

Art Therapy for Black Athletes

A Glance Into the Psychological Distress of An Overlooked Population



Athletes' Mental Health Disorders

Athletes experience a lot of pressures on the court or field, in the classroom, in the locker-room, socially, and within their family. All of these pressures often create a major imbalance with other areas of their lives and can lead to psychological disorders.

Eating Disorders: behavioral conditions characterized by severe and persistent disturbance in eating behaviors and associated distressing thoughts and emotions

Body Dysmorphia: a body-image disorder characterized by persistent and intrusive preoccupations with an imagined or slight defect in one's appearance

Anxiety Disorders: specific psychiatric disorders that involve extreme fear or worry

Mood Disorders: emotional disturbances consisting of prolonged periods of excessive sadness, excessive joyousness, or both

Personality Disorders: pervasive, enduring patterns of perceiving, reacting, and relating that cause significant distress or functional impairment



Black Mental Health Stigma

Racism, Discrimination, Inequity, Prejudice, Financial Issues, and Death highly effect one's mental health. Even though these are things the black community experience daily, mental health is not taken seriously within this community.

- ❖ Even though African American adults are 20% more likely to report serious psychological distress than White adults, only 1 in 3 Black Americans who need mental health treatment receive it
- ❖ Black adults living below the poverty line are 2x more likely to have psychological distress
- ❖ In a 1990 study, only 31% of African Americans believed depression was a health issue and 63% believed it was a measure of weakness
- ❖ The rate at which Black men are dying by homicides ages 15-24 is the highest for all demographics within the U.S.
- ❖ The suicide rate for Black men is higher than White males
- ❖ Because Black men make up 33% of the prison population and only 13% of the U.S. population, African Americans are frightened that if Black men with a mental illnesses commit a violent act they will be criminalized or killed instead of given proper mental health care

The Struggle of Intersectionality

As both an athlete and a POC, the feeling of appearing strong both mentally and physically is doubled. African American athletes experience many micro-aggressions, micro-assaults, and micro-invalidations which eventually combine to affect them psychologically. Athletes within the NCAA are viewed as cash cows and a way for an institution to produce more money and Black Student Athletes (BSA) are the main victims of this as they are the highest recruited race because of the belief that “dark skinned people excel in sports because of innate abilities”¹. Collegiate teams and especially PWIs (Predominately white institutions) reinforce the profitability of these young athletes by prioritizing their athletic skills over their schoolwork. Young African Americans have been taught that their athletic ability is one of the only ways for them to become wealthy and to succeed and collegiate teams and the NCAA support this idea when student athletes miss class and tests for games and are allowed to practice 7 days a week for 4 hours a day effectively using most of their time for grueling hours of practice as opposed to studying and rest. These stigmas allow black athletes to hyper fixate on their athletic ability and abandon their desire to learn, decreasing their confidence in any job other than the sport. Faculty also add to the stress of BSA's by stereotyping them as dumb or incapable of successfully completing their schoolwork by allowing them special privileges. Because of these additional stresses, this combination of microaggressions and athletes' standard psychological disorders cause BSAs to need an outlet such as Art Therapy in order to effectively communicate all that they are struggling with.

What is Art Therapy?

When we talk about mental health and therapy most people think about mindfulness practices and general talk therapy. Art therapy is another type of therapy that's goal is to combine the freedom of art making (dance, music, painting, drawing, drama therapy, and more) and treating psychological disorders. The goal of this type of therapy is to gain the ability and freedom of communicating without words and through your subconscious while collaborating with your professional art therapist to improve your mental well-being.

An effective way of coping with the many challenges of being a Black Student Athlete is through Art Therapy. In the following slides there are 3 forms that significantly help!



Collaging

You can create a piece in which you envision a scenario that brings you peace, comfort, happiness, or power. It does not matter how realistic or fantastical the piece is. With this art you are able to put together different pieces from different places to represent whatever you want it to mean to you. With this you can successfully calm fears, anxiety, or your mood in order to avoid feeling used or silenced and relieve yourself of the pressures of collegiate athletics. You can gain control back by cutting and pasting different pieces to form whatever you wish.



Drawing or Painting

Drawing and painting can provide an escape for overthinkers. You can be concentrating on your art instead of your reality or draw or paint what you wish your reality was and then talk with your therapist about how you can realistically achieve it. Although it does take practice to communicate effectively through it, repetition provides security and peace in the practice. You can unconsciously share your feelings of anger or anxiety through your colors or your picture's setting. Drawing and painting provide a platform for both you and your therapist to delve into your psychological health.



An abstract, painterly background featuring a violin and a human profile. The violin is rendered in dark, rich tones, with its body and f-hole visible. A human profile, possibly of a woman, is depicted in lighter, more ethereal colors, with the violin's body appearing to merge with or emerge from the face. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, earthy tones like ochre, sienna, and terracotta, contrasted with cooler blues and purples. The style is expressive and textured, with visible brushstrokes and a sense of movement. The word "Music" is written in a large, white, stylized font on the left side of the image.

Music

Athletes often use music to ground themselves, calm themselves, or get their adrenaline and energy pumping. Often, they stick to one genre and use it specifically for games or practice. Music can be used to heighten our mood, increase our focus on work, express our feelings, boost our confidence, express our negative emotions, and to relax. It can be helpful to listen to different genres such as jazz, blues, classical, rock, heavy metal, and hip-hop when trying to achieve or deal with different feelings. The words and tunes of music help bring out whatever we are feeling, even if we do not know exactly what it is and it is overall beneficial.



Interactive Activities

Journaling has many therapeutic advantages and allows people to reflect and ease their anxieties in a healthy way!

Some interesting prompts would be...

- ❖ Dear past/future me...
- ❖ Identify a problem and write about where it could possibly stem from?
- ❖ Write about a subject, topic, job, or class which you think could be improved and describe how you would improve it.
- ❖ My superpower is...
- ❖ Write a poem that encapsulates how it feels to be black.
- ❖ Write about three people from different demographics whom you admire and why you admire them.

Below is a link filled with more prompts for you to work your way through!

- ❖ <https://wanderersway.com/blogs/wanderers-way/60-effective-journaling-prompts-for-athletes>

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