

Recommendations Report

Humanizing Sport: Best Practices Guide to Support Student-Athlete Mental Wellness and Resilience for Anyone with an Athlete in their Life

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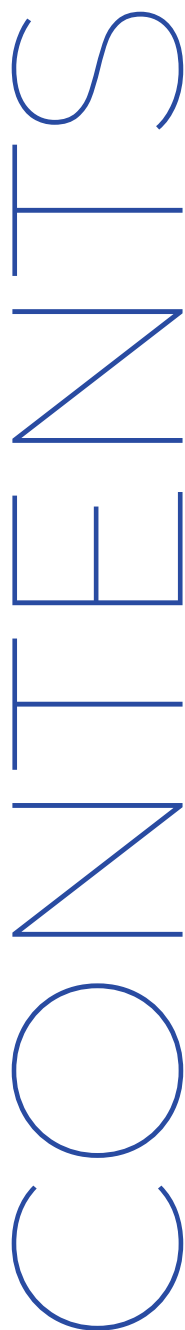
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E N Z O T A R I T I O N A L

Youth and young adults continue to experience increasing rates of mental health challenges to include stress, depression, and anxiety – experiences that were amplified and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (CDC, 2022; ACHA, 2022, HHS, 2023; Whitley et al., 2021).

Sport is a domain in which young people may experience additional pressure and stressors present in the competitive setting if intentionality to support athlete well-being is not present. The NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being study reported rates of mental health concerns to be 1.5 to 2 times higher in athletes in 2021 than those reported before the pandemic. Rates of mental health concerns reported by NCAA college athletes were noticeably higher among athletes of color, female athletes, queer athletes*, and athletes with family economic hardship (NCAA, 2022). As escalating numbers of mental health crises are grappled with at local, state, and national levels, our sport communities have tragically lost many athletes to suicide. As communities re-engage in more typical sport seasons in the post-COVID sport landscape, stakeholders have an opportunity and a critical responsibility to commit to develop safe and inclusive sport opportunities across communities, schools, colleges, and universities that build mental wellness and foster resilience in all student-athletes.

*The NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Study compares mental health concerns of athletes by sexual orientation by comparing athletes that identify as straight with those that identify on the queer spectrum; with queer spectrum including any athletes that self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, questioning, or unsure. (NCAA, 2022).

Lifelong enjoyment of sport and physical activity is essential to sustain public health and the viability of nations. Sport can be a powerful vehicle for young people to develop physical, social, and emotional skills that enable them to thrive throughout their life. Examples of positive development experienced through sport participation include increased self-esteem, confidence, social support, social skills and quality peer relationships, academic success and confidence in academic abilities, and decreased prevalence of depression, hopelessness, and loneliness, specifically when compared to peers that did not play any sports (Eime et al., 2013; Logan et al., 2019; Zarrett & Veliz, 2023). Additionally, the Healing Power of Sport study from the Women's Sports Foundation, found that youth that played more than one sport reported even greater benefits of participation compared to peers that only played one sport (Zarrett & Veliz, 2023).

Despite national and international sport and health governing bodies' emphasis on the mental, social, and emotional wellness benefits of sport participation and the need for increased participation among youth and young adults, rates of participation in recent years have steadily declined, and up to 70% of children that start playing sports drop out of sport by the time they reach adolescence. Sports have become increasingly inaccessible and unaffordable for a substantial portion of youth, as the "pay-to-play pipeline" via the private sport club system has fast tracked the commercialization and professionalization of youth sport - a staggering \$20 billion dollar industry in the United States in 2022. The boom of the private youth sport club system combined with local and state funding cuts of community recreation programs, have nearly eliminated equitable access for children and adolescents to try playing different sports and have reduced the availability of recreational participation opportunities (Gould, 2019; Logan et al., 2019; Pandya, 2021). Opportunities for youth to play a sport for the first time in a low risk, supportive, and affordable community-based program are quickly disappearing. The lack of equity for young athletes who can't afford to pay to play club sports translates to inequity in high school sport participation, where often club sport athletes occupy many of the high school team roster spots, having had years of access to practice, coaching, and sport specific skill development that their less affluent peers did not. Participation rates in youth sports in the U.S. have consistently been higher for boys, white children, and children from higher income households. Unfortunately, even for the many children, teens, and young adults that do have an opportunity to participate in sport, they often experience a social and psychological sport environment that is detrimental to their mental wellness and sense of self-worth (Logan et al., 2019; Merkel, 2013; Tuakli-Wosornu, 2021; Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021). For affluent youth athletes, unlimited access to year-

round competition can lead to substantial rates of mental and physical burnout and increased overuse injuries (Giusti et al., 2020; Jayanthi et al., 2018, 2019).

Mental wellness is defined by the Global Wellness Institute (2020), as a multidimensional process in which an individual builds mental strength and psychological readiness that supports healthy and adaptive ways of thinking, feeling, connecting, and functioning. Building mental wellness supports student-athletes' ability to move across the spectrum from languishing to flourishing while building resilience with each challenge, stressor, or adverse situation that is overcome. Athletes develop resilience through consistent and predictable support by the trusted adults in their sporting environments; adults who commit to developing mutual trust and respect in relationships with athletes, and prioritize athlete health, wellness, and safety above all else.

Resilience in athletes supports well-being and includes specific mental skills that extend and build upon mental wellness, specific to the unique pressures, demands, and goals of the dual achievement settings central to the student-athlete journey: the classroom and their sport. Student-athletes work hard to achieve excellence academically and athletically. This requires mental stamina that comes with mental wellness and the mental skills to succeed in both settings. Resilience in sport contexts involves a positive and growth mindset, confidence, control, challenge seeking, commitment to goals, and access to social support. Resilience shares many characteristics with mental toughness, however the idea of toughness in sport has too often been misunderstood and reduced to simply beating an opponent or saving face to uphold a winning reputation. When these mental skills are intentionally taught to student-athletes in conjunction with mental wellness, they learn invaluable skills that support mental strength, resilience, and flourishing in the pursuit of their chosen achievement goals.

For sport participation to support development of confidence, resilience, and mental wellness, every sport setting must be a human-centered endeavor that is inclusive, and representative of the diversity present in every community. Today, more sport organizations, from national sport federations to high school and college athletic departments are adopting values and goals rooted in a “whole-athlete” philosophy that meets the emergent needs of our youth who are navigating a rapidly changing globalized and technology-mediated society.



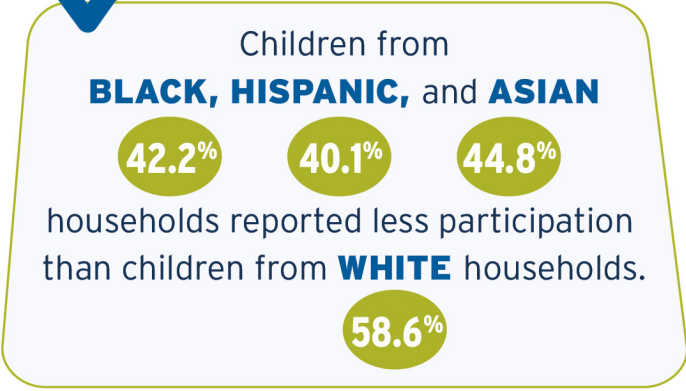
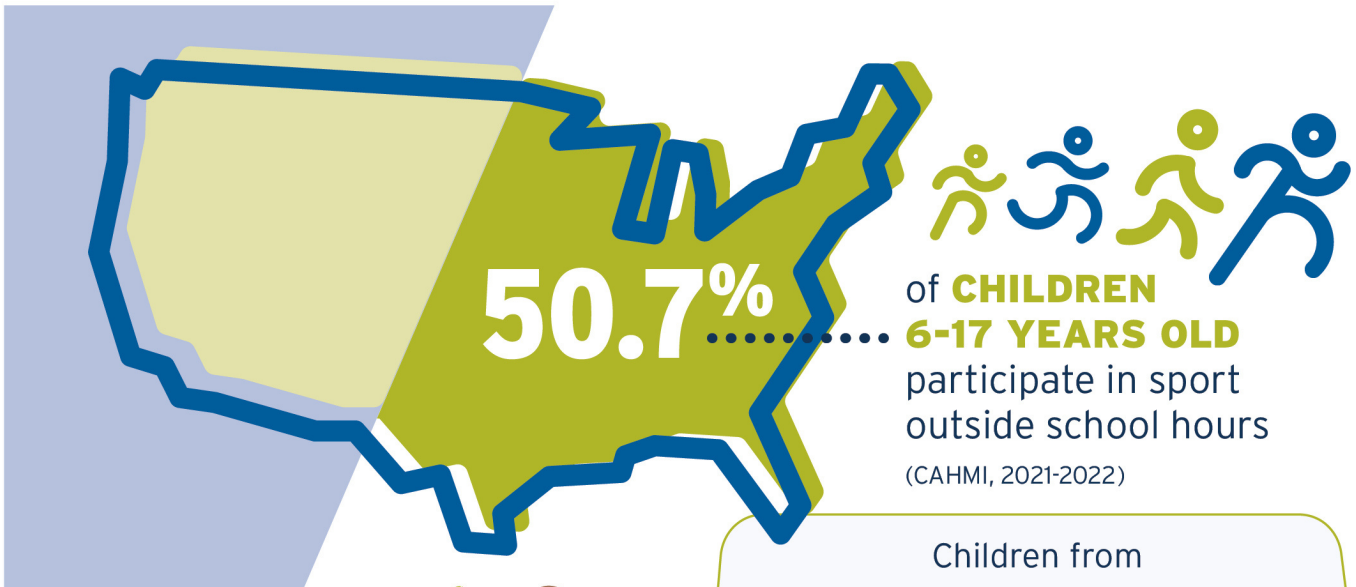
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to highlight current challenges in sport that hinder student-athlete mental wellness, and to provide human-centered, values-based opportunities for growth and improvement for all stakeholders across sport. These recommendations are evidence-based and prioritize the development of mental wellness and resilience in student-athletes across ages and competition levels, in public and private, community and school-based sports. Challenges and opportunities are outlined according to levels of influence present in sport culture today.

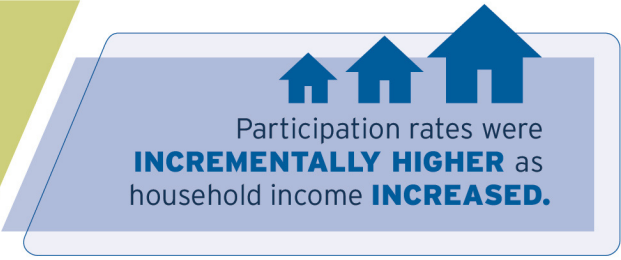
Opportunities for improvement assume as our first priority the inherent value of each student-athlete as a human and are intended to be a practical guide for immediate implementation.



SPORT PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES



Children with **NO ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES [56.1%]** were more likely to participate in sports than children who have experienced **ONE [47.4%]** or **TWO OR MORE [40.3%] ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES.**



7.6 million adolescents participated in **ORGANIZED HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS**, with **4.4 million** boys, but only **3.2 million** girls participating (NFHS, 2022)

522,165 student-athletes competed in the NCAA in 2022 (NCAA, 2022), including:

- **293,105 men** and **229,060 women**
- 326,017 White athletes, 83,305 Black athletes, 34,068 Hispanic athletes, 10,826 Asian athletes, 1,756 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Island athletes, 2,169 American Indian/Alaskan Native athletes, 25,633 Multi-racial athletes, and 24,206 International athletes

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental Health Concerns

have substantially increased in **ADOLESCENTS** and **YOUNG ADULTS** over the **PAST DECADE**

(CDC- YRBS, 2023, ACHA, 2022, Lipson et al. 2022)



Symptoms of mental illness can begin in adolescence and prevalence rates increase through young adulthood,

WITH YOUNG ADULTS AGES 18-25 REPORTING THE HIGHEST RATES OF MENTAL ILLNESS

in 2021 among all adults

(CDC, 2023; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023)

NCAA ATHLETES are reporting mental health concerns at rates that are

1.5-2 times greater than pre-COVID rates

(NCAA, 2022)



SUICIDE is the **2ND LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH**

among people aged **10-24** in the United States

(CDC, 2023)



- Only **46%** of individuals that **DIED BY SUICIDE** had a diagnosed **MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION**

(National Mental Health Alliance, 2023)

- This underscores the importance of building systems of support and recognizing that many individuals suffer in silence long before they seek mental health treatment.

- Even acute experiences of mental health symptoms or a sudden change in circumstance, such as **being cut from a team, failing a class, the ending of a romantic relationship, or any situation that feels hopeless** can lead to suicidal thoughts.



SPORT AND MENTAL WELLNESS



Athletes who receive **ENCOURAGEMENT** for effort and receive **POSITIVE SUPPORT** in a mastery-oriented sport climate are more likely to **ENJOY SPORT PARTICIPATION** and develop **COMPETENCE, CONFIDENCE,** and **SELF-ESTEEM**, all of which can contribute to a sense of **SELF-WORTH, RESILIENCE,** and **LIFELONG PARTICIPATION** in **SPORT**.

(Duda & Balaguer, 2007; Harwood et al., 2015; Vealey & Chase, 2018; Vitali et al., 2014; Weiss & Kipp, 2018)

Athletes who experience **PRESSURE TO PERFORM** and **CRITICISM** in an ego-oriented sport climate are more likely to **EXPERIENCE BURNOUT, FEAR OF FAILURE, PERFECTIONISM, ANXIETY,** and may be more likely to **LOSE INTEREST** and **DROP OUT OF SPORT**.

(Duda & Balaguer, 2007; Harwood et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2007)



EARLY SPORT SPECIALIZATION is associated with **STRESS** and **BURNOUT** in **ADOLESCENTS** (Giusti et al., 2020) and **COLLEGE ATHLETES**. (Rugg et al., 2021)

CONCEPTUAL GUIDING FRAMEWORK

A Sport Mental Wellness Social-Ecological Model along with the components of resilience and a healthy motivational sport climate are presented to provide conceptual frameworks that guide the evidence-based recommendations in this report.

Sport Mental Wellness Social-Ecological Model

To examine the multiple levels of influence in sport that shape a student-athlete's development and mental wellness outcomes, a modified social-ecological model is presented below (McElroy et al., 1988). The model intentionally centers the athlete in a social and cultural context. The Sport Mental Wellness Social-Ecological Model includes five levels of influence: 1) The Student-Athlete, 2) Relationships, 3) Organizations, 4) Community, and 5) Sport Culture.



Resilience and a Healthy Motivational Sport Climate

In presenting opportunities for growth and improvement, this report identifies how individuals and stakeholders across the levels of this model can support the development of skills for student-athletes that support mental wellness, resilience, enjoyment, and persistence in sport participation.

- **Mindset** - Positive and growth mindset that supports an optimistic view of adversity with a belief in a) the value of mistakes and challenges to teach important lessons that lead to growth and b) the ability to improve through consistency of practice. Dispositions that support positive and growth mindset include optimism, hope, and passion.
- **Commitment to Goals** - Steadfast commitment to achieve goals, acknowledge that there is not a linear path to success, and work through adversity with support from coaches, teammates, teachers, friends, and family.
- **Confidence** - Confidence in sport skills and the ability to improve over time through consistent effort and practice. Confidence in interpersonal relationships and the ability to communicate clearly and effectively.
- **Challenge Seeking** - Excitement to pursue optimal challenges, willing to take risks to grow and learn new skills, and actively seeking constructive feedback on how to improve skills. Knowing that mistakes, errors, and failures are necessary in the process of mastering and refining skills.
- **Control** - A realistic sense of what is in one's personal control, staying steady under pressure, having a strong sense of self-awareness, as well as skills to identify, process, and regulate emotions as needed to stay present and grounded in the moment-to-moment during competition.
- **Social Support** - Dependable, quality social support from coaches, teammates, teachers, friends, family, and other trusted adults.



To reduce the prevalence of mental health crises among student-athletes, sport stakeholders must expand resources offered to athletes to include:

- Timely referrals to mental health professionals in response to athletes experiencing symptoms of mental illness and in mental health crisis situations. **988 is the national suicide and mental health crisis lifeline – available via call or text 24/7 for connection to local, free, and confidential support.**
- A culture that proactively builds up every student-athlete through quality mentorship, education, and mental skills training.
- Mental skills taught in a healthy psychosocial environment that provides a mastery-oriented motivational climate for student-athletes to practice and compete in.

In any achievement setting, the coach, parent, or teacher sets the tone for the motivational climate. The motivational climate (Ames, 1992) is a psychological environment that fosters either process (mastery-oriented) or performance (ego-oriented) goals, or both, among participants. A mastery-oriented motivational climate is one in which success is focused on athletes consistently committing effort to mastering and improving sport-related skills, taking risks to challenge themselves in pursuit of steady improvement, and accepting failure and constructive feedback as essential to growth and success. In an ego-oriented motivational climate success is defined in terms of wins and losses, and team norms often include doing whatever it takes to win, avoiding risks that might interfere with winning or appearing superior, not tolerating failure, demanding perfection, and responding to athletes' mistakes with shaming, blaming, berating, humiliation and/or punishment. Coaches and sport leaders that foster a healthy motivational climate reject the "win at all costs" mindset and help athletes develop a healthy achievement perspective that supports mental wellness.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

STUDENT-ATHLETE

CHALLENGE

Student-athletes face unique and specific stressors and pressures that can hinder their mental wellness. These challenges are not comparable to previous generations of athletes due to the rapidly evolving nature of a globalized, technology-mediated society. As student-athletes enter adolescence, when peer evaluation and peer comparison greatly impact perceptions of identity and self-worth, they often begin to engage in peer relationships via social media platforms. Across adolescence and young adulthood, a multitude of factors compound into substantial risk for decreased mental wellness for student-athletes. A few examples include:

- Ever increasing academic demands
- Substantial screen time for school and entertainment
- Exposure to unrealistic social media representations of bodies, lifestyles, and accolades
- Online criticism and/or humiliation from peers and sport spectators
- Perceived pressures to perform stemming from the professionalization of youth sport (i.e. year-round travel, national youth rankings, private coaching, etc.)
- Pressure to specialize in one sport at a young age to pursue a college athletic scholarship which in turn increases the risk of burnout and limits a young person's identity and sense of worth to being an athlete
- New considerations of building a personal brand for sponsorship opportunities available through changes in NIL (Name, Image and Likeness) policies
- Complexities of navigating the NCAA transfer portal and increased volatility of roster spots

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT FOR THE STUDENT-ATHLETE

In this challenging environment, student-athletes have opportunities to use their voice and seek out resources and support for personal growth to increase their enjoyment and mental wellness as they participate in sport.



01

Your Self-Worth as a Human Comes First

Remember that you are the same excellent human every day you walk in and out of your sport regardless of your athletic performance or the performance of your team. Performance in a game or competition only represents a fleeting moment in time and it can give you useful information about skills you might want to practice, but it never determines your worth as a human.

02

Advocate for Personal Safety and Healthy Boundaries

Learn, identify, and maintain personal boundaries for physical and psychological safety by practicing self-awareness and learning to listen to the cues and signals of your body and mind.

Self-advocate and reach out to a trusted adult when your sport, school, and/or social media/digital environments are not supporting your mental or physical wellness, or you do not feel safe.

Never hesitate to communicate with a trusted adult if your safety is being compromised.

03

Break the Stigma

Talk about and identify the emotions you experience each day, and what experiences in your sport generate positive as well as challenging emotions.

Talk with teammates, friends, and family openly and often about these experiences and discuss effective strategies to deal with challenging emotions such as fear, sadness, frustration, anger, jealousy, uncertainty, overwhelm, or anxiousness.



03

Break the Stigma, cont.

Reducing the stigma around mental health is important so anyone struggling with mental health challenges feels empowered to reach out for help and avoid suffering in silence.

Learn to recognize common warning signs that you or a peer may be experiencing mental health challenges and may need to seek additional mental health resources (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). Only a mental health professional can identify and diagnose a mental health condition.

Common warning signs of mental health challenges:

- Loss of enjoyment or enthusiasm for everyday activities
- Unexpected changes in school and/or athletic performance
- Feeling sad or hopeless most of the time
- Difficulty with thinking, learning, concentrating, and/or decision making
- Frequently being consumed by worry or fear, and having highly self-critical thoughts
- Sudden or extreme changes in mood, behavior, and/or personality, including unusual emotional highs and lows
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger; easily agitated
- Unable to manage basic daily activities or handle stress
- Avoiding social activities and interactions with friends, teammates, and coaches
- Feeling tired most of the time; changes in sleeping habits
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or loss of appetite
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance
- Lack of emotional expression or emotional connection with others
- Risky behaviors such as the use of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Experiencing new and unexplained physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, body aches or soreness, unable to recover from training)
- Thinking about or talking about suicide, even if expressed as a “joke”



04 Mental Skills

Actively seek out resources to learn mental skills that enhance enjoyment, confidence, resilience, and performance in sport and help support the processing of challenging emotions.

Great mental skills to practice include:

- Shifting to a positive mindset
- Developing a growth mindset
- Practicing positive self-talk
- Starting a habit of gratitude practice
- Trying mindfulness meditation
- Visualizing success using imagery that includes all 5 senses
- Using controlled deep breathing exercises such as box breathing
- Journaling experiences on a regular basis

05 Quality Relationships and Trusted Mentors

Identify a trusted adult in your school or community who you can reach out to when you are struggling, to seek advice or resources from, and to share successes with.

- Who can you think of that you would feel comfortable reaching out to?

Balance time spent with teammates with time spent with friends and family outside of sport.

Prioritize getting to know your teammates and providing them consistent encouragement and support. Never hesitate to check-in with a teammate that doesn't quite seem to be acting like themselves or is struggling. Make a habit of checking in on teammates often even when they don't appear to be struggling.



06 Communication

Take responsibility for using your voice regularly to express thoughts, concerns, and feelings within the context of being a student-athlete to a trusted adult in your school or community.

Ask coaches for skill specific feedback to improve your skills and meet your chosen goals.

Be intentional with communication you share online and mindful of the reach and impact that posting on social media has on your mental wellness and the mental wellness of others.

- Consider taking periodic breaks from social media if the environment of comparison is not supporting your mental wellness. Regularly scheduled breaks can be beneficial.

07 Balance and a Healthy Identity

Periodically reflect on all the aspects of life that you love and enjoy that make up your identity as a human being. Remind yourself as needed that being an athlete is just one part of who you are, and that athletic performances will never define you as a human or determine your self-worth.

- If you were to assign a percentage to the part of your identity that you label as an “athlete” - what would that be? Does that percentage leave room or balance for other important parts of you?
- What other activities outside of sport bring you joy, help you relax, or you really look forward to doing?
- Are there hobbies or experiences you have been wanting to try that you could do with a friend in the off season?

08 Goal Setting

Set challenging goals that stretch you just beyond your current skill level and embrace the enjoyment that comes from accomplishing goals through hard work and perseverance.

What do effective and productive goals include?

- Positive: Goals that state what you “will do” and focus on a successful outcome
- Values: Goals that are important to you and in line with your personal values
- Measurable: Goals that can easily be measured or that have a clearly defined target for success
- Process: Goals that focus on your effort and process of practice and skill development, and not on long term outcomes that may be out of your control
- Visible: Goals are visible on a daily basis to increase accountability

09 Mental Health Resources

Ask a trusted adult such as a parent, family member, teacher, coach or school counselor what mental health resources are available and how to access those resources. It can be helpful and feel easier to learn about these resources before you or a peer needs them. Keep a list of these resources to include phone numbers, email addresses, and websites in a note on your phone or bookmarked on your computer browser for easy access during times of challenge or if you or a peer are experiencing a mental health crisis.

If you or a peer are experiencing a mental health emergency, call or text 988 anytime for free, confidential support and resources.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

RELATIONSHIPS

CHALLENGE

The multitude of relationships in sport have an immense impact on the mental wellness of each student-athlete. Ultimately, an athlete's mental wellness is shaped by the social and psychological environment, i.e., the motivational climate, created by every interpersonal relationship that intersects the sport experience. The significant interpersonal relationships in sport include those with family members, coaches, teammates, opponents, spectators, fans, peers, teachers, sport administrators, sports medicine staff, and school counselors. When a student-athlete interacts with each of these individuals, whether it be via conversations, observational learning, role modeling, goal setting, feedback, praise, and/or criticism, in person or online, they are receiving, processing, and internalizing information about what it means to be an athlete and if they are valued as a human being in those spaces, and not merely valued for their performances or achievements. Being valued and effectively supported in the sport space also means that the diversity of each athlete across the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status are recognized and unequivocally valued. Too often athletes have encountered unhealthy, developmentally inappropriate, and sometimes abusive sport settings with unrealistic expectations and extraordinary pressure to perform that have been a detriment to their overall development and have eroded their mental wellness (Merkel, 2022; Tuakli-Wosornu, 2021; Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).

ROLE-SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT IN SPORT RELATIONSHIPS

Every adult and peer in youth, high school, and college sports has an opportunity to leave a positive, meaningful, and lasting impact on every athlete and by doing so support their mental wellness.



Family Relationships

01

Love Your Athlete

Communicate and demonstrate love and unconditional positive regard for your athlete, ensuring they know their value and self-worth is never dependent on their performance, achievements, or success in sport.

02

Advocate for Athlete Safety and Healthy Boundaries

Acknowledge your responsibility to help ensure a safe and positive sport experience for your athlete. Advocate for your athlete when you believe they have been mistreated or placed in a setting that is neither age nor developmentally appropriate. Actively communicate with coaches and administrators when you observe or learn that athletes are not being coached in a safe or healthy manner. Expect and demand accountability of coaches and administrators who prioritize winning over athlete well-being. Do not hesitate to speak up and speak out as an advocate for your athlete.

Teach your athlete to stay curious, ask questions, and how to respectfully self-advocate their concerns to coaches and administrators.

03

Break the Stigma

Normalize family conversations that include naming and speaking about the normal range of emotions we all experience every day as humans and how these emotions can be heightened or prominent in the sport setting. Role model speaking about your own experiences, or those common to student-athletes, and effective strategies you have used to overcome mental, emotional, and physical challenges.

FAMILY



03

Break the Stigma, cont.

Reducing the stigma around mental health is important so anyone struggling with mental health challenges feels empowered to reach out for help and avoid suffering in silence.

Learn to recognize common warning signs that your athlete may be experiencing mental health challenges and may need to seek additional mental health resources (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). Only a mental health professional can identify and diagnose a mental health condition.

Common warning signs of mental health challenges:

- Loss of enjoyment or enthusiasm for everyday activities
- Unexpected changes in school and/or athletic performance
- Feeling sad or hopeless most of the time
- Difficulty with thinking, learning, concentrating, and/or decision making
- Frequently being consumed by worry or fear, and having highly self-critical thoughts
- Sudden or extreme changes in mood, behavior, and/or personality, including unusual emotional highs and lows
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger; easily agitated
- Unable to manage basic daily activities or handle stress
- Avoiding social activities and interactions with friends, teammates, and coaches
- Feeling tired most of the time; changes in sleeping habits
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or loss of appetite
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance
- Lack of emotional expression or emotional connection with others
- Risky behaviors such as the use of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Experiencing new and unexplained physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, body aches or soreness, unable to recover from training)
- Thinking about or talking about suicide, even if expressed as a “joke”



04 Mental Skills

Support and encourage your athlete to learn mental skills that enhance enjoyment, confidence, resilience, and performance in sport and help support the processing of challenging emotions. If your athlete does not have mental skills practice in their sport setting, these can be practiced at home together. Mental skills are important life skills that translate to support success in academics and the workplace and can benefit the athlete and other family members.

Great mental skills to practice include:

- Shifting to a positive mindset
- Developing a growth mindset
- Practicing positive self-talk
- Starting a habit of gratitude practice
- Trying mindfulness meditation
- Visualizing success using imagery that includes all 5 senses
- Using controlled deep breathing exercises such as box breathing
- Journaling experiences on a regular basis

05 Healthy Peer Relationships

Support and encourage your athlete to develop and maintain positive, healthy peer relationships on their team and in their sport, but also in non-sport settings. A balance of peer support in and out of sport is important for mental wellness.



06 Communication

Listen to, validate, and take seriously your athlete's concerns when they communicate them with you. Remind them often of your support and availability to discuss both challenges and successes.

Provide support and encouragement to your athlete before, during, and after practices and competitions, regardless of their performance. Ask open-ended questions about how your athlete is feeling, what their experience was like, or what they may have enjoyed or not enjoyed that day.

07 Support Balance and a Healthy Identity

Encourage and facilitate your athlete to engage in activities outside of sport so their identity and sense of self-worth is developed across different types of challenging activities that bring them joy and fulfillment and is not solely dependent on succeeding as an athlete.



08

Goal Setting

Encourage your athlete to set challenging goals that stretch them just beyond their current skill level and teach them how to embrace the enjoyment that comes from accomplishing goals through hard work and perseverance. Help your athlete understand the importance of mistakes and failure in the long-term process of learning and mastering skills in their sport. Encourage your athletes to set goals focused on aspects of sport they can control. Healthy and productive goals include those focused on:

- Consistency and quality of effort in practice
- Frequency of giving teammates positive feedback and encouragement
- Identifying small improvements each week
- Planning an extracurricular activity each week that does not involve sport

09

Mental Health Resources

Seek out a list of quality community contacts and resources to have on hand if your athlete needs to access professional mental health services. When your athlete confides in you that they are experiencing mental health challenges, take immediate action to support them in receiving care. If you are unsure of where to begin, check with the school or university counseling centers for resources that may be readily available for student-athletes.

If you or your athlete are experiencing a mental health emergency, call or text 988 anytime for free, confidential support and resources.



Coaches

The recommendations for coaches are robust and represent the magnitude of power, responsibility, and opportunity coaches hold in shaping the mental wellness of each athlete.

01

Humanize Your Coaching Philosophy

See and value every athlete as a human being first and foremost. Develop and practice a holistic coaching philosophy that prioritizes athlete well-being and mental wellness above all else. Ensure that your coaching behaviors and communication with athletes reflect this philosophy. Clearly and directly communicate your values, coaching philosophy, and team expectations at the start of every season. Foster a team culture that embodies your holistic, whole-athlete coaching philosophy.

Take the time to get to know each athlete individually and communicate your care for them as a person and not only as a number on the team. Commit to a coaching practice grounded in self-reflection and cultural humility, that actively recognizes that both coach and athlete bring life experience and biases to the sport setting that impact the way we communicate with one another and the choices we make.

02

Advocate for Athlete Safety and Healthy Boundaries

Advocate for every athlete you coach. The need for advocacy will vary based on each athlete's background and access to socioeconomic and social support resources, as well as developmental and competition level and other factors. Collaborate with parents, teachers, counselors, and other adults in the sport setting to advocate for any athlete that is struggling with mental wellness or experiencing a sport environment that is unsafe. Coaches often mentor athletes that compete on more than one team. Demand accountability of all coaches in your league, school, organization, or community to uphold the values of a human-centered coaching philosophy to collectively keep all athletes safe and well.

COACH



03

Break the Stigma

As you build your coaching philosophy and set team expectations to build team culture, normalize discussion about emotions and mental wellness to break the stigma of “just acting tough” and “not showing weakness in sport”.

Role model speaking about your own experiences, or those common to student-athletes, and effective strategies you have used to overcome mental, emotional, and physical challenges. Discuss the normal range of emotions we all experience every day as humans and how these emotions can be heightened or prominent in the sport setting. Share with your athletes the ways you take care of your own mental wellness through healthy behaviors and setting healthy boundaries with your time and activities.

Reducing the stigma around mental health is important so anyone struggling with mental health challenges feels empowered to reach out for help and avoid suffering in silence.

Learn to recognize common warning signs that you, your athlete/s, or your staff members may be experiencing mental health challenges and may need to seek additional mental health resources (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). Only a mental health professional can identify and diagnose a mental health condition.

Common warning signs of mental health challenges:

- Loss of enjoyment or enthusiasm for everyday activities
- Unexpected changes in school and/or athletic performance
- Feeling sad or hopeless most of the time
- Difficulty with thinking, learning, concentrating, and/or decision making
- Frequently being consumed by worry or fear, and having highly self-critical thoughts
- Sudden or extreme changes in mood, behavior, and/or personality, including unusual emotional highs and lows



03

Break the Stigma, cont.

Common warning signs of mental health challenges:

- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger; easily agitated
- Unable to manage basic daily activities or handle stress
- Avoiding social activities and interactions with friends, teammates, and coaches
- Feeling tired most of the time; changes in sleeping habits
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or loss of appetite
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance
- Lack of emotional expression or emotional connection with others
- Risky behaviors such as the use of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Experiencing new and unexplained physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, body aches or soreness, unable to recover from training)
- Thinking about or talking about suicide, even if expressed as a “joke”

04

Prioritize Mental Skills Training

Include ‘mental skills drills’ to support healthy emotional regulation, resilience, and mental wellness into the regular weekly practice plans. Great and easy mental skills to incorporate are:

- Controlled breathing exercises
- Mindfulness meditation
- Positive self-talk
- Gratitude practice
- 5-minute journaling



05

Teammate Relationships

Teammate bonds and opportunities to have breaks from training and competing will enhance the mental and physical wellness of each athlete and subsequently enhance the athletes' and team's performance.

Communicate with athletes the importance of getting to know one another and having periodic opportunities to have fun together to reduce stress and pressure.

Emphasize the importance of teammates checking-in with one another often and reaching out to any teammate that doesn't quite seem to be acting like themselves.

Emphasize the value that each person brings to the team individually and the responsibility that each teammate has to uplift and support one another.

Build in weekly time for all athletes to check-in with one another and get to know each other.

- Consider bringing a different question each week to practice that teammates can share with each other something about their lives outside of sport.
- Plan time and activities for teammates to have fun together and develop quality peer relationships with one another outside of the sport setting.

If coaching an athlete individually without teammates, consider ways to connect your athlete with peers of similar age and interests within the same league, club, organization or governing body to support them in developing healthy and supportive peer relationships.



06

Communication

Communicate with athletes in a clear and honest manner from a place of care and respect. Provide athletes skill-specific feedback as often as possible so they know specifically what they are executing well and what adjustments they need to make. Deliver feedback neutrally, and never in a way that shames, blames, belittles, or humiliates an athlete. Recognize and reward athletes for effort and consistency over outcomes, as oftentimes sport outcomes are, at least in part, outside the coach's and athlete's control. Use positive feedback and positive reinforcement as often as possible.

Set clear expectations with your athletes on what appropriate forms of communication are and what boundaries you have around time and communication. Create a relationship of mutual respect by also respecting when and how you contact athletes.

- When are you available outside of practice time for regular questions or concerns, and what is the best line of communication for an urgent concern or emergency?
- Are you available outside of practice/game time? What times are you unavailable?
- If you are coaching youth student-athletes, it is important not to text them questions or updates during their school day. This demonstrates respect and prioritization of their education and a healthy sport-life balance.



07 Balance to Support Healthy Identity

Encourage the athletes you coach and mentor to engage in different types of extracurricular activities in addition to sport to support them in developing a healthy identity that is not solely grounded in sport. Consider the value of family, friends, and balance of activities in your coaching philosophy when you set guidelines for attendance and participation. Value and support athletes that may request an occasional absence to do other enriching activities such as a school music concert, a study group, a family trip, or a community service project.

Share with your athletes examples of things you value and prioritize outside of coaching that bring you joy and fulfillment.

08 Goal Setting

Set team goals that center a healthy, task-oriented motivational climate. Set standards and expectations that focus on character, effort, and process, and not only on outcomes. Set team goals that are positively framed and that are in alignment with the values of a human-centered, whole-athlete coaching philosophy.

Encourage your athletes to partner with you in developing team rules and expectations to encourage their investment and buy-in to what will make their team and their season successful. Ask athletes how they define success and collaboratively develop a definition of success as a team.

Teach athletes that challenging goals don't have to be intimidating but can be exciting and achievable with consistent effort and support of one another in the process.



08

Goal Setting, cont.

Support athletes in setting individualized goals that are realistic, achievable, and developmentally appropriate by demonstrating how to create goal ladders. Goal ladders break larger goals into small, progressive action steps that increase the likelihood of small successes that build over time into their larger achievement goals. The momentum experienced with each “step” of success on the ladder builds the athlete’s confidence and competence.

Encourage athletes to set challenging goals that will stretch them just beyond their current skill level while communicating that you will be there to support them with feedback and encouragement. Communicate with your athletes that failure and mistakes are a normal and important part of the process of learning, growing, and reaching each new level of skill development.

09

Mental Health Resources

Seek out and develop a list of quality community contacts and resources to have on hand if you need to refer a student-athlete to professional mental health services. When an athlete confides in you that they are experiencing mental health challenges, offer to be present with them in taking the first step to call and make an appointment, and include a family member, caregiver, or other trusted adult like an assistant coach or a teacher in the conversation whenever possible. If you are unsure of where to begin, check with the school or university counseling centers for resources that may be readily available for student-athletes.

If you, an athlete, or a peer are experiencing a mental health emergency, call or text 988 anytime for free, confidential support and resources.



10

Professional Development

Actively seek out professional development opportunities and continuing education training to increase your knowledge and skills in developmentally appropriate and wellness-supportive coaching practices that are grounded in cultural humility. Look for trainings that include:

- Basic competencies in mental health and suicide prevention such as Mental Health First Aid or QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) training
- Developmentally appropriate coaching and training that centers a healthy motivational climate and optimizes positive psychosocial outcomes
- Training in diversity, equity, and inclusive belonging that includes best practices for being an ally and supporting athletes from all walks of life
- SafeSport Training
- Training in ethical coaching practices

Advocate for policies within your organization that require professional development that includes mental health, diversity, and SafeSport training for all coaches. Additionally, professional development and educational resources should specifically teach knowledge and skills for coaches to support their athletes' mental wellness, while also empowering coaches with healthy strategies to maintain their personal mental wellness.



Sports Medicine Staff

01

Humanize Your Training Room or Clinic

See and value every athlete as a human being first and foremost. Advocate in your organization for athlete well-being and mental wellness to be prioritized above all else. Take the time to get to know each athlete individually and communicate your care for them as a person and not only as a number on the team. Commit to professional practice grounded in self-reflection and cultural humility, that actively recognizes that both the sports medicine professional and athlete bring life experience and biases to the clinical setting that impact the way we communicate with one another and the choices we make.

02

Advocate for the Athlete Safety and Healthy Boundaries

Sports medicine staff sometimes have a higher likelihood of interacting with athletes when they are most at risk for experiencing deteriorating mental wellness and symptoms of mental illness due to the uncertainty and mental and emotional challenges that accompany injury. Be a voice of support for the athlete that needs extra rest or support to improve their mental wellness. The psychological component of returning to sport following an injury cannot be understated.

Make a commitment to check-in with the athlete on how they are doing and feeling before asking about their injury or rehab protocol, to help the athlete feel seen and validated and not reduced to merely the progress of their injury.



02

Advocate for the Athlete Safety and Healthy Boundaries, cont.

Ask athletes about their perceived confidence in return to sport both physically and mentally. Speak up when an athlete is not mentally prepared to return to sport especially if they are receiving pressure from coaches or others to return too soon.

Build relationships with coaches to better partner in supporting the well-being of each athlete, while respecting and honoring the privacy of the athlete and their unique circumstances.

03

Break the Stigma

Validate and normalize the range of emotions and potential mental health challenges an athlete may experience with an injury and throughout the rehabilitation process. Share examples of the range of experiences other athletes have had during the treatment process. Reassure athletes that there is no right or wrong way to experience or move through rehabilitation.

Reducing the stigma around mental health is important so anyone struggling with mental health challenges feels empowered to reach out for help and avoid suffering in silence.

Learn to recognize common warning signs that you, your athlete/s, or your staff members may be experiencing mental health challenges and may need to seek additional mental health resources (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). Only a mental health professional can identify and diagnose a mental health condition.



03

Break the Stigma, cont.**Common signs of mental health challenges:**

- Loss of enjoyment or enthusiasm for everyday activities
- Unexpected changes in school and/or athletic performance
- Feeling sad or hopeless most of the time
- Difficulty with thinking, learning, concentrating, and/or decision making
- Frequently being consumed by worry or fear, and having highly self-critical thoughts
- Sudden or extreme changes in mood, behavior, and/or personality, including unusual emotional highs and lows
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger; easily agitated
- Unable to manage basic daily activities or handle stress
- Avoiding social activities and interactions with friends, teammates, and coaches
- Feeling tired most of the time; changes in sleeping habits
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or loss of appetite
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance
- Lack of emotional expression or emotional connection with others
- Risky behaviors such as the use of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Experiencing new and unexplained physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, body aches or soreness, unable to recover from training)
- Thinking about or talking about suicide, even if expressed as a “joke”



04

Collaborate to bring Mental Skills Training to the Training Room

Seek out sport psychology or mental health professionals that may be able to collaborate to provide 'mental skills drills' or resources for healthy emotional regulation, resilience, and mental wellness specific to the rehabilitation process. Great strategies for the psychological return to play include:

- Mindfulness meditation
- Reframing goals
- Positive mindset
- Positive self-talk
- Gratitude practice
- Journaling
- Peer support

05

Prioritize Supportive Peer Relationships

Create a training room environment that helps athletes who are injured and may feel isolated from their teammates find peer support and connection with other athletes with injuries. An informal peer support group is easy to organize but can make a substantial positive impact.

Communicate with and educate coaches about the importance of team integration and teammate connections for every athlete experiencing injury.



06 Communication

Be mindful of the impact that words and communication have on athletes experiencing injury. Small changes in words and phrases can have a big impact on each athlete's mindset during the recovery process. Communication and feedback that centers positive reinforcement and rewards an athlete's consistency and hard work in their rehabilitation process, while not solely focusing on a deadline for returning to sport can help athletes stay in a positive mindset and feel successful through the mental and physical effort they are dedicating to recovery.

07 Goal Setting

Help athletes reframe and redirect their short-term goals to focus on their rehab process to give them back a sense of control after injury. Be honest and transparent with every athlete that goals and timelines for rehab may change because each body responds to healing differently. Encourage them to take time to practice their mental skills alongside their physical rehabilitation exercises to optimize their return to sport process.



08

Timely Mental Health Referrals

Ensure that a standard mental health referral process is in place in the case of any athletes who are referred by a coach, teammate, or trainer for mental health concerns. Ensure that all sports medicine staff are well trained in timely and appropriate referrals and that any community resource information given to athletes and/or families is kept up to date.

If you, an athlete, or a peer are experiencing a mental health emergency, call or text 988 anytime for free, confidential support and resources.

09

Mental Health Resources

Actively seek out professional development opportunities and continuing education training to increase your knowledge and skills in developmentally appropriate and wellness-supportive practice that is grounded in cultural humility. Look for trainings that include:

- Basic competencies in mental health and suicide prevention such as Mental Health First Aid or QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) training.
- Developmentally appropriate training that centers a healthy motivational climate and optimizes positive psychosocial outcomes in the training room
- Training in diversity, equity, and inclusive belonging that includes best practices for being an ally and supporting athletes from all walks of life
- SafeSport Training
- Training in ethical professional practice

Advocate for policies within your organization that require professional development that includes mental health, diversity, and SafeSport training for all sports medicine staff. Additionally, professional development and educational resources should specifically teach knowledge and skills for sports medicine staff to support athlete mental wellness, while also empowering staff with healthy strategies to maintain their personal mental wellness.



Athletic Directors, Program Managers, and Governing Body Directors

01

Humanize Your Sport Leadership Philosophy

Develop and practice a holistic sport leadership philosophy that prioritizes coach and athlete well-being and mental wellness above all else. Ensure that your leadership decisions and communication with coaches, athletes, and parents reflect this philosophy. Clearly and directly communicate your values, leadership philosophy, and coach expectations at the start of every season and upon hiring new coaches, administrators, sports medicine and support staff. Take the time to get to know each coach and staff member individually and communicate your care for them as a person. Commit to a leadership practice grounded in self-reflection and cultural humility, that actively recognizes that every person in the sport organization brings life experience and biases to the sport setting that impact the way we communicate with one another and the choices we make.

02

Ensure Accountability for Athlete Safety

Hire coaches who have an athlete-centered coaching philosophy and understand how essential positive relationships, positive communication, and healthy team culture are for healthy athlete development, athlete mental wellness, and ultimately team performance. Prioritize hiring coaches of diverse backgrounds to allow athletes access to diversity in sport experiences.

Develop, implement, and enforce policies that prioritize athlete safety above all else that include clearly defined consequences for any coach or staff member that compromises athlete safety or engages in any form of physical, mental, emotional, or sexual abuse of athletes. Ensure that consequences are enforced in a timely manner, regardless of the success or status of the program in question.



03 Break the Stigma

As you implement your leadership philosophy, set expectations for coaches and staff, and create or revamp the organizational culture, normalize discussions about emotions and mental wellness to break the stigma of “just acting tough” and “not showing weakness in sport”.

Role model speaking about your own experiences, or those common to coaches and athletes, and effective strategies you have used to overcome mental, emotional, and physical challenges. Discuss the normal range of emotions we all experience every day as humans and how these emotions can be heightened or prominent in the sport setting.

Reducing the stigma around mental health is important so anyone struggling with mental health challenges feels empowered to reach out for help and avoid suffering in silence.

Learn to recognize common warning signs that you, your staff members, your coaches, or your athlete/s may be experiencing mental health challenges and may need to seek additional mental health resources (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). Only a mental health professional can identify and diagnose a mental health condition.

Common signs of mental health challenges:

- Loss of enjoyment or enthusiasm for everyday activities
- Unexpected changes in school and/or athletic performance
- Feeling sad or hopeless most of the time
- Difficulty with thinking, learning, concentrating, and/or decision making
- Frequently being consumed by worry or fear, and having highly self-critical thoughts
- Sudden or extreme changes in mood, behavior, and/or personality, including unusual emotional highs and lows
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger; easily agitated



03 Break the Stigma, cont.

Common signs of mental health challenges:

- Unable to manage basic daily activities or handle stress
- Avoiding social activities and interactions with friends, teammates, and coaches
- Feeling tired most of the time; changes in sleeping habits
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or loss of appetite
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance
- Lack of emotional expression or emotional connection with others
- Risky behaviors such as the use of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Experiencing new and unexplained physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, body aches or soreness, unable to recover from training)
- Thinking about or talking about suicide, even if expressed as a “joke”

04 Prioritize Mental Skills Training

Routinely include mental skills practice to develop healthy emotional regulation, resilience and mental wellness of coaches, staff, and administrators into meetings on a regular basis. For example, this could be a regular part of meetings during the first week of the month.

Great mental skills for sport leaders to practice are:

- Reflection on or reframing the “why” for coaching or leading
- Controlled breathing exercises
- Mindfulness meditation
- Shifting to a positive mindset
- Developing a growth mindset
- Gratitude practice
- 5-minute journaling



05 Administrative Support for Healthy Work-Life Balance

Encourage and role model a healthy work-life balance for all coaches and staff. Reflect on typical program expectations and norms and make adjustments if the program culture is encouraging coaches and staff to work excessive hours with unreasonable performance expectations that are detrimental to physical and mental wellness. Coaches and staff that are supported in maintaining their own personal wellness are more likely to be healthy role models for their athletes and have cognitive and emotional capacity to support their athletes' mental wellness.

06 Goal Setting

Collaborate with all coaches and staff to develop organizational values and expectations that prioritize coach, staff, and athlete wellness to encourage investment and buy-in to what will make the program successful. Ask coaches and staff how they define success and collaboratively develop a definition of success as an organization.



07

Mental Health Resources

Maintain a list of quality up-to-date organizational and community contacts and resources to have on hand if you need to refer an athlete, coach, trainer, or staff member to professional mental health services. Prioritize financial investment in mental health and wellness resources to reduce the financial burden to necessary care.

When an athlete, coach, trainer, or staff member confides in you that they are experiencing mental health challenges, offer to be present with them in taking the first step to call and make an appointment. Communicate clearly your respect and support for their choice to ask for help.

If you, an athlete, a coach, or a peer are experiencing a mental health emergency, call or text 988 anytime for free, confidential support and resources.



08

Professional Development

Actively seek out professional development opportunities and continuing education training to increase your knowledge and skills in wellness-supportive leadership that is grounded in cultural humility.

Consistently provide evidence-based professional development opportunities for coaches, trainers, and staff.

Look for trainings that include:

- Basic competencies in mental health and suicide prevention such as Mental Health First Aid or QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) training.
- Developmentally appropriate coaching and training that centers a healthy motivational climate and optimizes positive psychosocial outcomes.
- Training in diversity, equity, and inclusive belonging that includes best practices for being an ally and supporting athletes from all walks of life.
- SafeSport Training.
- Training in ethical professional coaching and leadership practices.

Ensure that policies within your organization require professional development that includes mental health, diversity, and SafeSport training for all coaches and staff. Additionally, professional development and educational resources should specifically teach knowledge and skills for coaches and staff to support athlete mental wellness, while also empowering all members of the organization with healthy strategies to maintain their personal mental wellness.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

ORGANIZATIONS

CHALLENGE

While individual athletes, parents, coaches, athletic trainers, and sport administrators can commit to actively supporting and protecting student-athletes' mental wellness, sport organizations must commit to systemic changes to policy, mission, values, and funding priorities that center mental wellness for athletes and for all organization members. Re-humanizing sport will only be a successful and lasting endeavor if it is prioritized and enforced beginning at the highest levels of every sport organization and systematically integrated into every level of each organization. In the absence of a centralized national sport governing body for all levels and types of sport in the United States, policies, standardization for coaching credential requirements, and funding for coach and athlete wellness education varies widely. Until very recently, policies and coach and athlete education regarding mental wellness have been minimal or entirely absent. In response to athlete advocacy, prevalence of athlete abuse, athletes using social media platforms to share their mental health struggles, and athletes that have died by suicide, awareness and focus on the importance of mental wellness has increased. However, organizational level commitment to prioritize mental wellness in funding and policies is urgently needed for substantial and sustainable change across the entirety of youth, college, and Olympic/Paralympic sport systems.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT IN SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Public and private organizations at every level of sport have the opportunity and responsibility to ensure that the organization's mission, values, policies, structure, and financial decisions center and prioritize the human value and well-being of every athlete, coach, administrator, and staff member.

01

Humanize Your Organization's Mission and Values

Develop a human-centered organizational philosophy that prioritizes athlete, coach, staff, and administrator well-being and mental wellness above all else. Ensure that your organization's mission, values, strategic plan, policies, and financial decisions reflect this philosophy. Clearly and directly communicate these values to all organizational members and stakeholders, as well as post them publicly for organizational transparency and accountability. Ensure that all organizational practices are grounded in cultural humility, that actively recognize that every person in the sport organization brings life experience and biases to the sport setting that impact the way we communicate with one another and the choices we make.

What about sport brings value to the communities you serve? How does your organization support all constituents to foster wellness through sport?

02

Ensure Accountability for Athlete Safety

Develop, implement, and enforce policies that require all administrators, coaches, and staff to have education and certification in SafeSport, mental health, and diversity. Ensure that job descriptions include the need for candidates to have an athlete-centered coaching/leadership/practice philosophy and demonstrate value and competency in positive relationships, positive communication, healthy athlete development, and athlete mental wellness. Prioritize hiring coaches and staff of diverse backgrounds to support athletes with access to diversity in sport experiences.

Require the highest level of coach education and credentialing available for all sports and programs in your organization. If coach credential requirements are vague,



02 Ensure Accountability for Athlete Safety, cont.

unclear, or lacking in your organization, prioritize investments for robust and quality coach education that focuses on athlete safety, healthy athlete development, and athlete mental wellness. Update policies to reflect an increased standard of certification required.

Develop, implement, and enforce policies that prioritize athlete safety above all else that include clearly defined consequences for any coach or staff member that compromises athlete safety or engages in any form of physical, mental, emotional, or sexual abuse of athletes. Ensure that consequences are enforced in a timely manner, regardless of the success, profit, or status of the program in question.

03 Break the Stigma

As you implement your organizational philosophy, set expectations for administrators, coaches and staff, and create or revamp the organizational culture, normalize discussions and support across the organization about emotions and mental wellness to break the stigma of “just acting tough” and “not showing weakness in sport”. When every organizational leader and member is supported to normalize and readily share the range of human experiences with emotions and mental wellness, athletes will observe this and learn to not fear seeking help.

- This could be something like a “Mental Wellness Monday check-in” that happens within every team and division in the organization
- Consider offering all organizational members “no questions asked” mental health days off to engage in self-care of their choice



03

Break the Stigma, cont.

Consider allocating funding and resources for the organization's media to develop content that showcases the ways coaches, athletes, and leaders in the organization have experienced and overcome mental, emotional, and physical challenges. Ensure that media content represents the diversity of the communities served.

Reducing the stigma around mental health is important so anyone struggling with mental health challenges feels empowered to reach out for help and avoid suffering in silence.

Ensure every member of the organization is trained to recognize common warning signs of mental health challenges that may necessitate seeking professional mental health resources (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). Only a mental health professional can identify and diagnose a mental health condition.

Common warning signs of mental health challenges:

- Loss of enjoyment or enthusiasm for everyday activities
- Unexpected changes in school and/or athletic performance
- Feeling sad or hopeless most of the time
- Difficulty with thinking, learning, concentrating, and/or decision making
- Frequently being consumed by worry or fear, and having highly self-critical thoughts
- Sudden or extreme changes in mood, behavior, and/or personality, including unusual emotional highs and lows
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger; easily agitated
- Unable to manage basic daily activities or handle stress
- Avoiding social activities and interactions with friends, teammates, and coaches
- Feeling tired most of the time; changes in sleeping habits
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or loss of appetite



03 Break the Stigma, cont.

Common warning signs of mental health challenges:

- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance
- Lack of emotional expression or emotional connection with others
- Risky behaviors such as the use of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Experiencing new and unexplained physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, body aches or soreness, unable to recover from training)
- Thinking about or talking about suicide, even if expressed as a “joke”

04 Prioritize Mental Skills Training

Allocate funding and resources for mental skills training for all organizational members to develop healthy emotional regulation, resilience, and mental wellness. Require regular training and practice as part of the organization’s culture and values. Ensure that all organizational members have adequate time and resources to implement this training and practice and it does not add to an unbalanced workload.

Great mental skills for sport leaders and athletes to practice are:

- Reflection on or reframing the “why” for coaching, leading, or competing
- Controlled breathing exercises
- Mindfulness meditation
- Shifting to a positive mindset
- Developing a growth mindset
- Gratitude practice
- 5-minute journaling



05 Prioritize Healthy Work-Life Balance

Include statements about healthy work-life and sport-life balance in the organization's mission and values. Evaluate the typical organizational expectations and norms and make adjustments if the organization's culture is encouraging administrators, coaches, staff, or athletes to work or train excessive hours with unreasonable performance expectations that are detrimental to physical and mental wellness. Administrators, coaches, and staff that are supported in maintaining their own personal wellness are more likely to be healthy role models for their athletes and have cognitive and emotional capacity to support their athletes' mental wellness.

06 Strategic Goals and Objectives

Collaborate with all organizational members and stakeholders to develop organizational values and expectations that explicitly name and prioritize mental wellness to encourage investment and buy-in. Ask administrators, coaches, staff, and athletes how they define success and collaboratively develop a definition of success as an organization. Ensure that athletes are always included in the process and their needs are accurately represented when policies and strategic objectives are developed.

07 Mental Health Resources

Maintain a published list of quality up-to-date organizational and community contacts and resources for anyone in the organization that may need professional mental health services.



07 Mental Health Resources, cont.

Prioritize financial investment in mental health and wellness resources to reduce the financial burden to necessary care and ensure that the organization's employment benefits adequately cover mental health services.

Evaluate the financial, social, and/or psychological barriers athletes in your organization may face in the process of seeking mental health services and make necessary changes to organizational policies or processes to work towards reducing those barriers.

Explore ways in which the organization can leverage financial resources and community partnerships to support access to mental health services for all athletes within the organization and the surrounding communities.

If anyone in the organization is experiencing a mental health emergency, call or text 988 anytime for free, confidential support and resources.

08 Professional Development

Prioritize funding and resources for professional development opportunities and continuing education training across the organization to increase knowledge and skills in wellness-supportive leadership and coaching that is grounded in cultural humility.

Consistently provide evidence-based professional development opportunities for administrators, coaches, trainers, and staff. Require trainings that include:

- Basic competencies in mental health and suicide prevention such as Mental Health First Aid or QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) training.



08

Professional Development, cont.

- Developmentally appropriate coaching and training that centers a healthy motivational climate and optimizes positive psychosocial outcomes.
- Training in diversity, equity, and inclusive belonging that includes best practices for being an ally and supporting athletes from all walks of life.
- SafeSport Training
- Training in ethical professional coaching and leadership practices

Ensure that policies within your organization require professional development that includes mental health, diversity, and SafeSport training for all members.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

COMMUNITY

CHALLENGE

Over the past few decades, the private youth sport club industry has boomed, while community-based park and recreation programs and school-based sports programs have experienced substantial funding cuts. The greatest challenge in supporting mental wellness for student-athletes at the community level is addressing the growing inequity in access to sport participation. The inequities that the pay-to-play youth sport system have created paradoxically disadvantage athletes that lack access to participate in sport, as well as athletes that have access to unlimited participation. For children and adolescents that can't afford to participate in sport, they lack access to the possibility of positive psychological and social development available through sport participation that contributes to resilience and mental wellness. For affluent children and adolescents that can afford unlimited sport participation through specialized sport clubs, they are at risk for decreased mental wellness due to developmentally inappropriate volume of training, early single sport specialization, unrealistic performance expectations from coaches and parents, identity development limited to sport, and burnout.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT IN COMMUNITIES

Communities have the opportunity to reduce these inequities that don't support mental wellness of youth and young adults by evaluating, adjusting, and innovating policies, funding, and community infrastructure. Innovating community structures, funding, and policies to support mental wellness of youth and young adults through equitable sport participation opportunities will be a different process with different objectives for each community, however sustainable and impactful change will likely include key elements suggested here. These elements are in line with evidence-based recommendations of the U.S. National Youth Sports Strategy (NYSS) published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS, 2019). The recommendations in the NYSS are congruent with the human-centered values of this report, with the NYSS vision that "one day all youth will have the opportunity, motivation, and access to play sports, regardless of their race, ethnicity, sex, ability, or ZIP code."



01

Public and Private Sector Sport Partnerships

Public and private partnerships are essential to bridge the gap in sport participation access and leveraging the youth sports economy for the healthy development of all children. Innovative partnerships should consider:

- Partnering and collaborating with intention across all levels of sport from youth and recreational to high school and college to Olympic/Paralympic and professional sports
- Shared use agreements of community, school, and private sport facilities
 - Finding creative ways to leverage “down-time” of already existing facilities
- Partnering with academic or non-profit institutions to seeking grant funding for building or renovating community sport infrastructure
- Incentivizing private sport clubs that offer free or affordable community programming.
- Exploring ways that National Sport Governing Bodies can leverage their resources to increase sport access to kids of every community
- Increasing collaboration of sport organizations locally and regionally to keep kids playing closer to home. This decreases the cost of competing and increases community engagement and a sense of belonging and connectedness, which ultimately improves mental wellness within local communities



02

Equitable Access to Safe and Quality Sport Facilities

All community sport facilities should be evaluated for safety, equipment quality, and accessibility. Community organizers, elected officials, businesspeople, entrepreneurs, educators, policy makers, and community developers should consider evaluating:

- Does the quality of facilities vary based on the average income in different areas of the community?
- Are facilities deteriorated or unsafe in low-income areas?
- Is safe and affordable transportation available to access facilities?
- Are facilities accessible to individuals with disabilities?
- Do program fees and/or travel fees prohibit families from participating?
- Are there community-based volunteer organizations to partner with to staff new programs?
- What funding and policy changes are needed to increase access to sport participation in the community?



03

Increased Community Health Education on the Benefits of Sport

Sport participation can benefit everyone in the community through improved physical and mental wellness, community connectedness and belonging, and fostering lifelong love of movement that is a worthy investment for the future of every community.

Increased community-wide education on the benefits of sport participation can increase interest and value for sport participation and increase the likelihood of community members voting to support programming and infrastructure through community tax dollars and policy changes. Community education can also help to change the perception of sport from merely a highly competitive space for athletes to chase scholarships and fame, to a space where mental wellness, resilience, and quality relationships can thrive for individuals of all backgrounds and ability levels.

Increased community-based sport opportunities can also provide increased intergenerational community engagement. Youth experience increased opportunities to play with peers in a safe and healthy environment, while working adults and retirees invest time and value directly back into their communities.



ACT NOW!

It is with urgency and passion that we encourage every individual in sport at every level of influence to embrace the values and recommendations in this report to actively support, protect, and advocate for the mental wellness of every student-athlete. When we commit collectively as individuals – parents, family, friends, coaches, administrators, teammates, educators, business owners, board members, directors, community members, policy-makers – and collaborate across organizations and communities, we can transform the culture and landscape of sport to a space that is reliably healthy, protective, empowering, inclusive, and safe for all individuals.

By implementing these recommendations, we hope to see a future of sport where no athlete suffers in silence, no athlete ever hesitates to ask for help with mental health, no athlete loses their love for sport due to unrealistic or unhealthy training or performance expectations, and no child misses the chance to participate in sports. This will empower the next generation of athletes with the knowledge, skills, support, and resources to build healthy, strong, and resilient minds, bodies, relationships, and communities, and maximize the opportunities for every child to enjoy the process of learning new sports without barriers.



GLOSSARY

Dual-achievement settings

Student-athletes have performance and achievement goals and expectations academically in their classes and/or chosen area of study, as well as athletically in their sport. Balancing the demands of school and sport along with the perceived and actual pressures to perform from coaches, teachers, parents, teammates, and friends is especially challenging.

Ego-Oriented Motivational Climate

In an ego-involved team climate, the definition of success is narrow, and the focus is on outperforming others and demonstrating superiority. Feedback and response to mistakes is often punitive. Teammates are often pitted against one another as rivals. A 'win at all costs' mentality is encouraged.

Growth Mindset

A perspective based on the belief that skills and abilities can always be improved through learning, effort, and practice. In contrast, a fixed mindset is based on the belief that ability is fixed and unchangeable (i.e. someone is just naturally talented or they are not).

Mastery-Oriented Motivational Climate

In a mastery-involved team climate, the definition of success is improving each athlete's skills and ability through consistent effort and practice. Feedback and response to mistakes involves rewarding effort and giving skill specific corrections. Mistakes and failures are normalized as part of the necessary process of skill mastery and success. Teammates are encouraged to work cooperatively to achieve their goals.

Mental Wellness

A mental foundation that supports healthy thinking, learning, decision making, processing of emotions, overall functioning, and development and maintenance of healthy relationships. Mental wellness contributes to an individual's capacity to build resilience and grow through challenge and adversity. (Mental Wellness Institute, 2020)

Resilience

An ability to recover from setbacks, overcome challenges and persevere, while growing, learning, and being adaptable when facing adversity.

Skill Specific Feedback

Responding to an error made in practices or during games with clear feedback on how to adjust that skill to avoid that error in the future.

Sport Mental Wellness Social Ecological Model

A model for mental wellness among athletes that is based on a social ecological approach. This model identifies multiple levels of influence that intersect and impact health behaviors and outcomes in a complex social environment (McElroy et al., 1988).



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