

Addressing Mental Health Concerns Among Student-Athletes

Athletes often treat emotional distress in a matter similar to the ways in which physical distress is dealt with - emotional pain is 'shaken off'. Mentink (2002)

As youngsters develop, they tend to gravitate to and identify with subgroups of peers. These subgroups play a significant role in shaping what a youngster does with his/her time, what knowledge and skills are learned, and what values and attitudes are adopted.

Eccles and Barber (1999) found that the most common extracurricular activities for both males and females were “team sports, bands or orchestras, and church, with participation on sports teams being the most common by a substantial margin.” This is not surprising since athletics are iconic throughout the U.S. as well as in many other cultures.

The National Federation of State High School Associations indicates there were nearly 8 million high school athletes in 2017-2018. The benefits and downsides of student athletics have been widely discussed. For example, among other benefits athletes are seen as having better overall physical health as compared to non athletes.

Student athletes strive to achieve what they perceive as appropriate body weight, appearance, and other subcultural norms. For some, this can make them stand out among their peers, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

From a mental health perspective, we focus on the impact of social and emotional development and well-being. High school is a time when students are developing a sense of self and figuring out their identities. It also is a time when sports activity, especially formal team sports, becomes more competitive and stressful. All this has mental health implications.

As Puri and Sarita Sood (2018) note:

... the spirit of competitiveness [can] mar the reviving and rejuvenating experience resulting from involvement in sport activities. Rigorous physical activity undertaken by athletes to meet the performance expectations and to perform their best [can] lead to overtraining, burnout and increased risk of injury. Athletes experience time and energy constraints, loss of autonomy and psychosocial problems. ... The additional stressors/pressures stemming from sports and academics [can] negatively impact the mental health of student athletes.

Two Research Examples

While research indicates that student athletes are just as likely as other students to experience mental health issues, they view mental health help negatively and underutilize services.

López and Levy (2013) investigated intercollegiate student athletes barriers to help seeking and, if they were to go see a counselor, what their preferences were related to counselor, location, racial similarity, gender, sports experience, and age. The barriers students reported were lack of time to seek services, fear of stigma for seeking services, fear teammates would find out, and fear they would be considered weak. In terms of preferences, a significantly stronger preference was for the counselor to have sport knowledge and experience.

Martin (2005) studied high school and college athletes' attitudes toward sports psychology consulting. Findings were that athletes who had received such consultation in the past felt more comfortable seeking such assistance than those who had no past experience with such services. The latter group reported feeling greater stigma in seeking such assistance, with male athletes, younger athletes, and athletes socialized in sports that involve physical contact tending to report higher concern about stigma.

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About the School's Role

Youth sports is venue for emphasizing health and positive values. From a mental health perspective, the school's role with student athletes is to promote positive social and emotional development, prevent problems, and respond quickly when student athletes manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Accomplishing this requires the collaborative actions of coaches, teachers, student/learning support staff, administrators, parents, and policy makers. Coaches, in particular, often are some of the most influential models for young athletes.

Perhaps the growing interest in sports psychology will encourage increased attention to actions that will enhance positive social and emotional development and minimize harm to the athlete's well-being. At the same time, the presence of mental health and substance abuse problems among student athletes underscores the need for schools to do more to prevent and respond quickly to ensure that all students with such problems are assisted.

And as noted above, many students, and especially athletes, are reluctant to seek help when they need it. School policy must ensure that facets of the curricula normalize help-seeking, and all efforts to decrease bullying should include a focus on the harm caused by stereotyping and stigmatizing others.

Concluding Comments

Sports are an integral part of almost every culture. Athletics clearly is a broad and attractive arena of youth subculture identity, and a variety of subgroups have coalesced around formal and informal sports teams and around peers who adopt an athletic lifestyle. Good athletes usually are admired, and exceptional athletes often are treated as superstars.

A constant dilemma, of course, is that team sports are inherently competitive. Competition is stressful, and coaching involves a degree of pressure on athletes. Some schools tie their reputation and status to winning, and this increases the pressure on students and coaches. Such conditions have demonstrated negative physical and mental health effects. These are matters that warrant in depth exploration by school policy makers.

From the perspective of our Center's work, we understand the need for attending to the negatives associated with student athletics. At the same time, efforts to address the problems must avoid traditional tendencies to look at any subgroup of students as requiring totally unique intervention strategies. Many of the problems associated with student athletes clearly overlap those manifested by other student subgroups. Our Center advocates a unified, comprehensive, and equitable approach to address the problems experienced by students.

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