

5 Things to Know About Teen Anxiety



Practical strategies to help young athletes build confidence, resilience, and emotional well-being.

1. Some Anxiety is Healthy and Normal

Feeling nervous before a game, tryout, or big competition is a normal part of being an athlete. In fact, some anxiety can improve focus, motivation, and performance.

You can:

- Normalize pre-game nerves
- Remind athletes that anxiety often means they care about the outcome
- Help athletes focus on managing anxiety rather than eliminating it

Try saying:

- "It's okay to be nervous."
- "This means the moment matters."
- "Most athletes feel this way."

Avoid saying:

- "Don't be nervous."
- "Just relax."

Key Takeaway: Anxiety isn't always the problem—learning to manage it is the goal.

2. Adolescence is the Perfect Time to Build Regulation Skills

Athletics provide daily opportunities to develop emotional regulation and resilience that extend far beyond sports.

Young athletes learn to:

- Manage pressure
- Recover from mistakes
- Tolerate frustration
- Stay focused during stressful moments

Teach simple skills like:

- Deep, controlled breathing
- Positive, realistic self-talk

- Grounding techniques
- Refocusing on the next play

Key Takeaway: Coaching emotional recovery is just as important as coaching physical recovery.

3. Avoidance Makes Anxiety Harder to Manage

When athletes avoid challenging situations, anxiety often grows stronger.

Examples include:

- Skipping tryouts
- Avoiding competition
- Passing on leadership opportunities
- Quitting after mistakes

Instead, encourage athletes to face challenges one step at a time.

Try saying:

- "You can do hard things."
- "Courage first, confidence second."

Key Takeaway: Confidence grows from facing challenges, not avoiding them.

4. Self-Compassion is Not Softness

Many athletes believe they need to be hard on themselves to succeed, but excessive self-criticism often increases anxiety and makes it harder to recover from mistakes.

Encourage athletes to replace self-judgment with curiosity.

Instead of: "I'm terrible."

Try: "What can I learn from this?"

Key Takeaway: Athletes perform better when they recover, adapt, and keep moving forward.

5. Mindfulness Keeps Athletes Present

Anxiety often pulls attention toward future "what if" scenarios. Mindfulness helps athletes return their focus to what they can control right now.

Simple techniques include:

- Paced breathing
- Body scans
- Grounding through the senses
- Focusing on the next play instead of the last mistake or next outcome

Key Takeaway: Staying present improves both performance and emotional well-being.