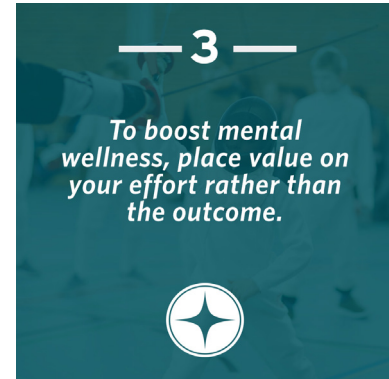
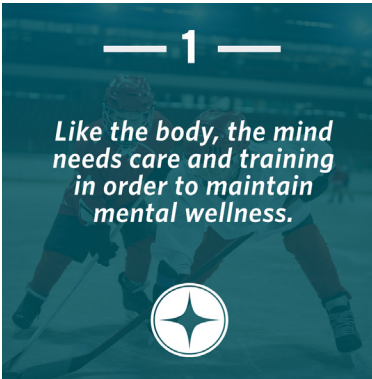


Mental Wellness



3 Key Takeaways



The Basics

- In relation to sport, mental wellness is a cornerstone of athlete wellness and is defined as an optimal state and functioning of the mind.
- Like developing mental skills, healthy behaviors around adequate sleep, nutrition, and regular exercise all contribute to keeping both the mind and body healthy.
- When in a healthy learning environment, sports provide a unique setting for positive psychosocial development that can permeate into other areas of the athletes' lives.
- Enjoyment in sport can be fostered through satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness.
- Effective coaches should be emotionally in tune with their athletes, recognizing their levels of mental wellness and responding accordingly.
- Keys to a healthy motivational climate include positive communication and fair reinforcement, value placed on hard work and effort rather than on the outcome, and realistic and measurable goals focused on skill development.

Mental Wellness: Ambassador Story

Team USA Paratriathlete and Paralympian Aaron Scheidies understands the power and influence sport can have on mental wellness. As a 9-year-old, Aaron's vision began declining. It would be five years until a doctor diagnosed this vision loss – a genetic eye condition known as Stargardt or Juvenile Macular Degeneration. The condition ultimately results in the progressive loss of one's central vision over time

As a teenager, Aaron began to feel a lack of "normalcy" and frustration when he could not see the world as clearly as others. As a budding young soccer star with hopes of playing professionally, Aaron's childhood dream slowly faded along with his vision, only adding to his frustrations.

At the start of his high school career, Aaron experienced a sharp, downward emotional spiral that was eventually diagnosed by professionals as an eating disorder, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). His frail frame was noticeable, as well as the fact that Aaron began separating from his friends while avoiding social settings. At this lowest point, he began to question the value of his life.

Fortunately, his older brother was keenly aware of Aaron's struggles and encouraged him to join the swim team. His brother assured him that it was a sport not dependent on vision. Reluctantly, Aaron agreed to give it a try. As he submerged into the water, he felt a sudden sensation of relief and inner peace as the daily pressures of society seemed to wash away. From this moment, Aaron's life began to change as his mental wellness improved along with his sense of purpose. He had discovered a sport that he could succeed in without his full vision.

Alongside a team of counselors, experts, and supporters, he began to find his confidence again. Aaron realized that, while he may not see the world the same way as others, his version of "normal" was what made him unique, and he shifted his focus to what he could do rather than on his hardships and limitations. He was uncovering his resilience by accepting reality, embracing challenges, and changing his mindset.

Over time, Aaron began to seek new challenges to test his abilities. This only increased his sense of resiliency, leading him to compete in his first ever triathlon as a senior in high school. Little did he know, this would be the start of what would become a lifelong, professional career in a sport that requires distance swimming, biking, and running. A 13-time triathlon World Champion and 11-time National Champion, Aaron is proud to compete for Team USA as a Paralympian and coach future blind athletes.

While Aaron still experiences periodic bouts with depression, he has developed and rehearsed much healthier coping mechanisms to manage it. Like the body, the mind requires care and training to maintain a healthy state, and for Aaron, sport is a major contributor to helping him overcome his mental wellness challenges. He is a firm believer that if you "change your attitude, you will change how you see the world and discover great potential."



AMBASSADOR STORY QUESTIONS

1. *What were the main points that you took away from the Ambassador story?*
2. *How has sport played a role in your overall mental wellness? Has sport had a positive or negative impact on your wellbeing?*
3. *Do you have someone in your life to support you during challenging experiences?*