



# MENTAL HEALTH COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES WITH ATHLETES

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A playbook for coaches, athletics staff, and student leaders

## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource is an adaptation of More Feet on The Ground (MFOTG), an online course on how to recognize when students are in need of mental health support, respond appropriately, and refer students to the help they need. The following content has been adapted from MFOTG for working with student athletes. It's designed for non-clinical staff such as coaches, department staff, and student leaders.

### The objectives of this content are to:

- Understand what mental health is and how it may affect a student-athlete
- Recognize the signs that indicate a student-athlete needs support
- Describe and practice ways of responding to student-athletes
- Understand where to refer and connect student-athletes to supports on campus
- Gain tools for self-reflection after supporting a student-athlete

Learn more about More Feet on the Ground: [morefeetontheground.ca](https://morefeetontheground.ca)



# THE FOUR Rs

This resource focuses on four Rs to help guide readers through the actions to take on the path to supporting an athlete with their mental health: *recognize, respond, refer, reflect*.

**ACTION 1: RECOGNIZE** Identify (recognize) signs that a student needs support

**ACTION 2: RESPOND** Describe and practice ways of responding to students.

**ACTION 3: REFER** Understand where to refer and connect students to supports on campus

**ACTION 4: REFLECT** Gain tools for reflection after supporting a student.



## ACTION 1: RECOGNIZE

There are a variety of indicators that could suggest a student-athlete is experiencing difficulty. These include:



1. **Physical indicators:** deterioration in physical appearance or personal hygiene; excessive fatigue, exhaustion; visible changes in weight; statements about changes in appetite or sleep



2. **Academic indicators:** statements about missed assignments, exams or appointments; statements about deterioration in work quality or interest in program of study



3. **Behavioural indicators:** difficulty controlling emotions; angry or hostile outbursts; yelling or aggressive comments; direct statements indicating distress, family problems or loss



4. **Safety indicators:** statements that mention despair, suicide or death; severe hopelessness, helplessness, depression, social isolation, withdrawal; statements that indicate a desire to injure or kill someone else



5. **Emergency indicators:** behaving in a physically or verbally-aggressive manner toward themselves, others, property, or animals; unresponsive to the external environment; the situation feels threatening or dangerous to you



## LISTENING STYLES

### Empathetic listening: Communication strategies for coaches and athletics staff

Generally, communication in sport is directive and implies a chain of command (one person instructing the other) – effective in drills, practices, and games. Empathetic listening requires a different approach. You don't need to treat the athlete – just be an ally. Communicate with the athlete to find the next “best steps.”

- Empathetic listening aims to:
- Help the athlete get to the best conclusion for their situation
- Encourage the athlete to state the reasons for change
- Affirm that you understand what they are feeling/experiencing

We can easily go into “fix” mode or throw questions at the person to get answers. Rather than engaging in this immediate solution-finding mode, it's recommended we utilize active listen

### What is active listening?

Paraphrase and reflect what was said back to the athlete

Withholds judgement and advice

Involves active presence (*don't multi-task while talking, avoid distraction, don't think about what you're going to say next – just listen*).



## ACTION 2: RESPOND

Once you recognize a student may be struggling, you have two potential paths of action:

### PATH ONE:

If you have an existing relationship with the student, you may feel comfortable beginning a conversation.



### PATH TWO:

If you don't know the student, you may prefer to link them to counselling/wellness staff that works with your student-athletes.



Your decision about which path to choose may be influenced by:

- Your level of experience
- The nature and severity of the problem
- Your ability to give time to the situation
- A variety of other personal factors

*Note: If you choose to speak to the student directly, you need only listen, support the student and offer resource referral information. You are not expected to, nor should you, take on the role of counsellor.*

## ACTION 2.1: STEPS FOR RESPONDING TO INDICATORS



### STEP 1.

#### Set the stage:

Speak to the student privately; be aware of your own body language and stress level; set a positive tone; ensure you have time to listen; understand the power dynamic between you and your students.



### STEP 2.

#### Ask permission:

Share your concern and ask permission to speak about it further.



### STEP 3.

#### Start the conversation:

Express your concern and caring; point out specific behaviours you have observed; ask open-ended questions; ask about how they're doing; listen attentively to the student's response and encourage them to talk.



### STEP 4.

#### Maintain professional boundaries:

Your role is not to counsel; respect confidentiality; avoid making sweeping promises around confidentiality; students do not need to disclose a diagnosis to you.



### STEP 5.

#### Safety risks:

Students who are suicidal need swift professional intervention; contact the appropriate resource if the student is a safety risk; become familiar with your institution's policy around suicide and crisis response.

## ACTION 2.2: CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING BEFORE YOU TALK

- Who is the person involved?
- What is the content you're discussing?
- When is a good time to have this talk so you're not rushed or distracted?
- Where is the best location for the talk, for privacy?
- Why do you want to have the conversation?
- How will you approach the discussion? (What tone will you take?)



## ACTION 2.3: APPROACHING AN ATHLETE

According to the Step UP! program, an initiative created in partnership with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), there are five steps to approaching an athlete:

### EXAMPLES OF WHAT TO SAY:

#### I CARE:

"John, do you have a minute? Because you're such a critical part of this team and **I care** about you, I want to talk to you about something very important."

"What else can I help you with? I'm someone who cares and wants to listen. What do you want me to know about how you are feeling?"

#### I SEE:

"I've been noticing that you have been avoidant lately, and some of the team is worried about your drinking. **From my perspective**, you really don't seem to be yourself."

"Who or what has helped you deal with something similar in the past?"  
"What can I do to help you talk to someone about what's going on?"

#### I FEEL:

"**I'm worried** about how this may be affecting you, not only in terms of your sport, but also your schooling, and personal life."

"I've been worried about you. Can we talk about what you're experiencing? If not, who are you comfortable, or more comfortable, talking to?"  
"What can I do to help you talk to someone about what's going on?"

#### I WONDER:

"I want what's best for you, you have so much to offer. Is there something you want to talk about? **I wonder** what we could do to turn this around."

"Sometimes talking to someone who has dealt with a similar experience helps. Do you know of others who have experienced these types of things that you can talk to?"

#### I WILL:

"I would be willing to find you some resources that could help. I want to support you however I can, but **I will** not lie for you or watch you continue to make unhealthy choices. I am really concerned John."

"It seems like you are going through a difficult time. How can I help you to find help?"  
"How can I help you find more information about \_\_\_\_\_?"





## HELPFUL WAYS TO RESPOND WHEN A STUDENT APPROACHES YOU WITH AN ISSUE OR CONCERN:

### GOOD THINGS TO SAY #1:

"I'm glad you came to me about this."

[The athlete is most likely worried about how the conversation will go and what the consequences will be. This will make them comfortable and like you're not judging them.]

### GOOD THINGS TO SAY #2:

"I'm sorry you're going through this. It must be hard."

[Let the athlete know that you understand the severity of this, – and that you understand the importance of the conversation.]

### MORE TIPS

- Use open-ended questions:



"Why don't you tell me how you are feeling?"

vs.



"I can see that you're feeling very \_\_\_\_\_."

- Use neutral language: *do not assume that anything is good or bad.*
- Give the person time to talk /answer.

### Other examples:

- "This will not change how I see you."
- "This will not change our relationship."
- "How are you coping?"
- "How can I help you?"
- "Are you looking for my perspective/advice or do you just need me to listen?"



## UNHELPFUL WAYS TO RESPOND WHEN AN ATHLETE IS WILLING TO DISCUSS A PROBLEM:

### THINGS NOT TO SAY #1:

“I know what you mean/me too.”

[Even if you have experience with mental illness, trying to match their situation to yours may not be helpful. Just listen.]

### THINGS NOT TO SAY #2:

“Have you tried yoga or meditation?”

[While helpful, these practices are not cure-alls. Ask instead what options they may see for themselves that may be helpful.]

### THINGS NOT TO SAY #3:

“Why aren’t you seeing a therapist?” and/or  
“Why aren’t you on medication?”

[The above statements come across as negative or accusatory. Like before, ask what they see as possible options that may be helpful.]

### THINGS NOT TO SAY #4:

“Are you OK?”

[While well intentioned, this question may make them feel belittled and feel obligated to say they’ are OK.]

### THINGS NOT TO SAY #5:

“It could be worse.”  
“Doesn’t seem so bad.”  
“You wouldn’t feel this way if...”

[Statements like these tend to dismiss, minimize, and trivialize what the student is saying.]



#### References:

[mentalhealth.gov/talk/friends-family-members](https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/friends-family-members)

[stepupprogram.org/facilitators/strategies-effective-helping/#within](https://stepupprogram.org/facilitators/strategies-effective-helping/#within)

### ACTION 3: REFER

You are not expected to take on the role of a counsellor, but you can refer students to services that can help them. When referring student-athletes to services:

Explain the limitations of your knowledge and experience and tell the student that the referral resource has the appropriate ability and capacity to help.

Realize that your offer of assistance may be rejected.



#### KEY MESSAGES TO REMIND THE STUDENT-ATHLETE:

[ 1 ] Getting support is normal.

[ 2 ] Get support as early as possible.



#### Best practices:

- Other things to consider when referring a student to external services:
- Provide the name, phone number, and office location of the referral resource.
- As much as possible, try to normalize the need to ask for help.
- Convey a spirit of hopefulness and remind the student that troublesome situations can and do get better.

## RESPONDING TO STUDENTS IN DISTRESS:

Sometimes when students are distressed, they act out in ways that are inappropriate or even disruptive.

If you have a student who exhibits this kind of behaviour, communicate your observations to your university's counselling or health services staff. They will help connect the student with appropriate resources and support you in maintaining your desired athletic environment.

It would also be useful to seek advice/support from someone in your department. Disruptive behaviour is not always a sign of a mental health problem, so it may not be appropriate to address the problem through counselling or health services.

Even in cases where disruptions are the result of a mental illness, your department can help you address safety, security, and other concerns.

Finally, if you are aware that the student is registered with your accessibility office, you can also reach out to their disability counsellor for advice and assistance.

In many schools, disruptive behaviour within athletics falls under the student code of conduct, so the conduct office may be an appropriate alternative to the academic department.

### Referral: What's available on your campus?

To find programs and services available at Ontario campuses, visit: [morefeetontheground.ca/services/](https://morefeetontheground.ca/services/)

## In all situations:

- Remember it's the student's choice if they want to get help and what kind of help they want.
- Acknowledge choice and reinforce positive aspects of help.
- Identify a person who would have influence (friend, teammate, partner, family member).
- Keep lines of communication open.
- Call distress line for university students: Good2Talk (1-866-925-5454)
- You may also want to speak to a supervisor and get advice on other ways to support the student. Always keep in mind the confidentiality of the student.



## SUGGESTING HELP AND REFERRALS: A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS



### STEP 1:

#### Before suggesting help:

Make sure you know the resources available and how to contact them.

Be prepared to work with the athlete to find a resource and potentially help them secure an appointment.



### STEP 2:

#### Remind the athlete:

Resources are quickly and easily accessible.

Campus services are free of charge.

Student health coverage will cover some external services.

Confidentiality laws exist – counsellors cannot disclose information to other students, professors, or coaches.

## SUGGESTING HELP AND REFERRALS: A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS



### STEP 3:

**Normalize use of counselling - many students use it to enhance their well-being:**

"I know lots of students who have expressed some of the same concerns you have. They sought help through personal counselling and it's been successful."

"Your concerns sound frustrating and seem like they're causing you a lot of stress. You're not alone. I can connect you with some help."

"Let me write down the contact information for the service we talked about. Remember they are here for a reason. - A lot of students need help at some point."

**Validate concerns with seeking help:**

"The sooner you reach out, the sooner you will be back to feeling and performing your best."



### STEP 4:

**Follow up:**

"How has everything been? I want you to know I'm always here if you need me."



**HOW TO:** Suggest Someone See a Therapist | Dr. Marie Fang

### STEP 5:

**If the student didn't seek support:**

"I know it can be hard to take the first step - but the sooner you do, the sooner you will start seeing things get better"

"I respect your decision, when you feel ready, I'll be here to help you"

"You know the options that are available; my door is always open"

## ACTION 4: REFLECT



### Best practices:

After an interaction with a student in distress, it's important to:

- Understand the boundaries of confidentiality as they relate to your role.
- Document key points  
(*no recording of personal information*).
- **Ensuring privacy:** if a student is in need, you can let them know that you may need to share information with superiors to help them, but you'll never share information with other staff members, students, or people outside the situation).
- **Self-care:** take a moment to reflect on your own emotional state and assess your need to engage in wellness activities.



### Self-reflection:

People involved with, or exposed to, stress and trauma can experience a range of emotional responses. It's important to take care of your own well-being after offering support to someone else. Take some time to do the following:

- Debrief with a friend or colleague
- Reflect on the situation and remember that your role is not a counsellor
- Look out for physical/behavioural/emotional symptoms in yourself and seek external support if needed
- Practice self-care

