

Anxiety Disorders

What Staff Should Know

Experiencing stress and worry can be common emotional reactions to life events, but persistent and intense worry that interferes with relationships or impairs academic and/or athletic performance may be an anxiety disorder. **Understanding anxiety disorders can help you recognize when a student-athlete may need additional support.**

WHAT ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Anxiety disorders are a category of mental health conditions characterized by persistent worry or fear that is hard to control and interferes with a student-athlete's daily functioning, relationships, or academic or athletic performance.

Examples of anxiety disorders include:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder** is characterized by ongoing, excessive worry about multiple areas of life, such as school, performance or relationships, and is often accompanied by tension, fatigue, changes in sleep and difficulty concentrating.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder** occurs when there is an intense fear of being embarrassed or judged negatively in social situations. This may be referred to as performance anxiety when the fear is limited to a performance, such as competition, public speaking or interviews.
- **Panic Disorder** occurs when someone experiences recurrent, unexpected panic attacks, which are sudden and intense waves of fear. The disorder can lead to fear of another attack or significant efforts to avoid one.
- **Phobias** are characterized as a strong fear of specific things or situations (such as flying or heights) that leads to avoidance whenever possible.



1 in 3
student-athletes
report experiencing
overwhelming anxiety.



Recognizing the Signs

Changes in a student-athlete's behavior, attitudes and academic or athletic performance may be signs of anxiety disorders. Other behavioral or physical signs may also be present.



Mental or Behavioral Signs

- Overthinking, difficulty focusing, negative self-talk, excessive worry about mistakes or replaying past performances.
- Irritability, tearfulness, avoidance of social performance situations or sudden withdrawal from teammates.
- Increased substance use, overtraining or excessive social media use.



Physical or Somatic Signs

- Restlessness, muscle tension, frequent headaches, sleep problems, fatigue or stomach pain.
- Racing heart, shortness of breath, chest tightness or dizziness.



What To Do

Identifying changes in a student-athlete can help provide opportunities for early support of potential anxiety disorders. If you are concerned about a student-athlete, consider reaching out to offer support.

- Start with empathy by sharing your concerns while considering student-athlete privacy.
- Listen actively by allowing them to share without interrupting or jumping to solutions.
- Remind them that anxiety is common and treatable.
- Encourage them to reach out to a licensed mental health provider. Remind them it is confidential and offer to help set up an appointment, if appropriate.

Promote healthy ways to cope:

- Rest, which may include physical downtime and/or reduced mental exertion.
- Balanced nutrition.
- Appropriate amount of sleep.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call, text or chat 988.

Create a supportive team environment by normalizing anxiety, discussing and providing resources for stress management and mental health support, communicating empathically and familiarizing yourself with your school's mental health action plan.

"I've noticed you've seemed distracted in practice lately. How are things going?"

For resources and guidance on mental health education, check out the [NCAA Mental Health Best Practices](#).

