

BACK TO
SCHOOL

TAKE
ACTION

FOR MENTAL HEALTH



Supporting the
Mental Health of a

**STUDENT
ATHLETE**

Supporting the Mental Health of Student Athletes: A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Coaches

Student athletes hear a lot about performance — how to play harder, train smarter, and stay focused. But we don't pay enough attention to the emotions behind their performance.

That's where you come in.

As a parent, caregiver, or coach, you play a powerful role in shaping how young athletes think about stress, balance, and asking for help. Sometimes that role means cheering them on. Sometimes it means knowing when to pull them back. And sometimes it means being the first person to notice that something's not right.

This resource is here to help you understand how to support student athletes not just as competitors — but as whole people with emotional lives, personal challenges, and evolving identities.



Moving Beyond 'Power Through'

In sports, it's common to hear things like "suck it up," "push through," or "toughen up" when a young athlete is struggling. These words are often meant to motivate, but they can send the wrong message — that mental and emotional challenges should be ignored or simply pushed past with more effort.

The truth is, many young athletes are already carrying a heavy load. School pressure, social dynamics, and figuring out who they are — all of that is already a lot. Add the demands of practices, games, and performance expectations, and it's no wonder so many feel exhausted or unseen.

As parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults, it's important for us to check in with ourselves, too. Ask yourself, *Am I encouraging them in a way that supports their growth — or am I unintentionally adding pressure?* Sometimes the right thing is to cheer them on through a tough moment. Other times, what they need most is permission to rest, reflect, or just be honest about what they're feeling.

Supporting young athletes doesn't always mean pushing them harder. Sometimes it means slowing down with them, listening without judgment, and reminding them they're more than their performance. Let's help them know it's okay to be strong and struggling — and that they don't have to carry it all alone.



Recognizing the Signs

Athletes are often trained — directly or indirectly — to push through pain, whether it's physical or emotional. That's why it's so important to notice the more subtle signs that something might be off, such as:



- Mood swings or becoming unusually quiet
- Trouble sleeping or seeming constantly exhausted
- A drop in school performance or motivation
- Avoiding practice, meets, or games
- Seeming “checked out,” angry, or overwhelmed



Sometimes what looks like laziness or a “bad attitude” is actually a sign of deeper struggles — fatigue, anxiety, or even depression.

When you notice a shift, try to lead with curiosity instead of criticism. Ask open-ended questions. Let them share — or just be near without pressure to talk. Remind them, in words and actions, that you're a safe space. Your calm presence can make more of a difference than you might realize.

Modeling Empathy and Balance

One of the most powerful ways you can support a young athlete is by modeling what caring for your own mental health looks like. That might mean setting boundaries, taking breaks, or talking openly about stress, pressure, and how you manage it.

When young people see the adults around them navigating emotions in healthy, honest ways, it sends a powerful message: It's okay to ask for help. It's okay to feel overwhelmed. It's okay to be human.

You don't need to have all the answers. You just need to show up in ways that say, *"I see you. I care. I'm here."* That's what real support looks like — and it can make all the difference.



Supporting Women in Coaching Roles



If you're a woman in a coaching role, especially in California's under-resourced, rural, or underrepresented communities, you may be facing your own unique mental health challenges, too.

Coaching isn't just about playbooks. It's about being a role model, a motivator, a mentor — and, often, an emotional anchor for your team. You may be simultaneously navigating the game and other people's biases. You may be managing practice while also managing family responsibilities. You may be mentoring young people who see you as one of the few adults who gets them.

And if you identify as Black, Latina, Native, Asian American or Pacific Islander, 2SLGBTQIA+, or a first-time coach in a system not built with you in mind — you are likely asked to do even more, with even less. You may be showing up strong on the outside while juggling a large mental load behind the scenes.

We want to name and validate that. Systems often expect more from women in leadership — without offering more in return. That kind of imbalance takes a toll.

So this is your reminder:

- You're allowed to step back and breathe
- You don't have to have it all together
- Your mental health deserves just as much attention as that of your athletes
- The way you care for others is powerful. But the way you care for yourself matters just as much
- Your leadership isn't just changing sports — it's changing lives



Resources to Support You and the Athletes You Care About

Whether you're supporting a student athlete through a tough season or simply want to be better prepared for the mental health challenges they may face, these free resources are available to help.



988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text **988** to reach trained crisis counselors anytime. This free, confidential service is **available 24/7** to support people experiencing emotional distress, thoughts of suicide, or mental health crises — as well as the loved ones supporting them.

CalHOPE Connect

Visit calhopeconnect.org or call **(833) 317-HOPE (4673)** for **24/7** non-emergency emotional support. CalHOPE provides culturally relevant help for stress, anxiety, or grief related to challenges like school, caregiving, natural disasters, or community trauma.

Crisis Text Line

Text **HOME** to **741741** to connect with a trained crisis counselor via text, anytime. This free service is **available 24/7** and offers confidential mental health support for young people, parents, and caregivers.



CalMHSA
California Mental Health Services Authority



Funded by counties through the voter-approved
Mental Health Services Act (Prop 63).

