



# Blowing the whistle on mental health & wellbeing: The experiences of AFL Umpires

**Dr Mandy Ruddock-Hudson, Dr Scott Ruddock & Dr Shahin Rahimi-Golkhandan**

## Background:

- An important element of professional sport is game-day officiating. It is through the diligence, professionalism and training of umpires that allows individuals to complete in sports matches on a level playing field.
- Nevertheless, this umpiring cohort is vulnerable to stressors from outside sources and job-related pressures (Baldwin, 2013).
- A lack of respect, abuse from players, coaches and spectators, as well as criticism from the media are factors that contribute to the stress of a game-day official, which compromise decision-making abilities (Andersen & Williams, 1999).

## Aim:

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of workplace stress and wellbeing in elite AFL umpires.

## Methods:

- Fifteen AFL Umpires took part in a 45-minute focus group discussion.
- Topics included: sources of occupational stress, workplace challenges, stressors and job burnout.
- An interpretive thematic analysis using inductive and deductive reasoning by two independent raters was used to analyse the data.

## Results:

Theme	Higher order theme	Lower order themes
Theme 1: <i>Job demands &amp; challenges</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical demands</li> <li>• Thought process</li> <li>• Validation</li> <li>• Scrutiny</li> <li>• Signs &amp; symptoms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fitness, health, strength, speed, rehabilitation, hours devoted to role</li> <li>• Cognitions, thinking, distracting thoughts, personal pressure, constant thought processes</li> <li>• Waiting for decisions on your decisions, trying to prove yourself, building trust in the Umpiring department</li> <li>• Coaches feedback, general public, industry feedback, criticism</li> <li>• Difficulty sleeping post game &amp; 24 hours prior, physical and mental exhaustion, mood swings, mood disturbances, loss of patience</li> </ul>
Theme 2: <i>Coping mechanisms &amp; strategies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work-life balance,</li> <li>• Mindfulness</li> <li>• Previous experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family, kids, work, study, time management, alternate activities, down time, switching off, doing something you love</li> <li>• Positive thinking, task appreciation, breathing techniques, body language, positive self-talk</li> <li>• Overthinker early in the career, validation from media, ups and downs, life / game experience</li> </ul>
Theme 3: <i>Precarious nature of pressure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• Perfectionism</li> <li>• Positivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggles, negativity, lack of conversation, self-doubt</li> <li>• Expectation, minimal error, correct decisions, accuracy, achieving excellence</li> <li>• Mind-set, visualisation, positive self-talk, control</li> </ul>
Theme 4: <i>Labour of love</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection</li> <li>• The experience,</li> <li>• Personal development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mateship, friends, group dynamics, cohesion, bonding, teamwork, trust</li> <li>• Challenging, rewarding, unique, controlling the narrative, intensity, opportunity</li> <li>• Skills, continuous learning, opportunity to grow &amp; develop, confidence, resilience, thick-skinned,</li> </ul>

## Conclusions

- Some umpires can adequately cope with the constant pressures of the job.
- Others may be more susceptible to psychological distress.
- Important implications regarding the workplace environment, job roles and management of umpires within the industry are highlighted.
- Findings may lead to improved knowledge of umpires' occupational pressure and identify factors that potentially enhance work-life balance for these unique individuals.

