



How to Talk About Mental Wellness with Your Athletes

It can be a daunting task, speaking to your athletes about mental wellness. It's a sensitive topic and one that can't be tackled lightly. Knowing that, psychiatrist Dave Conant-Norville, MD, shares some valuable tools and tips on how to start the conversation about mental well-being with your athlete, and how to keep those conversations moving forward.

Understand that mental wellness starts now

"Mental wellness includes all of the processes that go on in your brain — thinking, emotions, behavior, relationship processing. There's a lot going on. The idea of mental wellness is optimizing, being free of disease. We want to talk about mental wellness in order to help prevent mental illness," he adds. "We shouldn't start the conversation after there's already a problem, we want people to be mentally well."

Start with the performance benefits

Some kids are naturally going to be skeptical when it comes to talking to any adult about feelings and emotions, but Conant-Norville suggests leading the conversation with an explanation of mental wellness as performance-enhancing for sport.

"I always say your health is only as good as your mental health, because it's the governing factor for the rest of your health," he adds. "It impairs your physical function. An athlete can't function optimally without [mental wellness](#). It's really important to get over the dichotomy of the mind and body, that the two are separate."

Implement mindfulness

Deep breathing and meditation are two of Conant-Norville's favorite practices for athletes, and it's one of the fastest, simplest ways to get 'buy in' from your athletes.

Starting and ending practice with a minute or two of silence or even using a [short guided meditation](#) can be a great way to introduce the key mindfulness element of mental well-being into your athlete's life without adding stress of 'meditation as homework.' For parents, this can also be a great after-dinner wind-down that the whole family could take part in.

Provide other mental tools

“Successful coaches help students build a vocabulary around things like stress and [anxiety](#). They teach game-day tactics like how to focus and how to relax and mentally prep for a big game,” says Conant-Norville. “For example, if you’re not [sleeping adequately](#), you’re not going to do well,” he adds

Help athletes create a toolkit, whether it be teaching them about the importance of [full nights of sleep](#), practicing deep breathing exercises that an athlete can use before a key practice, or simply making it OK for an athlete to come to you with an emotional issue.

Create a trusting community

Creating a sense of trust and fun goes a long way towards encouraging mental wellness. According to Conant-Norville, it also creates a sense of community and encourages open lines of communication. The team that truly enjoys their time together is the team that can share their feelings.

But, don’t just start a conversation with ‘tell me about your emotions,’ says Conant-Norville. That puts most athletes on the defensive, and likely won’t yield authentic results. The same is true for parents: it’s easy to want to demand an emotional conversation but without that sense of trust, it’s unlikely that your athlete will be open with you.

Part of opening a conversation around mental wellness is paying attention to warning signs and knowing when it’s time to seek professional help for an athlete.

“Coaches are not therapists. You’re not equipped to treat mental health issues,” warns Conant-Norville. If you suspect that an athlete is dealing with some kind of mental health problem, make sure the athlete gets the help he or she needs from an expert.



About TrueSport

TrueSport®, a movement powered by the experience and values of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, champions the positive values and life lessons learned through youth sport.

TrueSport® inspires athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators to change the culture of youth sport through active engagement and thoughtful curriculum based on cornerstone lessons of sportsmanship, character-building, and clean and healthy performance, by creating leaders across communities through sport.

You can link back to the TrueSport article beginning August 1st at:
<https://learn.truesport.org/talk-mental-wellness-athletes/>