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Mental Health Matters

It's about building care and connection with your athletes.

Just like physical capabilities vary, the mental health of an athlete and the tools that they have to manage the ups and downs of sport varies. Technique and physical ability-wise, you might have one athlete who has an unbelievable drive, but struggles to make an up and down. Mentally, that can also be the case. You may have an athlete who is really driven- coming early to practice and spending hours on the range. That same athlete may buckle under pressure and be frustrated or tearful when they aren't in that top spot every round.

When it comes to mental health, an athlete may have a diagnosed mental illness, and may be managing it through various means. Another athlete may be struggling significantly despite never having had mental health concerns in the past. Whether an athlete has an official diagnosis, long-term struggle with mental health, or they are struggling to manage in a particular moment – as the coach, you can work to CARE and CONNECT with your athlete.

Sometimes coaches worry that by asking an athlete about their mental health, they will open up a problem they now have to solve, or that it will bring more attention to the issue and make it worse. Neither of those things are true. If an athlete discloses that they're struggling with their mental health, or if you notice something that seems to be off for that athlete, one simple question you can ask to show that you care and value connection is: **How can I support you best?**

SCORECARD

When connecting and caring with athletes, there is no one right answer! However, it may make you feel more prepared to think about mental health more broadly, outside of a specific situation.

First, consider your own experiences with mental health.

- What do you know about mental health?
- What messages did you receive about mental health growing up or in your training?
- Where do you see mental health show up in performance?

Think about your comfort level in talking to an athlete or their parents about mental health.

- Is that something that you've done before? How did it go?
- What can I do if I see an athlete may be struggling with their mental health?

It may be helpful to write down some questions you feel comfortable asking and practice those. That way, when you're in the conversation you will be able to focus just on what the athlete is saying.

Make a plan for how you want to support an athlete when you're concerned.

If you notice an athlete's physical appearance, mood, or behaviour has changed in a concerning way, you can show you care by initiating conversation. It can be helpful to share a tangible change in behaviour you've seen: "I've noticed that you seem to be quieter in the team setting – how have things been going?"

By offering to chat, you are opening a door for connection. Even if the athlete does not want to talk, knowing someone has noticed them and cares may help them feel less alone.

FOLLOW THROUGH

The first step to being a mental health ally for your athletes is to show that you care about them and value connection. Having the ability to recognize the signs and symptoms of declining mental health will allow you to keep a pulse on your athlete's well-being. The **mental health continuum** is a tool that serves as a guide to recognizing signs and symptoms of declining mental health. For more information on the Mental Health Continuum and additional resources – check out the **Mental Health Matters – Up and Down**.

As a takeaway, consider: What is one thing you can do to prioritize your athletes mental health in the next month?

“It's important to make sure that our athletes are okay, and they're happy both on the golf course and off.”

- Derek Ingram, Head Coach Team Canada - Men