

Mental health - Support card

No two people with mental health problems are the same. Get to know the person, it's important to understand their motivations and usual behaviour. This will help you to spot when players may need additional support.

What is mental health?

Good mental health means generally being able to think, feel and react in the ways you need and want to live your life. But if you go through a period of poor mental health, you may find the ways you're frequently thinking, feeling or reacting become difficult, or even impossible to cope with. This can feel as bad as physical illness.

Football pathways

People with mental health problems are playing and competing at every level of mainstream, pan-disability and impairment specific football. There are also specific teams for people experiencing mental health problems.

General characteristics

- Mental health is not a static state. A player's state of mental health can fluctuate frequently on a continuum from 'excelling' to 'in crisis'.
- Common mental health problems include:
 - Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) – players with GAD may have problems with their concentration as a result of constantly feeling 'on edge'. A training location with good transport links will reduce anxiety and travel time.
 - Social Anxiety Disorder (social phobia) – players with social anxiety may have problems developing social skills, appear withdrawn, and struggle with change. Therefore, be especially aware of players coming for the first time.
 - Clinical Depression - depression has a wide range of symptoms but players may experience poor sleep, lasting feelings of unhappiness and hopelessness, and they may lose interest in activities that they used to enjoy. Be aware of significant periods of absence, and check in with players when needed. If there is a feeling of hopelessness be aware of the possibility, or any history, of self-harm, and if possible, ask directly if there are any plans to do so.
- Be aware that physical fitness of some individuals may be poor due to long periods of inactivity.
- Be aware that some medication prescribed for mental health problems may affect players' fitness levels and attentiveness. Some medications are sedating and may have side effects, including dehydration and weight gain. Some players on medication may find it easier to attend sessions later in the day rather than early morning.
- If people are unsure or worried about their physical activity levels, they should discuss this with a medical professional.
- Try to understand the player's network of support. You are not expected to be a mental health expert, so it is best practice to know any family, friends, or mental health organisations you may need to refer to. Knowing the players and their networks is important.

Coaching considerations

- Create a safe space – a positive, non-judgmental environment where everyone is accepted. Add social elements to the practice to help interaction and teamwork.
- Be patient – give players space and time to find their feet. Some players may feel uncomfortable in a group setting; allow them to adapt at their own pace or buddy them up with a trusted peer.
- Be positive, be sensitive in all your messages, interactions and use praise often to help build confidence.
- Ensure your instructions are clear and don't be worried about re-emphasizing points positively.
- Avoid overcomplicating practices to help support understanding and concentration.
- Players may tire quickly and so need shorter work intervals with rests.
- Set clear parameters and group expectations – but also have a safe space if players need to step out.
- Watch out for changes in behaviour – be ready to listen to support where you can. Knowing the individual will help here.
- Familiarize yourself with your local support services, so you can signpost out and gain further support if needed.
- Timing of session is important – afternoons often work better.
- A change of coach, venue or timings can increase anxieties for some players, so give enough notice to help manage change.



Don't forget the golden nugget – Make sure your environment is always a safe and welcoming place to be!

How do I use STEP to adapt my session to include players with mental health problems?



Space – Make the session space relatable to the game, with space to dribble, run, pass and score. Avoid stressful, over-technical practices. Make sessions fun and do not overcomplicate them with too many cones or technical detail.



Equipment – Ensure your coaching practice and set up is easy to understand, clear, and accessible. Avoid unnecessary stress, delays or clutter, and ensure there is an area to take time out if needed.



Task – Ensure all tasks are clear and have positive outcomes. Avoid unnecessary standing still, link progressions to the game, make it fun, and praise all players accordingly.



Players – Ensure a positive environment for all players. A supportive coaching culture with inclusive behaviours will help players build confidence and self-esteem.

Step top tip:

Remember: STEP is a tool to help you coach, NOT a list of things you have to do. In order to use STEP effectively, it's essential you get to know your players so you can use the right modification at the right time to aid their development.

Additional resources

- England Football Website: Disability Section
- Disability Football Introduction Course
- Mind Website
- Mental Health First Aid Courses
- FA Guidance for coaches to support players with their mental health
- Sport and physical activity for people with mental health problems: a toolkit for the sport sector
- UK Coaching: Mental Health Awareness for Sport and Physical Activity