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WHITE PAPER

WHY WAIT UNTIL SOMETHING IS WRONG?

The Case for Proactive Mental Performance Care

Most people do not wait for a cavity to become unbearable before seeing a dentist. We schedule routine dental visits because prevention, monitoring, and early identification are part of taking care of our health. We understand that addressing a small concern today can be easier than managing a larger problem later.

Yet when it comes to mental performance, we often operate differently.

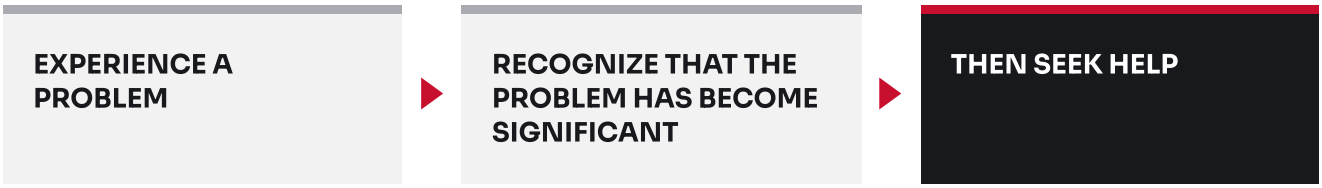
Athletes, coaches, and high performers may wait until something is noticeably wrong before reaching out for support. A performance slump becomes difficult to escape. Stress accumulates. Confidence continues to decline. Sleep becomes disrupted. Motivation disappears. A difficult transition becomes overwhelming. Only then does sitting down with a mental performance or mental health professional begin to feel necessary.

But what if we approached psychological health and performance more proactively?

Mental performance sessions do not have to be reserved for moments of crisis. Regular contact with qualified professionals can create opportunities to strengthen psychological skills, recognize changes in well-being, reflect on current stressors, and identify concerns before they become more disruptive. Just as physical training is most effective when it occurs consistently rather than only after performance declines, psychological skills can also be developed through intentional and ongoing practice.

MOVING FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE CARE

The traditional model of mental performance support has often been reactive: experience a problem, recognize that the problem has become significant, and then seek help.



The traditional model of mental performance support

There is an important place for this type of care. However, sport psychology increasingly emphasizes prevention, early identification, and ongoing mental well-being work alongside treatment.

The question does not always need to be, “Is something wrong enough that I need help?” A better question may be, “How would my performance benefit from regularly checking in on my performance and well-being?” Regular touchpoints create opportunities to monitor changes, reinforce healthy behaviors, and catch potential concerns early.

Mental performance support can serve a similar purpose. There is not currently evidence establishing that athletes should attend mental performance sessions every six months specifically. The principle, however, is valuable: do not make a problem the prerequisite for checking in.

DO NOT MAKE A PROBLEM THE PREREQUISITE FOR CHECKING IN.

MENTAL SKILLS ARE SKILLS, AND SKILLS REQUIRE PRACTICE

Athletes rarely expect physical abilities to improve after a single training session. Strength develops through repeated exposure. Technical skills improve through practice, feedback, adjustment, and repetition.

Mental performance skills are no different.

Goal setting, attentional control, emotional regulation, confidence, imagery, self-talk, mindfulness, and other psychological skills are commonly included within psychological skills training. These are not simply strategies to pull out when something goes wrong. They are capabilities that can be developed and practiced over time.

A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis examined psychological interventions designed to improve performance among competitive athletes, reflecting the growing body of research evaluating psychological training as part of athletic preparation (Reinebo et al., 2024). More recently, Zhao et al. (2026) synthesized 61 reviews representing more than 42,000 participants and found generally positive estimates across several psychological skills training approaches, including mindfulness, imagery, perceptual-cognitive training, and multi-component interventions. The authors cautioned that the certainty of much of the evidence remains low because studies vary considerably in quality, populations, interventions, and outcomes; however, the positive estimates found are an encouraging step to highlight the importance of ongoing and proactive mental performance training (Zhao et al., 2026).

61
reviews

42,000+
participants

Mental performance work should not become another box to check or another quota athletes feel obligated to meet. Instead, the research supports a broader principle: psychological skills can be intentionally trained, and meaningful development generally involves more than simply learning a strategy once.

Knowing a breathing technique is different from being able to use it before a high-pressure moment. Understanding what productive self-talk sounds like is different from recognizing an unhelpful thought pattern in real time. Knowing that attention matters is different from being able to redirect attention with seconds remaining in competition.

Consistent mental performance work provides opportunities to move from knowing a skill to using it.

REGULAR CONTACT CREATES OPPORTUNITIES TO NOTICE CHANGE

There is another benefit to proactive support that extends beyond performance enhancement: it creates opportunities to notice when something is changing.

Problems rarely appear at full intensity overnight.

Stress may gradually increase. Sleep may slowly deteriorate. Confidence may become less stable. An athlete may begin withdrawing socially, losing enjoyment in sport, becoming more irritable, struggling to recover from mistakes, or feeling increasingly overwhelmed by expectations.

Individually, these changes may seem manageable. Over time, however, small changes can accumulate.

Regular conversations with a qualified professional create repeated opportunities to establish a baseline and notice movement away from it. Research on routine outcome monitoring in psychotherapy supports the value of repeatedly assessing how someone is doing rather than relying only on a single snapshot (Lambert et al., 2018). The application to proactive mental performance care is not that every athlete requires psychotherapy or continuous clinical monitoring. Rather, regular contact gives athletes and professionals more opportunities to recognize meaningful changes.

When you know someone's baseline, it can be easier to recognize when something has shifted.

CATCHING THE SNOWBALL BEFORE IT GETS BIGGER

A small snowball is easier to stop than one that has been rolling downhill for a long time.

Mental performance concerns can operate similarly. Routine screening and surveillance can help identify athletes who may benefit from further evaluation and support, while early intervention may reduce the likelihood that certain concerns become persistent or more debilitating (Reardon et al., 2026).

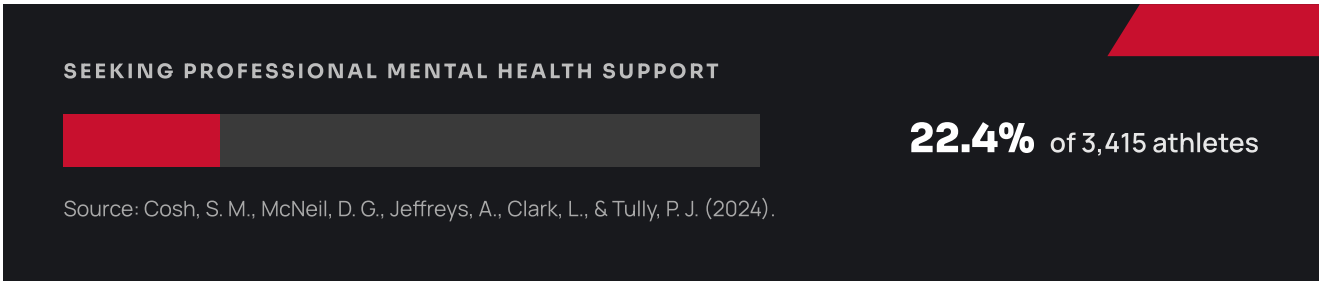
Regular mental performance conversations can also create a pathway to appropriate care when concerns extend beyond performance psychology. A mental performance professional working within their scope may recognize that an athlete's difficulty concentrating is no longer simply about focus during competition, or that changes in motivation, mood, sleep, anxiety, or functioning warrant evaluation by a licensed mental health professional.

The objective is not to turn normal struggles into diagnoses. It is the opposite. The goal is to create enough awareness and access that athletes do not have to wait until distress becomes overwhelming before they feel permitted to talk about it. Early support creates more options.

ATHLETES STILL ARE NOT REACHING OUT ENOUGH

This proactive approach becomes particularly important when we look at how frequently athletes actually seek professional support.

A systematic review and meta-analysis examining athlete help-seeking included 22 studies. Across studies that measured formal help-seeking, involving 3,415 athletes, the pooled rate of seeking professional mental health support was only 22.4 percent (Cosh et al., 2024). In other words, fewer than one in four athletes across the included studies had formally sought mental health support.



The researchers identified several barriers, including stigma, concerns about confidentiality, fear related to team selection, low mental health literacy, negative attitudes toward services, and elements of sport culture itself. Importantly, seeing other athletes model help-seeking emerged as a potential facilitator (Cosh et al., 2024).

This suggests that access alone is not enough. We also need to change what reaching out represents. If scheduling a session communicates, "Something must be seriously wrong," athletes may naturally hesitate. If scheduling a session instead communicates, "I take my mental performance and psychological well-being seriously," the meaning changes. Proactive engagement helps make psychological support part of preparation rather than evidence of a problem.

IF SCHEDULING A SESSION COMMUNICATES

"Something must be seriously wrong"

IF SCHEDULING A SESSION INSTEAD COMMUNICATES

"I take my mental performance and psychological well-being seriously"

CONSISTENCY MATTERS, BUT THERE IS NO MAGIC NUMBER

So, how often should someone be meeting with a professional?

Science does not currently provide a universal answer, and frequency should depend on the individual's goals, needs, current challenges, type of service, and recommendations of the professional involved.

Research from psychotherapy helps illustrate why simply prescribing a certain number of sessions can be misleading. A systematic review of 26 studies found evidence of a dose-response relationship between psychological treatment and improvement, but the amount of therapy associated with improvement varied substantially across settings, populations, and outcomes. The review found that treatment courses in routine settings ranged broadly from approximately 4 to 26 sessions, and that more frequent sessions appeared to accelerate improvement in some contexts (Robinson et al., 2020).

The goal is not arbitrary attendance. It is creating an ongoing relationship with psychological skills, self-awareness, and support.

THE PERFORMANCE BENEFIT OF CHECKING IN BEFORE YOU NEED TO

There is a fundamental difference between trying to build a skill during a crisis and having practiced that skill before the crisis arrives.

Imagine waiting until the championship game to begin training your cardiovascular fitness. Or waiting until an injury occurs to learn proper movement mechanics. We would recognize immediately that the timing is backwards.

Yet psychologically, athletes often do exactly this.

They wait until confidence disappears to work on confidence. They wait until anxiety becomes overwhelming to develop regulation strategies. They wait until burnout is approaching to discuss boundaries and recovery. They wait until they cannot stop thinking about mistakes to work on attentional control.

Proactive mental performance work allows skills to be developed when there is enough psychological space to experiment, reflect, practice, and adjust.

Then, when adversity arrives, the athlete is not encountering the strategy for the first time.

They have practiced it, and are ready to perform.

MENTAL PERFORMANCE AS PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE

Perhaps the most useful shift is to stop thinking about mental performance sessions exclusively as treatment for problems.

They can also be maintenance.

A session can be a place to examine what is working. It can help an athlete understand current attentional patterns, prepare for an upcoming challenge, identify stressors, strengthen psychological skills, reflect on recent performances, or simply establish a baseline for how they are doing.

Sometimes the outcome of a proactive check-in may simply be: things are going well.

That is not a wasted session.

That is information.

And when something has changed, identifying it sooner creates an opportunity to respond sooner.

DO NOT WAIT FOR THE PROBLEM

We schedule physicals. We go to the dentist. We perform preventative maintenance on equipment. Athletes complete preseason screenings, strength assessments, movement evaluations, and recovery testing.

The common principle is simple: we check important systems before they fail.

Our psychological health and performance deserve the same attention.

Proactive mental performance sessions cannot guarantee that an athlete will never experience anxiety, burnout, loss of confidence, performance struggles, or mental health concerns. Nor should performance psychology replace appropriate mental health treatment when clinical concerns are present.

What proactive support can do is create opportunities for awareness, skill development, monitoring, conversation, and early intervention.

Mental performance is not something we need to address only when it breaks down. Like every other part of performance, it is something we can intentionally train, monitor, and maintain. You do not need to be struggling to benefit from support. Sometimes the best time to build the skills you will need later is before you need them.

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