

Addressing Mental Health Challenges in Sports

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

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No relevant financial relationship exists

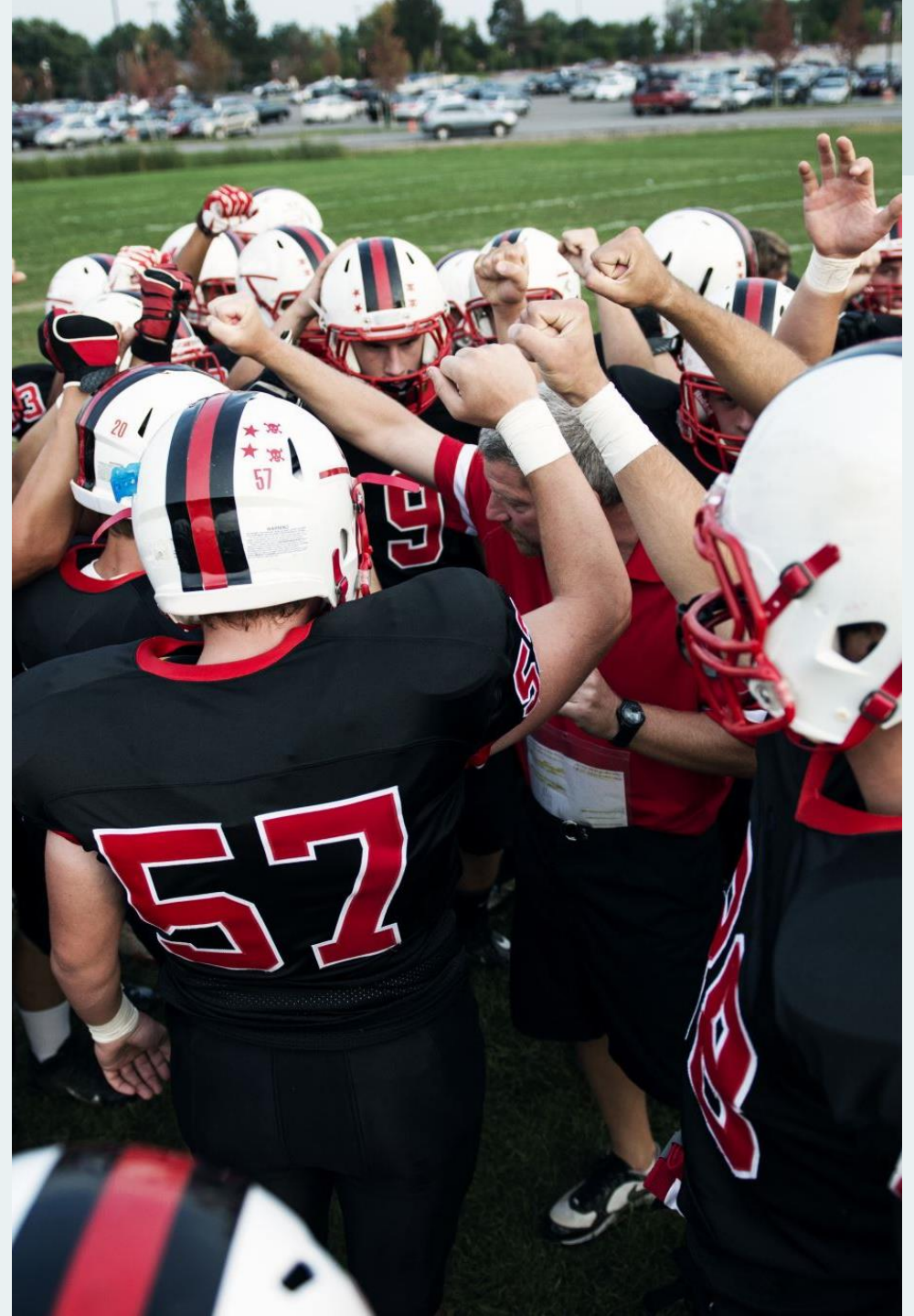
OBJECTIVES

- Explain the role of the Athletic Trainer when a patient discloses a mental health concern.
- Differentiate between typical stress reactions and concerning mental health symptoms.
- Determine when a referral to a qualified mental health professional is warranted.
- Explain the listen, validate and refer principle.

INTRODUCTION

- Clinical and Sport Psychologist
- Doctorate and Masters degree in Clinical Psychology from Nova Southeastern University
- Performance Consultant for over 6 years
- Former Division 1 volleyball player

Understanding Mental Health



What is Mental Health?

- According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (2024) "mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act, and helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices."
 - 23% of all adults experience some form of mental health concerns
 - "Young adults aged 18-25 years had the highest prevalence (36.2%) compared to adults aged 26-49 years (29.4%) and aged 50 and older (13.9%)"
 - 22.2% of adolescents experience mental health disorder that causes severe distress or impairment

Signs and Symptoms

- Emotional Changes
 - Sudden and intense mood swings
 - Sadness
 - Anger/Irritability
 - Excessive worry or fear
- Behavioral Changes
 - Skipping class/practice
 - Poor Hygiene
 - Canceling on plans
 - Difficulty "getting started"
- Difficulty concentrating, focusing, and remembering
- Changes in energy levels
- Complaints of chronic fatigue or illness
- Negative self-talk
- Experience of a traumatic event
- Changes in appetite
- Eating more or too little
- Weight gain or loss

Role Within Athletics



Understanding the Student Athlete Experience

- Research demonstrates that while athletes do experience higher levels of self-esteem and can utilize their sport as a protective factor, they are still at risk for experiencing mental health problems.
- Student athletes experience the same stressors as the non-athlete subgroup however, there is increased pressures placed upon them on a day-to-day basis:
 - Performance
 - Scheduling and time management
 - Injury
 - Coach and team pressure
- Student athletes are less likely to seek help from mental health professionals however, the NCAA has seen an increase in support seeking behaviors
 - Added support systems include coaches, athletic trainers, and team doctors

Understanding the Student Athlete Experience

- Mental health prevalence rates in student athletes are similar to that of the general population.
 - Eating disorders
 - Substance use
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Trauma

The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) has started to identify numerous mental health concerns, including suicidality, amongst collegiate student athletes.

- Over a course of 9 years, suicide made out about 7% of all student athlete deaths (Rao et al., 2015).

Understanding multiple factors contributing to identifying suicide risk in athletes:

- “Tough it out”
- “Show no weakness”

National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA)

- Mental Health Best Practices, 2024
 - A handbook created by the NCAA addressing various mental health topics that influence the daily lives of athletes including eating disorders.
- Recommends
 - Pre-Participation Mental Health Screening
 - Health-Promoting Environments that support mental well-being and resilience
 - Maintaining action plans for providing services and help for student athletes
 - Procedures for identification and referral of student-athletes to qualified practitioners

- Familiarize yourself with the link below as it has resources for a wide range of mental health concerns, crisis resources, and handouts:

<https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/10/sport-science-institute-mental-health.aspx>

What could you hear?

- It would be great if athletes directly told you what is going on however, that may not always happen. Here are some things to listen for if you suspect mental health may be affecting athletes you are working with:
- “I am fine, I have just had a lot on my plate recently.”
- “I am not anxious, I just feel stressed.”
- “I don’t want to go to the team event because I am too tired.”
- “I am not eating this way to lose weight, I am just trying to be healthy.”
- “Yea I have been sad lately but that does not mean there is anything wrong with me.”
- “My teammates hate me. They don’t think that I am good enough to be a part of the team.”
- **I encourage you to think of others or identify common terms your athletes may use when describing their mental health.**

Diversity Considerations

- In a study conducted by Ballesteros (2020) 81% of African American athletes, 78% Latin(x) American athletes, and 79% of Asian American athletes expressed some form of a mental health need.
- Few studies have reviewed the impact of diversity on suicide risk in student athletes. However here is what we know:
 - Engaging in sports is a greater protective factor for Caucasian males than females
 - Suicide risk may increase based on the sport engaged in (i.e., a male cheerleader and a female wrestler are more at risk)
 - Higher rates of suicides occur in professional athletes that have retired or had a career ending injury
 - Freshman experience higher rates of depression than older members of the team
 - Female athletes experience greater levels of depression when experiencing pain (i.e., injury)

Psychological Impact of Athletic Injury



PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF ATHLETIC INJURY

- Often times, the emotional consequences of injury are overlooked. Such consequences include:
 - Depressive Symptoms
 - Anxiety
 - Fear of Re-injury
 - Social Isolation
- Depressed mood is one of the most researched responses to athletic injury
- Research has shown that female athletes are more likely to report depressive symptoms over male athletes
- One week to one month is when athletes reported the most depressive symptoms
 - Three-month period is when they started to subside

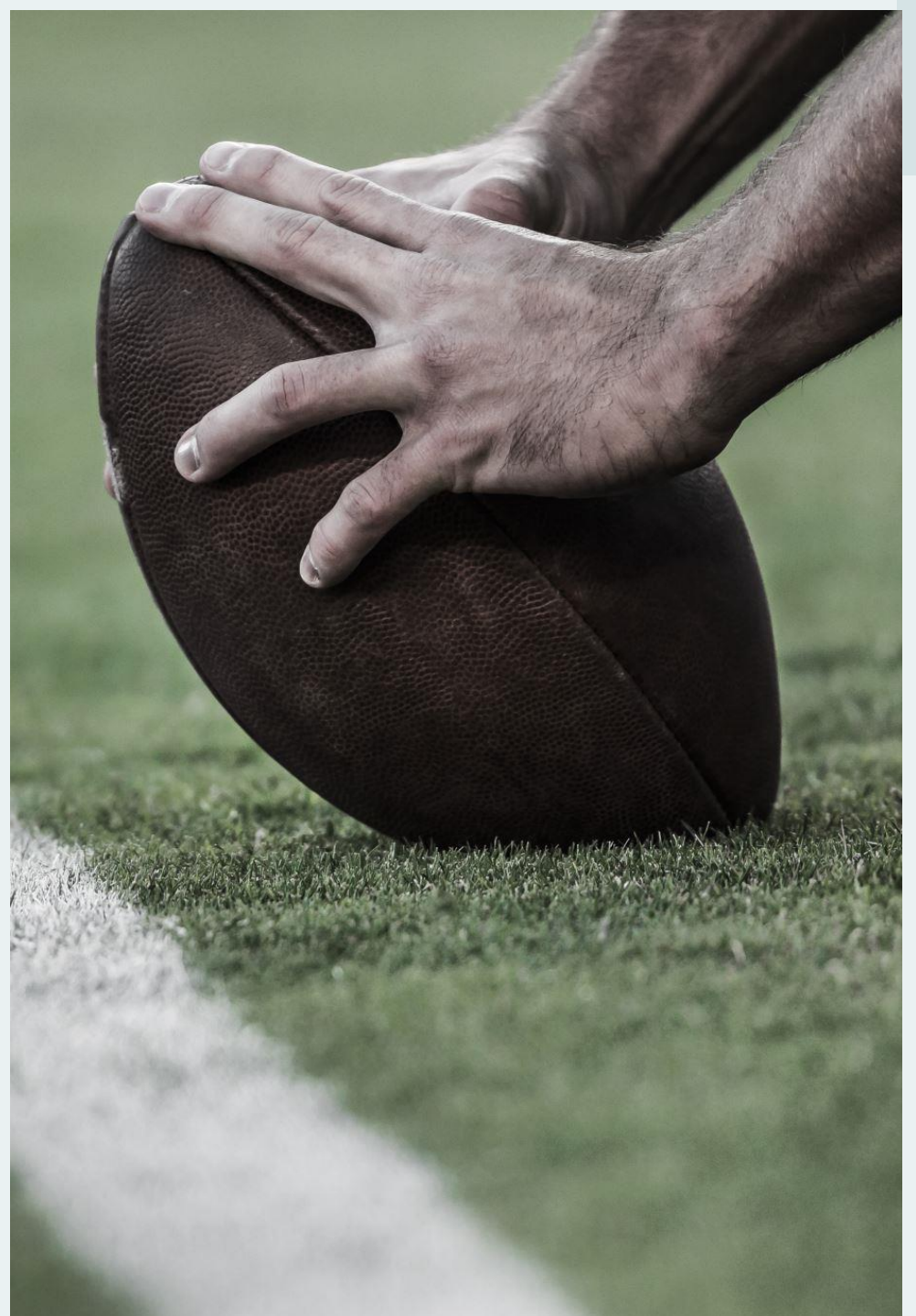
THE ROLE OF THE ATHLETIC TRAINER IN INJURY RECOVERY – MORE THAN PHYSICAL

- Podlog and Eklund (2006) interviewed 12 different athletes about their experiences throughout rehabilitation
 - 9 out of 12 athletes reported some fear or anxiety about re-injury
- They did not want to have any setbacks that would halt their recovery or chances to play again
- If all an athlete is thinking about when they are preparing to return to sport is “if I run this play I could tear my ACL again” what is going to happen to their performance?
- Who are you? How do you identify yourself? If I were to ask you what you do, what would you say?
 - Imagine that suddenly all of those things were taken away from you
 - How would you feel?
- When an athlete is injured, they can feel as though they have lost their identity in regard to sports

THE ROLE OF THE ATHLETIC TRAINER IN INJURY RECOVERY – MORE THAN PHYSICAL

- After ACL surgery, a group of athletes that were participating in a research study reported that they “relied on their family 87% of the time, followed by friends (84%), teammates (65%), athletic trainers (57%), coaches (51%) and physicians (36%)”
- These numbers tell us that athletes not only rely on their friends and family but also their interdisciplinary team
- Social Support was also found to decrease negative mood and help alleviate post-injury anxiety
- Podlog and Eklund (2006) found that throughout their interviews, goals were a common theme that the athletes mentioned
- They referenced short and long term goals some of which including:
 - Making a specific team
 - Returning to pre-injury levels
 - Improving particular skills

Listen, Validate, and
Refer



An athlete comes to you and is expressing that they have been struggling...

Listen

- Time for the discussion
- Attention to detail

Validate

- Affirm
- Appreciate their willingness to reach out

Refer

- Normalize seeking support
- Provide assistance in finding that support

Listen - Validate - Refer

LISTEN

- Let them speak
- Listen to understand, not to respond
- Create time and space for a discussion
- Ask if they would like any one to be present during discussion
- Avoid swearing confidentiality
 - "I promise I won't tell anyone."

VALIDATE

- Show empathy and understanding
- Avoid easy answers such as "it will be ok" and "this will pass"
- Utilize active listening skills (i.e., nodding your head, making eye contact)
- Validating statements can sound like:
 - "That makes a lot of sense."
 - "I hear what you are saying."
 - "This sounds so difficult to deal with."

REFER

- Provide a resource for the student athlete
- Ask if they would like assistance in getting connected to the resource
- "What do you feel you need right now?"

Understanding Your Role

- **DO:**
 - Let them know you are aware that she/he is feeling down and you would like to help
 - Listen to what they are willing to share
 - Always encourage the individual to seek help
- **DO NOT:**
 - Minimize their feelings (i.e., says things like “you shouldn’t feel this way” or “just relax”)
 - Bombard them with “fix it” solutions or advice (i.e., “well you know you could just... ”)
 - Ignore remarks about suicide
 - Promise confidentiality

How to provide a referral or talk about mental health services:

- There are a number of different therapy services such as individual therapy, group therapy, couples, and family therapy.
 - Individual therapy is one-on-one work
 - Group therapy involves a number of (4-10) individuals experiencing similar concerns

Looking into cost can be a large component

- Insurance?
- Sliding Scale?
- What kind of therapist is right for the athlete?
- What does confidentiality mean?
- How do I help my athletes to find a therapist?
 - Student counseling center on campus
 - School counselor on high school and middle school campuses
 - Having a parent or the athlete call their insurance provider for covered practitioners
 - Reviewing search sites such as: [Psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com)

Thank
you!

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