

College athletes twice as likely to have depression than retired collegiate athletes

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A survey of current and former college athletes finds depression levels significantly higher in current athletes, a result that upended the researchers' hypothesis. The finding published in *Sports Health* suggests the need for more research to understand depression among college athletes.

"We expected to see a significant increase in depression once athletes graduated, but by comparison it appears the [stress](#) of intercollegiate athletics may be more significant than we and others anticipated," says the study's senior investigator Daniel Merenstein, MD, an associate professor of family medicine at Georgetown University School of Medicine and in the department of human science in the School of Nursing & Health Studies.

While no research exists on depression in athletes who have recently graduated from college, the researchers hypothesized that the changes in lifestyle and loss of personal identity would put former college athletes at an increased risk for depression.

"College athletes often derive their personal identity from their sport, focusing a lot of their time on athletics in college," the study authors write. "They are often surrounded by other athletes and frequently have an athletic identity from their peers who recognize them on campus as an athlete."

The authors also point out that after college athletics, there is a loss of

social support from teammates, coaches and advisors, and that former athletes may not maintain peak physical condition—all possible factors for depression.

To examine their [hypothesis](#), the researchers sent surveys to 663 athletes; 163 former and 117 current athletes from nine different universities took part in the study. All had participated in Division I NCAA sponsored sports. Graduated athletes represented 15 different sports and current athletes represented 10.

The analysis of the surveys revealed that nearly 17 percent of current college athletes had scores consistent with depression—double that of retired college athletes (eight percent).

Merenstein, a [family medicine](#) physician, and his colleagues suggest that stressors experienced by college athletes such as overtraining, injury, pressure to perform, lack of free time or stress from schoolwork could contribute to increased susceptibility to depression.

"College in general is a potentially stressful time for many students. The additional stress of playing high-level sports appears to add to that stress," he says.

Merenstein advises parents, friends and coaches to be aware of changes in behavior, weight and sleep of [college athletes](#), and of all students.

Provided by Georgetown University Medical Center

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