

# When college athletes kill themselves, healing the team becomes the next goal

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In the weeks after Stanford University soccer goalie Katie Meyer, 22, died by suicide last March, her grieving teammates were inseparable even when not training.

Coaches adjusted practices to give the athletes time and space to make sense of losing their friend and team captain. They offered to cancel the spring season, but the players declined, said Melissa Charloe, who started as a Stanford assistant women's soccer coach the day Meyer died.

"It's hard because there's no playbook on how to do this," Charloe said.

No playbook exists because, until recently, it was relatively uncommon for student-athletes to die by suicide. But at least five NCAA athletes, including Meyer, ended their lives in a two-month period last year. And a 2021 NCAA poll released in May found that student-athletes say they are experiencing more [mental health concerns](#), anxiety, and depression than they reported in surveys conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in 2020.

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death on college campuses. And despite the overall rise in [mental health](#) concerns there, universities have been caught off guard when student-athletes have died by suicide. Traditionally, sports psychologists focused on mental [health](#) as it related to performance on the field. Their goal was to help athletes improve physically—jump higher, run faster—not navigate mental health crises, largely because of a misperception that college athletes were less susceptible to mental health concerns.

What little research exists about student athletes and mental health is inconsistent and inconclusive. But many experts thought athletes were insulated from risk factors such as depression and [social isolation](#), in part because physical activity is good for mental health and athletes have a steady stream of people around them, including coaches, trainers, and teammates, said Kim Gorman, director of counseling and psychological services at Western Carolina University.

"They're kind of used to pain—it's not so foreign to them," added

organizational psychologist Matt Mishkind, deputy director of the Helen and Arthur E. Johnson Depression Center at the University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Campus.

Still, athletes face pressures that their peers in the general student population don't, such as balancing sports, schoolwork, fears of career-ending injuries, and mistakes that can lead to ridicule that gets amplified on social media. With [suicide rates](#) in the general population on the rise and the effects of the pandemic continuing to threaten well-being, high-profile suicides highlight how to deal with the unthinkable—and how to try to prevent it from happening again.

In the wake of such suicides, schools are reevaluating the kind of mental health support they provide. Creating a safe space to talk about grief with someone who understands suicide is a critical first step, said psychologist Doreen Marshall, a vice president at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

"Many professionals are good with grief, but suicide grief can be a little different," she said, as it often involves guilt and questions about why someone would end their life.

Gina Meyer, Katie's mother, and her husband, Steve, have developed an initiative, Katie's Save, to ensure that all students have a trusted advocate to turn to in times of trouble. "We know that the bravest thing you can do is ask for help," she said.

The Meyers filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Stanford in November alleging that their daughter ended her life after receiving an email from the university about disciplinary action against her. Stanford University spokesperson Dee Mostofi did not answer questions about the case, but Stanford posted a statement on its website saying the Meyers' suit contains misleading information and the school disagrees with their

allegations that it is responsible for Katie's death.

"Like other colleges and universities across the country, Stanford has seen a sharp increase in demand for mental health counseling and other well-being resources over the last two years," Mostofi said. "Mental health remains not only an ongoing challenge but our most urgent priority."

After Meyer died, Stanford provided mental health counselors and a sports psychologist to her teammates, but the players said they lobbied the university to pay for Zoom sessions with a specialist, Kimberly O'Brien, a clinical social worker in the Sports Medicine Division's Female Athlete Program at Boston Children's Hospital.

O'Brien has professional and [personal experience](#) dealing with sports and suicide: She was an ice hockey player at Harvard in 1998 when one of the athletes in her university house died. "I wasn't even extremely close to her, but it affected me profoundly," she said. "There were no resources to deal with it."

That's changing. Colleges are trying to hire more mental health therapists to meet increasing and varied needs. Some, including Stanford and Washington State University, are working with The Jed Foundation, which provides suicide prevention programming for high school and college students. And crisis support doesn't happen just in the student health center: Colleges are establishing campus-wide "postvention" programs to prevent suicide contagion.

Before cross-country runner Sarah Shulze, 21, died by suicide at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in April 2022, the athletics department was expanding its professional mental health support from two staffers to six to help the school's approximately 800 [student-athletes](#), said David Lacocque, the department's director of mental health

and sport psychology. The department, known until eight months ago as "clinical & sport psychology," changed its name in part because [student-athletes](#) were asking for mental health support.

In addition to scheduled appointments, the sports liaisons attend practices, team meetings, training sessions, and competitions to help normalize mental health concerns.

"Gone are the days when we sit in our office and wait for people to knock on the door and talk to us," Lacocque said.

Student-athletes can also seek free help from the university's mental health professionals or providers in the community under contract with the University of Wisconsin athletics department. And some women's cross-country athletes at the school now keep an eye on their teammates when coaches aren't around, letting the team's liaison know if they're concerned about someone's mental health.

"We don't want anyone slipping between the cracks," said teammate Maddie Mooney. "It's a hard time for everybody, and everybody grieves at different paces and processes things differently."

Teammate Victoria Heiligenthal, who shared a house with Shulze, said she avoided talking to campus counselors for months after her close friend died. "I only wanted to be alone or be with my friends who really understood the situation," she said.

Heiligenthal couldn't bear to stay in the home where she and Shulze had lived, so the university put her and Mooney up in a hotel for a week, and then she stayed awhile at Mooney's apartment. Once back in her own place, teammates, coaches, training staff, and psychologists checked in on her and Mooney.

But the real game changer for the two was connecting last spring with Stanford soccer players Sierra Enge and Naomi Girma (who now plays professionally). Enge reached out after seeing something Mooney posted on Instagram. Since then, the four have met via Zoom. They have also talked with O'Brien and will join her on a mental health panel at a conference in Boston in June to talk about their experiences of losing a teammate to [suicide](#).

"It was powerful hearing the parallels," Heilighenthal said. "It made you realize Maddie and I weren't alone; there were others who were experiencing similar things to us."

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Stanford, athletes honored their late teammates last fall by raising mental health awareness. At a major meet in October, the Wisconsin runners painted green ribbons on the course, put ribbons in race packets, and contributed to a video. At Stanford's game against UCLA in November, spectators wore green ribbons to highlight the importance of addressing mental health issues.

Stanford won the game, handing UCLA its first loss of the season. The victory was bittersweet. A year earlier, Meyer had spearheaded the team's first mental health awareness game.

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