



Co-funded by  
the European Union

# GUIDELINES FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN YOUTH SPORTS



## YOU MIND: Guidelines for Mental Health in Youth Sports

### 1. Defining mental health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is defined as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community".

However, there is ongoing debate about the adequacy of this definition. Some researchers argue that people with good mental health can still experience sadness, unhappiness, or anger, which are normal parts of a fully lived life.

Emphasizing this idea, the dual continuum model of mental health by Keyes (2002) proposes two scales on which people are located: low to high mental well-being and mental illness to no mental illness.

Thus, mental health should not be defined solely by positive emotions or productivity. In response to this, a more dynamic definition has been proposed: mental health is described as "a state of internal equilibrium that enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with the universal values of society." It emphasizes the ability to manage cognitive, emotional, and social skills, while maintaining balance between body and mind, despite external challenges.



## 2. Link between sports and mental health

The connection between mental and physical health has been acknowledged since ancient times, as seen in the Latin phrase "mens sana in corpore sano" (a healthy mind in a healthy body). Numerous scientific studies have explored this relationship, proving the positive impact of exercise as a key factor in promoting mental well-being. Research has shown a direct correlation between involvement in sports activities in its widest form during childhood and improved mental health during adolescence.

Furthermore, studies support the long-lasting positive impact of exercise and physical activity on mental well-being across the lifespan, with evidence suggesting that participation in sports during youth is associated with better mental health later in life. However, physical activity tends to decline with age, with the most significant drop occurring between ages 15 and 16. Thus, promoting active exercise during adolescence is crucial to ensure long-term mental and physical health.

Both individual and team sports have proven beneficial to psychological, social, and cognitive health. Specifically, involvement in sports helps reduce stress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and loneliness.

Physical activity also plays a critical role in managing mild-to-moderate mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. Aerobic exercise and strength training have been shown to significantly reduce depressive symptoms, while anxiety and panic disorders improve with regular physical activity, providing effects comparable to meditation or relaxation techniques.

Beyond direct physiological benefits, exercise contributes to mental health through more subtle mechanisms. The sense of belonging to a community is one of the most significant psychological benefits derived from sports participation. Engaging in regular physical activity, particularly in group settings, fosters social connections and teamwork, both of which are essential for mental well-being. Sports also instill a sense of discipline and routine, contributing to improved mental structure and stability. Moreover, the satisfaction derived from accomplishing training sessions or reaching fitness goals enhances self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal productivity. Outdoor sports also provide opportunities to reconnect with nature, which can have a calming effect, reducing stress and encouraging mindfulness. Additionally, listening to music while exercising can enhance emotional expression and self-awareness, making sports a powerful tool for mental well-being.

While both individual and team sports have been shown to benefit psychological health, team sports, compared to individual activities, have demonstrated stronger associations with better mental health, mood, life satisfaction, and social connectedness. The "What Works" study from the [HOORAY project](#) concludes that it is not just physical activity that protects against depressive symptoms but the social context in which these activities occur.

When it comes to anxiety, findings suggest that associations between physical activity and mental health are context-dependent, emphasizing the social and collaborative dimensions of sports as key mechanisms for enhancing psychological well-being.

These findings suggest that team sports play a crucial role in supporting young people's mental health beyond the benefits of physical activity alone.

Nevertheless, individual exercise has also gained attention from researchers for managing mental ill-being. Regular walking has been proven beneficial for reducing depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, while running has been linked to numerous psychological benefits, including reduced tension, improved self-image, and better overall mood.

However, running does not have to be a solo exercise. Many inclusive organizations promote well-being through physical health, facilitating socialization and community connection while reducing loneliness.

The significance of mental health in sports is also reflected in a survey conducted by the YouMind project, which aimed to gather data to raise awareness of its importance, particularly among young people.

The survey revealed that 65% of youth involved in both team and individual sports expressed interest in attending an online session on mental health and life coaching. However, when asked, "How familiar are you with mental health & life coaching?" responses indicated that knowledge of these topics was limited, mostly ranging from "moderately familiar" to "not familiar at all." In fact, less than 3% of respondents stated they were "very familiar" with the subject.

Interestingly, while many young people were open to attending an online session, they were less willing to participate in an in-person session, likely due to factors such as lack of knowledge, embarrassment, or shyness.

This led to further inquiries about what would make them more comfortable in such a setting. Responses highlighted key preferences: 40% of participants indicated a strong preference for sessions led by professional psychologists and mental coaching experts, while 35% emphasized the need for a comfortable and trusting environment.

Many responses pointed to the importance of discretion, trust, and a supportive atmosphere. Additionally, young athletes expressed a desire to develop key skills such as self-belief, goal-setting, and applying these skills in both their training and daily lives.

These insights underscore the importance of integrating mental health awareness into sports programs, not only through physical activity but also by fostering an inclusive and supportive environment.

The intersection between sports and mental well-being is not solely about movement; it is about community, guidance, and personal development. By leveraging the benefits of both individual and team sports and addressing the psychological barriers that prevent young people from seeking support, we can create a more holistic approach to mental health in athletics.

### 3. Target audience

When discussing mental health in sports, the partners of the YOUMIND project suggest focusing on Youth, especially youth in the sports clubs (in and outside schools) and coaches, who hold significant influence over the well-being and development of young athletes.

As Rick Reilly, the famous U.S. sportswriter, puts it: "Never let anyone tell you sports doesn't matter. Never let them tell you it's all about the wins, the losses, and the stats. Sports is so much more than that." This statement underscores the idea that sports are not just about physical achievement but also about fostering emotional, social, and mental well-being.

School sports clubs are more than just physical training spaces; they are environments where young-athletes spend considerable time, form social connections, and develop life skills. The mental health of these young people can be directly affected by the culture within the club, the dynamics between teammates, and the behaviors modeled by coaches.

Coaches, in particular, occupy a critical role not only as physical trainers but also as mentors, leaders, and role models. Their impact on mental health is profound because they shape the psychological climate of the team and influence how young people view challenges, setbacks, and successes.

A coach's leadership style can either foster a positive environment where young people feel supported, or it can create pressure, anxiety, and fear of failure. For example, coaches who emphasize emotional intelligence, encourage open communication, and demonstrate empathy can help young people build confidence, resilience, and coping strategies for both athletic and personal challenges.

On the other hand, a highly critical or unsupportive coach can contribute to stress, burnout, or even mental health issues like anxiety or depression. Furthermore, coaches are often the first point of contact for young people experiencing mental health challenges, meaning they are in a unique position to observe early signs of distress, such as changes in behavior, mood, or performance.

However, without the proper training in mental health awareness, many coaches may overlook these signs, do not know how to effectively respond or are not aware that they have this task and this position. Coaches usually are there to coach, to make their young people perform and are focussed on results. Nevertheless, they should be more aware of their unique position.

Engaging this audience, therefore, is essential to promoting a holistic approach to athlete development—one that prioritizes mental health alongside physical performance.

By addressing school sports clubs and coaches, this paper seeks to raise awareness of the important role they play in shaping young peoples' mental well-being, and to provide strategies and tools to help them create a more supportive, understanding, and mentally healthy sports environment. In doing so, coaches can become advocates for mental health, helping to break the stigma that often surrounds these issues in sports

and ensuring that young-athletes are equipped to handle both the physical and emotional demands of competition.

Ultimately, fostering a mentally healthy environment can not only improve athletic performance but also promote long-term emotional resilience and well-being, which are critical to both the success and overall happiness of young people. In the end, creating an atmosphere that is psychologically healthy can enhance athletic performance as well as long-term emotional resilience and well-being, both of which are essential for young people to succeed and be happy in general.



#### 4. How to talk about mental health with young people?

- Firstly, it's important to be an active listener. Make sure you listen more than you talk. If you're listening to a friend, focus on understanding their concerns. When it comes to your athlete, they are trusting you, so give them the space to express themselves.
- At the same time, normalize the conversation and adjust your language to suit the person you're talking to. In general, create a safe space—a place for sharing, understanding, and support.
- If needed, and if you're not reaching clear insights, try talking to youth about their mental health while they're engaged in an activity. While it's beneficial to have formal moments for these discussions, it's not always necessary to create a formal setting (like insisting on eye contact) to get valuable insights. If they don't feel like they're being scrutinized, they might share more openly.
- Breaking the ice can feel challenging on both sides. However, there are some strategies to ease into the conversation. Having a few simple questions ready, like "How was your day today?" or "What made you feel proud of yourself?" can make the conversation more approachable. An engaging ice breaker activity is often highly effective in creating a relaxed atmosphere and ensuring that all participants start on equal footing.
- If they start to open up, it's crucial they feel supported. One way to do this is by offering concrete explanations or reasons for their feelings or thoughts. Part of their self-learning process involves understanding what might be behind their emotions.
- Lastly, try to end each interaction with some tips that may be helpful for their specific situation. This doesn't have to be a big step; sometimes, small suggestions can make a meaningful difference. Examples of tips could be: talk to close ones, breathing exercises, writing a (gratitude) journal, or ways to stimulate self-observing and reflection.
- Model openness yourself. Share your own emotions or challenges (appropriately) to show that it's okay to talk about feelings. When young people see adults being vulnerable, it helps reduce the stigma and encourages trust.
- Use age-appropriate tools or resources. Depending on their age, interests, or communication style, tools like emotion cards, anonymous question boxes, or journaling prompts can help facilitate dialogue.
- Reassure surrounding participants that it's okay not to be okay. Avoid rushing to solutions. Sometimes, they just need to be heard without being "fixed."
- Encourage professional help when appropriate. If the young person seems to be struggling beyond what a supportive conversation can help with, gently introduce the idea of speaking to a counsellor, school psychologist, or helpline—and assist them in navigating that process if needed.

## 5. How to make a sport session more beneficial for mental health?

- Foster a positive environment by creating a mastery climate instead of a performance climate (focus on effort, improvement and personal development instead of winning, best performance, praise/ let only the “stars” play).
- Include fun and joy elements in training. Most of the skills you want to develop in kids and youth can be taught and trained in a playful way.
- Make sure to use constructive feedback to motivate (e.g., *This was good. And you can do even better if you...*) rather than discourage (*What the hell was that?*).
- A coach can adapt the session to the athlete's physical and mental health, making adjustments as needed to ensure well-being and avoid overtraining while still fostering progress. Just as preventing fatigue-related injuries helps protect athletes, preserving their well-being also helps prevent delayed burnout.
- By teaching young people to focus on the activity at hand rather than past mistakes or future concerns you teach mindfulness skills on the side which can be helpful in other life areas.
- Promote teamwork and encourage peer support by including training activities that require collaboration and teamwork. Additionally, encourage young people to support and encourage one another. You can even develop a team slogan.
- Create training activities so that young people can celebrate small successes and improve their self-efficacy and confidence. Create tasks of varying difficulty and let young people try and choose which difficulty suits them best. With that, you can help young people to set achievable goals and reach them.
- Use setbacks as learning opportunities and normalize mistakes. Discuss how challenges and failures can lead to growth and improvement. Encourage persistence and problem-solving rather than dwelling on mistakes.
- Create a safe space for participants to express their feelings, both related and unrelated to sports. Check-in regularly with individuals to understand their emotional well-being.
- Be a role model and display a healthy attitude toward competition, self-care, and mental health. You even might share examples of how you cope with stress or pressure to inspire young people.
- Set up a feedback time at the end of the session to assess the athlete's general condition: How did the session go for you? How are you feeling?



## 6. Tips for coaches on how to be more aware of the mental health of young people

- Be aware as a coach of your mental health
  - Maintain a balanced diet, proper sleep habits, physical activity, and strong social support network.
- Mental Health Literacy
  - Train to recognize mental health symptoms, facilitate help-seeking, and refer young people to a licensed practitioner who possesses appropriate competencies and qualifications to provide mental health services.
  - Regularly reflect on your own behavior, communication style, and emotional responses. Ask yourself: “Did I create a safe space today?” or “How did I respond to a young person showing distress?”
  - Coaches should prioritize continuous learning by attending training sessions, webinars, workshops, and joining discussion groups. This helps them stay informed and better support the mental health of young athletes.
  - Understand mental health as overall psychological well-being, not just the absence of a diagnosis.
  - Recognize the distinction between resilience, persistence, and untreated mental health challenges.
- Break Mental Health Stigmas & Normalize conversations
  - Create a culture where discussing mental health is as accepted as discussing physical injuries.
- Educate and Inform
  - Presentations by mental health professionals to increase awareness and encourage self-care.
  - Inform about therapy benefits and reduce hesitancy in seeking help.
  - Sports coaches could recognize and encourage the value of seemingly mundane physical activities, such as walking, hiking, or a simple bike ride, as powerful tools for improving mental health.
- Foster a Supportive Environment
  - Create open spaces for dialogue.
  - Set expectations; young people are driven to live up to their coaches expectations so make it an expectation to acknowledge and address feelings.
  - Personalized feedback and emotional awareness are key to promoting motivation and team cohesion.
  - Provide constructive feedback and use communication to strengthen the development of a positive self-image.
- Monitor Mental Health Indicators
  - Recognizing symptoms such as trouble sleeping, headaches, appetite changes, fatigue, or trembling.
  - Be alert to behavioural changes: withdrawal from peers, substance use, or declines in performance.
- Look for cognitive and emotional indicators: poor concentration, confusion, negative self-talk, agitation, lack of motivation.

- Ensure confidentiality
  - Respect privacy and level of comfort with the coach's involvement.
  - Coaches should recognize when they are not equipped to handle certain situations and seek external help if needed. If they feel overwhelmed, they should ask for support with the athlete's and their family's consent, ensuring the best care for the athlete's well-being
- Establish Team Culture
  - The barrier to seeking help is due to a belief that help-seeking means to be perceived as weak. Shape values that normalize and support mental health help-seeking.
- Prevention Strategies
  - Primary prevention: efforts to reduce new incidence of mental illness at a population level by modifying existing environments and equipping individuals with the ability to cope with stressful situations.
  - Secondary prevention aims to reduce the duration and prevalence of mental illness through early detection and appropriate treatment.
  - Tertiary prevention involves efforts to reduce residual defects among individuals who have been diagnosed and are recovering from mental illness.
  - Collaborate with others - You don't have to handle everything alone. Create partnerships with school counselors, psychologists, or community mental health organizations for advice, referrals, or co-designed workshops.



## 7. Conclusion

Mental health in youth sports is as crucial as physical movement itself, yet it remains an often-overlooked aspect among both young athletes and their coaches. While participation in sports has the potential to enhance psychological well-being, the attitudes and behaviors of coaches and peers significantly influence this impact. A psychologically safe and supportive environment fosters self-esteem, social connectedness, and resilience.

Coaches, as key figures in youth sports, play a pivotal role in shaping a culture that prioritizes mental well-being. Through meaningful conversations, early identification of distress signals, and the responsible use of their influence, coaches can contribute to the holistic development of young athletes. Moreover, fostering an environment where discussions about mental health are normalized is essential, whether in a competitive or recreational sports setting.

To further support both adolescents and their coaches in this regard, initiatives such as the [EUSA lead YouMind project](#) and the [ENGSO Youth lead HOORAY](#) knowledge hub provide valuable resources, materials and strategies to promote mental health within the sports environment. It is always possible to seek information from psychologists and sport psychologists, and it is imperative that all stakeholders in youth sports actively engage in this dialogue. By integrating mental health literacy, preventive measures, and responsive coaching practices, we can ensure that youth sports remain an enriching and supportive experience for all.

Youth Individual Sports Mindset (YouMind) project raises awareness about the importance of mental health in sport, developing and implementing different strategies to prevent mental health issues for young athletes. The ideas were developed jointly with all of the partners, and have been summarised in a form of a video and these guidelines, sharing our good practices.

To truly harness the benefits of youth sports, we must move beyond merely acknowledging mental health and take deliberate action to protect and nurture it, fostering a culture where mental well-being is prioritized as much as physical performance. By embracing education, open dialogue, and professional support, we can create an environment where young athletes not only thrive in their sport but also develop the resilience and confidence needed for life beyond the game.

Disclaimer and linguistic note: the grammatical forms used in the text apply to all genders.



Co-funded by  
the European Union



Co-Funded by the European Union.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.