



ROLE OF THE ATHLETES' ENTOURAGE: KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Entourage members should **foster psychologically safe athletic environments**; described as environments where athletes feel safe in taking interpersonal risks within the sports ecosystem, feel accepted as an integral part of the sports ecosystem, and feel respected by the sports ecosystem.⁽⁵⁰⁾
- The athletes' entourage plays an enormous role in **reducing the stigma** around the discussion of mental health. Particular attention should also be paid to deconstructing cultural and gender-based taboos and misconceptions.
- Entourage members should work with athletes to **better understand the stressors** they face in all aspects of their lives (e.g., competitive stress, personal stress and organisational stress) in order to help develop healthy coping strategies.
- **Mental health should have the same level of significance as physical health.** Mental health screenings should be included as a routine part of physical health screenings and be actively encouraged by athletes' entourage members.
- It is important that entourage members know how to **respond to an athlete who is in distress** and know how to help them determine the best course of action.
- Entourage members should be **knowledgeable of the referral pathways** available if they have concerns about an athlete's mental health. Positive discussions around these pathways can reduce barriers to help seeking.
- It is advised that all entourage members are familiar with the **IOC Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool 1 (SMHRT-1)**,⁽⁵¹⁾ which, although not a diagnostic tool, was developed to assist entourage members in recognising when an athlete may need further help and/or support.
- It is important to be mindful of any strategies, interventions or treatment that athletes may be following to improve their mental health, and to **facilitate a safe and supported return to play** in the event that an athlete has been absent from training or competition for physical or mental health reasons.



3.2. ROLE OF THE ATHLETES' ENTOURAGE

What is an athlete's entourage?

The entourage consists of all the people associated with an athlete including, but not limited to, managers, agents, coaches, physical trainers, medical staff, scientists, sports organisations, sponsors, lawyers and any person supporting the athlete's sporting career, including family members and friends.

In this sub-section we focus on all entourage members, with the exception of health care professionals and sports organisations, as these stakeholders are specifically discussed in [SECTIONS 3.3](#) and [3.4](#).

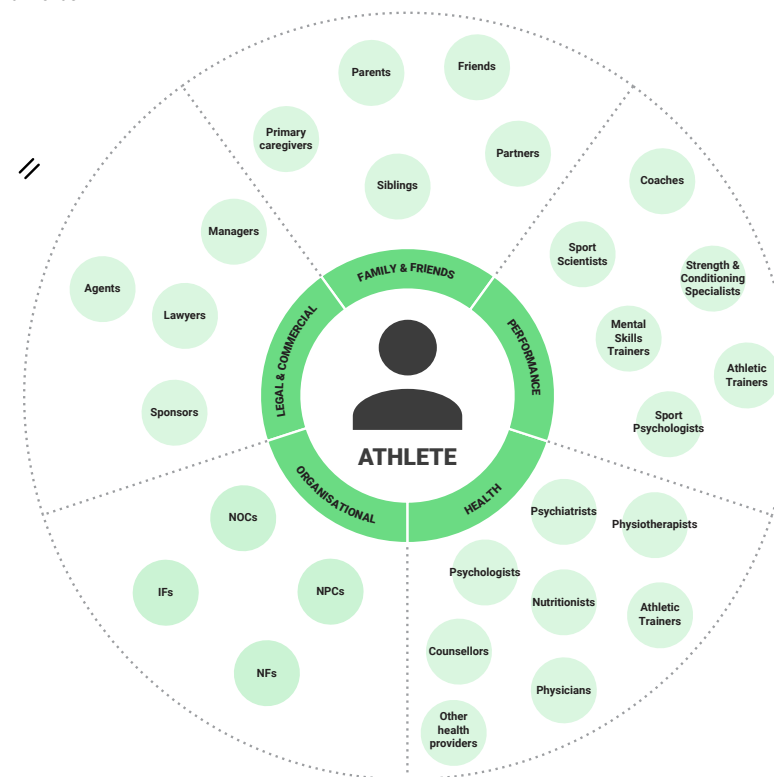


Diagram displaying an example of an athlete's entourage

Responsibility of the athletes' entourage

Members of the athletes' entourage often have a substantial influence on athletes. It is therefore important that they always act in their best interests.

In 2011, the IOC set out minimum standard Guidelines for the Conduct of the Athletes' Entourage.⁽⁵²⁾ The protection and promotion of athlete mental health is encompassed in these guidelines, as demonstrated in the following extract:

EXTRACT FROM THE IOC GUIDELINES FOR THE CONDUCT OF THE ATHLETES' ENTOURAGE

2. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- 2.1. The Entourage must respect and promote ethical principles, including those contained in the Olympic Charter, the IOC Code of Ethics and the WADA Code.
- 2.2. The Entourage must, in accordance with such principles, always act in the best interests of the athlete.

3. RESPONSIBILITY/ACCOUNTABILITY

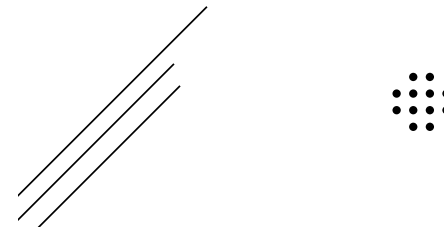
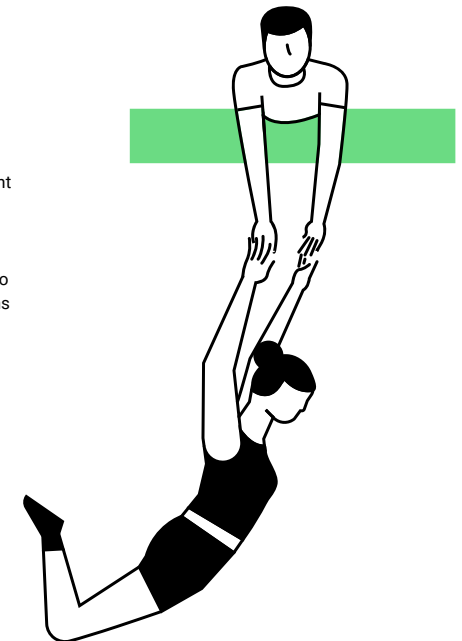
- 3.1. The Entourage must always respect the moral, physical and psychological integrity of the athlete.

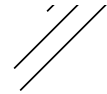
Entourage members have an important role to play in supporting athlete mental wellness. In the elite sporting context, it is essential that mental health symptoms are detected early and followed with swift intervention.⁽⁵³⁾ Entourage members, being in frequent contact with athletes, may therefore be in the best position to recognise when an athlete may be in need of support.

They also play an important role in fostering athletic environments which are psychologically safe and encourage help-seeking. Studies show, however, that when it comes to mental health, members of the entourage are often unsure of what to do and are concerned that they may unintentionally engage in behaviours that negatively impact athletes.⁽⁵⁴⁾ This is an important issue to address, and underlines why it is important to be aware of the tools available (such as the Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool-1) to assist entourage members in recognising when an athlete may be in need of specialist support, and to improve understanding of mental health symptoms and disorders in elite athletes. In this section we therefore examine:

- **Stressors and environmental factors** that influence elite athlete mental health
- How to foster **psychologically safe cultures** that support help-seeking
- **Understanding** pathways to care
- **Responding** to a mental health concern
- **Supporting** safe return to play

The International Olympic Committee Mental Health Working Group developed the **Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool** to assist entourage members in recognising mental health symptoms or disorders in elite athletes. The SMHRT-1 can be found [HERE](#).





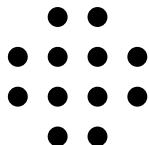
IN FOCUS: COACHES

Coaches are hugely influential stakeholders in an athlete's entourage. The IOC's "**Quality Of A Great Sports Coach**" guidelines⁽⁵⁵⁾ describe a good coach as being positive, enthusiastic, supportive, trusting, focused, goal-oriented, knowledgeable, observant, respectful, patient and a clear communicator.

As coaches tend to work closely with athletes on a day-to-day basis, they are afforded the opportunity to ensure that mental wellness is placed as a priority, and are in a position to recognise differences in moods, performance, social interactions and other changed or abnormal behaviours that might indicate further support is needed.⁽⁵⁶⁾ In addition, support by a coach when an athlete is seeking or in need of mental health treatment can greatly decrease stigma and improve help seeking behaviours for athletes.



The able coach attempts to instil confidence, inner peace, courage, ethics, initiative, discipline, concentration, and a sound respect for nutrition, training, a drug-free body, and a balanced lifestyle in their athletes – all of which have a profound impact on self-image. Finally, the proficient trainer seeks to promote efforts toward self-fulfilment and self-actualisation.⁽⁵⁷⁾



IN FOCUS: PARENTS/GUARDIANS/FAMILY/FRIENDS

Family and friends have a unique role in the life of an athlete and can create a strong and trusted support system. Athletes may feel more at ease opening up about mental health concerns or challenges to those closest to them, especially during their downtime when they have less direct pressure from training or the need to perform. This close circle may include parents, siblings, partners, friends, grandparents, etc.

Some symptoms and disorders (as well as life stressors) may be more readily identified by this group due to the closeness of their relationships. This may especially be the case for observing changes in mood or behaviour over time. This presents the opportunity to support athletes and communicate with support networks to discuss mental health with confidence while in a safe environment.

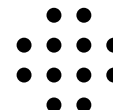
IN FOCUS: PHYSIOTHERAPISTS AND ATHLETIC TRAINERS

Injury is a risk factor associated with mental health symptoms and disorders, and is a risk faced by every elite athlete. When elite athletes are injured or ill and are not able to train or compete, there are often mental challenges to overcome in addition to physical healing.

Physiotherapists and athletic trainers may play a crucial role in the early detection of mental health symptoms and disorders. They may be in a position to notice changes in behaviour such as signs of self-harm or indications of eating disorders or substance abuse. Furthermore, this group may also be able to identify unhealthy training environments.



In a recent survey of sports medicine physicians, it was found that 80% of the time athletes coming to treatment for an injury also discuss psychological issues related to the injury.⁽⁵⁸⁾



3.2.1 ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

The #MentallyFit continuum

It is important to recognise that mental health is on a continuum (FIGURE 1). Athletes who at one point may be mentally healthy may at other times experience mental health symptoms and disorders that are influenced by environmental and other factors.⁽⁵⁹⁾ This is the same for athletes as it is for the general population.

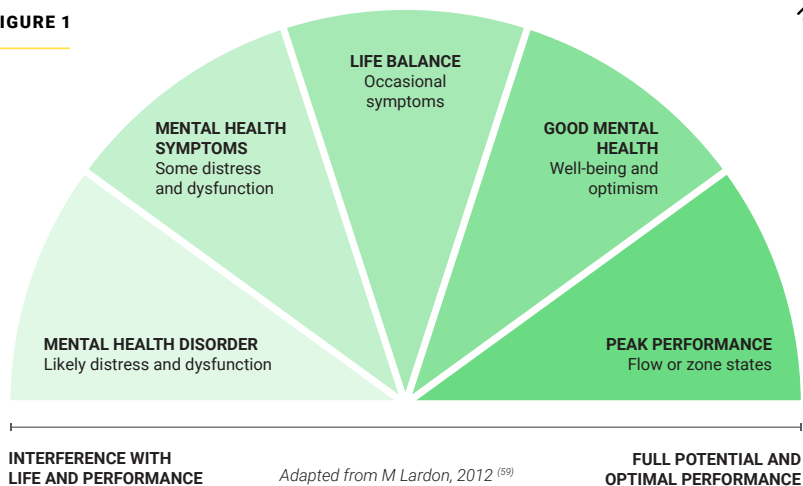
“Peak performance flows” or “zone states” are often correlated with full athletic potential and athletic performance, but athletic performance and quality of life can be negatively affected by the presence of a mental health disorder.

In sport, mental health is often overlooked. It is important to acknowledge that an athlete’s mental health needs are as important as their physical health needs, and that both contribute to optimising the athlete’s overall well-being in conjunction with performance excellence.⁽⁶⁰⁾

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- An athlete’s mental health needs are as important as their physical health needs.
- In sporting culture, psychological illness should be accepted as readily as physical injury, and the same process of recovery and return to sport process should apply.

FIGURE 1



3.2.2 UNDERSTANDING STRESSORS AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

As for all of us, there are many stressors and environmental factors that can influence athlete mental health. At elite levels, the intensity of competition may lead to increased stress levels. Additionally, athletes may also experience adverse life events outside sport, such as relationship issues, financial trouble, etc. which can exacerbate their stress level.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Both life-event stress and high stress responses can in turn lead to an increased risk of injury.⁽¹⁸⁾ As members of an elite athlete’s entourage are often closest to the athlete on a day-to-day basis, it is important that they are equipped with the knowledge and skill to understand and recognise key stressors and environmental factors which may impact elite athlete mental health.

What are the key stressors?

Key stressors can be split into three categories: competitive stress, organisational stress and personal stress.⁽⁶¹⁾ These three categories are not exclusive and can have knock-on effects or impacts on other categories.

Competitive stress

- the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with competitive performance

Personal stress

- the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with personal “non-sporting” life events

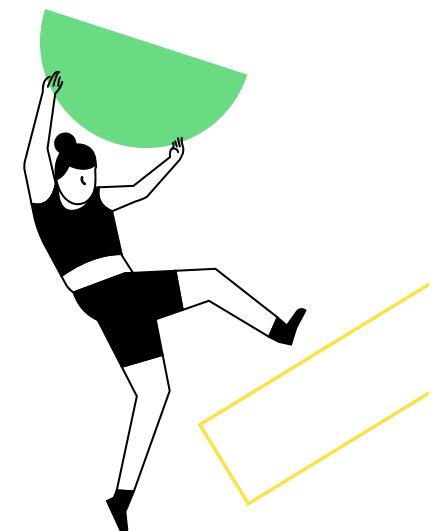
Organisational stress

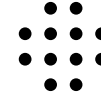
- the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with the organisation within which an individual is operating

A 2014 study by Sarkar & Fletcher⁽⁶¹⁾ identified in excess of 640 organisational stressors during a professional sports career that may induce common mental health disorders. These are further divided into four categories: Leadership and personnel, cultural and team, logistical and environmental, and performance and personal.

Another important category of stressors which athletes may experience are **traumatic stressors**. These stressors, which can be experienced inside or outside sport, may include bullying, cyberbullying, physical abuse, psychological abuse or sexual harassment or abuse.

As noted by Lazarus in 2000,⁽⁶²⁾ the ways in which athletes appraise and cope with these stressors can be a powerful determinant of the impact the stressors have on both their mental health and their sporting success. As members of an athlete’s entourage, it is important to recognise the impacts that such stressors can have on an athlete’s mental health, and work with them to develop healthy coping strategies.





Examples of competitive, personal and organisational stressors are outlined in the below infographic:

FIGURE 2



3.2.3 CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE CULTURE AND ONE WHICH SUPPORTS HELP SEEKING

In this context, when we speak of psychological safety, it is the creation of an athletic environment where athletes feel comfortable being themselves, can take necessary interpersonal risks, have the knowledge and understanding of mental health symptoms and disorders, and feel supported and comfortable in seeking help if needed.

In order to establish psychologically safe environments that encourage help-seeking, it is important to understand the key barriers that may be faced by athletes. A 2012 athlete survey by Gulliver *et al.*⁽⁶³⁾ identified the following key factors (listed from 1-10 in the order of most applicable to least applicable):

BARRIERS TO HELP SEEKING

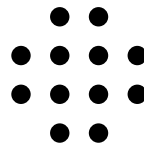
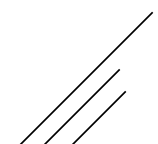
1. Stigma
2. Difficulty or unwillingness to express emotion
3. Lack of problem awareness
4. Lack of time
5. Denial of problem
6. Scared of what might happen
7. Impacts on ability to play or train
8. Not sure who to reach out to
9. Accessibility
10. Belief that it would not help

Breslin *et al.*, (2017)⁽⁶⁴⁾ argues that athletes have traditionally been poorly supported in managing their mental health, with the perceived "costs" of seeking help outweighing the benefits in a culture where strength and power are celebrated and weakness is shunned. Consequently, that stigma, either self-imposed or through others, inhibits the willingness of an athlete to express emotion and has a significant detrimental impact on an athlete's willingness to seek treatment for mental health issues.^(63,65,66,67)

In addition to stigma there may be additional barriers depending on an athlete's cultural background. Dr Jacqueline Nakiddu, Medical Commission Chair for the National Olympic Committee of Uganda, notes that: *"In Uganda and other African countries, mental wellness is rarely discussed and is surrounded by superstition. Talking openly about feelings or emotions is uncommon in most traditions, carries negative perceptions, and is seen as taboo to the male sex"*.

Indeed, studies have indicated that gender may also be a determinant in seeking help, especially in cultures where males may be conditioned to be "stoic", which can inhibit the willingness to seek help and lead to maladaptive coping strategies.^(64,68,69)

It is clear that members of an athlete's entourage have a vital role to play in addressing barriers to help-seeking, including reducing stigma and fostering environments where mental health self-awareness and expressing emotions is encouraged and supported.



In addition to identifying the key barriers to help-seeking, Gulliver *et al.*⁽⁶³⁾ also went on to determine the key facilitators to help-seeking behaviours in athletes. These were identified as:

KEY FACILITATORS TO HELP-SEEKING

1. Education and awareness raising of mental health issues and services
2. Social support
3. Encouragement from others
4. Accessibility (money/transport)
5. Positive relationship with entourage members
6. Confidentiality
7. Integration into athlete lifestyles and cultures
8. Openness and ease of expressing emotions
9. Time
10. Positive past experiences

Educational interventions aimed at improving mental health literacy have been widely recommended as a strategy to both prevent and treat mental health symptoms and disorders in elite athletes. It is important that these interventions are evidence-based, developed in collaboration with professionals (such as sports psychiatrists, sports psychologists and clinical psychologists), and are tailored and adapted to the cultural and social context.

Such educational interventions should consider knowledge and understanding of self-management strategies, including:⁽⁷⁰⁾

- challenging stigma
- improving awareness and understanding around mental disorders
- the use of mental health or psychological first-aid to assist others
- the facilitation of help-seeking behaviours

Positive relationships with entourage members, social support and encouragement are all key facilitators to help-seeking. Studies have found that coaches – as leaders of the social group – have the opportunity to actively impact athlete mental health in a positive manner,⁽⁵⁴⁾ including taking steps to reduce stigma. These steps may include:

- Normalising conversations around mental health and psychological stress
- Easing access to mental health professionals and encouraging support seeking
- Practising communication skills such as empathic listening, which may contribute to creating greater ease and understanding when responding to an athlete raising concern
- Collaborating with athlete role models and educating them on how they may help others by addressing stereotypes and de-stigmatising mental health conversations⁽⁶⁴⁾

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has designed education materials specifically for coaches. These communication tools can be found [HERE](#).

In summary, whilst there are many barriers that athletes may face in recognising, acknowledging and seeking help for mental health concerns, members of the entourage play a crucial role in addressing these barriers and working to overcome them. Cultivating athletic environments where understanding and communication about mental health are encouraged and services are made available if an athlete needs support is key.



Over 40% of the barriers listed by participants related to stigma and the embarrassment an athlete would feel in seeking help... a lack of knowledge about symptoms of mental disorders was considered a major barrier.⁽⁶³⁾

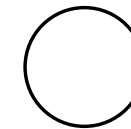
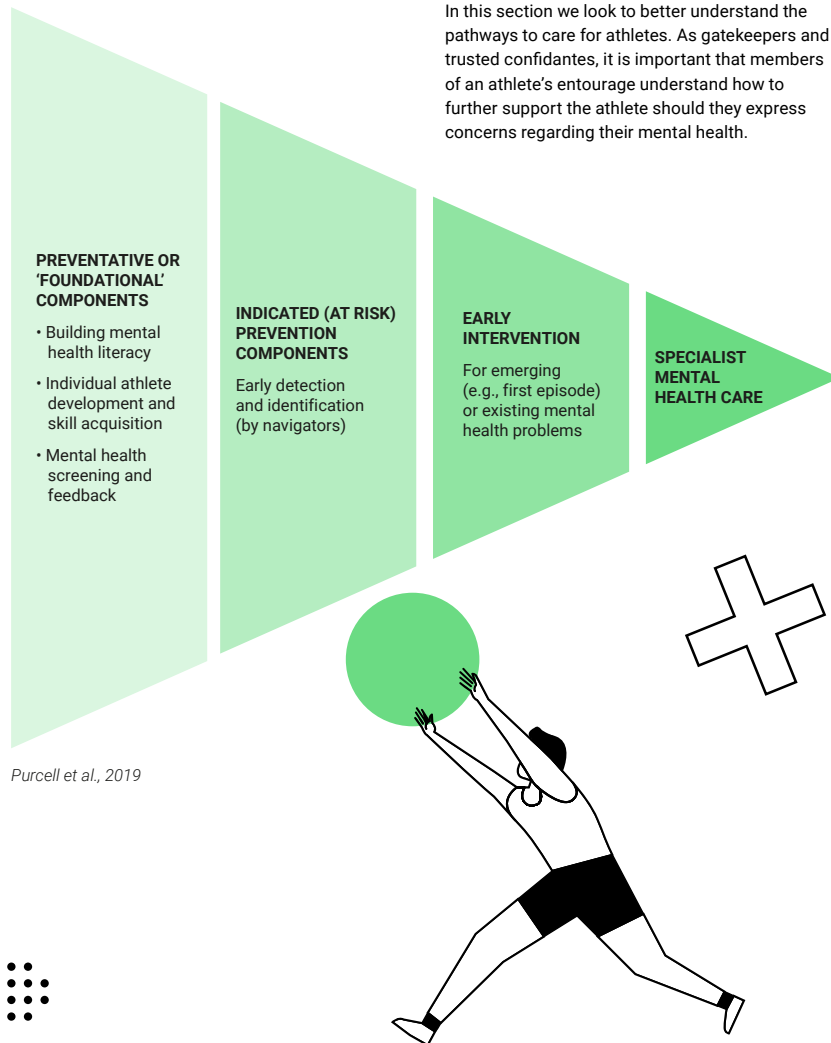


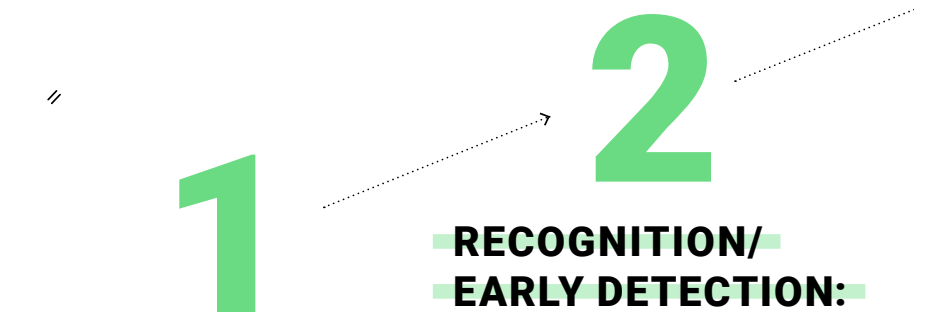
FIGURE 3



3.2.4 UNDERSTANDING PATHWAYS TO CARE

In this section we look to better understand the pathways to care for athletes. As gatekeepers and trusted confidantes, it is important that members of an athlete's entourage understand how to further support the athlete should they express concerns regarding their mental health.

It is important to mention that entourage members should not attempt to diagnose athletes' mental health without the appropriate background or training needed to do so. This is why a clear and structured pathway to determine the most effective route to assessment and treatment for each individual athlete should be established and followed.



PREVENTION:

The first step in pathways to care, as shown in **FIGURE 3**,⁽⁵³⁾ encompasses prevention and foundation; establishing a safe environment for athletes and entourage members to recognise and promote the importance of mental health and well-being. This includes practices such as regular check-ins to discuss how athletes are feeling, standardised screening for mental health symptoms or disorders, education in mental health literacy, building supportive and trusting personal relationships, and removing the stigma surrounding requesting assistance for mental health care. Although each athlete is unique, these elements are the foundation of every athlete's pathway to care.

RECOGNITION/EARLY DETECTION:

The earliest recognition of mental health symptoms or disorders may often be by those closest to the athlete: a family member/close friend, a coach, physio or other members of the entourage, who might notice changes in behaviour or other signs and symptoms, and to whom an athlete may disclose concerns. Because of their access and proximity, athletes' entourage members are therefore key stakeholders in an athlete's pathway to care and may find themselves responsible for taking the first steps. These first steps may include reducing stressors, adapting an athlete's immediate environment and/or promoting or facilitating access to professional care. But how do you know if an athlete needs further support? The IOC's Mental Health Working Group has developed The IOC Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool (SMHRT-1).⁽⁵¹⁾ The SMHRT, although not a diagnostic tool, was developed specifically for athletes, coaches, family members and all other members of an athlete's entourage to assist in determining if an elite athlete requires further professional assistance. You can find more information on this tool in **SECTION 3.2.5**.

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EARLY INTERVENTION:

This is described as being “necessary in instances where the performance and life demands placed on an athlete exceed their ability to cope (i.e. major career-threatening injury or significant life stress)”⁽⁵³⁾ In this case, when you recognise that an athlete needs formal or professional care, early intervention by sports or clinical psychologists or psychiatrists, or medical staff where appropriate, is required. This should ideally be provided by in-house professionals or professionals who are known to the athlete and are part of the club/team’s network. As part of early intervention, mental health clinicians will offer individualised approaches specific to the context and situation of that athlete in order to target the psychological processes and other factors that are impeding the athlete’s return to mental health or wellness. More information for mental health professionals on early intervention can be found in **SECTION 3.4**.



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SPECIALIST MENTAL HEALTH CARE:

The final step in pathways to care is seeking specialist mental health care. This is required when athletes experience severe or complex mental health problems that cannot be addressed purely by preventative measures or early intervention. The need for a referral to a mental health specialist will usually be made by the team doctor. In the case of a mental health emergency, clinicians should follow the club/team’s Mental Health Emergency Action Plan (MHEAP). The development of such action plans is discussed in **SECTION 3.3.2**. As a member of an athletes’ entourage, check that your team/club has a MHEAP and if so, understand your role in it.

Although you may wish to solve all of the athlete’s problems, there are limits to what you can do without specialised mental health training – being understanding and facilitating access to appropriate care are extremely important.

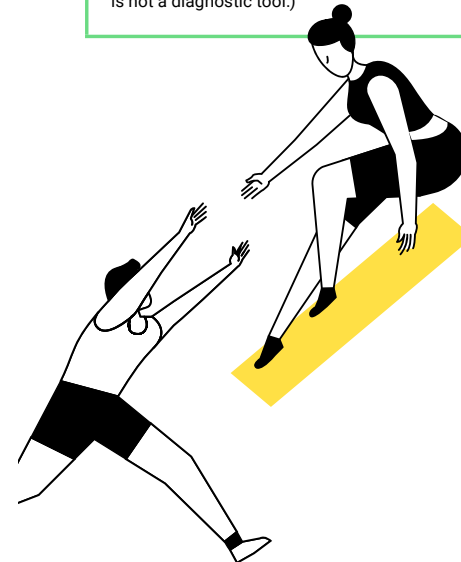
It is important to keep in mind that treatment cannot be forced. Aside from when an athlete poses an immediate danger to themselves or others, you can only encourage and support an athlete in seeking further help. For cases involving minors, primary caregivers (e.g., parents/guardians) should assume the responsibility of initiating help-seeking if an athlete may be unwilling.

3.2.5 THE IOC SPORT MENTAL HEALTH RECOGNITION TOOL 1 (SMHRT-1)

The IOC Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool 1 (SMHRT-1)⁽⁵¹⁾ was developed by the IOC Mental Health Working Group to assist athletes, coaches, family members and other members of an athlete’s entourage to recognise mental health symptoms or disorders in elite athletes.

The SMHRT-1 presents a list of athlete experiences (thoughts, feelings, behaviours, physical changes) that could be indicative of mental health problems. If an athlete reports and/or displays these experiences and they are significant and/or persistent, you, as members of the athlete’s entourage, have a crucial role in encouraging the athlete to get the support needed as early as possible.

The tool is simple, easy to use, and can be found **HERE**. (Please note that the SMHRT-1 is not a diagnostic tool.)



3.2.6 RESPONDING TO A MENTAL HEALTH CONCERN

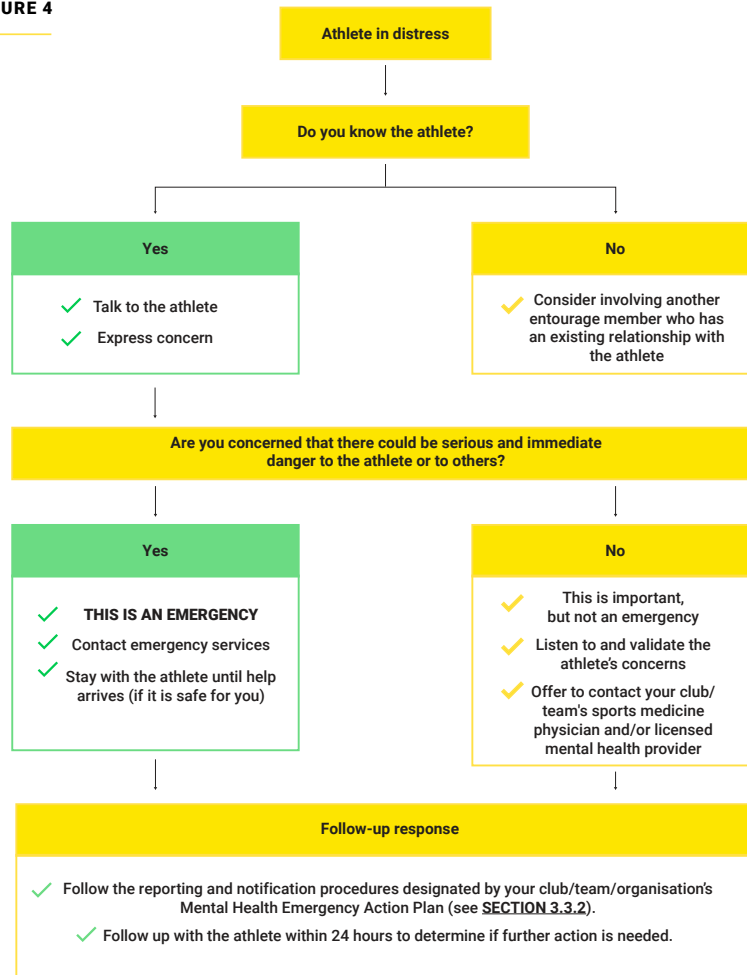
The framework shown in **FIGURE 4** has been designed to assist members of an entourage to respond to an athlete who is in distress and may need help determining the best course of action. If you have concerns about an athlete’s mental health or wellness and decide to speak with them about it, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Practise empathic listening
- Focus and relate to them as a person and not as an athlete
- Let them know what specialist support is available
- Consider their culture, gender, age and social norms
- Respect their right to make their own decisions related to seeking further help (unless they present an immediate risk of harm to themselves or others)
- Don’t judge or blame them for their symptoms or actions
- Don’t promise things you cannot deliver or provide inaccurate/false information
- Respect their need for privacy and don’t pressure them to share their story
- Provide a safe space and environment to share their concerns should they wish to
- Do not isolate or punish athletes for talking about their mental health concerns





FIGURE 4



Adapted from the NCAA Mental Health Referral Decision Tree⁽⁷¹⁾

3.2.7 SUPPORTING SAFE RETURN TO PLAY

After an athlete has been absent from training or competition, whether it be for reasons of a physical or mental health problem, they need a safe and supported return to play. In this section, we will discuss supporting a safe return to play for athletes whilst a mental health problem is being addressed.

The first step in a supported return to play is simply checking in. Entourage members can support athletes on an emotional, informational and motivational level. Engaging in informal conversations regarding the athlete's progress and mental status, supporting self-monitoring techniques, encouraging goal setting, and helping to maintain motivation are strong initial steps of support during the rehabilitation process.⁽⁷²⁾

More formal check-up measures may include regularly scheduled appointments with a health care professional. Appointments should follow a similar procedure as would be applied to injury rehabilitation. Normalising these appointments by approaching the issue as akin to any physical injury can help athletes and stakeholders reduce stigma and encourage open and honest mental health conversations. During this time, coaches and trainers can take extra measures to ensure that athletes are not segregated from team environments, traditions or social interactions, making sure that athletes do not feel left out or as if they are being punished for their mental health issue.⁽⁷³⁾

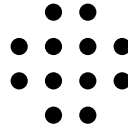
Steps for a safe return to play should be created, initiated and supported as soon as long-term rehabilitation begins for either a physical injury or mental health disorder. Considering that many athletes have mental health symptoms during rehabilitation for physical injuries, a supported recovery can help aid in a faster and less complicated recovery.⁽⁷⁴⁾



It is important for coaches, athletic trainers and team physicians to provide support for injured athletes and keep athletes involved and part of the team. This might include keeping athletes engaged and encouraging athletes to seek help instead of “tough it out”.⁽⁷⁵⁾

3.2.8 EXERCISE: KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR ATHLETES' ENTOURAGE MEMBERS

We hope this section has helped to emphasise the crucial role that members of an athlete's entourage play in protecting and promoting elite athlete mental health. We recommend that you take some time to reflect upon the section and consider how what you have learnt may inform your own relationships and interactions.



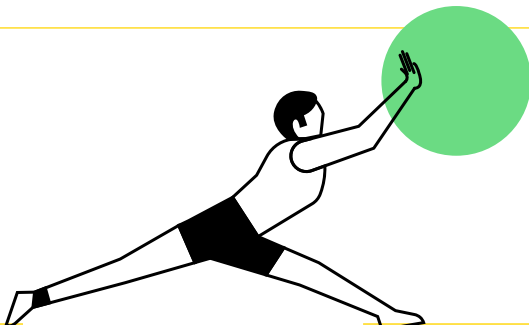
LIST THREE TAKEAWAYS (THINGS WHICH STOOD OUT TO YOU) FROM THIS SECTION.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. _____

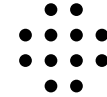
2. _____

3. _____



We now recommend that you complete this short traffic light exercise:

Thinking back to what you have read in this section, list three things that you will start doing, three things that you will stop doing and three things that you will continue to do related to cultivating and promoting psychologically safe environments for athletes that support help-seeking.



LIST 3 THINGS THAT YOU WILL START DOING:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

LIST 3 THINGS THAT YOU WILL STOP DOING:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____



LIST 3 THINGS THAT YOU WILL CONTINUE DOING TO PROMOTE AND CULTIVATE PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENTS FOR ATHLETES:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

