

Mental Health Strategy for Ontario Equestrian

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Executive summary

This mental health strategy aligns with Ontario Equestrian’s broader vision of becoming a more modern, inclusive, and athlete-centered organization; one that is closely aligned with the principles of high-performance sport, while continuing to prioritize the well-being of both animals and the people who ride, coach, and support them.

Grounded in national best practices and existing initiatives, this strategy positions Ontario Equestrian within the wider Canadian sport landscape as a leader in athlete mental health. With the regular development and launch of new programs aimed at increasing participation and long-term engagement, this strategy supports Ontario Equestrian’s goal of cultivating a lifelong passion for equestrian sport. By addressing mental health proactively, the organization fosters a more welcoming and affirming environment that builds up athletes, supports their well-being, and enables them to stay well while pursuing both personal enjoyment and high-performance goals. A strong mental health foundation helps retain athletes and encourages sustained involvement across all stages of life.

This strategy reflects a need to align with established best practices—such as those from the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)—and complements the Long-Term Equestrian Development (LTED) 2.0 model (2025), which reimagines rider development across recreational and competitive contexts. Just as LTED 2.0 supports lifelong participation, a mental health strategy ensures that psychological well-being is not a barrier to progression, but a key part of what makes such long-term involvement possible.

Lastly, this strategy represents the first of hopefully many iterations. Woven into the strategy is regular monitoring and feedback so as to keep pace with best practices and the needs of the Ontario Equestrian community.

Glossary

It is acknowledged that terminology is always evolving, and there is a balance to be struck between honouring tradition and updating terms to reflect new directions and best practices. In order to be consistent with the Mental Health Strategy for High Performance Sport in Canada (Durand-Bush & van Slingerland, 2021), terminology from high performance sport will be utilized in this document. This is also consistent with the Long-Term Equestrian Development 2.0 document published earlier this year.

- Equestrian: includes participants in all sports under Equestrian Canada; can encompass ‘athlete.’
- Equine: includes horses, ponies, mules, or donkeys.
- Athlete: subset of equestrians who identify as riders, participants, and/or competitors, and comprises the horse/human combination.
- Daily Training Environment (DTE): captures the arena, as well as any indoor or outdoor spaces where equestrian training occurs.
- Yearly Training Plan (YTP): a systematic approach to training, competition, rest, and recovery that is updated annually and collaboratively between athletes and coaches/trainers.
- Mental Health: the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) describes it as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.”
- Stigma: negative attitudes and behaviours (prejudice and discrimination) towards an individual or group of people due to some aspect of their identity or experience. Stigma can be overt or covert, purposeful or inadvertent, and is always harmful. See this [fact sheet](#) for more information.
- Psychological Safety: the feeling that one can give feedback, raise concerns, or admit mistakes without fear of intimidation, humiliation or other negative outcomes (Edmondson, 2018). It is associated with positive mental health and well-being, as well as with performance-related outcomes (Vella et al., 2022).
- Mental Health Practitioner: Licensed professionals such as clinical psychologists, (usually have a PhD; trained to diagnose and treat mental health concerns;), psychiatrists (medical doctors who can diagnose and treat mental health concerns, as well as prescribe medication), and social workers (usually having a Masters; can provide talk therapy but cannot diagnose or prescribe).
- Certified Mental Performance Consultant ([CMPC](#)): specialists (usually have a Masters or PhD) who train athletes and performers to optimize their performance by building mental skills such as focus, pressure management, confidence, and more.

Mental Health Strategic Plan

Mission, Vision, and Purpose

In accordance with the Mental Health Strategy for High Performance Sport in Canada (Durand-Bush & van Slingerland, 2021), the overarching priorities are:

- The prevention of mental health challenges
- The promotion of positive mental health

For Ontario Equestrian in particular, having a mental health strategy is imperative for several reasons:

- To bring the organization into alignment with the Mental Health Strategy for High Performance Sport in Canada (Durand-Bush & van Slingerland, 2021), as well as the recommendations from larger sport bodies, such as U Sports (2020) and the [NCAA \(2nd edition 2024\)](#).
- To become a leader amongst provincial and national sport organizations in adopting a Culture of Excellence (developed by Own the Podium), of which a mental health strategy is a component. Mental wellness is a key ingredient for peak performance.
- To serve the larger mission of Equestrian Canada, which is to “unite the equestrian community in the pursuit of excellence, while inspiring and serving people and their horses.” Mental wellness affects everyone, including athletes, coaches, staff, as well as the horses, since healthy riders = healthier horses.
- To uphold the vision of Equestrian Canada, which is to “foster a love of horses and sport, for life.” Cultivating positive mental health will help all members perform at their best, deepen the passion for horses and sport, and facilitate lifelong involvement. When individuals are unsupported or inadvertently harmed due to lack of psychological safety and health in their sport environment, they tend to underperform and may leave their sport altogether.
- Alignment with these priorities can unite the equestrian community across all performance levels, from youth to old age.
- When all members and stakeholders feel psychologically supported, they are better able to live out the values of *responsibility, community, quality, and pride*. Decreasing shame and stigma around mental health improves sense of community and increases pride. Greater wellbeing translates to stronger connections and ability to uphold responsibility across the community.

This mental health strategy is meant for all stakeholders and members of the equestrian community, from competition organizers, to coaches/trainers, athletes, parents, and recreational riders.

Mental Health in the Equestrian Context

Research shows that contrary to popular notions about athletes epitomizing health, athletes experience mental health challenges at similar and sometimes higher levels than in the general population (e.g., Golding, Gillingham, & Perera, 2020; Gorczynski, Coyle, & Gibson, 2017; Gouttebauge et al., 2019). Alongside the clear benefits to physical and mental health provided by sport, athletes also experience significant stressors, which for some individuals, can represent risk factors that challenge mental health (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012). These include: expectations to perform; risk of injury for the athlete and/or animal; sport specific challenges (e.g., body weight/shape pressures); aging and retirement; relationship conflicts (e.g., with teammates, personnel, animals); and financial pressure (e.g., Butler-Coyne et al., 2019). Research documenting athletes' experiences shows that many continue to experience stigma and shame about the impact of these challenges, which interferes with asking for help, and more broadly, slows cultural and systemic change. Other barriers to help seeking include lack of education, low perception of psychological safety, financial barriers, and unclear pathways to help.

At the same time, there are tremendous protective factors associated with sport, and specifically with equestrian. The rider/horse partnership is a unique opportunity to support and foster positive mental health (Butler-Coyne et al., 2019). Many a rider will share how partnering with an animal builds emotional awareness and self-regulatory skills. Additionally, many riders describe how the equestrian sport provided a place of comfort and community, which they did not find in other activities or sport/performance environments.

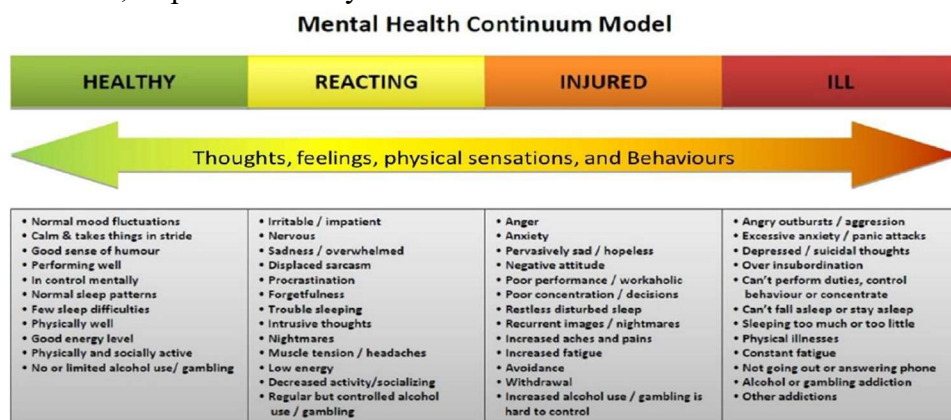
Unique features of the equestrian sport landscape must be considered for the development and implementation of an effective mental health strategy. Athletes, coaches and trainers are relatively decentralized across disparate stables, posing challenges to synchronizing initiatives and action plans. Many athletes hold multiple roles, such as also being business owners, coaches, and trainers, which can cause tensions with respect to whose needs must be prioritized at any given time. There is a longstanding tradition in equestrian sport, which may not fit seamlessly with the high-performance sport landscape. It is challenging to shift a culture towards one that is inclusive, diverse, and affirming of positive mental health. Ontario Equestrian is actively promoting this evolution through initiatives such as an equity project with Canadian women and sport, reaching more riders at the grassroots level through the Ticket to Ride and Rookie Riders programs, which can bypass some of the financial barriers associated with this sport. These early efforts are exciting and should be promoted and expanded.

Strategic Priorities and Action Plan

This mental health strategy's overarching priorities can be further specified into the following:

Prevention and Intervention for Mental Health Challenges

1. Early Identification and Intervention for Mental Health Issues: Early detection is a component of a proactive mental health strategy. Mental Health is not a binary concept; just like physical health, individuals can experience different signs, symptoms, and degrees of severity that each warrant a different response and a different type of practitioner. See the diagram below for a visual description of Mental Health as a continuum, as put forward by the Mental Health Commission of Canada:



Rather than waiting for a mental health crisis (red zone), if individuals with early signs of a mental health challenge can be identified and connected to the appropriate help, larger problems can be avoided. Having this process in place also demonstrates to the equestrian community that individuals are cared for in a holistic way.

- **Formalized Screening Process:** Due to the decentralized nature of equestrian sport, in addition to funding constraints, at this stage formal mental health screening is only available to athletes in the GRIT (Great Rider Intensive Training) program. These athletes have access to an annual mental health screening appointment with a Mental Health Practitioner affiliated with the CSIO. The purpose of this appointment is to screen for mental health concerns, and to triage to appropriate support if needed. When indicated, this Mental Health Practitioner receives written consent from the athlete to communicate with appropriate individuals in their entourage to encourage more holistic support, such as with their coach or parent. This same Mental Health Practitioner checks in with the athlete later in the season to ensure that support was received and if not, barriers are addressed together.

- **Additional Screening Mechanisms:** As funding permits, athletes outside of the GRIT program may be eligible for a mental health wellness appointment through the CSIO, which functions similarly to the screening appointment described earlier. Athletes can self-identify or be encouraged by those around them to book one of these appointments through the CSIO medical coordinator if early warning signs are apparent.
 - If funding ever became available to hire a Mental Health Practitioner within Ontario Equestrian specifically, their role would include conducting annual mental health screening appointments for eligible athletes, as well as acting as a touchpoint for athletes throughout the season to provide brief support and refer to longer term support if indicated. As is described in more detail in the next section, it should be noted that increasing the mental health literacy of the equestrian community (including athletes, parents, coaches, etc.) will help individuals spot early mental health challenges and to direct them to appropriate supports. See Appendix for Mental Health Resources that community members will become familiar with through promotion efforts explained in priority 2.
 - **Support from the CMPC:** Some athletes, such as those in the GRIT program, have the opportunity to work alongside a CMPC (Certified Mental Performance Consultant) associated with Ontario Equestrian. CMPCs can provide tremendous support for athletes by reducing and better managing performance-related stressors. They can also support the optimization of athlete/horse and athlete/coach relationships. In general, the CMPC is an appropriate support for athletes who are in the Healthy to Reacting zone of the Mental Health continuum and are aware that if there are early signs that the athlete may be moving along the continuum and/or requires additional support outside of their professional scope, they should refer the athlete to specialized mental health support. Resources associated with CMPC services can be found on the Community Hub (online learning platform). The CMPC may need to regularly clarify their role and scope within the equestrian community so as to reduce confusion about the different practitioners who support wellbeing.
2. **Development of a Mental Health Emergency Action Plan (MHEAP):** Leaders at Ontario Equestrian have undergone training provided by the CSIO Mental Health Practitioners to create their own MHEAP. This document describes a workflow for supporting and connecting an individual in the DTE experiencing a mental health crisis to the appropriate supports. The MHEAP will be disseminated at least annually amongst the equestrian community for immediate use.
 3. **Pause/Return to Play Protocol for Mental Health Challenges:** Similar to concussion protocols, which are already widely known amongst the equestrian community, Pause/Return to Play Protocols to guide individuals experiencing a mental health

challenge have been developed for the Canadian sport context (see Appendix). The equestrian community should become aware of these protocols so that they can be implemented when needed. These protocols are initially led by a physician, supported by a Mental Health Practitioner, and ultimately the trainer/coach. For GRIT athletes, physicians and Mental Health Practitioners affiliated with the CSIO will direct the protocol. Non-GRIT athletes should be directed to their family physician and encouraged to share the protocol with them.

4. Identification of Risky Periods for Mental Health in the YTP: This is an important component of being proactive at the organizational level. Once risky periods in the YTP are clearly delineated, then extra supports (such as extra check-ins, additional CMPC support, workshops, reminders of resources, reduction of stressors if possible) can be implemented during these times. This is an example of a systemic level intervention. Examples of risky periods for an athlete include: the post injury/concussion period; retirement; major competitions; transition into other roles. At present, Performance Advisors work with GRIT athletes and their parents and can assist in monitoring stress levels throughout the YTP and providing some additional support during risky periods. At the organizational level, further conversations are still in process in order to determine ways to support more athletes and coaches during these risky periods.

Promotion of Positive Mental Health

1. Education: Mental health literacy in the equestrian community will be addressed through workshops aimed at athletes, as well as coaches and parents. Ontario Equestrian members will be invited to attend workshops offered by Mental Health Practitioners affiliated with the CSIO, which will occur at least once annually. Additionally, GRIT athletes typically have access to bespoke workshops on mental performance and mental health, delivered by the CMPC or Mental Health Practitioners, respectively. These workshops can educate individuals to spot early warning signs in themselves and others, to whom they should turn for help, to be proactive with their own mental health, and how to have supportive and non-stigmatizing conversations about mental health with those in their community.
2. Stigma Reduction: Opportunities for past and present riders to share their lived experiences via annual panels and presentations in order to reduce stigma, provide hope, reinforce the notion that riders can continue with their sport and even thrive in spite of mental health challenges, so long as they are adequately supported and protected from harm.
3. Awareness of Mental Health Resources: One component of mental health literacy is knowledge about who and where to turn for support. This knowledge will be disseminated through the mental health literacy workshops, Ontario Equestrian social media campaigns (e.g., during Mental Health Awareness Week), on the Ontario

Equestrian website, on the Community Hub (online e-learning platform), and through email blasts to the equestrian community. In brief, the main Mental Health resources include:

- i. [Game Plan](#): For athletes who are AAP carded, they are eligible for up to \$2500/year of mental health services from a Game Plan approved Mental Health Practitioner.
 - ii. [Homewood Health](#): For athletes who are not carded but who are on the national team, they can create a free account and access a variety of mental health resources through Homewood Health, who recently partnered with Game Plan in 2025.
 - iii. For individuals who are not eligible for i. or ii., other supports are listed on the [Mental Health Resource](#) page compiled by the CSIO. These include provincially funded services, fee for service options (which may also be covered by personal health insurance programs), and self-help resources.
4. **Fostering Safe Sport and Psychological Safety:** Members of the organization must routinely complete online education modules to familiarize themselves with Safe Sport, how to navigate a complaint, and how to receive mental health support through the process. The annual mental health literacy workshops provide some background on creating psychological safety.
 5. **Growing a DEI Culture:** It is well documented that positive mental health is increased when individuals feel safe, included, and free of barriers and discrimination (Emmer, Dorn, & Mata, 2024). Increasingly, DEI policies are being adopted by sport organizations across Canada, and the COC recently published a [DEI Strategic Plan](#) for 2025-2028. As it relates to Ontario Equestrian, DEI policies and action steps will be reviewed annually, with an emphasis on bringing the organization into alignment with the COC DEI Strategy. Feedback will be elicited from the membership, with an emphasis on translating commitments to concrete actions (Peers et al., 2023).

Monitoring and Evaluation of the Strategy

To ensure that the strategy is respected and improved over time, it will be evaluated through the following:

1. Annual feedback surveys with questions designed by a Mental Health Practitioner affiliated with the CSIO, who will also review the responses and provide recommendations to the organization. If funding permits, a Needs Gap Assessment could be conducted by the Mental Health Practitioner in order to formalize the feedback and recommendation process.

2. Annual review with leadership and a Mental Health Practitioner to ensure organization remains aligned with the strategy, with the goal of setting concrete objectives for strategy implementation for the upcoming season.

Commitments and Next Steps

Ontario Equestrian commits to the following immediate action steps in order to bring the mental health strategy to life:

- Share the mental health strategy with the Ontario Equestrian community
- MHEAP: develop for camps, disseminate throughout the organization and membership, and update annually. Longer term initiatives include supporting individual barns in developing their own MHEAPs.
- Integrate Mental Health First Aid Training into the coaches' development programs, eventually ensuring that an individual at each barn and at each camp or event is trained in Mental Health First Aid.
- Disseminate the Pause/Return to Play protocols. Invite regular meetings amongst staff to tailor these protocols to the equestrian context.
- Post mental health and MPC resources on website, Community Hub, and other relevant platforms.
- Promote positive mental health on Ontario Equestrian social media and other relevant platforms.
- Distribute information about mental health literacy workshops. Promote and encourage attendance and participation through social media, emails, and conversations initiated by leadership.
- Schedule and plan an annual presentation or panel to share lived experience.
- In this season's annual survey, elicit feedback from the equestrian community as to what they would like to see from their organization to better support their mental health.
- Schedule a post-season meeting for leadership to review alignment with the mental health strategy and establish goals for the following season.

Looking Ahead

This strategy represents an important first step in Ontario Equestrian's ongoing commitment to protecting and promoting mental health. It is appreciated that it will take time for the mental health strategy to be rolled out in full. This strategy is intended as a living document that will be reviewed and refined over time to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness. Through this strategy, Ontario Equestrian resolves to take sustained, concrete action to support all members of the organization.

Appendix

CSIO Resource Page

For the full resource, please see: <https://csiontario.ca/resource/csio-mental-health-resources/>

CANADIAN SPORT INSTITUTE ONTARIO **INSTITUT CANADIEN DU SPORT**

SELF-DIRECTED MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

SPORT INFORMED CARE

CARDED ATHLETES

All Sport Canada carded athletes, and their coaches are eligible for up to \$2500/year of mental health support. Contact mentalhealth@mygameplan.ca to reach the Mental Health Network Coordinator for confidential service.

NON-CARDED ATHLETES

All non-carded national team members must first go to Homewood Health for support.

How to access Homewood Health services:

- Online**
 - Create a private account at homeweb.ca.
 - Click "Register," search for "Team Canada Athletes" and follow the steps to create your account.
 - Once registered, you can complete a self-led intake using Pathfinder or connect with a live intake counsellor for support.
- On the App**

Download the Homewood Health app on your Apple or Google device.

For more information, visit Game Plan x Homewood Health FAQ's.

*All carded athletes also have access to Homewood Health Services

**Homewood Health is not Sport-Informed

National Team athletes affiliated with CSIO, whether carded or not, have access to a Game Plan Advisor at CSIO. Please contact gameplan@csiontario.ca for more information. The Game Plan Advisor provides personalized strategies for your success on and off the field, offering support in mental health, skill development, education, and more.

Athletes at all levels can reach out to inquire if they are eligible for a Mental Health Wellness Check with a Mental Health Practitioner at CSIO. To access this service, please connect with the Sport Medicine Coordinator at sportmedicine@csiontario.ca.

If you are looking for sport-informed care you can access resources and fee-for-service therapy at the [Canadian Centre for Mental Health in Sport \(CCMHIS\)](#).

Worldwide, 24/7/365 Crisis Support for Team Canada Athletes:

- 1-888-383-3798 (from North America only)
- 226-251-0821 (local collect calls)

For Non-National Team athletes or anyone else having a Mental Health Crisis in North America:

- Call or text: 9-8-8

More resources available in the CSIO Resource Hub

Pause/Return Guidelines

For more information, see: <https://nso.olympic.ca/return-to-and-removal-from-sport-guidelines-due-to-mental-health-concerns/>




GAME PLAN
PLAN DE MATCH

RETURN TO SPORT

GUIDELINE

Decisions at each step should always be based on **safety, stability and function** and be individualized and managed on a case-by-case basis. Team or treating physician will communicate the plan to stakeholders. In some cases, athletes may need to move back a step or remain for longer at a step when progress isn't happening. The time spent in each stage will be case by case. Athletes should have regular follow up with a mental health professional during each stage.

STEP 1 MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Who is responsible? Team or treating physician and Psychologist.

STEP 2 SPORT REMOVAL (SEE REMOVAL FROM SPORT PROTOCOL)

➤-A Acute crisis period. Management will depend on specific signs and symptoms. Once the team or treating physician deems no acute safety concerns, the athlete may enter stage **➤-B**.

➤-B Return to activities of daily living (ADL), including exercise outside the training/team environment.

Who is responsible? Team or treating physician.

Once athletes meet the criteria, they can progress to **Step 3**.

- There are **no safety issues** preventing a return to the team environment.
- There are **no safe-sport restrictions** on returning to the team environment.
- Athlete is **stable** and able to **manage ADLs** consistently without significant deterioration of mental status.
- Athlete **feels ready to manage the stressors** of the team environment.
- The team or treating physician has provided **written medical clearance** to progress based on safety, stability and function.

STEP 3 GRADUAL RETURN TO TRAINING (ALLOW SEVERAL WEEKS)

Who is responsible? Team or treating physician.

Once athletes meet the criteria, they can progress to **Step 4**.

- The athlete has been able to **maintain their mental health** status in the team environment.
- The athlete **feels ready to start performance-guided training** again with the team and can manage the team environment's stressors.
- The team or treating physician has provided **medical clearance** to enter performance, team-based training based on safety, stability and function.

STEP 4 RETURN TO PROGRESSIVE TRAINING

Supervised by support team members in a high-performance environment. Progressive return to the field of play.

STEP 5 PROGRESSION TO STANDARD TEAM-BASED PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED TRAINING

Sport-specific training with the team's coaches. Medical constraints or limitations may persist at this stage, but the team or treating physician and athlete will determine them and communicate them to the coaching team.

Who is responsible? Team or treating physician remains the lead but coach becomes more involved and may guide the daily routine and determine the training plan according to the athlete's physical abilities and mental status.

Once athletes meet the criteria, they can progress to **Step 6**.

- The athlete has **maintained their mental health** status in the team environment.
- The athlete **feels ready to manage the stressors** of the competitive training environment (potentially to include travel).
- **Medical clearance** has been provided by the team or treating physician, supported by the team or treating licensed mental health provider based on safety, stability and function.

STEP 6 RETURN TO FULL TRAINING (NO RESTRICTIONS EXCEPT FOR OFFICIAL COMPETITIONS)

Who is responsible? Coach.

Once athletes meet this criteria, they can progress to **Step 7**.

- The athlete has **maintained a consistent high-intensity training** schedule with the team.
- The athlete has been able to **manage fluctuations in their mental health** status in the high-performance team environment.
- The athlete **feels ready to manage the stressors** of the competitive environment (potentially to include travel).
- **Medical clearance** has been provided by the team or treating physician based on safety, stability and function.

STEP 7 RETURN TO COMPETITION

Who is responsible? Coach.

The athlete **must receive medical clearance** before returning to official competitions

The athlete can only proceed to this stage after obtaining medical clearance. The athlete must have reached the level of sport-specific performance to participate in competitions safely. The athlete's mental health status must be compatible with a return to performance. This stage can include competition simulations.

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