

The Athletic Director's Mental Health Toolbox: Preventing Burnout for Coaches and Athletes



Welcome to the Mental Health Toolbox

- Key Concepts:
 - Operational Structures
 - Proactive Approaches
 - Physical, Emotional, Personal Wellness
- Take a moment to check in with yourself
 - How are you feeling right now?
 - [How We Feel](#)
 - What brought you to this presentation?
 - [Gratitude](#)

Understanding Mental Health

- Encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being
- Impacts how we:
 - Think
 - Feel
 - Act
 - Manage stress
 - Form relationships
- Changes throughout different life stages



The Gen Z Student, Athlete, & Coach

“Yeah, that does me no good. All my learning has been online.”

Response from 24-year-old assistant athletic administrator to Darryl Nance, when shown the first three chapters of a potential book.



Who is Gen Z?

Birth Year

Born after 1996.

First Job

54% believe their first job will come through digital/social connections

Confidence

52% are more confident in their tech skills than soft skills.

Ethnicity

Nearly 50% of Gen Z are non-white.

Technology

First 100% digitally native generation.



- Born between late 1990's and early 2010's—usually 1996/1997-2010
- First 100% digitally native generation
- More comfortable with tech skills than “soft” skills
- 50% of Gen Z is non-white
- iGen—new description



Gen Z

- Decreased rates of
 - Drinking
 - Drug and alcohol use
 - Dating/sex
 - Overall, less risky behavior
- Delays in work and obtaining driver license
 - Delayed adulthood?
- Time with friends, but alone



Gen Z – Contributors to Anxiety

- More time on-line, alone
- “Virtual friends”
- FOMO
- Huge emphasis on academic and/or athletic success
- Life is scheduled



Gen Z

- Gen Zers, ranging from middle school students to early professionals, are reporting higher rates of anxiety, depression, and distress than any other age group
- Gen Zers were more likely (1.8x) to report having a behavioral-health diagnosis but less likely to seek treatment compared with other generations
- Factors that account for Gen Z's lack of seeking help: developmental stage, disengagement from their healthcare, perceived affordability, and stigma associated with mental disorders



Gen Z Athletes

- Many student-athletes report *higher levels of negative emotional states* than non-student-athlete adolescents.
- High-school sports have begun to copy the training methods and intensity levels of college sports - *“sports professionalization”*
- *“Intensive parenting”* has become the norm, parents in recent decades have pressed upon their kids the idea that endless practice is the route to athletic mastery.
- *Youth sports industrial complex*—annually over \$16 Billion in the US

Wisconsin Athletics: The Current Landscape

- Student Mental Health Data (MMSD Example):
 - 32-35% of students report feeling anxious "often" or "always"
 - 28% report symptoms of depression
- Critical Questions for Athletic Directors:
 - "Am I supporting my coaches' mental health?"
 - "How can I provide needed resources?"
 - "Am I supporting my athletes' mental health?"
 - "How can I provide needed resources?"

Building a Culture of Mental Wellness

- Athletic Directors and Coaches CREATE the culture
- Key Responsibilities:
 - Support mental wellness education
 - Emphasize rest and recovery
 - Provide safe spaces for dialogue
 - Stress importance of help-seeking
- Language Matters Protocol:
 - Avoid stigmatizing mental health language
 - Use "people-first" communication

Creating Psychological Safety

- Foundations of a Psychologically Safe Environment:
 - Trust
 - Respect
 - High-performance support
- Key Components:
 - Quality interpersonal relationships
 - Consistency and accountability
 - Vulnerability acceptance
 - Open communication

Decreasing Stigma

Athletic Directors and Coaches MUST:

- Support mental wellness education
- Avoid negative words around mental health
 - Crazy, nuts, psycho, etc.
 - Use “people first” communication
- Emphasize appropriate sleep/rest
- Provide safe space to talk about mental health
- Acknowledge that stigma may exist
- Stress the importance of seeking help



Psychologically Safe Team Environment

- A psychologically safe team environment stems from a sense of *trust* *and respect* across the team environment
- Psychologically safe teams facilitate both high-performance and wellbeing among team members
- Abusive coaches create a toxic environment

Psychologically Safe Team Environment

- Interpersonal relationships
 - high-quality interpersonal relationships, particularly the coach-athlete relationship
- Consistency and accountability
 - Athletes felt unsafe when there was inconsistency between words and action
- Fostering vulnerability
 - Observe vulnerability from someone in a position of power and see this vulnerability met with acceptance and support
- No athlete voice suppression
 - Communication must flow in both directions

Mental Health Literacy

- Four Core Components:
 1. Build mental health skills
 2. Understand mental disorders
 3. Reduce stigma
 4. Improve help-seeking
- Staff Wellness is Crucial
- How do you currently support [mental health literacy](#)?
- [Coaches education](#)

Understanding Stress

- Stressors vs. Stress:
 - Stressors: Unmeetable demands
 - Stress: Physical body response
- Stress Model Barometer:
 - $\text{Demands} > \text{Coping} = \text{Stress}$
- Coping Strategies:
 - Identify current demands
 - Develop reduction techniques
- Think-Pair-Share:
 - List your current stressors
 - Discuss potential coping mechanisms

Regulation *Proactive and responsive approach*

**Physical movement	Signals your body that you have survived the threat.
Social Connection	An external sign that the world is a generally safe place.
Intentional breathing	Connection to heart rate
Real laughing	Humor as a social connector, solidarity in profession.
Affection from others	20 second hug releases Oxytocin (Gottman) flooding your brain with feelings of love, connection, safety, and trust. Therapy animals lower blood pressure, provide an example of trust and safety. Higher power community, faith & trust.
A big cry	Flushing stress & toxins releasing Oxytocin and Endorphins-natural pain management.
Making something	Can be a safer way to express what your brain might be shielding you from.

Healthy Ways to Manage Stress



Social Connection and Co-Regulation

- Social Connection Signals Safety
- Relationship Building Strategies:
 - Create conversation space
 - Active listening
 - Establish boundaries
 - Admit mistakes
- Guiding Principle: Share calm, not chaos
- Reflection Question: How do you currently co-regulate with your team?

Not Just Athletes

- Coaches face increasing pressures from parents at a time when we are seeing younger coaches with less experience get head coaching positions
- Administration must recognize need for support in all areas of the job
- Parents fuel anxiety in kids AND coaches
- Leads to burnout and increased turnover
 - Starts a vicious cycle
- Find opportunities for mentorship

Coaches Wellness Study

- 6000 NCAA coaches surveyed
 - 40-50% of coaches felt mentally exhausted constantly (or almost every day)
 - 67% female coaches
 - Younger coaches more impacted (Gen Z, millennial >> Gen X, boomers)
 - 55-60% coaches were very concerned about their athlete's mental health
- Coaches wish they had same resources as athletes

Co-Regulation Steps

- Three-Step Process:
 1. Regulate (Counter threat response)
 - Mindful breathing
 - Sensory awareness
 2. Co-regulate
 - Welcoming communication
 - Supportive body language
 3. Communicate
 - Use "I" statements
 - Clarify needs
 - Set boundaries
- Role-Play Activity: Practice co-regulation techniques

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Recognizing Warning Signs

- Potential Support Indicators:
 - Isolation
 - Sleep/eating pattern changes
 - Loss of activity interest
 - Low energy
 - Increased irritability
 - Performance decline
- Critical Risk Factor:
 - Talking about self-harm

Suicide Prevention Awareness

- Suicide Prevention Facts:
 - Warning signs often appear before attempts
 - Direct communication can lower risk
- ACT Approach:
 - Acknowledge
 - Take seriously
 - Listen attentively
 - Show care
 - Involve support team

Crisis Intervention Best Practices

- Immediate Response Protocols:
 - Ensure physical safety
 - Never leave person alone
 - Remain calm
 - Suspend judgment
 - Reassure support availability
- Confidentiality Considerations

Resources and Referral

- Immediate Support Steps:
 - Connect to resources
 - Mobilize support system
 - Identify school support team
- External Resources:
 - 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
 - Care Solace: 888-515-0595
- Closing
 - What's one key takeaway?
 - How will you implement today's learning?

Key Takeaways

- Mental Health Best Practices:
 - School leadership
 - Comprehensive education
 - Clear referral procedures
 - Consistent follow-up
- Community Matters
- Final Reflection:
 - Take care of yourself
 - Take care of each other
- Write one commitment to mental wellness

Summary and After Action

- After Action—my best new favorite phrase
- A new approach to mental health—a deliberate plan of action
- How will Mental Health Action Planning be helpful for you to support mental health?
- Objectives
 - Remember the signs and symptoms—Struggling, Stressing, Striving and some days just Surviving before we THRIVE
 - Realize Available Resources
 - Recognize the Need
 - Relate Appropriately
 - Respond Effectively
 - Review the Response
 - Supporting Others
 - Next Steps

Thank You and Contact

- Gratitude for Your Participation
- Questions Welcome
- Continued Support Available: NIAAA Health and Wellness
 - Celebrate commitment to mental health
 - <https://positivecoach.org/resource-zone/the-coaches-guide-to-supporting-high-school-athlete-mental-health/>

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Struggling/Stressing/Striving & Surviving

- The Stress Model Barometer: Are the demands greater than my ability to cope?
- **Stress Model Equation: Demands > Coping = Stress**
- Identify the demands currently experienced
- Identify coping strategies to reduce the demands and reduce the stress
- When the stress barometer drops, when the demands are no longer greater than our ability to cope, we are now prepared

You have the power to protect your peace.

SCAN ME



Join the NIAAA Health & Wellness Committee Sports You Group for access to great insight and resources.



Professional Development

Provide the NIAAA membership with consistent opportunities for professional development that focuses on mental and emotional health and well-being.



Tools and Support

Provide the NIAAA membership the tools and support to not only help themselves but also help their coaches and student-athletes who may be struggling with mental and emotional health.



Best Practices

Provide the NIAAA membership with best practices to maintain and improve mental and emotional health that will be vital in supporting retention of athletic administrators throughout the nation.



State Health & Wellness Coordinators

Provide support and encourage State Associations to create and fill the position of Health and Wellness Coordinator.

Please complete the following form

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