

SUPPORTING INJURED GYMNASTS' MENTAL HEALTH

If you feel that an athlete is experiencing mental health issues that are concerning, communicate with their parent/guardian and advise them to seek assistance from a licensed mental health professional, primary care physician or sports medicine physician. If someone is having thoughts of suicide, direct them to immediate medical care or call 988.

IMPACT OF INJURY ON GYMNASTS' MENTAL HEALTH

Following any injury (even one that seems minor), a gymnast can experience normal, common, and expected emotional responses, such as sadness, self-isolation, anger, worry, frustration, confusion, decreased motivation, difficulty with concentration and/or changes in appetite. Beyond these, the psychological stress of injury can result in significant mental burden, leading to maladaptive coping skills and mental health difficulties, such as:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Impaired or delayed injury recovery
- Sleep disturbance
- Disordered eating or eating disorders
- Overtraining
- Social isolation
- Repetitive or distorted negative beliefs
- Substance use or abuse

POSITIVE IMPACT OF SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH

Coaches, parents, and teammates have an important role in supporting the athlete's mental health during this time. There is substantial evidence that positive social support can help buffer high and chronic levels of stress, that a gymnast may experience during a time of injury. This support can have many positive impacts on the athlete, such as:

- Potential for faster injury recovery and decreased delays in recovery
- Decrease the risk of mental health conditions (i.e., anxiety or depression)
- By supporting a gymnasts' mental health, a coach can promote an open and safe environment to discuss and report injuries and decrease the stigma of mental health issues/diagnosis
- Promotes a gymnast's resiliency and psychological readiness upon return from injury

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STRATEGIES

FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

- Be aware of normal and appropriate emotional responses to physical injury
- Be aware of more significant mental health issues that can result after a physical injury
- Be aware of behavioral manifestations of these responses, which can vary widely, such as reduced communication, increased contempt or anger, low motivation, or increased fear
- Be willing to accept that a gymnast is experiencing a significant mental health burden and advocate for additional mental health support
- Communicate with psychologists or mental skills coaches, if available, about the best language to use while guiding athletes through injury
- Avoid comparisons to other athletes who were injured and their timeline for recovery. Every injury and recovery path is unique
- When athletes are sitting out or doing their rehab away from their teammates, it can make them feel left out or isolated. Here are tips to keep them involved engaged with their teammates and coaches.

ENGAGEMENT

KEEPING ATHLETES ENGAGED WITH THEIR TEAM

- Planning activities they can do nearby the team
- As their doctor permits, allow the athletes to safely participate in conditioning and gymnastics with their teammates, and discuss modifications with their rehabilitation specialist
- As their doctor and physical therapist permit, get a written list of home exercises that can be done near or with teammates to allow for positive social interaction and inclusion
- Teaching them to coach skills or judge routines, or assist with choreography if appropriate
- Checking in regularly with the athlete when they are doing assignments away from the team
- Encouraging their teammates to continue to engage the athlete, keep them as a part of the team, or reach out to the injured athlete for assistance
- Recognizing their efforts (not results) in their recovery, and celebrate their willingness to be involved and commit to their rehabilitative program, even if that is rest
- Helping the coach or team with:
 - Setting up equipment or moving mats (if physically able)
 - Timing routines
 - Cheering and supporting teammates

