will have the opportunity to share knowledge and challenges associated with asking or receiving support within the professional hockey environment and share experiences around the extent to which you feel athletes at the professional level are supported.

Confidentiality:
Please note that any information that you provide in the interviews will remain confidential and de-identified. This means that no information that can identify you will be discussed or made available within any reports that may result from this research. However, in the event that the interviewer feels the participant may be a current risk to themselves or others, the interviewer has a duty to inform a clinician or health care worker. All audio-recordings, transcripts, and data will be encrypted and kept on a password-protected computer in the office of the principal investigator at UBC. The only people who will have access to your information and recordings are the principal investigator and the student investigator. Please note that your responses will be de-identified (which means that any information that could potentially identify you will be removed from the transcripts and any subsequent research reports).

Participation and Withdrawal:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any point in time without consequence. All participants will have the opportunity to review their transcripts after the interviews. Note that it may not be possible to honour all requests for the deletion of data upon withdrawal, such as in the case where the data has already been published or presented. Also, you can refuse to answer any questions if you do not feel comfortable, and still remain in the study. Overall, you can stop the interviews at any time or withdraw without consequence.

Information About the Study Results:
Upon study completion, a summary of the study results will be available upon request. Please contact Kaitlin Crawford should you wish to be sent a summary of the study results via email.

Contact for information about the study:
If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Kaitlin Crawford (phone: ████████ ; email: ███████████).

Information about Participating as a Study Participant:

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights or treatment as a research participant, please contact the 'Research Participant Complaint Line' in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail to RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Consent:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.

Do you agree to participate in this study? Yes / No (An oral agreement to participate denotes consent, and will be recorded before prior to the interview taking place).

Name of Participant _____

Date: _____

_____
Signature of Interviewer   Date

Help-seeking behaviours of male professional athletes

Interview Guide

The following questions represent an overarching agenda for interviews with the athletes. The questions will be pursued flexibly and may be altered and added to over time as different themes and patterns emerge in the data.

Demographic Questions

Age: ___

Number of years in professional hockey: ____

What is your marital status?
☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Common Law or living with partner
☐ Widowed ☐ Separated ☐ Divorced

Which of the following describes your ethnicity?
☐ Aboriginal decent (e.g., North American Indian, Métis or Inuit)
☐ White
☐ Chinese
☐ South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)
☐ Black
☐ Filipino
☐ Latin American
☐ Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, etc.)
☐ Arab
☐ West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.)
☐ Korean
☐ Japanese
Other – specify: _____

Country of Birth: _____

What is the highest level of education you have completed?
☐ Some high school ☐ High school diploma ☐ Vocational school or some college
☐ College/University degree ☐ Professional or graduate degree   Other: _____

Pre-amble to questions about help-seeking behaviours: "Help-seeking behaviour is defined as any attempt to gain support for a range of mental, emotional, or physical problems. Help-seeking can be provided by either formal (counsellor, doctor, psychologist, etc.) or informal (i.e., family, coaches, teammates, etc.) sources. Throughout this interview I will be referring to help-seeking primarily, however I may also refer to it as "seeking support" or simply "asking for help". In a moment I'll ask you some questions about your experiences with seeking support throughout your life, and in particular through your hockey career. These questions will cover your experiences from your time in junior or college hockey through to your current experience at the professional level. Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?"

Questions about personal hockey career background and trajectory:

1. Please tell me a bit about how you got into hockey?

2. Tell me about your experience in junior or college?

3. When you were growing up playing hockey, who would you say was your primary source of support?

    a. How did they help you during your times of need?

4. Recall a time during your time junior/college hockey that you needed to ask for help?

    a. Describe a time during junior/ college when you might have needed some help/support, but did not ask for it?

5. Describe how the transition from the junior/collegiate to the pro-level was for you?

6. How has your experience been playing hockey at the professional level?

Questions about perceived barriers and antecedents of help-seeking behaviours:

7. Tell me about a time during your professional hockey career when you needed help? What happened?

8. Describe a time during your professional career when you felt you needed help, but did not reach out for support?

9. Describe a situation in which you felt comfortable to seek out help within your current team?

a. Describe a situation or problem in which you feel it would be inappropriate or uncomfortable to seek out help?

10. If you were dealing with a personal problem **who** would you feel most comfortable speaking to about it?

a. Elaborate on why you feel the most comfortable to speak to that particular person?

11. Describe a time when you asked for help and you felt like you were positively supported?

12. Describe a time when you asked for help and felt you were not supported or that your request was negatively received?

13. If your teammate came to you with a personal issue or problem how would you respond?

14. If you went to your coaching staff with a personal problem how do you think they would respond?

15. To what extent has your comfort level with asking for help changed over your hockey career?

16. To what extent does your identity as an athlete influence your capacity to ask for help?

Questions about team environment/ organization and help-seeking:

17. To what extent is seeking help accepted or part of the culture of your organization/team?

18. On your current team what sort of support systems are in place to help you and your teammates when personal issues arise?

19. To what extent do you think teams in the NHL/AHL do a good job in supporting player welfare? Is there anything else you think they could do?

a. To what extent do you think the NHLPA/PHPA does a good job in supporting player welfare? Is there anything else you think they could do?

Appendix F: List of national crisis lines in Canada and United States

Canada

- Canada Suicide Prevention Service (CSPS) (available 24/7 in French or English) **1-833-456-4566**
- KidsHelpPhone Ages 20 Years and Under in Canada **1-800-668-6868**
- First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness 24/7 Help Line **1-855-242-3310**
- Canadian Indian Residential Schools Crisis Line **1-866-925-4419**
- Trans LifeLine – All Ages **1-877-330-6366**
- Alberta Crisis Line – All Ages **403-266-4357**
- British Columbia Crisis Line – All Ages **1-800-SUICIDE**
- British Columbia Mental Health Support **310-6789**
- BC211 – Referral Hotline 24/7 Dial **211**
- Manitoba Crisis Line – All Ages **1-877-435-7170**
- New Brunswick Crisis Line – All Ages **1-800-667-5005**
- Newfoundland and Labrador Line All Ages **1-888-737-4668**
- NWT All Ages 24/7 **1-800-661-0844**
- Nova Scotia Crisis Line – All Ages **1-888-429-8167**
- Nunavut Line – All Ages 7 pm-11 pm (EST) **1-800-265-3333**
- Ontario Crisis Line – All Ages **1-866-531-2600**
- Ontario College and University Students **1-866-925-5454**
- Prince Edward Island Crisis Line – All Ages **1-800-218-2885**
- Quebec National Crisis Line – All Ages **1-866-277-3553**
- Saskatchewan Crisis Line – All Ages **1-306-525-5333**
- Yukon Crisis Line – All Ages 7 pm-12 am (PST) **1-844-533-3030**

United States

- U.S. National Suicide Prevention LifeLine **1-800-273-TALK**
- Trans LifeLine – U.S.A. **1-877-565-8860**
- The Trevor Project Lifeline **866-488-7386**