

Mental Health in Student Athletes

Why We're Here

- ❖ Discuss mental health in Student Athletes
- ❖ Review barriers to help seeking
- ❖ Discuss how to identify and help a struggling Student Athlete



A Student Athlete Story

From race anxiety to an eating disorder – it is important to recognize how negative coping can snowball and create dangerous habits



Academy Bullets '03-08
University of Michigan '09-'13



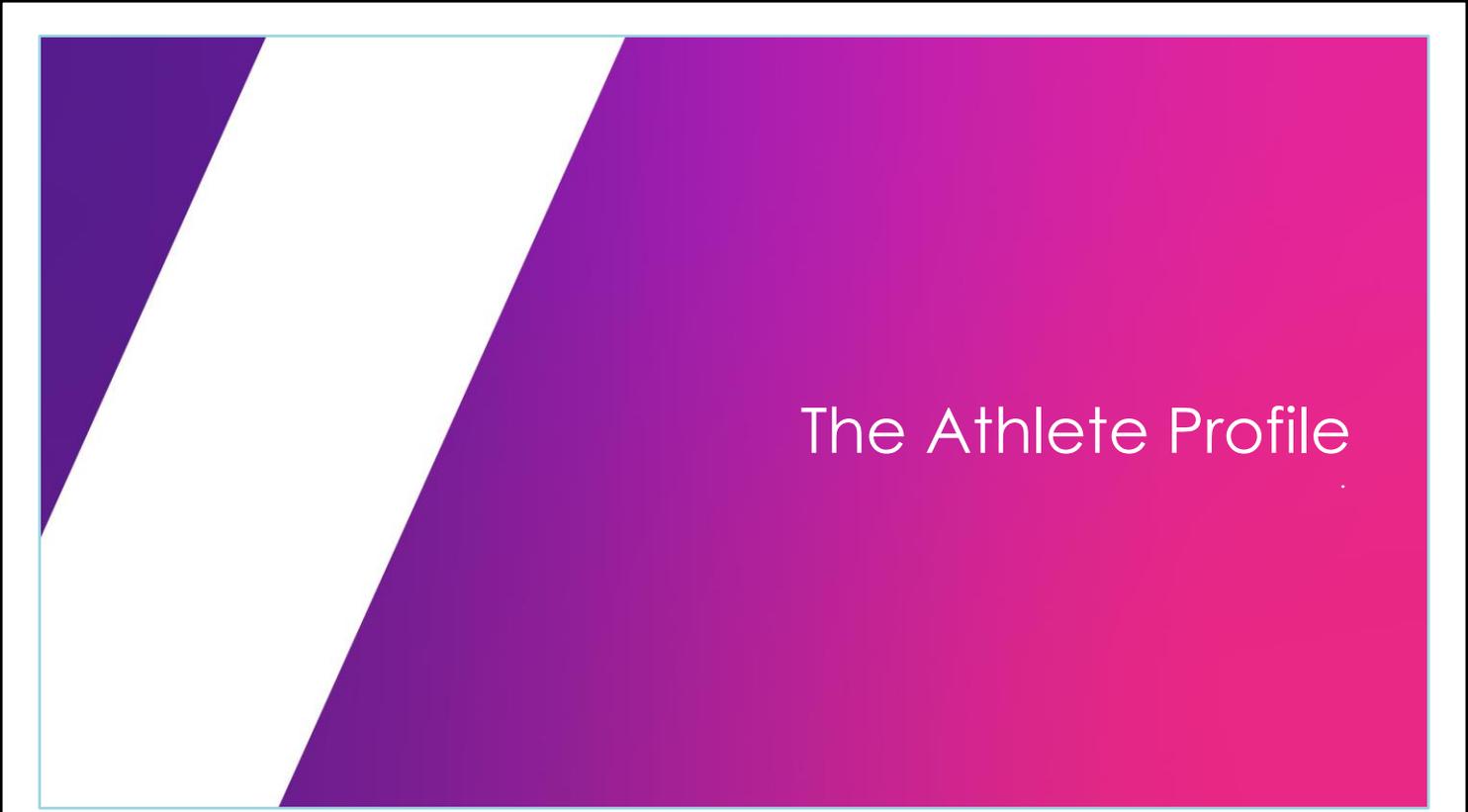
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4unBogLs8>

Kally Fayhee – Swam for the academy bullets from 2005-2008 and then swam for UofM from 2009-2013.

“In high school, I dealt with race anxiety for high stakes races because I felt pressure to make Olympic Trials, get recruited at a top school and live up to the expectations I felt others had for me. I did not learn to cope with the anxiety because it was manageable, and I felt that showing anything less than perfect on the outside was unacceptable and would hinder my goals. In 2008 I missed Trials by .3 seconds in the 200fly and struggled with being recruited during an Olympic year without a trial cut. However, Michigan picked me up and I was able to manage the anxiety that stemmed from “failure” because I knew I was going to a good program with a scholarship.

When I got to college, I experienced a whole new set of pressures – schoolwork, time management, harder swim practices, competition to travel, fulfilling the tradition of winning that the university of Michigan held and living up to the money Michigan was paying me to swim. I had never learned positive coping strategies, so when things got rough, I would cope in negative ways because of the stress. Everything hinged on swimming – a bad practice would lead to me being in a bad mood, not paying attention as well in class, then potentially a bad afternoon practice and then bad study habits after practice. I did not have a balance within my world, which at the time, I was happy with, but I did not realize how destructive this was. Even within friend and family groups I was known as “the swimmer,” it was my identity. This is something that can be very dangerous for any athlete but especially your driven ones – when there is only one focus, a breakdown in that one thing can cause a breakdown in the entire machine, especially if positive coping strategies are not top of mind or implemented in daily routines.

A year before Trials in 2012 my main focus was the trial cut again – I began to count calories because I knew lighter meant faster, so I began restricting – it gave me a sense of control (a negative coping strategy) but the funny thing was, I was more out of control mentally than I had ever been. In the summer of 2012 I missed my Trials cut by .01 and I entered into a very dangerous spiral. I felt like a complete failure and sought control more than ever. Purging became my way to control when things would go wrong in my day. Many times I knew reaching out would help but I was worried about the stigma that would come with reaching out. I knew there was a high likelihood I would be a captain my senior year and I felt that if I reached out and said I was struggling, my teammates would think I was weak – after talking to people once this video aired, I found that they actually would have seen me as strong and it would have helped a few of my teammates that were struggling with similar issues. Each time I wanted to reach out or fell deeper into the hole, I used the tactic that had worked for years while swimming, I put my head down, tried harder and decided to tough it out. Toughing it out and trying harder doesn’t typically work when it comes to mental health – your brain needs to be trained, like any other muscle to get stronger and putting your head down is not always the right approach.”

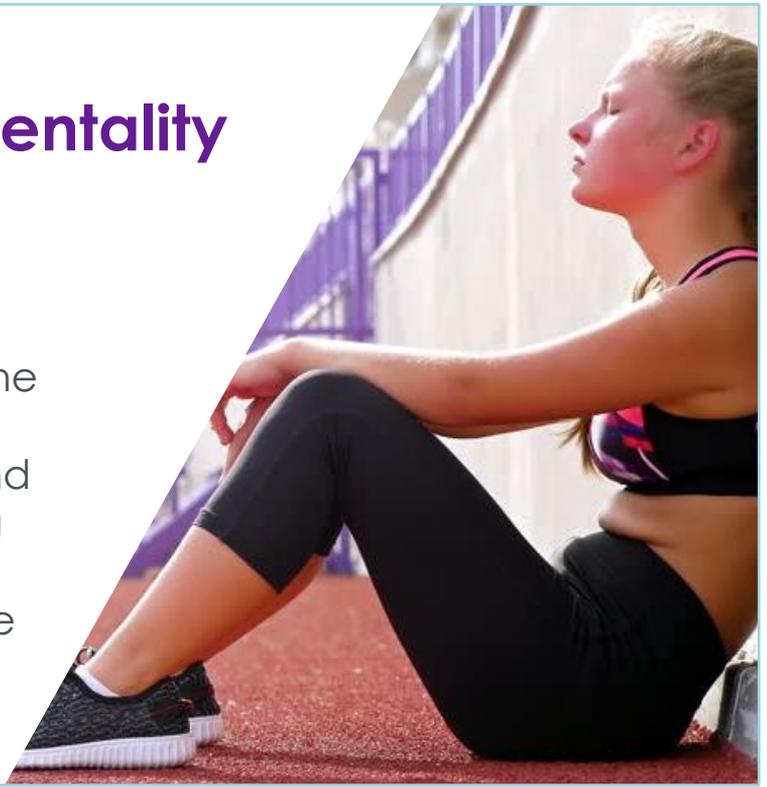


The Athlete Profile

The Tough-It-Out Mentality

“The **culture** of athletics may inhibit student-athletes from seeking help to address issues such as anxiety, depression, the stress associated with the expectations of their sport, and the everyday stress of dealing with relationships, academic demands, and adjusting to life away from home.”

Source: NCAA Mind Body and Sport



The thing that makes athletes so great is something that can be dangerous for them if coping skills are not introduced. Athletes thrive in environments where putting your head down and trying harder usually yields results. But with mental health, that does not always work, so it is important to break down the stigma around help seeking. The big question – how do we do that?

Help Seeking Habits

Athletes are less likely to experience mental health related issues.

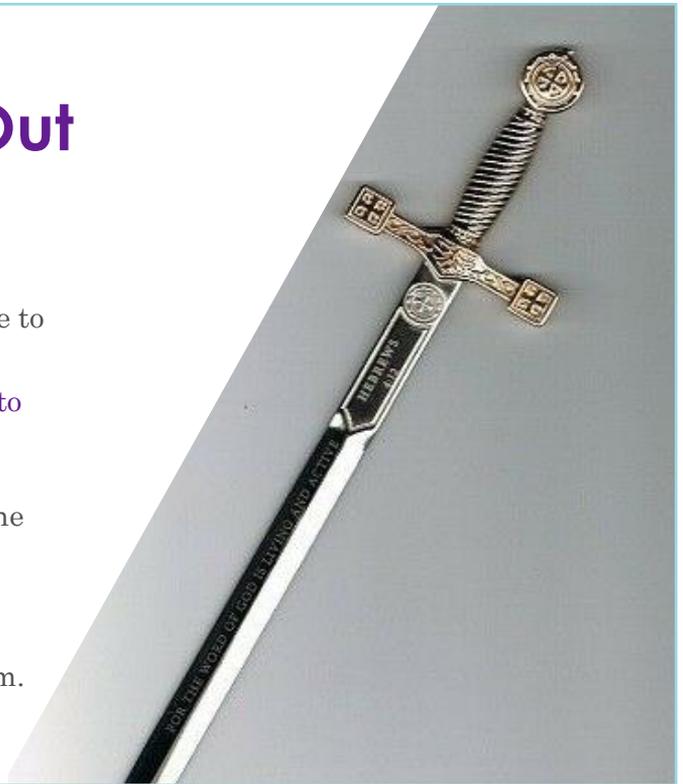


Student
Athletes are
**3x Less
Likely to Ask
for Help**

To answer that question we first have to look at the SA and research – it's not that they experience more mental health issues (actually the opposite) but they are less likely to reach out. This is in part due to the type of person it takes to be successful in sport – driven, passionate and somewhat of an addictive behavior. We need to start talking about help seeking and breaking down the barriers to help seeking for this group specifically.

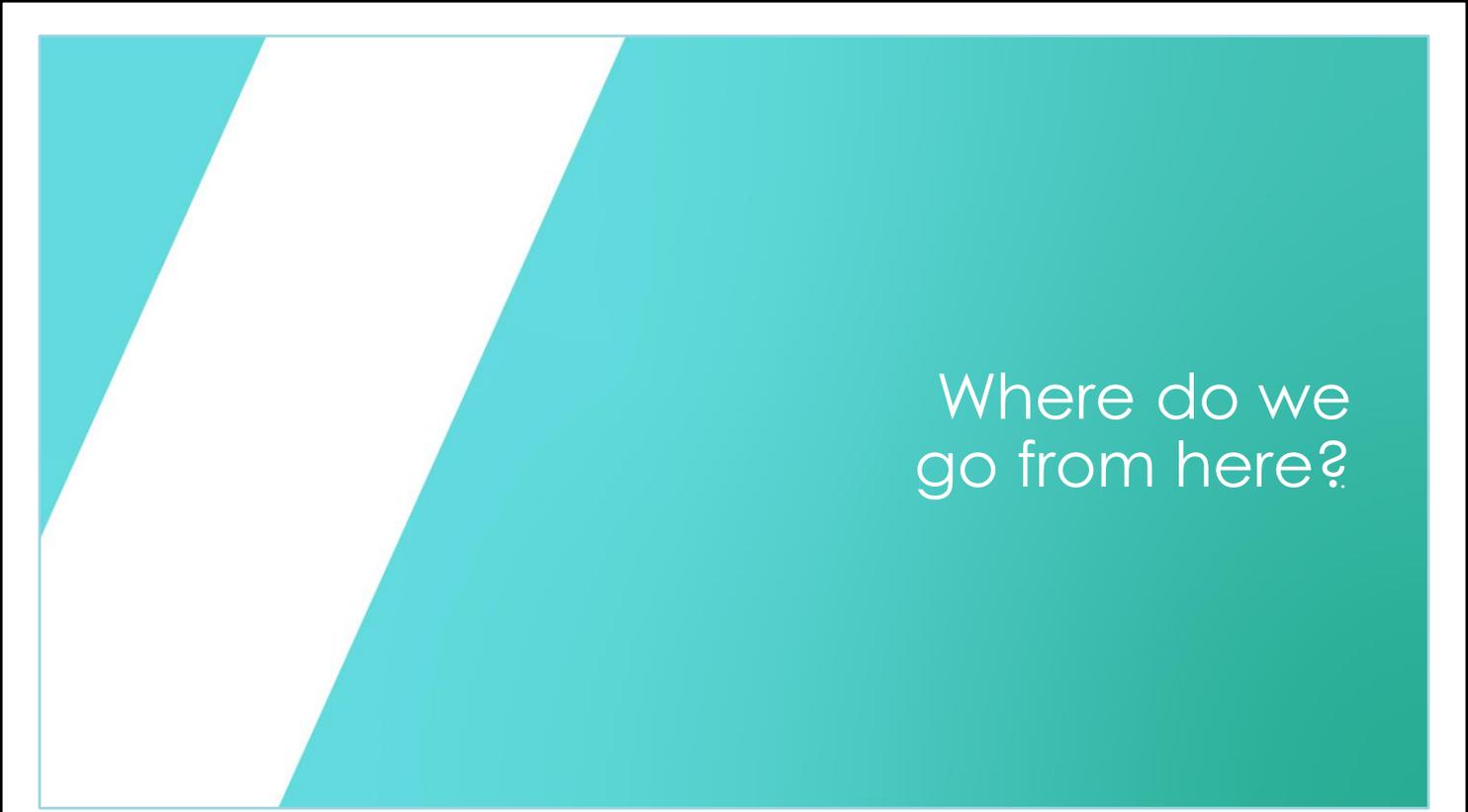
Barriers to Reaching Out

- ❖ Believing they can “tough it out” and it will get better.
- ❖ Embarrassment, believing they “should” be able to handle it on their own.
- ❖ Fear that the coach may judge them as unable to play or perform and there could be a loss of playing time or role on the team.
- ❖ Fear of what others might think if they knew the student-athlete was in counseling.
- ❖ Uncertainty about what counseling is or how it might be useful.
- ❖ Unaware of resources and/or how to access them.



Source: NCAA Mind Body and Sport

Double edge sword reference from slide 5 – the thing that makes athletes so successful can be dangerous if there is no balance in their life.

The top half of the page features a teal background with a white diagonal stripe running from the top-left towards the bottom-right. The text is positioned on the teal background to the right of the stripe.

Where do we
go from here?

The Brain As A Muscle

What if we changed the way we thought of the brain?

Reframe Mental Health to **Mental Performance**



One answer to the question posed on the first slide is to treat the brain as a muscle.

If you tear your rotator cuff, there is rehab and potentially even surgery needed. In this process there is devastation from not being able to participate but rarely is there shame in reaching out for help or contacting a doctor – many times the athlete cannot push through because the arm doesn't work like it should.

The dangerous thing about mental health is that it can be hidden much easier than a torn muscle – but what if we change our mentality on mental health and look at the brain as just another muscle in the body. What if we viewed the brain the same way we viewed a rotator cuff?

If we do this, we can start to help swimmers “prehab” with positive coping strategies and view their progress as “mental performance enhancing”. By getting in front of the problem, when issues arise, swimmers will have strategies in their back pocket to help deal with the stress – further, if the issue persists and clinical help is needed, the hope is help seeking is not seen as a weakness. With this way of thinking, reaching out is viewed like the rotator cuff – something that has to be done to be successful down the road.

Pre-Clinical Outlets



Coping Skill Videos



Mindfulness Practice



Conversation & Normalization

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=DmxAIrr1LZc&feature=emb_logo

Recognizing Distress

- ❖ Withdrawing/isolating from social contact
- ❖ Irritable, edgy, impatient, argumentative
- ❖ Deterioration in appearance and/or hygiene
- ❖ Negative self-talk
- ❖ Excessive worry or fear
- ❖ Loss of enjoyment in activities previously found to be enjoyable
- ❖ Irresponsibility, lying
- ❖ Feeling out of control
- ❖ Physical complaints not related to sport injury
- ❖ Unexplained wounds or deliberate self-harm
- ❖ Unhealthy weight control practices (e.g., restrictive dieting, binge eating, over-exercising, self-induced vomiting, or abuse of laxative, weight loss supplements and diuretics)
- ❖ Overuse injuries, unresolved injuries, or continually being injured
- ❖ Talking about death, dying or “going away”

Source: NCAA Mind Body and Sport

Approaching a Student Athlete

- ❖ Practice **empathetic listening**.
- ❖ **Focus on the individual as a person** and not as an athlete.
- ❖ **De-stigmatize care** seeking for mental health concerns.
- ❖ If you think the student-athlete might be a threat to him/herself or others, enlist emergency mental health services.
- ❖ Recognize that **the student-athlete may not be ready for help right away and may refuse your suggestion**. Don't take it personally.

Source: NCAA Mind Body and Sport