

GROUPS 4 HEALTH: Sport

A new program to manage identity change during career transitions



Career transitions, particularly retirement, can have a major impact on a person's sense of direction and purpose. This is because career transitions challenge identity — a person's sense of who they are, and their place in the world — in ways that impact on mental health and well-being.



This research piloted a new intervention, GROUPS 4 HEALTH: SPORT (G4H: SPORT), targeting identity change and how it can be managed both before and during career transitions in order to aid adjustment to retirement for professional athletes.

G4H:SPORT helps manage the identity changes that take place when athletes transition out of elite sport.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE: Six retired male elite football players: 5 AFL, 1 NRL.
Average age: 30 (27-32 years)
Mean length of professional career: 7.5 years

APPROACH: Individual, qualitative, semi-structured interviews covering program feasibility, participant experience, and of identity change in the retirement transition.

G4H:Sport is an online program in five parts that can be completed alone or in a small group.

Identity matters

Preparing

Groups build identity

Powering

Mapping identities

Positioning

Managing identities

Planning

Sustaining identities

Persevering

RESULTS

Retired players found **G4H:SPORT** easy to use and appropriate for athletes. The issues of identity change presented resonated with the players and they welcomed the opportunity to talk about their own experiences of transitioning out of sport. Most said that **G4H:SPORT** helped them to make sense of what they had experienced. It also allowed them to consciously map out and structure their social group networks in ways that helped them understand who they were after retirement. The program also challenged some to think in new or different ways about a topic they felt was not spoken about enough in sport. This is reflected in the players' response to the program (see quotes).

BENEFITS

1. **G4H:SPORT** raised awareness of the importance of building and maintaining social group networks.
2. **G4H:SPORT** provided new knowledge and skills to protect athletes from poor health outcomes associated with career transitions.
3. **G4H:SPORT** offered support for athletes to cope with identity change and associated losses.

"It's made me acknowledge more about my different social groups, how they connect, and how important they are. I've probably never placed any importance to what I do socially to people, it's just what I've done"

"It was a really good chance to reflect on things ... when you see it out there on your map or write about it you go 'oh yeah that's why I feel good about that group' and 'that's why this one is not as important.'

"I think (retirement) is something that's not spoken enough about... It really sheds a spotlight on what needs to be addressed in the system. I think there'd be quite a few players that get caught up in the fact that they are only a footballer"

"I found it really useful and it's probably something that I'd promote moving forward... I think it was definitely a useful project to be a part of and take on, and I think it's something that more clubs and more athletes should consider moving forward... Reality is, when you are in an elite environment or playing football it's a really small snippet of your life. I think it's very much a beneficial program in so many ways"