



Supporting Mental Health

In any given year, 1 in 5 Canadians will experience a mental health problem or illness.

Mental illness affects people of all ages, education, income levels and cultures. No one is immune, and this includes athletes.



When an athlete is in distress, they may turn to their coach for support. As recognized leaders in the sport community, a coach's attitude toward mental health can greatly influence an athlete's likelihood of coming forward and seeking help when they need it.

Common Stressors for Athletes

- Achieving personal goals
- Meeting parent and coach expectations
- Pressure to achieve athletic success
- Anticipation of feedback from coaches
- Playing time/positions
- Conflict with teammates
- Personal relationships
- Sustaining an injury

Barriers to Athletes Sharing Mental Health Challenges

- Fear of losing their position within the team or sport organization.
- 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.

How You Can Support as a Coach

- Lead by example - be open and transparent about the importance of looking after your mental health and well being.
- Emphasize that seeking help is a sign of strength, courage and resilience.
- Display posters or stickers for mental health resources in locker rooms, on bulletin boards, etc.
- Build mental health into regular conversations and normalize talking about it.
- Learn how each of your athletes responds to stress, how it impacts them and signs to look for.
- Understanding your limits and knowing when to connect an athlete with professional resources.

Helping Athletes in Distress

- 1 Listen to your athlete explain the situation. Try paraphrasing what the athlete has said to demonstrate that you hear them.
- 2 Reassure them that mental health struggles affect everybody and help normalize the experience for them.
- 3 Ask questions to ensure you understand the situation in its entirety.
- 4 Triage the severity of the situation to determine if the issue can be managed in-house or requires professional support.
- 5 Connect your athlete to the appropriate resources for help and support (eg. licensed mental health professionals, Kids Help Phone, support groups, etc).

If an athlete appears to be an immediate risk to themselves and/or others (e.g., suicidal ideation, severe mental illness, substance dependency, etc.), it is vital that professional help be obtained either by visiting your local emergency department, calling 911, or your local crisis hotline.

 Kids Help Phone - Text CONNECT to 686868

 1-800-668-6868

 kidshelpphone.ca/live-chat

[Distress & Crisis Ontario - dcontario.org/centres.html](http://dcontario.org/centres.html)

References: Centre for Addiction & Mental Health (2016) “Mental Health in the World of Sports”
James E. Bissett, University of Toronto (2020) “Supporting the psychological well-being of athletes: What can coaches do?”