

Is It Adolescence or a Mental Health Concern?



Recognizing and Responding to Mental Health Struggles in Student Athletes

Changes in mood and behavior are a normal part of adolescence—but persistent or significant changes may signal that a young athlete is struggling. You are not expected to diagnose mental health conditions, but you may be among the first trusted adults to notice when something has changed.

Why Student Athletes Are Uniquely Vulnerable

Sports offer many mental health benefits, but they can also create unique stressors that increase vulnerability.

Student athletes often balance:

- Academic and athletic demands
- Pressure to perform
- A culture that values mental toughness
- An identity closely tied to athletic success

High-risk periods include:

- Transitioning from high school to college
- Recovering from an injury or surgery
- Losing a starting position
- The end of a season or athletic career
- Academic struggles
- Relationship or family challenges

When Should You Check In?

Look for **persistent changes** from an athlete's typical behavior.

Performance

- Declining performance or motivation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increased mistakes under pressure

Physical Health

- Fatigue disproportionate to training load
- Headaches, GI complaints, or vague physical symptoms
- Changes in weight or appetite
- Disrupted sleep (insomnia or hypersomnia)
- Increased injury frequency

Emotional Well-Being

- Irritability or mood swings
- Tearfulness or emotional withdrawal
- Isolation from teammates or friends
- Increased conflict with others
- Expressions of hopelessness
- Increased alcohol or substance use

If something feels different, trust your instincts and start a conversation.

How to Start the Conversation

A supportive conversation doesn't require the perfect words.

DO

- ✓ Choose a private place
- ✓ Lead with what you've observed
- ✓ Listen more than you talk
- ✓ Respond with empathy
- ✓ Normalize seeking help
- ✓ Connect the athlete with appropriate support

Try saying:

- "I've noticed you haven't seemed like yourself lately."
- "How are you really doing?"
- "I'm glad you told me. Let's figure out the next step together."

DON'T

- X Minimize their feelings
- X Promise confidentiality if safety is a concern
- X Tie support to athletic performance
- X Wait until you're certain something is wrong

A conversation that wasn't needed costs very little. A conversation that never happened could have lasting consequences.

Know When to Act Immediately

Some situations require same-day action.

Take immediate steps to connect an athlete with a mental health professional if they:

- Talk about wanting to die or not wanting to be alive
- Express feeling like a burden
- Engage in self-injury
- Give away valued possessions
- Say goodbye in a way that feels final

Your role is simple:

- Stay with the athlete
- Do not leave them alone if you're concerned about their safety
- Notify the appropriate school or organizational personnel
- Connect them to immediate professional support, including 988 or emergency services when appropriate.

Remember Your Role

You don't have to have all the answers.

Notice. Check In. Listen. Connect.

A caring coach can't solve every problem—but one conversation can be the first step toward helping an athlete get the support they need.