

*Coaches are uniquely placed to notice changes in their athletes and have the potential to help shape team cultures that normalise, destigmatise and are supportive of mental health help-seeking.*

Being aware of the impacts of mental illness will help you to provide the right support to your athletes and better encourage help seeking amongst the team.



## Supporting Athletes

### Want to learn more?

**Complete Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) training online.**

QPR is targeted at audiences with no assumed knowledge of mental health or suicide prevention. Delivered through a web-based course, QPR covers:

- common myths and misconceptions about suicide
- warning signs of suicide
- how to ask someone whether they are experiencing suicidal ideation
- how to persuade someone to stay alive
- how to refer individuals to appropriate professional help

**It's free, takes one hour and you could save a life. Learn more:**



### Coaches responding to Mental Health

Participation in competitive sport carries a unique combination of mental health-related risk and protective factors. For example, athletes may be exposed to unique psychological stressors, such as injury, heavy training demands that can exacerbate anxiety, media attention, performance pressures, identity foreclosure and sport retirement.

Athletes may also participate in sport environments where there is heightened perceived stigma related to mental illness and help-seeking, specifically the belief that help-seeking will result in lost playing time or being perceived as mentally weak in a setting that prioritises toughness. There are several common themes related to athlete mental health reported in the literature. Although athletes may suffer from any psychological disorders, commonly reported mental health concerns among athletes include: burnout, eating disorders, anxiety and depression, excessive or risky behaviour, and changes in mood state or cognitive ability.

Conversely, research shows the psychological and emotional benefits of participation in sport, including reducing the risk of depression and anxiety, building social connections and purpose, and improving communication skills, resilience and self-esteem. What this tells us is that there is a great need for increased awareness, open communication, and encouragement of help-seeking within the specific sporting context.

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A safe space for  
mental health education

[www.mieact.org.au](http://www.mieact.org.au)

## Why is mental health in athletes important?

Mental illness is the most common health issue in young people, with 75% of mental illness having its onset before the age of 25. Australian data suggests that one in four people aged 16–24 have experienced mental ill-health in the past 12 months. In addition to the prevalence of mental illness within the general Australian population that will invariably be mirrored within sporting groups; coaches and sporting organisations should be mindful of the impacts of sport and sport culture on the mental health of athletes.

## First signs of mental illness?

Coaches can often be the first to notice changes in mental health for their athletes, and though athletes may not be so forthcoming about saying “I have anxiety,” or “I have been feeling depressed lately,” the evidence may still be present. Some signs to look for include:

- Changes in concentration, motivation, or confidence.
- Excessive irritability or easily becoming upset.
- Changes in appetite inconsistent with training load.
- Obsessive concern over aspects of training or lifestyle.
- Changes in sleep patterns inconsistent with training load.
- Changes in mood.
- Overwhelming sense of impending danger, panic, or doom.
- Alcohol or drug use.
- Sudden problems with motor skills.
- Not turning up for sessions.
- Change in usual interaction with others.
- Changes in training (over/under).
- Neglecting self-care.
- Appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn and losing interest in activities they previously enjoyed.
- Wanting to talk about how they are feeling.

## Tips for responding to mental health concerns

- **Foster a culture of inclusivity by having open conversations about mental health and wellbeing.** Sporting teams who have embraced vulnerability and open dialogue around mental health have often enjoyed better on-field results.
- **Avoid making assumptions about an athlete’s behaviour.** If you are concerned, talk to the athlete directly about how they are feeling and what you have noticed.
- **Understand your limits to helping.** We are not all mental health professionals, and we are not expected to be. Be aware of the avenues for support available for your team, and actively encourage help-seeking from professional services if an athlete discloses an experience you do not feel equipped to support.
- **Unless you are also a mental health professional, refrain from “counselling” an athlete who may be experiencing a mental health issue.** If an athlete reports suicidal feelings or potential harm to themselves or others, link them with professional help immediately.
- **Ensure your responses are non-judgemental and validate the athlete’s experience.** There is no one right way to feel and behave under pressure. Using phrases like “I’m hearing that you are feeling overwhelmed”, or repeating back an athlete’s sentence, “from what you have told me it sounds like you are having a hard time” can help the athlete feel heard and supported, increasing the likelihood of accessing further help.
- **Include conversations about mental health in the same way as you would talk about physical injury.**