

## Mental Health Powers Performance: Why Mental Health May Be Your Best Arsenal as a Coach

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From the Unceded Territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg Nation

### Overview

Long ignored by the world of sport, mental health as a significant performance factor has now entered public consciousness not least because high-profile Olympic athletes, including gymnast Simone Biles, swimmer Michael Phelps, tennis player Naomi Osaka, and alpine skier Lindsay Vonn, have chosen to reveal their debilitating struggles with depression and its effects upon performance.

Closer to home, Canadian high performers such as beach volleyball player Melissa Humena-Parades, trampoline specialist Rosie MacLennan, and pole vaulter Alysha Newman have spoken openly about their mental struggles, defying the stigma that has for so long kept such struggles a deep, dark, and shameful secret.

For coaches, understanding the impact, positive and negative, of mental health on your athletes' performance is essential in today's stressful and complex world. The three authors of the latest Journal article share their professional expertise and personal experience as they describe a series of comprehensive tactics and self-evaluation tools that "promote and protect well-being in training and competition environments ..."

This powerful article is sure to guide coaches to the realization that "there is considerable power in mental health." It is an essential read. - Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor

*The views expressed in the articles of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching are those of the authors and do not reflect the policies of the Coaching Association of Canada.*

### Introduction

This article was written by three women who love sport, have played various roles in sport as athlete, coach, parent, and mental performance consultant, and are affiliated in different capacities with the University of Ottawa and the Canadian Centre for Mental Health in Sport

(CCMHS). Also, it was written with lived well-being and ill-being experiences, the Mental Health Strategy for High Performance Sport in Canada, and the slogan 'Mental health powers performance' in mind.

This slogan, recently adopted by the CCMHS, aims to embolden the sport community to see and use well-being as a performance factor that sets participants apart from their competitors, giving them an edge to achieve and sustain their greatest potential in sport. As a coach, you are an integral member of the sport community capable of driving change for yourself, your athletes, and your staff. Furthermore, as a woman coach with indispensable competencies such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and resilience, you are well positioned to be a leader in this space. While this article targets women in coaching, the content is applicable to all coaches. Additionally, although the focus is on coaches as individuals, the broader sport landscape must be considered. Mental health is a social phenomenon impacted by sport systems and organizations that can facilitate or impede well-being. We hope this article will inspire you to boost your coaching and help change the culture of sport, which has often taken mental health for granted.

## 1. Examine the Power of Mental Health

When untangling the definition of mental health, it is easy to conceptualize how this state of being can be a difference-maker. According to the [World Health Organization](#), mental health is:

“A state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development.”

Actions such as building relationships, learning, achieving goals, making sound decisions, and serving as positive role models in the community are at the heart of sport and coaching. From this perspective, it is logical to integrate mental health as a core construct in one's coaching practice. It is promising to see how, through various recent initiatives, coaches are learning to include mental health as a foundational element of their coaching philosophy and a pillar of successful performance. However, this is only the first step; coaches can learn to implement concrete tactics to promote and protect well-being in training and competition environments while pushing performance boundaries that could potentially lead to ill-being if support, safety, and recovery are inadequate.

### *Tactic 1a – Explore your mental health narrative*

One of the first tactics for coaches should be to look at their mental health narrative. Evidence shows that all sport participants have the potential to experience high and low levels of mental health (well-being), which should be reflected in coaches' conversations with those in their

training and competition environments. Coaches must also acknowledge that all sport participants have vulnerabilities that can lead them to experience symptoms of mental illness (ill-being), and that protective factors can minimize the occurrence of these symptoms. In this sense, coaches can be prepared to observe and communicate that mental well-being and ill-being can vary from one day to the next, and everyone has a responsibility to support one another in this space. Once coaches acknowledge and integrate this into their narrative, they will likely be more inclined to invest time and effort into elevating their mental health literacy.

### *Tactic 1b – Strengthen your mental health literacy*

Coaches do not need to be mental health experts to positively impact the well-being of others in training and competition environments. However, they will be better equipped if they engage in formal and informal training to strengthen their literacy surrounding mental health. Such training allows coaches to understand how mental health and mental illness symptoms can be improved, how stigma can be decreased, how help-seeking and self-care competencies can be enhanced, and how systems or organizations can best support well-being.

Several options are currently available to coaches to increase their mental health knowledge and skills. In terms of informal training, coaches can read on the topic of mental health starting with the [Mental Health Strategy for High Performance Sport in Canada](#). The Strategy summarizes key priorities, objectives, and actions that can improve mental health outcomes within the sport community, which are grounded in empirical and contextual evidence applicable in the Canadian context. The document also includes many resources and references that can guide coaches in their reflection and action planning. Since the official launch of the Strategy in July 2021, other resources such as workshops; webinars; and mental health assessment and planning tools have been created for coaches by different organizations such as the [Coaching Association of Canada](#), [CCMHS](#), [Game Plan](#), and [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#). The following are simple but powerful suggestions addressed in these resources, which rely on sound coach-athlete and coach-staff relationships:

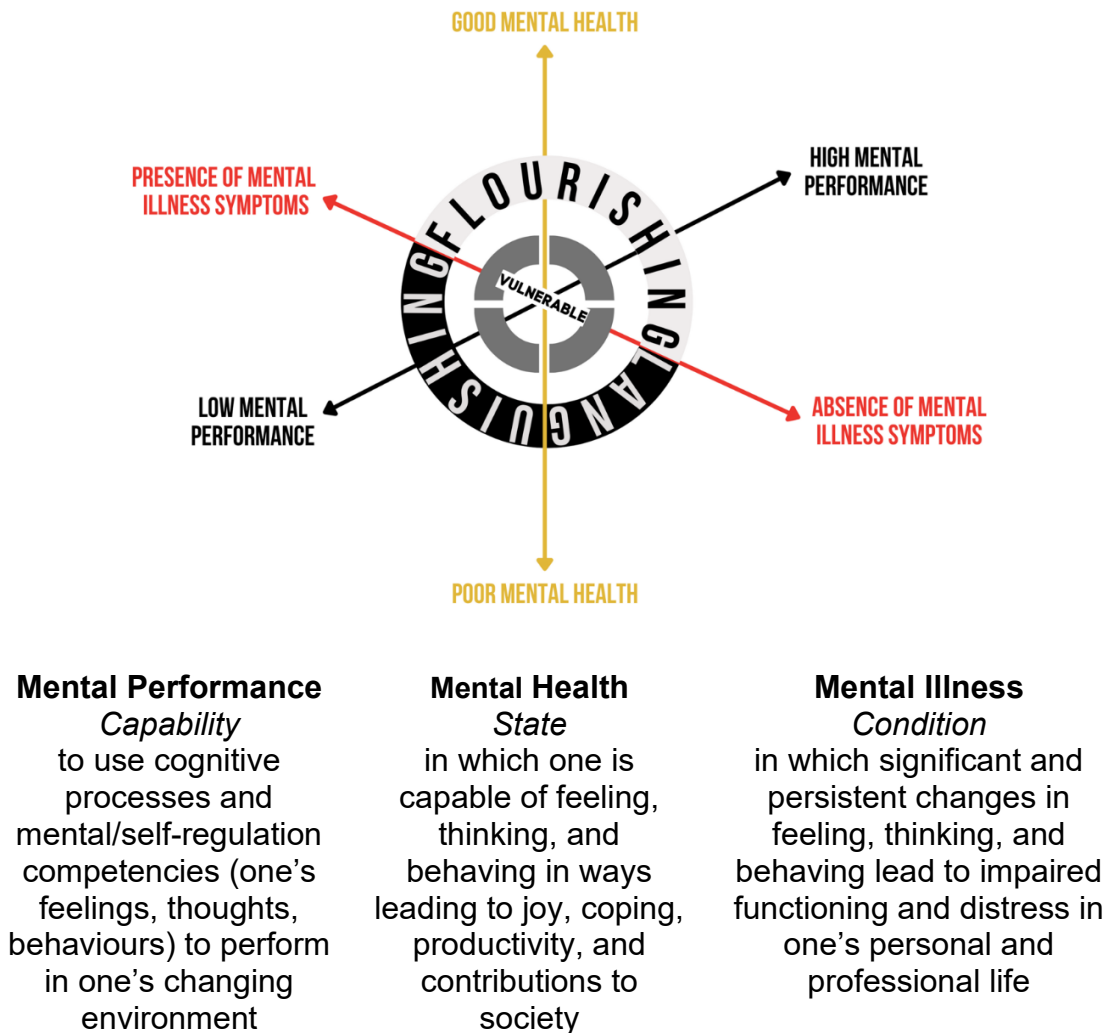
1. Recognize and normalize the signs and symptoms of mental well-being and ill-being.
2. Create a basic mental health plan with and for those operating in training and competition environments.
3. Build trustworthy relationships through transparency, respect, and confidentiality.
4. Communicate with others using a curious, caring, and relaxed approach.
5. Offer continuous support and commitment and refer to an expert when necessary.
6. Know how the broader sport system and organizations impact well-being and advocate for healthy and safe environments.

## **2. Power Mental Health with Mental Performance**

To optimize their literacy, coaches are invited to think beyond mental health and examine the role of mental performance in improving well-being and decreasing ill-being. As depicted in the Mental Health Strategy and the three-dimensional model below (Figure 1), mental performance interacts with mental health and mental illness to influence an individual's overall functioning

and performance in sport. Coaches can use the model to explain how these three important constructs can vary over time and lead athletes, coaches, and staff to flourish, be vulnerable, or languish, particularly when facing stress and setbacks.

**Figure 1 – Three-dimensional Model of Mental Health, Mental Illness, and Mental Performance**



**Tactic 2 – Prioritize mental performance**

Mental performance is at the root of every outcome in sport. It refers to one's capability to utilize cognitive processes such as reasoning, memory, and decision-making and mental/self-regulation competencies such as confidence, motivation, and stress management to perform in a dynamic and fluctuating environment. Thoughts, behaviours, and feelings are the building blocks of mental performance and importantly, these same building blocks also shape mental health and mental illness. The following are ways coaches can use mental performance to bolster mental health in sport, with the model serving as a guide:

1. Explain that mental performance is a capability (high or low) that directly impacts one's state of mental health (good or poor). It is therefore in one's best interest to train and improve mental performance to increase one's chances of achieving good mental health.
2. Understand that when mental health is poor due to a variety of internal (e.g., low self-care, burnout) and external (e.g., unsafe environment, organizational stress) factors, one's capacity to use cognitive processes and self-regulation competencies is reduced and mental performance can suffer (e.g., difficulty focusing, managing emotions, and remembering information). This can lead to compromised athletic performance. Coaches can address these internal and external factors to try to restore mental health and mental performance.
3. Acknowledge that when thoughts, behaviours, and feelings significantly worsen for a sustained period of at least two weeks, they can lead to a condition that generates distress and hinders normal daily functioning. This condition, also known as mental illness (mental injury), can impede mental health and mental performance. However, a high level of mental health and mental performance can help one cope with and buffer the negative effects of mental illness symptoms, hence another reason to invest in mental performance training. From another perspective, if one experiences mental illness symptoms (e.g., anxiety), it does not mean that they will automatically have low mental performance, poor mental health, and negative athletic outcomes. Conversely, if one does not experience mental illness symptoms, it does not mean that they will automatically have high mental performance (e.g., positive self-talk), good mental health (e.g., positive relationships with teammates), and positive athletic outcomes.
4. Refer to the model to regularly check which quadrant one is situated in as this can vary weekly or even daily (e.g., presence of mental illness symptoms + moderate mental health + high mental performance). Reflect on whether one is vulnerable, languishing, or flourishing and take actions to improve or maintain functioning and performance, as necessary.

### 3. Power Yourself by Focusing on your Own Mental Health

Safeguarding mental performance, mental health, and mental illness can be linked to coaches' duty of care. Notably, coaches' duty of care applies not only to their athletes and staff but also themselves. This is important because coaches are more likely to reach their full potential as leaders, achieve success with their athletes, and prevent burnout if they maintain good mental health. Also, athletes may be more willing to discuss their mental health when coaches model positive well-being behaviours.

In today's sport landscape, all coaches are at risk of experiencing mental ill-being because of personal (e.g., balancing home-job responsibilities), performance (e.g., meeting high expectations), and organizational (e.g., worrying about job-financial security) stressors. Coaches who identify as women face additional threats to their mental health due to reduced

opportunities, resources, and power. Women coaches also frequently prioritize the mental and physical needs of others (e.g., athletes, family members). The following tactic is intended to help coaches shift their power and focus on themselves by performing regular check-ins.

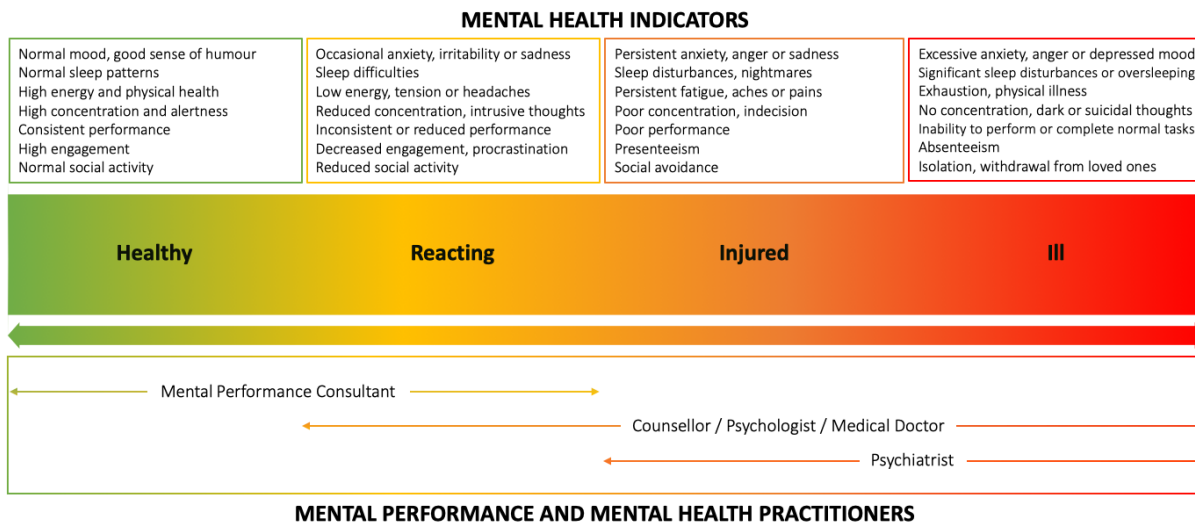
### Tactic 3 – Perform a daily check-in

Coaches can empower themselves by evaluating their mental health states and tracking their level of functioning. To do this, they can use the Mental Health Continuum included in the Mental Health Strategy (Figure 2), which includes various ‘feeling, thinking, and behaving’ indicators as well as different types of practitioners who can provide support based on mental health states such as healthy, reacting, injured, or ill. Completing a self-check at the beginning of each day allows coaches to prioritize their individual needs and then be able to provide support to others. The following points outline how coaches can use the continuum:

1. Spend two minutes early on in your day to determine your mental health state based on the indicators provided. Pay attention to your level of functioning and notice if you are experiencing recurring thoughts, behaviours, and feelings over time.
2. If you are ‘healthy’, keep doing much of the same as your well-being is high and you are in a strong position to support others.
3. If you are ‘reacting’, take some time to reflect on what seems to be contributing to this and set a goal to address the situation to the best of your ability. For example, improve your routine at night if you’re struggling with sleep. Consider sharing with someone from your support network such as a mental performance consultant, partner, or mentor to get additional insight. Protect your energy when providing support to others since you are somewhat depleted.
4. If you are ‘injured’, take the time you need to engage in self-care and reach out to a counsellor, psychologist, or medical doctor to discuss your mental health state. Focus on feasible and controllable solutions such as making time to exercise at least 20min/day, adjust your coaching by letting an assistant prepare and run a practice, and let your athletes and staff know that you are experiencing a depleted state.
5. If you are ‘ill’, ask your employer for time off to recover and seek care immediately to address the more persistent thoughts, behaviours, and feelings you are experiencing. Seeing a psychiatrist or psychologist is recommended as they can perform an in-depth assessment and give you a comprehensive mental health care plan. Engage with your support system and let your athletes and staff know that you are focusing on your mental health.
6. Finally, consider using an app such as Welltory, InnerBalance, Health, HeartRate+, LifeCycle, Womaze, and/or MoodMeter to help track your thoughts, behaviours, and feelings and get feedback to improve your overall health.



Figure 2 – The Mental Health Continuum



**Note.** Mental Performance Consultants (MPCs) can collaboratively work with mental health practitioners to support performance and mental health during the Injured and Ill phases but cannot diagnose or treat mental illnesses if they are not dually trained as psychologists or counsellors. MPCs and Medical Doctors (MDs) are key first points of contact and referral sources when mental health challenges arise.

## 4. Cultivate Collective Power

To improve mental health outcomes in sport and achieve the objectives outlined in the Mental Health Strategy, coaches must come together to champion this movement. There is no doubt that coaches can individually do their part by strengthening their own mental health and that of their athletes. However, their collective wisdom and commitment is what will ultimately lead to a culture shift in sport that is predicated on wellness.

### Tactic 4 – Become a mental health champion

Coaches are in a powerful position to demand more of their leaders and organizations to support mental health. They can challenge the status quo and join forces with other coaches as well as provincial/territorial/national/multi-sport sport organizations to lobby for safe and healthy sport cultures, as well as adequate training and resources to meet the mental health needs of the sport community. With increasing allegations of misconduct and maltreatment in sport, Minister of Sport Pascale St-Onge has publicly committed to making systemic changes to improve the experiences of all participants. This is an opportune time to build collective power amongst coaches to share experiences, develop support networks, and advocate for holistic wellness to achieve success in sport. Here are examples of actions coaches can take to lead in this space.

1. Identify up to five coaches with whom you would like to join forces to champion mental health and set up a meeting with them to start a conversation. Make a point to reach out to coaches of all genders, including women coaches.

2. Ask your employer/organization if they have mental health policies and resources in place and how you can access them. Advocate for the development of such policies and resources if these do not exist to ensure that sport systems and organizations foster wellness rather than ill-being.
3. If you have a good level of mental health literacy, offer to mentor a group of coaches or athletes, including those experiencing marginalization and oppression, to help them better navigate this space. Be aware of your biases and use inclusive and equitable language and practices.
4. Join a group, task force, board, or event designated to improve mental health in sport so that coaches are represented and have a voice. Your knowledge of training and competition environments is crucial to ensure that guidelines and practices are feasible.

In sum, it is hoped that through this article, coaches realize that there is considerable power in mental health. Sometimes a shift in perspective is all it takes to begin using the construct of mental health as an arsenal in one's coaching practice. Various tactics and resources are available to positively impact well-being in sport at individual, group, and organizational levels, and coaches are encouraged to use them and also reach out to the authors for any additional support.

## About the Author

Dr. Natalie Durand-Bush is a sport psychology professor in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. She specializes in mental skills training and assessment, mental health, and coaching psychology. Natalie is the Executive Director of the [Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport](#) - a specialized Centre providing sport-informed mental health care and resources to athletes, coaches, and support staff. As a Mental Performance Consultant for the past 27 years, Natalie has helped athletes and coaches of all ages, sports, and levels achieve their performance and well-being goals. Natalie co-founded and chaired the Canadian Sport Psychology Association. She also served as the Vice-President of the International Society of Sport Psychology and as the President of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology. Natalie recently co-authored the [Essential Guide for Mental Performance Consultants](#), the book [Mental Health in Elite Sport](#), the [Mental Health Strategy for High Performance Sport in Canada](#), and the [Gold Medal Profile for Sport Psychology](#).

Jennifer Misurelli is a PhD candidate and member of the SEWP lab in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. She is a certified Level 2 swimming coach and has been coaching athletes for over a decade, including varsity athletes at the University of Ottawa. Her coaching experiences have inspired her doctoral research, which focuses on the mental health literacy of sport coaches. Under the supervision of Dr. Natalie Durand-Bush, and in partnership with the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC), her project pertains to the implementation and evaluation of workshops designed to assist coaches in fostering mental health in their training and competition environments. As a



Psychotherapist, Mental Performance Consultant, and as the current Director of Education and Community Outreach at the Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport, Jennifer is passionate about supporting individuals, teams, and organizations in the development of mental health policies and practices that promote performance and wellness.

Mikaela Papich is a PhD candidate in the SEWP Lab in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. Her doctoral research, supervised by Dr. Natalie Durand-Bush, focuses on developing a sport-specific mental health strategy for Tennis Canada. Mikaela completed her master's degree at McGill University under the supervision of Dr. Gordon Bloom, where she studied coach-athlete relationships with Canadian high performance tennis coaches. Mikaela was a Division 1 varsity tennis player at Bucknell University for four years. As an elite athlete, Mikaela has first-hand experience with mental illness as well as a back injury that required a spinal fusion. She empathizes with the challenges athletes encounter as they train for athletic success and she is dedicated to ensuring that athletes, coaches, and staff are provided with the necessary care and resources to flourish both physically and mentally. Mikaela is also a certified Level 1 tennis coach and coaches tennis players (10-20 years old) at Tennis 13 in Laval.

**References available upon request.**