

Athletic Departments Need Support to Address Student-Athlete Mental Health



Mantra Health & NAIA Survey 2022

A mental health crisis has long existed in collegiate athletics, but now athletic directors, coaches, administrators, and other key staff members are taking notice.

In addition to experiencing the normal stressors of college life, student-athletes face the crushing pressure to perform in sports and academics, all while balancing interpersonal relationships and personal responsibilities. Athletes are less likely to seek help than non-athletes and have been conditioned to play through physical, emotional, and psychological pain. This has contributed, in part, to higher rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and in many cases, has exacerbated pre-existing mental health conditions.

While athletic departments are recognizing the need for more mental health resources, services, and support, there is no clear direction on how to develop or implement best practices, which is why we conducted a survey in collaboration with the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). We surveyed 50+ members of NAIA, 39 of whom are athletic directors and 73% of whom work at private institutions, to better understand the challenges facing athletic departments and what services they need to support the health and well-being of their athletes.

Confronting Obstacles On and Off the Field:

Athletic department staff and student-athletes spend hours together every day, often forming close relationships. While coaches, trainers, and administrators aren't trained clinicians, they are given unique insight into the lives of student-athletes – and all understand that student-athletes face mental health challenges.

Top three factors impacting student-athlete mental health, according to respondents:

Balancing academic and athletic responsibilities 92%

Interpersonal relationships 82%

Financial security 77%

The concerns among student-athletes are common in the general college population, but are often compounded by the high-pressure environment of college athletics, in which performance in the classroom can impact play time and performance on the field can dictate future financial opportunities. Policies and regulations, such as the [student-athlete endorsement rules](#), are changing in an effort to better support student-athletes, but not enough is being done to protect the athletes' health and well-being.

Respondents acknowledge the mental health warning signs they are most concerned about.



37%

Self-harm

10%

Skipping practice

24%

Isolation from friends/teammates

8%

Decreased motivation

12%

Missing class

8%

Failing out

While mental health warning signs may seem obvious, they aren't always. Other signs that often go overlooked, but can be just as problematic as self-harm, include poor or difficult family relationships, a history of trauma, distress, a high level of substance use, or impulsive behaviors.

Some warning signs can be caught early, but many go unaddressed and this can worsen mental health problems, putting the student-athlete at serious risk for harm.

Athletic staff play an important role in the health and well-being of student-athletes, but many oversee dozens, if not hundreds, of athletes and may not have the resources or training needed to properly act when warning signs are identified.



Athletic Departments Need Support to Address Student-Athlete Mental Health

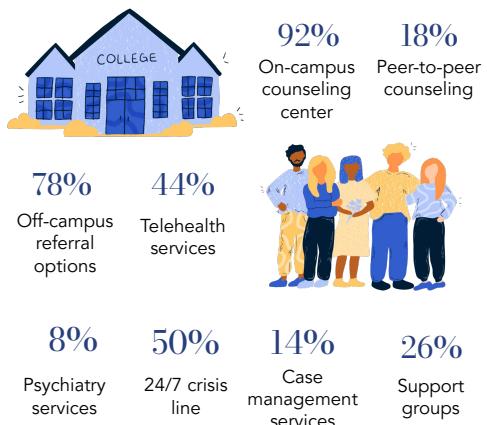


Increasing Mental Health Resources for Student-Athletes

Maintaining a strong, collaborative team of high-performing athletes is a top priority for coaches and athletic directors, even in solo sports. When a teammate is unable to perform due to a physical injury, it can have a significant impact on the team as a whole – and the same is true for a mental health issue. The difference, however, is that mental health conditions can be invisible, making them easier to hide, and harder to identify, diagnose, and treat.

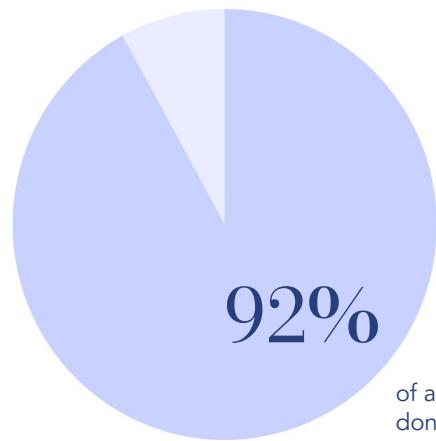
The majority of athletic directors and support staff report having an on-campus counseling center as a mental health resource for student-athletes, but that doesn't mean that hours are conducive to student-athletes or that student-athletes feel comfortable going in, especially if they are easily recognized by their peers. This may be why more than three-fourths of respondents reported off-campus referrals as a resource. Referring a student-athlete to an off-campus resource, such as a community-based organization or a private therapy office, can be beneficial, but athletes may not have the means to pay for these services or have the time to allocate to an in-person visit, and there's no way for the coach or athletic director to know if the athlete actually booked and attended an appointment.

Respondents report having the following mental health resources available to student-athletes.



Ninety-two percent of respondents say there is on-campus counseling available, but this doesn't necessarily mean that the center is open 24/7 or that on-staff clinicians have the bandwidth or expertise required to work with student-athletes. If a student-athlete has a bad experience or is turned away due to limited scheduling, they may not return and their mental health can worsen as a result. In order to properly care for the mental health of student-athletes, athletic departments need to offer tailored resources and services which recognize the unique needs of the student-athlete. This should include preventive strategies and care, in addition to 24/7 crisis services.

“ My players wrote [in journals] once or twice per week. It was anonymous and they used a code name on the cover. I was able to read it and they could write/draw about anything they wanted. It improved coach-to-player dialogue and allowed us to handle situations faster. ”



of athletic departments don't have, but want psychiatry services available for student-athletes

Top 5 Resources

Athletic department staff wish they had:

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 90% | Mental Health training for coaches & directors |
| 88% | Workshops on developing coping skills & building resilience |
| 86% | Mental health training for students |
| 70% | Sports psychologist or therapist |
| 57% | Walk-in hours |



Athletic Departments Need Support to Address Student-Athlete Mental Health



Athletic staff members report “leadership” as their most important job responsibility, surpassing operations, finance, administrative, and compliance. Ninety-two percent of respondents feel that their duty is to lead, as opposed to budget, schedule, or coach. While student-athletes are under enormous pressure to do well, so are athletic directors, coaches, and other staff members. When there are unaddressed problems, everyone in the department suffers.

44%

of athletic staff rate their institution's mental health resources as “average”

“ I am a part of our University's CARE Team. During the school year, we meet bi-weekly to discuss students who are struggling with mental health issues. I oversee the student-athletes and keep in constant contact with the coaches about each athlete's mental health. ”

Taking Charge: Making Student Success a Priority

Mental health is a serious concern for athletic departments. When students are battling mental illness, it can not only impact the health of the student, but also the team, the department, and the school at large.

48%

Reported academic success as their top priority when it comes to student mental health

44%

Reported student retention as their primary concern

“ We created a remote counseling center in athletics through our counseling department. ”

Most athletic directors, coaches, and athletic department staff members want the best for student-athletes, but aren't always aware of the culture, systems, or protocols that hinder student success. To encourage more skill-building and help-seeking behaviors, athletic departments should consider incorporating new strategies, practices, and services into their existing programs.

Rewriting the Playbook: How to Build and Implement Mental Health Best Practices

Coaches and staff are uniquely positioned to notice signs and symptoms of mental health conditions, but they need proper training to assess, identify, and intervene. How do you know if an athlete's injury is the result of self-harm? Is a player isolating themselves or merely introverted? Does every member of the team feel comfortable seeking help when needed or is there stigma within the department? When an athlete is offered a resource, how do you know if they have used it?

More conversations on mental health in sports are being held, with many elite and Olympic athletes paving the way. Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles and Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka are just two of the many athletes coming forward to share their own personal experiences with anxiety, depression, suicide ideation, and other mental health issues. While this is spreading awareness and bringing greater attention to student-athlete mental health, it's just the beginning of a much larger initiative to change the culture in athletics.

“ Our greatest success story to date is leveraging our existing on-campus resources and building a collaborative relationship between athletics and the campus health center. ”



Athletic departments can no longer ignore the student-athlete mental health crisis, but building robust mental health best practices will take time, research, and collaboration. To begin addressing the needs of student-athletes, athletic departments can begin with the following:

Training

Athletic staff are expressing the significant need and desire for more relevant training on mental health issues. This should be comprehensive, covering everything from mental health symptom identification to mental health interventions, so athletic directors, coaches, athletic trainers, and other relevant staff members can recognize mental health concerns and connect student-athletes to the right resources.

Awareness

A student-athlete's training, schedule, and responsibilities are often more demanding than a full-time job. There needs to be more discussions around mental health and the unique issues faced by student-athletes. The more that's known about mental health, the easier it is to recognize and identify a mental health problem.

Collaboration

Some athletic departments have built successful collaborations with on-campus counseling services, but others have a strained relationship, or none at all. Strengthening cross-campus relationships will benefit the entire student body, in addition to the student-athletes, as staff, clinical providers, and administrators are all dealing with students in different capacities. The better the communication, the better the chances of averting a crisis.

Funding

Not every athletic department has enough funding to hire a team therapist, but there are countless other ways to address mental health, including compiling a reliable and updated list of mental health resources for student-athletes, hosting a workshop on coping strategies, or investing in a 24/7 crisis call center.

Student-athletes may be on the verge of adulthood, but they are vulnerable and in need of support. Athletic departments need more resources and guidance so they can properly care for and protect their health and well-being. If you wish to learn more about our findings or our service offerings, please visit mantrahealth.com.