



SOCCKER JOURNAL

"I need a mental health break." How to navigate today's mental health culture with our athletes

By Dr. Rachel Lindvall

"I need a mental health break." This phrase has become an increasingly common occurrence out of the mouths of today's athletes. Both professional athletes and social media have provided this phrase as a way of speaking up when an athlete feels overwhelmed, taxed, anxious, stressed, or any number of mental pressures or fatigue. For coaches, this concept can feel overwhelming, frustrating, or maybe even angering for some. It can feel like players are just trying to get out of something. I have heard comments such as, "My players need a 'mental health day' anytime they know we're doing fitness at training," or "One person needs a mental health day, and suddenly everyone needs a mental health day." For coaches who feel like the mental health day is a tool used by athletes as a form of control, there is a lot of push-back to the concept of a mental health break. For those truly seeking to understand and listen to their athletes, it can feel overwhelming, or they can feel ill-equipped to come alongside these athletes. All-in-all, regardless of perspective, this is a challenging time for coaches navigating our culture's current mental health crisis.

Before addressing this topic further, let's look at changes in how physical injuries have been viewed in the past twenty years. Entering this century, young athletes experienced a greater prevalence of ACL tears, stress fractures, and any number of overuse injuries as opportunities to play increased and the expectation of year-round participation and specialization of sport became the norm. Initially, athletes who suffered frequent injuries may have been viewed as weak, or with a body that "just couldn't handle the higher levels." However, throughout the last two decades coaches experienced increased awareness regarding their role in the physical health of athletes. Focus has strengthened on proper warm-up and injury prevention methods including education around recovery. As we know, injury prevention is not without its challenges, but we have made significant strides in the ownership of coaches when it comes to the physical health of athletes.

Let's carry this idea over to our current mental health crisis. Pre-pandemic, my doctoral research showed that stress and anxiety were at all-time highs in the youth through college-age populations. Then, as we all know, the pandemic hit which skyrocketed these already high numbers. Research shows that the stress and anxiety that this current generation is experiencing is real. They are not weak; they are genuinely experiencing stresses and pressures differently than Gen X or even Millennials experienced. Accepting and

acknowledging this reality is the first step toward helping coaches better embrace the situation at hand. Secondly, it is important to realize that an athlete asking for a mental health day is a symptom; it is not the problem. As a collegiate coach, who also happened to be a Certified Athletic Trainer, I paid special attention to the injuries my athletes sustained. If I noticed more than one athlete sustaining the same injury in a season, I would step back and evaluate what I might be doing (or not doing) in training that could be contributing to these injuries. I evaluated what I could do in the moment, but also what I could incorporate consistently moving forward to prevent injuries in the future. This is the same way we should approach the request for a mental health day. Instead of balking at it or resisting it, use it as an opportunity to reflect; is there anything in your training that could be contributing to this? Is there anything you can add or subtract that might prevent this in the future? Is your team culture one that is creating healthy soil for positive mental health outcomes? These questions can be a starting point for reflecting on your team cultural norms.

Let's take a moment and address the idea that the mental health day is used to "get out of fitness" or used by the player to "punish" the coach for not giving them the playing time they want. These scenarios are still an opportunity to evaluate our methods. Is your team fitness culture one that is building your athletes up or tearing them down? Is the purpose communicated to your athletes or does it just feel like punishment to them? You may be reading this thinking, "This athlete is just lazy." And maybe they are! But it's still an opportunity to have a conversation and determine the real underlying issue. If the issue is around playing time, it may be an opportunity to have further dialogue around why they aren't playing and help them embrace their current role.

So, what am I suggesting coaches do when their athlete asks for a mental health break? First, thank them for coming to you. Acknowledge that it takes courage to make this request. Second, remind them that they are not alone. Many athletes struggle with mental health challenges. Third, ask if there is anything at training that makes them feel better or worse? They may not have the answer immediately (and that's okay), but this could provide some insight into whether what they are feeling is even soccer-related. It could be they are feeling overwhelmed by outside sources and soccer feels like the easiest thing to cut out. If they can tell you something that makes it worse at training, then you can navigate a conversation around this topic. Maybe it is fitness, but it might not be for the reason you think. We may assume they are lazy, but in reality, fitness may shine a light on something that makes them feel like a failure. Fourth, give them a break. Start by recommending one day off. Let them know you want to help them through this mental challenge and that you don't expect it to be "fixed" with a day off. A day off doesn't magically fix mental health challenges if the real issues are not addressed and navigated. Fifth, provide them with a contact for a mental health professional. Find someone in your area that you can use as a reference for your athletes.

When your athlete returns, create a communication plan so you are aware of how they are feeling and can navigate their return to play. If you suspect they are trying to get out of something or are using “mental health” as an excuse, work to stay objective. View it as an opportunity to improve your relationship and understanding of that athlete. If an athlete is trying to get out of playing or fitness, that in and of itself is evidence of a mental struggle. You know, as the coach, that if they continue to use excuses, it will hinder them throughout life. Consider how you can use this opportunity to help them grow through conversation and understanding instead of calling them lazy or accusing them of faking. These accusations can lead to truly negative mental health outcomes.

So, if the symptom is athletes asking for a mental health day, what’s the prevention? In the January issue of The Training Ground, I wrote an article listing four different things coaches can do to promote positive mental health outcomes in their athletes: tools for navigating perfectionism, comparison, emotional regulation, and identity. Research shows that these four topics can have some of the greatest impact on promoting positive mental health outcomes in athletes. These culture implementations do not replace mental health professionals nor are they a guaranteed cure, but just like a proper warm-up and recovery can prevent physical injury, these tools can help prevent or reduce many negative mental health outcomes in our athletes.

I challenge you to embrace this increased focus on mental health, much like I’m sure you embrace physical health and injury prevention. We are much better as a coaching community at preventing physical injuries than we used to be, let’s work to be better at preventing mental ones too.

Have questions? Reach out: Rachel@DrRachelLindvall.com