



# Helping Athletes in Distress

Recognize and respond to early signs of distress amongst your athletes to connect them with the resources they need to be mentally, emotionally & physically fit.

## Sport & Mental Health

Research has long suggested that athletes participating in sport, particularly at competitive and elite levels, may be at-risk for experiencing psychological distress and associated mental disturbance because of the various sport-specific stressors they may face, such as sustaining athletic injury, conflict with teammates, and pressures to achieve athletic success.

## Signs of Distress

- Weight loss/gain.
- Consistent feelings of anxiety & depression.
- Vague explanations for missed practices/games.
- Avoidance of peers.
- Unusual anger/irritability.
- Low-motivation & self esteem.
- Increase in self-criticism.

# Barriers

**There are many barriers inherent to the sport system that can discourage athletes from seeking help when they are experiencing distress.**

## **Most common barriers:**

- Fear of losing their position within the team or sport organization.
- Fear their coach will lose faith in them.
- Emphasis on being “mentally tough” in traditional sporting culture.
- Previous bad experience seeking support.
- Perceived stigma of having a mental illness.
- Lack of peers who have been open and transparent about their struggles.

# Breaking Through Barriers & Creating a Positive Culture

**How can coaches help combat these barriers?**

**Research shows that creating a positive sport culture is the biggest tool that coaches have at their disposal.**

**Creating a sport culture where your athletes feel encouraged to speak openly about stressors greatly increases the likelihood that they will disclose when they are in distress.**

- **Role Model.**
  - **Establish an Open-Door Policy.**
  - **Be purposeful with your language.**
  - **Create a diverse support team.**

# Steps for Helping an Athlete in Distress

## Immediate

- Listen to your athlete explain the situation.
- Try paraphrasing what the athlete has said to demonstrate that you hear them.
- Reassure them that mental health struggles affect everybody and help normalize the experience for them.
- Ask questions to ensure you understand the situation in its entirety.

## Short-term steps

- Triage the severity of the situation to determine if the issue can be managed in-house or requires professional support.
- Help your athlete in creating an action plan to manage their distress.
- Connect your athlete to the appropriate resources for help and support (eg. licensed mental health professionals, Kids Help Phone, support groups, etc)

## Long-term steps

- Keep your athlete involved with the team and the sport. Fear of losing this is a very common reason why athletes resist disclosing distress.
- Check in on a regular basis and be available for support as needed.
- Show patience with recovery and understand that it may take significant time.
- Modify training as needed to balance keeping your athlete connected with sport while also allowing them space to recover.

Overall, confidentiality is key. Even if you think it is already implied, it is important to say expressly that your athlete can trust that any conversation between the coaches and them is private.

## References & Resources

James Bissett, "Student-Athlete Disclosures of Psychological Distress: Exploring the Experiences of University Coaches and Athletes" 2020, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology.

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