

Is my young athlete mentally well? When and How to Intervene

Mental wellness can be difficult for parents, coaches, and other guardians to cope with when it comes to young athletes. Is a bad grade on a test just because an athlete didn't study, or is it a sign of something deeper? Is an athlete who's been tired at practice all week a bit overextended, or are they struggling with insomnia and depression? Coaches and parents should be on the lookout for signs that an athlete's mental health is suffering, and while they may not be equipped to help the athlete, guardians can help connect an athlete with the right professionals.

Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) Kevin Chapman, PhD, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, shares red flags to look for when it comes to an athlete's mental well-being, and explains how to intervene when you do suspect that there is an issue.

What are some common mental wellness red flags?

Parents identifying these mental wellness problems with their athletes need to think about several different factors, says Chapman.

1. [Personal distress](#). "In other words, is the athlete bothered, and saying they're bothered?" Chapman asks. "That's the easiest one, where your athlete is telling you that they are in distress and need help."
2. Impairment in functioning. "Whether it be competition, school, friendships, or anything your athlete normally does at a certain level, any unexplained drop could signal that something may be wrong," Chapman says.
3. Physical changes. "Sleep disturbance is a big warning sign, since young athletes typically sleep well. You may notice your athlete is sleeping constantly, or that they're struggling to fall asleep and suffering from insomnia—sleep changes in either direction are concerning. [Eating is similar](#): Big swings in how much your athlete is eating can be a warning sign."
4. [Increase in worry](#). "If you notice your athlete acting more anxious and worrying more than usual, that can be a red flag," says Chapman. Some worry is normal—if finals are coming up, for instance—but if the worry seems more generalized, that's cause for concern.
5. [Change in aggression](#) and other external behaviors. "If your athlete is suddenly acting more aggressive, crying, yelling, or generally acting out, that can be a sign as well," says Chapman.

However, these signs and potential symptoms rely on you knowing your athlete's baseline. Some athletes are naturally more prone to dramatic tears and short bursts of anxiety that go away when finals week is over. Some athletes naturally sleep 11 hours each night, while others are bouncing out of bed after six hours. Pay attention to your athlete before there's an issue, so that you'll be able to notice when changes happen.

What is the first step a parent should take?

"[Rule number one is to talk to the athlete first](#), rather than skipping that step and going beyond the athlete," says Chapman. "If I'm an anxious parent, I could be reading into something that's not even a problem. It could be that your child had a fight with a best friend, or didn't study for a

test and failed, or just had a tough week at practice. We don't want to hold an intervention where we bring in an expert and make things overly dramatic. The key is talking to the athlete first to gauge if the problem you suspect is clinically significant." If your athlete says that things are fine, consider setting up a weekly check in for you to chat about how they're feeling, voice any concerns, and see if the situation has changed. And make sure that your athlete understands that you're here to help, not to accuse them of bad behavior.

When is seeking help necessary?

Unfortunately, there's no single right answer for who to go to first when seeking help for your athlete. But you can start with searching for a counselor to speak with, or if you're concerned about your athlete's health—maybe because there are eating or sleeping issues as well as emotional dysregulation—you should also consult your primary care physician.

"If you're looking for a therapist, I recommend looking online at the [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#), or the [Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies](#) to find someone in your area who specializes specifically in emotional symptoms. Going to the right person does matter," Chapman says. If you still aren't sure what to look for, consider asking your athlete's school guidance counselor for some local recommendations.

If your athlete is unwilling to admit that there's anything wrong but you're still seeing warning signs, consider asking them to go to a counselor with you to discuss the situation. Keep continuing the conversations as well. Maybe your athlete is just going through a rough adjustment period or a tough time that's a normal part of adolescence, and the symptoms you're noticing will gradually fade. But if the behaviors persist, consider consulting with a counselor to voice your concerns and discuss potential next steps.

When is medication necessary?

It should come as no surprise that while medication can certainly help many young people deal with [depression, anxiety, and other mental wellness issues](#), it shouldn't be prescribed as a blanket approach to dealing with any issues, and should always be discussed with a doctor. Additionally, finding a form of talk therapy or counseling to accompany any medication-based intervention is important. "The first-line approach to dealing with symptoms of emotional difficulties tends to be medication," Chapman says. "You can start by discussing options with a pediatrician, but you may also want to consult a psychiatrist for a second opinion, since they'll be more specifically versed in how to best help your athlete." Lastly, not every athlete struggling with a mental health issue is going to require medication. Some will benefit from talk therapy alone, so don't assume a diagnosis of anxiety immediately means medication.

Takeaway

Don't wait for your young athlete to ask for help. Pay attention to warning signs like sudden, drastic changes in behavior and mood, and even if it's not a comfortable topic, bring it up with your athlete. Make sure that your athlete knows they have your full support, and work with your athlete to find them the right professional help.



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