

College Athletics & Mental Health

How does college athletics affect an athlete's mental health?

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Abstract

1 The Challenge

Student-athletes must balance: athletic demands (practices, games, travel) with academic responsibilities (classes, homework)

2 The Gap

Athletes face: missed classes, fatigue, stress, and difficulty keeping up with assignments

3 The Goal

This research helps coaches, advisors, and professors create better support systems and policies for athlete success



Literature Review: Mental Health Crisis

The Numbers



- 1/3 athletes feel mentally exhausted
- 30% show anxiety and depression symptoms

Major Stressors



- Balancing academics and sports
- High competition pressure
- Social expectations

Key Insight



- Mental health concerns affect athletes just as much as general students
- Athletes are less likely to seek help
- Need for targeted support

Literature Review

- Mental health among college athletes is a growing concern across higher education and sports medicine.
- Athletics can provide fitness, discipline, and social connection, but also psychological stress.
- NCAA (2023): many athletes feel mentally exhausted during season, significant rates of anxiety/depression reported.
- Edwards & Froehle (2023): athletes have similar or higher rates of mental health diagnoses compared to non-athletes but are less likely to seek help.

Key takeaway: participation does not automatically protect against mental health problems.

Literature Review

Time commitment & burnout: Harris & Maher (2023) - commitments can exceed 40 hours/week → sleep loss, isolation.

Athletic identity: Kegelaers, De Brandt & Wylleman (2024) - strong athletic identity increases vulnerability after poor performance or injury.

Help-seeking barriers: Moreland, Coxe & Yang (2017) - stigma, “mental toughness” culture, confidentiality and access issues reduce service use.

Social support & team culture: Cohen-Young, Waller & O’Rourke (2024) - cohesive, open teams lower anxiety/depression risk.

Research Methods - Questionnaire Content

Five open-ended questions focused on:

1. Biggest mental health challenges as a student-athlete
2. How athletic commitments affect academics and social life
3. Sources of support (coaches, teammates, staff, family)
4. Coping strategies used when stressed or burned out
5. Perceptions of institutional mental health resources and suggestions for improvement

Research Method - Questionnaire

- 40 collegiate student-athletes (cross country athletes; men's and women's teams).
- Sample: multiple grade levels, voluntary participation, no identifying information collected.
- Recruitment: team announcements and coach permission, emphasis on confidentiality.
- Limitations: single-sport focus and modest sample size, limits generalizability.



Results

80%

Both Positive and Negative
Impact

32/40 athletes

70%

Struggle with
Academic-Athletic Balance

28/40 athletes

60%

Feel Somewhat Supported

24/40 athletes

75%

Say Colleges Aren't Doing
Enough

30/40 athletes

Research Method - Interview

Key Themes from Athlete Interviews

- **Stress from Balancing Everything**
Athletes described juggling practice, school, travel, and social life as overwhelming and mentally draining.
- **Pressure to Perform**
Many felt constant pressure from coaches, teammates, or themselves to perform well, which increased anxiety.
- **Mixed Feelings About Support**
Some athletes felt supported by coaches and teammates, while others said mental health wasn't talked about unless performance suffered.
- **Coping Strategies**
Common strategies included talking with teammates, exercising outside of practice, journaling, sleeping more, and taking breaks when possible.
- **Barriers to Asking for Help**
Athletes mentioned stigma, fear of looking "weak," and lack of time as reasons they don't use counseling or mental health resources.

Research Method - Case Study

Daily Schedule Overload

- Wakes up at 5:30 AM for practice
- Classes from 9 AM–2 PM
- Afternoon lift sessions or team meetings
- Homework at night
- Goes to bed late → chronic fatigue
Impact: reports trouble focusing in class and emotional burnout.

2. Academic Stress

- Missed 5 classes in one month due to travel
- Struggles to finish homework on meet weeks
- Feels pressure to keep grades high to stay eligible
Impact: Anxiety about falling behind academically.

Results

80% (32/40) reported the impact as both positive and negative (structure & camaraderie vs. stress & fatigue).

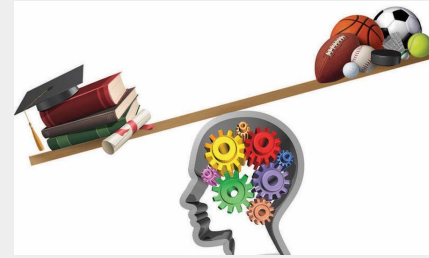
Top stressor: balancing academics and athletics

Support: 60% felt somewhat supported; support quality varied widely by coach/team.

Perception of institutional response: 75% believe colleges are not doing enough to support athlete mental health.

Common coping strategies reported: peer support, exercise outside of practice, journaling, meeting with counselors/trainers, prioritizing sleep, setting boundaries.

Barriers to help-seeking: stigma, time constraints, fear of impact on playing status, inconsistent accessibility of resources.



Recommendations for Future Studies

Expand the Sample: Include athletes from multiple sports, divisions, and institutions to compare mental health experiences across different athletic environments.

Look at Different Groups of Athletes: Future research should explore how gender, race, socioeconomic status, or scholarship status affect mental health outcomes.

Follow Athletes Over Time: Tracking athletes over their four-year collegiate experience could reveal how stress, coping strategies, and well-being change over time.

Test What Actually Helps: Evaluate the effectiveness of mental health programs, coach training, or team-based support groups to determine what actually improves outcomes.