

Mental health issues and impact on the student athlete



Chapter 1. Introduction

Many of us believe that the movement out of our homes and into the freedom of a college campus should be one of the most exciting times in a young person's life. However, for a young person dealing with a mental health condition or undiagnosed condition, it can be a time of uneasiness and fear. Additionally, some students arrive on campus already under duress with the pressures to excel placed on them by family as well as the competitiveness between classmates and teammates. The added pressures of making new friends, learning how to handle new freedoms and finding new social networks, can throw a young person into a world full of anxiety. Adding the pressures of being a collegiate athlete to this mix can quickly become overwhelming.

Mental health illnesses among teens is a growing concern. According to statistics from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, (NAMI) 50% of all cases of mental illness begin at age 14 and 75% by age 24. Understanding these statistics and how these combined with the stresses that can accompany social/emotional relationships, competitive academics, the transition to college, and being a collegiate athlete, make it easy to understand why students may struggle when starting college. For the purposes of this paper, I will mainly focus on the impact on the student-athlete.

In a 2015 survey by the NCAA, 30% of college athletes self-reported being "intractably overwhelmed during the past month". This was an increase from results seen only 5 years earlier (CollegeAD 2018). Stress, anxiety, and

depression along with navigating the social, academic and independent changes that come along with demanding practice schedules and high expectations can become more apparent and difficult to manage. Being a college athlete presents exceptional and intensified stressors. Often times college is the first time a young athlete is separated from parental support and required to continue to perform at a high level, without that supportive infrastructure (CollegeAD 2018).

Student-athletes are an essential focus group for student affairs and student health services. “ They are student-athletes, and they come with the same baggage that other students have,” says Christopher Miles, assistant professor of family and community medicine and biomedical engineering at Wake Forest University. “ They just have a lot more stressors because of their expectations, their time commitments” (Velasco, 2017). Overall, out of about 500, 000 student-athletes who compete annually in NCAA sports, 477 died from suicide between 2003-2013, according to a University of Washington study analyzing athlete deaths (Velasco, 2017).

Armed with these statistics, what do campuses do to address this? At many universities, campus mental health centers and clinics reach out and let parents and students know of their available services during freshman orientation and other freshman events. As the stigma around seeking help is diminishing and our nation works towards talking more freely about mental health concerns, it remains an issue for young people to admit to the problem and reach out when they need assistance (Donaldson James, 2017).

This is when mental health becomes a matter of safety. So, where do students go for help? “ No one wants to admit there’s a problem until it’s too
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late,” Duke basketball player Oderah Chidom said. Most student-athletes viewed professional help as a “ sign of weakness.” Those who did seek help found the wait time was up to three weeks to book an appointment (Ching, 2018). In 2013, Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Brian Hainline declared mental health as the No. 1 health and safety concern in the NCAA (Ching, 2018). On a positive note, more students are reaching out as colleges continue to increase efforts in making students aware of resources.

An unfortunate reality is that for the counseling centers, this awareness also creates difficulties in being able to keep up with meeting student needs. Many colleges are decreasing counseling staff due to budget deficits. Public universities especially are constrained by state budgets and many face challenges having appropriate funding to extend and increase programming and services to students in need (Simon, 2017).

Recommendations and Conclusion

- Campus wide collaboration teams including campus safety officers, faculty, academic advisors, student affairs, resident life staff, students and coaches along with health care staff and legal counsel, must all come together when creating campus plans. A wide variety of perspectives are needed to ensure that all students are represented and policies are legally compliant.
 - The athletic community must continue to talk about mental health concerns in order to reduce the stigma. This community of individuals must start the conversation on behalf of the athletes. Reducing the stigma in college athletics will be a significant key to changing how mental health is
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viewed in our nation. Helping athletes and those around them realize that mental health illnesses are similar to having an injury that you would seek medical treatment for, is priority.

- Universities must ensure that athletes understand they have access to trained mental health professionals on campus and that they must take advantage of these on campus resources and supports.
- Creation of a screening tool for athletes that will identify potential mental health issues prior to participating in a college sport.
- Combining departments across campus that may deal with students on a regular basis in situations that are stressful. For instance, the tutoring center may see many student-athletes that could use counseling in addition to tutoring. Conversations with their tutor during a session may lead to the opportunity to have the student speak with an on campus counselor located in the same office.
- A campus review of all policies that relate to student and student-athlete mental health and disabilities. Reviewing these policies may offer insights to change that will benefit the entire campus community.
- A departmental review of the fees that are charged for counseling as students may find barriers in paying or providing insurance information.
- Many campuses are overwhelmed with the number of students that need to be seen. Reviewing the number of trained staff and adding additional staff would decrease the amount of time between appointments for students in need. This additional staff could also be in the form of online, <https://assignbuster.com/mental-health-issues-and-impact-on-the-student-athlete/>

telephone or texting support which many students are more comfortable accessing.

- Create an easy to access and locate, dedicated website highlighting counseling, health, and disability services. Have team members managing this website and using social media to reach out and be available to students in need.
- Train Resident Hall Assistants/Advisors to be prepared to handle mental health crisis.

As a society, we need to begin viewing mental health appointments with the same urgency as a medical appointment for a physical injury. We owe this to the all students and student-athletes that battle daily with illness and are capable of successfully competing and earning degrees that will move them into their next phase in life, offering hope for a brighter future.

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