

Athletes and the Arts®

# Mental Health in the Performing Arts



Mental health awareness has become a focus of conversation for over a decade. Much of this focus has identified the need for increased support to those who experience mental health concerns. Currently, 1-5 individuals are diagnosed with a mental illness, but far more experience a decline in their mental health at some point in their lives. Certain populations are at high risk to experience mental health concerns; one example is performing artists and athletes who have an even higher rate of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, or the misuse/abuse of substances (Kearns Davoren, & Hwang, 2014). Indeed, mental health is an overlooked aspect of the performer's overall health and optimal functioning, which might lead to underutilizing mental health treatment. Imagine if we could shift this mindset in performers and allow them to not only seek mental health treatment when experiencing a decline, but understand the dynamic of building mental wellness.

## The Mental Wellness Continuum

Mental health is a critical and often overlooked aspect of performer health and functioning. Many individuals are fearful to discuss their emotional struggles for a variety of reasons: the unknown, the stigma, and/or fear of being labeled “crazy.” It is hard to grasp the emotional turmoil an individual might struggle with because, in most cases one cannot tangibly see the pain or “injury.” However, if one was experiencing a physical injury it would be easy to seek treatment and rehab. The goal is for performers to learn to utilize resources that will build their mental health and allow them to be mentally well. Building awareness to one's emotional and mental health can shift this pattern. You might start by checking in on your mental health, seeking treatment to reduce a mental illness, and utilizing skills to build mental wellness. Performers should be encouraged to rehab their emotional and mental pain just as they would their physical pain.

## Things to Look Out For

Various studies have shown that performers are particularly vulnerable to a variety of psychological issues, including:

- performance anxiety
- depression
- stress disorders
- substance abuse
- eating disorders
- sleep problems
- perfectionism
- procrastination

These conditions become symptomatic as a result of either poor coping in response to performance challenges, or in response to other internal (psychological) or external (environmental) life stresses tied to stage of life and other developmental challenges. Any of the following signs and symptoms of mental health conditions should raise concerns and encourage a referral for professional help:

- experiencing a change in mood
- change in sleep or eating
- loss of interest in activities
- constantly feeling jittery, overwhelmed, irritable, or just plain off.

If you experience any of these, reach out to someone. Find a trusted individual and ask them to connect you to a professional who can help you improve your mental health.

It's okay to not be okay, in fact most of us aren't at some time or another! But remember there are a multitude of resources out there that can help you.



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