athletes for hope wellbeing

Athletic Identity Toolkit

A guide to understanding athletic identity and supporting mental well-being beyond sport.



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Welcome to the **Athletic Identity Toolkit!**

The Athletic Identity Toolkit is created for all Athlete for Hope athletes, with the goal of education and empowerment. Athletes spend years learning how to compete, lead, recover, and push through discomfort.

Those strengths do not disappear when a season changes, an injury happens, or your sport looks different than it used to. This tool kit is designed to help you understand athletic identity, recognize when the transition feels heavy, and begin building a fuller sense of self beyond performance.

This toolkit is meant to:

- Give a better understanding of how athletic identity can influence the mental health of athletes throughout any stage of their athletic career
- Enhance your knowledge of how to identify if you or someone else may be struggling
- Inspire and empower you with a few ways to support your mental health at any phase of your athletic career

While this toolkit isn't all encompassing, it is a starting point. At AFH, we will continue to support your education as you move through the causeway - this is just the beginning of something great. Remember - however you get there, it's the journey that matters. Let's make sure we lift up others on our journey, too.

With gratitude and courage,

Athletes for Hope



So, what is athletic identity?

Athletic identity can be defined in many ways, but can generally be understood as the degree to which your engagement in athletics shapes you. Your athletic identity may shape how you see yourself, how others see you, what you prioritize, how you measure success, and where you feel a sense of belonging.

Your athletic identity can also be a source of confidence, discipline, structure, purpose, community, and pride. Research shows that one's athletic identity can be a driving force to their athletic success as it can influence traits such as intrinsic motivation and commitment. However, athletic identity can also be seen as a source of distress during periods of change or transition from sport.

Athletic identity can look different for everyone, but there are two main categories that are important to distinguish between- fixed or flexible.

A fixed athletic identity often occurs when one has not explored interests or roles outside of their sport, and when the majority of their concept of self is their sport (Haslam et al., 2021).

Fixed athletic identity:

- "I am a lacrosse player."
- "I am a runner."
- "I am a teammate."
- "I am someone who competes."



Flexible athletic identities are seen in those who have explored interests and communities outside of their sport, and who define themself with sport being just a part of who they are.

Flexible athletic identity:

- "I am known for being strong, disciplined, and driven."
- "I am a runner, a friend, and a family member"



In order to achieve one's goals in sport it can be challenging to not develop a fixed athletic identity. However, having a flexible identity has been proven to reduce the likelihood of experiencing distress during high risk moments that can occur during an athletic career.

High-Risk Moments for Athletic Identity Stress

Some moments can intensify identity questions. These moments do not affect every athlete the same way, but they are important times to check in with yourself or someone you care about.



Injury

An injury can change more than your physical ability. It can interrupt your role, routine, confidence, and connection to the team. The link between injury and mental health is well documented. Reviews have found that sport injury is associated with psychological distress, anxiety, depression symptoms, reduced social functioning, and lower quality of life, and that high athletic identity can shape how athletes respond to injury and rehabilitation (Edison et al., 2021).

Athletes may struggle with:

- Feeling separated from teammates or competition
- Worrying about being replaced or forgotten
- Feeling frustrated with the pace of recovery
- Questioning whether they are still an athlete while injured
- Hiding emotional pain because they are focused on physical rehab

Supportive Reminder

Rest, rehab, and recovery are not signs of failure. They are part of caring for the athlete and the person.



Being cut from a team or replaced in your role

Being cut or being benched can feel personal, even when decisions involve many factors. It may bring embarrassment, anger, sadness, or self-doubt. The experience of being cut or having your role replaced can cause stressors such as sudden role loss, reduced belonging, uncertainty, and threats to identity (Reifsteck et al., 2023).

Athletes may struggle with:

- Feeling like they lost a community overnight
- Questioning their worth or ability
- Avoiding people connected to the team
- Feeling unsure where they belong next
- Believing one decision defines their entire athletic story

Supportive Reminder

Being cut is an experience, not an identity. It may change your path, but it does not erase your work, character, or future.



Retirement

The end of a season, college career, professional career, or long-term competitive role can bring mixed emotions. Some athletes feel proud and ready. Others feel grief, emptiness, or fear.

Research on athletic retirement shows that athletes with a strong athletic identity may be more likely to experience mental health symptoms during the transition out of sport, especially when retirement is unexpected or support is limited (Roberts et al., 2023).

Athletes may struggle with:

- Missing the structure and intensity of competition
- Feeling uncertain about their next role
- Losing regular contact with teammates and staff
- Feeling pressure to "move on" before they are ready
- Wondering who they are without the uniform, schedule, or title

Supportive Reminder

Transition is not a single day. It is a process. You are allowed to need time, support, and new experiences.

Signs someone may be struggling

These high-risk moments for athletic identity stress can bring grief, confusion, anger, relief, pressure, or uncertainty. Struggling does not mean you are weak. It means something important is changing, and your mind and body may be trying to adjust.

Athletes often live with clear goals: make the team, win the game, beat the time, get stronger, recover faster, earn the role. When sport changes, those goals may suddenly feel unclear.

Consider reaching out to a trusted person or mental health professional if you notice:

- Persistent sadness, anxiety, anger, or numbness
- Pulling away from people who care about you
- Major changes in sleep, appetite, motivation, or daily functioning
- Feeling hopeless about the future
- Using substances, overtraining, or risky behaviors to cope
- Thoughts of harming yourself or not wanting to be here
    - If you feel unsafe or are worried you may hurt yourself, seek immediate support!

You do not have to wait until things feel unbearable to ask for help. Support can be useful when you feel stuck, overwhelmed, disconnected, or unsure how to move forward.







What Helps

Athletic identity does not need to disappear. It can evolve. The same qualities that helped you in sport can support you in relationships, school, work, leadership, advocacy, and personal growth!

Evidence-informed transition support often focuses on preparation, social support, career development, and building a broader identity that includes but is not limited to sport (Barcza-Renner et al., 2020).

Identity diversification means building a fuller sense of who you are.

Instead of asking,
"Who am I if I'm not an athlete?"
try asking, "**What else is true about me?**"



You might also be

- A leader
- A student
- A friend
- A mentor
- A creator
- A learner

This approach is consistent with research suggesting that athletes benefit from developing athletic and nonathletic sources of identity, especially because injury and retirement can disrupt the athlete role unexpectedly (Roberts et al., 2023)

Support from multiple mentors can be especially helpful during transitions. Think of it as creating your own "board of directors" to ensure you have a network of support. In order to help build and grow an athlete's identity, which innately has many facets, multiple people need to be involved to meet the player's needs. Consideration should be given to someone who shares the athlete's cultural, ethnic, and racial background, potentially a separate individual who can relate to their sport culture, and also a person or people who the athlete can connect to around hobbies or other professional interests outside sports, amongst several other combinations of mentors.

The goal being that the athlete is surrounded by people they can contact to grow, not only while in sport, but also during their transition beyond and outside of it. (Kelly et al., 2014)

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