

Mindfulness Practices Used to Support, Encourage Mental Health

By Micah S. Lamb, DO, and Joel S. Brenner, MD, MPH

It is understood that within adolescents in the United States, there is a recent increase in mental health issues. While many of these concerns require psychiatric care, there has been a recent push to improve general mental well-being even when there is no formal diagnosis. This is particularly true when dealing with athletes.

Athletes are often pictured as beacons of physical health, but what is often overlooked is the role mental health plays in their success. By encouraging mental wellness, coaches, teachers, athletic trainers and administrators can nurture young people both while they are playing sports and into adulthood.

As the focus on mental health is brought more to the forefront, research is being done to evaluate both ways to promote mental well-being and more objectively see the results of interventions. Recent studies suggest that fostering mental wellness can produce resilience, be performance enhancing, and give students the tools to overcome adversity which will serve them well long after their sports careers are completed.

Mindfulness practices are becoming better appreciated as a relatively easy and accessible way to support and help encourage the mental health and well-being of these young athletes.

Definitions

Mindfulness can be difficult for the general public to define and understand. As a result, mindfulness can often have an inappropriate stigma that it is some form of religious experience or designed to be trance-like or hypnotic. The most common definition cited by Jon Kabat-Zin is that mindfulness is “paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” Parsing this definition out, mindfulness practices can be any act that leads someone to intentionally focus on the present moment without trying to impart their own bias.

The nature of sports makes them particularly conducive to mindfulness practices. Sports are performance-driven activities and as such will come with successes and failures. Part of the draw of participating in a sport is the accomplishment of achieving something difficult. This comes alongside numerous failures

in an attempt to achieve other goals. By encouraging athletes to be present, mindfulness can help adjust their focus from the failures that happened in the past, to the present moment. It can also help athletes remember the positive outcomes that have occurred while reversing the brain's innate negative bias (i.e., always being drawn to the negative).

Need Within High School Athletes

The demands placed on young athletes are higher today than ever before. There are more athletes specializing in sports earlier and playing on multiple teams through multiple seasons with little rest. While we have seen the physical toll this can take in overuse injuries, similarly mental exhaustion can create its own problems.

Levels of burnout and dropout for high school athletes have been noted to be growing, as are issues with anxiety, depression and focus. Many of these issues have been looked at in the setting of implementing mindfulness practices.

There have recently been articles published highlighting how different types of mindfulness activities can help lead to decreased rates of depression and anxiety, decreased negative self-perception, improved compliance to an exercise routine, improved attention, and decreased performance anxiety while improving overall performance. Mindfulness has also been suggested to decrease injury rates, improve perception of pain, and decrease anxiety around returning to sports after an injury. All of these benefits are important not just for sports and activities, but also in creating well-adjusted adults.

Practices

Mindfulness practices can take many forms and often are readily accessible at little to no cost. Practices are non-invasive with no real associated risks. Table 1 is a non-exhaustive list of different mindfulness practices. Some focus on breathing or non-strenuous movements, others use sounds or mental imagery to aid the participant in finding the present moment. Most can be done in very little time and any location.



Mindfulness activities can be done individually or as a group or team. They can be self-guided or led by an instructor. There are also a number of recently developed cell phone and tablet applications that can assist and guide students and coaches through mindfulness practices. One example of how a mindfulness program has been incorporated into a children's hospital's sports medicine program can be found at www.chkd.org/mindfulnesscoaching.

Table 1. Mindfulness Practices

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| • Breath Focus Exercise | • Exercise |
| • Breath Control Exercise | • Gratitude Practice |
| • Body Scan | • Meditation |
| • Sound as an Anchor | • Journaling |
| • Positive Self-Talk | • Guided Imagery and Visualization |
| • Self-Compassion | • Yoga or Tai Chi |

Conclusion

One of the goals in the NFHS mission statement is to promote lifelong health and safety values through participation in sports activities. Particularly in the current climate, it is essential for those who work with high school students to help promote lifelong health by giving them the tools they need to improve their mental well-being. This will both enrich their experience through high school athletics and help them grow into successful adults. Mindfulness practices can be a safe, easy and effective way to help encourage this growth and should be considered by anyone working in high school athletics. **HST**

References:

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144–156. <https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bpg016>

Resource Books:

- Mack G, Casstevens D. *Mind Gym: An Athlete's Guide to Inner Excellence*; McGraw Hill 2002
- Dudney G. *The Mindful Runner: Finding Your Inner Focus*; Meyer & Meyer Media 2018.
- Harris D. *10% Happier*; Harper Collins 2014
- Holiday R. *Stillness is the key*; Penguin Random House 2019
- Kabat-Zinn J. *Wherever You Go There You Are*; Hachette Books 2010

Article:

Anderson SA, Haraldsdottir K, Watson D. Mindfulness in athletes. *Curr Sports Med Rep*. December 1, 2021;20(12):655-660.

Access current/archive articles online at www.nfhs.org/resources/high-school-today.

Micah S. Lamb, DO, is an assistant professor of pediatrics and a sports medicine specialist at the Eastern Virginia Medical School, the Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters and Children's Specialty Group, PLLC in Norfolk, Virginia.

Joel S. Brenner, MD, MPH, is a professor of pediatrics and a sports medicine specialist at the Eastern Virginia Medical School, the Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters and Children's Specialty Group, PLLC in Norfolk, Virginia. He is the medical director of the sports medicine program and the director of the mind and body fitness coaching for young athletes program. He is also a member of the Virginia High School League's Sports Medicine Advisory Committee.