RAISING TRAUMA AWARENESS IN SPORT

U.S. CENTER FOR SAFESPORT
CHAMPION RESPECT. END ABUSE.

What Is Trauma?

We experience trauma when a shocking, scary, or life-threatening event (or series of events) overwhelms our ability to cope. Our bodies and minds stay on high alert even when we are no longer experiencing the event. The constant stress caused by trauma harms our bodies. We may have headaches, stomach pain, and difficulty sleeping. Trauma stress can also change our brains. It can affect our memory, concentration, and judgement.

The Connection Between Trauma and Sport

If you are part of a sport community, it is likely that you are coaching, training, or playing with someone who has experienced trauma.

In the U.S. Center for SafeSport's **2024 Athlete Culture and Climate Survey**, we found that approximately:

- 78% of athletes have experienced behaviors related to emotional harm and neglect while in sport.
- 35% of athletes have experienced physical harm or the threat of physical harm.
- 11% of athletes have experienced unwanted sexual contact or sexually explicit behavior.

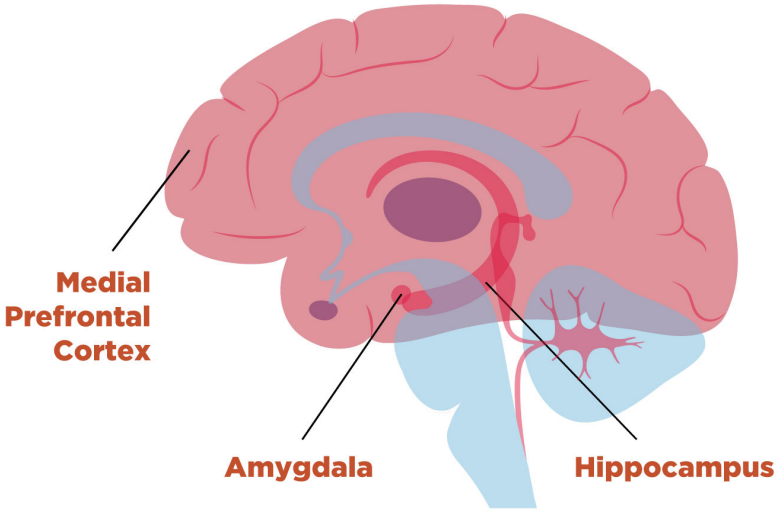
Athletes who experience this type of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse may develop trauma responses. One study reported that athletes who experience abuse within sport are twice as likely to report a mental health issue. Athletes may also experience trauma outside of sport. Understanding the effects of trauma on the brain can help you support mental and physical health in sport and beyond.

How Trauma Affects the Brain

Trauma can affect brain structure and function. It influences our behavior, memory, emotions, judgement, and physical health. Areas of the brain affected by trauma include the:

- **Amygdala**, which helps us sense threats and control our emotions. It prepares us to react in dangerous or stressful situations by releasing hormones, like adrenaline.
- **Hippocampus**, which helps us remember, learn, and process emotions. It also holds our long-term memories.
- **Medial prefrontal cortex**, which helps us evaluate situations and decide an appropriate response.

When we remember how an event made us feel, it is a result of the connection between our amygdala and hippocampus. Trauma causes the amygdala to become *hypervigilant*. Our brains enter a state where they are preparing to react to potentially dangerous situations. This may result in trauma-related responses and reflexes that aren't intentional. Instead, they are driven by our brain's instinct to protect us.



Trauma disrupts the connection between the amygdala and the hippocampus. It can interfere with the hippocampus's ability to recall long-term memories. Traumatic stress also affects the hippocampus by making it hard for us to tell what is past or present.

We may feel like a past traumatic event is happening in the present moment. Someone dealing with a trauma may not be able to remember the details of the traumatic event or they may remember it in fragments—meaning out of chronological order. Fragmented memories one way we might process traumatic events.

A hypervigilant amygdala also makes it more difficult for the prefrontal cortex to judge threats and figure out what response is needed. Imagine an athlete screaming and yelling because of a change to the laundry detergent for their uniform. From the outside, this may seem like an overreaction. But smells and other environmental cues can be triggers for someone who has experienced trauma. The new detergent may remind them of a location related to their trauma.

Signs of Trauma

There is no one way and no right way to respond to trauma. Every person's response reflects their individual experience with trauma. Even people who experience the same traumatic event may have different responses. Youth, especially younger children, may also respond to trauma differently than adults.

Younger children below age 6 may:

- Regress developmentally, for example wetting the bed after being toilet trained
- Act out their trauma
- Become unusually clingy with parents and other adults

Signs of trauma for older children, teens, and adults include:

- Feeling anxious, fearful, angry or irritable
- Having sleeping difficulties, like nightmares or insomnia
- Having a hard time concentrating
- Isolating themselves from family and friends
- Experiencing physical pains, like headaches and stomachaches
- Being easily startled

Neuroplasticity and Recovering from Trauma

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to form new connections that help it learn, grow, and take on new challenges. It is also connected to how trauma reshapes our brain. The trauma response repeatedly activates the parts of our brain dealing with threat and survival. Over time, they make connections and become more isolated from the rest of the brain.

When we experience trauma, it may feel like our brain is stuck in these trauma patterns—but neuroplasticity offers us hope of change and recovery. We can rewire our brains by consistently making small changes to how we think and behave.

If you have experienced trauma, it is important to know that what happened to you does not define you.

You and your brain are strong and capable of resiliency. Consider talking to a therapist about ways to rewire your brain. There are many types of trauma therapies that can help survivors create new patterns of behavior, such as reframing past experiences, learning to react differently to triggers, and incorporating strategies to reduce symptoms like anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

How Knowledge of Trauma Can Help Athletes

Learning about how trauma shapes our brains helps us recognize how it can affect an athlete's performance, behavior, and interactions. It also highlights the importance of building trauma-sensitive sport environments where we behave as if anyone we are working with could have experienced trauma. This helps create inclusive sport environments where every athlete can feel safe and understood.

Ways to create a trauma-sensitive sport environment:

- Learn about trauma and its signs.
- Work with athletes to identify their trauma responses and triggers.
- Have a consistent structure.
- Ask athletes about their well-being. Let them know they matter as athletes *and* people.
- Get support to deal with your own trauma, if any. These experiences can shape how we relate to and support athletes.

Contact Us

Our Process Navigators offer trauma-informed information about the Center's investigative process. We can also help you connect to resources on positive coaching, mental health, trauma, therapy, and neurodiversity. We provide services in both English and Spanish.

You can:

- **Send us an email:** process.navigators@safesport.org
- **Leave us a voicemail**: 720-531-9024

Emails and calls are usually returned during our business hours, Monday–Friday, 8 a.m. – 4 p.m. MT. We will return all messages by the end of the next business day.

This document is for educational purposes. It is meant to help explain the Center's legal documents and policies (e.g., the SafeSport Code). It does not replace or override them. The information in this document does not constitute legal or medical advice.

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