



Parents: What is mental health and why does it matter?

What is mental health?

Mental health is a person's condition in regard to mental, emotional and psychological well-being. Overall health includes spiritual, physical, financial and relationship elements. Each of these exist on a continuum so we might be doing really well on one, not so well on another and somewhere in the middle on yet another.

As the parent of a student-athlete, you may notice your son or daughter functioning on different levels at different times. They may struggle, strain or strive (see below) in each of the elements of mental health and their level may fluctuate. Stronger mental health helps young people to perform better athletically, academically and socially. It is valuable for you to understand and be able to do something to help when needed. Use this information to guide you.

Levels of mental health?

How well is your child able to do what they need to do and handle what is happening in their life?

- **Struggling** – facing excessive demands and having a great deal of difficulty coping and performing; survival-oriented, professional help may be needed.
- **Straining** – facing a lot of demands and having some difficulty coping and performing; coping-oriented, support and advice may be needed.
- **Striving** – able to meet demands and perform appropriately; goal-oriented; praise and encouragement may be needed.



Positive affects of athletics

Improvement in athletics can help to build resilience that helps people to cope effectively during difficult times.

For example:

- Exercise helps to keep the mind and body healthy.
- Opportunities to connect with teammates.
- Physical growth and strength.
- Opportunities to experience mastery of their sport (proficiency, knowledge and understanding).
- Possible opportunities to be outside in the sunlight and fresh air.

These experiences have a positive influence on mental health.



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The down side of athletics

Athletics is more than fun and games. There are some aspects of involvement in sports that can have a negative impact on mental health.

- It can be difficult or uncomfortable to be in the spotlight.
- Pressure to perform well.
- They might make mistakes, fail or let people down.
- Potential for burn out if involved in multiple sports, activities.
- Difficulty with time management.

As parents it is important, not to just help young people to learn coping strategies, but to make sure that they are using those strategies to maintain a healthy mindset.



Viewing athletics from their perspective

To gain some insight into what your child is going through, try putting yourself in their shoes.

- Being a student-athlete has its ups and downs.
- Look past the surface image. Just because they are wearing a uniform does not mean everything is ok.
- Acknowledge, validate and empathize with the reality of what they're going through. The stress is real and life isn't fun when you're under all the pressure.
- Remember that being a student-athlete is not the same today as it was when they (you) were young.

Self reflection

Take a quiet moment and consider these questions about how you are taking care of your athlete.

Remember there are no correct answers.

- How would you describe your child's life as a student-athlete? (Joyous? Stressful? Promotes connection? Pressure inducing?)
- How are you supporting your son or daughter's athletic endeavors?
- How are you supporting their mental health?
- What is your own relationship with mental health?
- What is your child's relationship with athletics?
- How are these things connected?