

Robbie's Hope

ATHLETIC HANDBOOK

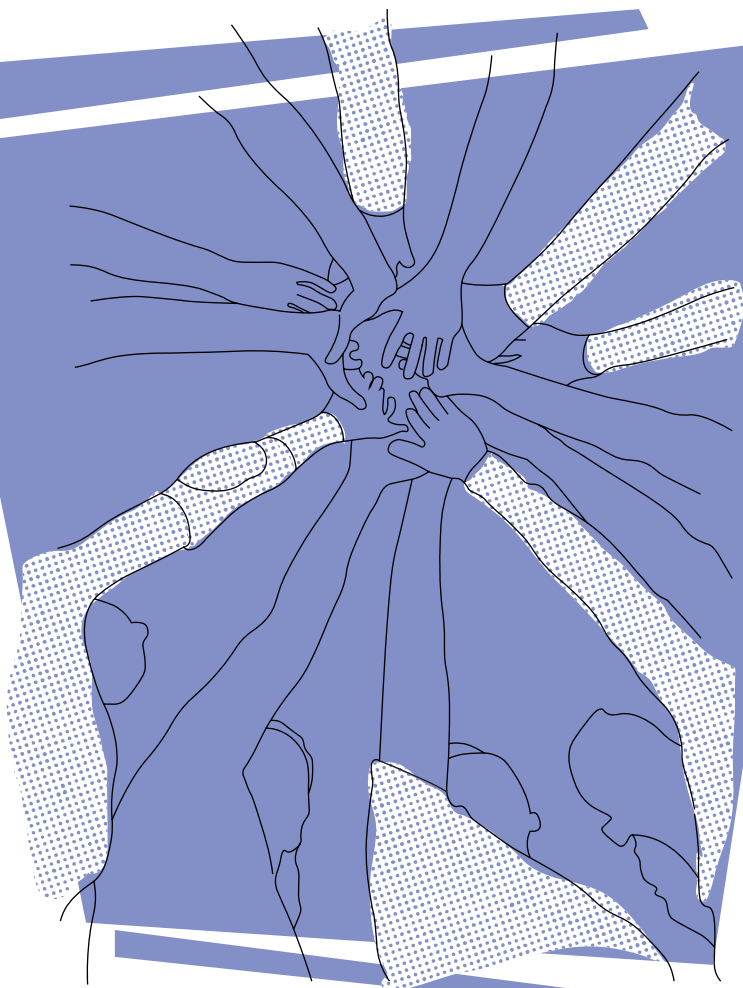


table of contents



03

OUR STORY & INTRODUCTION

04

PART 1: SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN ATHLETES

09

PART 2: FOR ATHLETES

14

PART 3: FOR COACHES AND PARENTS

21

RESOURCES

Introduction & Overview



OUR STORY

Since 2018, Robbie's Hope has been tirelessly working to fulfill our mission of cutting the teen suicide rate in half by 2028. Organized by teens for teens in honor of Robbie Eckert, who died by suicide in October 2018, we are a movement of young people working to normalize talking about our emotions and to remind anyone who's struggling that they're not alone — and that It's Ok To Not Be Ok.

INTRODUCTION

Athletes, like anyone, can experience a wide array of mental health challenges. **In the competitive and high-pressure nature of sports, mental health related issues are commonly overlooked.** The demands of training, competition, and performance all contribute to a person's overall well-being, and the conversation surrounding athletes' mental health is highly stigmatized.

This guide represents **the third installment** in our series of handbooks designed to provide valuable resources for parents, trusted adults, and teens dealing with depression and anxiety. In this guide, you will discover a wealth of information on the prevalence of mental health concerns in sports, along with coping strategies.

The information contained in this guide has been created by teen athletes drawing from their personal experiences and input from medical professionals.

Intended for athletes, parents of athletes, and coaches with the aim of raising awareness about mental health in sports and initiating conversations to prevent issues from arising.

PART 1: SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN ATHLETES

Depression

Depression is defined as a state of being sad for a prolonged period of two weeks or more. While the causes of depression can vary in youth athletes, it is often linked to factors such as injury, overtraining, lack of support, or intense pressure experienced in a sports environment.

Symptoms in athletes may look different than non-athletes, and can include:

- An extreme decline in performance,
- Decreased interest in activities,
- Changes in habits (sleeping, eating, socializing, etc.).

Playing a sport is often a huge part of a young person's life. When people have to take time away from their sport because of injury or other reasons, they are susceptible to feelings of isolation, loneliness, frustration, and in some cases, depression.

Burnout

Burnout is defined as a state of physical or emotional exhaustion with a reduced sense of accomplishment. Burnout is considered a mental disorder, however, it can also lead to several other mental illnesses; including but not limited to anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide.

There are various stages of burnout, ranging from basic anxiety to suicidal ideations. Burnout can have various origins; such as being overworked, having a lack of support, and excessive stress.

Symptoms can/may include:

- Decreased motivation
- Exhaustion
- Loss of enjoyment in sports
- Insomnia
- Irritability
- Decreased performance

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are considered a mental illness and are often overlooked as an issue in athletics. Oftentimes in sports, athletes are restricted to a diet. Some coaches give athletes misleading information about food, and in some sports, coaches restrain the type/quantity of food that one can eat, which is a prime contributor to disordered eating.

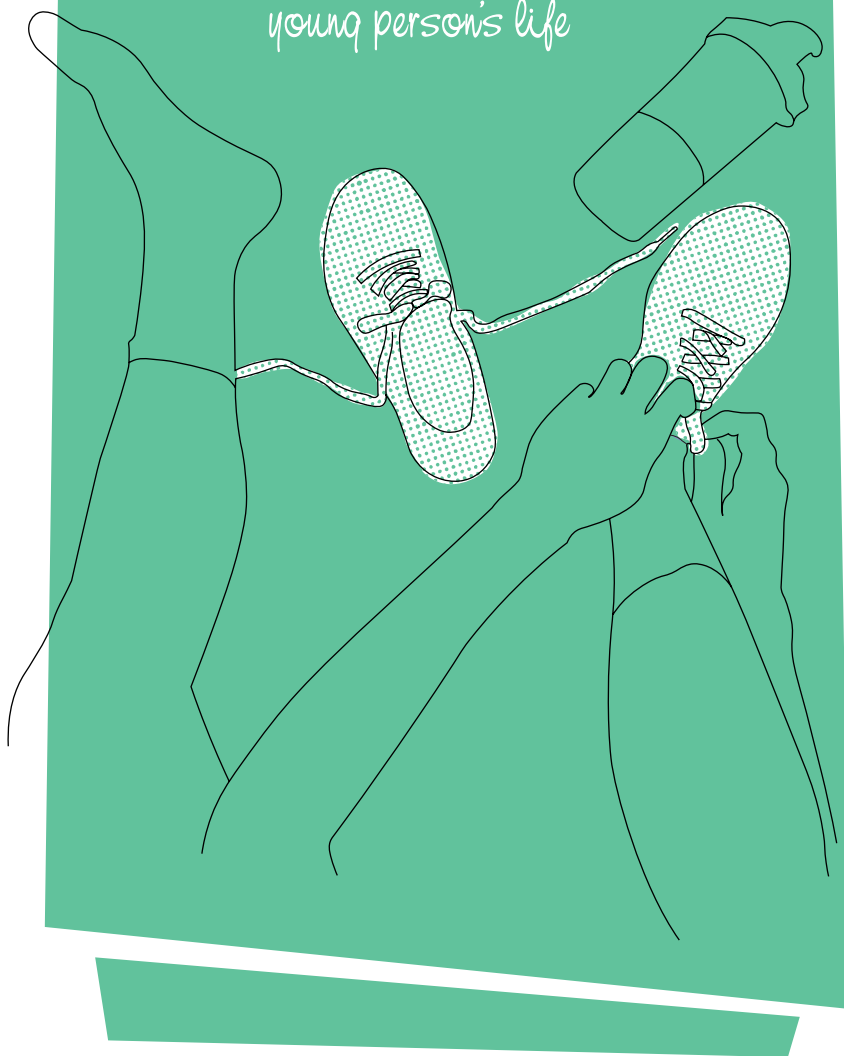
The types of eating disorders are:

- *Anorexia Nervosa: Restriction of calorie intake*
- *Bulimia Nervosa: A process of overeating followed by self-induced vomiting or purging*
- *Binge Eating Disorder: Recurrent episodes of binge eating.*
- *Avoidant-Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID): Feeding disturbance based on concerns or consequences of eating.*
- *Muscle Dysmorphia: Preoccupation with the physical flaws or perceived defects of physical appearance that are not observable by others.*
- *“Orthorexia”: Not an official eating disorder prognosis; Preoccupation with healthy “clean” eating.*
- *Relative Energy Deficiency Disorder (RED-S): Athletes do not get enough food to support the energy needed for their daily lives and exercise.*

Information derived from the Eating Recovery Center. For more information, please visit eatingrecoverycenter.com

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Playing a sport is
often a huge part of a
young person's life



Although symptoms for each type of eating disorder vary, some athlete-specific symptoms include:

- Difficulty with days off and tapering
- Rigidity in athletic-related behaviors and routines
- Difficulty concentrating during training or in academics
- Withdrawing from team social activities
- Decreased muscle strength, coordination, speed
- Prolonged or additional training above and beyond what is required for the sport
- Longer recovery times
- More frequent injuries
- Dizziness upon standing, after lifting, training, getting out of the pool, etc.

Anxiety

When playing a competitive sport, athletes are surrounded by constant pressure from peers, coaches, parents, and themselves. Anxiety can be a common issue in sports because of the stress put on an athlete's shoulders. This constant pressure can cause a fear of failure, which can then lead to other mental health concerns. Along with pressure, athletes are held to a higher standard in areas outside of sports, such as school. Balancing school, sports, and personal life can cause stress and further lead to burnout or depression.

Similar to depression and other mental disorders, warning signs of anxiety may include:

- Inability to concentrate
- Constant worry
- Panic attacks
- Insomnia

Warning Signs: *Being observant of warning signs of a potential mental illness can be crucial in further preventing issues from prevailing. Noticing these symptoms early on and getting support can positively affect one's performance in athletics. Everyone is different, and these signs/symptoms do not mean the same thing for each person.*

“MENTAL HEALTH IS AN INTERDEPENDENT PART OF AN ATHLETE’S EXPERIENCE AND CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM PHYSICAL HEALTH OR PERFORMANCE. AS COMPETITIVE PRESSURES CONTINUE TO BUILD FOR YOUNG ATHLETES, IT’S CRITICAL THAT WE AS ADULTS, PARENTS, COACHES, SPORT ORGANIZATIONS, AND A SOCIETY MORE BROADLY CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT AND SPORT PARTICIPATION BY REDUCING STIGMA FOR HELP SEEKING, INCREASING MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AND ACCESS TO RESOURCES, AND CONTINUING TO DEVELOP HEALTHY, SUPPORTIVE, SPORT CULTURES.”

Dr. Emily Clark

*Licensed Psychologist, Sr. Psychological Services Provider,
United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee*

PART 2: FOR ATHLETES

Overview

Sports are as mental as they are physical. Many athletes are dealing with mental health issues in one way or another. It is important to know that you are not alone in your struggles. In this section, we highlight some things to take into account when it comes to taking care of yourself.

Trusted Adult

Having someone who you can trust to talk to about certain issues is crucial to success and a good mental state. A trusted adult can be someone like a coach, parent, counselor, teacher, etc. A trusted adult should listen without judgment and support you unconditionally.

Taking Care of Yourself

Fundamental components of both an athlete's overall well-being and sports success include adequate rest and recovery. While training and exercise are crucial for enhancing one's physical capacities, the body also needs time to rest and heal.

- *Uninterrupted/Quality Sleep:* Although it varies by individual, a person should get 7-10 hours of sleep every night. Many youth athletes may struggle to find time to balance school, sports, and life in general. It is crucial that one gets the right amount of uninterrupted quality sleep every night. Proper amounts of sleep can encourage faster reaction times, better endurance, injury prevention, and overall a better performance.
- *Rest Days/Breaks:* Taking a day off every once in a while is crucial to improving performance and mental well-being as an athlete. Giving your body and mind time to rest helps promote muscle growth and injury prevention, which can help you avoid burnout. Every sport is different when it comes to the amount of rest needed, but every athlete needs a designated time for rest. It's important to reach out to your coach to find out how to properly rest your body, specific to your sport.

Positive Affirmations:

Staying positive in a competitive, high-pressure situation can be hard. By reminding yourself of your capabilities, you can rewire your brain to have more confidence in certain situations. These positive statements can alter your subconscious thinking, which can lead to a better performance and mental state.

Here are some examples:

- *"I will focus on things in my control".*
- *"My fears and doubts are normal, and I am still capable of great things".*
- *"I believe in myself and my abilities".*
- *"My body is strong and is allowing me to live my dream."*

WRITE YOUR OWN

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TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF CONTINUED

- *Mindfulness*: Mindfulness is a mental practice that involves paying attention to the present moment without judgment. Strong emotions like frustration, anger, or disappointment can be brought on by sports. Athletes who practice mindfulness are better able to control and manage their emotions, which helps them avoid emotional outbursts that can impair performance.
- “*Food Is Fuel*” is a term used commonly to describe the importance of eating a healthy amount, especially when it comes to sports. Eating too much or too little can often alter one’s performance and make it harder to perform to the fullest of one’s ability since the body is not properly nourished. Everybody is different, but it is important to understand the proper amount of nutrition your body needs to be successful.

“EVEN THE BEST OF THE BEST ATHLETES HAVE THEIR OWN STRUGGLES AND CHALLENGES. I WISH THAT I KNEW IT WAS OKAY TO GET HELP EVEN IF THAT MEANT REACHING OUT TO A PROFESSIONAL, VIRTUALLY, IN THE PRIVACY OF MY OWN HOME. THE HARDEST THING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH/ EATING DISORDERS IS THE FEELING THAT YOU NEED TO SUFFER ALONE. THE PRESSURES OF SPORTS CAN FEEL LIKE THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD IS ON YOUR SHOULDERS, BUT IT IS OKAY TO TALK ABOUT IT. IN FACT, IT’S NORMAL.”

Patrick Devenny

Former University of Colorado Football Player

“THE MENTAL HEALTH OF AN ATHLETE IS THE MOST ESSENTIAL ELEMENT TO THEIR OVERALL WELL-BEING AND SUCCESS. WITHOUT THIS ELEMENT, NOTHING ELSE CAN WORK. THERE IS NO BETTER WAY TO HONOR A SPORT THAN TO HONOR THE OVERALL WELL-BEING OF THOSE INVOLVED.”

Lara Vette

High School Cross Country and Track Coach

- *Develop a Game-Day Routine:* The pressures before a competition can be stress-inducing, however, sticking to a continuous routine can help reduce pre-game anxiety and build confidence. Everyone's routines will look different, so take time to find what makes you feel most prepared. **Here are some ideas to get you started:**
 1. Make a pregame playlist
 2. Visualize: Create a mental image of yourself accomplishing your goals
 3. Breathing exercises
- *Balanced Schedule:* Maintain a healthy balance between rest, competitions, and training. To avoid burnout and preserve general life satisfaction, schedule time for hobbies, socializing, and relaxation.
- *Coping with Injury:* Obviously, injuries alter physical performance, but being injured is a long and draining process, and the impact it has on one's mental health is often significantly overlooked. Being injured not only takes away one's ability to participate in sports, but it also takes away socialization with the team and the physical outlet that helps

with other stresses in life. Every injury looks different, but the recovery process does have some similar characteristics; it's long and boring, which really isn't great for mental health. **Here are some ways to optimize physical and mental performance during recovery:**

1. Start goal setting and be present in your journey
2. Focus on the aspects that you have control over
3. Pay attention to what your body needs
4. Be creative with your workouts and recovery
5. Reach out for help
6. Be patient
7. Stay connected with the team
8. Fill your time with other things that make you happy



**Fundamental components
of both an athlete's overall
well-being and sports
success include adequate
rest and recovery.**

PART 3: FOR COACHES AND PARENTS

Overview

What you do can influence your athletes greatly. It's important to understand that mental health issues are more prevalent than ever, and they are not always visible. This resource provides information to help coaches and parents identify the different types of mental health issues and how coaches and parents can prevent them. Adults need to be open with their athletes about mental illness in sports, and the best way to prevent them is to destigmatize the conversation, spread awareness about what they are, and provide information on how to prevent them.

Identification and Prevention

- *Educate Yourself:* Mental performance is just as crucial as physical performance in every sport. Before you can educate others you need to educate yourself on the common types of mental illness in sports. This includes but is not limited to depression, anxiety, burnout, and eating disorders. Each and every illness looks different for every person, but there are common ways to avoid them. Burnout can have various origins; being overworked, having a lack of support, and excessive stress.
- *Educate Your Athletes:* Taking the time to sit down and talk about what mental illness looks like in sports is the best way to start. Many athletes do not know the extent to which they are suffering, because mental issues have become so normalized in sports settings. Educate your athletes on all types of mental issues in sports and create conversations to where they feel comfortable and safe talking about their personal issues. Normalize that it is okay to not be okay. Use our *Robbie's Hope Adult Handbook* to facilitate these conversations.
- *Identify Early Warning Signs in Athletes:* As highlighted, sports are very mental, and without a good mental headspace it's hard to find success. If coaches and parents can identify the warning signs of mental illness early on, it can be treated before becoming severe. Identifying these warning signs is not easy, but it is crucial to an athlete's well-being. Below are some warning signs of a declining mental health in athletes:

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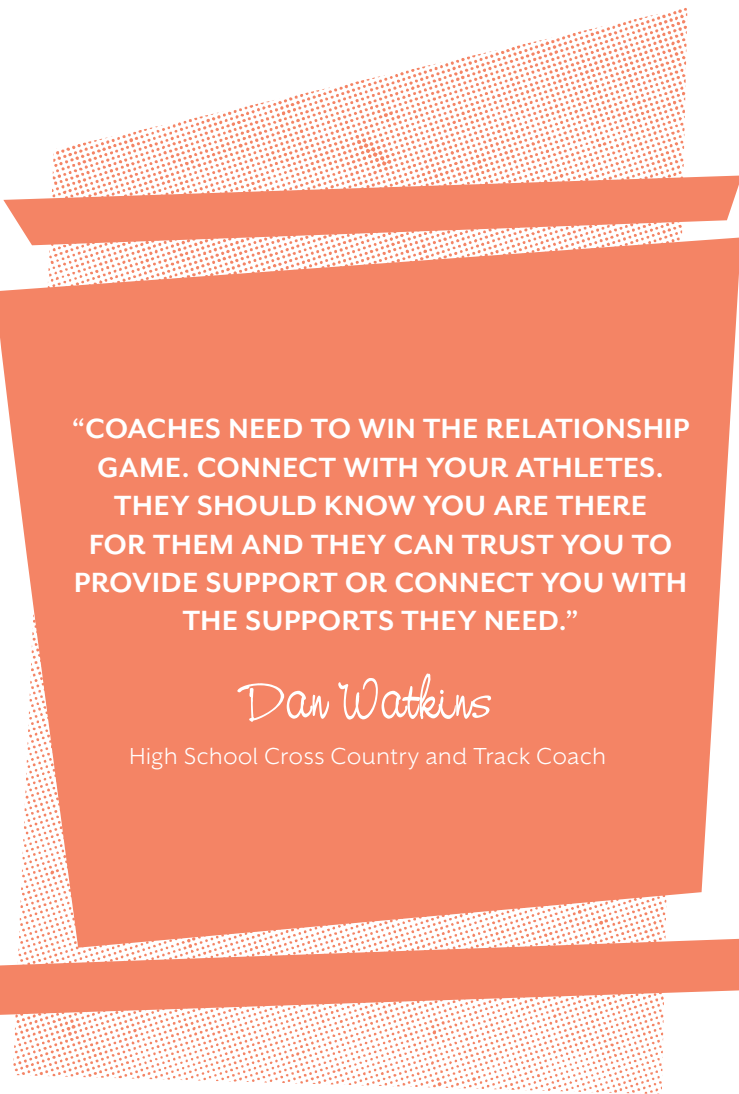
Potential warning signs of a declining mental health in athletes:

- *Constant worry about the mental state they are in, the future, possible problems, or fear of failure*
- *Decrease in enjoyment*
- *Irritability: Being more emotionally volatile and declining patience*
- *Loss in concentration and ability to stay focused*
- *More frequent injuries*
- *Restlessness or insomnia: having trouble sleeping or staying up*
- *Changes in eating habits*
- *Decreased muscle strength, coordination, speed*
- *Difficulty with days off and tapering*
- *Prolonged or additional training above and beyond what is required for the sport*
- *Longer recovery times*

- *Strive to Create Positive Impact:* Coaches and parents carry a significant amount of influence on an athlete's well-being. Adults need to create an environment that is a safe space for youth to talk about their issues. You never know what an athlete may be going through, and teens want to be heard rather than told how to feel. Your ultimate goal as a trusted adult is to communicate your support.
- Encourage rest and recovery, which gives the body time to rest and muscles to develop. Giving athletes proper rest time will help aid in an increase in overall performance.
- Reduce the importance of winning. Yes, winning is the goal of sports, but a “win at all costs” mindset often reduces enjoyment and creates unnecessary stress.
- Be supportive in a time of need. If you notice an athlete struggling, work with them to find the root of the issue, and make alterations as needed to prevent issues from worsening.

- Steer clear from toxic positivity. Toxic positivity is the belief that no matter how difficult a situation is, people should always maintain a positive mindset. Toxic positivity can make people have their problems feel overlooked.
- *Approaching the Issue:* The most challenging part of dealing with mental health is approaching the problem after identifying the issue. These conversations are extremely hard to have, but they can make a huge impact. As a coach or parent, you play a huge role in an athlete's life, whether you know it or not. To know how to fully navigate this conversation, see our Adult Handbook on our website (robbies-hope.com). *However, below are the key ideas to take away:*
 - Teens often express that they want to talk or ask for help but don't for fear of being alienated or judged. It's important to express your unconditional love and support. Teens say that some of the hardest topics to talk about include: insecurities including body image, friend/relationship issues, fears about the future, pressures around school and sports, being a disappointment to you, and something that you did that hurt them. Fear, guilt, anxiety, shame, and not wanting to feel like a burden drive teens to avoid these conversations with parents and other trusted adults. Emotions and devaluation of self-worth continue to build until a breaking point is reached.
 - If a teen's close friend, coach, or teacher is the one to express concern about the teen's feelings of depression or thoughts of suicide, consider the consequences of telling the teen the name of the person who told you. The close friend or trusted adult could be someone the teen might turn to for support in the future—acknowledging they expressed concern could alienate that relationship.
 - Some teens expressed discomfort about being directly questioned about their own feelings of depression, anxiety, or suicide. It can make them feel defensive. Some prefer parents and trusted adults ease into the conversation by asking something like: "Do you know anyone who seems to struggle with depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts?"

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**“COACHES NEED TO WIN THE RELATIONSHIP
GAME. CONNECT WITH YOUR ATHLETES.
THEY SHOULD KNOW YOU ARE THERE
FOR THEM AND THEY CAN TRUST YOU TO
PROVIDE SUPPORT OR CONNECT YOU WITH
THE SUPPORTS THEY NEED.”**

Dan Watkins

High School Cross Country and Track Coach

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

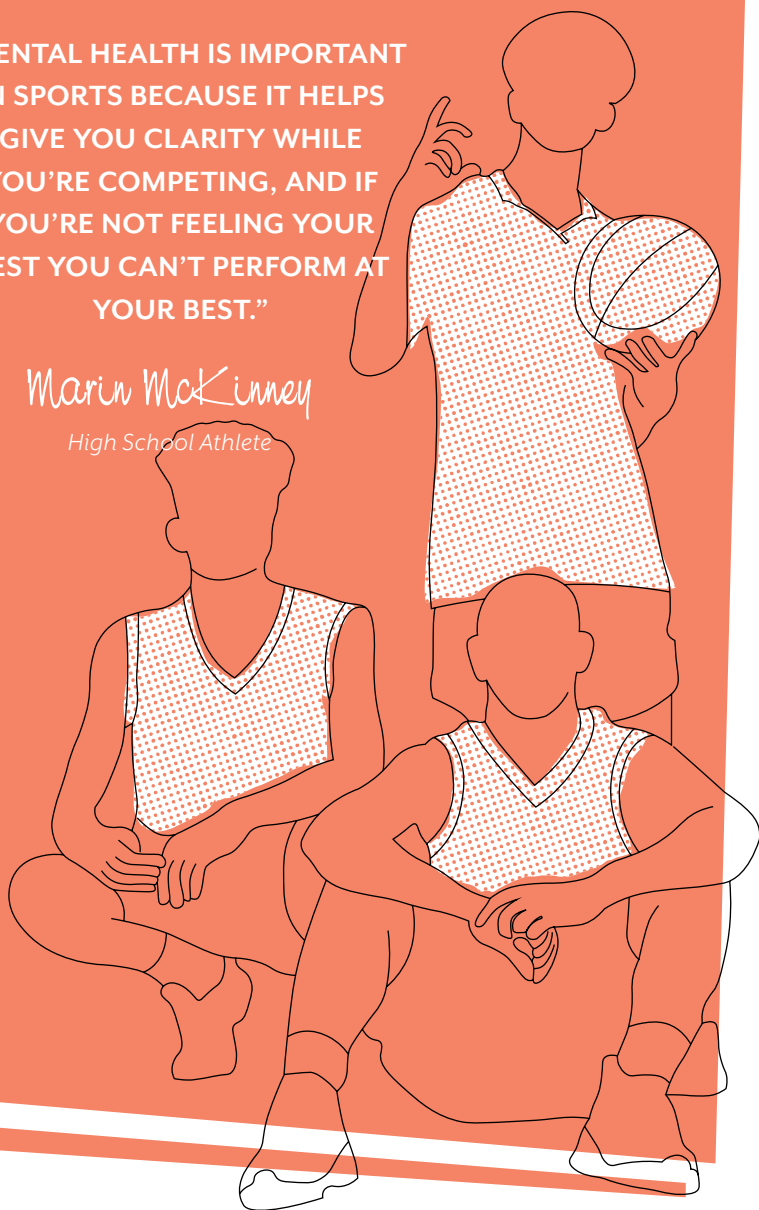
- Express your ongoing support. Let the teen know it's important and OK to reach out to you in the future. Also, encourage them to open up to other people they trust, whether it's a friend or another trusted adult who can help.
- Validate that the teen's feelings are real. The most important thing you can do is listen and acknowledge the teen's feelings. Your role is not to be a problem solver but an active, engaged listener and a trusted support system to help navigate the teenage years and beyond.
- Take a class. If you're a trusted adult who frequently interacts with teens, it can be helpful to attend a mental health training course like QPR or Mental Health First Aid. These classes offer valuable resources for understanding how to support teens in need and provide helpful tools for dealing with a teen in crisis.
- DO NOT suggest there is an immediate solution. For many teens, working through these normal adolescent emotions is an ongoing process that can't be "fixed" with a quick or easy answer. The best thing to do is to be an ongoing support system rather than suggesting there's a quick solution.
- Suggest professional help. If after talking and listening to the teen, you feel the struggles have reached the point that they're affecting the teen's life, school, extracurricular activities, mental wellbeing, or physical health, it's OK to suggest and look into meeting with a professional therapist. Just like we would recommend a teen see a doctor for a physical illness, we need to start looking at mental health treatment as a useful resource for addressing feelings of depression, anxiety, and suicide. It is OK to seek professional help.

**For more information,
go to QPRinstitute.com,
MentalHealthFirstAid.org, and
Robbies-Hope.com.**

“MENTAL HEALTH IS IMPORTANT
IN SPORTS BECAUSE IT HELPS
GIVE YOU CLARITY WHILE
YOU’RE COMPETING, AND IF
YOU’RE NOT FEELING YOUR
BEST YOU CAN’T PERFORM AT
YOUR BEST.”

Marin McKinney

High School Athlete



NOTE FOR PARENTS

The most important resources will be found in our *Robbie's Hope Adult Handbook*, which is a *Guide by Teens on How to Talk to Teens*. There are a few important factors to keep in mind when supporting your teen. First and most important, do not put additional pressure on your child. After all, they should be playing this sport because it is what they love to do. They already have pressure on them from their teammates, coaches, and themselves; they do not need another person stressing them out.

Second, it's important that you support them in whatever they are doing. If they want to take a break, let them take a break; athletes know their own bodies way more than you know their bodies. Lastly, if you notice any warning signs signaling/indicating potential mental illness, take action immediately. See our *Adult Handbook* for information on how to approach your teen. **There is more to your kids' life than just sports. Oftentimes we center our children's lives on what they do rather than who they are.**

If you are concerned that there is an imminent safety risk for the teen, please call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Line at
988

RESOURCES

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

988

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Nacional de Prevención del Suicidio

888-628-9454

Write Your State's Crisis Line Number Here

Trevor Project

866-488-7386 or text "Start" to 678678

Eating Recovery Center

1-866-479-2865 or <https://www.eatingrecoverycenter.com/>

NCAA Sports Science Institute

<https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2016/8/4/mental-health-educational-resources.aspx>

For more resources, go to Robbies-Hope.com



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