

---

## Module 5: Factors contributing to risky nutritional behavior

---

### Learning Objectives of the Module

After the successful completion of this module, you will be able to:

#### Remember & Understand

- Identify the specific cognitive distortions, such as optimism bias and health compensatory beliefs, that athletes use to minimize the perceived risks of doping
- Describe the psychological impact of performance slumps across different career stages and how these slumps increase vulnerability to unethical decision-making

#### Apply & Analyze

- Analyze the mechanisms of moral disengagement, including euphemistic labeling, displacement of responsibility, and advantageous comparison, that allow athletes to justify prohibited behaviors.
- Calculate and assess the tensions inherent in ethical dilemmas, such as the conflict between "fairness versus competitive survival" or "health versus performance maximization"

#### Evaluate & Create

- Critique the influence exerted by Athlete Support Personnel (ASP) and peer networks, examining how power asymmetries and horizontal social pressure normalize doping behavior
- Create practical strategies for resilience and resistance, utilizing reflective decision-making, values clarification and emotional regulation to protect athlete integrity

### 1. Introduction

---

This chapter aims to explore the complex psychological, social, and ethical dynamics that shape athletes' vulnerability to doping, particularly during periods of pressure, uncertainty, and performance instability. Rather than treating doping as a simple rule violation or individual moral failure, the chapter adopts a broader psychosocial perspective. It examines how performance slumps, ethical dilemmas, cognitive biases, peer influence, and unhealthy lifestyle patterns interact to create moments of heightened risk. By integrating concepts such as moral disengagement, optimism bias, health compensatory beliefs, and peer pressure, both within and beyond the sporting context, the chapter seeks to illuminate the subtle psychological pathways through which doping can become normalized or justified. At the same time, it emphasizes protective mechanisms that empower athletes to make value-consistent decisions aligned with health, fairness, and the spirit of sport.

The chapter is structured in six interconnected sections. It begins by examining performance slumps across different career phases and their impact on identity, confidence, and decision-making. It then explores the ethical dilemmas athletes encounter, particularly in relation to spirit-of-sport values such as fairness, health, honesty, respect, and courage. The third section analyzes cognitive distortions, focusing on optimism bias and health compensatory beliefs that minimize perceived risk and rationalize enhancement behaviors. The fourth section addresses peer pressure, both within sport and in broader lifestyle contexts, including unhealthy sleep patterns, stimulant use, partying culture, painkiller and supplement misuse, and recreational drug use, and

how these behaviors may indirectly increase doping vulnerability. The fifth section involves pressure set by the athlete's entourage in their effort to persuade athletes to use supplements. The chapter concludes by presenting practical strategies for resistance and resilience, highlighting reflective decision-making, value clarification, emotional regulation, supportive environments, and healthy lifestyle habits as key components in safeguarding athlete integrity and long-term well-being.

## 2. Performance slumps in sport: Psychological impact and vulnerability to doping

---

Performance slumps are a common yet emotionally destabilizing experience in athletes' careers. A slump can be defined as a sustained period of underperformance relative to one's previous standard, expectations, or competitive demands. Unlike a single bad performance, a slump persists across training sessions and competitions, often creating uncertainty, frustration, and self-doubt. While slumps are developmentally normal in sport, they can feel catastrophic to athletes whose identities, opportunities, and future prospects are closely tied to performance outcomes. The comic narrative captures this moment of destabilization, when a previously confident athlete begins to question her ability, worth, and future.

Performance slumps may occur at different phases of an athlete's career, and their meaning shifts depending on developmental stage. In early career phases (adolescence to emerging adulthood), slumps often coincide with transitions such as moving from junior to senior competition, adapting to higher training loads, or competing for scholarships and selection spots. At this stage, athletes may lack psychological coping experience. A downturn in performance may be interpreted not as a temporary fluctuation but as evidence of personal inadequacy. When athletes define themselves primarily through success, early slumps can trigger identity instability and fear of being "not good enough." During mid-career or peak-performance years, slumps can be even more threatening because they challenge an established reputation. Athletes who were previously top performers may struggle to accept decline. Expectations from coaches, sponsors, teammates, and themselves are typically higher. A performance plateau or regression may create intense cognitive dissonance: "I am supposed to be improving, yet I am stagnating." This discrepancy can produce frustration, irritability, and rumination. In high-performance environments where results determine contracts and visibility, slumps can feel like existential threats rather than temporary setbacks. In later career stages, slumps may be interpreted as signs of aging or physical decline. Athletes may fear replacement by younger competitors. The anxiety associated with "running out of time" can intensify risk-taking tendencies. When athletes perceive limited opportunities to achieve career-defining goals, they may become more vulnerable to shortcuts that promise rapid improvement.

Across all career phases, performance slumps affect psychological functioning in profound ways. One of the first consequences is a reduction in perceived competence. According to competence-based motivational models, athletes derive confidence and enjoyment from feelings of mastery and progress. When improvement stalls, self-efficacy declines. The athlete begins to doubt their training methods, preparation, and even natural ability. In the comic, the protagonist's stopwatch times become symbolic markers of eroding confidence. Each slower time reinforces a narrative of decline.

Slumps also increase cognitive anxiety. Athletes may become preoccupied with negative evaluation, anticipating criticism from coaches or comparison with teammates. Social comparison intensifies in competitive environments. Seeing others improve while one stagnates can amplify feelings of inadequacy.

Social media exposure, rankings boards, and performance metrics make comparison constant and visible. Over time, this can produce chronic stress responses, sleep disturbance, muscle tension, irritability, which ironically further impair performance.

Another psychological impact is identity threat. Many athletes invest deeply in their athletic role. When performance declines, they may feel that their core identity is under attack. Thoughts such as “If I fail, I am nobody” reflect a fusion between self-worth and outcomes. Identity foreclosure, the narrowing of self-definition exclusively to sport, magnifies the emotional cost of slumps. Instead of viewing performance variation as part of development, the athlete interprets it as a threat to personal value. Emotional responses during slumps frequently include frustration, shame, anger, and helplessness. Shame is particularly relevant because it involves global self-evaluation rather than specific behavior evaluation. An athlete who feels shame may think, “I am inadequate,” rather than “I need to adjust my training.” Shame can drive avoidance behaviors or desperate attempts to restore status. When athletes feel publicly exposed as declining performers, the motivation to rapidly reclaim competence increases. These psychological shifts influence decision-making processes. Under stress, individuals are more likely to adopt short-term, outcome-focused reasoning. When long-term development appears uncertain and immediate results are demanded, cognitive appraisal may shift from “Is this ethical?” to “Will this work quickly?” In such states, doping can begin to appear less as a moral violation and more as a strategic solution.

Importantly, slumps also distort perceptions of norms. Athletes experiencing decline may overestimate how many others are using performance-enhancing substances. When struggling, it is psychologically easier to attribute others’ success to hidden advantages rather than to differences in training adaptation or talent. This attribution protects self-esteem but may normalize doping cognitively. In the comic, whispers about others being “on something” feed uncertainty. Even without evidence, the perception of widespread enhancement can reduce moral resistance.

The pathway from slump to doping vulnerability often unfolds gradually. It may begin with legal coping strategies: adjusting training load, improving sleep, refining nutrition, or using approved supplements. These steps are adaptive and appropriate. However, if improvements remain insufficient, frustration can deepen. When legal supplementation is framed as the “first step,” the psychological boundary between permitted and prohibited enhancement may blur. Incremental normalization reduces the emotional barrier to stronger interventions. Authority can influence compounds this vulnerability too. When coaches imply that results are urgently needed or subtly reference “better support systems,” athletes may interpret this as endorsement of enhancement. Even indirect pressure can heighten perceived expectation. In environments where selection, contracts, or scholarships depend on performance, athletes may feel that refusing enhancement equates to self-sabotage. Another psychological mechanism during slumps is risk discounting. When athletes fear losing everything, the perceived cost of not improving may outweigh the perceived risk of sanctions or health consequences. Anxiety narrows temporal focus, making long-term consequences feel distant compared to immediate performance demands. If detection probability appears low, doping may be cognitively reframed as a manageable risk rather than a catastrophic gamble. Emotional isolation can further increase vulnerability. Athletes experiencing slumps often withdraw socially due to embarrassment or fear of judgment. Reduced communication with supportive teammates or mentors limits access to protective perspectives. In contrast, peers who normalize shortcuts may gain influence. The absence of open dialogue about performance struggles allows distorted thinking to intensify.

However, performance slumps do not inevitably lead to doping. They can also become growth opportunities when athletes receive appropriate psychological and medical support. Reframing slumps as part of performance cycles rather than personal failure is critical. Sport science recognizes that adaptation is non-linear; plateaus and regressions often precede breakthroughs. When athletes understand this, anxiety decreases and patience increases. Protective factors include strong moral identity, autonomy-supportive coaching, and access to credible medical guidance. When athletes feel safe discussing fatigue, overtraining, or psychological strain with professionals, they are less likely to seek hidden solutions. Clear education about legal supplementation, recovery science, and anti-doping regulations strengthens informed decision-making. Reconnecting athletes with intrinsic motives also buffers against vulnerability. Remembering why they started, joy, mastery, community, counterbalances external pressures. When performance becomes the sole measure of worth, shortcuts gain appeal. When sport retains meaning beyond results, integrity regains priority. In the narrative arc of the comic, the turning point occurs when the athlete reanchors her identity in values rather than fear. This shift illustrates a crucial psychological transition: from externally driven desperation to internally guided clarity. By seeking professional advice, addressing recovery scientifically, and rejecting secrecy, the athlete restores control over her career trajectory.

In conclusion, performance slumps are emotionally intense periods that can challenge athletes' confidence, identity, and sense of security across all career phases. Slumps undermine perceived competence, increase anxiety and social comparison, and heighten fear of replacement or irrelevance. Under these psychological pressures, doping may begin to appear as a rational shortcut, especially when reinforced by peers or implied authority expectations. However, vulnerability is not destiny. With supportive environments, accurate knowledge, reflective coping, and strong personal values, athletes can navigate slumps without compromising health or integrity. Understanding the psychological landscape of slumps is therefore essential for both storytelling and prevention, as it highlights how ordinary performance struggles can evolve into ethical crossroads, and how resilience, support, and informed decision-making can keep sport clean.

### 3. Ethical dilemmas and the Spirit of Sport: Navigating values under pressure

---

The concept of the “spirit of sport” represents the ethical foundation of competitive athletics. It encompasses values such as fairness, honesty, health, respect for rules and opponents, courage, character, dedication, teamwork, and joy in effort. These principles are not abstract ideals; they are the moral architecture that gives sport meaning. However, when athletes experience performance slumps, career insecurity, or intense competitive pressure, as illustrated in the comic, these values may come into conflict with immediate ambitions. Ethical dilemmas arise precisely because athletes care about both success and values. The tension between them creates vulnerability to doping. Typically, athletes face the following ethical dilemmas related to doping:

**a. Fairness vs. competitive survival:** Fairness is central to the spirit of sport. It ensures that success reflects talent, preparation, and resilience within agreed rules. Yet athletes may confront the perception that others are gaining unfair advantages. When doping is believed to be widespread, fairness can be reinterpreted as self-disadvantage. The internal dilemma becomes: “Is it fair that I lose because I follow the rules while others break them?” This dilemma distorts fairness into a personal survival calculation. The athlete shifts from collective fairness (shared rules) to comparative fairness (relative advantage). Resolving

this tension requires reframing fairness as a shared social contract. Sport only functions if athletes collectively agree to uphold the same standards. Violating them undermines not just opponents but the integrity of competition itself. Athletes can strengthen their commitment by recognizing that clean sport protects not only outcomes but the legitimacy of achievement.

**b. Health vs. performance maximization:** Health is another pillar of the spirit of sport. Athletic development ideally enhances physical and psychological well-being. However, elite sport often blurs the boundary between healthy risk and harmful overreach. When substances promise faster recovery or enhanced endurance, athletes face the dilemma: “If this improves performance and seems controlled, is it really harmful?” This ethical conflict intensifies when health risks are minimized or framed as manageable. Yet doping contradicts the principle that sport should enhance, not endanger, human flourishing. Long-term consequences, cardiovascular damage, hormonal disruption, psychological strain, and reputational harm, extend beyond competitive years. Athletes can resolve this dilemma by broadening their temporal perspective. Viewing health as a lifelong asset rather than a short-term performance tool reinforces the incompatibility between doping and well-being.

**c. Honesty vs. image management:** Honesty and authenticity are core spirit-of-sport values. Athletes are expected to win through genuine effort. Doping introduces secrecy, deception, and image management. The dilemma here is subtle: “If no one knows, and I still train hard, is it really dishonest?” This rationalization separates effort from ethics. An athlete may argue that substances only enhance already existing hard work. However, secrecy fundamentally conflicts with authenticity. The need to hide behavior from family, teammates, or fans generates chronic anxiety and moral strain. Resolution requires recognizing that honesty is not conditional on detection. Integrity is defined by congruence between actions and publicly endorsed values, regardless of external scrutiny.

**d. Respect for rules vs. pragmatic adaptation:** Respect for rules is foundational to organized sport. Rules create structure and comparability. Yet athletes may perceive rules as restrictive or outdated, especially when competitive pressure intensifies. The dilemma becomes: “If the rules limit my potential while others bend them, should I pragmatically adapt?” This framing portrays rule adherence as naive rigidity. However, rules are the collective expression of fairness and athlete welfare. Breaking them for advantage erodes mutual trust. Athletes can address this dilemma by distinguishing between advocating for rule reform (a legitimate action) and unilaterally violating rules (an unethical action). Respect for rules sustains the shared environment that makes achievement meaningful.

**e. Teamwork vs. personal integrity:** Team environments create strong bonds and shared responsibility. Athletes may feel pressure to enhance performance “for the team.” The dilemma is emotionally powerful: “If I refuse enhancement and we lose, have I failed my teammates?” This tension confuses contribution with compromise. True teamwork is grounded in mutual respect and shared ethical standards. Sacrificing integrity for collective success may create short-term gains but long-term distrust. Athletes can resolve this by redefining contribution: being reliable, training diligently, and competing honestly are forms of loyalty that strengthen team culture. Upholding values may even protect teammates from escalating moral pressure.

**f. Courage vs. conformity:** Courage is often associated with pushing physical limits. Yet ethical courage involves resisting harmful norms. In environments where doping is normalized or glamorized, resisting can

feel isolating. The dilemma emerges as: “Is it courageous to take risks to win, or courageous to refuse?” Sport culture sometimes equates boldness with risk-taking enhancement. However, genuine courage aligns with moral strength rather than conformity. Resisting shortcuts, especially when others appear to benefit, requires resilience. Athletes can cultivate this courage by building supportive peer networks that reinforce clean sport norms and by recognizing that ethical resistance is a form of leadership.

**g. Dedication and hard work vs. shortcuts:** Dedication is central to athletic identity. Ironically, doping is sometimes framed as an extension of dedication, doing “whatever it takes.” The dilemma becomes: “If I am already working harder than everyone, why not use every available tool?” This reasoning equates dedication with outcome obsession. However, the spirit of sport values the process of disciplined effort within ethical limits. Shortcuts undermine the developmental journey that gives achievement depth. Athletes can resolve this by reaffirming that excellence is defined not only by results but by the manner in which they are achieved.

**h. Joy in effort vs. fear of failure:** Perhaps the most overlooked spirit-of-sport value is joy. Many athletes begin sport for enjoyment, challenge, and growth. During performance slumps, joy is replaced by fear, fear of being replaced, forgotten, or exposed as inadequate. Doping may appear as a solution to restore status. The dilemma becomes: “If winning brings back joy, is the method secondary?” These reverses cause and effect. Joy arises from meaningful engagement, not from artificial enhancement. Winning through cheating often generates anxiety rather than satisfaction. Athletes who reconnect with intrinsic motives, movement, mastery, community, are less likely to view doping as necessary for fulfillment.

#### 4. Resolving Spirit of Sport-related dilemmas

---

Resolving these dilemmas requires more than rule knowledge; it demands reflective practice. Athletes can engage in structured self-questioning:

- Does this decision align with the values that define sport?
- Would I feel comfortable explaining this choice publicly?
- How will I evaluate this decision five years from now?
- Does this action strengthen or weaken the integrity of competition?

Values clarification exercises, mentorship, and psychological support can reinforce moral reasoning. Building environments where open discussion about pressure and fear is normalized reduces the likelihood that dilemmas escalate into secret decisions. Ultimately, spirit-of-sport values are not obstacles to success; they are the framework that gives success legitimacy. Ethical dilemmas arise because competitive pressure challenges these values. However, by consciously reaffirming fairness, health, honesty, respect, courage, dedication, teamwork, and joy, athletes can transform moments of vulnerability into moments of character development. In this sense, the athlete’s struggle during a slump, as depicted in the comic, is not only about performance. It is about deciding what kind of competitor, teammate, and person they wish to become. Choosing clean sport does not eliminate difficulty, but it preserves meaning. And in the long run, meaning sustains both performance and personal well-being far more reliably than shortcuts ever could.

## 5. Moral disengagement and the justification of doping in sport

---

As discussed above, doping in sport presents a fundamental moral conflict. Most athletes are socialized into sport with values emphasizing fairness, health, respect, and integrity. At the same time, elite sport environments impose intense performance pressures, career insecurity, financial stakes, and public expectations. When the desire to succeed collides with internalized moral standards, athletes may experience cognitive and emotional tension. To resolve this tension without abandoning their self-image as “good” or “honest” individuals, they may engage in psychological processes that allow them to justify behavior that would otherwise violate their moral code. These processes are described as moral disengagement.

Moral disengagement refers to cognitive mechanisms that deactivate self-regulatory moral controls, enabling individuals to engage in unethical behavior without experiencing overwhelming guilt or self-condemnation. Rather than changing their core values outright, individuals reinterpret their behavior in ways that make it appear acceptable, necessary, or harmless. In sport, these mechanisms are particularly relevant because athletes’ identities are often built around ideals of fairness and merit. When doping is contemplated, athletes must reconcile the discrepancy between their actions and these ideals. The video provides a vivid illustration of how such justifications are constructed and contested.

One of the most common mechanisms is euphemistic labeling. Through this process, language is used to sanitize behavior and reduce its perceived severity. Instead of referring to “doping,” actors may use terms such as “optimization,” “recovery support,” or “performance management.” By reframing prohibited substance use as medical treatment or scientific enhancement, the moral meaning of the act is softened. In the video, the coach deliberately avoids the word “doping,” emphasizing instead “optimization” and “medical-level performance management.” This linguistic reframing reduces emotional resistance by detaching the behavior from stigmatized imagery associated with cheating or criminality. Athletes who adopt such terminology can convince themselves that they are engaging in professional preparation rather than rule-breaking.

A second mechanism is moral justification; whereby unethical conduct is framed as serving a higher or socially valued purpose. In sport, this often involves appeals to team success, family welfare, career survival, or organizational loyalty. When doping is portrayed as necessary to secure a contract, support one’s family, or help teammates win, the behavior is recast as altruistic or responsible rather than selfish or dishonest. In the video, the coach appeals to the athlete’s family and teammates, suggesting that performance enhancement is justified by collective benefit. Moral justification shifts the ethical focus from the means (rule violation) to the ends (career stability, collective success), thereby reducing internal conflict.

Advantageous comparison is another powerful strategy. Here, the unethical behavior is compared with more extreme or harmful acts, making it appear relatively minor. For example, using “mild” substances may be contrasted with dangerous injections or high-profile doping scandals. By comparing one’s intended behavior to more severe transgressions, the individual perceives their own conduct as moderate or even responsible. In the video, the coach implies that the suggested substances are not as extreme as what “others” might use. This comparative framing reduces perceived wrongdoing by shifting the reference point. Athletes who engage in advantageous comparison may think, “At least I’m not doing what those athletes did,” thereby neutralizing moral discomfort.

Displacement of responsibility occurs when individuals attribute decision-making authority to someone else, typically an authority figure. In sport, coaches, medical professionals, and performance staff may assume advisory roles that can blur accountability. If an athlete convinces themselves that “the coach knows best” or “the doctor said it was safe,” they may feel less personally responsible for the consequences. The video demonstrates this mechanism when the coach offers to “handle everything” and assures safety. By transferring responsibility to an authority, athletes reduce the burden of moral agency. However, anti-doping regulations place ultimate responsibility on the athlete, creating a tension between perceived and actual accountability.

Closely related is diffusion of responsibility, which occurs when unethical behavior is normalized within a group. When athletes believe that “everyone does it,” individual responsibility becomes diluted. If doping is perceived as widespread, refusing to engage may feel naive rather than principled. The coach in the video claims that many admired athletes use enhancement practices, framing doping as practically normal. This normalization fosters collective rationalization, making individual participation seem less exceptional. Diffusion of responsibility is particularly potent in environments where success appears systematically linked to enhancement practices.

Distortion or minimization of consequences further facilitates moral disengagement. Athletes may downplay health risks, ignore long-term consequences, or assume that negative outcomes are unlikely. Statements such as “you won’t hurt anyone” or “testing is rare” reduce perceived harm. In the video, the coach minimizes both health risks and detection probability. By reframing doping as harmless or low-risk, moral concern is replaced by cost-benefit reasoning. When perceived harm diminishes, ethical resistance weakens.

Another important mechanism is attribution of blame or blaming the system. When athletes perceive sport as fundamentally unfair, due to unequal resources, financial disparities, or inconsistent enforcement, they may justify doping as compensation rather than cheating. If the system is viewed as corrupt or biased, rule-breaking may appear as adaptive survival rather than moral failure. In the video, the coach argues that structural disadvantages necessitate enhancement to “catch up.” This reframing shifts responsibility from the individual to systemic injustice. The athlete is encouraged to view doping not as initiating wrongdoing but as responding to preexisting inequity.

These mechanisms do not emerge randomly. Athletes may resort to moral disengagement when they experience identity threat, performance pressure, or fear of failure. Elite sport environments often create high-stakes contexts in which success and self-worth are closely intertwined. When an athlete’s future appears uncertain, due to injury, declining performance, or contractual instability, the temptation to justify risky strategies increases. Moral disengagement allows athletes to preserve their identity as competent and deserving while pursuing prohibited means. Importantly, moral disengagement does not necessarily indicate absence of moral values. On the contrary, it presupposes the existence of moral standards that must be cognitively bypassed. Athletes who strongly value fairness may experience greater internal conflict and therefore engage more actively in justification processes to reconcile behavior with self-concept. The video illustrates this dynamic through the athlete’s resistance, as he explicitly counters each disengagement attempt. His responses expose the mechanisms at work, demonstrating that awareness can interrupt moral disengagement.

The incremental nature of justification is also critical. Doping decisions often unfold gradually rather than as abrupt choices. Initial acceptance of mild supplementation may lead to normalization of pharmacological enhancement, followed by rationalization of prohibited substances under escalating pressure. The “just once” framing seen in the video reflects this gradual erosion. By presenting doping as temporary or situational, long-term consequences are psychologically distanced. Over time, repeated justification can recalibrate moral boundaries, making future transgressions easier.

Understanding why athletes use these mechanisms requires acknowledging the motivational climate of competitive sport. When success is narrowly defined as winning, external rewards dominate intrinsic values. In such climates, ethical considerations may be subordinated to instrumental reasoning. Athletes may come to perceive doping not as betrayal of sport but as strategic adaptation. Moral disengagement thus becomes a coping strategy for navigating structural contradictions between idealized sport values and performance-driven realities.

Preventing doping therefore requires more than rule enforcement. It demands interventions that strengthen moral identity, promote reflective decision-making, and expose justification mechanisms. When athletes recognize euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, or diffusion of responsibility in real time, they are better equipped to resist them. The video illustrates how articulating counterarguments, emphasizing fairness, long-term harm, and personal responsibility, can disrupt disengagement processes.

In conclusion, moral disengagement provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding how athletes justify doping while maintaining a positive self-image. Through mechanisms such as euphemistic labeling, moral justification, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, minimization of consequences, and blaming the system, athletes can cognitively reconstruct prohibited behavior as acceptable or necessary. These mechanisms are activated in contexts of pressure, vulnerability, and perceived injustice. Recognizing and addressing these cognitive processes is essential for developing effective prevention strategies that uphold both athlete well-being and the integrity of sport.

Emotional regulation plays a crucial role in ethical clarity. Anxiety, shame, and fear narrow cognitive focus and increase susceptibility to shortcuts. Developing coping skills, breathing techniques, cognitive restructuring, seeking social support, stabilizes emotional states and enhances reflective reasoning. Athletes who feel psychologically supported are better positioned to make principled decisions even under pressure.

Communication is another protective pathway. Ethical dilemmas often intensify in secrecy. When athletes feel unable to discuss doubts openly, internal conflict escalates. Creating safe spaces with trusted teammates, mentors, or sport psychologists allows for perspective-sharing. Dialogue externalizes the dilemma, reducing cognitive isolation. In the comic, the presence of a protective peer figure serves this stabilizing function. Seeking professional advice, particularly from qualified medical personnel, further grounds decisions in evidence rather than rumor.

Education about anti-doping rules and the “spirit of sport” also reinforces ethical orientation. Sport is not solely about measurable output; it embodies shared values of honesty, respect, and courage. When athletes reconnect with these foundational principles, performance becomes part of a larger moral narrative. Winning gains meaning only within agreed boundaries. Re-centering on the intrinsic joy of movement, mastery, and self-improvement counterbalances external pressure.

Finally, cultivating moral courage is essential. Ethical decisions in sport often require standing alone, at least temporarily. Moral courage involves acting in accordance with values despite fear of disadvantage. This does not mean rejecting ambition; it means pursuing ambition within ethical constraints. Athletes who develop moral courage often report stronger long-term satisfaction, even if immediate rewards are uncertain.

In conclusion, ethical dilemmas surrounding doping are complex conflicts between competing values rather than simple choices between right and wrong. Athletes may struggle with tensions between fairness and success, health and performance, loyalty and integrity, survival and authenticity, short-term gain and long-term consequence. These dilemmas intensify during performance slumps, career transitions, and high-pressure environments. However, they can be resolved through values clarification, identity resilience, emotional regulation, open communication, evidence-based education, and long-term perspective-taking. When athletes recognize moral disengagement strategies and reaffirm their commitment to integrity, they transform ethical crossroads into opportunities for growth. In doing so, they preserve not only their careers but also the meaning and spirit of sport itself.

## 6. Optimism bias and health compensatory beliefs in doping: Psychological traps and how athletes can overcome them

---

Doping decisions rarely emerge from ignorance alone. Many athletes are aware of anti-doping regulations, potential health risks, and possible sanctions. Yet some still engage in prohibited substance use. To understand this paradox, it is necessary to examine cognitive distortions that shape risk perception and moral reasoning. Two particularly influential psychological processes are optimism bias and health compensatory beliefs. These mechanisms allow athletes to minimize perceived risks, rationalize behavior, and maintain a positive self-image while contemplating or engaging in doping. Recognizing and addressing these distortions is essential for effective prevention.

### Optimism bias: “It Won’t Happen to Me”

Optimism bias refers to the cognitive tendency to believe that negative events are less likely to happen to oneself compared to others. Individuals systematically underestimate personal vulnerability to risk while acknowledging that such risks exist in general. In health psychology, optimism bias has been observed in areas such as smoking, unsafe driving, and risky alcohol consumption. In sport, it plays a significant role in doping-related decision-making. Athletes may understand that doping can lead to bans, health complications, or reputational damage. However, they may simultaneously believe that they personally are less likely to experience these consequences. This distortion operates in several ways.

First, athletes may underestimate the likelihood of detection. They might reason that anti-doping testing is infrequent in their league, that testing systems are imperfect, or that others have avoided detection successfully. The belief becomes: “Yes, athletes get caught, but not someone like me.” This reduces deterrence effectiveness. If perceived detection probability is low, the cost-benefit calculation shifts in favor of risk-taking.

Second, athletes may underestimate health consequences. Even when aware of potential side effects such as hormonal imbalance, cardiovascular strain, or psychological disturbances, they may assume that adverse

outcomes occur only in extreme cases or with reckless misuse. They may view themselves as disciplined, medically monitored, or careful, and therefore immune to harm. The narrative becomes: “Others abuse substances. I would use them intelligently.”

Third, optimism bias can distort moral risk perception. Athletes may believe that even if caught, they would be able to recover their reputation or justify their behavior. This belief reduces anticipated shame and social consequences. Because humans are generally motivated to preserve a positive self-image, optimism bias serves as a psychological buffer against anxiety about potential wrongdoing. During performance slumps or career-threatening periods, optimism bias may intensify. Under pressure, athletes seek psychological relief. Believing that negative outcomes are unlikely allows them to reduce fear and maintain a sense of control. Unfortunately, this false reassurance can lower ethical barriers.

### **Health compensatory beliefs: “I Can Balance It Out”**

Health compensatory beliefs (HCBs) refer to the belief that the negative effects of an unhealthy or risky behavior can be offset by engaging in positive behaviors. For example, someone might believe that exercising compensates for unhealthy eating. In the doping context, athletes may believe that disciplined training, good nutrition, hydration, or medical supervision can counterbalance the risks associated with prohibited substances. These beliefs allow athletes to maintain a self-concept of being health-conscious while engaging in potentially harmful behavior. An athlete might reason: “I eat clean, sleep properly, and train scientifically. So, using this substance occasionally won’t hurt me.” Alternatively, they may believe that small or controlled doses eliminate danger: “If I micro-dose, it’s not really harmful.” Health compensatory beliefs are particularly dangerous because they are rooted in partial truths. It is correct that healthy behaviors support overall well-being. However, they do not negate the physiological and ethical consequences of doping. Cardiovascular stress, hormonal disruption, psychological dependency, and legal consequences cannot be neutralized by clean eating or stretching routines.

Another compensatory belief involves moral balancing. Athletes may think that because they work extremely hard and have “earned” success, using substances merely supports the effort they already invest. The implicit logic is: “I train harder than anyone else. This just helps my body keep up.” Here, hard work is used to morally compensate for rule-breaking. Compensatory thinking may also appear in the transition from legal supplementation to prohibited substances. Athletes may start with approved supplements and believe that moving slightly beyond regulatory limits is simply an extension of performance optimization. Because they are already engaged in structured, legal enhancement, the boundary feels flexible rather than absolute.

### **How athletes experience these distortions**

Optimism bias and health compensatory beliefs often operate subtly and unconsciously. They do not feel like irrational distortions; they feel like reasonable justifications. During performance slumps, when frustration and anxiety are elevated, the mind seeks explanations and solutions. If improvement does not follow legal adjustments in training or nutrition, doping may appear as a calculated step rather than an emotional reaction. Optimism bias reduces fear by convincing the athlete that risks are exaggerated. Compensatory beliefs reduce guilt by suggesting that responsible habits mitigate harm. Peer and authority influences can amplify these

distortions. If teammates suggest that “everyone is doing it without problems,” optimism bias is reinforced. If a coach frames substances as medically controlled and safe, health compensatory beliefs gain credibility. The athlete may feel reassured rather than reckless. Importantly, these beliefs allow athletes to preserve a moral self-image. Rather than seeing themselves as cheaters, they see themselves as strategic, disciplined, and misunderstood by rigid systems. The psychological comfort provided by these distortions makes them powerful.

### **Why these beliefs are problematic?**

Although optimism bias and health compensatory beliefs reduce anxiety in the short term, they increase long-term vulnerability. They distort risk assessment, weaken moral resistance, and create gradual normalization of unethical behavior. From a health perspective, doping effects are not always immediate. Some substances produce cumulative damage that becomes visible years later. Optimism bias ignores delayed consequences. From a regulatory perspective, testing systems evolve, and retrospective sample analysis can lead to sanctions long after use. Assuming immunity is therefore objectively flawed. Ethically, compensatory reasoning erodes integrity. Sport’s legitimacy depends on shared compliance with rules. When individuals justify exceptions for themselves, collective fairness collapses. Moreover, secrecy and fear of exposure generate chronic psychological stress, undermining well-being.

### **How athletes can address optimism bias?**

The first step in addressing optimism bias is awareness. Athletes must recognize that feeling invulnerable does not mean being invulnerable. Structured reflection can help counter distorted thinking. Questions such as “What evidence supports the belief that I am less likely to be caught?” or “Am I underestimating long-term health risks?” encourage critical evaluation. Education that presents real cases of detection, delayed sanctions, and long-term health complications can correct unrealistic optimism. Hearing testimonials from sanctioned athletes often reduces perceived invulnerability.

Another effective strategy is perspective-taking. Imagining oneself explaining the decision publicly, to family, future children, or younger athletes, reduces the illusion of immunity. Social and moral consequences become more concrete and emotionally salient. Developing long-term thinking is also crucial. Instead of focusing on immediate performance gains, athletes can evaluate decisions across career and post-career horizons. This temporal expansion reduces impulsive risk-taking.

### **How can athletes address health compensatory beliefs?**

To counter compensatory thinking, athletes must understand that healthy behaviors cannot “cancel out” harmful ones. Education in physiology and anti-doping science helps clarify that risk accumulation is not offset by positive routines. Athletes can practice cognitive reframing. Instead of thinking, “I train hard so I deserve this,” they can shift to, “Because I train hard, I respect my body and the rules.” This reframing aligns effort with integrity rather than entitlement. Establishing non-negotiable boundaries is also effective. Clear internal rules, such as committing only to batch-tested legal supplements, reduce ambiguity. When boundaries are predefined, situational rationalization becomes harder. Open communication with medical professionals and

sport psychologists can further dismantle compensatory beliefs. Transparent discussions about fatigue, recovery, and frustration often reveal legitimate, safe solutions that eliminate perceived need for shortcuts.

### **Building psychological protection**

Ultimately, preventing doping requires strengthening protective psychological factors. These include moral identity, self-regulation skills, autonomy-supportive environments, and strong intrinsic motivation. When athletes define success not solely by outcomes but by values, cognitive distortions lose persuasive power. Mindfulness and emotional regulation training can also help. When athletes observe anxious or desperate thoughts without automatically acting on them, they create space for ethical reasoning. Slumps and stress are temporary states; doping consequences are not.

Peer networks that openly support clean sport further reduce optimism bias and compensatory thinking. When team culture reinforces realistic risk assessment and shared values, distorted beliefs are less likely to spread.

Overall, optimism bias and health compensatory beliefs are powerful psychological mechanisms that shape doping vulnerability. Optimism bias convinces athletes that negative consequences are unlikely to affect them personally. Health compensatory beliefs create the illusion that disciplined routines or small doses can neutralize harm. Together, these distortions reduce fear, minimize guilt, and rationalize unethical behavior. However, awareness, reflective questioning, long-term perspective-taking, clear boundaries, and supportive environments can counteract these cognitive traps. By recognizing these mental shortcuts, athletes can reclaim moral agency and make decisions aligned with health, integrity, and the true spirit of sport. In doing so, they protect not only their performance but their long-term well-being and identity as clean competitors.

## **7. Peer pressure and doping in sport: Theoretical foundations of athlete-to-athlete influence**

---

Doping in sport is often framed as an individual moral failure; however, a substantial body of research indicates that athletes' decisions are deeply embedded within their social environments. Among the most influential contextual factors is peer pressure. Teammates shape norms, expectations, and perceived realities about performance enhancement. In the peer-based interaction depicted in the video, doping is not introduced through authority or institutional power, but through normalization, camaraderie, and shared frustration. This reflects a distinct but equally powerful pathway of influence: horizontal social pressure within athlete groups. Peer influence in sport can be understood through the lens of social norms theory. Athletes are highly sensitive to perceptions of what "others like me" are doing. Descriptive norms (beliefs about how common a behavior is) and injunctive norms (beliefs about whether important others approve of a behavior) significantly shape behavioral intentions. When a teammate implies that "half the team is on something", the descriptive norm of doping prevalence is inflated. Even without concrete evidence, the suggestion that doping is widespread can create a false consensus effect, increasing the likelihood that athletes view doping as typical rather than deviant. Perceived normalization reduces moral resistance and increases psychological justification.

The Theory of Planned Behavior provides a structured framework for analyzing this process. Behavioral intention is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Peer pressure primarily operates through the subjective norm component. When teammates imply that performance enhancement is expected, necessary, or common, athletes may feel implicit pressure to conform. In the video, the persuasive athlete frames doping-related practices as a practical necessity for “survival” and advancement. Simultaneously, perceived behavioral control is enhanced through minimization of detection risk (“When was the last time anyone got tested here?”), thereby lowering perceived barriers.

Social identity processes further explain peer influence. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership. Team belonging is particularly salient in sport contexts, where shared goals, uniforms, and collective struggle strengthen identification. When doping is framed as something “we” do for team success, resistance may be interpreted as disloyalty. In the video, the suggestion that refusing to “level up” means “holding us back” directly ties moral choice to group identity. The athlete is confronted not only with a performance decision but with a relational dilemma: conform or risk marginalization. Conformity research also highlights the power of peer majority influence. Even in the absence of formal authority, individuals often align their behavior with perceived group norms to avoid social exclusion. In tightly bonded sport teams, exclusion can mean reduced support, limited playing opportunities, or social isolation. The fear of being left behind, explicitly voiced in the video, reflects this dynamic. The persuasive teammate does not threaten directly; instead, he emphasizes inevitability and shared participation. This subtlety makes peer pressure particularly potent, as it operates under the guise of advice rather than coercion.

Incrementalism is another important psychological mechanism illustrated in the video. The persuasive athlete proposes starting with supplements and “small steps,” implying that progression to prohibited substances is optional and controlled. This reflects the “slippery slope” phenomenon, where minor ethical compromises increase the likelihood of more serious transgressions. By redefining boundaries gradually, peers can reduce the psychological shock associated with overt rule violations. The normalization of legal supplementation becomes a gateway that makes subsequent doping decisions feel less drastic.

Risk minimization further contributes to peer persuasion. Athletes’ perceptions of detection likelihood significantly influence doping intentions. When peers emphasize low testing frequency or limited oversight, perceived risk decreases. In the video, anti-doping controls are dismissed as irrelevant to their league level. This narrative reframes doping as a rational gamble rather than a high-risk violation. Research consistently shows that when perceived detection probability is low, deterrence mechanisms weaken. Peer communication that trivializes enforcement undermines anti-doping education efforts.

Emotional vulnerability also plays a key role. Feelings of underperformance, frustration, and comparative inferiority create psychological strain. When athletes believe they are working hard yet falling behind, they may experience cognitive dissonance between effort and outcome. Peers who attribute success disparities to hidden enhancement practices offer an explanatory model that reduces this dissonance. Instead of interpreting underperformance as personal inadequacy, athletes can reinterpret it as structural unfairness. In the video, doping is framed as compensation for inequality (“Other teams have money... we compensate for what is denied to us”). This narrative morally reframes doping as restoration of fairness rather than violation of fairness.

Motivational theories provide additional insight. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, athletes are more vulnerable to maladaptive behaviors when their basic psychological needs are thwarted. Perceived incompetence (falling behind), threatened relatedness (risk of exclusion), and diminished autonomy (pressure to conform) create a climate conducive to external regulation. Peer pressure undermines autonomous motivation by shifting the focus from intrinsic enjoyment and personal mastery to external validation and group approval. In the video, the resistant athlete expresses fear of “losing myself” and no longer enjoying sport. This reflects tension between intrinsic values and externally imposed performance standards.

Importantly, peer pressure differs from authority pressure in its relational framing. It often appears as solidarity, shared struggle, or friendly advice. The persuasive athlete in the video, does not present himself as superior; rather, he frames doping as pragmatic realism. By positioning himself as a teammate offering help, he reduces defensiveness and increases receptivity. This aligns with research suggesting that horizontal influence can be more persuasive than top-down directives because it operates within perceived equality and trust.

However, peer influence is not uniformly detrimental. Peer networks can also serve as protective factors. Athletes who belong to subgroups that strongly endorse clean sport norms may experience reverse peer pressure in favor of ethical behavior. The resistant athlete’s internal dialogue in the video demonstrates moral identity salience, the importance of maintaining self-integrity. Moral identity strength has been associated with reduced doping susceptibility. When athletes anchor their self-concept in fairness and authenticity, peer persuasion may fail to override internal standards.

Ultimately, doping-related peer pressure illustrates the relational nature of ethical decision-making in sport. Athletes navigate a complex social landscape in which belonging, ambition, fairness, and survival intersect. Peer communication can normalize unethical practices through inflated prevalence perceptions, moral disengagement, incremental framing, and risk minimization. At the same time, resistance is possible when athletes maintain strong autonomous motivation, moral identity, and confidence in alternative pathways to success.

Prevention strategies must therefore address team-level dynamics rather than focusing exclusively on individual knowledge deficits. Interventions that correct misperceptions of doping prevalence, strengthen collective clean-sport norms, and empower athletes to resist conformity pressures are critical. Cultivating open dialogue within teams, promoting ethical leadership among peer influencers, and reinforcing intrinsic values may reduce the potency of horizontal pressure. The video illustrates how easily doping can be reframed as rational, collective, and necessary. Understanding these psychological mechanisms is essential for developing evidence-based responses that preserve both athlete well-being and the integrity of sport.

## 8. Peer Pressure beyond the field: Unhealthy lifestyles, substance use, and doping vulnerability in athletes

---

Athletes are often portrayed as disciplined, health-oriented individuals whose lifestyles revolve around training, nutrition, and recovery. While this is frequently true, athletes are not immune to the same social pressures that affect their peers outside sport. In fact, the social environments in which athletes operate, teams, universities, clubs, social media networks, can amplify pressures related to unhealthy lifestyle

behaviors. These behaviors include disrupted sleep patterns, excessive energy drink consumption, partying culture, misuse of painkillers and supplements, and recreational drug or alcohol use. Although these behaviors may seem unrelated to doping, they can create psychological, physiological, and normative pathways that increase vulnerability to performance-enhancing substance use.

Peer pressure is a powerful social influence mechanism rooted in the human need for belonging and acceptance. Athletes, especially adolescents and young adults, are highly sensitive to group norms. Being part of a team fosters identity, cohesion, and shared experience, but it also creates conformity pressures. When unhealthy behaviors are normalized within peer groups, resisting them can feel isolating or socially costly.

### **Unhealthy lifestyle patterns and performance anxiety**

Sleep disruption is one of the most common lifestyle risks among athletes. Late-night socializing, gaming, social media use, travel schedules, and academic stress can erode recovery routines. In some environments, staying out late or sacrificing sleep may be perceived as socially desirable or a sign of toughness. However, chronic sleep deprivation impairs cognitive function, mood regulation, hormonal balance, and physical recovery. When performance declines due to poor recovery, athletes may misattribute the cause. Rather than recognizing lifestyle factors, they may perceive a loss of talent or conditioning. This misinterpretation can increase frustration and self-doubt. In such contexts, doping may appear as a solution to restore energy and performance, when in reality the underlying issue is lifestyle imbalance.

Similarly, excessive consumption of energy drinks and stimulants has become normalized in many sport and academic settings. Athletes may rely on caffeine-heavy beverages to compensate for fatigue caused by inadequate sleep. Over time, tolerance develops, and higher doses are required to achieve the same effect. This normalization of stimulant reliance can shift psychological boundaries. If using strong caffeine products feels acceptable, transitioning toward stronger pharmacological stimulants may seem less drastic. The mindset evolves from “I need rest” to “I need a boost.”

Party culture presents another challenge. Celebratory or stress-relief drinking, especially in team environments, may be framed as bonding or reward. However, alcohol impairs recovery, disrupts sleep cycles, and increases injury risk. Repeated alcohol misuse can produce mood instability and impaired judgment. When athletes experience underperformance linked to these behaviors, they may seek rapid corrective strategies, including substances promising enhanced recovery or energy.

### **Painkiller and supplement misuse: The slippery slope**

Pain tolerance and injury management are embedded in sport culture. Athletes frequently use over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medications to train or compete despite discomfort. In some cases, painkiller use becomes normalized within teams. Teammates may share medications or downplay risks, reinforcing the idea that suppressing pain is part of commitment. The problem arises when masking pain replaces addressing injury. Overuse of painkillers can cause gastrointestinal issues, kidney strain, and other complications. More importantly, it promotes a mindset that discomfort should be chemically overridden rather than responsibly managed. This normalization of pharmaceutical coping reduces psychological resistance to stronger substances.

Nutritional supplements occupy a particularly ambiguous space. Many supplements are legal and beneficial when used appropriately. However, peer influence often drives use without adequate knowledge or professional guidance. Athletes may feel pressure to adopt supplement “stacks” used by teammates. The message becomes: “If you’re serious, you take these.” Even when supplements are legal, the habit of relying on external substances for marginal gains can shift attitudes toward pharmacological enhancement. Furthermore, contaminated supplements pose inadvertent doping risks. The progression is subtle. First, legal supplements become standard. Then, stronger but still accessible products are introduced. Over time, the psychological barrier between legal and illegal enhancement narrows. Peer conversations that glorify “advanced support” reinforce this drift. The athlete’s identity shifts from disciplined training-based improvement to substance-assisted optimization.

### **Recreational drug use and risk normalization**

Smoking, alcohol misuse, and recreational drug use are sometimes dismissed as separate from performance-enhancing drugs. However, they share common psychological roots: sensation seeking, stress relief, social bonding, and identity experimentation. In some athletic subcultures, occasional recreational drug use is framed as harmless or even a marker of social integration. Engaging in recreational drug use can alter risk perception. When athletes normalize one form of rule-breaking or substance use, cognitive dissonance decreases for other forms. The internal narrative may become: “I already take risks socially; this is just another calculated choice.” This erosion of behavioral boundaries can increase susceptibility to doping rationalizations.

Moreover, recreational drug use can impair recovery, increase fatigue, and destabilize mood. These physiological and psychological consequences may contribute to performance slumps. Rather than addressing root causes, athletes may seek performance-enhancing substances to compensate. Thus, unhealthy lifestyle behaviors indirectly fuel doping vulnerability.

### **The psychological mechanisms connecting lifestyle and doping**

Several psychological processes link peer-driven unhealthy behaviors to doping decisions. First, normalization reduces moral salience. When teammates regularly consume high-dose stimulants, misuse painkillers, or party heavily, substance reliance appears ordinary rather than exceptional. This normalization lowers the threshold for considering prohibited enhancement.

Second, compensatory thinking emerges. Athletes may believe that because they train hard, they can “balance out” unhealthy behaviors. For example, an athlete who drinks heavily on weekends may increase training intensity to compensate. When fatigue persists, they may turn to stimulants or other substances, reinforcing a cycle of imbalance and chemical correction.

Third, identity conformity plays a role. Young athletes often strive to fit into team culture. If unhealthy behaviors signal belonging, resisting them risks exclusion. The fear of social isolation can override long-term health considerations.

Finally, emotional regulation deficits contribute. Many unhealthy behaviors serve as coping strategies for stress, disappointment, or performance anxiety. When adaptive coping skills are lacking, substance use

becomes a quick relief mechanism. Doping may then appear as another tool for controlling outcomes and emotions.

### **How can athletes resist peer pressure**

Resisting peer pressure requires both personal skills and supportive environments. At the individual level, athletes benefit from developing strong self-regulation and identity clarity. Knowing one's values, health, fairness, longevity, authenticity, provides a stable anchor during social influence. When decisions align with deeply held values, conformity pressure weakens. Practical boundary-setting is essential. Athletes can pre-commit to non-negotiable routines: consistent sleep schedules, moderated caffeine intake, limited alcohol use, and consultation with qualified professionals before taking supplements. Pre-commitment reduces in-the-moment vulnerability. Developing assertive communication skills is equally important. Athletes can practice polite but firm responses to pressure, such as: "That's not part of my routine," or "I'm focusing on recovery differently." Rehearsing such responses increases confidence during real interactions. Seeking credible guidance from sports dietitians, physicians, and psychologists strengthens informed decision-making. When athletes understand how sleep, nutrition, and recovery scientifically influence performance, they are less likely to attribute slumps to insufficient chemical enhancement. Finally, stress-management skills reduce reliance on maladaptive coping strategies. Mindfulness, cognitive restructuring, time management, and recovery planning help athletes navigate pressure without resorting to unhealthy behaviors. When emotional resilience increases, the appeal of shortcuts decreases.

Peer pressure for unhealthy behaviors outside sport, whether related to sleep patterns, energy drink overuse, partying culture, painkiller misuse, supplements, or recreational drugs, can subtly influence athletes' perceptions of risk, normality, and performance solutions. These behaviors may not directly constitute doping, but they create psychological and physiological conditions that increase vulnerability to it. Normalization of substance reliance, compensatory thinking, identity conformity, and stress-driven coping all contribute to blurred boundaries.

Preventing doping therefore requires a holistic approach that addresses lifestyle culture as well as explicit performance-enhancing substances. By strengthening value-based decision-making, promoting healthy routines, fostering supportive team norms, and developing emotional regulation skills, athletes can resist peer pressure and protect both their performance and long-term well-being. Clean sport is not sustained solely by testing systems; it is sustained by everyday lifestyle choices that reinforce integrity, health, and authentic achievement.

## **9. Athlete Support Personnel (ASP) influence in doping-related decision-making**

---

Athlete Support Personnel (ASP) comprise all individuals who work with, treat, or assist athletes in preparation for or participation in sport. According to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), this category includes coaches, physicians, physiotherapists, trainers, sport psychologists, nutritionists, managers, agents, and other members of the athlete's entourage. This broad definition reflects the recognition that athletes do not operate in isolation. Their performance, health, and career progression are embedded within relational systems

characterized by interdependence, authority structures, and shared goals. Consequently, responsibility for clean sport extends beyond the athlete to the wider support network that shapes decision-making contexts.

ASP occupies structurally powerful positions within sport organizations. Coaches determine selection and playing time, medical staff control treatment and clearance decisions, and agents influence contract negotiations and career mobility. These roles create asymmetrical power dynamics, as athletes depend on ASP for access to competition, rehabilitation, and professional advancement. Particularly in elite sport, where performance outcomes directly affect financial security and career longevity, this dependency intensifies. In the video, the team doctor's authority is not merely medical but existential; he frames performance enhancement as central to the athlete's contract renewal and continued relevance. Such framing illustrates how structural power can be subtly translated into psychological pressure.

Athlete decision-making regarding doping is rarely a spontaneous or purely individual act. Instead, it is shaped by cognitive evaluations, emotional vulnerability, and social influence. ASP are uniquely positioned to shape each of these determinants. They can reframe attitudes by presenting performance-enhancing substances as medical or restorative rather than unethical. They influence subjective norms by implying that "others at this level" engage in similar practices. They enhance perceived behavioral control by reassuring athletes that risks can be managed or detection avoided. In the video, the doctor systematically engages in these forms of influence, reducing the athlete's psychological barriers to doping.

Beyond rational evaluation, moral cognition plays a central role in doping decisions. The video provides a clear illustration of moral pressure. The doctor avoids the explicit term "doping," instead using phrases such as "hormonal support" and "performance medicine." He minimizes risk by referring to controlled doses and medical supervision. He diffuses responsibility by stating that he will "carry the weight," implicitly relieving the athlete of moral burden. He normalizes the practice by suggesting that many others engage in similar behaviors. Through these communicative strategies, moral resistance is gradually weakened.

Communication dynamics between ASP and athletes are central to understanding this influence. Medical professionals and experienced coaches possess epistemic authority derived from specialized knowledge. Athletes may lack the scientific literacy or regulatory expertise necessary to critically evaluate complex information regarding pharmacology or anti-doping regulations. This asymmetry enhances informational social influence, whereby individuals defer to experts under conditions of uncertainty. In the video, when the athlete questions legality and health risks, the doctor reframes these concerns as naive or exaggerated, subtly undermining the athlete's moral intuition and reinforcing professional hierarchy.

Trust further complicates this relationship. Elite sport requires high levels of relational trust, as athletes entrust their bodies and careers to ASP. While trust can promote well-being and development, it also increases vulnerability if exploited. When ASP position themselves as protectors who assume responsibility, they may inadvertently, or intentionally, encourage athletes to relinquish moral agency. Statements such as "You trust me. I carry the weight" exemplify displacement of responsibility, a known facilitator of ethical transgression. The athlete is encouraged to view compliance not as wrongdoing but as reliance on expert guidance.

Pressure within sport environments often operates indirectly rather than through explicit coercion. Career insecurity, injury, team selection, and contractual instability create structural vulnerability. Injured athletes, in particular, may experience identity threat, fear of replacement, and anxiety regarding future prospects. These psychological stressors heighten susceptibility to persuasive influence. In the video, the athlete's injury

becomes the contextual catalyst for ethical compromise. The doctor's framing of rapid return as necessary for survival illustrates how vulnerability amplifies ASP influence. Injury periods are therefore critical windows for safeguarding interventions.

The motivational climate cultivated by ASP also shapes doping vulnerability. Environments emphasizing outcome dominance, external rewards, and social comparison may inadvertently promote instrumental reasoning about performance enhancement. When success is framed as paramount and intrinsic enjoyment minimized, athletes may perceive doping as a rational strategy rather than a moral violation. In the video, intrinsic motives such as joy and fairness are dismissed as unrealistic. Performance and contract renewal are portrayed as existential imperatives. This reflects a controlling climate in which ethical boundaries become negotiable under performance pressure.

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, athlete well-being depends on the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. ASP can either support or undermine these psychological needs. Autonomy-supportive communication acknowledges choice, encourages reflection, and provides balanced information. In contrast, controlling communication restricts perceived options, induces guilt or fear, and pressures compliance. In the video, the doctor narrows perceived alternatives by suggesting that refusal equates to career disappearance. This autonomy-thwarting approach increases psychological tension. The athlete's eventual refusal represents a reassertion of autonomy and alignment with intrinsic values, highlighting the protective function of self-determined motivation.

Health framing constitutes another critical dimension of ASP influence. When performance-enhancing substances are presented as therapeutic or restorative rather than enhancement-oriented, ethical distinctions become blurred. Medicalization can legitimize otherwise prohibited practices by situating them within clinical discourse. However, this framing may obscure long-term risks and ethical implications. Anti-doping frameworks emphasize that the "spirit of sport" encompasses health, fairness, and respect for rules. When ASP selectively present information or minimize risks, informed consent is compromised. The video illustrates how strategic reassurance can reduce perceived danger and normalize secrecy under the guise of professionalism.

Given their extensive influence, ASP bear significant ethical responsibility. Anti-doping regulations recognize this by holding ASP accountable for complicity in rule violations. Nevertheless, regulatory enforcement alone is insufficient. Ethical sport cultures require ASP education in power awareness, autonomy-supportive communication, and conflict-of-interest management. Structural pressures, such as financial incentives, organizational expectations, and performance demands, can create moral blind spots. Without reflective practice and institutional safeguards, even well-intentioned professionals may rationalize ethically problematic decisions.

Ultimately, ASP functions as either protective or risk factors within the athlete's moral ecosystem. They can reinforce ethical norms, promote long-term welfare, and support autonomous decision-making, or they can normalize moral disengagement, amplify vulnerability, and prioritize short-term success over integrity. The narrative presented in the video demonstrates how doping-related pressure often emerges not through overt coercion but through subtle linguistic reframing, authority-based persuasion, and strategic minimization of risk. Understanding these relational and psychological processes is essential for designing effective prevention

strategies. Doping prevention must therefore extend beyond athlete education to address the interpersonal dynamics, power asymmetries, and communication patterns embedded within the athlete-ASP relationship.

### Additional Recommended Material

---

1. Check the materials in **IRIS project** which combats doping by educating athletes in recreational and elite sport to become more risk savvy and make informed choices about NS use, <https://irisproject.phed.auth.gr/>
2. Check the materials and the cutting-edge serious gaming elements in **GAME Project** which addresses the need to advance anti-doping education intervention targeting competitive and recreational athletes, <https://projectgame.phed.auth.gr/>
3. **VIRAL** is a groundbreaking project that propels clean sports ethics forward. Through immersive experiences within a Virtual Reality social simulator, participants gain firsthand insights into the social & psychological complexities of doping, fostering a generation of integrity-driven athletes, <https://viraltheproject.aau.dk/>
4. Check the effective anti-doping interventions of **SAFEYOU project** which responds to the growing need for better understanding of the reasons why young exercisers and athletes engage in doping practices, <https://safeyou.phed.auth.gr/>