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Mental health crucial to overall wellbeing of athletes

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Athletes at all levels are pressured to be physically superior, which can cause many to overlook their mental health needs.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, participation in organized sports can subject an athlete to a unique set of challenges and circumstances, which can make them vulnerable to depression or anxiety. These feelings can sometimes lead to more serious conditions such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or melancholia. Research from 2016 showed that 21 percent of male and 27 percent of female collegiate athletes reported feeling "so depressed that it was difficult to function."

"Mental health in athletes is crucial to their health overall," said Vijay Jotwani, M.D., a Houston Methodist primary care sports medicine physician. "The biggest challenge is recognizing when an athlete might be struggling with a mental health problem and helping him or her seek assistance from a medical professional."

Since mental illness involves brain chemistry, noticing it in yourself can be challenging, so Jotwani recommends that teammates, parents, and coaches watch for signs and symptoms of mental illness. These include withdrawing from friends or family, talking about hurting themselves, or extreme mood changes.

Services such as support groups and counseling can help. These services are available to most student athletes on campus, and many professional athletes have mental health resources through their team. In some cases, medication will be recommended in addition to counseling services.

"Medication can help, but it's often the combination of medicine, counseling, stress management, and choosing to be proactive about mental health that makes the biggest difference for an athlete," Jotwani said. "It's also key to understand that treatment and recovery take time. A mental health diagnosis may seem overwhelming, but it's just the first step in the process."

Other steps in the recovery process include enabling individuals to identify goals for achieving wellness, developing coping skills, and garnering support from family, friends and even teammates and coaches.

"Playing sports has so many benefits, such as regular physical exercise and experience in team settings," Jotwani said. "However, we need to remove the stigma surrounding mental health and start focusing on encouraging athletes to be aware of their mental health and report symptoms. That is the first step in making sports safer for all."

Source:

<http://www.houstonmethodist.org/>
