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# **Athletes' Minds Matter Guidebook**

**Supporting athletes' mental and physical health**



## Table of Contents

<b>A Letter from the Creators</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Campaign Goals</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Why Athlete’s Minds Matter</b>	<b>5</b>
Your Role	5
<b>Activities</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Student Voices</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Additional Resources</b>	<b>11</b>
General Resources	11
Warning Signs of Suicide Require Immediate Action	12
Mental Health Resources for Athletes	13

## A Letter from the Creators

Dear coaches, captains, school faculty, and student athletes,

This program was created to bridge the gap between mental and physical performance, in particular, for student athletes. As student athletes ourselves, we have seen firsthand the connection between our athletic performance and our mental health. However, we have also witnessed the increased stigma around mental health conversation for athletes, as oftentimes, the expectation is that physically strong athletes should be mentally impermeable as well. Growing up in the ever-competitive Northern Virginia area, athletics quickly became a priority for both of us. Between the two of us, we participated in soccer, baseball, basketball, swim team, ballet, Tae Kwon Do, and even Crossfit for a short time. By the time we got to high school, we both prioritized competitive swimming, competing with our high school, club, and summer league teams, and eventually pursuing (or planning to pursue) swimming at the collegiate level.

There often exists a stigma around mental health conversation, particularly in athletics. As athletes, we are expected to take all necessary actions to strengthen our bodies physically. We are told to attend practices every day, to lift weights, to eat healthy foods, and even to get enough sleep, but the aspect of our fitness that is often left out is our mental health. We are expected to be physically strong, but often, as athletes, it feels like ignoring mental health challenges is part of this pursuit of physical strength. Rather than asking for help and using the resources we need, it can feel like we should figure things out on our own. But how can we expect to perform at our best if our brains (arguably the most important part of our body) are not in their best shape? Athletes' Minds Matter is designed not only to make student athletes more aware of the mental health resources within schools, but also to offer a starting point for these necessary conversations to decrease the stigma around mental health.

This program is designed for student athletes by student athletes. We have adapted many of the activities developed by [Our Minds Matter](#) to fit the needs of athletic teams. Many of them can even be completed virtually so that teams can stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic or any other time that the team is apart. These activities are indicated with an asterisk throughout this document. We hope that this guide can help start the conversations that need to be started and that as leaders on your teams, these conversations will continue beyond the activities.

Very Respectfully,

Kelsey Isman  
Yorktown High School '19, Wesleyan University '23

Daniel Isman  
Yorktown High School '22

## Campaign Goals

- ★ Educate coaches and athletes about the connection between mental and physical health
- ★ Reduce the stigma around mental health amongst athletes
- ★ Provide mental health resources and activities to coaches and captains
- ★ Foster inclusivity on athletic teams

## Why Athletes' Minds Matter?

\***A 2015 study** demonstrates that student athletes report **higher levels of negative emotional states** than non-student athlete adolescents ([The Atlantic, 2019](#)).

\***With 1 in 5 teenagers** living with mental health concerns, studies show that injuries, emotional stress, and physical strain put high school athletes at **higher risk for anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation** than their non-athlete peers ([Ohio University, 2020](#)).

\***Among professional athletes**, data shows that up to **35% of elite athletes experience a mental health crisis** which may manifest as stress, eating disorders, burnout, or depression and anxiety ([Athletes for Hope, 2021](#)).

### Your Role

**As coaches**, you play a very important role in student athletes' lives. Athletes will remember their favorite coaches for the rest of their lives. As a trusted adult in students' lives, your responsibility is to support young people's wellbeing- both physical and mental. **The conversation about mental health starts with you.**

—**As captains**, you are the leaders of your team. We all know that hearing something from your coach can be different than hearing it from another athlete on your team. Checking in with your group regularly can promote connectedness within your team and allow your fellow athletes to feel more comfortable and be more vulnerable. **As both their peer and leader, your teammates will look up to you and trust you in a very special way.**

**As a member of the athletic department** at your school, we hope that you will take a leadership role when it comes to starting the conversation around mental health. One way that you can support the teams at your school is by simply checking in with athletes and coaches throughout the season.. This is a great way to not only check in with the athletes but also **show that mental health is a priority for the athletic department at your school.**

## Activities

These activities are designed to be completed before or after practice in about ten minutes; **like a mental warm-up or cool-down.** Below you will find a few examples focusing on checking in with teammates, opening a safe space for mental health conversation, and promoting healthy habits. For a full list of activities, please visit the Athletes' Minds Matter portal. Your school's Minds Matter club can assist captains or coaches in these quick activities.

### Connection Activities

- **Smoke, spark, fire** - At the start of practice, invite everyone to share a “smoke” (something negative that is clouding their mind), a “spark” (something they have recently been excited about), and a “fire” (something that has brought them joy for a while).

### Identity and Mental Health

- **Gender Expectations** - Have athletes sit down with an index card and a pen/pencil. Invite them to write down an expectation that they feel is placed on them because of their gender identity. Underneath this expectation, encourage them to write how they feel about this expectation.

Collect the anonymous cards and read them aloud or have athletes read them. Open the floor for athletes to have a discussion about these expectations.

### **Resource Awareness**

- **Identifying Resources** - Have athletes break into small groups and pass out a sheet of paper to each group. Invite them to brainstorm a list of mental health resources in their community and write down the pros and cons of using each resource. After a few minutes, collect the papers and discuss as a large group. Consider posting the information of your school's mental health resources in the athletic space as a follow up. For part 2 of this activity, see the Athlete's Minds Matter portal.

### **Coping Skills**

- **Coping Strategy Keychains** - Pass out an index card to each athlete. Take a minute or two to brainstorm out loud some positive coping skills. Then, invite athletes to write down three positive coping skills that resonate with them on their index card. They can also feel free to decorate their cards as they would like. Once they have finished, they can attach them to their equipment bags with ribbon so they will always have coping skills to turn to during practice or a competition.

### **Healthy Mindset (Body Positivity?)**

- **Body Positive Affirmations** - Read the following affirmations and any other body positive affirmations that resonate with you and your team. Athletes can take turns reading these out loud or one person may read them and others can repeat back.

- My body is a good body. My body is deserving of love and respect. I will not compare my body to anyone else's. I am grateful for everything my body allows me to do. My body is my home and I will build it up, not tear it down. I am strong. I am enough and I always have been.

### **Mindfulness**

- **Grounding Exercise** - At the end of practice, instruct athletes to sit quietly and take three breaths. Then, ask them to silently list 5 things they can see, 4 things they can touch, 3 things they can hear, 2 things they can smell, and 1 thing they can taste.



# Student Voices

We invited student athletes to share their experiences with mental health. We hope that these stories will help student athletes understand that they are not alone in their experiences, and help coaches see the importance of promoting mental wellness on athletic teams.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Alex Brun (he/him) Swimming

“For as long as I can remember, I have suffered from anxiety; it affects all aspects of my life and manifests itself in a constant, seemingly never-ending restlessness. I rarely find myself in moments where I'm truly calm and carefree. Will I be happy and successful in the future? What do people think of me? How will I do on this test? These are just a fraction of the questions that cross my mind on a daily basis.

Most notably, my anxiety has had detrimental effects on my swimming performance, especially at swim meets. **I train very hard at practices and when I get to a competition, I have trouble translating adrenaline into motivation or excitement.** Instead, I become extremely nervous, tense, lightheaded, and all too often, conjure-up negative thoughts. Ultimately, it hurts my performance and invalidates my previous training.

I'm relatively vocal about the mental health issues I experience, and it really helps me to talk about my thoughts and feelings with trustworthy people. I live more comfortably knowing that other people know what I face and that I can ask for help anytime. **Nobody should have to suffer in silence; it's important to be open and to seek consolation when needed.**

\* \* \* \* \*

**Lexi Hurwitz (she/her)**  
**Lacrosse**

“Whenever someone made a mistake on the field, my coach would count to three then every teammate would say, ‘you let the whole team down.’ His goal was to encourage all of us to strive for perfection and take personal responsibility; however, this made every mistake that much more embarrassing and difficult to overcome. **This comment's effects didn't end at the boundaries of the field.** This comment caused a lack of confidence and feelings of inferiority that we carried with us from the field to our classrooms to our jobs to our personal relationships. I believe that one of the purposes of youth sports is to raise kids' confidence from the mastery that comes from years of practicing and playing. **When my coach introduced this saying in my sophomore year of high school, eleven years of built up confidence from my beloved sport was demolished in one season.**”

\* \* \* \* \*

## Additional Resources

### General Resources

These resources are all pulled from the Our Minds Matter website for your convenience. Coaches, captains, and administrators, please provide all athletes with these resources at the beginning of the season. It is also a good practice to have information about your school's specific mental health resources available in athletic facilities, such as school counselor referral forms and office info. More resources can be found at the [our minds matter website](#).

- [Hopeline](#)
  - Call 1-800-Suicida for Spanish speakers
  - Call 1-877-YOUTHLINE for teen-to-teen counseling
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
  - Call 1-800-273-TALK(8255)
- [The Trevor Project](#) – LGBTQ Crisis Hotline
  - Call 1-866-488-7386
- [I'm Alive](#) – an Online Crisis Network Chat
- [Teen Online](#) - Teens helping teens in online chats
- [Find a therapist](#) - Search Psychology Today to find a professional to see in your area
- [Better help](#) - another way to find a therapist near you
- [The Hope Line \(faith-based\)](#) - Live chat available from 2pm – 12am

## Warning Signs of Suicide Require Immediate Action

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself.
- Talking or writing about suicide or death.
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Talking about being a burden to others and how the world would be better off without him/her.
- Talking about being trapped or in unbearable pain.
- Complete withdrawal.
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge.
- Displaying extreme mood swings and acting recklessly.
- Looking for ways to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining access to firearms, pills, or other means to kill oneself.
- Giving away prized possessions and other personal things; tying up loose ends.

\*Consider how these warning signs may present in student athletes at practice, at games, or around school\*

If you or someone you love exhibits any of these signs, you should immediately call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/) at 1-800-273-8255(TALK). If you cannot reach someone on this line, go to an emergency room, make sure you or your loved one is not alone until professional help arrives and remove all firearms, sharp objects, drugs, alcohol and other things that could be used in a suicide attempt.

## Mental Health Resources for Athletes

- [How Being Injured Affects Mental Health](#) - An excerpt from the Sport Science Institute's guide to understanding and supporting student-athlete mental wellness
- [Elite Sport is Gradually Waking up to Widespread Mental Health Issues](#) - Administrators are arriving at a better understanding of the extent of anxiety and depression among top sportspeople and a finger is pointing at social media
- ["It's OK to Not be OK"](#) - What top athletes have said about mental health in sport
- [Coalition Aims to Expand Conversation Around Sports and Mental Health](#) - Changing the dialogue through the Stay in the Game Network
- [NCAA and Mental Health](#) - Supporting student-athlete mental wellness
- [Boys Need Better Access to Mental Health Care](#) - Why aren't they getting it?
- [Eating Disorders and Athletes](#) - National Eating Disorders Association
- [Morgan's Message](#) - Taking a Shot at Mental Health
- [The Hidden Opponent](#) - Advocacy group that raises awareness for student-athlete mental health
- [Mental Wellness & Concussions](#) - Spot the warning signs of a concussion and the adverse mental health impact it can have on athletes
- [Black Student Athletes and Mental Health](#) - Exploring the ways sports culture can both enhance and complicate the mental health of Black student athletes