

Chapter 8

Trauma–Sensitive and Responsive Coaching

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the prevalence and impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on today's youth. Information related to the impact of previous trauma and sports-related trauma on youth athletes is discussed. The benefits of sports and physical activity in combatting the effects of trauma are presented. Information about trauma-informed models, pedagogies, and coaching practices are presented in order to highlight the importance of awareness and implementation of trauma-sensitive coaching pedagogies to help youth athletes including those who have been impacted by trauma or ACEs thrive.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the importance of trauma-sensitive athletic coaches, and introduces several pedagogical approaches and practices from educational settings and existing coaching models that athletic coaches can implement for their trauma-exposed athletes. Initially, recent statistics related to trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are presented. Less information is known about the prevalence of ACEs for student athletes, but available literature suggests athletes are not immune to the negative effects of ACEs and other traumatic events. Additionally, sports-related injuries and concussions can impose new trauma on athletes, impacting their mental health, emotional well-being, and identity. At the same time that recent research suggests athletes may be at risk for negative effects of trauma and

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ACEs, ample research also documents many benefits associated with sports and physical activity on cognitive and academic performance, as well as mental and social-emotional health of youth. Thus, remaining active in athletics can improve the health and well-being of young athletes. Coaches and other professionals involved in sports who are aware and engaged have the opportunity to help athletes heal and thrive. To that end, this chapter addresses the importance of awareness and implementation of trauma-sensitive coaching pedagogies.

The objectives of this chapter are for the reader to be able to:

1. Describe the characteristics of trauma-impacted athletes.
2. Describe statistics related to trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) for today's youth.
3. Describe the benefits of sport and physical activity on cognitive performance and mental and social-emotional health.
4. Describe the importance of trauma-sensitive and -responsive athletic coaching.
5. Describe the attributes and characteristics of trauma-sensitive and -responsive athletic coaching.

BACKGROUND

Today's youth are exposed to traumatic events at high rates, and the symptoms associated with trauma present differently across individuals. Trauma can have lasting adverse effects on individuals' physical, mental, and emotional health. Yet, individuals in positions of leadership such as athletic coaches have the ability to aid their athletes by implementing trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive coaching practices. A trauma-informed coach realizes the prevalence of trauma and recognizes symptoms associated with trauma in today's youth. Trauma-sensitive coaches build trusting, authentic, and positive relationships with their athletes, create and maintain open lines of communication, and intentionally build safe environments so as to actively prevent re-traumatization. Establishing this type of environment may require changes to current practice, and trauma-sensitive coaches change and adapt their practices accordingly, frequently reflecting and creating a system of continual improvement. While trauma-informed coaches have a working understanding of trauma, they also realize they do not replace professional mental health workers, and realize their duty to inform and involve such professionals when the situation arises. This chapter introduces additional information about trauma-informed practices for athletic coaches.

TRAUMA AND ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACES)

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (2020, para. 1), a traumatic event "is a shocking, scary, or dangerous experience that affects someone emotionally." Traumatic events include natural disasters, accidents, illness, abuse, or assault (Perry, 2007). Related, an adverse childhood experience (ACE) is a potentially traumatic event that occurs in children under 18 that can include events of violence, abuse, growing up in a family with mental health or substance use problems, or experiencing the death of a family member; and can result in longer term mental and physical health problems (CDC, 2020). Several large scale survey studies show that between half and two-thirds of today's population self-report the minimum of one ACE in the first 18 years of their lives (CDC, 2020; Felitti et al., 1998).

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