



MENTAL HEALTH GUIDE FOR COMPETITIVE SWIMMERS & YOUNG ATHLETES

INTRODUCTION

We are a swim family who, like many, have seen an increase in the number of mental health related challenges in youth sport. **Young Athletes are 600 times more likely to suffer** from stressors than non athletes yet there is very little in place to support them.

This guide accompanies a documentary with our panellists that can be found on YouTube @Swim-mum

What are we hoping to do?

- Raise awareness of mental health in youth sports, starting with swimming.
- Give local clubs some ideas on things they can get started with immediately that would make a difference.
- We want to do something positive to help enable people to reach their full potential, love the journey and look back with fond memories feeling proud.

Why are we doing this?

Swimming is our sport and it has given us all so much. This is our way of giving back. Some of the things we have seen have made us sad and we thought rather than be laissez faire we would see what we could do to help.

This project is not a catchall but simply hopes to be an encouragement, and place to start. We hope it inspires you to have your own conversations, make a plan, adapt processes and make a difference to the increasingly fragile lives of our young people.

Please share these resources with others and help us spread the word. We would love to hear stories of how this has inspired you as a club, parent or young athlete on our social media channels sso we can all share new ideas and best practices.

With love
Jack, India & Andrea Brown

To help with this project we talked to this panel of experts

- Jemma Lowe – Olympic Swimmer
collegesportsamerica.com
- Ed Sinclair, 2X Olympian and Founder of Maximum Performances Swim Coaching & Camps
maximumperformances.com
- Kike Anunobi, Forensic Psychiatrist, Available for individual or club counselling
kikeanunobi@icloud.com
- Claire Kerslake, Soundwell Swimming Club Welfare Officer.
soundwellswim.org.uk Welcoming new members around Bristol
- Dino Nocivelli, Partner at Leigh Day Solicitors
DNocivelli@leighday.co.uk
- Keith Oddy, Independent Child Protection Consultant with previous experience with British Swimming, British Rowing & British Equestrian
kochildprotection.com
- Jake Brown, Performance Psychologist
mindframeperformance.com

Other Contributors

- Paula Harvey, Essex Talking Therapy, in person and online therapy
essexalkingtherapy.co.uk
- Chandler Shrode, Editor & Videographer
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The amazing brave young people who contributed: Amelia, Oscar, Lola, Maisie, Jack & India.

Thank you all. ❤️

The content of this guide is opinion and sharing of information. Every young person and situation is different. Please consult with athletic and medical professionals if you have any concerns

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

- Mental health has reached epidemic proportions in our society
- Additional stressors of competitive sport on young people make them more likely to struggle
- There is little or no focus on or proper policy to address this

What is mental health & who gets it?

Everyone is at some risk of developing a mental health disorder, regardless of age, sex, income or ethnicity. In most of the developed world, mental disorders are now one of the leading causes of disability.

Social and financial circumstances, adverse childhood experiences, biological factors and underlying medical conditions can all shape a person's mental health.

Many people with a mental health disorder don't even know they have one and many have more than one condition at a time.

"If that nervousness had been addressed when I was younger it may not have affected me when I was older".

Jemma Lowe, Olympic Swimmer London & Beijing

Types of mental illness

Anxiety disorders: are the most common mental illness.

People with these conditions have severe fear or anxiety related to certain objects or situations. Most people with an anxiety disorder try to avoid exposure to whatever triggers their anxiety.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) involves excessive worry or fear that disrupts everyday living. People may also experience physical symptoms including restlessness, fatigue and tense muscles.

Panic attacks: During a panic attack, a person may experience overwhelming emotions, including helplessness and fear. Physical symptoms can include a fast heartbeat, rapid breathing, sweating, and shaking. Panic attacks often happen in specific situations that trigger heightened stress. But some people experience them repeatedly, with no clear triggers. In this case, the person may have panic disorder.

Phobias are deeply personal, and doctors do not know every type. There could be thousands of phobias, and what may seem unusual to one person can be a severe problem that dominates daily life for another. These are the most common ones:

Simple phobias: These may involve a disproportionate fear of specific objects, scenarios, or animals. A fear of spiders is a typical example

Social phobia: Sometimes known as social anxiety, this is a fear of being subject to the judgement of others. People with social phobia often restrict their exposure to social environments.

Agoraphobia: This term refers to a fear of situations where getting away may be difficult, such as being in an elevator or a moving train. Many people misunderstand this phobia as the fear of being outside.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD): People have obsessions and compulsions. They experience constant, stressful thoughts and a powerful urge to perform repetitive acts, such as handwashing.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can occur after a person experiences or witnesses an intensely stressful or traumatic event. During this type of event the person thinks that their life or other people's lives are in danger. They may feel afraid or that they have no control over what is happening. These sensations of trauma and fear may then contribute to PTSD.

People may also refer to mood disorders as affective disorders or depressive disorders.

People with these conditions have significant mood changes, generally involving either mania, a period of high energy and joy or depression. Examples of mood disorders include:

Major depression: An individual with major depression experiences a constant low mood and loses interest in activities and events that they previously enjoyed. They can feel prolonged periods of sadness or extreme sadness.

Bipolar disorder: A person with bipolar disorder experiences unusual changes in their mood, energy levels, levels of activity and ability to continue with daily life. Periods of high mood are known as manic phases, while depressive phases bring on low mood.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD): Reduced daylight during the fall, winter and early spring months triggers this type of major depression. It is most common in countries far from the equator.

Schizophrenia disorders: The term schizophrenia often refers to a spectrum of disorders characterised by psychotic features and other severe symptoms. These are highly complex conditions

Signs of schizophrenia typically develop between the ages of 16 and 30. The individual will have thoughts that appear fragmented and may also find it hard to process information.

"I want to know what to do and get the skills I need to support the young people. Actively showing them we care as a team and are known and approachable is key".

Claire Kerslake, Soundwell Swimming Club Welfare Officer

O.K So you just get a test right?

It is still hard to detect early signs. No physical test or scan reliably indicates whether a person has developed a mental illness. A doctor may begin by looking at a person's medical history and performing a thorough physical exam to rule out physical conditions or issues that may be causing the symptoms.

So how do you know?

Look out for these as possible signs of a mental health disorder:

- Withdrawing from friends, family and colleagues
- Avoiding activities they would normally enjoy
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Eating too much or too little
- Feeling hopeless
- Having consistently low energy
- Using mood-altering substances, including alcohol and nicotine, more frequently
- Displaying negative emotions
- Being confused
- Experiencing delusions
- Being unable to complete daily tasks, such as getting to work or cooking a meal
- Having persistent thoughts or memories that reappear regularly
- Thinking of causing physical harm to themselves or others
- Hearing voices

"It's important that all of us are working together to make sure that the Swimmer feels supported from every angle".

Claire kerslake - Welfare Officer Soundwell Swimming Club

Getting help

Your GP - Doctors may order a series of laboratory tests such as imaging exams and bloodwork to screen for other possible underlying causes.

They will do a psychological evaluation. This includes asking about a person's symptoms, experiences and how these have impacted their lives. Sometimes, the doctor may ask a person to fill out mental health questionnaires to get an idea about a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviour patterns.

There are **mental health related agencies available on the NHS** that your doctor can refer you to. Unfortunately as a result of the overwhelming demand there is a prioritisation and assessment of who gets access to them.

In my experience the system is not great. It is underfunded and overwhelmed by demand.

There are long waiting lists (we waited over 12 months) to see NHS counsellors. Once you get offered a session these may be during the school day or after school during the week which is not ideal for swimmers who generally train then. You will typically get about 6 sessions which may not be enough to fully explore the problem or get that child to open up. It's a start though and a therapist can try and request additional sessions for you if needed.

If you can afford to go private, do. It will cost you about £50 per hour. You will have a better choice and can fit sessions in around your schedule. You can also develop a long term relationship coming back to that same person who knows your family when needed.

You need to feel connected and comfortable. Not all therapists are equal or as experienced and you just might not like some! Always ask for a free consultation initially to listen to what they say but also get a feel for if you think they will connect well with your child.

In a crisis go to a hospital. They can assess, admit and get you seen by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team. CAMHS does not have the ability to support everyone long term. Being discharged by them does not mean there is no longer mental health work to do.

"Swimmers spend most of the time half naked. It's really tricky to navigate"

Jemma Lowe, Olympic Swimmer London & Beijing

Sports Psychology & Mindset Coaching

Not surprisingly lots of these services are popping up. Fees tend to be around £70 per hour with multi session packages making it a bit cheaper. I would recommend you ask if they have any swimming experience.

Not a deal breaker but advantageous if they understand our world. We are giving mindframeperformance.com a go.

"Why should we assume we should be able to deal with pressure, nerves and anxiety if we were never taught how?"

Jake Brown, Performance Psychologist

Jake Brown shares his process:

Step 1 - Get to know you and try to understand what is happening, when and why.

Step 2 - Diagnose and come up with framework and a plan.

Step 3 - Talking, Sharing exercises and homework that gets your mind to break some of the patterns and start thinking in a different way.

Changing our perspective on cost

Why do we think that when we spend SO MUCH MONEY on race skins, hotels, entering races, food and the rest?! £50 is one pair of goggles folks and we are talking about the mental health of our children that will affect them for the rest of their lives!

I am talking to myself here too. It took me a while, too long to make the investment. We need a mindset shift that prioritises mental health, spending money on and making time for something less visible.

"With young people doing competitive sports I think at least 60% of the performance can be attributed to their mental state. We spend time in the gym to make our muscles strong. Well the brain is a muscle too! If you don't train it to be strong it will be weak. No one becomes strong by accident. You either become strong by experience or we teach ourselves to be strong".

Kike Anunobi - Forensic Psychiatrist

Guess what? Coaches need mental health support too.

Coaches deal with a lot and are often overwhelmed with limited resources. They are not psychologists but are usually involved in almost every facet of club operations including welfare.

While this is not the main topic here I do think if we want to have coaches who stay in swimming, enjoy it, don't get burned out and live up to their full potential we must look at how we support their mental health too.

LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS

Here are some ideas we love that can help you to start making a real difference today!

Puberty for swimmers can be more stressful. Don't ignore it & pretend its not happening. Talk about it & share information on it.

"By the time you get to competition it is all mental yet 100% of my training has been on physical. Zero on mental preparation until I was older and even then only perhaps 10%".

Jemma Lowe, Olympic Swimmer London & Beijing

Where do you start?

Survey your members & Understand

For clubs our experts suggest that you try and understand your swimmers and how they feel by sending out an anonymous survey using a site like survey monkey or Google forms.

Survey Questions

When putting together your list of questions, keep in mind that there can be a difference between what someone thinks and how they might feel. A lot of people ask about how they think and not how they feel. For example “do you feel your coach doesn’t like you?”. That’s not a feeling that’s a thought.... So “do you think your coach doesn’t like you?”

Paula Harvey, Essex Talking Therapies

Have you felt down, low mood or depressed in the last 6 months?

What percentage of that do you think was related to swimming? Is/was there other stuff going on outside swimming that is affecting how you feel?

Have you experienced any of these situations (Tick all that apply)

- Feeling bad about yourself
- Feeling disappointed in yourself
- Feeling like you have let yourself, your family and or your club down?
- Feeling bad when you get compared to other swimmers who may be faster, taller, stronger than you?
- Not liking your body
- Wanting to quit swimming
- Feeling like you don’t have any friends
- Feeling like other swimmers don’t like you
- Feeling like the coach doesn’t like you
- Feeling overwhelmed and that it’s all just too much pressure
- Feeling so exhausted and tired to the point that you wish you didn’t have to swim
- Just being unhappy about swimming but not sure why
- Do you have someone you can talk to?
- Would you like us to confidentially arrange for someone for you to talk to? This survey is anonymous but if you would like help please tell us who you are and anything else you would like us to know like is there anyone you don’t want to talk to?



There is a ‘core 10’ form used for assessing mental health in teenagers. Take a look at that to see if there are any more questions of relevance you would like to add to your survey.

Once you have put together your list of questions our expert advises that we give space to put any other thoughts / feelings / worries that are not mentioned above.

It would also be good to ask the question “what do you do with your thoughts / feelings?” Maybe have a tick box response such as:

- Speak about it
- Say nothing
- Journal

If the answer is to speak about it, who to?

Once you have your survey results in it is important to let your members know that the information good, bad or ugly, that they submitted will not fall on deaf ears.

Top Tips for navigating periods from other swimmers trial and error!

Everyone struggles with this. You are not alone. If you are brave enough to bring it up with your other female swimmers you will probably find that they are all going through the same thing.

Do not think you are fat just because you are on your period. This is completely natural. Make friends with your body and learn what works best for you.

Be kind to yourself. You may feel lethargic or tired and not quite yourself when you are on your period. You may not race as well. However, don’t assume the negative. Some girls say they have more energy and feel they race better just before or towards the end of their period. It might be your secret weapon!

Having some period specific kit can help. Black towels, black swimsuit and a black or dark coloured race suit. There are several brands of period swimwear. Some girls wear a pair of black bikini swim bottoms under their swimsuits.

Tampons or Tampax definitely make things easier. Make friends with them if you can.

If you are embarrassed that the whole squad will see you grab your bag when you need to go to the toilet with supplies during a session, try hiding a little bag with your tampax in behind a toilet.



Clubs consider providing a basket of supplies that is there when your club is training.

In all Swim England events it is now acceptable to wear period bikini bottoms under a race suit. This is not accepted at British Swimming events and FINA/LEN events so in these cases the race suit should be worn alone without bikini bottoms. Swim England’s website has more on this.

“Don’t be so afraid of saying the wrong thing that you say nothing. If you are concerned you must say something”.

Kike Anunobi – Forensic Psychiatrist

Boys, Bodies and Hair

Bodies change at different times. Standing on the block next to boys that have grown muscles and developed sooner than you can be intimidating and rock your confidence.

Puberty brings with it hair. As a swimmer during major races many swimmers shave down arm pits, arms and legs. Asking your coach if they want you to “shave down” for a competition is normal. Many early teens get their adults to help them with this.



Clubs consider talking about puberty as it relates to swimming and how many swimmers eventually even out. Setting the expectation about things like shaving to avoid anyone having to ask. Having older swimmers talk about what they did or experienced in a lighthearted way sends the message that everyone goes through this and your door is open to talk about any concerns.

“Don’t wait for governing bodies to mandate policy around mental health. That work is being done but there can be delays. Clubs can bring positive change at a grassroots level. Increasing your knowledge with certified mental health courses is a great place to start.”

Keith Oddy, Independent Safeguarding Consultant



What actions can you take next?

- If there are any serious/dangerous revelations take immediate action.
- Reach out to a local therapist or one that delivers support remotely. Share your survey results and get advice
- Come up with a short and long term mental health plan.

Club Ideas for Short Term Goals

- Make sure everyone knows you are serious about mental health - release a statement outlining your commitment and being open to ideas.
- Skill up! Take some free mental health courses. You don't know what you don't know.
- Make sure you have the right person in place to be a welfare officer and they are someone young people would find accessible, approachable and visible.
- Get a therapist to provide some content (or find some online) and share it in email to all members monthly. This reinforces your commitment and reminds people.
- Create collaboration on purpose by giving parents a letter to share with schools

FREE MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID COURSES

There are free online courses available on mental health for parents & clubs giving you a level two qualification.

"The collaboration and communication between school, swimming club, coach, parent and the swimmer at the forefront is vital".

Claire Kerslake, Soundwell Swimming Club Welfare Officer

 *Why doesn't every club commit to getting their coaches and welfare officer certified in these mental health courses over the next 12 months?*



Recommended courses for clubs and parents:

- Mental Health First Aid
- Children and young people's mental health
- Men's Mental Health
- Counselling Skills
- Self harm and Suicide Prevention
- Awareness of Mental Health Problems
- Distressed behaviour that challenges in children
- Understanding Autism



Clubs - Why not provide every swimmer with a letter for school - Initiate collaboration from the get go!

Template Letter

Dear Teacher

We are delighted to let you know that Janet is now a competitive swimmer with our club and we are thrilled to have her! As part of our commitment to the total wellbeing of our athletes we believe in the collaboration between swimmer, parent, club and school. As a result we wanted to create a line of open communication and sharing with you.

Competitive swimming is a very rigorous sport involving early mornings and swimming in the evenings.

With this in mind we hope you don't mind us sharing a list of best practices that other schools and clubs have used. These small things can make a BIG difference to our swimmers. Often swimmers find it tricky to know what to ask for help with so we hope this helps to provide some ideas and a starting point for discussion.

- Have a line of communication with the coach and parents regarding swimming
- Ability to arrive late because of early morning swimming or leave a bit early to get to training
- Understand the training and competition schedule
- Keep an eye on how tired they may be and talk through strategies
- Make allowances for homework due dates
- Ability to wear PE kit after early morning swimming
- Anything you can do to help families feed athletes who are usually rushing meals in the car
- Check with the swimmer. Some enjoy being celebrated publicly while others really hate it.
- Take the time to understand their world with the pressure and disappointment that comes with competitive sport. Develop conversation when things are good so they will be more inclined to talk to you when they are struggling.
- When is PE and how necessary is it for the Swimmer? Are they already physically tired? Could that time be used for things like a rest in well-being or catching up on homework?

Every swimmer and circumstance is different so we encourage you to find what works best. I am attaching our training schedule.

Below are the contact details for our welfare officer and head coach. Please feel free to reach out to us with any questions or concerns.

I love sport which is why I choose to specialise in it, but medals can't be more important than the wellbeing of our children. Sport must be safe and if it isn't it shouldn't exist in its current form. I think we need to do a lot more to ensure that everyone that participates can be safe, and can do it without fear of abuse or repercussions. Mental health is a key aspect of that.

Dino Nocivelli, Partner Leigh Day Solicitor, Child Abuse Department. Sports organisation specialism

Club Ideas for Long Term Goals

- Quarterly speaker on mental health. It doesn't need to be terribly tragic or deep. The idea is to remove the stigma, show you are a club that cares and make it ok to share our vulnerabilities.
- Regular 10 minute mental health check in. This could be with the welfare officer or the coach. No one is singled out because there is a problem making it standard practice.
- Homework! How can we strengthen our minds? Come up with a task that everyone does. Perhaps provide a club journal to document feelings that can be used for the task. Create a platform and space for anyone who wants to share something that the task revealed to them either publicly or anonymously.

"Schools have lots of measures in place with people to support and experts in various areas of mental health. Youth sport needs to do the same".

Claire Kerslake, Soundwell Swimming Club Welfare Officer

Finding ways to track and measure the mental health of your members and share your results is key. An image of two thermometers, one for physical health and one for mental health being honest about where you are and your commitment to wanting swimmers who are strong physically and mentally.

Welfare Officer Best Practice

- Be visible – Let people know who you are
- Be approachable & get to know swimmers & their families
- Listen. Don't judge or be too quick to respond. It's ok to reflect and come back with a plan
- Communication is key! Say you care about the situation and the swimmer. Then show it through consistent actions and regular follow ups
- Remove the stigma – add reference to your commitment to mental health to your email signature
- Skill up! Take one or more mental health courses

What goes in a youth athlete mental health toolbox?

- Emotional resilience
- Not to give up. It's just one bad moment or bad day. Nothing lasts forever.
- Where to go for help
- No shame in asking for help
- Mental health is as important as hurting any other part of your body
- There's a time for rest
- Not everyone will like you or want to be your friend. That's OK
- Be true to your own values
- It's ok to feel disappointed. We feel that and then we pick ourselves up again.

"Let them know life can be difficult. If you shield and protect them from everything they will never learn the skill to handle life's challenges and triumph over them"

Kike Anunobi, Forensic Psychiatrist

"I had a very good chat with her today about swimming and everything surrounding it. I praised her for these amazing achievements and her mindset in general. She seemed really positive despite the news of not getting the National time and I encouraged her to focus on the positives of what she is doing, the improvement she has made and what she can control, which she absolutely is! I will definitely monitor this moving forward and I have said to her we are going to have regular check ins to ensure she feels supported in school with her swimming and has someone to talk to about the highs and lows of high level sport".

Lucy Dannatt, Head of Year 8 and PE Teacher
– Denmark Road High School, Gloucester

Some of the added pressures for swimmers

- Feeling like a failure
- Not making the times
- Plateauing
- Getting DQ'd
- Not getting moved up squad when your friends do
- Having siblings faster than you
- Feeling like the coach has favourites and you aren't one of them
- Being told you aren't trying hard enough when you feel that you are
- Working so hard for a year and then not making the county/regional/National cut
- Going through puberty, being body conscious and being half naked most days.



Clubs & Coaches – If you are moving swimmers up and you know this will be upsetting to someone who is not being moved why not take the time to talk to that family first. Don't hide behind the email! Reaffirm your belief in swimmers not moving up, acknowledge that you understand they will be disappointed and reinforce the different journeys swimmers have.

Tips for Parents/Responsible Adults

- Remind them that this should be fun! Set that as the race day goal.
- Tell them you are proud that they showed up and did their best.
- Let them know you are not disappointed in them.
- Do not compare them to anyone else.
- Celebrate attitude and feelings as well as PB's
- Help take the pressure off, don't add to it
- Not all swimmers like public celebration. Ask before you broadcast
- Do not be afraid to ask questions even if they get annoyed at you. Ask and keep asking.

It is so important that swimmers and their families understand that swimming is a process with lots of ups and downs. There are times you will PB and times you won't. There can be long plateaus which are difficult and the ability to deal with failure and not being the best in training sessions and at races is key. Sometimes the goal should just be to go out, have fun and smile from the block.

Ed Sinclair Olympian Swimmer





Statistics

Around 200 young people die by suicide every year. Our report investigates the relationship between loneliness and suicide in young people, and if or how they may be connected.

Samaritans

Young men between 15 – 24 years old are 3 times as likely to take their lives as their female peers.

RCPCH – State of Child Health

When the 17-year-olds were asked if they had ever hurt themselves ‘on purpose in an attempt to end your life’, 7% replied yes. When asked if they had self-harmed during the previous year, 24% responded that they had

The millennium cohort study

41% of all admissions to hospital for self-harm were teenagers. “What we are seeing year on year clinically is more young people presenting self-harm in A&E and admissions to paediatric beds and mental health units.”

NHS Digital Data

Resources our experts recommend: charliewaller.org/

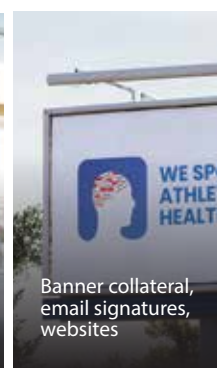
Books: How to talk so your kids will listen & How to listen so your kids will talk
Dan Siegel books are fantastic



Raise Awareness
- Free Resources



Pop up banner
template



Banner collateral,
email signatures,
websites

If I had to do it all again I would definitely focus more on my mental health. The swimmer that beat my British record had a sports psychologist and I really think it gave him the edge.

Ed Sinclair – Olympian and Founder
of Maximum Performances

When you have a swimmer that is very fast from a young age it's important to start setting the right expectation then. Educate swimmers and parents that there won't always be big jumps in time improvement, sometimes none or you may even add time. All that is completely normal.

Ed Sinclair – Olympian and Founder
of Maximum Performances

"I think a focus on mental health for young athletes will make a big impact.

You will find more athletes doing well even after they stop being athletes. You will find more athletes that are both physically and mentally competent. You will find less athletes becoming drug addicts, using alcohol or just not coping. You will find happier athletes, because what about when the swimming stops? Swimming is just a small aspect of their lives. They are going to be husbands, wives, parents and get jobs. What about all the aspects of their lives? I am bold enough to say that we are going to raise athletes that are going to be in trouble if we don't take care of their mental health and it will be more difficult for them to ever achieve their full potential".

Kike Anunobi – Forensic Psychiatrist

"At elite levels all the swimmers are pretty similar physically nowadays. I think the thing that separates the swimmers who go really far in the sport is their mental resilience."

Ed Sinclair – Olympian and Founder
of Maximum Performances

Watch the documentary here:



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