Sports Psychiatry: A Primer on the Mental Health of Young Athletes

Stacy L. Leon, MD[1] and John Powers[2]

[1]Lead Author
[2]Second Author

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Common Psychiatric Diagnoses in Young Athletes
3. Team vs. Individual Sports
4. Stressors in Youth Sports
5. Healthy Coping Strategies
6. When to Seek Treatment
7. Conclusion
8. Breathing Exercises and Screening Tools
9. References

Introduction

Sports psychiatry focuses on identifying and treating mental health challenges that arise in connection with sports participation. While the primary goal is improving mental health, enhancements in athletic performance often follow naturally. Sports psychiatrists evaluate, diagnose, and treat mental health issues that athletes experience, striving to ensure their well-being both on and off the field.

This primer is specifically tailored to address the mental health needs of child and adolescent athletes. A population that is often underserved in terms of accessible guidance. My aim is to provide a resource for youth, their families, coaches, and others involved in their lives. De-stigmatizing mental health struggles and emphasizing the importance of early intervention is a key focus.

Children and adolescents' mental health is shaped by the social structures they engage with, and the environment they are fostered in; family, school, peer groups, sports teams, and coaches. A systems-based approach is critical to effectively coordinate support across these areas. Given the large number of youth participating in sports and the potential for some to continue at collegiate or professional levels, it's crucial to identify and treat psychiatric conditions early. This manual aims to serve as an accessible guide for anyone working with young athletes, helping to address the unique stressors they face.

Common Psychiatric Diagnoses

1. Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders in young athletes may include generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, and sports-specific anxiety. While some anxiety is normal in competitive settings, it becomes a concern when it causes significant distress or impairs functioning in sports, school, or daily life. Symptoms may include:

- Persistent worry or fear
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulty concentrating
- Panic attacks
- Avoidance of school, practice, or competition

Athletes often hide or underreport these symptoms, so it's vital to ask directly about their experiences and monitor their behavior for signs of distress.

2. Depression

Depression in children and adolescents may not present as classic sadness but rather as irritability, loss of interest, poor academic or athletic performance, and changes in sleep or appetite. Asking about suicidal ideation is critical, as is seeking professional help when concerns arise.

3. Eating Disorders

Sports emphasizing weight or leanness—like gymnastics, wrestling, or running—carry a heightened risk of eating disorders. Screening for disordered eating is crucial, as these conditions can be life-threatening. Start with simple questions about dieting, weight loss, or body image concerns and refer to a primary care physician or specialist for further evaluation if needed.

4. Substance Use Disorders

Though athletes may have lower substance use rates overall, issues can still arise with alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, stimulants, and performance-enhancing drugs. Addressing these concerns through nonjudgmental conversations and regular screenings is vital. Using a nonjudgmental, non confrontational approach is essential to creating a safe space where athletes feel comfortable addressing these issues.

5. ADHD

Athletes with ADHD face unique challenges, particularly when using stimulants, which can lead to side effects like heat intolerance or elevated heart rate. Collaborating with healthcare providers to adjust medication timing or explore alternatives is essential, especially as stimulant use may require waivers for collegiate or professional athletes.

6. Sleep Disorders

Busy schedules and travel often lead to sleep disturbances in young athletes. Behavioral interventions, like establishing bedtime routines and practicing relaxation techniques, are preferred over medications for this age group.

7. Concussions

Heightened awareness of concussions has emphasized the importance of proper diagnosis and recovery. Athletes often under report symptoms out of fear of losing playing time. Educating athletes, coaches, and parents on the dangers of "playing through" a concussion is critical to long-term health. A good resource is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Concussion prevention and recognition in youth sports.

8. Overtraining Syndrome

Overtraining can lead to physical and mental burnout, characterized by fatigue, poor performance, and loss of motivation. The best treatment is rest, combined with a focus on sleep, nutrition, and overall well-being. Therapy may help athletes struggling to accept reduced training intensity.

Team vs. Individual Sports

Athletes face different stressors depending on whether they participate in team or individual sports:

- **Individual Sports**: The pressure to perform falls entirely on the individual, often leading to heightened anxiety, particularly when results impact recruitment or advancement.

- **Team Sports**: Challenges include navigating team dynamics, securing playing time, and managing interpersonal conflicts. Both scenarios require mindful support from parents, coaches, and mentors.

Stressors in Youth Sports

1. **Academic Pressures**
   Balancing school and sports can lead to long, exhausting days. Parents and coaches should support young athletes in managing their time and alleviating unnecessary stress.
2. **Parental Expectations**
   Perceived or real parental pressure to excel can diminish the joy of sports for young athletes. Families may need help to navigate this dynamic and refocus on the athlete's personal goals and enjoyment.
3. **Peer Issues**
   Relational challenges, bullying, or isolation are common during adolescence and can negatively impact athletic performance and overall well-being. Recognizing and addressing these issues early is essential.

Healthy Coping Strategies

1. **Mindfulness and Meditation**
   Developmentally appropriate mindfulness practices—such as guided breathing exercises, visualization, or engaging in calming activities like art or music—can help athletes manage stress.
2. **Positive Self-Talk**
   Encourage young athletes to develop affirmations and practice reframing negative thoughts to boost confidence and resilience.
3. **Self-Care**
   Adequate sleep, nutrition, and social time are essential for both athletic performance and personal development. Helping athletes develop interests outside of sports can also promote long-term mental health.

When to Seek Treatment

The primary indicator for seeking treatment is when symptoms interfere with significant areas of life, such as school, family, or social relationships. Warning signs may include:

- Sudden changes in sleep, appetite, or concentration
- Withdrawal from family or friends
- Declining academic or athletic performance

Initial evaluations often begin with a pediatrician, but a psychiatrist may be necessary for more severe or persistent concerns. If suicidal ideation, eating disorders, or substance use issues are present, immediate intervention is critical.

Conclusion

This primer offers a foundational understanding of the mental health challenges faced by young athletes. By addressing these issues early and fostering supportive environments, we can ensure better outcomes for their well-being. Collaboration between families, coaches, and mental health professionals is key to helping youth navigate the pressures of sports while maintaining a healthy and balanced life.

Appendix: Breathing Techniques for Young Athletes

Effective breathing techniques can play a pivotal role in reducing stress, enhancing focus, and improving athletic performance. Below are two accessible techniques suitable for children and adolescents, designed to help them manage anxiety, build energy, or relax.

1. Relaxation Breathing (Box Breathing)

Box breathing is a simple, structured method to promote calmness and reduce anxiety, often used by athletes and professionals in high-pressure situations.

Steps:

1. **Inhale** deeply through your nose for a count of **4**
2. **Hold** your breath for a count of **4**
3. **Exhale** slowly through your mouth for a count of **4**
4. **Pause** after exhaling for a count of **4**

Repeat this cycle **5–7 times** or until a sense of relaxation is achieved. Athletes can practice this before competitions or during stressful moments in school or sports.

Tips:

- Visualize a square while practicing, imagining each count as moving along one side of the box.
- Adjust the counts to 3 or 5 seconds depending on the child's comfort level.

2. Energizing Breathing (Power Breathing)

This technique helps to invigorate and boost energy levels, making it ideal for pre-game preparation or overcoming fatigue.

Steps:

1. Sit or stand in a relaxed position.
2. Take **quick, shallow breaths** in through your nose and out through your mouth in a steady rhythm.
    - Aim for about **2–3 short breaths per second**.
3. Perform this breathing for **15–30 seconds**, then pause to take a deep, slow breath.

Repeat the cycle up to **3 times**, pausing after each set.

Tips:

- Avoid practicing this for extended periods, as it may cause dizziness.
- Encourage the athlete to combine this with light movement, such as shaking out their hands, for a dynamic energy boost.

Practice and Integration

- Encourage athletes to practice these techniques in low-stress environments first, such as during downtime at home or before bed.
- Over time, these breathing techniques can become automatic tools to handle challenges during sports and life.

Eating Disorder Screening Tool

SCOFF Questionnaire

- **Annotation:** This five-question tool effectively identifies individuals at risk for eating disorders. Each "yes" response scores one point, with a total score of two or more suggesting the possibility of an eating disorder. The SCOFF is particularly valuable for early detection in athletic settings, where pressures related to body image and performance can increase vulnerability.
- **Sample Questions:**
    1. Do you make yourself *Sick* because you feel uncomfortably full?
    2. Do you worry you have lost *Control* over how much you eat?
    3. Have you recently lost more than *One* stone (14 lbs) in a three-month period?
    4. Do you believe yourself to be *Fat* when others say you are too thin?
    5. Would you say that *Food* dominates your life?
- **Where to Access:** The tool is freely available via resources like the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA).

Depression Screening Tool

Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)

- **Annotation:** The PHQ-9 is a widely used and validated screening tool for depression. It assesses symptom severity over the past two weeks and is simple to administer in both clinical and non-clinical settings. For young athletes, it helps identify depression that may stem from sports-related pressures, injuries, or academic challenges.
- **Sample Items:**
    - Little interest or pleasure in doing things.
    - Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.
    - Trouble concentrating on tasks or activities.
- **Scoring:** Total scores range from 0–27, with higher scores indicating greater symptom severity. A score of 10 or more suggests the need for further evaluation.
- **Where to Access:** Available for free download on the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) website.

Concussion Screening Tool

CDC HEADS UP Concussion Checklist

- **Annotation:** Developed for parents, coaches, and athletes, this checklist is a straightforward guide to recognizing concussion symptoms and responding appropriately. It provides actionable steps for seeking medical evaluation and outlines key signs to monitor during and after sports activities. This tool is indispensable for youth sports programs and recreational teams.
- **Common Symptoms to Watch For:**
    - Headache or “pressure” in the head.
    - Nausea or vomiting.
    - Difficulty concentrating or feeling “foggy.”
    - Sensitivity to light or noise.
    - Loss of consciousness (even briefly).
- **Where to Access:** The tool is available for free on the CDC HEADS UP website.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.

Baron, D. A., Reardon, C. L., & Baron, S. H. (Eds.). (2013). *Clinical sports psychiatry: An international perspective* (1st ed.). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118404904

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *Concussion prevention and recognition in youth sports*. https://www.cdc.gov/headsup/youthsports/index.html

Creado, S., & Reardon, C. L. (2016). The sports psychiatrist and performance-enhancing drugs. *International Review of Psychiatry, 28*(6), 564–571. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2016.1190690

Creado, S., & Reardon, C. L. (2016). The sports psychiatrist and psychiatric medication. *International Review of Psychiatry, 28*(6), 606–613. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2016.1190691

Edwards, C. D. (2021). Depression assessment: Challenges and treatment strategies in the athlete. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 44*(3), 381–392. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psc.2021.04.011

Gill, V. S., Sullivan, G., Stearns, H., Tummala, S. V., Haglin, J. M., Economopoulos, K. J., Marks, L., & Chauhan, M. (2024). Mental health in elite athletes: A systematic review of suicidal behaviour as compared to the general population. *Sports Medicine, 54*(6), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-024-01998-2

Glick, I. D., Stillman, M. A., Reardon, C. L., & Ritvo, E. C. (2012). Managing psychiatric issues in elite athletes. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 73*(5), 640–648. https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.11r07481

Glick, I. D., Stull, T., & Kamis, D. (Eds.). (2018). *The ISSP manual of sports psychiatry*. Routledge.

Han, D. H., McDuff, D., Thompson, D., Hitchcock, M. E., Reardon, C. L., & Hainline, B. (2019). Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in elite athletes: A narrative review. *British Journal of Sports Medicine, 53*(12), 741–745. https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2019-100713

Lynch, J. H. (2021). Posttraumatic stress disorder in elite athletes. *Current Sports Medicine Reports, 20*(12), 645–650. https://doi.org/10.1249/JSR.0000000000000918

McDuff, D. R. (2012). *Sports psychiatry: Strategies for life balance and peak performance*. American Psychiatric Publishing.

National Eating Disorders Association. (n.d.). *Eating disorders and athletes*. https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/general-information/athletes

National Institute of Mental Health. (n.d.). *Mental health information*. https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics

Oregon Health Sciences University. (2019, June 4). *Psychiatry Grand Rounds: Unique challenges of diagnosis and treatment of PTSD in athletes*.

Pluhar, E., McCracken, C., Griffith, K. L., Christino, M. A., Sugimoto, D., & Meehan III, W. P. (n.d.). Team sport athletes may be less likely to suffer anxiety or depression than individual sport athletes. *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine, 18*(3), 490–496. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6683616/

Purcell, R., Gwyther, K., & Rice, S. M. (2019). Mental health in elite athletes: Increased awareness requires an early intervention framework to respond to athlete needs. *Sports Medicine - Open, 5*(1), 46. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-019-0220-1

Purcell, R., Rice, S. M., Butterworth, M., Clements, M., & Rice, S. G. (2019). Mental health in elite athletes: International Olympic Committee consensus statement. *British Journal of Sports Medicine, 53*(11), 667–699. https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2019-100715

Reardon, C. L., & Factor, R. M. (2010). Sport psychiatry: A systematic review of diagnosis and medical treatment of mental illness in athletes. *Sports Medicine, 40*(11), 961–980. https://doi.org/10.2165/11536580-000000000-00000

Reardon, C. L., Gorczynski, P., Hainline, B., Hitchcock, M., & Rice, S. (2024). Anxiety disorders in athletes. *Clinics in Sports Medicine, 43*(1), 33–52. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.csm.2023.06.002

Sheppard Pratt. (2024, October 9). *On-demand Grand Rounds: Mental health in athletes*.

Stillman, M. A., Brown, T., Ritvo, E. C., & Glick, I. D. (2016). Sport psychiatry and psychotherapeutic intervention, circa 2016. *International Review of Psychiatry, 28*(6), 614–622. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2016.1202812

Glick, I. D., Stillman, M. A., & McDuff, D. (2020). Update on integrative treatment of psychiatric symptoms and disorders in athletes. *The Physician and Sportsmedicine, 48*(4), 385–391. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913847.2020.1757370

U.S. Anti-Doping Agency. (2023). *Therapeutic use exemptions for athletes*. https://www.usada.org/tue/