



**It's Ok to Not Be Ok:
Adjusting to Identity and Life Changes in the Adolescent Athlete/College Student**

by Amy Foster, 2021 CTI Fellow
Mallard Creek High School

This curriculum unit is recommended for:
(Target audience: Athletes - grades 11-12; Sports Medicine II & III; Can be adapted for
all students grades 11 & 12)

Keywords: Anxiety, athlete, burnout, fear of failure, identity, intention, life change, mental health, meditation, mindfulness, stress, suicide

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix I](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: Many high school athletes struggle as they transition into college. Their constantly changing identities, fear of failure, leaving environments they dominated for more competitive spaces, and the ever looming fear of injury predominates the minds of many young athletes. These concerns, when left unaddressed, can cause student athletes to develop poor coping mechanisms (e.g., substance abuse, social withdrawal), depression, anxiety, and even commit suicide. Through activities, conversations and self-exploration, students in Sports Medicine will be equipped with the tools to understand why they and their peers struggle with the challenges posed by college and how to apply mindfulness techniques to develop a healthy mindset. Students that are taught this curriculum will cover topics such as working through changes in their identity, identifying titles versus roles that they play in life, how to address an athlete's "fear of failure", and how to apply mindfulness techniques to help overcome feeling overwhelmed and lost in their new phase of life. The goal of this unit is to allow student-athletes the opportunity to realize that they are not alone in their struggles and that they are fully capable, with the appropriate tools, of navigating new landscapes successfully. Although the unit was written for student-athletes, it can easily be adapted for teachers who work largely with juniors and seniors.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 124 students in Sports Medicine I, II, & III.

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Amy Foster

Introduction

High school student-athletes are faced with increasingly higher expectations, in the hopes that their talent will turn into college scholarships and profitable professional careers. Yet, despite the hours of coaching, many student athletes are underprepared for the social and emotional demands that accompany playing at such high levels. Adolescents in general are constantly overwhelmed with the idea that college is creeping up upon them and they may not be aware or ready to handle the challenges and changes that this next phase of life brings. For student athletes, this concern is often greater. I have had the pleasure of working with all kinds of students and student-athletes in my 20+ year long career. A number of my former students had expressed that they felt as though they were not prepared for what the college experience ended up being for them.

It was believed that student athletes had higher self-esteem and more social connectedness because of their status, and that these factors were protective of mental health. However, more recent studies have shown that athletes are no less likely to experience mental illness than the general population. “With increased prevalence of mental health conditions in the general adolescent and young adult population, prevalence in student athletes is also likely increasing.” (Xanthopoulos, 2020). “The stressors of the pressure from coaches, peers and parents, injury and illness, the failure to meet perfect expectations, and the termination of their athletic career can then lead to thoughts of suicide and the willingness to participate in high risk behaviors.” (Rao, 2016).

The purpose of this unit is to help student-athletes identify their stressors and the evidence based tools that will help them cope with them. Using two texts, “What Made Maddy Run” by Kate Fagan and “The Mindful Athlete” by Greg Mumford and Phil Jackson, students will be able to read and dissect the secondhand account of a star student athlete who committed suicide and then follow up with a book on the importance of integrating mental health, awareness, and mindfulness into sports written by one of the most successful basketball coaches of all time, Phil Jackson.

At the end of this unit, students will have had the opportunity to express their feelings about their lives as athletes, good and bad, and play with the possibility of an identity shift once graduation ends and reality of the future begins. Most importantly, students will have been introduced to and the opportunity to practice life skills that they can use throughout their careers and lives.

Rationale

The mental health of our young people is something that I feel needs to be brought into the forefront of education. Even before the pandemic, our young people were struggling with life so much more than ever before. As an educator of students and student-athletes in the eleventh and twelfth who are preparing to embark on a completely new chapter of life, I have found that the stressors they experience are compound and persistent. As educators, we know that they are in no way ready to handle the stress that this life change will bring. The data and statistics show the rising cases of mental illness and suicide among this population, but we struggle with how to support them and provide them with meaningful and applicable information to carry with them as they move forward. I had lost a student, KD, to suicide early on in my teaching career, and I recall the feelings that myself and my students experienced. We were all heartbroken and devastated, but what I remember most was the shock that we all felt. None of us really recognized that she was carrying such a heavy load mentally and emotionally. As an athletic trainer and teacher, I feel like I have a unique opportunity to address the needs of student-athletes specifically, but all advanced students, who are dealing with the stress of transition in order to ease their minds and provide some comfort but most importantly encourage them to seek help.

Once I finished reading “What Made Maddy Run?” I immediately began to contemplate the struggles of my own students and student-athletes as they adjust to college life. I asked a number of former students from my 22-year teaching career to identify for me things that they wish they had been taught in high school, which would have prepared them for the mental stress and strain that they experienced in college. A few of them said that they would wish they knew it was ok to feel overwhelmed, stressed, and unfamiliar with the overall life changes of the college experience. Others had expressed that an overview of what they should expect and ways to handle this change would have been extremely beneficial. During this time, I was recalling a conversation with one of former Sports Medicine Students and Student Assistants with whom I became quite close. She had come to talk with me the summer before her senior year about how she had fared at UNC- Chapel Hill. During our conversation, she began to inform me that she had intense mental and emotional struggles in college. I was shocked. Not only because she was a high performing, driven, positive young lady with a wealth of family support, but also because she had persevered through every challenge that I had seen her face up until now. As she told me when she literally hit rock bottom, and called her mom and told her that she had admitted herself into the hospital for suicidal ideations, I immediately became overcome with emotion to think that she had contemplated ending her life. How could she have felt so alone? Why didn't anyone recognize the signs? Did she reach out for help before deciding that this was her only way out? It was at that moment that I knew that the mental health of these kids was to become something that I would always try to mention and focus on in my classroom, somehow. My girl now has a graduate degree from the University of Tennessee. She channeled her experience, and started a blog to empower women, a small business and just recently

became engaged. Not all stories have a happy ending like KD, Maddy and so many others; the pressure student-athletes face feels insurmountable.

The purpose of this unit is to provide teachers the tools and guidance to intervene and prevent student-athlete suicide as well as simply help students prepare for the change and pressures that await them in college and to give students a chance to thrive. Further, the goal of this unit is to normalize and de-stigmatize feelings that many student-athletes perceive are unique to their experience. The addition of the Social and Emotional Lessons are helpful to assist students in recognizing when to ask for help and take part in the dialogue surrounding mental health challenges among their peers with the understanding that this is becoming more common as we normalize the stigma. The mind and body connection is something that athletes understand. We can see and recognize injuries to our physical body and assess limitations on our performance, however it is not as simple when isolating the mind piece. This curriculum aims to support student and student-athletes as they face these challenges.

School Demographics

Mallard Creek High School (MCHS) is located in the Northeast Learning Community of Charlotte, NC. The school opened in 2007 and has a number of rigorous academic programs and a large number of students with dual enrollment in Central Piedmont Community College. Mallard Creek High School serviced 2373 students in 2020 with 123 full-time teachers with 97% of our teachers having 3 or more years of experience, which is higher than the 93% state average. Mallard Creek also staffs one principal, 5 assistant principals and 2 deans of students. Roughly, 65% of our students are black, and just under 12% white with 35% of our population receiving free and reduced lunch. MCHS currently staffs one career development coordinator, one social worker, one school psychologist and seven school counselors. We have 1526 students participating in Career and Technical Education tracks and a 93.4% graduation rate. Mallard Creek holds a 16:1 teacher to student ratio as compared to 12:1 in the North Carolina. At Mallard Creek, 93% of our students graduate which is above the state rate of 88%, and low-income students hold a 91% graduation rate, which is at or above the state average of 82% as reported by greatschools.org.

A large number of these students are athletes with dreams and goals of moving on to the next level. Unfortunately, the concern of whether or not they have the support they need to move on successfully and without taking a hit to their mental health is not present in school policy or curriculum. This is the very reason for the need to educate them and provide opportunities to clarify who they are and how to be content with themselves as identity changes.

Objectives

The unit is composed of two major sections. Each section is specifically geared to athletes, however it can be adapted to any and all 11th and 12th grade students if necessary.

Each of the two sections of this unit is set to take place over 5, 90-minute class periods. The first week of lessons focuses on the changing identity of athletes, while the second week is centered on using mindfulness techniques to develop a sense of calm and focus in one's life. It is important to recognize that some groups of students may need additional time to discuss and process the content from each lesson therefore, flexibility is key to ensuring that each class can apply the materials appropriately to their personal situation and more importantly that each objective is met.

It is important to note that I do not have a North Carolina Standard Course of Study for my three levels of Sports Medicine courses. Therefore, I have to create all of my lessons and materials from scratch. In this case, for this curriculum unit, I have created my own standard and objectives (see [Appendix 1](#)).

I teach three levels of Sports Medicine and have students in grades 9-12 in my classes. I have identified that this unit is appropriate for 11th and 12th grade students and I plan to teach my unit in my Sports Medicine I, II & III courses. I have a wide variety of achievement levels and types of students in my classes. I think that by reaching these students, they will also inform their peers of what we are doing and can possibly extend the content to their peers, regardless of whether or not they are athletes.

Content Research

An Athlete's Changing Identity

Athletic identity is defined as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role” (Hagiwara, 2021). This definition encompasses the psychological, emotional, and behavioral components of an athlete's self-identity. For example, as youth begin playing sports they have not yet developed an athletic identity. For example, they will say, “I play basketball.” As they become better at the game, they will transition to, “I *am* a basketball player.” Or “I *am* a baller” As they identify more and more with the athletic endeavor, they will prioritize their “baller” identity over others (i.e. being a student) and in the most extreme cases will not feel like they have any identity and thus a reason to leave if there is no athletic endeavor to pursue. As student-athletes continue to thrive in a new atmosphere, injury, burnout, the stress of overtraining and the fear of failure all contribute to their changing identity. The larger question of “Who Am I?” is one that brings about the questions of an athlete's public vs. private identity. Rebecca Symes writes that “there are two faces of identity, private identity and public identity. Private identity is concerned with how we see ourselves and is usually described as being unavailable for public scrutiny – it includes our attitudes, beliefs, feelings and emotions. Public identity on the other hand is concerned with how we think others see us, or indeed may judge us. Private and public identity are not opposite ends of the same scale, they are in fact closely aligned and this impacts our behavior, since according to role-identity theory we are likely to base our actions on how we like to see ourselves and how we like to be seen by others.”¹ In the

¹ This article explains the two sides of an athlete's identity: public and private and highlights the Athlete Identity Measurement Scale.

documentary, “The Weight of Gold” Michael Phelps, Lolo Jones, Steve Holcomb, Jeret Peterson (mother), David Boudia, and Gracie Gold explain their struggles with their own mental health and identity. Some were able to fight their way through, while others were not. This is real, and becoming a much more common occurrence than in years past and is trickling down to the high school level.

As high school students begin the college selection and admission process, students should recognize the need for dealing with feelings of anxiety, stress and the fact that an identity shift will begin to take place that can come from injury, stress, and burnout. The conversations with some of my current and former students about their transition from high school to college details the challenges and fears of meeting high expectations set by many in their supportive village. Often, dealing with these high expectations for academic and athletic success by their family, peers and supporters can create a fear of failure as their identity begins to shift and change. The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM5), states that “a mental disorder is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotional regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental process underlying mental functioning.” The definition further states that mental disorders are “usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities.” (Neal, 2015) As educators, we should be recognizing that not all of these students suffer from mental disorder, rather suffer from mental health challenges throughout their life.

In the book, “What Made Maddy Run?” Kate Fagan tells the story of Madison Holleran, Penn student and Cross Country athlete. Madison was beautiful, talented, successful – very nearly the epitome of what every young girl is supposed to hope she becomes. (Fagan, K. 2015) Her college experience was like so many others’ who either are able to battle through the pain or struggle but also those who are not able to push forward. Madison found herself in this experience of being expected to adjust to an extremely competitive lifestyle, even though she was a very competitive student-athlete through high school. Her schedule became more intense due to an increase in training requirements, higher academic expectations and rigor all while adjusting to being away from home and her familiar support network. An Ivy League school, in 2014 Penn commissioned a task force to assess how the campus climate might affect students. This report used the term “destructive-perfectionism” and observed “the drive for academic excellence along with the perception that in order to be successful one needs to hold leadership roles in multiple realms contributes to the amount of stress and distress experienced by Penn students. This last quote is essentially used to describe the “Penn Face”, which is the phrase used to describe the culture of appearing effortlessly perfect. (Fagan, 2017). I think that if I asked my students about this they would agree that this is something overwhelmingly felt by themselves and their peers in all schools, not just the Ivy League.

Madison’s shift in her identity was the cause of her distress. She began to feel as if she was no longer that perfect person. Her Instagram account was the key to her story. Madison struggled with issues of achievement, not feeling alone in her experience, with the idea of failing and not being able to adjust to college life, but most of all being unaware of what depression was. She had a family history, however her family never spoke of it and she was never a witness to how

those family members survived. The red flags were there, and it was surprising to her family and close friends to accept that she was so unhappy. This story also pointed out the strong relationship between social media and identity. What is remarkable through all of this is that her Instagram account was full of perfect photos of herself and positive posts – to find that public acceptance of perfection while fighting the struggle inside of herself. All of the perfect photos, I mean we never post a bad selfie, meaningful and insightful posts all insinuating that our lives are perfect. Madison’s story tells us that perfectionism is just something that we see and what’s really going on inside is a struggle with the very identity that we perceive on our social media accounts.

Mental health illness has increased its prevalence over the course of the last few years. Collegiate level medical professionals discussed best practices for their athletes to identify, discuss and report any health and wellness concerns. Collegiate athletes often suffer injury and/or illness. The effects of these problems can manifest in various psychological forms; stress, anxiety, depression, withdrawal, disordered eating and substance abuse (Hong, 2018). It is recommended that all returning student athletes should complete a depression-screening tool such as the Center for Epidemiological Studies – Depression (CES-D). In addition, there should be a team of professionals ready to discuss any concerns related to their mental health and wellness whenever necessary.

The organization Active Minds, a national leader for young adult mental health advocacy and suicide prevention, reports that 67% of young adults tell a friend they are struggling before anyone else and 50% of us will experience a mental health condition in our lifetime. We need to recognize that mental illness is treatable and suicide is preventable. Suicide is the number 2 cause of death among young adults (Active Minds). The fact that these young people think that suicide is the only way to end the pain, is alarming. We can support these individuals and provide support and education on how to push through with the right tools. 280 people decide not to go through with a suicide attempt for every person who dies of suicide (Active Minds). The COVID-19 pandemic has had varied effects on this age group. A survey conducted by Active Minds, reports that 89% of college students surveyed are experiencing stress or anxiety as a result of the pandemic and 56% of students reported that their daily level of physical activity has decreased or significantly decreased and 1 in 4 said that their depression significantly increased (Active Minds). I believe that if I surveyed my students the results would be similar. According to a report, the “United States Department of Health and Human Services state that suicide remains the third leading cause of death among individuals of collegiate age and the second leading cause of death among the general student population with it being the fourth leading cause of death among collegiate athletes.”(Rao, 2016).

In its 2015 [consensus statement](#), the NATA stated that many student-athletes define themselves by their identities as athletes.² Threats to that identity may come in the form of struggling performance; a chronic, career-ending, or time-loss injury; conflicts with coaches and teammates; or simply losing the passion for playing their sport (Neal, 2015). As an Athletic

² This consensus statement clarifies the use of the terms “psychological concerns” and “mental disorders” and how they are applied instead of using the term “mental illness” since only credentialed mental health care professionals have the appropriate legal authority to use that term.

Trainer, I have always been mindful of the identity piece of my athletes. I have always asked them genuinely about their day, mindset or head space. It is necessary as I do not think athletes have that check-in opportunity from their village and so it is our responsibility to give them the chance to open-up and let it out! This statement was developed for Athletic Trainers to develop a plan to help recognize potential psychological concerns in secondary-school athletes and refer them into the mental healthcare system for treatment (Neal, 2015). This statement was published after the 2013 consensus for collegiate athletes.

Throughout my research, I keep coming back to the first-hand accounts of athletes who have suffered similar identity challenges. In the documentary “The Weight of Gold”, former Olympians discuss their life after their Olympic careers. These athletes never get to experience a normal childhood, the sole focus is the Olympics, and everything else is secondary. To best recognize identity issues, we really need to understand how these athletes (and our students) feel. Our high performing students are also experiencing similar circumstances. All of these athletes feel as though performance defines them. Apollo Ohno (8-time Olympic Medalist in speed skating) mentions a fear of failure, Michael Phelps (Olympic swimmer winning 28 medals throughout his Olympic career) explains that over 80% of these athletes go through post-Olympic depression which David Boudia (2-time Olympic diving medalist) calls the “post-Olympic blues”. The loss of or shift in identity is a common theme. Phelps references his warning signs were his multiple arrests for DUIs and then his suicidal thoughts. Thankfully, he was able to get the help he needed in a treatment center for 45 days. He was lucky. Jeret “Speedy” Peterson (3-time Olympian Ariel Skier) and Steve Holcomb (2-14 Olympic Silver Medalist bobsledder) were not able to win against their struggle. Speedy’s mom indicated that he lost his identity and he was not able to handle the change. These athletes tell the tale of the loss of identity after everything they have worked for ends (The Weight of Gold, 2020).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation requires us to be present in the moment while being aware of observing ourselves nonjudgmentally while also showing compassion for ourselves. Research suggests that this practice has many benefits to both our physical and mental health. Today, we are inundated with stress and anxiety, which in turn is directly correlated to negative physical health conditions such as hypertension and heart disease. Many studies have been done to show the varying effects that mindfulness has on the body in terms of the improvement of cellular aging, decreased blood pressure, and improvements in immune system function. Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced this practice at the University of Massachusetts in 1982 and developed the multi-week course in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).³ As we apply this type of focus to our life, it creates a positive effect on neuroplasticity⁴. One of the most applicable and relevant effects of mindfulness meditation are the effects to mental health. “Researchers found that going through mindfulness meditation programs (including Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and other mindfulness meditations)

³ Jon Kabat-Zinn Zinn applied the basic principles of mindfulness meditation to patients in a medical setting and his work developing the MBSR program proved effective in helping alleviate the suffering of chronic and previously debilitating medical conditions such as chronic pain.

⁴ Neuroplasticity is the process of how the brain changes in response to experience.

effectively reduces the negative components of psychological stress, with effects comparable to what would be expected from the use of an antidepressant. And a review of nine clinical trials published in *JAMA Psychiatry* found that when comparing routine treatments for depression, including antidepressants, MBCT reduced rates of relapse for up to 60 weeks.” (mindful.org/the-science-of-mindfulness).

When looking at the effects of MBSR there is strong evidence to support that, our mental clarity will improve, decrease the wandering mind, create an increase in self-confidence and leadership and improve mood just by focusing on ourselves while we are controlling our breath. These effects are extremely beneficial to our students. When faced with burnout, thoughts of suicide and the need for more focus and attention, our young people can benefit from this type of practice.

The book “The Mindful Athlete” by Greg Mumford, a leading expert in sports psychology and performance and Phil Jackson, the successful NBA coach who won 11 NBA Championships, 6 with the Chicago Bulls and 5 as the coach of the Los Angeles Lakers the success of MBSR became clear. Phil Jackson has used this type of meditation for years, not only in his own life, but also applied mindfulness as he developed a sense of focus and attention in his players. The skills that he engaged in with his team helped cultivate their success.

“The mind has to be empty to see clearly.” (Krishnamurti) This is so true when looking at a juggler. They must clear their mind to keep moving, to be ready for the next phase of the skill, demonstrating the ability to let go. Letting go of the daily distractions that pop into our mind just as quickly as they appeared. I believe that if we teach our kids this skill, they would be able to adapt and keep a much stronger focus in their lives. We need to let them go, and not look back and dwell on them, so we can keep moving forward in the present moment. (Mumford, 102). This is vitally important as young people get distracted by these outside stressors and stimuli all of the time.

How do we practice this oh so important skill? There many different ways to meditate. It is beneficial to be in a comfortable space, one where you are able to focus on the present and block out the stimuli of your surroundings. One way this is accomplished is to sit on a cushion with your eyes closed or your gaze soft, and begin to focus on your in-breath and your out-breath (Mumford, 102). This Awareness of Breath, or AOB allows the athlete, in this case, to be able to relax their mind and focus on performance anxieties, be aware of internal self-talk, and recover from the mental and emotional stress and strain from injury. When our athletes face the potential identity shifts and are overwhelmed with stress and fear of the unknown, it is important for them to take the time to meditate. It is similar to the glass half empty/half full mindset. If we can see the glass as half full, then we are able to visualize the possibilities that life has for you. It is all about the mindset. In order for all of this to work, you must have intention. Intention motivates athletes to do what they have to do, even if it means pushing out of their comfort zone. (Mumford, 112). This is especially true with the example of Jared. Jared was a seemingly non-athletic eighth grader. He had the dream and *intention* to play in the ACC. Years later, he attended and played for Boston College and was voted ACC Player of the Year his senior year. He was the first men’s basketball player at Boston College to achieve that honor. Later, he made

it to the NBA and for not playing guard, he ended up guarding Kobe in the NBA. Intentions and purpose fueled his desire to play at that level. He saw the glass as half full. (Mumford, 114). Athletes like Madison Holleran, Jeret Peterson, Steve Holcomb and countless others would benefit from taking this time for themselves as they fell victim to the “glass as half empty” mindset.

As mentioned previously, athletes are often unaware of how to adjust to their new lifestyle, new surroundings and new expectations without knowing how to create a meaningful support network away from home. The pressures of these experiences creates a negative mindset and an increasing need for positive coping skills.

Instructional Implementations

Teaching Strategies

Teaching Sports Medicine gives me the ability to create my own pacing plan, lessons and materials. I have often had conversations with my students to test the waters about adjusting my unit topics to fit their needs. This unit is no different; however, it is a bit off the regular track of unit instruction. Over the last couple of weeks, I have slipped some strategies and questions about how identity shifts and changes in their life, and how these shifts can affect their life choices moving forward. I have been surprised at the enthusiastic feedback and willingness to learn. Throughout my two-week unit plan, I hope to create a solid sense of identity in my students and allow them opportunities to apply and utilize mindfulness strategies to assist them in times of uncertainty and distress.

My main resources that I will use for teaching this unit to my students will include the books “What Made Maddy Run?”, and “The Mindful Athlete”, as well as the documentary, The Weight of Gold. As we begin to unpack and identify stress, identity, and mindfulness applications, I will use the strategies of open discussion, open-ended questions, critical thinking and content analysis to generate a safe space within my classroom to allow students to explore themselves and their fears. Activities and resources are located in [Appendix II](#) and [Appendix III](#).

Self-Assessment & Identity

Identifying Stress in their Life

This content is a review of the Healthful Living MEH standard that students were taught in their Healthful Living class. Teachers not familiar with this content on stress can reach out to Healthful Living teachers for material or refer to [Appendix III](#) for a link to the content presentation. Students will conduct self-reflection on their current types of and amounts of stress. We will recognize how stress can affect our mind and body and review that some types of stress are good (*eustress*), and some are bad (*distress*). Initially, students will receive the “Stress Questionnaire”. Upon completion, I will assist them with scoring and we will begin to identify key information related to identifying and managing stress. Students will journal their feelings with an open-ended questions of “What causes you stress?” and “How do you manage your

stress?” Through a think-pair-share opportunity, students will share their responses with a peer and then transition to a class discussion on their responses and analyze how we categorize good vs. bad stress and ways to cope with stressful feelings. We will also discuss how our body responds to stress and the “Fight or Flight” response to stressful feelings.

Who are You?

Once we unpack the basics of stress, students will begin to analyze their identity. My goal will be to have students identify themselves by recognizing their values rather than the roles that they play. I will do this by allowing them to first journal their feelings on this topic and then create identity posters once we differentiate values vs. roles. Students will complete a visual representation of who they think they are and answer questions on the Identity Wheel. Once they complete this initial activity, kids will have brief conversations of who they are with their peers in class. Once they begin to recognize their values instead of their roles, we can figure out how to look at the importance of genuinely knowing who they are, especially when identity begins to shift and life begins to change and albeit becomes harder to focus on their genuine sense of self. I think having opportunities to discuss this with their peers also gives them the opportunity to realize that they are not in this alone.

We will begin this 10-day unit with the guiding essential question, “Who are You? vs. What do you do?” This question seems to be a simple one; however, it has the potential to create a huge impact as we embark on the chance to create a positive sense of self. When teaching any material that is focused on an individual’s sense of self and being, I think we need to dig deep into who they are as people. After all, teenagers often feel as if us adults do not understand what they are faced with every day. By asking them who they are, we will begin the unit with opportunities to share stressors, life events, and challenges that often jeopardize who they are. As we dive deeper into how they identify themselves, we will begin to differentiate that into roles vs. identity. Through my years of experience, I know that adolescents often only scratch the surface to see what they want others to see in themselves. For example, I expect responses that will include, “I am a football player, “baller”, swimmer, student, etc.

Guiding questions asked throughout this week will include;

- Who are you?
- How will life challenge you to act out your values?
- What titles or roles do you play and when are they not the same?
- What would you do if you weren’t an athlete
- What does it mean to win?

Throughout our discussions on this topic, I hope to hear that students recognize that they are kind, goal-oriented, hard-working, sincere, supportive, etc. and hope that their responses are on the positive side; however, in this time of uncertainty I suspect that I will sense their anxiety and negative outlook until we unpack how to change. It is eye opening to see that others are facing similar struggles and to determine the need for understanding the perception of their identity.

What happens when identity changes?

The transition to the stories that we will analyze in class, I will give them the Athlete Identity Measurement Scale. The results will help us to unpack whether their identity is one that focuses on their public identity or their private identity. We will discuss the difference - public identity is what others see your identity as while your private identity is what you see in yourself. I believe social media also plays a significant role in how identity is perceived. Once we address their identity concerns, I will include excerpts from “What Made Maddy Run?” the “Weight of Gold” and other elite and professional athletes who have recently begun to speak out about mental health to give my students the perspective of the very people they emulate and strive to be such as Simone Biles, and Naomi Osaka. It is powerful to see someone like Michael Phelps talk about hitting rock bottom, arrested for multiple DUIs and then going into a rehabilitation facility to get help. Students need to know this is a human experience and we should recognize and support them. Each day moving forward a new aspect of identity will be addressed, questions answered and applications practiced. My resources will help recognize that the college experience can be tough and often creates a sense of failure if the expectations are not met. We will also analyze Madison Holleran’s story and create opportunities for discussion while identifying any similarities in their own situation or anyone that they know personally. Points of discussion can include how their parents and guardians have either helped or hindered their sense of identity. Using Maddy as an example, students will journal what they think that Maddy might have told her dad when he dropped her off at college once they noticed that she had changed from the Maddy they once knew. We will follow that with an activity I call “What I wish I could tell you” where students will write a letter to a coach, a parent or other important person in their life that may have contributed to their sense of identity or level of stress. These letters will not be sent, but used as an opportunity to express their feelings and recognize the need for acceptance and identify other activities that these student-athletes wish they would have been able to do if not for the expectations of their family and friends.

As we complete our week of their ever-changing identity, students will research an athlete who has recently spoken out regarding mental health. Students will identify the athlete, their sport, and how/why they have chosen to speak out about their own mental health and create a relationship between that athlete and their own struggles while also determining their identity and how it shifted as they investigate their athlete’s story. Students will wrap-up and re-visit their visual representation activity and identity wheel responses. Students will then have an opportunity to create an after copy to update their responses and visual representations of their identity. This will allow students to make a connection, reflect and make this personal in order for students to understand the need for identifying these changes as we begin to lead into using mindfulness as a way to focus and provide a clear mind for moving forward. Whether they are working through their own injuries, stress and/or burnout, I believe we can begin to recognize the opportunity for focusing on roles they will play in their life and how they will handle their changing identity. They can do this by answering the questions, what does it mean to win in life and sports, and how can I work through the struggle that often comes with winning at life?

Mindfulness

This section should help to answer the question of “how can I work through the struggle?” I plan to discuss with them or ask if anyone has experienced using this technique in the past.

Introducing the philosophy and providing some background information will be the initial priority while allowing them to do some guided discovery on what mindfulness actually is all about. The lesson template of creating essential questions, providing information and answers to those questions, as well as identifying tools of application will be used for this content. As a class, we will dive deep into the history behind mindfulness and give them some additional background on the success that Phil Jackson has had by using it with his NBA teams. Using it as a hook will peak their interest and create a connection between success and the use of this strategy.

As we move through this week of mindfulness training and application, I will be adapting strategies from the books, “Learning to Breathe” and also “Teaching Mindfulness: A Practical Guide for Clinicians and Educators.” These texts will allow me the opportunity to provide students with the background necessary to be able to apply mindfulness not only in the classroom, but also to their daily life. As their teacher, I plan to ensure my own understanding of how to allow my students the time to apply this technique as well with the use of these texts and take the time during class to have some mindfulness time. Each day that we move into a new aspect of being mindful, we will apply new information and strategies to our own daily challenges, and discuss how becoming more mindful has assisted us in changing how stress management and stress actually looks and feels. It is vital to constantly re-visit our discussions from week 1 in order to be able to identify the times or the situations where mindfulness might be necessary.

What is Mindfulness?

Making the transition from identity to mindfulness should be a seamless one as mindfulness should create a sense of relaxation among my students and these lessons should create a great flow from struggling with those causes of identity shifts, to managing the anxiety of the struggle. Now that students are aware of their stressors, and identity, we are going to begin to learn about practicing the skill of mindfulness. We will begin with the question, what is mindfulness? I will give students a few minutes to explore what this is. They will respond to this question in their journal and then we will create a mind map to record their responses. Once we have their responses, I will share with them Jon-Kabat Zinn’s definition of mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally.” (Broderick, 2013) After a brief reflection of how students perceive this definition, we will begin our quest to learn the practice and identify ways to apply this in our lives. During our discussion, we will discuss how even though negative thoughts pop into our mind, we are able to acknowledge them and “watch” them but not react to them. We have the opportunity to choose whether we “pick up” those negative thoughts and do something with them, or let them pass by and move forward. One way that we can explore how we may already apply mindfulness to our life is to identify those things we do on “autopilot”. Looking at activities that we engage in mindfully – with attention and mindlessly – without attention. My challenge for them is to choose an activity that they do every day and attempt to put every ounce of themselves and focus solely on that activity. Examples include, brushing their teeth, showering, washing your hands, eating lunch, getting dressed, riding to school, etc. We plan to reflect on these outcomes in our next class.

An additional aspect of this lesson will include an opportunity to watch a video and listen to how Phil Jackson applied mindfulness and meditation to his team development. This will also allow an opportunity for discussing how mindfulness relates to meditation, and recognize how to be your authentic self while upholding your personal values as you begin the quest to find your inner voice. As we wrap-up this first day of mindfulness, I will instruct students to sit quietly in their seat for about 2 minutes. After time I will play a bell sound. Students are not required to close their eyes, but can also focus on a spot on the floor. Students will write down and/or share what they heard. I will ask them to do it again, but this time focus on the sounds that they hear come and go while sitting silently. Students will focus on sounds that are close and far away and how they appear and disappear during this time of silence. After this period of silence ends, we will compare both exercises, and discuss what was different the second time. We will discuss how we were focused on what was happening around us in the present moment – the definition of mindfulness. This exercise will start a discussion on how being focused in the present moment can help deal with feelings or stress, anxiety, and fear that we discussed last week in our lessons. Students will then engage in a mindful eating activity called the “raisin exercise” on page 33 of *Learning to Breathe*. This can be done on the next class day if time did not allow us to finish.

Breathing Awareness

Students will enter the room while relaxing music plays. As we review the definition and purpose of mindfulness, I will provide students with content related to how breathing is the first step in the application of mindfulness. Content will include information from *Learning to Breathe*, and *The Mindful Athlete*. I will prepare students to begin to tap into a state of mindfulness by first discussing how it felt to attempt to focus on a daily activity as their challenge from the day before. We will then prepare to practice a controlled breathing exercise to demonstrate how focusing on breathing can help clear the mind.

As part of this lesson, I will introduce a breathing exercise from the *Learning to Breathe* (Broderick, 2013) resource to tap into being aware of how effective this technique can be to clear the mind and be in the present.

- Step 1* – find a comfortable position in your chair, feet flat on the floor, back straight, shoulders relaxed, muscles relaxed and hands in your lap.
- Step 2* – take a deep breath in through your nose to the count of 4 and let the breath out of your mouth long and slow. Repeat 2-3 more times to help find yourself in a relaxed state.
- Step 3* – let your breath move into and out of your mouth quietly, paying attention to the in and out breath. Keep breathing and focus solely on the path of your breathing. Continue this until the sound of the alarm.

After we complete the exercise students will record their reflections from the exercise in a mindfulness journal. Each day we begin class, we will start with a breathing exercise, or writing in their journal to gain enough time and opportunities to practice the skill. It will be important to discuss the issues or stressors that are occupying their minds before we begin each lesson this week.

Body Awareness

Today's lesson will include being aware of the body. We will practice a body scan today to enhance our initial skill or breathing awareness. As stated earlier, we will review each lesson and begin each class with either a breathing exercise and/or an opportunity to free write in their journals about anything they are dealing with that day.

After our review and discussion, we will begin with content on the importance of the body scan. Background information will be provided on how important it is to be aware of your body and create a sense of relaxation. Then we will practice a body scan in class. I will use the video 13 Minute Body Scan for Teens and Adults linked in [Appendix II](#). Students will use the think-pair-share technique to discuss their reflections on the body scan activity.

Thoughts and Mindfulness

Athletes are constantly thinking about if they are able to play at the next level, which college are they going to attend and wonder if they can get a scholarship. I always tell my athletes to have fun, and go to a school where you are going to get to play the sport you love, for as long as you can. This lesson on tapping into their thoughts is important, as they are involved in the recruiting process. I will tell them a story [Appendix II](#) about an athlete who is heavily involved in the recruiting process to play college football. After I read the story, student will be asked to complete a reflection worksheet that asks students to record their feelings – good, bad, neither? I will read the story a second time, but adding an additional ending and students will then be asked to reflect as they did the first time. I will point out that perceptions vary from person to person and we are in control of how we perceive situations and how we respond to them. Our next activity will be “My Mind is a Cast of Characters” on page 49 of *Learning to Breathe* (Broderick, 2013).

Paying Attention

After a review of the importance of being aware of our thoughts, we will focus on the importance of paying attention to ourselves in the moment. This lesson will allow us to go back and revisit our lesson on stress. We will look at the top stressors of the class by having students complete a worksheet where they list their top stressors. We will compile a class list of the top 5 stressors. Once we have our list the question will be presented – “How does our body tell us that we are under stress?” Students will respond and then discuss their answers as a class, and create a mind map on the board with responses. We will then explore what happens when the body is under chronic stress and we do not address it. The *Learning to Breathe* – [Appendix III](#) resource has some great graphics and activities to share this content with students.

At the end of the 10 days, students will be able to recognize their identity and how their values shape not only who they are but also how they handle the issues or stress, burnout and injury as they relate to identity shifts. In addition, they will be able to apply mindfulness strategies to not only win on the field, court, pool, and track, but also in their daily life. These are

concepts that we do not teach in school or often at home. I anticipate that kids will leave prepared for and equipped with a sense of empowerment to take on all that college and life has to offer.

Assessment & Evaluation

The assessment piece for this unit is unique. Since this unit tailors to the individual needs of the student, reflection opportunities, a review of the application and relevance of the content and practices are most important. The questions are ones that will give the teacher an idea of how much the student gained from the material and activities. Best options for delivering the assessment can be via paper pencil assessment or Google Form. The assessment questions are open-ended and are included in [Appendix II](#).

Appendix 1

The standard that I created for this unit is as follows:

Students will be able to develop an understanding of the relationship between identity and mental health.

Objectives in this standard include:

1.1 - Students will be able to identify their own identities.

1.2 - Students will be able to apply strategies to protect their mental health when identity shifts and changes.

Appendix II

Student Resources

Journal Prompts

Self-Assessment & Identity:

Who are you?

How will life challenge you to act out your values?

What titles or roles do you play and when are they not the same?

What would you do if you were not an athlete?

What does it mean to win?

Mindfulness:

Free write - Write about what you are feeling in this moment.

How did you feel when you became aware of your breathing?

What does “One Breath, One Mind” mean to you?

What Made Maddy Run? – Students can read the book, or the teachers can pull excerpts and chapters for classroom lessons and reflection of relevant concepts.

Videos for application and reflection:

[The Weight of Gold](#)

[Kobe Bryant & Phil Jackson on Meditation](#)

[13 Minute Body Scan for Teens and Adults](#)

Worksheets and Activities:

Social Identity Wheel:

<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/wp-content/uploads/sites/355/2018/12/Social-Identity-Wheel-3-2.pdf>

Identity T-Shirt

Identity T-shirt!

Please create a t-shirt design that depicts your identity and who you are as a person.
You may use markers, colored pencil, etc. Get creative!



Remember:

ALWAYS BE TRUE TO WHO YOU ARE!

Appendix II cont.

Worksheets:

Athlete Identity Measurement Scale

The following items can be administered to students on paper or in a google form or survey.

Athlete Identity Measurement Scale Items

1. I consider myself an athlete.
2. I have many goals related to sport.
3. Most of my friends are athletes.
4. Sports is the most important part of my life.
5. I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else.
6. I need to participate in sport to feel good about myself.
7. Other people see me mainly as an athlete.
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport.
9. Sports is the only important thing in my life.
10. I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport.

Items scored on the following scale:

1 = Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = Agree Somewhat 4 = Neither Agree or Disagree
5 = Disagree Somewhat 6 = Disagree 7 = Strongly Disagree

Responding to Emotions

Story - A:

Imagine that you are an athlete who is in the middle of the recruiting process. You are one of the top athletes in your position and you have received offers from a number of different strong programs in your sport. One of your offers is from the school that your family member (mom, dad, and/or sibling) attended and you often feel pressured to continue that have your family's presence at that school. You have a scheduled visit to this school with your family. However, two other schools have shown interest in your opportunity to play or even start.]

Respond to the following questions:

1. How do you feel?
2. Are your feelings good, bad or neither? Why?
3. How might your emotions effect your decision to either choose this school or keep your other options open?
4. Do you think that your family will support you?

Story - B:

Imagine that you are an athlete who is in the middle of the recruiting process. You are one of the top athletes in your position and you have received offers from a number of different strong programs in your sport. One of your offers is from the school that your family member (mom, dad, and/or sibling) attended and you often feel pressured to continue that have your family's presence at that school. You have a scheduled visit to this school with your family. However, two other schools have shown interest in your opportunity to play or even start.

After your visit, you felt as if you were comfortable talking to the coach, felt good about the campus and recognized the strong possibility of being able to start. You still have visits scheduled to your top two schools.

Reflection:

1. How have your feelings changed? Explain.
2. Do you feel like your emotions and interactions on your visit will affect your decision?
3. Have your perceptions of this situation changed?
4. How might you deal with the challenge of making the best choice?

Appendix II cont.

Assessment/Evaluation

Assessment/Evaluation

Please answer the questions based on the content covered in this unit. There are no set right or wrong responses, however your answers should reflect our lessons covered throughout the unit and you must answer all of the questions. Your responses will be between you and I.

1. Do you feel like you know how your values shape who you are? Explain.
2. Explain how your identity relates to your values.
3. How did Madison Holleran's identity change once she started as a student-athlete at Penn?
4. What factors contribute to the changes in her identity?
5. What are some things that Madison could have done to help her manage the college experience?
6. If you were Madison, would you have talked to your parents more about your struggles? Who can you talk to?
7. What are some similarities between the Olympians in "The Weight of Gold"?
8. How did their identities change?
9. Did you see yourself in the stories we identified during the unit? (Madison Holleran, Olympic athletes)
10. Has the way you perceive and respond to stressful situations changed because of this unit?
11. What does mindfulness mean to you?
12. What mindfulness strategies do you plan to adapt?
13. Do you feel as if the changes in your identity will be easier for you to manage?
14. Why is it important to recognize our values when we are in a situation where our identity is threatened?
15. Do you feel as though you can win at life when life is tough?
16. What does "one breath, one mind" mean to you? Do you think mindfulness would help your team achieve success?
17. Do you feel more prepared for the college experience?
18. How can mindfulness help you manage stress and focus on the present?
19. How did the meditation exercises make you feel?
20. What information will you share with your peers about how our unit helped you shed light on how to win at life?

1. 11 Rings by, Phil Jackson
2. Mindful Athlete by, Greg Mumford, Phil Jackson
3. What Made Maddy Run? By, Kate Fagan
4. Weight of Gold – HBO documentary
5. Learning to Breathe: A Mindfulness Curriculum for Adolescents to Cultivate Emotion Regulation, Attention, and Performance by, Broderick, Patricia C., Myla. Kabat-Zinn, and Jon. Kabat-Zinn.
6. Mindfulness videos – Phil Jackson
7. [Super Soul Sunday](#) – Phil Jackson discusses importance of mindfulness and his teams
8. [Wisdom 2.0 Mindfulness Summit Interview](#)
9. [John Kabat-Zinn Mindfulness Practice – Wisdom 2.0](#)

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12. <https://www.greatschools.org/north-carolina/charlotte/3509-Mallard-Creek-High/>
13. <https://www.mindful.org/the-science-of-mindfulness/>

