

# Athlete Mental Health

## A QUICK GUIDE TO MENTAL HEALTH FOR COMPETING ATHLETES

Individuals with sound mental health will perform better and be more settled in all aspects of their lives. Athletes are no different. It's especially important for athletes to work on developing mental health, resilience, emotion regulation and managing the stress of injuries and setbacks due to the highly competitive, high-performance environments they work in.

We believe there is strength in acknowledging problems and seeking help to improve your mental health. As an athlete, there are a few key areas you can focus on to develop stronger mental health and better overall performance in your sport.

- 1) Resilience
- 2) Emotion regulation
- 3) Managing injuries and setbacks

### IMPORTANT!

If you or someone you know needs help, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the equivalent helpline in your country.

Here are some key areas to think about.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING RESILIENCE

Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” after a trauma or stressful life event. For athletes this could mean dealing with a loss, being dropped from a team or coming to terms with an imminent retirement. We need to be resilient to life's challenges to take on consequent hurdles and keep mentally and physically healthy.



There are a few important factors in building resilience but the most beneficial is having supportive people around you. In addition to our inner circle, we also need to be able to make realistic plans and carry them out, view ourselves in a positive light, have solid communication skills and be able to manage strong feelings.

### IMPORTANT!

Remember that building resilience is a personal journey as we all deal with trauma and stress differently.

#### 5 WAYS TO BUILD RESILIENCE

- 1. Connect.** Surrounding yourself with people you trust will make it easier to ask for and accept help from them. Being able to accept help is an important tool in strengthening your resilience.
- 2. Take steps towards your goal, even if they're small.** Sometimes the prospect of achieving a large goal can be overwhelming. Break your goals into smaller steps and ask yourself, “what is one thing I can achieve today?”.
- 3. Keep things in perspective.** When you've experienced a setback it can be easy to blow it out of proportion. Step back, consider your problem in a broader context and try to re-frame its impact.
- 4. Take care of yourself.** Having a sole focus on sport can actually be detrimental to your performance. Carve out time for other things you enjoy.
- 5. Take action.** Resilience is about accepting that something hasn't gone well, looking at a way to improve it and taking the necessary steps to get there.

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## REGULATING YOUR EMOTIONS

Emotion regulation is the ability to use strategies to initiate, modify, maintain and/or display emotions. Being able to regulate your emotions enhances your wellbeing, your performance and your relationships with others.



The best way to regulate emotions is mindfulness. Mindfulness meditation is simply the practice of being aware of your experience and emotions in the present moment without trying to push them away or over-engage. Being mindful helps train the mind to pause and pay attention, so that action can be taken with greater reflection and clarity.

## IMPORTANT!

Emotions are not static, they ebb and flow, but we can teach ourselves to recognise and work with each emotion as it occurs.

### 3 WAYS MINDFULNESS CAN HELP REGULATE EMOTIONS

- 1. It reduces stress and anxiety.** Anxiety and stress, including fear of failure, effects athlete performance in competitive situations. Athletes with a greater sense of mindfulness can better manage anxiety and stress in the short and long term, improving their training and ability to stay calm when it counts.
- 2. It increases focus.** Mindfulness helps train the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that creates a calm and alert state of mind. Athletes with greater mindfulness are better able to stay focused, avoid distraction and perform at their best on race or game day.
- 3. It helps make easier adjustments.** Mindfulness brings a heightened sense of awareness by activating another part of the brain: the insular cortex. This awareness creates communication between body and mind, allowing athletes to sense small physiological changes – a tense muscle or shallow breathing – and make split second adjustments without conscious thinking.

## IMPORTANT!

Knowing yourself and your strengths can really help you in your recovery journey.

## MANAGING INJURIES AND SETBACKS

The first step in managing injuries and setbacks in your sporting career is learning what to expect. Sharing your feelings with those you trust is also vital, so that you can lighten your 'emotional backpack' and better get on with the important work of recovery.



There are a few key warning signs that can indicate a poor adjustment when dealing with injury. These include unreasonable fear of re-injury, extreme guilt about letting the team down, rapid mood swings and withdrawal from significant others. Being self-aware and self-reflective can help you recognise these emotional reactions and help you get the right kind of help to aid your recovery.

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## 5 TIPS FOR MANAGING INJURIES AND SETBACKS

- 1. Keep a journal.** Your journal can be a great tool for self-reflection. It can also be a fantastic resource for the future, serving as a concrete reminder of how you managed difficult challenges in the past.
- 2. Be an active participant in your recovery.** This can be done by learning about your injury. Make sure it is explained to you in terms that you understand. Information can help to reduce uncertainty and will give you clearer expectations.
- 3. Stay connected.** There is a lot of research suggesting the importance of social support and community connections during the rehabilitation phase. It is important to stay connected with teammates and resist the urge to isolate yourself.
- 4. Adjust your outlook and use positive self-talk.** It is common for athletes to engage in negative self-talk during injury or setback. Redirecting these thoughts and statements into positive self-talk, task-oriented thoughts and affirmations can help to provide direction and motivation in the rehabilitation process.
- 5. Use visualisation and imagery.** Remember that your mind, body and spirit are all interconnected. Visualise yourself healing and getting back to training. Positive images of healing, and visualisation of being fully recovered, have been shown to speed up athletes' recovery.

## NEXT STEPS

Find more helpful resources about athlete mental health on [our website](#).



Watch [Brene Brown's incredible TED talk](#) on the power of acknowledging your vulnerability.



Learn more about practising mindfulness on the [Headspace website](#).



[Read the research](#) on athlete mental health.



[Contact us](#) for more info about our 1:1 mental health support.



View our other [athlete mental health and transition fact sheets](#).

