Equity Isn’t a Game: Women Athletes in Semi-Pro and Professional Sports and Mental Health

Regina P. Wilson, PhD
Wilson Mental Health Services, LLC
What is Mental Health

• Mental health refers to our emotional, psychological and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It determines how we handle stress, relate to others and make healthy choices.

• Female athletes are at greater risk for depression and anxiety as compared to their male counterparts

• Unaddressed mental health issues can affect one’s performance and functioning
Stress

Body
- headaches
- frequent infections
- taut muscles
- muscular twitches
- fatigue
- skin irritations
- breathlessness

Mind
- worrying
- muddled thinking
- impaired judgement
- nightmares
- indecisions
- negativity
- hasty decisions

Emotions
- loss of confidence
- more fussy
- irritability
- depression
- apathy
- alienation
- apprehension

Behavior
- accident prone
- loss of appetite
- loss of sex drive
- drinking more
- insomnia
- restlessness
- smoking more
Signs & Symptoms: Anxiety

- Excessive worry
- Irritability
- Sleep disturbance
- Poor concentration
- Restlessness
- Muscle tension
- Fatigue

Signs & Symptoms Depression

• MOOD: Anxiety, Apathy, Hopelessness, Loss of Interest or pleasure in activities, Guilt, Discontentment, Mood Swings, or Sadness
• BEHAVIORAL: Agitation, Excessive crying, Irritability, Restlessness, or Social Isolation
• SLEEP: Early awakening, Excess sleepiness, Insomnia, or Restless sleep
• WHOLE BODY: Excessive hunger, fatigued, or Loss of Appetite
• COGNITIVE: Lack of concentration, Slowness in Activity, or Thoughts of suicide
• WEIGHT: Weight gain or loss
Signs & Symptoms of Burnout

• Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress

• Physical: Tired and drained most of the time; frequent illnesses due to lowered immunity, headaches or muscle pain, change in appetite and sleep habits

• Emotional: Sense of failure and self doubt, feeling helpless, trapped and defeated, detachment, feeling alone, loss of motivation, cynicism, negative thoughts, and decreased satisfaction

• Behavioral: withdrawing from responsibilities, isolating self, procrastinating, using food, alcohol or drugs to cope, taking frustrations out on others,
Mental Health Issues Associated with Semi-Pro and Professional Female Athletes Playing Abroad

• Isolation

• Impact of COVID restrictions

• Stress/Frustration (i.e., foreign country, language barrier etc.)

• Burnout

• Pressure to Perform

• Contract Negotiations: Knowing your worth
MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Physical Self-Care
- Nutrition
- Sleep
- Exercise
- Water intake
- Medication
- Supplements
- Breathing

Spiritual Self-Care
- Prayer
- Meditation
- Spiritual community
- Forgiveness
- Finding purpose and meaning

The Goal
To feel vital and balanced, free from depression and anxiety

Lifestyle
- Structure/routine
- Relaxation
- Setting goals
- Fulfilling work
- Time in nature
- Pleasure

Mental/Emotional Self-Care
- Positive self-talk
- Positive beliefs
- Feeling one’s feelings
- Mood journal
- A library of positive memories
- Psychotherapy
- Family of origin healing
- Working through grief
- Working with a good therapist

People Support
- Family
- Friends
- Psychiatrist/therapist
- Minster/rabbi
- Support group
- Day treatment
- Community service
WHAT SELF-CARE ISN'T

So we've covered the fact that self-care is different for everyone and that all individuals have different needs to meet in order to be mentally and emotionally healthy. There is no ultimate guide for self-care because it is such an individual thing, however, here are some handy pointers on what self-care does not mean.

A SIGN OF WEAKNESS
You are never weak for taking the time to care for yourself. Actually, prioritizing your self-care is bound to ensure your mental and physical health, and through that, your strength as an individual.

ONLY EMOTIONAL CARE
Self-care techniques can be as emotionally rooted as journaling or as physical as going to the gym. Taking care of yourself comes in all types of packages.

ONLY FOR SOME PEOPLE
It doesn’t matter who you are — caring for yourself is important. Feelings of being run down and exhausted don’t discriminate... and neither does the need for self-care.

SOMETHING TO KEEP QUIET
Keep talking about self-care! Exchange self-care techniques and start a campus-wide conversation. It’s our responsibility to look after ourselves and to look out for each other.

THE SAME FOR EVERYONE
Your self-care routine is likely very different from your friend's, from your sister's, from your professor's — and that’s okay. Every individual is different, and so are our self-care needs.

BUT SELF CARE IS...
... whatever it looks like to you, an extremely important and extremely healthy way to manage stress, to achieve success, and to always make sure you’re doing your best.
STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A SELF-CARE PLAN

• Create a space for yourself and have a personal practice to consciously work on emotional cleansing. Nourish yourself spiritually

• Approach each day with a purpose. Be productive by outlining daily structure. Stay connected to what you find meaningful and what brings you joy. Do what inspires you. Be creative

• Review supports available to you and utilize them. Create new ones if necessary

• Try to have fun, make new friends, participate in enjoyable activities

• Purify your environment and light candles, and burn incenses or oils

• Observe your diet and choose healthy, delicious foods to nurture your body and mind
Strategies for developing a Self-Care Plan (Cont’d)

• Exercise

• Get adequate sleep and rest

• Utilize relaxation techniques to decrease body tension and to manage stress

• Set new personal and career goals

• Avoid being self-critical. Have compassion for yourself. Use positive self-talk to reassure yourself, to cope effectively, and to allow yourself to see that there are always choices.

• Take responsibility for your own life. Understand yourself, your behaviors, your thoughts, beliefs, and your motivations
JOURNAL WRITING

• Write out all those thoughts and feelings you are holding inside
• Vent
• Reduce stress and anxiety
• Problem solve
• Track progress and growth by revisiting previous entries
• Track any symptoms day to day so that you can recognize triggers and better ways to control them