

# Supporting Psychologically Distressed Athletes: Suggested Best Practices for Coaches

James E. Bissett & Katherine A. Tamminen

University of Toronto



## Background & Purpose

- Student-athletes are an at-risk population for experiencing psychological distress, such as challenges related to athletic injury, sexual identity, and teammate conflict, which may impact their mental well being (Moreland, Coxe, & Yang, 2018)
- To manage distress, student-athletes often rely on support providers, including coaches (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001)
- Coaches are documented to play an integral role in the lives of student-athletes and recent focus has centered on educating coaches to better prepare them in supporting distressed athletes (Sebbens, Hassmén, Crisp, & Wensley, 2016)
- To date, however, little is known about coach-athlete interactions when athletes disclose psychological distress to their coaches
- **The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of coaches in supporting psychologically distressed student-athletes**

## Methods

### Participants

- 15 university coaches (4 female, 11 male) from across Ontario and involved in a variety of sports including baseball, cross country, golf, hockey, rowing, rugby, soccer, swimming, track & field, and volleyball

### Data Collection

- Coaches took part in semi-structured interviews to explore experiences of supporting distressed student-athletes
- Interviews were an average length of 1 hour, 5 minutes, and transcribed verbatim

### Data Analysis

- Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

## Results

### Overcoming Barriers to Disclosure through Culture Setting

- Student-athletes face barriers to disclosing psychological distress to coaches  
*“It’s related to cultural values and stigma around needing help or not appearing strong, ... especially in the context of athletics where, you know, strength or toughness is valued. ... [That’s] probably the initial barrier.” (Adam, Rowing)*
- Identified barriers included: the emphasis of athletic toughness, the power of coaches, an athlete’s position on a team, poor visibility & understanding of psychological distress, and previous bad experience with disclosure
- Coaches may overcome these barriers through effective culture setting:  
*“It’s a bit cliché, but from day one ... we try to create the open-door policy. It’s one thing to say it, but then you gotta figure out how you can demonstrate it. ... If we don’t create an environment where [student-athletes] feel comfortable and open and trusting of what we may do or how we may handle [distress], then we may never hear about any of the situations of distress.” (Erik, Volleyball)*

### Providing Effective Support to Distressed Student-Athletes

- Steps to coaches’ initial responses to disclosure: listen, reassure, question, triage, and connect  
*“The most important thing is to listen to what they’re saying. ... Allow them to disclose the problem and explain what’s going on with them.” (Adam, Rowing)*
- Short-term support involved a combination of working with athletes to create plans for next steps and connecting them with appropriate support resources  
*“We make sure we have a plan in place. ... This is what we’re doing for the next steps. The next step might be meeting with me again ... or we’ll set up an appointment potentially with ... a counsellor that works for our varsity athletes.” (Cheryl, Rugby)*
- Long-term support involved regular and ongoing communication with athletes  
*“Follow up with [the student-athlete] until you know ... that things are working themselves out. ... It’s important that you just don’t leave it be because chances are ... student-athletes are not always very good at following up with the help that they need. ... As a coach, it’s your responsibility to help them make sure they get the help that they need.” (Jesse, Track & Field)*

## Discussion & Applied Implications

- Coaches may minimize the impact of perceived barriers that discourage student-athletes from disclosing distress by fostering supportive team cultures
- Optimal practices for coaches when responding to athlete disclosures of distress involves responding positively to initial disclosures, and offering forms of both short- and long-term support (see handout)
- These findings should prompt discussions about what the boundaries should be for coaches’ roles and responsibilities regarding athlete mental health
- Findings from the present study may be used to inform the development of future coach education modules in relation to supporting psychologically distressed athletes