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Suicide risk is real for student-athletes

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Why would a 21-year-old collegiate football player take his own life just two days after his team's 53-7 victory, a game in which both he and his younger brother scored touchdowns that led to the team's success?

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The recent suicide of University of Pennsylvania football student-athlete Kyle Ambrogi reminds us that there are young adults in athletics departments around the country who are struggling to cope with overwhelming mental health challenges.

In recent years, researchers have found that, contrary to popular belief, student-athletes may be more at-risk than their non-athlete peers for experiencing mental health difficulties, such as alcohol abuse, social anxiety and depressive symptoms. Consistent with these findings, recent research suggests that student-athletes suffer from depression at similar rates as their non-athlete counterparts. Reasons for this rate may stem from the culture of athletics, which emphasizes being "mentally tough," "showing no sign of weakness" and "fighting through the pain."



Chamberlain

It appears that intense psychological pain and a sense of hopelessness are the main factors leading to contemplation about suicide. When individuals reach this state of crisis, they are unable to see any other viable alternative. They may think that the only way to escape the pain and to remove them from the hopeless situation is to die. While considering suicide, though, most people still are ambivalent about dying.

Moreover, individuals may give their friends and family clues about their intentions. Although there are exceptions, most suicide attempts occur after considerable thought by the individual. It is not generally a spontaneous, impulsive act.

In some ways, student-athletes may be more vulnerable to contemplating suicide. For many, their identity as a person is almost exclusively tied to being an athlete. That is problematic when a student-athlete suffers a serious injury, gets cut from the team, is finished with eligibility or is asked to play a limited role on a team. These losses lead to questions, such as "Now what?" and "Who am I?"



Moore

Some student-athletes also hesitate to seek mental health treatment when dealing with depression because they believe no one will really understand what they are going through -- they do not know where they can go for help or they fear whatever stigmas may come along with seeking help. Thus they feel isolated and helpless to manage the pain, and they see few alternative paths to remove themselves from the situation. For some student-athletes, the stigma of quitting their sport seems more weighty and difficult to live with than to simply "get out" altogether.

Fortunately, the NCAA has recognized the need to address the importance of student-athlete mental health, and specifically, depression. A committee of licensed psychologists currently is developing guidelines to be included in the NCAA Sports Medicine Handbook for addressing student-athlete depression in athletics departments.

But guidelines alone are not enough. It is imperative that athletics department personnel, especially coaches, athletic trainers and academic advisors, notice team members' behavioral changes and emotional struggles. This is especially important when athletes are coping with recent losses in their lives such as a death in the family, a parent's divorce, a relationship break-up, a major injury or a significant change in team status.

Signs to watch for include changes in sleep and/or eating (increases or decreases), difficulties in concentrating, decreased performance in school and/or sport, diminished interest or pleasure in most activities, increased fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of sadness, and feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt. Individuals suffering from depression also may choose to cope by using or abusing alcohol or other drugs.

Additionally, it is essential that athletics departments find and allocate resources to help student-athletes cope with mental health difficulties. An initial step, and one we highly recommend to athletics departments around the country, is to set aside the time and watch the video "Nathan's Story" (www.ncaa.org/sports_sciences/education/video/NathansStory/). Following the video, the athletics department staff can discuss ways to improve their delivery

of mental health services to their student-athletes.

Coaches and athletic trainers have opportunities to interact with their student-athletes daily and often are the first to know about difficulties in student-athletes' lives. In some cases, coaches and athletic trainers can assist student-athletes by taking the time to listen and show a personal interest in the student-athletes' day-to-day struggles, but most coaches and athletic trainers are not equipped and/or trained to help a student-athlete with depression. Therefore, a referral network of qualified mental health professionals must be established in every athletics department.

Athletics departments can provide even greater benefits to their student-athletes by employing mental health professionals who have experience with sport psychology or including such professionals in their referral network. Sport psychologists are familiar with the unique culture of athletics and are trained to provide mental health services to athletes.

By establishing a strong connection between student-athletes and sport psychologists, athletics departments can provide accessible mental health services for their student-athletes while emphasizing the value of physical and mental strength and normalizing the importance of the mind-body connection.

Since many student-athletes are hesitant to go to the campus counseling center on their own (because of concerns about confidentiality or unawareness about the culture of athletics on the therapist's part), this integrated approach allows departments to better provide for the mental health needs of their student-athletes.

The unfortunate reality is that every year young people like Kyle Ambrogi will take their lives, regardless of what is done on college campuses. However, if athletics departments around the country will take the time to learn from this terrible tragedy and re-examine what they can do at their own schools to improve the delivery of mental health counseling to their student-athletes, then lives can be improved and potentially saved.

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For more information

- **NCAA Online**

www.ncaa.org/health-safety

- **International Olympic Committee Medical Commission Web site**

www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/commissions/medical/index_uk.asp

- **Female Athlete Triad Coalition** www.femaleathletetriad.org

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