

Therapy 101

Athlete Resource Guide



Mental Skills

Many colleges, leagues and teams offer Mental Skills Coaches and/or Sports Psychologists. These professions focus on developing the mental skills necessary to improve performance and optimize execution. The development of strong mental skills is essential to the success of the team and the individual athlete.

After a game, the Mental Skills Coach and Sports Psychologist might ask an athlete:

How'd you do?

What do we need to do next time to improve confidence and performance?

Did you feel prepared?



What is the difference between **Mental Skills** and **Mental Health**?

The major difference between mental skills and mental health is that the former focuses on performance execution and enhancement while the latter focuses on the specific mental health needs of the athlete such as chronic anxiety & depression, bi-polar, panic disorders, past & current traumas, disordered eating & substance use.

Mental skills coaching and clinical mental health services are NOT competing with one another. To provide holistic care for the athlete, and to optimize the athlete as an athlete AND a person, these services should work alongside one another. Mental Health Specialists, Mental Skills Coaches and Sports Psychologists should collaborate to fully support the athlete's wellbeing.

Mental Health

With a clinical mental health specialist an athlete can explore how being an athlete impacts them as people. In a confidential and therapeutic setting, an athlete can address any existing clinical mental health concerns such as a diagnosed mental illness, struggles with interpersonal relationships and/or past or current traumas.

After a game, the Clinical Mental Health Specialist might ask an athlete:

How are YOU?

What kinds of protective factors can be put in place to keep you feeling emotionally and psychologically stable?

What was it like for you to experience that kind of pressure and competition?



What is **Therapy**?

Therapy is a process and a place!

As a place, therapy is a safe and confidential space for someone to express and explore their emotional and psychological world.

As a process, therapy is a supportive and relational process created by the therapist and the client to address the client's concerns about identity, relationships, traumas, problematic thoughts & behaviors, and mood instability.

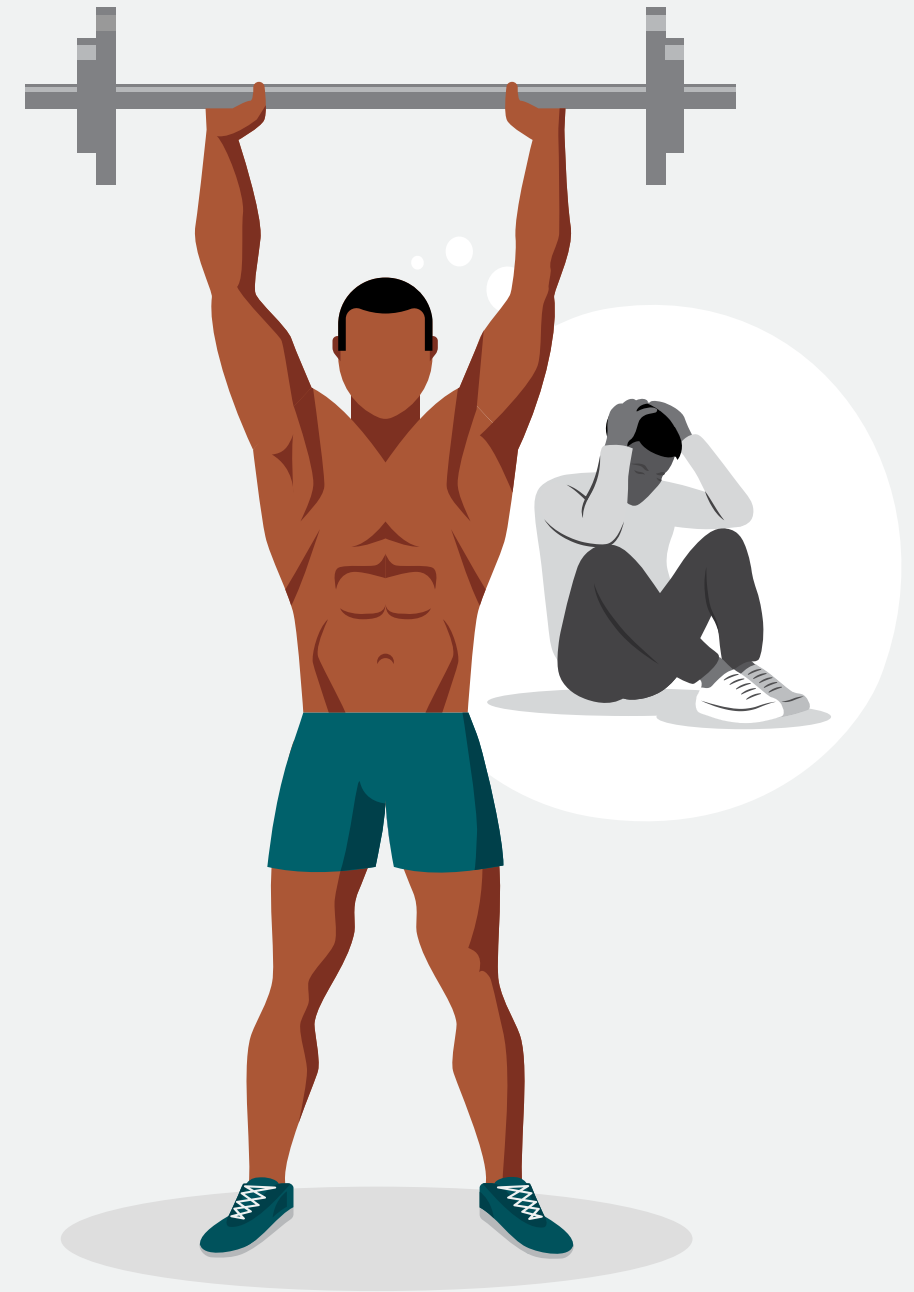
What stigmas or barriers do athletes face when seeking mental health support?

There is a pervasive fear of appearing weak in front of teammates and coaches. Sometimes athletes are hesitant to ask for help because they are afraid of losing playing time.

STRENGTH: Athletes are trained and taught to be STRONG. Being physically and mentally strong is NOT the same as being emotionally strong. There is not a direct correlation between mental strength and emotional/psychological well being.

LACK OF MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES: Many organizations don't have the funding, or even staffing to meet the need of mental health support for their athletes. Additionally, many insurance providers don't recognize mental health issues as significant health issues, meaning there can be high out-of-pocket costs.

LACK OF AWARENESS: Many athletes are unaware they are experiencing a mental health crisis or challenge. There are several reasons for this such as a lack of education on what mental health/mental illness looks like and a tendency to minimize thoughts and feelings. Additionally, while many teams have Mental Skills Coaches and Sports Psychologists, the benefits of these services are not accessible if the athlete is experiencing a mental health crisis or emotionally dysregulated. It is essential to be aware of the difference in treatment between mental skills coaching and mental health services. An unawareness of providing the appropriate care to the athlete's needs will act as a barrier to the accurate form of treatment.



What are the risk factors athletes face that may cause someone to seek therapy?

- Past or current trauma, including complex trauma
- Pre-existing mental illness and/or biological disposition for developing a mental illness
- Problems or challenges within relationships
- Excessive societal pressures on athletes to perform
- Environments perpetrating toxic masculinity or hyper-masculinity
- Priority of physical health over emotional health
- Environments that prioritize mental toughness over mental well-being
- Normalized maladaptive behaviors (ex: rigid food rules, strict exercise schedule/rules)



How do I know if seeking therapy is right for me at this time?

Remember, this is like going to the doctor to get your check up - if something feels off, it's okay to seek external help!

As we destigmatize mental health, we want to acknowledge that ANYONE and EVERYONE can benefit from therapeutic support. If you're currently experiencing any of the following symptoms it could be a good time to explore your therapeutic options with a clinical mental health specialist:

- Experiencing the impact of a current or prior physical injury
- Changes in sleep, appetite and/or weight
- Preoccupation with weight, shape, or size
- Debilitating preoccupation with athletic ability
- Previous coping tools or practices becoming maladaptive
- Loss of interest in activities that previously brought you joy
- Change in athletic performance not explained by a physical cause
- Changes in mood including increased feelings of sadness or anxiety
- Increased feelings of isolation, helplessness and/or hopelessness
- Challenges in personal relationships, including family members, friends, romantic partners, and/or teammates
- Questions about self-identity
- Worries or concerns about life after sport
- Transitioning out of sport and/or other major life events



So, where can I go from here?

If you're experiencing a suicidal crisis or emotional distress, please call the 24/7 suicide prevention hotline at 988.

If you're in crisis and in need of immediate support, please call 911 or go to your nearest emergency room.

If you're looking for more in-depth conversations about this topic, please check out Athlete of Hope's "[Ask A Clinician](#)" series!

If you're looking for accessible mental health education, tips, or resources check out Instagram accounts like [@people_too](#), [@dearmyanxiety](#), [@sidelined_usa](#), [@therapywhileblack](#), [@themindgeek](#), [@my_huddle](#), [@browngirltherapy](#), [@samehere_global](#), [@asianmentalhealthcollective](#).

If you're looking for resources on how to find a therapist in your area, [Psychology Today](#) and the [Alliance of Social Workers in Sports](#) has a database to search for mental health providers. For collegiate athletes, you can check out [Thriving Campus](#). Don't forget to ask your coaching staff, players association, or organization about resources that are already free and available to you.