Virtual health assessment for athletes with intellectual disabilities

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BACKGROUND

- Special Olympics Washington (SOWA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to facilitating physical activity, fitness, wellness, and community engagement for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) via competitive team sports tournaments, social events, and connection with local resources.
- Health data collected from in-person health assessments are vital for tailoring SOWA services and programs to the needs of athletes.
- Mandated physical distancing orders due to ongoing 2020-2021 pandemic have prevented in-person events with health assessments, thereby limiting data collection.
- Conversion of in-person health assessments to virtual formats became top priority for engaging athletes and allowing for continued data collection; additionally, it was of interest to update these materials with weight-neutral language.

PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES

PURPOSE
- Facilitate seamless data collection for Special Olympics, enabling athletes’ continued access to up-to-date resources and activities during pandemic quarantine orders.

OBJECTIVES
- Convert in-person health screenings to a virtual format.
- Introduce concept of weight neutrality into SOWA programming via educational handouts for athletes as well as re-wording of sensitive questions in health assessments.

METHODS

- POPULATION
  SOWA athletes with Internet access.
- HEALTH ASSESSMENT VIRTUAL CONVERSION
  Assessments conducted using registration and polling features on Zoom.
- INCORPORATION OF WEIGHT NEUTRALITY
  New handouts created and existing materials (e.g., PowerPoint slides, etc.) modified to be weight-neutral.

ATHLETE HANDOUTS

A total of 5 topics were included in handouts:
- EATING, HEALTH, & WEIGHT (pictured below)
  Primer on the handout packet with basic facts about health and weight.
- HUNGER & FULLNESS CUES
  Description of identifying hunger and fullness using a scaling method.
- CYCLE OF MINDFUL EATING
  Prompts to incorporate into feeding schedules that probe eating motivations.
- WHAT IS NORMAL EATING?
  Brief outline of different features of “normal” eating behaviors.
- HOW TO DITCH YOUR SCALE
  How to guide with integrated barrier prevention for eliminating regular weight measurements.

OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

- 57 total participants registered over 10 sessions.
- 18 (32%) of those registered attended live sessions.
- 8 identified as female/girl, 7 male/boy, 1 other, 1 declined.
- 17 identified as non-Hispanic White.
- 8 reported consuming 1-2 servings of fruit daily.
- 11 reported consuming 3-5 servings of vegetables daily.
- 8 reported weekly consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.
- 7 reported daily and 6 reported weekly (n = 6) consumption of foods with solid fats and added sugars.
- 9 described their physical health and bodily satisfaction as “just OK” (n = 8) or concerning (n = 1).
- 9 described their mental health and stress as “just OK” (n = 4) or concerning (n = 5).

CONCLUSIONS

Special Olympics athletes face unique challenges during the pandemic, and while conversion of in-person health assessments to a virtual format was successful, it carries limited utility in both the short- and long-term as most athletes have limited access to or interaction with technology suitable for conducting valid data collection virtually.

The virtual environment may not be the norm for the long-term future as quarantine restrictions begin to lift. However, virtual health assessments should focus on more equitable recruitment; phone sessions and screenings conducted in a dual setting (e.g., during an existing doctor’s visit) would likely recruit more participants.