Mental health & well-being among student-athletes

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Objectives

- Briefly summarize mental health issues and barriers to care among collegiate student-athletes
- Identify key symptoms in student-athletes with possible mental health concerns
- Provide strategies to reduce barriers and for talking to student-athletes with mental health concerns
- Support your review of resources in your department and outside it for addressing mental health care
- Vignettes and practice!
Survey of students and student-athletes 2008 – 2011
Fewer student-athletes reported experiencing depression and anxiety within past 12 months, but numbers still high

“Felt Depressed” in the last 12 months
- 21% of male student-athletes vs. 27% of male non-athletes
- 28% of female student-athletes vs. 33% of female non-athletes

“Felt Anxiety” in the last 12 months
- 31% of male student-athletes vs. 40% of male non-athletes
- 48% of female student-athletes vs. 56% of female non-athletes

Substance use among college student-athletes

- 2013 survey of DI, DII, DIII student athletes
  - Alcohol use
    - 39.6% to 50.4% of males reported >5 drinks in “typical” drinking episode
    - 31.9% to 37.8% of females reported >4 drinks in a “typical” episode
    - 15.5% to 20.4% of males reported >10 drinks in a “typical” episode
    - 2.4% to 3.3% of females reported >10 drinks in a “typical” episode
    - 30% of student-athletes reported ≥1 instance of memory loss from drinking
  
  - Marijuana use
    - 21.9% of student-athletes reported marijuana use within the last year
    - This is similar to numbers reported in 2005 and 2009

Common stressors faced by Student–Athletes

- Heightened visibility
- Pressure to win
- Athletic injury
- Playing time/reduced role on the team
- Limited access to campus resources during normal business hours
- Conflicts with coaches and teammates
- Finishing their competition career
- Sexuality/Coming Out
- Substance Abuse
- Bullying, hazing
- Sexual assault
- Disordered Eating Behavior, Eating Disorders, Body Image concerns
Barriers to student-athletes seeking support

“Of college students suffering from a mental illness, 1 in 3 will seek professional help, which is too low. In the student-athlete population, however, that statistic drops to 1 in 10.”

Source: [http://athletesconnected.umich.edu/helping-a-student-athlete/](http://athletesconnected.umich.edu/helping-a-student-athlete/)

- **Barriers**
  - Need to be “tough”
  - Self-care activities are often neglected
  - Fear their participation in sport being limited
  - Difficulty accessing a licensed mental health provider trained in working with student-athletes
Potential signs of Distress

- Withdrawal from friends, teammates, activities
- Expressions of hopelessness
- Significant changes in sleeping or eating behavior
- Violent or rebellious behavior
- Drug/alcohol use
- Unusual neglect of personal appearance
- Marked personality change
- Agitation, difficulty appearing calm/relaxed
- Appearing down, sad, or having low energy
- Critical statements about body shape, size, weight, or level of fat
- Substantial weight loss or gain
- Appears distracted during practice, team meetings, etc.
- Verbal cues: “I won’t be a problem for you much longer” or “it doesn’t matter...”
How coaches, teammates, and administrators can help

- Recognize strengths of student-athletes
  - Motivated, goal-oriented, resilient, disciplined, committed, open to feedback
- Promote an environment that helps reduce stigma
  - Observe and challenge language used
  - Talk about the importance of self-care
  - Empower team leaders to communicate about observations and concerns—SAMs, SAAC, Captains, etc.

Provide information to your student-athletes:
- Workshops/preventative education to teams
- Postings in locker rooms, team spaces, or via social media
- Share stories of student-athletes and professional athletes:

- Observe student-athletes for potential signs of distress
- Approach student-athletes you are concerned about for a conversation
- Make a referral – 911 for emergency; licensed practitioner

Before approaching a student-athlete you are concerned about

- Think about who might be closest to the individual
- Try to speak to the student-athlete one-on-one in a private location
  - Always prioritize your own safety
- Have a plan
Talking to a student-athlete you are concerned about

- Use “I” statements
- Ask them how they are doing and listen
  - Reflect
- Only move to problem-solving after listening
- If concerned, ask directly about thoughts about suicide or self-harm
- Emphasize their value/worth to you
- Encourage them to meet with a licensed mental health provider or other trained resource (Dean’s Office, Student Health Center)
- Ask their permission to check-in with them again
Promoting access to care

- Identify mental health resources ahead of time
  - Including substance use and eating disorder specialists
- Promote early access—help them be prepared about what to expect and questions to ask
- Partner with licensed mental health providers to increase their visibility and reduce stigma
- Talk to team leaders, coaches, administration, and staff about the value of mental health services
- Partner with student health and student affairs to leverage resources
- Follow up with the teammate/student athlete
Resources to consider

- Within Athletics:
  - Academic Affairs
  - Sports Medicine
  - Sport Psychology
  - Sports Nutrition
  - Sports Chaplain
  - Coaches
  - Administration

- On Campus:
  - Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
  - Office of the Dean of Students
  - Student Health Center
  - Student Disability Access Center (SDAC)
  - Women’s Center
  - Office of Multicultural Affairs and/or Office of African–American Affairs
  - Student Affairs
  - University Judiciary Committee
Exposure and Practice!

- Get into a smaller groups of about 8 people
- We will provide a vignette to discuss for 15 minutes
- Nominee to present to the larger group
- Questions to consider:
  1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
  2. How would you respond?
  3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
  4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
  5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
A student-athlete is a high performer in practice and scrimmages, but seems to underperform in game/match/meet situations. They interact/act much differently in the context of competition.

1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
2. How would you respond?
3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
A student-athlete is clearly on edge and increasingly irritable and short-fused. Others on the team are commenting about it, but nobody seems to be addressing it.

1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
2. How would you respond?
3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
You have learned that a student athlete was arrested in an alcohol/substance-related incident.

1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
2. How would you respond?
3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
You notice small cuts on a student-athlete's arm that look like they were made by a knife.

1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
2. How would you respond?
3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
You observe a teammate frequently drinks to the point of losing control. Even though nothing bad has happened, being intoxicated is the only time your teammate seems happy.

1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
2. How would you respond?
3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
You recently heard a student-athlete expressing worry about their coach’s perception of their fitness. For the past week, that student-athlete has gone to the bathroom after every meal.

1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
2. How would you respond?
3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
A student–athlete that is usually very talkative and outgoing has been distant and quiet. The student–athlete skips social activities and seems sluggish in practice.

1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
2. How would you respond?
3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
You are at a party at the team house. You’ve had a few drinks and everyone is having a good time. You notice that your teammate is leading another student upstairs by the hand. This student has been drinking and is stumbling.

1. What is key to attend to in this situation?
2. How would you respond?
3. What resources already exist in Athletics, on campus, off campus to aid in this situation?
4. What resources need to be explored/developed?
5. What questions do you have for the larger group?
Additional resources

- American College Health Association Data Summary: http://www.acha-ncha.org/docs/ACHA-NCHA-II_ReferenceGroup_ExecutiveSummary_Fall2011.pdf
- Athletes Connected: http://athletesconnected.umich.edu/helping-a-student-athlete/
- Step up program: http://stepupprogram.org/