

Big dreams and high demands: The mental health challenges of elite youth athletes

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Elite sport poses several unique pressures that can impact athletes' mental health.

Demanding travel schedules and intense [competition pressures](#) can lead to negative emotional experiences. Athletes can [become injured](#), or they may be [uncertain about their future career](#) in sport.

Unfortunately, some athletes may also face [physical, psychological or sexual abuse](#) in their sport.

Pressures of elite sport

Research has shown that [elite](#) athletes can experience [mental health issues](#) at rates equal to or higher than the general population. A [recent study](#) found that 41 percent of Canadian Olympic and Paralympic athletes surveyed met the criteria for one or more [mental disorders](#), such as depression, anxiety or eating disorders.

[Another study](#) involving Australian elite athletes revealed that they were nearly twice as likely to experience significant psychological distress compared to the broader community.

Even though elite athletes often have many resources to support them, [they may feel it is hard to reach out and ask for help](#). When left untreated, [mental health challenges](#) and performance pressures can lead to athletes feeling burned out or wanting to drop out of their sport, and they may even experience [feelings of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts](#).

Young people engaged in elite sport might be at even greater risk.

Who are elite youth athletes?

Reaching the highest levels of performance often requires athletes to [specialize](#) in their sport during their teenage years, and [several athletes competing at the Olympic Games are adolescents](#). There are numerous

clubs, leagues and [schools](#) that focus on elite youth sport specialization, and there will be 1,900 athletes taking part in the [Youth Olympic Games](#) Jan. 19 to Feb. 1, 2024.

Clearly, youth athletes are already competing at elite levels or hope to reach elite levels in their sport.

While the term "elite youth athlete" can be tricky to define, [we use the term](#) to describe youth athletes who are training in sport settings that have a primary focus on achieving superior performance, with the explicit or implicit goal of moving to adult elite, collegiate or professional sports.

Elite youth sport environments may prioritize spending time on sport activities instead of school or relationships with friends outside of sport. These settings can provide the training and specialized skills needed to become an elite performer, but they may also pose risks to the mental [health](#) of young athletes.

Mental health among elite youth athletes

Some pressures that are unique to elite youth athletes include early specialization and over-training, having critical or demanding coaches and parents, poor sleep, and trying to balance educational and [social needs](#) with increasingly professionalized sporting demands. These factors can all affect the well-being of youth [elite athletes](#).

Perhaps especially related to elite sport, young people around the world are reporting unprecedented levels of perfectionism. Perfectionism is common among athletes, and strongly linked with poor mental health outcomes.

Beyond the pressures of elite sport environments, young people

experience the heaviest burden of mental ill-health. For young people around the world, [the peak age at onset for a mental health disorder is 15, and approximately half of these disorders occur before the age of 18](#). There are many reasons why young people's mental health is at such high risk, including increasingly troubling [global conflicts and climate change](#), [parental unemployment](#), and [economic prospects](#).

Compared to the body of research on mental health among *adult* athletes, there is limited research exploring this issue among elite *youth* athletes. Currently, we do not have adequate data to reliably report on the prevalence of mental health disorders among elite youth athletes.

One exception is the topic of eating disorders, with a [recent review](#) suggesting that elite youth athletes may be at increased risk compared to non-elite youth athletes, and compared to young people more broadly.

Considering the unique challenges faced by adolescents in elite sport, [there is a pressing need to support the mental health of elite youth athletes](#).

Closing the gap: Supporting elite youth athletes

A key focus for supporting the mental health of elite youth athletes involves creating youth sport contexts that are protective for mental health. Elite youth sports environments need to be [psychologically safe](#) and [free from abuse and harassment](#).

A large responsibility sits with parents and coaches, who must avoid overly critical or demanding behaviors and instead engage with [young people](#) in supportive ways. Sport organizations should [prioritize well-being and healthy development](#) among youth athletes.

[Early detection](#) is important to help elite youth athletes get the support

they need. Warning signs of mental health concerns can include changes in an [athlete's](#) emotions, mood, behaviors, sleep and appetite. [Coaches and parents](#) play important roles in noticing changes in athletes' mental health, and they can help by opening up conversations about mental health among youth athletes.

Listening without judgment, asking athletes what they think they might need, and offering to help them find places to seek support [are all helpful strategies when talking about mental health concerns](#).

Elite youth athletes and their parents may benefit by seeking support from a psychologist, psychotherapist or psychiatrist who specializes in working with athletes.

[Much more work is needed](#) to understand the nature of mental health concerns among elite youth [athletes](#). Given the unique demands and pressures of competing in elite sport environments and the challenges that [youth](#) face, it is imperative that we pay attention to the [mental health](#) needs of these young performers.

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