### Supporting Psychologically Distressed Athletes: Suggested Best Practices for Coaches

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Table 1. Coaching practices to address barriers to athlete disclosures of distress.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Barriers to Disclosure</th>
<th>Specific Coaching Practices</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasis on Athlete Toughness</strong></td>
<td>• Adopt and demonstrate a holistic coaching philosophy that places increased emphasis on athlete development and well-being (i.e. sleep, nutrition, academics, etc.)</td>
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| **Power of Coach** | • Verbally communicate that help-seeking may require athletes to step away from sport temporarily, but that athletes will have an opportunity to return following recovery  
  • Develop coach-athlete relationships founded on trust, openness, and reciprocal communication with athletes |
| **Athlete’s Position on a Team** | • Provide transparent selection criteria  
  • Provide equitable training opportunities to all athletes  
  • Assign all athletes a valued role on the team |
| **Poor Visibility & Understanding of Psychological Distress** | • Teach athletes awareness surrounding their mental and psychological well-being  
  • Enforce accountability such that athletes understand they are responsible for managing their own holistic well-being  
  • Share personal experiences with psychological distress and/or mental health challenges |
| **Previous Bad Experience with Disclosure** | • Verbally communicate coaching expectations to athletes  
  • Engage with all athletes in an empathetic and compassionate manner when distressing situations arise |

**Global Coaching Practices**

- Establish and demonstrate an open-door policy
- Role model behaviours that support positive psychological well-being
- Use appropriate and non-discriminatory language when discussing athletes’ psychological health and well-being
- Build a diverse coaching and support staff

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Table 2. Effective support practices for coaches in assisting distressed student-athletes.

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<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Suggested Support Practices</th>
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| Initial Response to Disclosure | • Listen to athlete describe their concern(s)  
  o Paraphrase what the athlete is saying  
  • Provide reassurance to athlete  
  • Ask follow-up or probing questions (if needed)  
  • Triage the severity of the distress  
  • Connect athlete with appropriate professional resources (if needed) |
| Short-Term Support Provision | • Assist athlete in creating plan to manage distress  
  o Engage athlete in this process to show support for their autonomy and support accountability  
  • Connect athlete with professional resources  
  o Offer to schedule appointment/make connection on the athlete’s behalf  
  o Offer to take athlete to initial meeting |
| Long-Term Support Provision | • Keep athlete engaged with the team  
  • Check in with athlete on consistent basis  
  • Make yourself readily available for as-needed communication  
  • Modify sport-related demands  
  • Maintain athlete confidentiality  
  • Demonstrate patience and understanding in regards to the slow process of recovery |

References


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