

Taking a Team Approach to Mental Health

Best Practices for Collegiate
Athletic Departments



Mantra Health

Introduction:

It's time to face the student-athlete mental health crisis. We've already lost one too many student-athletes to suicide - and it's not enough for institutions and athletic departments to simply acknowledge this; actions must be taken to build preventative measures.

Within sport, student-athletes are often hesitant to ask for help, and when they do, there may not be enough resources, services, and treatment options available to suit their needs. In this white paper, we address the barriers preventing student-athletes from accessing quality mental health care and offer recommendations for making changes in your athletic department to better support student-athlete mental wellness.

The State of Mental Health in Athletics

Among student-athletes, 78% feel overwhelmed, 71% feel mentally exhausted, 43% feel lonely, and 24% feel so depressed that it's difficult to function.¹ Financial strain, academic stressors, unknown plans for the future, pressure to perform, social media messaging, and interpersonal relationships add to an already overburdened student who may also be coping with athletic failures, fear of injury, isolation, identity confusion, and the possibility of early career termination.²

Student-athletes face a tremendous amount of stress, but studies have shown that they underutilize mental health services. According to the NCAA Student-Athlete Well-Being Survey, two-thirds of student-athletes report knowing where to go for care, but less than half feel comfortable seeking support from a mental health provider.

Not every student is hesitant to discuss mental health. In fact, studies have shown that members of Gen Z are more likely to report and seek care for mental health concerns compared to other generations.³ Student-athletes, however, are less likely to seek help than their non-athlete peers, with stigma playing an important role in health-seeking behaviors.⁴

AMONG STUDENT ATHLETES:

78%
feel overwhelmed

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“If you bring an issue to your coach and they tell you to just do your job, it doesn't matter how many counselors you have at your campus.

If your teammates call you out, make fun of you, shame you, or disparage you in some way when you bring up mental health concerns, you're less likely to advocate for yourself.”

STEPHEN HEBARD, PHD, CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER AT PREVENTION STRATEGIES.



A campus may have counseling center services, but are they accessible to a student-athlete's schedule? Are the counselors trained in the psychology of sport? Do they have experience working with student-athletes who have intersectional identities? There are many reasons why student-athletes experiencing mental health issues are unwilling to speak up.

Why Existing Mental Health Resources Aren't Enough

Some student-athletes will reach out to a friend, confide in a coach, or even reach out to the counseling center, but how many receive the care they need?

"At many universities, there is a demand for counseling services than there are resources," says Erin J. Reifsteck, PhD, Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology at University of North Carolina Greensboro. As a result, university counseling centers may focus on triaging patients and dealing with acute situations before referring patients out, she explains. Not only is this process insufficient in meeting the needs of student-athletes, but it fails to account for preventative measures and often leads to fragmented care.



Here are some reasons why student-athletes aren't accessing care, let alone quality care:

Insufficient and Unspecialized Mental Health Resources:

Athletic departments and counseling centers aren't always equipped with the resources needed to support student-athletes properly, as they are a specialized population requiring specialized care. In addition to connecting student-athletes to on-campus counselors, athletic departments should also offer skills-based training, mental health workshops, and specialized counseling for athletes.

Mental Health Literacy:

Athletic directors, coaches, trainers, staff, and student-athletes may not know how to effectively assess, intervene, or act when an athlete is facing a mental health issue or in crisis. It's far too easy to ignore a problem, dismiss it as mundane, or attempt to offer a quick solution, if you don't know the signs or symptoms of a mental health condition. Telling a student-athlete to "it's not a big deal," "brush it off," can dissuade a student from seeking professional care, which inevitably worsens a condition. Every member of the athletics department should be equipped with the knowledge to communicate and respond appropriately.

Inaccessible Services:

College counseling centers are a necessity for every student, but unfortunately, these centers aren't always accessible to the student-athlete. Most centers are only open from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. During this time, student-athletes are busy attending classes, training, conditioning, and practicing. They should be given the option of telehealth services, which can be easier to access, as well as being available on nights and weekends, which may be more conducive to their schedule. Institutions should also offer 24/7 behavioral health services, so athletes can access care at any time from anywhere.

Cultural Concerns

Many student-athletes are students of color or those from other historically oppressed and repressed groups, such as LGBTQ+ or gender diverse communities, and they may be less likely to seek out therapy compared to their white peers who don't identify as a sexual or gender minority because they have experienced a lifetime of microaggressions, macroaggressions, and chronic marginalization, says Carla Chugani, PhD, LPC, Vice President of Clinical Content and Affairs at Mantra Health. They may not feel confident that they'll receive competent care due to previous negative experiences in treatment, lack of access to providers with similar identities, or the stigma of being seen entering a physical space on campus that is designated for mental health treatment.

How to Achieve Better Mental Health Outcomes

“Right now, the dots are not connecting,” says Deborah Wardlaw, Director of Athletics at Columbia College. “Each department is doing something to address mental health, but none of them are working together. It would be great if athletic directors received mental health resources so they could disseminate them, but often they face the responsibility of developing their own.”

Traditionally, athletic departments are siloed from the rest of campus and few collegiate athletic departments have full-time, on-staff clinicians who are specialized in student-athlete mental health – and according to Alex Auerbach, PhD, the Director of Wellness and Development for the Toronto Raptors, hiring more more clinical providers, while necessary, isn’t enough to solve the problem.

The NCAA Sports Science Institute suggests that “student-athlete mental well-being is best served through a collaborative process of engaging the full complement of available campus and community resources, which may include athletics, campus health, counseling services, disability services and community agencies.”⁵

“There’s too much ambivalence around the commitment to mental health as a priority,” says Dr. Auerbach. The majority of higher education presidents, across both public and private institutions, claim that student mental health is a pressing issue,⁶ but how many are building comprehensive mental health programs?

“One of the only solutions is money,” Dr. Auerbach says. While working at the University of Arizona, he did the math to figure out the monetary value of clinical services. “I got paid a set amount of dollars and the average out-of-state student was paid a set amount in scholarship funds. If seeing me for treatment meant that they could compete in 25% more games, then I could determine how much I saved them. It’s a lot of money.” He projects it was over \$3 million dollars within a \$90 million operating budget.

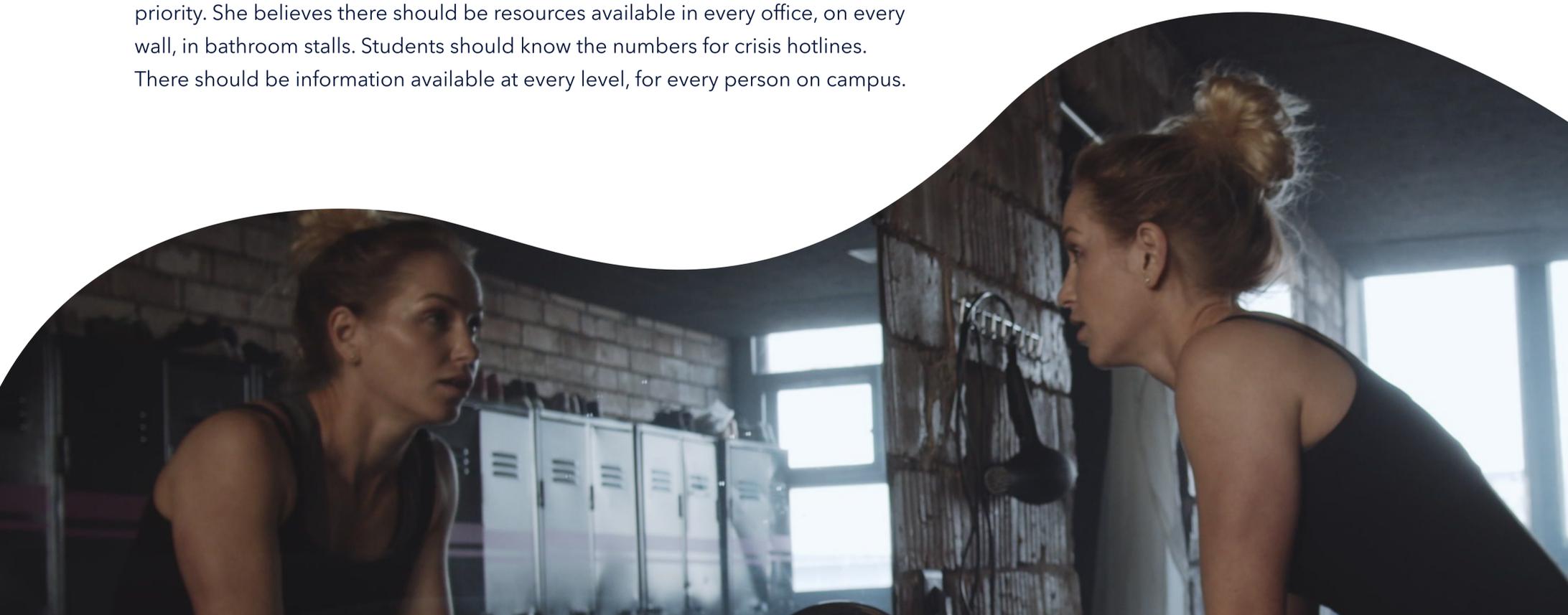
Institutions and athletic departments can make adjustments to their budget – and save a lot of money – by simply investing in more mental health care; they just have to make that a priority.

“It’s a trending topic,” says Deborah Wardlaw, Director of Athletics at Columbia College, but we’re still not at the point where mental health is a major campus priority. She believes there should be resources available in every office, on every wall, in bathroom stalls. Students should know the numbers for crisis hotlines. There should be information available at every level, for every person on campus.

The Responsibility of the Campus

To confront the root of the ongoing mental health crisis, Dr. Auerbach suggests making these campus-wide changes:

- **Engage in more nuanced conversations** around mental health, so people understand how the brain really works and what conditions are related to mental health disorders
- **Establish advocates** at every level of the institution to build cross-functional communication
- **Increase mental health literacy** through training and continuing education for coaches, administrators, and other staff members
- **Ease the pressure on coaches**, so they don’t engage in harmful behaviors
- **Apply for grants and build fundraising campaigns** to invest more into student mental health resources





10 Best Practices for Athletic Leaders to Follow

1 | Educate Yourself

To prevent a crisis and improve student-athlete mental wellness, athletic leaders must prioritize and learn about mental health symptoms, behaviors, interventions, and coping strategies. Athletic departments should offer expert-led training, workshops, webinars, and seminars to coaches, staff, and even athletes themselves.

2 | Lead by Example

Student-athletes put a lot of trust into their coaches, trainers, and athletic directors. Be willing to discuss your own mental health issues or experiences with therapy. Discuss the benefits of failure, remind athletes to practice self-care, encourage athletes to take social media breaks, and also establish an open-door policy so they feel comfortable sharing their own feelings.

3 | Practice Active Listening

Many people in coaching or athletics are leaders, and leaders like to fix things, says Jeffrey Milroy, MPH, DrPH, Associate Director of the Institute to Promote Health & Wellness at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, and Director of Programs at Prevention Strategies, but this isn't the right way to approach a mental health concern. Coaches and other athletic staff don't need to be clinicians and they don't need to know how to diagnose mental health conditions, says Dr. Hebard, but they need to be caring and empathetic. In addition to listening intently, athletic leaders can observe behavior and emotions and offer reflective thoughts or ask open-ended questions, which subtly shows that you're interested and invites student-athletes to dig deeper into their experience

4 | Bring in Mental Health Experts

Not every athletic department can afford to hire a full-time clinician, but coaches and their athletics programs should explore ways to bring in mental health experts who can inform mental health screenings, facilitate discussions, or even educate athletes on signs, symptoms, and coping strategies. "Create spaces where it feels normal to talk about how you're feeling [and] protect athletics who are willing to say something," Dr. Hebard recommends.

5 | Add Mental Health to the Mission

"Have a clear mission and vision for your athletics department," says Dr. Reifsteck. In addition to updating your mission statement, be willing to address mental health at every team meeting and with every person on campus until mental wellness is embedded into the institution's culture.



6 | Connect with Student-Athletic Clubs and Associations

If mental health information doesn't come directly from coaches, student-athletes may not utilize it, Wardlaw explains, so you have to be creative and find other ways to reach these students. Build relationships with the student representatives of the athletic clubs and associations. Give them resources, workshops, and training sessions to share with the teams directly. Ideally, the information will be short, concise, and direct, so student-athletes are more likely to review it.

7 | Build a Team of Advocates

Athletic leaders need to look beyond the athletic program to actively monitor and support their players' mental and behavioral health. Establishing an interdisciplinary team is recommended by the NCAA Sports Science Institute.⁷ This can and should include counseling center directors, student affairs leaders, administrators, faculty, even leaders from the community. The Hilinski's Hope Game Plan is also a beneficial program which can be used to improve communication between relevant stakeholders and student-athletes.⁸

8 | Prioritize Peer Support

When a student-athlete is battling a mental health issue, often they turn to peers for support, so we must engage with the athletes themselves. In addition to providing student-athletes with mental health resources, we must also train them on assessing and intervening, so they can notify the right people when there's a mental health concern.

9 | Recognize Staff Burnout

Student-athletes aren't the only ones facing high levels of stress. Within the athletics department at Columbia College, every staff member has a responsibility that extends beyond their main role. A coach may be in charge of transportation, while another is considered the compliance officer, Wardlaw explains, and athletic directors should be checking in on them, making sure they're not overwhelmed. You can also reduce the burdens put on coaches and other athletic staff by offering quick, accessible resources or training that tackles very specific issues.

10 | Invest in Mental Health Care

Not every athletic department can afford to hire an in-house clinical psychiatrist or sports psychologist, but every athletic director can advocate for and invest in accessible mental health services and resources. Athletic directors can work directly with a mental health company that liaises between the athletics department and the counseling center, for example, and provides therapy and psychiatry at night and on weekends via telehealth, as well as a crisis hotline, self-guided mental health and wellness content, and other resources.

Crisis Prevention and Management Strategies

The mental health crisis isn't new, but student-athlete deaths by suicide have garnered more media attention in recent years, prompting coaches, athletic directors, and other staff to wonder what processes exist and what best practices should be implemented to prevent this from happening.

In addition to creating a robust mental health program, equipped with specialized and readily available clinicians, colleges and universities must invest in crisis and suicide prevention for student-athletes. Suicide is one of the leading causes of deaths among college-age individuals⁹ and student-athletes are considered an at-risk population in need of ongoing, preventative care.

“Often the message received from coaches and other well-meaning people is to be bigger, faster, and stronger, to push through barriers, face any challenge, and ultimately, show no weakness.”

DEBORAH WARDLAW, DIRECTOR OF ATHLETICS AT COLUMBIA COLLEGE

Here's what you can do:

- ✓ **Establish regular communication** with counseling center directors and other campus leaders to stay abreast of student-athlete circumstances, mood, and behavior
- ✓ **Build a crisis and emergency response plan**, making it available to all staff members
- ✓ **Requiring annual training**, using evidence-based programs, such as the Mental Health First Aid Training course¹⁰
- ✓ **Invest in a 24/7 crisis hotline**, to be made available by call or text
- ✓ **Ensure key crisis resources are made easily available** to student-athletes by including them in classrooms, offices, and on relevant materials

You can do everything right, and still, something can go wrong. When it comes to mental health, prevention is just the beginning – there needs to be ongoing and consistent care in place so student-athletes are protected, cared for, and treated with the highest quality care.



Featured Contributors:



ALEX AUERBACH, PHD

The Director of Wellness and Development for the Toronto Raptors

Dr. Auerbach joined the Toronto Raptors after serving as the Director of Clinical and Sport Psychology for the University of Arizona. He has worked with NCAA Division-I schools in the Pac-12, ACC, Big 12, and Conference USA. Dr. Auerbach has worked for seven years providing clinical care, crisis intervention, and performance consultation for professional, collegiate, and Olympic athletes, as well as coaching staff, medical staff, and sports administration. Dr. Auerbach earned his doctoral degree in counseling psychology with a specialization in sport and performance psychology from the University of North Texas. He received a Master's in Business Administration from Salve Regina University and a Bachelor in Business Administration from the University of Arizona.



CARLA CHUGANI, PhD, LPC,

Vice President of Clinical Content and Affairs at Mantra Health

Prior to joining Mantra Health, Dr. Chugani worked as an Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Health. Her research has focused on suicide prevention with emerging adults in the higher education setting. She is also interested in tailoring suicide prevention and intervention programs to marginalized populations, including students with disabilities and those identifying as LGBTQ+. Dr. Chugani is also a licensed professional counselor and is Linehan Board Certified in the practice of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) for treatment of chronic suicidality and self-injury. Dr. Chugani holds a Bachelor's degree in Opera Performance from Mannes College, The New School for Music. She holds a Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling from Florida Gulf Coast University. Dr. Chugani completed her doctoral degree in Counselor Education from the University of South Florida and her postdoctoral training through the T32-funded Adolescent Research in the Community (ARC) program at the University of Pittsburgh.



DEBORAH WARDLAW,

Director of Athletics at Columbia College

A Columbia College Alum, Wardlaw is serving her third year as the Director of Athletics at Columbia College (SC). She has been inducted into the South Carolina Athletic Coaches Association, South Carolina Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame, and the Columbia College Athletics' Hall of Fame. Debbie was a dual-sport athlete in basketball and volleyball, while at Columbia College, where she earned All-American honors. She spent 35 years in public education in Richland School District One at Lower Richland High School as a physical educator, girls' basketball coach, and athletics director. She served on the South Carolina Athletic Coaches Association Board of Directors for 4A and coached girls' basketball for 24 years, earning seven state championships and several coach of the year honors. She was honored with the "Key to the City" in Columbia by Mayor Steve Benjamin. Wardlaw earned a Bachelor of Arts in Physical Education from Columbia College and a Master of Science in Sport Management from Southern New Hampshire University.



ERIN J. REIFSTECK, PhD,

Associate Professor in the Department of Kinesiology at University of North Carolina Greensboro

Dr. Reifsteck holds a PhD in Kinesiology (Sport and Exercise Psychology) and completed a postdoctoral fellowship with the Institute to Promote Athlete Health and Wellness at UNCG. She also has a graduate certificate in Women's and Gender Studies from UNCG and a B.S. in Psychology with a minor in Neuroscience from Saint Francis University. Her current research focuses on promoting lifelong physical activity and health among athletes. Dr. Reifsteck has served as principal investigator for two NCAA-funded projects focused on the development of the Moving On! program, which supports student-athletes in making healthy transitions to life after sports.



JEFFREY MILROY, MPH, DRPH,

Associate Director of the Institute to Promote Health & Wellness at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, and Director of Programs at Prevention Strategies

Over the past several years Jeff has directed the implementation of myPlaybook across more than 150 NCAA member institutions nationwide, managed the collection of alcohol and other drug use data from over 15,000 student-athletes and is a regular contributor to Drug Free Sports' Webinar series on alcohol and other drug use among athletes. Jeff's love for working with athletes stems from growing up as a hockey player growing up in Canada and from his time as an NCAA student-athlete (SUNY Potsdam).



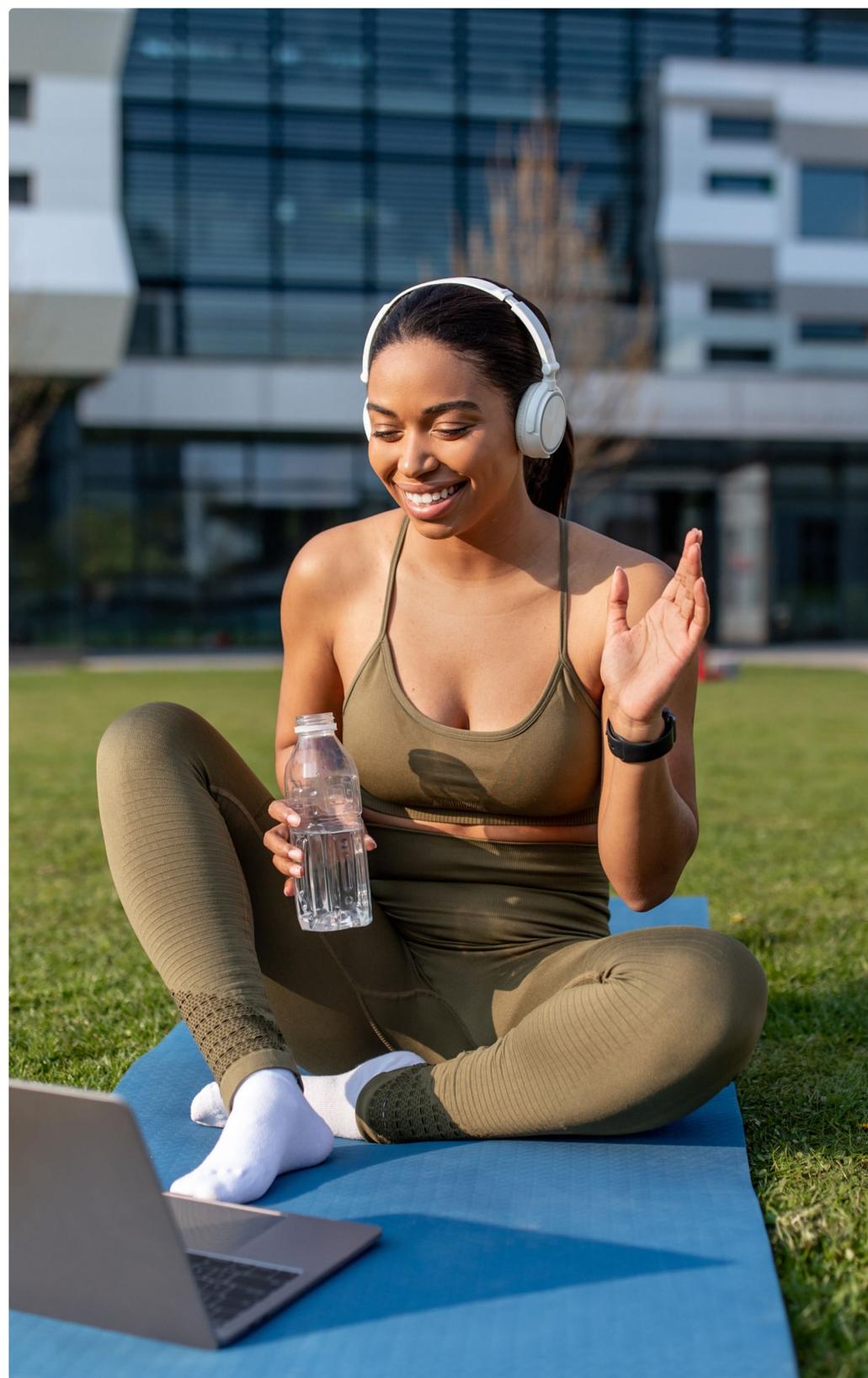
STEPHEN HEBARD, PHD,

Chief Innovation Officer at Prevention Strategies

Hebard earned his Ph.D. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at the University of North Carolina Greensboro in 2015 and worked as an assistant professor of Counselor Education at The University of Alabama at Birmingham before joining the Prevention Strategies team. He is a member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) whose clinical background in substance abuse and mental health intervention bring a unique perspective to prevention research. Stephen has provided Motivational Interviewing training and consultation for professionals in the fields of general medicine, oncology, psychiatry, nursing, pharmacy, education, and school, mental health, and addictions counseling. He is interested in creating innovative conceptual models and applying methodological frameworks in prevention. Stephen's research foci include Motivational Interviewing, mental health literacy in sport, application of the Multiphase Optimization Strategy (MOST), and the development of prevention and intervention models related to mental health, wellness, and risky behaviors.

Improving Student-Athlete Mental Wellness with Mantra Health

Mantra Health is a digital mental health clinic on a mission to improve access to evidence-based mental healthcare for young adults. Through augmenting high-quality clinical services with software and design, we're on a mission to improve the mental health of over 20 million university and college students through partnerships with higher education institutions and health insurance plans. The Mantra Health program has been deployed across 50+ campuses with over 500,000 students and we've built partnerships with institutions across the country, including Penn State, MIT, Cornell, and Miami Dade College. Working closely with athletic departments, we can provide therapy, psychiatry, and 24/7 behavioral health support.



Citations:

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To learn about our student-athlete mental health services, please contact partners@mantrahealth.com or visit mantrahealth.com to review our service offerings.