

THE ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH — PLAYBOOK —

REAL QUESTIONS. EXPERT ANSWERS. BUILT FOR THE MENTAL SIDE OF SPORT.

WHY DOES MENTAL HEALTH MATTER FOR ATHLETES?


**KICKING
THE
STIGMA**



WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health is something everyone has. It is experienced individually and can change over time.

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community.

Think continuum, not category.

A helpful way to understand mental health is as a continuum ranging from non-optimal to optimal. An athlete's position on that continuum can shift as circumstances, stressors, supports, and skills change.

ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE AND MENTAL HEALTH ARE CONNECTED.

When athletes are mentally healthy, they are more likely to:

Stay focused

Direct attention to the task at hand.

Handle pressure

Respond flexibly in demanding moments.

Recover from setbacks

Regroup after mistakes, injuries, or losses.

Perform consistently

Access skills across changing conditions.

Mental health challenges do not prevent athletes from succeeding, but they can make success harder to sustain.

MENTAL HEALTH ISN'T ALL-OR-NOTHING.

Athletes move through different states of mental well-being throughout their lives. That movement is a normal part of being human.

The Athlete Mental Health Continuum shows that mental health exists on a spectrum. Athletes move through different states of mental well-being throughout their lives. From thriving to struggling, where an athlete falls on the continuum can change over time, and that's a normal part of being human.

ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM



An athlete's mental health can move along the continuum over time as life circumstances, stressors, supports, and skills change.

What can affect movement?

- Injury or rehabilitation
- Competition and expectations
- School, work, family, or financial stress
- Sleep, recovery, and social connection

What can help?

- Trusted relationships
- Healthy routines and rest
- Mental performance skills
- Professional mental health support

The goal is not to feel great all the time. The goal is to notice changes, use helpful supports, and seek care when distress becomes persistent, severe, or disruptive.

WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

A mental illness is a health condition that affects a person's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, or a combination of all three.

It's not an athlete's fault. Just like a physical illness, a mental illness is something that is not an athlete's fault. Think of it as something they "have" or "develop" just as one would "have" or "develop" a common cold or the flu.

Care can look different for different people.

Depending on the person and condition, support may include counseling or psychotherapy, medication prescribed by a qualified clinician, support from family or friends, changes to routines, and other evidence-based care.

Pay attention when...

- Symptoms persist or intensify
- Daily life, school, relationships, or sport are affected
- There is self-harm or talk of suicide
- An athlete says they need help

Start with...

- A licensed mental health professional
- A physician or other qualified health provider
- A school or team support professional
- A trusted adult who can help

NOTE: This playbook is educational and is not a diagnosis or a substitute for individualized medical or mental health care.

MENTAL HEALTH AND PERFORMANCE ARE CONNECTED, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE SAME THING.

Performance optimization includes tools that help athletes perform at their best, such as:

Focus

Motivation

Emotional
Regulation

Visualization

They can overlap.

Skills such as emotional regulation, focus, and helpful self-talk may support both well-being and performance.

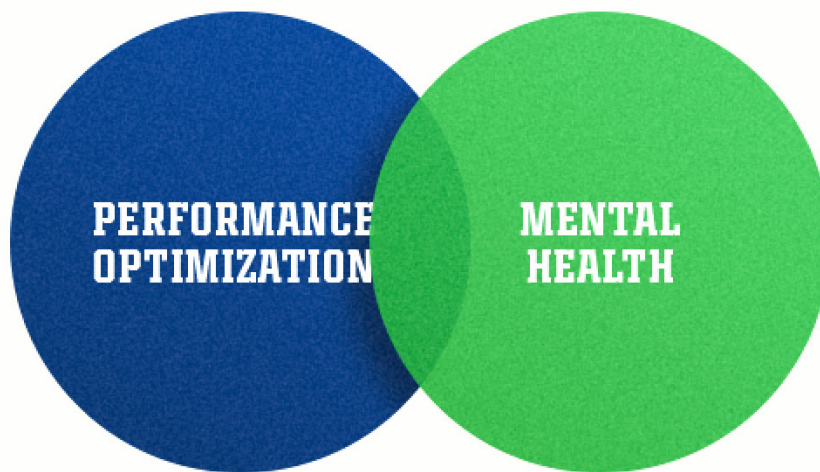
They are not substitutes.

Performance tools do not replace mental health care, assessment, counseling, or treatment.

An athlete can perform well while struggling mentally, or struggle with performance while maintaining positive mental health.

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS CAN CREATE AN “ECLIPSE.”

Athletes can be taught to compartmentalize so that mental health concerns do not create an “eclipse,” where those concerns move in front of the Performance Optimization sphere and interfere with their ability to perform at their best.



Compartmentalizing Is a Short-Term Performance Strategy.

Compartmentalizing is not a replacement for care. Mental health concerns still deserve attention, support, and treatment. The aim is not to suppress or ignore them.

Performance optimization skills can support performance, while mental health support helps athletes thrive both on and off the field.

THE PLAYBOOK.

Additional resources and tools to explore.

World Health Organization (WHO)

Global mental health definitions, facts, risks and protective factors, promotion, prevention, care, and treatment.
[Mental Health Fact Sheet](#) | [Mental Disorders Fact Sheet](#)

NAMI

Information and resources for individuals, families, caregivers, and communities.
[NAMI National](#) | [NAMI Resource Center](#)

988 Lifeline

Free, confidential call, text, or chat support. People do not have to be suicidal to reach out.
[Get Help From 988](#)

911 / Emergency Care

For immediate danger or a life-threatening emergency, call 911. A hospital emergency department or local crisis service may also provide an urgent evaluation.

Explore additional mental health resources and learn more at
[KickingTheStigma.org](#).

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Key takeaways

- Everyone has mental health, and it can change over time.
- Mental health and athletic performance influence one another, but they are not the same.
- Performance optimization tools can help athletes perform, but they do not replace mental health care.
- Mental illness is a health condition, not a personal failure.
- Listening, early support, and connection to qualified care can make a meaningful difference.

For additional Athlete Mental Health Playbook topics, visit
KickingTheStigma.org/Athletes.