



# Creating Authentic and Open Conversations with Your Athletes

## Opening the Lines of Communication

Today's youth experience stressors from a variety of sources, including their peers, family, school and social media.

Anxiety relating to these areas can quickly accumulate and become overwhelming for many adolescents if they don't have a safe outlet to work through them.

Within sport, coaches can help to create this safe space by talking openly about mental and emotional health and building these conversations into daily and weekly practice.

By adopting this proactive approach to mental health and wellness, you will help your athletes develop tools that will enable them to become healthy and resilient adults.

# Tips for Coaches:



## Be Present, Curious and Open

Let them know you are a person they can talk to about the good, the bad and everything in between.

## Start by Having Conversations About Neutral Topics

Talk about a tv show/movie/book they like or an event they have recently attended (like a concert or a vacation).



Encouraging someone to talk about the tough stuff takes time, but establishing a foundation of trust on a neutral topic will let your athlete know you are there for them.

## Ask Open vs Direct Questions

A direct question can sometimes be intimidating to answer. Consider reframing your questions so that your athletes can respond in a more open-ended and descriptive manner. For example:



**Direct** – “How was school today?”

**Open-ended** - “What was something that made you smile today?” or “What was one new thing you learned today?”.

## Reflect on Your Own Views of Mental Health

Pay attention to the way you feel and react to stories of mental health in the media or around you.



Be mindful of how you talk - refrain from using words & phrases like “that’s crazy”, “calm down” or “it’s no big deal”.

Regardless of your opinion, the feelings being experienced by your athlete are very real and deserve to be validated.

## Remember the Rule of Two



Whether an email trail or closed-door meeting, avoid a 1-1 interaction. Include another coach or teammate on an email trail, or have your conversation out on the field where you are observable by others.

## Actively Listen



Don't pretend to 'get' something if you don't. It's better to ask for clarification when needed, and your athlete will appreciate your honesty.

Demonstrate empathy. You can validate their experience by saying something like, "Wow, that does sound difficult."

## Active Listening Game - Try It!

Improve your listening skills by trying the 'Last Word First Word' improv game with a friend or small group:

- Have the first person start the story by stating the first sentence or two.



The next person then has to start their sentence (or two) with the last word of the previous person's last sentence. Go back and forth if in pairs, or down the line if in a group, until the story is complete.

- People have a tendency to start thinking about how they want to respond to someone before their conversation partner has even finished talking, which means they are not actively listening.
- This exercise encourages participants to practice their active listening skills and pay attention right to the end of each person's turn.

## References & Resources

Kids Help Phone, "How to have an open conversation with a young person", 2021. [KidsHelpPhone.ca/get-involved/programs-resources/open-conversation-young-person/](https://KidsHelpPhone.ca/get-involved/programs-resources/open-conversation-young-person/)

[KidsHelpPhone.ca](https://KidsHelpPhone.ca)

[Sick Kids – AboutKidsHealth.ca](https://AboutKidsHealth.ca)

