

Depression and Mood Disorders

What Staff Should Know

Feeling sad, irritable or having shifting moods can be a normal response to life events, but persistent mood changes that feel overwhelming or affect daily functioning may be signs of depression or another mood disorder. Coaches and athletic staff are in a unique position to notice early signs of potential mood disorders, listen with empathy and connect student-athletes with help.

WHAT ARE DEPRESSION AND MOOD DISORDERS?

Depression and mood disorders are mental health conditions that involve ongoing or intense changes in mood, energy and functioning. They can impact everyday life and academic and athletic performance. Common mood disorders include:

- **Major Depressive Disorder** occurs when someone experiences episodes of persistent feelings of sadness, emptiness or loss of interest in activities that lasts for weeks to months.
- **Persistent Depressive Disorder (Dysthymia)** occurs when an individual experiences a low mood on most days for two or more years.
- **Bipolar Disorder** is characterized by shifting mood cycles, alternating between periods of elevated mood and periods of feeling down, sad or withdrawn.

~50%
of student-athletes feel
comfortable talking to
their coaches about
mental health.



Recognizing the Signs

Mood disorders can look different for everyone. In addition to changes in mood, signs and symptoms of mood disorders may show up in behavior changes, relationships and academic or athletic performance. Signs and symptoms of mood disorders can include:

- A change in energy or motivation.
- Changes in academic or athletic performance.
- Withdrawal from teammates, classes or social activities.
- Changes in sleep or appetite.
- Difficulty concentrating in class or during athletic activities.
- Irritability, anger or frustration that is uncharacteristic for the individual or disproportionate to the context.
- Expressions of hopelessness or guilt.
- Uncharacteristic impulsivity or risk-taking behaviors.



What To Do

If you're concerned about an athlete, consider:

- **Starting with empathy:** Choose a private moment and share what changes you've observed and ask if they would like to talk.
- **Listening actively:** Allow them to speak without interrupting or rushing to solutions.
- **Normalizing help-seeking:** Let them know depression and mood disorders are common and treatable, and that help is available. Offer to help connect them with a licensed mental health provider or team physician.
- **Reassuring them that mental health care is confidential:** Many student-athletes are hesitant to seek help for fear of judgment by their peers or losing playing time.
- **Promoting mental wellness before there is a crisis:** Normalize talking about mental health and help-seeking.

Create an environment that promotes well-being: Modeling balance, openness and practicing mental health self-care show that caring for mental well-being also supports peak performance.

See [NCAA Mental Health Best Practices](#) for more information.



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

