

# BIG IDEA 3



**MENTAL HEALTH MUST BE PROACTIVELY  
ADDRESSED IN AND THROUGH ATHLETICS.**

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## CONTEXT

BIOS focuses on a range of mental health trends and practices. We hosted numerous seminars to learn from campus researchers and specialists. We observed, participated in, and studied promising programs. Our areas of learning span a continuum – from general research on mental wellness to specific insights in areas such as peak performance psychology and the research and practice on mindfulness/meditation in elite sport settings. Here, in *BIOS Volume 1*, we present some emergent findings to inform athletes, coaches, leaders, and other sport communities.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS: WHAT TO KNOW

- We've seen a steady increase in mental health concerns across broader youth and adolescent populations over the past 15 years. CDC trend data between 2009 and 2019 indicated:
  - A 40% increase in youth experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (over 1 in 3 youth).
  - A 44% increase in youth reporting that they made a suicide plan in the past year (1 in 6 youth).
- The students who will be arriving to universities in the next five years have experienced the problematic intersection of already escalating mental health concerns with Covid 19 and broader societal unrest. The lagging effects of their experiences will continue to unfold as they transition to college.
- In 2021, more than a third (37%) of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year (CDC, 2021).
- Youth who felt connected to adults and peers at school were significantly less likely than those who did not to report:
  - persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (35% vs. 53%);
  - that they seriously considered attempting suicide (14% vs. 26%); or attempted suicide (6% vs. 12%).
- Fewer than half (47%) of youth reported feeling close to people at school during the pandemic.
- School connectedness (in/post-Covid) is more important than ever in addressing youth adversities.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS: WHAT TO KNOW

- Participation in team sports may serve as a mental health protective factor through adolescent development phases and beyond. Those who discontinue team sport after adolescence report higher levels of stress and worse coping levels than those who continue sport participation into young adulthood (Murray, et al., 2021).
- Trends among college students (*Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2022):
  - In 2021, more than 60% of college students met the criteria for one or more mental health problems;
  - Mental health worsened for all racial and ethnic subgroups across the eight-year period;
  - Among all college students, between 2013 and 2021, researchers found:
    - 134% increase of symptoms of depression;
    - 110% increase in anxiety symptoms;
    - 96% increase in eating disorders; and
    - 64.0% increase in suicidal ideation.
- In terms of service utilization, there was a 24% increase among all students in utilizing mental health supports from 2013 to 2021. Within this population:
  - Students of color had the lowest rates of mental health service utilization.
  - The highest levels of utilization among students of color subgroups were lower than the lowest rates of utilization among white subgroups.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS: WHAT TO KNOW

- Comparisons among college student-athletes and non-student-athletes (Kilcullen, et al., 2022):
  - Student-athletes consistently reported lower levels of distress than non-athletes across mental health subscales;
  - Whereas student-athletes at Division 2 and 3 levels may utilize mental health services less frequently than non-athletes, athletes at Division 1 levels utilize the services at perhaps even greater levels than non-athletes.
  - All students demonstrated benefits from treatment. Across some domains of treatment, student-athletes demonstrated more change at the completion of treatment than non-athletes;
  - College athletics programs may have unique opportunities for identifying risk and delivering prevention and intervention to students in need.

### One Intervention at UW Athletics: Meditation Training

UW-Madison is engaged in mental health and wellness research on multiple levels. One noteworthy example includes UW's trailblazing work in performance and meditation training. The efforts are led by the country's only Division 1 Athletics Director of Meditation Training, Chad McGehee. Some notes about meditation training:

- Meditation training can be viewed as strength and conditioning for the mind.
- Meditation training gives individuals and teams the skills to 1) be aware of internal conditions, B.E.S.T.<sup>™</sup> (Behaviors, Emotions, Senses, Thoughts) as well as external conditions with a sense of clarity and stability and 2) develop psychological and contemplative skills to navigate those conditions in the direction of greater performance and well-being.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS: WHAT TO KNOW

- The research on meditation in sports is just beginning, but there is evidence to suggest that the impacts include increased resilience, greater focus, reduced anxiety and depression, reduced perceived stress and improved sleep. This includes ongoing research being published on the meditation training happening at UW Athletics.
- Collaboration with coaches and staff is essential; in particular the role of an internal champion on the team to facilitate implementation.
- The personal practice of the meditation coach is critical and foundational to the impact of the training for athletes.
- To stay updated on the work, you may be interested in following the Director of Meditation Training, Chad McGehee on Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn.

### Primary sources:

- Chad McGehee, Director of Meditation Training, Wisconsin Athletics
- Lindsey Miller, Ph.D, UW-Madison Sports Leadership Faculty
- Peter Miller, Professor, UW-Madison Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
- Kilcullen et al., 2022 *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*