



YOUTH ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH PLAYBOOK

A guide for coaches, parents, and caregivers to support youth athletes, by the Mental Health Coalition & Kicking The Stigma

The success of athletes depends as much on mental health as on physical health. While sports can be deeply rewarding, they can also bring unique pressures and challenges. That's why it's essential to prioritize the mental wellbeing of athletes — especially young athletes — so they can thrive both on and off the field.

This guide will help coaches, parents, and caregivers create a mentally safe, supportive environment for school-age athletes. Read on to learn about the importance of mental health for youth athletes, how you can provide support, and where to find credible resources for more information.

YOUTH ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH 101

Common Mental Health Challenges Among Youth Athletes

Research shows that youth athletes may face a range of mental health challenges. These can stem from the competitive nature of sports, performance expectations, demanding schedules, or personality traits common among high achievers. While the list may feel daunting, awareness is key to prevention and early support. Key challenges frequently encountered include:

- **(Performance) anxiety** — excessive worry, avoidance, or panic attacks related to an upcoming activity like a game or match (More info from [Healthline](#))
- **Depression** — persistent low mood, hopelessness, loss of interest in hobbies or social life (More info from [APA](#))
- **Body image and eating concerns** — restricting, purging, or bingeing food; hyper-criticism of one's own body or food habits (More info on [OCD](#), [Body Image](#), [Eating Disorders](#))
- **Stress related to competitiveness, perfectionism, or pressure to succeed** (More info from [TrueSport](#))
- **Identity development during adolescence** (More info from [ACT for Youth](#))
- **Emotional and physical burnout** (More info from [American Academy of Pediatrics](#))
- **Decline in mental wellbeing after an injury or early retirement** (More info from [Henry Ford Health](#))

More resources: [Kids Mental Health Foundation](#) & [The Alliance](#)

YOUTH ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH 101

Benefits of Sports and Strengths of Youth Athletes

The sports world can be both high-pressure and high-reward. Supporting young athletes means recognizing not only the risks they face but also the many benefits and strengths that come with athletic engagement:

- Physical exercise has been shown to decrease symptoms of mental health conditions and **support overall mental wellbeing**.
- Exercise boosts **brain function** by supporting critical thinking, learning, creativity, and judgment.
- Physical activity can support **sleep regulation** and boost **endorphins**, which positively impact mood and reduce stress.
- Youth athletes can benefit from the joys of being on a **team** — building community, making social connections, and learning how to manage those relationships effectively (Learn more: [MHC](#)).
- Working towards and achieving goals increases **self-efficacy** — dedicating time to a sport and seeing gradual growth based on your effort promotes confidence, self-trust, and a growth mindset that you can accomplish anything by practicing, failing, and trying again.
- Sports provide opportunities to build **emotion regulation skills and resilience** by learning to manage frustration, self-criticism, or anger during competition.
- Youth athletes often demonstrate high levels of **leadership, work ethic, school success, responsibility, discipline, and commitment**.

SUPPORTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

What is everyday mental health vs. clinical mental health?

When talking about youth athlete mental health, it's important to distinguish between **everyday mental health** and **clinical mental health**. Just as everyone has physical health, everyone has mental health every single day — regardless of whether they live with a diagnosable condition. Recognizing this helps reduce stigma and encourages athletes to notice when they may need support.

Everyday mental health refers to your current state of wellbeing. Take tabs on your mood right now — whether you are slightly stressed, highly anxious, or feeling great, that is your mental health.

Clinical mental health refers to diagnosable conditions, when symptoms become disruptive or persistent enough to impact daily functioning. (To learn more about this, see The Mental Health Coalition's [Roadmap to Mental Health](#).)

When should I seek formal help for youth athletes?

Support should be sought if an athlete is experiencing:

- Symptoms that get in the way of daily life, school, or sports performance
- Thoughts of suicide
- Self-harm behaviors

Where should I find formal help for youth athletes?

For both daily stressors and clinical mental health conditions, a **primary care physician or pediatrician** can point you in the right direction for treatment. Common mental health providers include psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health counselors, and social workers.

Ensure athletes know about **crisis support services**. If they experience a mental health crisis, they can:

- Call or Text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline)
- Text COALITION to 741741 (Crisis Text Line)

ENCOURAGING YOUTH ATHLETES

As a coach, parent, or caregiver, it can be hard to know how much to push a young athlete to perform to the best of their ability while still protecting their mental health. A helpful rule of thumb: support them as *whole people*, not just as athletes.

1. Create a supportive environment

- Foster connection among peers and mentors around mutual care, encouragement, and wellness. Normalize rest, healthy eating habits, and time with loved ones.
- With social media, it's easy to get discouraged and compare yourself to others online, so remind athletes to be kind to themselves and hone in on their own performance — their *own* personal best, growth, and enjoyment.

2. Be mindful of your approach

- Keep the tone of practice light. Remember that sports should bring fun and fulfillment.
- Set goals together, and be collaborative rather than pressuring.
- Use positive reinforcement. Rewards and encouragement motivate more effectively than criticism or shame.

3. Talk about physical *and* mental health

- Touch base with your athlete(s) about how they are doing mentally, emotionally, and physically. Try these conversation starters:
 - “I’ve noticed you seem more [down, nervous, irritable] lately, do you want to chat for a bit after practice today?” If the answer is no: “That’s totally fine, and I hope you get to talk to someone soon who you feel comfortable with.”
 - “How can I help? I can just listen, or I can help brainstorm some ideas.”
 - “I wanted to check in, how’re you feeling today?”
- Model open conversations around mental health, and if that is new for you, learn from the pros. Michael Phelps, Solomon Thomas, and Simone Biles have all modeled what it looks like to take your mental health seriously.
- Treat your young person as more than an athlete; be curious about their other passions, worries, and who they are as a whole person.
- Follow their lead in these conversations. Use the language they use. Follow openings they give you. Match their tone, whether it is playful, somber, or anything in between.
- Check in regularly about what’s working and what’s not — don’t assume their performance tells the whole story. Athletes might hope their coaches or parents can read their minds, but we can’t know without starting the conversation.
- Adapt as needed. Some athletes respond to gentle encouragement, others to firmness — ask what helps them most.
- Only offer advice if it is wanted or requested.

ENCOURAGING YOUTH ATHLETES (continued)

4. Encourage peer support among teammates

- Promote open conversations among teammates. Sharing struggles helps normalize difficult emotions, reduce isolation, and build trust.
- Provide bonding activities among your team. The closer they feel to each other, the more they will lean on each other for support.
- Point athletes to trusted resources, like MHC's [Roadmap to Friends Supporting Friends](#).

5. Know when to seek extra support

- Point athletes in the right direction for clinical support (see page 4 of this guide).
- Learn more yourself so that you can share knowledge with youth athletes (see the Resources on page 7).

Learn more: ([MHC](#), [Active Minds](#), [NCAA](#))

YOUTH ATHLETE RESOURCES

Active Minds: Active Minds is a nonprofit organization focused on empowering youth and reshaping discussions about mental health.

ADAA: The Anxiety & Depression Association of America promotes the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety, depression, OCD, PTSD, and related disorders.

Athletes For Hope: The Athlete Mental Health Alliance (AMHA) aims to amplify athletes' lived experiences and voices to drive systemic change around athlete mental health.

Athletes Mental Health Foundation: The Athletes Mental Health Foundation is a nonprofit dedicated to transforming athletic systems to better support mental well-being.

NCAA & Sport Science Institute: Mental Health Best Practices: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Health provides recommendations for team, athletics, campus and community-based approaches to supporting, promoting and managing student-athlete mental health concerns.

Opening Minds: Targeted to Athletes and Coaches, The Working Mind - Sports mental health course strives to improve the culture of mental health in sport.

Our Minds Matter: Athletes' Minds Matter is a teen-led initiative within the nonprofit Our Minds Matter that embeds mental health check-ins and discussions into the daily routines of student-athletes.

The American College of Sports Medicine: ACSM publishes peer-reviewed journals, books, online education courses and digital resources on athlete mental health. Their Healthy Youth Sports Podcast dives into youth and adolescent sports, injury prevention, physical activity and health with some of the world's leading subject matter experts.

The National Alliance for Eating Disorders: The Alliance provides referrals, education, free therapist-led support groups, and recovery resources for individuals experiencing eating disorders and their loved ones.

The Hidden Opponent: The Hidden Opponent is the leading non-profit organization for athlete mental health advocacy, education, and support. They provide accessible resources and unite a global community to empower athletes to prioritize their mental health and shatter the stigma within sports culture.

The Defensive Line: The Defensive Line's mission is to end the public health crisis of youth suicide by centering the experience of people of color and transforming the way we communicate and connect about mental health. TDL offers suicide prevention workshops and trainings for schools and organizations.

U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee & Team USA: The USOPC Mental Health & Performance Directory is a public resource to connect Team USA athletes with highly-qualified mental health and mental performance providers who have experience working with elite athletes.

ADDITIONAL YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

- [Black Girls Smile](#)
- [Bring Change To Mind](#)
- [Teen Line, a program of Didi Hirsch](#)
- [The Jed Foundation](#)
- [Silence the Shame](#)
- [The Trevor Project](#)
- [The Steve Fund](#)
- [The AAKOMA Project](#)
- [RAINN](#)
- [The Kids Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#)

Explore more resources in the Mental Health Coalition's [Resource Library](#).

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Created in partnership with [Kicking The Stigma](#).

Kicking The Stigma's focus is two-fold: raising awareness about the prevalence of mental health disorders in our communities and raising and distributing funding to nonprofits and other organizations for direct treatment services.