



THE ARMY OF SURVIVORS

TRAUMA-INFORMED ENVIRONMENT IN SPORTS

Because we know that at least 13% of athletes will experience at least one type of sexual assault or harassment in the context of sport, it means we are likely interacting with at least one athlete survivor in our work in sports. Traumatic experiences are correlated with physical health problems, impaired cognitive functioning or self regulation, as well as difficulty processing emotions. As a result, those who have experienced trauma may have an overactive stress response, meaning they will jump into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn mode faster than those who may not have experienced trauma.

We should always strive to create a trauma-informed environment so we give athletes who have experienced trauma a place to thrive. In order to do so, here are eight actionable steps that can be taken in order to create a more trauma-informed environment for athletes:

1. CREATE STRUCTURE

A key to creating a trauma-informed environment is creating structure for athletes. Often, sports have a built-in structure that allows the opportunity for consistency across practices. By creating a consistent structure, we can make sure to eliminate the stress for athletes of not knowing what is going to happen next. This can look like always starting with a warm-up routine, sharing the practice plan with the team, and reminding everyone what's coming next.

2. HOLD TEAM CHECK-INS AT THE BEGINNING AND END OF PRACTICE

Creating time to check in with athletes before and after practice allows you to better understand where they are at mentally and physically. This is also a great time to check in on athletes that may have injuries so you know what they should or shouldn't attempt in practice that day. It is also a great time to ask for feedback. This can be as simple as walking around and having individual conversations with athletes as they are preparing or packing up. It could also be more formal like sitting in a circle and sharing with the whole team.

3. ASK FOR FEEDBACK OFTEN AND WITHOUT REPERCUSSIONS

By allowing athletes to give you feedback about what they like or dislike about practice, you give them the power to influence their environment. This also gives you different ideas on how you can coach more effectively, and what you're doing well that is resonating with the athletes. For example, ask players if they feel like practice time was effective or how the team can improve.

4. USE STRENGTH-BASED COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

By using strength-based communication, coaches focus on the strengths, opportunities, and empowerment of their athletes. This gives the young person the opportunity to begin to self-actualize what coaches see in them that they may not yet see themselves. Phrases like "great try!" "you're working so hard!" or even "WHEN we get through practice efficiently today, we can play a game," instead of "IF we get through practice efficiently" can change the athletes' outlook on themselves and the way they approach practice.

Key points to strength-based communication also include honoring self-identification by ensuring you refer to individuals in a way that reflects their identity. This means using the correct language around pronouns and names.

5. PRIORITIZE CONSENT

Always ask an athlete before touch correction is used and explain exactly where your hands will go as you are correcting them. It is important to try other forms of correction and teaching methods (like demonstrating, or talking the athletes through the correction) before considering touch correction.

If asking athletes to do exercises that require touch between athletes, always give alternatives for those who may not be willing to be touched. Additionally, explain to athletes how they should ask each other for consent during the exercise, and exactly how and where they should be coming into contact with other athletes.

6. USE PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

Using person-first language such as “athletes with disabilities” instead of “disabled athletes” is important because it centers the human first and athlete second, honoring the identity that they have outside of athletics as well. Be sure to speak specifically and in detail to allow for clear communication, saying things like “please pick up the cones” rather than “pick those up.”

7. CREATE A “RESET” ROUTINE FOR ATHLETES WHO MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING DYSREGULATION DUE TO A TRAUMA RESPONSE

Coaches often respond to negative or dysregulated behavior by asking the young athlete to remove themselves from the activity and calm down by sitting quietly. But understanding trauma, it’s important to note that this is the exact opposite of what their brain may need. Instead, rhythmic and repetitive experiences can be more soothing following a stress response than sitting. For example, coaches can play music across a PA system or incorporate rhythmic activities to help regulate the entire group. If a dysregulated athlete prefers to have a moment alone to recenter themselves, coaches may ask that young person to complete a regulating activity like going for a walk, jumping rope, or dribbling a basketball until they feel ready to rejoin the group.

8. COMMIT TO PRIORITIZING CONNECTION

According to research, intense moments of repeated connection can change the brain through what is called “therapeutic dosing.” Every coach has the opportunity to employ this method through moments of simple, human connection such as nods of acknowledgment, celebratory high-fives, or eye contact when speaking.