

# Readings for Thematic STEM Debate – Secondary 2023

14<sup>th</sup> December 2023

**Adolescents under pressure:  
Inevitable or avoidable aspect of life?**

Dear Debater,

The following statements below refer to adolescents.

**Globally, one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group.**

**Depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents.**

**The consequences of failing to address adolescent mental health conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults.**

<https://www.who.int/>

Below, you will find the link to four readings regarding '*Adolescents under pressure*'. These will help you to present your arguments and recommendations to the debate group on Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

Kindly use the following texts for your reading:

1. [https://hpd.gov.mt/hpu/mental\\_health\\_and\\_wellbeing?gclid=Cj0KCQjw\\_mvSoBhDOARIsAK6aV7jLtevDBiy7qqfavHlwutCtRe6yArndtZ4OjLxLpBrp5P0xCDN1eCYaAi33EALw\\_wcB](https://hpd.gov.mt/hpu/mental_health_and_wellbeing?gclid=Cj0KCQjw_mvSoBhDOARIsAK6aV7jLtevDBiy7qqfavHlwutCtRe6yArndtZ4OjLxLpBrp5P0xCDN1eCYaAi33EALw_wcB)
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK575986/>
3. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/a-generation-of-teenagers-who-think-stress-is-a-disorder.710812>
4. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/publications/how-manage-and-reduce-stress>

The final reading on the next page has been modified to remove some material.

# Under Pressure: Are Sports Too Intense for Young People?

Research shows that the pressure of elite sports competition is taking a heavy toll on young athletes' mental health.

*Taken from Everyday Health - July 2022.*

Byron Jamar Terry, 22, began playing recreational football at age 6. "It was fun. Yes, it was," he says. In fact, he loves the sport so much, he hasn't stopped playing since, except for when he's been injured.

For Terry, the best part of playing was having fun hanging out with friends and learning more about the sport, he says. But Terry, a rising college senior at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, admits that being a football player has had its rough patches.

In high school, he was part of a multistate champion football program. "Everything was serious — workouts, practice, and training even outside team workouts," says Terry. "It was really serious, and I wasn't progressing on the field as much as I hoped for or would have liked to. Football wasn't necessarily fun anymore." Terry felt during that rough stretch that football wasn't the safe haven it had once been for him. At one point, Terry says, the sport felt more like a job than the sport he fell in love with as a kid.

For Terry, being on such a competitive football team exacerbated his depression, a mental health condition he'd been diagnosed with in middle school after his parents divorced.

My struggles with football didn't help that much mentally," he says. "If I didn't do well with sports, then I would be sadder, and it would add to my depression." His family also moved around a lot, which worsened his depression, too. "I didn't fit in too much," says Terry. "I just felt really alone."

"Having a mental health disorder is stigmatizing," says Terry. "Athletes have to be tough, and things can't bother you because you have to be so ingrained in your sport. That's why I didn't want to tell anyone. I didn't want to alarm anyone, so people were used to seeing me as a happy-go-lucky person who was always smiling and joking around.

"You would never know because I looked so happy," he adds.

## **A wide-ranging problem**

Research shows that participation in team sports can offer several mental health benefits to kids and teens, including reduced anxiety, depression, and attention problems, according to a study with more than 11,000 participants published in June 2022 in PLoS One.

Participation in sports teams is also tied to better mental health in adulthood among kids affected by adverse events during childhood, such as domestic or sexual abuse, separation or divorce of their parents, or having a parent in jail, per a study published in May 2019 in JAMA Pediatrics. The study included nearly 10,000 participants who were in grades 7 to 12 when the study began and were ages 24 to 32 when the study ended.

So where did things go wrong for Terry and other young athletes like him? Experts believe that the challenges of elite and high-level competition sports in particular can play a role in causing or worsening depression and among young adults and even adolescents.

"There is a big debate about youth sports specialization and professionalization, where adolescent and younger athletes are asked to practice and play in a manner similar to professionals," says Ashwin L. Rao, MD, a sports medicine physician in Seattle and the team physician for University of Washington Athletics.

"This can lead to injury and burnout, and many young athletes can be turned off to this level of stress, and hence sport, at a young age. These effects and impacts are still being studied," adds Dr. Rao.

In fact, researchers are just beginning to get a handle on how pervasive mental health struggles are among elite teen and young adult athletes, says Rao, who adds that many previous studies have been focused on older adults.

An analysis of multiple scientific studies of mental health disorders among elite athletes, including young adults, published in June 2019 in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, found that the prevalence of mental health issues among the athletes ranged from 19 percent for alcohol misuse to 34 percent for anxiety and depression. Currently, experts believe this prevalence is similar to that of the general population, but more research is needed to know for sure.

### **What Is It About Elite Sports That Can Cause or Worsen Mental Health Issues?**

While team sports have been shown to be very beneficial for mental health in kids, teens, and young adults, the pressures of high-level and elite competition sports in particular can compound with other issues, such as the preexisting depression Terry had, performance pressure from parents, teachers, and peers to succeed academically and athletically, perfectionism, and unrealistic goals. Unchecked, these stressors can be dangerous and lead athletes to think they are failures if they feel they don't meet others' or their own expectations. Worst of all, they often won't share how these pressures are destroying them.

"If you ask an athlete if they're depressed, we think they're going to try to give you an answer you want to hear," warns Eugene Hong, MD, the chief physician executive with Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) Physicians and MUSC Health, and a professor of orthopedics and family medicine at MUSC in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. He formerly served as the team physician for athletes in all major sports at Drexel University, Philadelphia University, and Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

One reason? Many young athletes fear that if they speak up about having mental health problems, they won't get playing time and might not get the same opportunities as if they hadn't admitted these struggles, says Dr. Hong.

This is especially problematic because athletes have unique risk factors for depression, Hong says. They risk injury every time they play, and those injuries can take them out of the game temporarily or be career-ending, causing them to feel isolated.

"We all have aspects of self-identity, but the concept of athletic self-identity is very important," says Hong.

In fact, some athletes' toughest moments may be when they leave the sport, either voluntarily or due to injury. The aforementioned analysis published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine found that 16 percent of former athletes had feelings of distress, and 26 percent of athletes had anxiety and depression.

Terry's darkest moments came when he tore his meniscus and needed knee surgery, as well as when he injured his hip.

"One of the hardest things I ever had to do was watch people I know and people in general play football and everyone giving them their props while I sat at home and watched it on TV and social media," Terry explains. "It hurt me so much. I didn't even really want to watch college football very much or go to any of my university's football games because of the mental toll it would take on me. As time went along, I learned to deal with it better, but it still hurt."

Another reason experts say high school and college athletes struggle with mental health issues is the time demands of being a student athlete.

"A Division 1 college athlete might spend 40 hours a week on their sport on top of their academics. The time pressure alone can be overwhelming," says Hong.

What's more, the environment in which athletes live and compete is very complex because of the internal and external pressures they face every day.

"Athletes have a complicated, high-performance mindset and have high expectations of themselves because of their abilities," says the gold medal-winning Paralympic athlete Cheri Blauwet, MD, who is now a sports medicine physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

"That in and of itself makes it difficult for athletes to have self-empathy. So, they may struggle for some time and not seek or receive the help they need," Dr. Blauwet adds.

### **How Do We Stop the Pattern?**

"On the one hand, athletes are so resilient and do incredible things. On the other hand, athletes are so fragile and we need to take care of them," says Emily Clark, PsyD, a licensed clinical psychologist and the associate director of mental health services for the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

The good news? Research shows that evidence-based treatment for mental health works: Medication and psychotherapy can help people manage and improve symptoms of various mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety.

But experts say we need to change our approach to keeping athletes and everyone else mentally healthy. Because many athletes still don't know that they can — and should — seek help, they miss out on early intervention and potentially even prevention, says Dr. Clark.

"We need to normalize mental illness or [mental] struggle, to allow athletes to feel comfortable seeking and receiving help," says Rao.

Clark has very specific ways of helping her athletes avoid long-term mental health issues. The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee now uses two recently developed mental health recognition tools, which are short-answer questions to help them assess whether the 4,500 athletes they regularly work with are at risk for or already experiencing mental health issues.

The athletes also attend educational programs to help them understand and become aware of mental health issues so they can learn to recognize the signs and symptoms and know when they need to seek help, ideally before a crisis. For instance, Clark says she helps athletes learn to differentiate the signs and symptoms of clinical anxiety from ordinary, everyday anxiety, because sometimes it can be normal for athletes to feel sadness or fatigue.

### **From Secrecy to Speaking Out: How Terry Bounced Back**

Terry's life began turning around once he confided in his college coaches about his depression.

"They worked with me on it. They told me if I had to go home and see my therapist that it was okay," says Terry. "I got the sense that they understood or had an idea of what I was going through mentally.

"What also helped me get out of my funk and helped me deal with my mental health struggles was leaning on my faith, seeing a therapist, and connecting with other athletes and regular people dealing with the same mental health struggles and hearing their mental health stories," says Terry, adding that he journals about his struggles online for Medium.

Terry has also found it rewarding to coach fifth and sixth graders, as well as high school kids, in football. "I try to be a role model by showing good character, hard work, and leadership," he says. "I also want them to know I care about them beyond their sport."

These days, Terry says he's successfully managing his mental health challenges. He says he wishes he had told people around him about his mental health struggles sooner. "It would have made more of a difference," Terry says.

"It's okay to not be okay, and it's okay to reach out for help," he adds.