

The Unseen Hit: Concussions and the Psyche



A concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) caused by a direct or indirect blow to the head. It often doesn't show up on a scan (MRI/CT), making it an invisible injury—but the effects, both physically and mentally, are real.

In youth athletes, the brain is still developing, which means recovery from injury, particularly concussions, can take a long time in some cases. This stage of growth also comes with an increased risk for emotional and behavioral symptoms following an injury. On top of that, external pressure to “push through” pain or return to play too soon can result in long-term setbacks, both physically and mentally.

Common Mental Health Effects After Concussion:

Mood & Emotional Symptoms

- Tearfulness, anger, apathy, or social withdrawal
- Increased irritability or sensitivity to feedback
- Feelings of hopelessness or fear of never returning to play

Anxiety & Suicidality

- Worry about falling behind athletically or academically
- Signs of suicidal thinking (subtle signs include statements of giving up, expressing hopelessness, researching suicide)

Cognitive Changes

- Trouble focusing, forgetfulness, slowed thinking
- Appearing disorganized or “not trying”, this can be misread as ADHD or laziness

Emotional Dysregulation

- Overreacting to small stressors
- Difficulty calming down, tantrums, defiance, or even aggression

Sleep Disturbances

- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Sleeping too much or not enough
- Sleep issues often worsen mood and focus
- Nightmares

What You Can Do: Spot the Signs

As someone who knows your athletes well, look for behavior that feels “off”:

- Unusual quietness, irritability, or lack of focus
- Avoiding drills or physical contact
- Missing practices or seeming withdrawn
- Struggling with plays or instructions

How to Support Athletes

Talk With Care:

- “You’ve seemed a little off lately, what’s going on?”
- “We care more about your health than how many minutes you play.”
- Praise honesty and openness: “It’s strong to speak up.”

Involve Parents:

- Share only what you’ve observed (not diagnosed)
- “He’s not himself, he seems more withdrawn and less focused.”
- Offer resources and referrals when needed

Create a Supportive Environment

- Normalize rest and emotional recovery, just like with a physical injury
- Use affirming language: “healing,” “recovering,” not “faking” or “dramatic”
- Model patience and trust the process
- Collaborate with school counselors, mental health providers, and parents

The Power of Sleep in Recovery

- Sleep is essential for healing the brain after a concussion
- Poor sleep = prolonged symptoms, mood swings, attention issues

Sleep Hygiene Tips:

- Set a consistent bedtime/wake-up time—even on weekends
- No screens an hour before bed
- Avoid caffeine after 3 p.m.
- Reframe sleep as part of athletic performance

When to Refer

- Mental health concerns persist more than 2–4 weeks
- Ongoing sleep issues or emotional changes
- Signs of depression, anxiety, or suicidal thinking
- Repeated concussions or pre-existing mental health diagnoses

To set young athletes up for long-term success, it is imperative that we prioritize their health over their performance. This isn’t just the right thing to do—it’s the foundation for resilience, and well-being in our young athletes both on and off the field.