A Salutogenic approach to being physically active: A Case Study of a Paralympic Gold medallist

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Purpose
A research project conducted by CHI PhD student Bridie Kean aimed to explore the role of physical activity in maintaining health for a Paralympian diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis.

It is documented in the literature that there are key benefits from participation in physical activity, however there is still limited information available on high performing athletes. Thus it was deemed of interest to inquire about the lived experience of a patient diagnosed with MS who had been able to not only continue to be physically active, but obtain the highest accolade in sport: Gold at a Paralympic Games. This includes barriers, motivators and facilitators to being physically active.

Background
Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic, progressive disease of the central nervous system (Dlugonski, 2012) that may result in disability. It is more common in women than men and it is often diagnosed in the third or fourth decades of life. (Dlugonski, 2012) Research aimed at looking at the role of physical activity for people with MS in addressing a case where physical activity had been used to maintain health.

Data Collection
Purposeful sampling was used to identify an extreme case, where maintenance of health had been a powerful motivator in maintaining physical activity levels, which eventuated to competing at the highest level in sport. An interview was conducted at the participant’s training venue. Results were transcribed and thematic analysis used to interpret the results of the narrative.

Methods
Qualitative research was undertaken with the goal of understanding the experiences and life events of the athlete, beyond specifically focusing on barriers, motivators and facilitators. The case study used a narrative inquiry, to enable a depth of understanding, where the themes that emerge are not led by the researcher (Patton, 2002)

Preliminary Results
Results of the narrative of the Paralympic gold medallist were contrasted in relation to the concepts covered in self-efficacy theory and a Salutogenesis framework. Themes emerged demonstrated that high coping skills, a preventative strategy and social support were evident resources in the motivation to be active for the Paralympian. Themes that were identified during thematic analysis represent the opportunity for salutogenesis to be used in health promotion for aimed at increasing exercise participation.

Future practice implications
The case demonstrates how a Salutogenesis theoretical framework, provided health promotion direction. Salutogenesis is a theoretical construct suggesting despite adverse circumstances, certain people possess the capability to maintain and create health (Antonovsky, 1987).

This case study highlights how exercise has transferred into a positive way to manage and maintain health for the participant. Commitment to physical activity to maintain health lead the participant to the highest elite level. This case study provides insight for future health promotion interventions focused on increasing participation in physical activity for people with a disability.

References
Photos courtesy of Chris Bond