



## Supporting the Mental Health of Men in Special Olympics

### What is this Snapshot about?

We all know that participating in sports has wonderful benefits for athletes' physical and mental health but it can also contribute to stress and anxiety. Athletes spend months and years training to compete. Their family and friends all cheer them on and winning can come down to milliseconds, or inches. Especially when we watch athletes excel, it is easy to forget that they can also struggle with their mental health.

This is especially true for men because men are often told not to express their emotions, to be tough, or to “suck it up”. More and more athletes in different levels of sports have been opening up about their mental health. For instance, [Michael Phelps](#) has been speaking about his depression. [Apollo Onno](#) has spoken about how in the past, athletes didn't even know how to talk about their mental health.

### Why is this important?

This conversation on men's mental health in sports is very important for athletes with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, who are far more likely to experience mental health problems than their fellow athletes without disabilities. Here are **5 key things** to consider to support athletes when they have mental health concerns.

## 5 Tips to Support Men's Mental Health and Wellbeing

### 1. Find the Right Amount of Pressure and Stress

We are looking to do our best, and this leads to pressure and stress. Sometimes we send a message that athletes, especially male athletes, should just handle their stress, no matter how intense it gets. However, too much stress can make performance worse and lead to distress. This distress can build over time and lead to more serious mental health problems, like anxiety or depression.

Family members can work with athletes to set them up for the right amount of pressure for them. It is important to let athletes know that they can talk about the stress they feel. Ask athletes specifically about their feelings leading up to an event. Start with a broad question (e.g., How do you feel about going to the next games?), and then follow up with a more specific question (e.g., Are you feeling stressed about the next games?). Each athlete will be different in how much pressure they can handle, so understanding what works best for the athlete in your family is key.

### 2. The Team Matters

Athletes are part of a team, whether on or off the field. This team includes other athletes, coaches and you. The team's culture and climate significantly impact each athlete's mental health. Athletes need to feel safe and supported by their team. Often, men are expected to be less social or emotional or to act aggressively within a sports context. This is unhealthy because it makes it hard to form safe connections, feel valued, and get support when needed. Look for ways to help athletes connect with each other both inside and outside of sports. For example, attending social events, holiday parties, or team get-togethers can be a way for athletes to engage with each other outside of practice and game days.



### 3. Avoid Mental Fatigue

Just like physical rest is important when we work out our body, mental rest is important when we work out our mind. It is important to support the athlete in your family to find moments to relax and have fun.

Communicating with your athlete's coaches about what is going on in their life outside of sports can help coaches better support them. Remember that men need to recharge their minds, not just their bodies.

### 4. Set Short, Medium and Long-term goals

Having big dreams as an athlete is great but it can be frustrating when the big wins do not happen immediately. You can work with the athlete in your family and their coaches to come up with personal, tailored, short (today's practice), medium (this season), and long-term goals (where I want to get to in the next 5 years). What is achievable with hard work in this practice? What should we shoot for in this training year? What do we want to achieve 2 years from now? What about 5 years? This can help find opportunities for quick wins that can be celebrated while still having big dreams for the future.

### 5. Pay Attention and Know When to Reach Out to Others

When people have difficulties with their mental health, their behaviours, feelings, and ways of thinking change. By learning about what is usual or normal for your family member, it will be easier to spot when things are out of the ordinary for them.

For instance, if you know the athlete in your family usually likes to pace around the room once before getting started with stretching, and then they stop pacing and look tired, this can signal a change from the ordinary for them. Using resources like [My Strong Mind](#) can be helpful in tracking and knowing your athlete's normal. Noticing enough changes from the ordinary could mean that they need help and could flag the need to reach out to a healthcare professional.

### Additional Resources

If you want to know more about mental health for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, check out [this accessible website](#) for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, family members, and professionals. You can also look at the resources developed by [Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities \(H-CARDD\)](#). You can learn more about autism and mental health by downloading the [Autism Mental Health Literacy Project Guide](#).

### About the Team

This family snapshot was written by Dr. Jonathan Weiss. This project was led by Dr. Avra Selick from CAMH, together with Special Olympics Canada athletes, caregivers, coaches, researchers and community partners from across the country.

### About H-CARDD

[Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities \(H-CARDD\)](#) is a research program that aims to enhance the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services.

H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, health care providers, people with disabilities and families working collaboratively.

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