

# THE COACHES' GUIDE

to Supporting High School Athlete Mental Health



The Jed Foundation

**POSITIVE  
COACHING  
ALLIANCE**®

# This Is Your Guide to Supporting Your Players

Teens are facing an escalating crisis in mental health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one in three high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019. Nearly 20% of all high school students had serious thoughts of suicide in the past year, a statistic that rises significantly for LGBTQ students and students of color. Sports teams offer unique opportunities to create spaces where teens feel safe, seen, heard, and valued.

A trusted, caring adult can be a game changer for young people, and coaches are ideally positioned to provide that support. You can be the first to notice when an athlete is struggling emotionally, and the first person an athlete trusts enough to reach out to.

The Jed Foundation (JED) and Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) created this quick, easy-to-use guide to increase your knowledge and comfort in navigating these situations and conversations. We want to help you feel prepared, and we want you to know:

- You do not have to be a mental health professional to support an athlete with their mental health.
- You are never alone when you support athletes.
- You don't have to provide care. You can be the bridge that connects them to it.

**This guide will walk you through straightforward—but significant—steps you can take to:**

- **Support** mental health on your team.
- **Recognize** and **reach out** to a struggling athlete.
- **Connect** athletes to professional help, if and when it is needed.



Photos courtesy of Positive Coaching Alliance and contracted photographers.

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### About The Jed Foundation

The Jed Foundation (JED) is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We partner with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We equip teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge they need to help themselves and each other. We encourage community awareness, understanding, and action for young adult mental health. **Learn more and access resources at [jedfoundation.org](http://jedfoundation.org).**

### About Positive Coaching Alliance

PCA's vision is to build a world where every child benefits from a positive youth sports experience with a coach who inspires them to become the best version of themselves in the game and in life. We train coaches and partner with youth sports organizations, parents, sports leaders, and communities to make youth sports more positive, equitable, and accessible to all kids regardless of social or economic circumstances. **For more information go to [positivecoach.org](http://positivecoach.org).**

# How to Create a Community of Care in Sports

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You can support your athletes' mental health by talking openly about the importance of mental health, supporting help-seeking, and creating an accepting environment where athletes experience a sense of belonging and connection to something bigger than themselves.

## **Build Connection**

Create opportunities for athletes to connect, such as a [get-to-know-you activity](#) like pairing athletes with warm-up buddies and having them ask each other non-sports questions during each stretch. Remind them that they can be supports for one another.

## **Talk About It**

Begin practice with a check-in to see how athletes are doing. Let them know you are available before and after practice to connect when they are struggling, and reiterate that during high-pressure times, such as before competitions or championships. Let them know their well-being is important to you, and you are here to be a support if they need it.

## **Make a Safe Space**

Start the season by telling players how you expect them to treat one another and letting them know your team is a [safe space](#) for everyone, including all sexual orientations and gender identities.

## **Encourage Self-Care**

Consider incorporating mindfulness, [deep breathing](#), or other calming activities into your practices, and encourage athletes to engage in self-care activities such as taking breaks from school and sports, getting good sleep, or talking with friends. You can model self-care by sharing what you do to manage stress, which not only benefits them, but also is critical to your well-being. You, too, are part of the community of care you are creating.

## **Establish Rituals and Routines**

When athletes celebrate positive traditions and understand your team routine, they can feel safe and secure and focus on learning and interacting with teammates.



## Focus on Effort

Encourage athletes to set realistic goals that prioritize effort and learning so they can experience improvement and the self-confidence that comes with it. Identify and emphasize their strengths, and frame mistakes as opportunities to [learn](#) and improve. Valuing effort and learning over outcomes helps athletes experience success, regardless of the score.



## Give Athletes Voice and Choice

When athletes' thoughts and opinions are encouraged and valued, they feel more ownership over their experience. In addition to developing problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, athletes will gain a sense of control that can help them feel safe within their team and comfortable reaching out when they need to.



## Share Resources

**Local and school:** Find out what organizations exist in the community to support teen and young adult mental health, and compile contact information for them. If you are part of a school program, find out what support services are available to students for academic stress and mental health support. If there are specific colleagues who provide student support, invite them to come to a practice, introduce themselves, and explain the services they offer. That will help students feel more comfortable seeking them out if needed.

### National:

- For a referral for mental health treatment, call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) to reach [SAMHSA's National Helpline](#).
- For the Crisis Text Line, text HOME to 741-741 for a free, confidential conversation with a trained counselor at any time.
- To connect with help and support during a mental health, substance use, or suicide crisis, call or text 988 or use the online chat function at [988lifeline.org](#).
- You can find additional crisis resources at [jedfoundation.org/its-an-emergency](#).

Share all these resources verbally, and include them in team emails and communications using language like this:

*“If you are feeling stressed, worried, or down, or if you think a friend may be struggling, please feel free to let me know, and I will help. Here are some helpful places to go: [list school and local resources]. If you or someone you know needs to talk to someone right now, text HOME to 741-741 for a free confidential conversation with a trained counselor at any time. If you are experiencing a mental health, substance use, or suicide crisis, text or call [988](#).”*



## How to Recognize an Athlete Who Is Struggling

You know your players. If something concerns you, trust your gut and err on the side of checking in. It may turn out that nothing substantial is going on, but showing athletes you care is part of supporting mental health. Athletes—like all of us—fare better when they feel seen, cared for, and part of a community.

The most important sign that something is going on for an athlete—or anyone—is a significant change in how they behave or function.

### Here are some specific examples:

- Repeated absences
- Decline in performance
- Reduced participation
- Excessive fatigue
- Changes in personal hygiene
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating
- Inappropriate or exaggerated actions
- Intense irritability or anger
- Worsening nervousness
- Changes in socializing
- Facing stressful life situations at home or personally
- Concern from a friend or peer
- Involvement in bullying

# How to Reach Out to a Struggling Athlete



## DO

- Invite the athlete to talk in a comfortable space.
- Use a calm, positive tone of voice and relaxed body language.
- Tell them what you observed that concerns you.
- Use “I” statements, such as “I have noticed” or “I am concerned about,” rather than “you should.”
- Ask open-ended questions about how they are doing.
- Let athletes guide the conversation: “Tell me more about that.”
- Focus on listening to their concerns rather than sharing your own feelings or experiences or rushing to fix things.
- Let them know you have heard them and you care.
- Refer athletes to community- or school-based supports as needed. Ask if they would like an introduction or would prefer you reach out on their behalf.
- Follow your school or program’s crisis and mandated reporting protocols if you feel the athlete is in danger or is an immediate threat to themselves or someone else.



## DON'T

- Underestimate or minimize their struggles. It is far better to check in unnecessarily than to dismiss a potentially harmful situation.
- Promise confidentiality. Honor the athlete’s privacy without committing to confidentiality. Program or school guidelines may require you to report an athlete at immediate risk of harming themselves (see next page).
- Leave the athlete alone if you feel they are at immediate risk.
- Feel pressured to be a therapist. If you notice an athlete is having a problem, you simply need to connect them with someone who has the training to help them.

# How to Know When an Athlete Needs Immediate Help

An athlete may be at immediate risk and should be connected to professional mental health services right away if they:

- **Express despair.** *“Sometimes it feels like I’d be better off dead.”*
- **Express hopelessness.** *“No matter what I do, nothing gets better. Sometimes I wonder if it’s even worth being here at all.”*
- **Talk about leaving their family or friends.** *“I feel like I’m such a burden to them. They’d be better off without me.”*
- **Mention self-harm.** *“It seems like the only thing that makes me feel better is cutting myself.”*
- **Show signs of self-injury,** including visible cuts, burns, or scars, or wearing long sleeves in warm weather to hide injuries.

## What to do:

- **Stay calm.** This will help you think clearly about how to respond, and it can help reduce the student’s anxiety.
- **Let them know you hear them and want to help.** (See wording examples on next page.)
- **Ask the athlete if they are thinking about suicide.** Research suggests that acknowledging and talking about suicide may reduce rather than increase suicidal thoughts.
- **Follow your school** or program’s crisis support and emergency guidelines.
- **Walk the athlete to the mental health support staff** or appropriate administrator.
- **Stay with the athlete** until they are connected with someone who knows the next steps to take.
- **Call 988,** the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, if you are unable to connect with a trained staff member.
- **Call 911** in the case of an immediate medical emergency. Explain that it is a mental health crisis, so first responders arrive prepared to respond appropriately.



# How to Start the Conversation

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## Ways to Approach a Struggling Athlete

*“I noticed you’ve seemed a little down lately, so I wanted to check in with you. Could you tell me what’s been going on?”*

*“I noticed you missed practice a few times. Could you share how things have been going for you?”*

*“You seem really tired at practice lately. How are you doing these days?”*

## Ways to Respond When an Athlete Shares Their Struggle With You

*“I am so glad you told me about this. Let’s brainstorm how we can get you some support.”*

*“Thank you for telling me. I am here for you, and I want to help. I am going to introduce you to [name of mental health staff member], who can offer strategies to help you through this.”*

*“Wow, that sounds really hard. It makes sense you are struggling. I know some organizations that can really help in situations like this and are confidential and safe.”*

## Ways to Talk With an Athlete Who Needs Immediate Help

*“I understand you are hurting right now. You are not alone. I am here to help you and make sure you stay safe.”*

*“I can tell you’re very upset, and I’m concerned about you. I’m going to connect you with someone who can help you stay safe.”*

**If an athlete declines support and they are at immediate risk, call 911 and explain that you need help for a mental health crisis.**

**If an athlete does not want to share with you and you are *not* worried they're at immediate risk:**

- Ask them if there is someone else they would feel comfortable talking to.
- Let them know you're always here to listen.
- Share your concerns with a school or program administrator and consult about the next steps.

Remember you are never alone when you help athletes. You can enlist school or community professionals and connect athletes to on- or off-site mental health services. Each day, you play positive roles in the lives of your players. You can have a huge impact when an athlete is dealing with challenges in their life. Just showing you care can create a beneficial ripple effect that changes an athlete's trajectory, athletic experience, and sense of connection.

**Your help can change—and even save—lives.**



Photos courtesy of Positive Coaching Alliance and contracted photographers.

# Resources for Supporting Teens and Young Adults

Students can find open-minded support and advice on managing feelings, mental health conditions, and particular situations in JED's [Mental Health Resource Center](#).

[Mental Health is Health](#) and [Seize the Awkward](#) both have information on identifying someone who is struggling and opening a conversation with them.

JED offers "[You Can Help](#)" trainings for faculty and students on supporting students in distress.

Learn more about how The Jed Foundation can [support your school or district](#). You can also email [jedhsinfo@jedfoundation.org](mailto:jedhsinfo@jedfoundation.org).

## **Additional resources for coaches:**

[3 Ways to Create a Caring Climate](#)

[Addressing Players' BASE Needs](#)

[Understanding Trauma's Impact on Behavior](#)

For information on PCA's live workshops focused on positive youth development, [click here](#).

