

Research confirms need to support student-athlete mental health

16 January 2015, by Laurel Thomas Gnagey

A pilot program designed to raise awareness and encourage discussion about mental health issues among student-athletes at the University of Michigan has been met with an overwhelmingly positive response, a U-M team told the NCAA today.

Results were reported at the collegiate sports organization's annual convention, held near Washington, D.C.

More than 90 percent of U-M's 900-plus [student-athletes](#) took part in the program last fall. Of those participating, 96 percent said they were likely to use what they learned, either to help themselves or others, said Daniel Eisenberg, associate professor of health management and policy at the U-M School of Public Health.

The Athletes Connected program was developed through a partnership among the School of Public Health, Depression Center and Athletic Department, and funded by a NCAA Innovations in Research grant. As part of the program, student-athletes were surveyed before and after their participation in educational presentations to all 31 athletic teams, and drop-in support groups that were offered biweekly.

Eisenberg, who also holds positions with the Institute for Social Research and the Depression Center, noted among the responses that 63 percent of student athletes reported having an emotional or [mental health](#) issue that had affected their athletic performance in the four weeks prior to the survey.

"That statistic says to me that these issues already are on people's minds. It might not be in the forefront. It might not be in regular conversation. But I think there's a lot of interest and need for this general initiative," he said. "So what we're hoping to do is build on that beginning and engage people and make discussions of mental health part of the

culture."

Previous research has shown that one in three students experiences significant symptoms of depression, anxiety or other [mental health conditions](#). Yet only about 30 percent of these students seek help, and that number goes down to only 10 percent for student-athletes. Eisenberg said that some of the core traits of athletes, including the need to "be tough," often lead them to ignore their mental health needs.

To address this concern, U-M received the largest of six NCAA awards to develop mental health initiatives for student athletes, and to evaluate their impact. The \$50,000 grant helped fund creation of two videos featuring testimonies from former athletes about their struggles with mental illness and two videos on [coping skills](#), as well as the presentations to all U-M athletic teams, the development of biweekly support groups for ongoing help and the program evaluation.

After viewing videos featuring former football player Will Heining and swimmer Kally Fayhee, 99 percent of participants said the pieces were engaging and relevant for them or for other student-athletes. And for those that participated in the drop-in [support groups](#), 92 percent said they expected to use the coping skills and other strategies learned during the sessions.

Preliminary results measuring the recall of concepts presented in two coping skills videos—when compared with reading an article on the same topic—show that student-athletes better retained the information presented in videos. They also were more likely to report using the self-care strategies from the videos, and to have talked with a health professional about mental health.

The statistic of particular interest to Barbara Hansen, athletic medical staff counselor, is that following the team presentations, 40 students

indicated they would like an appointment with a counselor to address an immediate concern.

"Student-athletes really found the presentations to be beneficial," she said. "It helped some of them to speak out and, for the first time, really seek help for some of the struggles they were having."

During their presentation at the NCAA convention, the research team members also highlighted next steps, which likely will involve new testimonial videos, more presentations and additional training opportunities for student-athletes. They also hope to engage more student-athletes in the development and implementation of the program.

"We're looking forward to continuing our collaboration here on the University of Michigan campus, and we hope down the line to have a model we can disseminate to other campuses nationwide," said Trish Meyer, manager for outreach and education at the U-M Depression Center.

Provided by University of Michigan

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