

12 TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUR TEEN ATHLETE

About Their Mental Health



The Jed Foundation

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12 Tips for Talking to Your Teen About Their Mental Health

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(with input from Positive Coaching Alliance)

Sports, especially at a competitive level, can add another layer of stress to the lives of teens. There's balancing the time commitment between school and sports, as well as the pressure, disappointment, and social scrutiny that can come with competition: losing, not making a team, having your plays shared and sometimes criticized on social media, trying to earn scholarships, and more.

As the caregiver of a teen athlete, your support can help them understand their feelings and feel valued and cared for. You can provide a safe space to work through all the inevitable emotions of life and competition. Of course, they may not immediately take advantage of it. Any parent of a teen knows that, "fine" is often the go-to answer when we ask how practice went or how they are feeling. That may leave you feeling frustrated and confused. How can you help your teen athlete if they won't talk?

Schedules, time constraints, and moods can add to the challenge, making it feel impossible to find the right time to broach difficult topics. Know that there is no perfect time, and it isn't a one-time conversation. Small interactions can be every bit as meaningful, especially for providing consistent connection and support so they will rely on you when the bigger moments come.

Here are 12 tips for talking to your teen athlete about their mental health.





1. Be Genuine

Teens know when their parents are uncomfortable or anxious. If you aren't sure how to start, you're worried about how they will react, or are just plain new at this, own it. Say something like, "This is hard for me to talk about and I'm not sure how to start, but I want us to be able to talk about things—even the ones that are difficult to say out loud."

Once you get the conversation started, be direct and simple: "I know this is a hard time for all of us, and I want to make sure I can support you in anything you need help with. Can we talk about how things are going for you?"



2. Connect Over the Sport Your Teen Enjoys

Contrary to popular belief, the trip home after games or practice is not always the best place to talk to your athletes. They may look forward to the car, bus, subway, or walk home as a place to decompress and listen to music after an intense practice or event.

Engaging in an activity while talking is a good way to break the tension. Passing a soccer ball, throwing a softball, bumping a volleyball, shooting baskets, or simply going on a walk can be effective, because you're not face to face and the physical exercise reduces stress. You can also talk while playing cards or video games, baking or cooking, or any other activity your teen enjoys.



3. Provide Effort-Based Feedback

Athletes can take a bad performance or loss hard. Take time to listen so you understand what they are feeling and validate those feelings. Avoid adding to their distress by criticizing their performance. Instead, look for positives and praise their effort instead of the results. Be specific in this praise by saying things such as, “I noticed you really hustled to make that tackle, even when your team was down by three goals. I really appreciated that effort.”

Use the Positive Coaching Alliance’s [resource database](#) to learn more about being a Second-Goal Parent and helping your athlete learn the life lessons sports provide.



4. Check in With Your Athlete

Take time to check in with your teen about their sports experience. Is the pressure too much? Do they still enjoy playing? Do they feel like they are part of the team? Validate their feelings and provide them support in their choices, even if you disagree.



5. Get Comfortable With Silence

It takes time to process information or questions about mental health, particularly if it isn’t something your family discusses often. Give your athlete time to think. Interrupting a silence because you’re uncomfortable may actually prevent them from sharing their thoughts. Give them a few minutes, and then follow up to acknowledge how difficult it is to talk. Say, “I know this is hard to talk about, but the more we talk about it, the easier it will get.”





6. Share Observations and Ask Open-Ended Questions

Just asking your teen if they're OK won't get you far, because they can easily answer with a quick, "Yes," or, "I'm fine," and return to whatever they were doing. If you've noticed changes that worry you, be direct about it. Try something like, "I noticed you're doing/not doing [behavior] lately, and I wonder if that's related to stress, anxiety, depression, or something else." That way you communicate that you are connected, paying attention, and ready to help. It also requires more than a one-word answer, which helps launch a real conversation.



7. Take Your Teen Seriously

You may not relate to the struggles your teen athlete is having, but it matters to them if they share it with you. Do your best to listen and really consider what they say. Approach these interactions with empathy, and aim to understand their perspective and affirm that you believe them.

When teens mention [self-injury](#) or [suicide](#), it can be really scary to hear. You may feel the urge to downplay those concerns out of your own fear. Resist it. The good news is that they are sharing these thoughts with you, which means they are open to help and you can [help them find it](#).

[Find out how to get help.](#)



8. Use a Simple Rating Scale

It can be difficult for teens to put words to feelings when they feel overwhelmed, but starting with a simple check-in can help. Try asking for a number: “On a scale of one to 10, with 10 indicating that your mental health is really good and one indicating that you’re struggling to even get out of bed and to school each day, where would you rate your overall mental health right now?”

That opens the door to talking about how they feel each day. If they rate themselves between eight and 10, talk about what that feels like and what strategies help them stay in that zone. If they rate themselves between five and seven, say, “It sounds like some days are better than others and you’re having some struggles right now. I can understand that. Do you need support or solutions right now?” If they rate themselves a three or four, chances are they need some help. Acknowledge how difficult it must be by saying, “That sounds hard. It must feel like a challenge to get through the day at times. Let’s think about some ways we can get some support for you.”

If your teen rates themselves a one or two, seek a [licensed mental health professional](#).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Seek a licensed mental health professional.		Chances are they need some help. “Let’s think about some way we can get some support for you.”		“Some days are better than others... I understand that.” Ask if they need support or solutions right now.			Talk about what it feels like. Discuss strategies to help them stay in this zone.		

Learn [how to find affordable mental health care](#).

If you are concerned your teen is considering suicide, it’s helpful to ask them directly. It won’t put the idea in their head, but it may make them feel some relief that you see how much they are hurting. Here’s a [guide to making that conversation easier](#).



9. Offer Other Support Systems and Share Crisis Resources

Not all teen athletes feel comfortable discussing their mental health with their caregivers. That doesn't mean they're not close to you or don't trust you; it just means they need someone else to talk to.

Offer a school counselor or therapist, other trusted family members, or local or online youth support groups. You can also ask if you can talk to their coach to ensure a network of support extends to their team.

- At [TeenLine](#), teens can get support from trained peer counselors by texting TEEN to 839-863 every day from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. PT (9 p.m. to midnight ET).
- [The Trevor Project](#) supports LGBTQIA+ youth. Text START to 678-678 or call 866-488-7386 or [chat with them directly on their website](#).
- [Trans LifeLine](#) offers 24/7 support for the trans community when you call 877-565-8860.

If you are worried your teen athlete is in crisis, give them phone numbers where they can reach trained support staff for a confidential conversation.

- Text HOME to 741-741.
- Call or text the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 or use the chat function at [988lifeline.org](#) to talk with a trained counselor at any time.

You can also reach out to these resources for support on how to help your teen.



10. Don't Push

Your athlete may insist they're fine even when you see signs that they aren't. Resist the urge to prove you know they're struggling, since that will make them more likely to insist nothing is wrong. It's better to keep checking in and stay curious. If your teen athlete has a difficult day, give them time to relax first and follow up by saying, "It seems like today was hard. I'm here if you need to vent. I won't offer solutions, unless you want me to. I can just listen."



11. Stay Open and Calm

It's not always easy to hear things your athlete is struggling with, especially if they touch on areas that worry you. This is an emotionally tough time for them, so they may not always share what's going on with them in a calm, constructive way. Sometimes they act out to get our attention, and it can be really hard not to react in anger.

We know teens open up when they feel connected, respected, and supported, so do what you can to stay calm and nonreactive during the conversation. Some deep breaths can help. If you still feel agitated or worried, it's OK to let them know you need a minute to calm down because this is emotional for you too. That's great emotional modeling for them. You're demonstrating that you can take space to regroup when you feel overwhelmed by emotions.



12. Keep the Conversation Going

Don't worry about having all the answers right away. Talking about mental health is an opportunity to learn together. The important thing to remember is that each conversation builds on the previous one. Once you get into the habit of talking about mental health with your athlete, it will become a much easier conversation to return to as needed.

And remember to talk about the good times they are having and connect with them around the things they like to do. They will be more likely to share when things are hard if you've shown interest when things are going well.





About The Jed Foundation

The Jed Foundation (JED) is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults. We partner with high schools and colleges to strengthen their mental health, substance misuse, and suicide prevention programs and systems. We equip teens and young adults with the skills and knowledge they need to help themselves and each other. We encourage community awareness, understanding, and action for young adult mental health. **Learn more and access resources at jedfoundation.org.**

About Positive Coaching Alliance

PCA's vision is to build a world where youth benefit from a positive sports experience with a coach who inspires them to become the best version of themselves in the game and in life. We train coaches and partner with youth sports organizations, parents, sports leaders, and communities to make youth sports more positive, equitable, and accessible to all kids regardless of social or economic circumstances. **For more information, go to positivecoach.org.**