Mental Health Checklists

Clinical and sub-clinical changes in mood and mental states can impact the ability of student-athletes to function effectively—on the field of play, in the classroom, and over their lifecourse. Many mental health disorders are at least partially rooted in genetics. However environmental stressors—including stressors associated with being a student-athlete—can play a critical role in whether these vulnerabilities turn into burdensome health conditions. One of the best ways to limit the negative consequences of most mental health conditions is early detection and treatment. This is where athletic departments and sports medicine departments can play a critical role: establishing prevention programming and reducing stigma around care seeking, setting a plan to encourage effective early detection, and communicating to all stakeholders about how to manage emergency and non-emergency mental health issues.

Four checklists have been developed to assist athletic departments and sports medicine departments in self-assessment and planning related to managing mental health issues among student-athletes. More information and resources are available on the NCAA Sport Science Institute website: (http://www.ncaa.org/health-and-safety/medical-conditions/mental-health).

Checklist #1: Prevention and preparation
Checklist #2: Managing a non-emergency mental health issue
Checklist #3: Managing an emergency mental health issue
Checklist #4: After managing a mental health issue
CHECKLIST 1: Prevention and preparation

1. Conduct a needs assessment

- Get input from all relevant stakeholder groups. Learn about perceptions of student-athlete mental health/performance needs, ideas for enhancing mental health performance services for student-athletes, and barriers to change. These stakeholders groups will vary by campus but should include:
  - Athletes (talking to your Student-Athlete Advisory Committee is a good place to start)
  - Sports medicine and athletic training staff members
  - Athletic administrators
  - Coaches other staff who have direct contact with student-athletes
  - Faculty athletics representatives

- If you are concerned about getting honest feedback from these stakeholder groups, consider using an anonymous survey mechanism.

- Make sure to have a discussion with your Director of Compliance about concerns she/he may have about pursuing enhanced mental health/performance services for your student-athletes or to review rules associated with these types of services.

2. Build relationships

- Contact your state psychology licensing board (http://www.ceunit.com/psychologistsstateboards.htm) for help in identifying individuals who could serve as competent referral sources for your student-athletes on your campus and in your community.

- If your campus has a counseling center or other mental health service for students, arrange to meet with the Director. Consider asking some of the following questions to get the conversation started:
  - How often do student-athletes use the campus counseling center?
  - Given identified student-athlete needs related to mental health, what do you recommend for how to better meet these needs?
  - What is the average wait for a student to get services?
  - Have you had specific counselors identified as liaisons to certain areas of campus?
  - Is there anyone in the center who has a background in athletics, or who would be interested to learn about the unique culture of athletics?
  - If a particularly high-profile student-athlete needed to receive counseling services, is there any provision you could offer to protect his/her privacy?
  - Would someone on your staff be willing to provide some outreach programs to our student-athletes, or at least come and introduce yourselves to our student-athletes each year?
  - How do you handle psychotropic medication referrals?
  - What kind of psycho-educational assessment services do you offer?
Whether working with an on-campus resource (such as the counseling center or psychology department) or an off-campus provider (such as a private practitioner), make sure the provider has the following traits:

- They are a licensed mental health professional
- They have expertise and/or credentialing in clinical AND performance services
- They have an understanding and appreciation for the unique needs of student-athletes

Initiate interactions with the mental health provider and your student-athletes when there is not a need for service. These non-clinical interactions will establish a rapport between the provider and your student-athletes which will make it easier when the provider’s services are needed. Some non-clinical interactions include:

- Presentations about sport psychology to teams
- Attending staff meetings with coaches, academic counselors, and sport medicine clinicians

3. Make a plan

Prior to an incident, develop a general plan to address mental health issues and make sure your staff is aware of it. Your plan should be written into your policy and procedures. The plan should include:

- Flexibility
- How to refer and triage
- How to educate staff
- What to do after-hours

Know your school’s policies and procedures for on-campus mental health issues. Ensure that your plan and program are consistent with the campuses general student population.

- Know your school’s “duty to report” policy on mental health issues
- Know how your school manages “conflict of laws.” For example, do licensed mental health providers on your campus follow HIPAA or FERPA?

Establish who is the liaison between the mental health care provider and the athletic department.
CHECKLIST 2: Managing a non-emergency mental health issue

1. Demonstrate compassion
   - Some helpful tips for calming the student-athlete and demonstrating compassion are:
     - Remaining calm yourself—maintain calm body language and tone of voice.
     - Listen to the student-athlete. Allow them to express their thoughts. Provide them a forum to be heard. It is okay if there is a moment of silence between you and the student-athlete.
     - Avoid judging the student-athlete.
     - Provide unconditional support. You do not have to solve their problem.
     - Normalize the student-athlete’s experience and offer hope.

2. Gather information
   - Ask questions including questions of safety (“are you thinking of hurting yourself?” and “are you thinking of suicide?”)
     - Please note, asking the important questions will NOT plant the idea in their head.
     - By asking questions about suicide, you will receive valuable information. If they hesitate or confirm, you know to elevate the intervention (see “How to Triage and Manage a Mental Health Issue—Emergent” Checklist)
3. Make a referral

- Generate with the student-athlete treatment options.
- When you identify a student-athlete who would benefit from mental health services but they do not possess the awareness of this need:
  - Inform the student in a matter of fact manner that you believe they would benefit from counseling. Base your recommendation on their behaviors or, identify specific behaviors that you have noticed and are concerned about.
  - Ask the student athlete how they are feeling, how their actions are impacting their life, and if they have done anything about it so far.
  - Leave open the option for the student to accept or refuse the recommendation.
  - Encourage time to “think it over.” But, remember to follow-up.
  - If the student-athlete refuses to attend counseling, leave the issue open for possible reconsideration.
  - Notify the athlete’s team athletic trainer, the director of sports medicine, as well as the mental health provider affiliated with your department.
  - If the recommendation is accepted, assist in creating a plan to schedule an appointment, and follow up with the student in a timely manner. You may call the mental health provider with the student-athlete. If you call with them, you will know that an attempt to schedule has been made as well as when the student-athlete’s appointment is which can assist you in follow-up
  - Inform your mental health provider that a referral had been made.

4. Respect boundaries and abilities

- Know what you are comfortable of doing as well as what you are not comfortable doing
- Don’t promise secrecy. If necessary, you can inform the student-athlete: “It took courage for you to disclose this information to me. And, by telling me, it says you want to do something about what is going on. The best thing we can do is to inform someone else such as a mental health provider who can provide you the care you need.”
CHECKLIST 3: Managing an emergency mental health issue

1. Identify if there is an immediate threat to safety

   ✓ In order to identify if the situation is an immediate threat to safety, ask the following questions:
   
   o Am I concerned the student-athlete may harm themselves?
   o Am I concerned the student-athlete may harm others?
   o Did the student-athlete make verbal or physical threats?
   o Do I feel threatened or uncomfortable?
   o Is the student-athlete exhibiting unusual ideation or thought disturbance that may or may not be due to substance use?
   o Does the student-athlete have access to a weapon?
   o Is there potential for danger or harm in the future?

2. Manage immediate risks

   ✓ In the case of an immediate risk to safety:

   o Keep yourself safe—do not attempt to intervene.
   o Keep others safe—keep a safe distance between the student-athlete in distress and others in the area.
   o Get help from colleagues.
   o If the student-athlete seems volatile, or disruptive, alert a co-worker for assistance. Do not leave the student-athlete alone. However, do not put yourself in harm’s way if they try to leave.
   o Call 911, campus security, or have the person taken directly to the emergency department at the nearest hospital. When you call, be prepared to provide the following information:
     - Student-Athlete’s name and contact information.
     - Physical Description of the student-athlete (height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing).
     - Description of the situation and assistance needed.
     - Exact location of the student-athlete.
     - If the student-athlete leaves the area or refuses assistance, note the direction by which the student leaves.
   o Follow campus and department protocols and policies

   ✓ If possible, offer a quiet and secure place to talk.

   o Listen to the student-athlete; maintain a consistent, straightforward, and helpful attitude.
   o If the student-athlete is expressing suicidal ideation:
     - Listen
     - Show your genuine concern
     - Emphasize risk to safety
     - Do **NOT** leave the person alone
How to ask about suicide:

"Are you/Have you been thinking about suicide?"
"Are you/Have you been thinking about killing yourself?"
"Sometimes when people are (your observations), they are thinking about suicide. Is that what you’re thinking about?"

How NOT to ask about suicide:

"You’re not thinking about suicide, are you?"

3. Contact mental health care provider

- Make arrangements for appropriate university intervention and aid.
- Call the mental health provider to initiate next steps of care
- If medical care seems appropriate, head to the nearest hospital or call 911.
- If the student-athlete is expressing suicidal ideation make a referral for a suicide risk assessment
  - On-site mental health professional
  - Local hospital
  - Local crisis line/mobile assessment team
    - Suicide hotline: 1-800-784-2433 or 1-800-273-Talk
CHECKLIST 4: After managing a mental health issue

1. Initiate follow-up care
2. Debrief and plan for the future

1. Initiate follow-up care

✓ Identify what is needed for follow-up care
✓ Identify available resources
✓ Initiate continuity of care:
  o How is the mental health issue going to be managed within the athletic department?
  o If the issue is not to be managed within the athletic department, how do you make appropriate referrals and transitional steps to ensure the safety and well-being of those involved?

2. Debrief and plan for the future

✓ Schedule a meeting with athletic department staff involved with the intervention as well as athletic department staff who will be involved moving forward. While maintaining appropriate confidentiality:
  o Identify the strengths of the intervention approach.
  o Identify what did not work with the intervention approach.
  o Identify what improvements could be made to the departmental protocol for prevention, early detection and management of mental health issues.