



THE IMPACT OF SPORT ON MENTAL HEALTH: STRESS, CONFIDENCE AND WELL-BEING

Understanding how movement influences emotions, thoughts, social connection and daily life

STRESS

CONFIDENCE

WELL-BEING

Why was this guide prepared?

The mental-health effects of sport are often reduced to “exercise and you will feel better.” In reality, the outcome depends on age, health, training load, team climate, performance pressure and the meaning attached to sport.

Regular and appropriately dosed activity may support stress regulation, self-efficacy, social connection, sleep and general well-being. Excessive loading, constant evaluation, injury, exclusion or a results-only culture may increase psychological strain.

This guide presents the benefits of sport without romanticising them, balancing useful mechanisms, limitations and warning signs.

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What do mental health and well-being mean?

Mental health is more than the absence of illness. It includes regulating emotions, maintaining daily responsibilities, building relationships and returning to balance after difficulty.

Well-being does not mean being happy all the time. It involves a sense of meaning, competence, connection and room to act.

Sport may support these areas, but it does not solve every problem on its own. It should be viewed as one part of healthy living and, when needed, professional care.

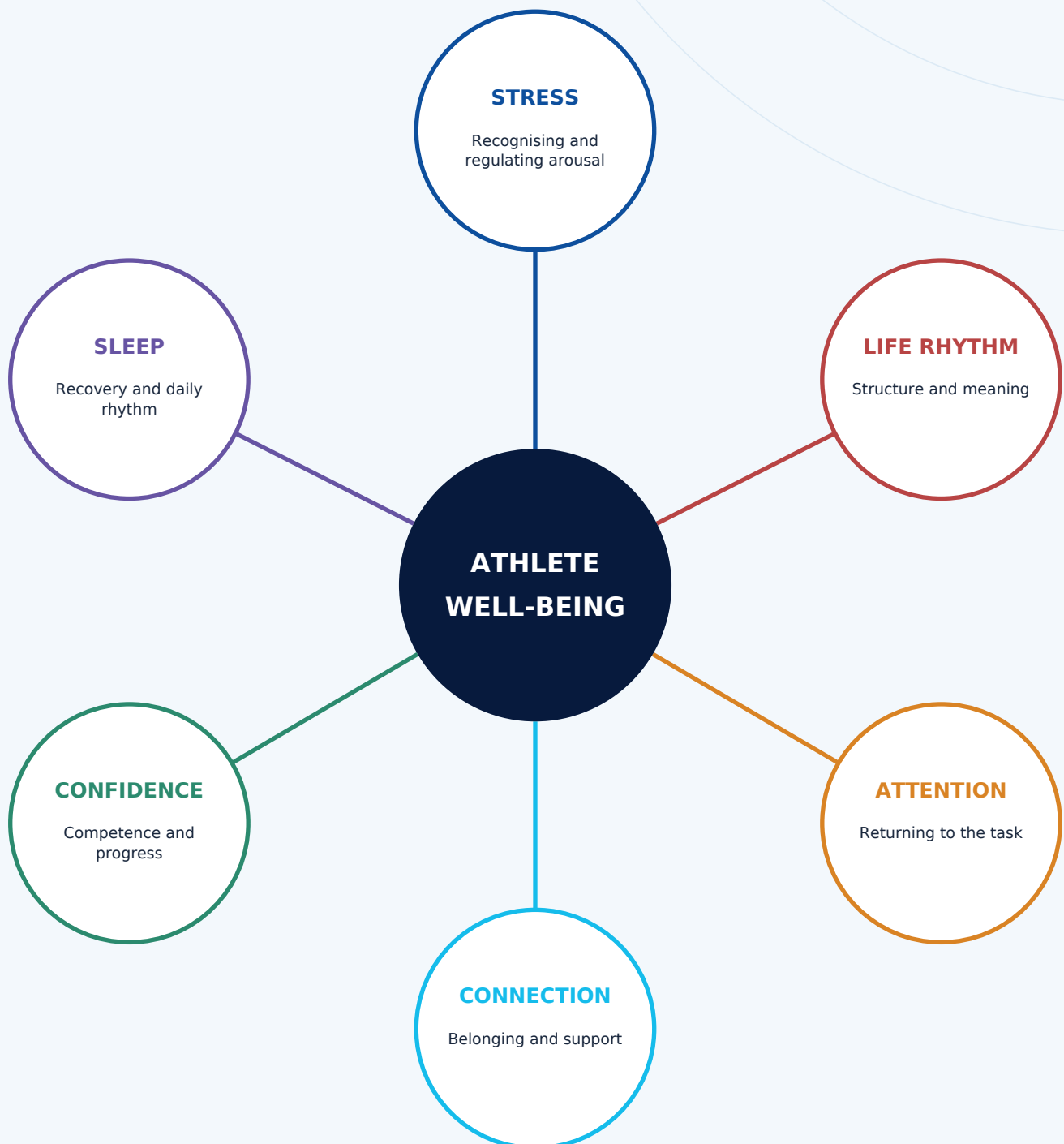
How can sport influence mental health?

Physical activity affects arousal, attention, sleep and stress systems. Regular exercise may reduce symptoms of anxiety and low mood in some people.

Sport also provides a concrete setting for progress. Learning a new skill, maintaining a routine and taking a role within a team can strengthen self-efficacy.

The effect is not only biological. Coach language, team culture, friendships and the athlete's internal dialogue all shape the psychological outcome.

The impact map



Sport affects mental health through several pathways. Body, mind, social environment and daily structure interact.

At the centre is the athlete's well-being. From it, pathways extend toward stress regulation, sleep, confidence, social connection, attention and life rhythm.

When one area improves, others may benefit. When overload, pressure or exclusion develops, the same pathways may work in the opposite direction.

Stress: removing it or regulating it?

Sport does not remove all stress. Appropriate physical challenge may help people recognise arousal and learn to manage it.

Training provides a controlled setting for difficulty. The athlete becomes tired, makes mistakes, tries again and gradually learns to stay connected to the task.

When load remains high, recovery is poor or the athlete feels constantly judged, sport can become another source of stress.

How does confidence develop?

Confidence does not come only from winning. Seeing skill improve, learning a difficult movement, accepting responsibility and noticing the link between effort and outcome all support confidence.

Healthy confidence is not the belief that success is guaranteed. It is the capacity to continue when failure remains possible.

When only results are praised, confidence becomes fragile. When effort, decision quality and development are recognised, it becomes more durable.

Social connection and belonging

Team sport can provide a sense of belonging. Shared goals, shared language and repeated contact may strengthen social support.

Belonging is more than being listed on a team. It means that contribution is noticed, mistakes do not lead to exclusion and athletes can speak safely.

Ridicule, bullying, constant comparison or presenting substitute status as shame can increase psychological burden.

Sleep, attention and daily rhythm

Regular physical activity may support sleep quality and daytime alertness. Training can also give useful structure to the day.

Very intense late-evening training, excessive arousal or insufficient recovery may make sleep more difficult.

When sleep deteriorates, attention, emotion regulation and decision-making are also affected. Sleep is central to both performance and mental health.

Body image and self-worth

Sport can teach athletes to value the body for function: swimming, accelerating, enduring, learning and moving with others.

When weight, muscular appearance or body measurements are repeatedly emphasised, body dissatisfaction may increase. This language requires particular care with children and adolescents.

An athlete's worth should not be reduced to performance, weight or physical appearance.

Sport is not always protective

Overtraining, injury, selection pressure, conflict with coaches, academic load and insufficient recovery can challenge mental health.

An athlete may appear successful while experiencing anxiety, burnout, low motivation or loneliness. High performance does not rule out psychological distress.

The message “you are an athlete, you must be strong” can delay help-seeking. Strength also includes asking for support.

Children and adolescent athletes

Young athletes are strongly affected by the language of adults around them. Parent and coach responses shape the meaning of both success and error.

When sport becomes tied only to results, children may fear mistakes, lose enjoyment or link self-worth to performance.

A development-focused environment prioritises curiosity, effort, safety, friendship and gradual progress.

Coach and parent language

Replace “You must win” with “Follow your plan and give your best.”

Replace “Do not embarrass us” with “I am interested in what you learned.”

Replace “Be stronger” with “What do you need when it becomes difficult?”

Replace “You were poor today” with “Which part felt most difficult today?”

Supportive language does not remove expectations. It makes them clearer, safer and more developmental.

When should training load be reviewed?

Training load should be reviewed when an athlete remains unmotivated, experiences marked pre-training anxiety, develops sleep or appetite changes, or shows an unexplained drop in performance.

Frequent injury, persistent fatigue, increased irritability, withdrawal from friends or thoughts of leaving the sport also deserve attention.

The solution is not always to stop sport. Reducing load, improving recovery, changing the role or seeking support may be sufficient.

When is professional support needed?

Professional assessment is useful when anxiety, low mood, anger, eating problems or sleep disturbance clearly affect daily life.

Thoughts of self-harm, statements that life feels meaningless, severe withdrawal or sudden behavioural change require prompt attention.

Discussing difficulties in sport does not mean the athlete is weak. Early support often protects both quality of life and healthy participation.

Seven-day well-being plan

1

Day 1: Name your pre-training mood in one word.

2

Day 2: Write one strength that is not related to performance.

3

Day 3: Give one teammate specific and genuine appreciation.

4

Day 4: Review sleep and recovery.

5

Day 5: Replace one harsh post-error thought with a more useful one.

6

Day 6: Notice one moment of enjoyment during training.

7

Day 7: Ask: "What does sport give to my life, and what does it take away?"

8

This plan is not designed to make you feel good all the time. It builds regular and honest contact with your mental state.

Final note and references

Sport can be a powerful resource for mental health. Movement, progress, team connection and structure support many people.

Its benefit does not depend only on the type of exercise. Load, psychological safety, adult language and the athlete's ability to value more than results are equally important.

Selected references:

World Health Organization. Guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour.

Biddle SJH, et al. Physical activity and mental health in children and adolescents.

Schuch FB, et al. Physical activity and incident depression: meta-analysis.

Rebar AL, et al. Physical activity and depression and anxiety symptoms.

Eime RM, et al. Psychological and social benefits of participation in sport.

International Olympic Committee consensus statements on mental health in elite athletes.

This guide is for general information and does not replace individual mental-health assessment or treatment.