



WELLNESS SCREENING GUIDELINES FOR THE SECONDARY SCHOOL ATHLETIC TRAINER

*Guidelines for implementing a wellness screening tool for the secondary
school athletic population.*

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INTRODUCTION

There is an ever-increasing emphasis on mental health across the world. Athletic trainers (ATs) in the secondary school have a unique perspective in health care that positions them to have regular and frequent interactions with their patients. As such, ATs in the secondary school must be knowledgeable, prepared and proactive in addressing any mental health concern that their patients might experience.

Each year, more research and resources are developed related to the mental health in the secondary school. In 2015, the Journal of Athletic Training published the "[Inter-Association Recommendations for Developing a Plan to Recognize and Refer Student-Athletes With Psychological Concerns at the Secondary School Level: A Consensus Statement](#)," which outlines data related to the mental health problems that secondary school-aged athletes face, behaviors that the athletic health care team should monitor, and recommendations for referral to the proper allied health care professional for treatment of such issues. In 2016 the NATA Secondary School Athletic Trainers' Committee (SSATC) published the [Emergency Action Plan Guidelines: Mental Health Emergency in Secondary School Athletes](#) document to increase the recognition and management of mental health crises within the secondary school setting. This document will focus on a specific method for monitoring behaviors specific to secondary school aged athletes throughout the school year.

RATIONALE – WHY IS THE SCREENING NECESSARY?

Throughout the course of a school year, a secondary school aged athlete may face a myriad of situations that bring about both positive and negative emotional and psychological responses. These situations may involve home life, school life, sport life, social life, or a combination of the sort. While the athletic health care team often has frequent contact with student athletes to potentially recognize these situations, oftentimes student athletes may hide or deny their emotional or psychological responses in person. Therefore, it may be advantageous of the athletic health care team to administer frequent surveys electronically to all student athletes to assist in recognizing student athletes with concerns affecting not only their athletic experience but also their general wellbeing.

EVIDENCE – WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Current research on the use of wellness screenings for athletic populations is lacking. The research available that is most appropriate to the secondary school student athlete demographic would [be the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire](#). This questionnaire identifies many of the areas of concern that could impress negative emotional or psychological responses, including sleep, concentration, mood, stress, anxiety, substance use, and school and home environment. The most important aspect of implementing a wellness screening is the sensitivity and specificity of the questions asked. It is essential the survey identify those who have a concern, and to not identify those who do not (false positives vs. false negatives).

EXAMPLES – WHAT DO WE HAVE OUT THERE SO FAR?

Currently there is no standard approach to designing a wellness screening tool. It is essential to tailor the questions to your demographic, as each school setting has a unique student population and culture. [The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire](#) is a great place to start, as it includes areas of discussion that you may wish to use to identify at-risk student athletes.

HOW TO GUIDE

The wellness screening implementation should start with designing a tool to your specific population. Here is a [sample survey](#) and [response sheet](#) that may be useful when selecting questions with high sensitivity and specificity. The response sheet can be altered so that answers indicating high risk are color coded or flagged. Here is one resource from Steve Nightingale, MSc, CSCS outlining the steps of how to set up your survey and spreadsheet using Google Forms. [Google Form Wellness Survey: A How To Video Guide](#).

Prior to initializing your tool, have a meeting with administration so they may understand your goal in implementing the wellness tool. Meet with your coaching staff and express your concerns surrounding student athlete wellness, and the need to ask specific questions in a friendly and non-hostile method. Send a letter home to parents so they are aware of what is being asked of their child.

When initiating your screening tool, you may choose to first target certain sports, teams or programs where coaches and parents have bought in to the idea so data collection is authentic. In doing so, trust is built, allowing the wellness tool to be received with a healthy attitude by all sports, teams and programs in the future.

Lastly, ensure you have the appropriate use of data collected. Responses, like all other student records must be kept confidential and shared on a need to know basis. Wellness surveys can widen the safety net for student athletes and where the academic and athletic personnel work together to aid the student's wellbeing. Survey users must regularly check responses and follow up with athletes as necessary. If an athlete is using the survey to share something, ATs must respond to keep their trust in us as health care providers. As mandatory reporters, any self-harm, abuse, or neglect shared through the survey must be reported to appropriate authorities. ATs should monitor the response rate and adjust the frequency and/or timing of survey delivery to allow not only the greatest amount of participation and feedback but also the intended data. Survey fatigue can happen when surveys are sent too frequently and surveys sent every Monday at the same time likely will yield similar responses versus a more random sampling after hard workouts, before big games, or end of semester finals etc.

Lastly, remember to utilize the [Emergency Action Plan Guidelines: Mental Health Emergency in Secondary School Athletes](#) as a guide to direct student athletes to appropriate resources as needed by their responses; the athletic trainers goal is to recognize when student athletes need help and refer to appropriate practitioners.