

Mental Health Consensus Statement for Collegiate Athletics During the COVID-19 Pandemic

*This statement was created by a working group within the **Clinical/Counseling Sport Psychology Association (CCSPA)** to appeal to all levels and divisions of collegiate sport. The information contained within may be applicable to professional, Olympic/Paralympic, and/or high school and youth sport as well.*

This statement was endorsed by the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), the American Psychological Association's Society for Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology (APA Division 47), and the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport (ASWIS).

Mental health has been identified as a primary concern of student-athletes for many years, with increased attention following the release of the NCAA's Mental Health Best Practices in 2016. Recent research (e.g., NCAA Student-Athlete COVID-19 Well-Being study, 2020; Petrie et al., 2020) and clinical practice indicate an increase in psychological distress among student-athletes, especially student-athletes of color and those with economic hardships, since the outset of COVID-19 pandemic and campus/sports shutdowns. Ongoing racial injustice, systemic oppression, and prolonged uncertainty exacerbates this distress and continues to have a significant impact across all mental health and well-being indicators, including emotional health, cognitive health, behavioral health, economic status, physical health, and world view/spiritual health.

Prevention, early intervention, and comprehensive mental health promotion will continue to be paramount. Specifically, (a) understanding student-athlete mental health needs and unique considerations, (b) coordination with local licensed mental health providers, (c) potential expansion of existing mental health resources, and (d) consistent application of proactive strategies for building resilience and maintaining connection (APA, 2012) are crucial now and moving forward.

Recommendations:

- Provide information (e.g., updates on COVID, updates on both academic and athletic schedules, etc.) to student-athletes, coaches, and staff in a transparent, direct, and timely manner and acknowledge uncertainty when specific information is not known.
- Work with athletics department and/or campus licensed mental health providers (LMHPs) to establish a multidisciplinary working group to holistically promote mental health and well-being. This group may include student-athlete development professionals, academicians, mental performance consultants, sports medicine professionals and/or other department and campus personnel.
- Develop a comprehensive response plan to (a) efficiently disseminate information; (b) facilitate mental health screening; and (c) provide education and support for resocialization, quarantining and transitioning in the event of sport cancellations or campus closures.
- Coordinate with coaches & sport administrators to develop team-based delivery mechanism for content to support well-being following announcements of postponement, cancellation, and/or campus closure.
- Review departmental/campus mental health emergency action plan to ensure consistency with pandemic and/or quarantine protocol(s).
- Proactively equip coaches and student-athlete support staff with education and training to effectively respond to student-athlete needs and provide mental health referrals and resources, including quarantine-specific protocols.
- Where needed, identify community-based LMHPs qualified to assist with increased student-athlete needs and implement an appropriate referral protocol (see NCAA Mental Health Best Practices, 2016). Consider coordination with LMHPs in other communities via electronic means (e.g., virtual meetings, telehealth).
- Obtain student-athlete feedback about experiences and needs to inform ongoing mechanisms of support.
 - Implement a post-quarantine/isolation survey to capture attitudes concerning mitigating risk, adherence to protocols, and interest in behavioral health support.

Student-Athlete Factors to Consider When Implementing Recommendations:

- Student-athletes may need:
 - Support around experiences of grief and loss
 - Structure and consistency
 - Autonomy and sense of control
 - Support around experiences related to stigma, racism, and/or discrimination, including engagement in personal and social justice advocacy
 - Social support and connection, including virtually and while physically distancing
 - Increased mentorship and contact with team leadership
- Specific concerns or impacts may include:
 - Loss of, or threats to, athletic identity
 - Consider intersection with other important aspects of identity (gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, etc.).
 - Consider the unique impact on student-athletes of color, especially Black/African American student-athletes; International student-athletes; first-year and senior student-athletes; and incoming and outgoing transfers.
 - Financial/economic/environmental impacts, including:
 - Associated challenges and potential lack of resources for successful virtual learning
 - Familial/support system challenges
 - Health challenges, injury, and/or death of family members or loved ones
 - Consider the potential disruption of rehabilitation timeline for injured student-athletes.
 - Consider the impact of quarantine on mental health & well-being, team cohesion, and readiness for return to sport.
 - Changes in priorities, career decision-making, sport involvement, and/or eligibility
 - Maintaining motivation (athletic, academic, social roles & responsibilities)
 - Ongoing uncertainty about the future

Considerations for Coaches and Student-Athlete Support Staff When Responding to Student-Athlete Needs:

- Demonstrate support and value the well-being of coaches and staff.
 - Consider potential loss of, or threats to, coaching/professional identity.
- Ensure coaches and staff know how to access services for their own mental health care.
- Provide information on the following topics:
 - Issues related to grief, loss and recognizing signs of distress, mental health emergency action protocol, and role in connecting student-athletes with resources (in virtual and in-person settings)
 - Strategies to help student-athletes tolerate uncertainty, develop psychological flexibility, and build routines
 - Acknowledge the presence of chronic uncertainty, as a “business as usual” approach may contribute to student-athlete distress.
 - Focus on clear communication, including acknowledging what is and what is not known.
 - Strategies to remain engaged with student-athletes who test positive and are quarantined or socially isolated during the recovery period
 - Innovative approaches to maintain virtual connection/cohesion with their student-athletes
 - Consider strategies to support coach/athlete, athlete/athlete, coach/coach, and coach/support staff connections.
 - Unique impacts on different student-athlete groups (see above) and strategies to support and connect with additional resources
- Connect with campus-based partners (e.g., Diversity & Inclusion office, Title IX office, etc.) to assist with programming to support student-athlete return to campus efforts.
- For smaller institutions, consider involving community or state-wide resources via virtual means.