



Supporting the Mental Health of Men in Special Olympics

What is this Coach's Corner about?

We all know that participating in sports has wonderful benefits for athletes' physical and mental health but it can also contribute to stress and anxiety. Athletes spend months and years training to compete and winning can come down to milliseconds, or inches. Especially when we watch athletes excel, it is easy to forget that they can also struggle with their mental health. This is especially true for men, because men are often told not to express their emotions, to be tough, or to 'suck it up'.

Yet increasingly male athletes have been opening up about their mental health. For instance, [Michael Phelps](#) has been speaking about his depression. [Apollo Onno](#) has spoken about how in the past, athletes did not even know how to talk about their mental health. In 2021, the Canadian Olympic Committee had a [feature](#) on athlete mental health, highlighting the various experiences of athletes and their difficulties with finding help.

Why is this Important?

This conversation on men's mental health in sport is very important for athletes with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, who are far more likely to experience mental health problems than their fellow athletes without disabilities. Here are **5 key things** to consider to support athletes when they have mental health concerns



5 Tips to Support Men's Mental Health and Wellbeing

1. Find the Right Amount of Pressure and Stress

We are trying to do our best, and this can lead to pressure and stress. Sometimes we send a message that men should just be able to handle their stress, no matter how intense it is. Too much stress though is not helpful. It can make our performance worse, and lead to distress. This distress can build over time, and lead to more serious mental health problems, like anxiety or depression.

Coaches need to work with each athlete to set them up for the right amount of pressure *for them*. Each athlete will be different, based on the amount of pressure they can manage. Learn what works best for each athlete.

2. The Team Matters

Athletes are part of a team with other athletes and coaches, whether it is on or off the field. The team's culture and climate matters to each athlete's mental health. Athletes need to be able to lean on each other, learn from each other and feel safe with each other (and with their coaches). So if there are unhealthy dynamics in your team, that can affect the mental health of your athletes.

Often men are expected to not be very social or emotional, or to act in aggressive ways to others within a sports context. This is unhealthy because it makes it hard to form safe connections, feel like we matter, and get support from others when we need it.

Coaches need to set the right examples of support, respect, and safety for the team, and hold their athletes to the same standard. Avoid using forms of aggression to coach, whether it be violence, intimidation or shaming as a way to motivate. Focus on the positives, and act as you would like others to act.

3. Avoid Mental Fatigue

Athletes put tremendous physical and mental energy into what they do. Just like physical rest is important when we work out our body, mental rest is important when we work out our mind. Encourage athletes to take a break, find times to relax, have fun, and not think about sport. Pay attention to what is happening for the athlete outside of sport. Do they have very stressful things happening in their lives? Men need to recharge their minds, not just their bodies.

4. Set Short, Medium and Long-Term Goals

Having big dreams as an athlete is great but it can be frustrating when the big wins do not happen immediately. It is critical that coaches work to align different kinds of goals with appropriate timelines. What is achievable with hard work in this practice? What should we shoot for in this training year? What do we want to achieve 2 years from now? What about 5?

As coaches, we can work with athletes to come up with personal, tailored, short (today's practice), medium (this season), and long-term goals (where I want to get to in the next 5 years).

5. Pay Attention and Know When to Reach Out to Others:

When people develop mental health problems, their behaviours, feelings, and way of thinking change. By learning what is usual or normal for a specific athlete, it will be easier to spot when things are out of the ordinary for them.

For instance, if you know that an athlete usually likes to pace around the room once before getting started with stretching, and then they stop pacing, this signals a change. Noticing enough changes from the ordinary could mean that they need help.

Discuss the changes you are noticing with the athlete and with people who care for them. Share why you think it is a concern, and ask if they need support. What can you do to help, if anything? Who else needs to be involved to help? Resources like [My Strong Mind](#) can be helpful in tracking and knowing your athletes' normal.

Additional Resources

If you want to know more about mental health for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, check out [this accessible website](#) for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, family members, and professionals. You can also look at the resources developed by [Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities](#) (H-CARDD). You can learn more about autism mental health by downloading the [Autism Mental Health Literacy Project Guide](#).

About the Team

This coach's corner was written by Dr. Jonathan Weiss. This project was led by Dr. Avra Selick from CAMH, together with Special Olympics Canada athletes, caregivers, coaches, researchers and community partners from across the country.

About H-CARDD

[Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities \(H-CARDD\)](#) is a research program that aims to enhance the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services.

H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, health care providers, people with disabilities and families working collaboratively.

This study was funded by Special Olympics Canada. No endorsement by the funders or collaborators is intended or should be inferred.