

# PLAY IN MY BOOTS

A mental health resource for players, coaches, clubs and communities



Download your free **Play In My Boots** pack at [www.playinmyboots.ie](http://www.playinmyboots.ie)

### ST PATRICK'S MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND ST. PATRICK'S MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION



St. Patrick's Mental Health Foundation fundraises on behalf of St. Patrick's Mental Health Services.

St. Patrick's University Hospital was founded over 250 years ago by Jonathan Swift, and is today, Ireland's largest independent, not-for-profit, mental health service provider. We aspire to provide the highest quality mental health care, to promote mental health and to advocate for the rights of those who experience mental health difficulties.

'Walk in My Shoes' is a campaign of St. Patrick's Mental Health Foundation which raises awareness for mental health and funds to provide mental health services to vulnerable young adults.

- The idea from 'Walk in My Shoes' came from a 16 year old who said he wished his friends could put themselves in his shoes and better understand mental health difficulties.

**'Walk in My Shoes' challenges the stigma associated with mental health difficulties.**

St. Patrick's Mental Health Services Support and information line is open 9-5pm Monday to Friday and is manned by Mental Health Professionals with an answering and call-back facility outside hours. You can contact the Support & Information service by calling **01 249 3333**, or you can email your query to [info@stpatmail.com](mailto:info@stpatmail.com).

For more info see [www.stpatricks.ie](http://www.stpatricks.ie)



As Ireland's largest sporting and community organisation the GAA has always played a role in promoting health and wellbeing amongst its members and players.

By their very nature GAA clubs are health promoting units offering excellent opportunities for physical exercise, social interaction, community engagement, as well as a safe environment for recreational activities, intergenerational connections, and life skill development. Your local GAA club, its officers, volunteers, and your team mates also provide a valuable support system to help members and communities overcome challenges they may face from time to time.

While all this happens organically in our clubs, the Association has put in place dedicated structures to drive and support this health agenda at national level through the GAA Community & Health Section in Croke Park and the newly formed National Health & Wellbeing Committee, and at county level through the new Health & Wellbeing Committees. Clubs are also being asked to appoint a Health & Wellbeing Officer (replacing the previous role of the ASAP Officer).

The GAA's strength remains our ability to reach into every parish on the island of Ireland and our work in the area of health and wellbeing will be largely dependent on appropriate partnerships with organisations that have the requisite expertise, knowledge, and resources. That is why we have chosen to work with St. Patrick's Mental Health Services in the creation of this resource and we hope you find it both useful and informative.

The GAA very much supports the mantra of 'healthy bodies, healthy minds' and we wish all our members every success and enjoyment in maintaining their mental fitness.

For more info see [www.gaa.ie](http://www.gaa.ie)





## Focus on Mental Fitness

**PLAY**  
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Sport and the GAA have a great contribution to make to the health and mental wellbeing of Irish society. The old adage of a healthy body and a healthy mind still rings true today. Unfortunately, the concept of mental health has been stigmatised, despite the fact that it plays a part of all of our daily lives – from how we think, relate to people, handle pressure or stress, and view the world we live in.

These packs shine a positive light on the concept of mental health and align it with the world of GAA sports people. That is why we are using the term 'mental fitness' throughout this booklet.

Approaches to developing and maintaining our physical fitness and our mental fitness are very similar – we need to exercise our minds and bodies regularly, watch our diet and hydration levels, get plenty of sleep, and enjoy appropriate down time. But even if we do all this, injuries can happen through no fault of our own.

If you pull a hamstring you get a physiotherapist to assist you in your recovery. Getting help to overcome a 'mental injury' is no different. The earlier you do so, the earlier you will get back doing what you love!



The key to mental fitness for anyone is **BEING AWARE OF 'WHEN' YOU NEED TO ASK FOR HELP** and knowing what positive choices are available to you.

There is a "super athlete" perception out there that leads to players feeling like they shouldn't have to seek help.

### Factors affecting your Mental Fitness:

- 1 Relationship stress
- 2 The loss of something important
- 3 Bullying: in school, in college, in work, in the community, in your club or online
- 4 Financial strain or hardship
- 5 Unhealthy lifestyle choices e.g. use of tobacco, alcohol and other substances, poor diet
- 6 Too many commitments - college team, club team, county team, academic studies
- 7 Exposure to violence, such as witnessing or being a victim of physical or sexual abuse/ assault

### SPORT SPECIFIC FACTORS AFFECTING MENTAL FITNESS

- Players can be criticised in ways that the average person doesn't experience
- Struggling with recurring or long-term injury
- Retirement from competitive sport
- Implications for self-esteem and coping
- Stress is a major contributor to athletes' mental ill health and loss of form
- Surroundings – stadiums filled with people watching every move and action of a player and examining and ridiculing every mistake or achievement
- Sideline negativity that reflects on a player's sports ability, temperament and fitness for purpose
- Social Media – players face being ridiculed on social media through comments and photos which many people see
- Body image – added pressures of having a perfect body image

"The key thing for anyone who is feeling depressed is to always remember there is light at the end of the tunnel. And if you ever get to a point where you are struggling to see it, like I did, then that is the moment to reach out for help. Opening the vault that had become my head was crucial in lifting my depression."

**Alan O'Mara**  
Cavan Footballer

*Mental health difficulties affect 1 in 4 people.  
Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.*



# Focus on Teams & Mental Fitness

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*In this section you will find tips and advice on how to promote positive mental fitness for you and your team mates.*



"In sport and in life we face setbacks. These can be challenging but with experience you realise it's natural to hurt sometimes and things will get better. There is always someone there to help you through, be it team mates, family or friends."

**Deirdre Burke**  
Galway Camogie Player

In a sports team environment there is a huge support network and many "go to" people you can talk to, including:

- Coach
- Mentor
- Team Captain
- Close team mates
- Club members
- Parents/other parents
- Team physio, selectors, doctor
- Teachers, lecturers
- Support services/helplines



## Protective and beneficial factors of being on a team

1. Positive attitude
2. Enhanced self-confidence and positive self-belief
3. Development of good communication skills
4. Making boundaries/setting limits together
5. Having assertiveness
6. Experiencing a strong sense of community/belonging
7. Opportunities to socialise in a safe environment

"Look at speaking about how you're feeling as a sign of strength not weakness. Keeping quiet about our issues only deepens our problem. Speaking out about how you feel allows you the opportunity to improve your situation. It is about speaking up, not shutting up."

**Seamus Hennessy**  
Tipperary Hurler

If you think someone on your team might be having difficulties with their mental fitness you can help by:

- Asking them if they are ok
- Really listening to their response
- Making sure they know they are not alone and help is out there
- Making sure they don't isolate themselves
- Taking time to be there for them off the field
- Telling your coach
- Encouraging them during training sessions/matches
- Encouraging them to seek help

## BENEFITS TO MENTAL FITNESS TEAM SPORT OFFERS

- Reduced feelings of anxiety & increased well-being
- Reduced stress and depression
- Improved mood and concentration
- Improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and confidence
- Opportunity for making new friends
- Developing your social skills such as communicating with others and self-confidence

**Stress is an overlooked trigger of poor mental health in players**

**Research shows talking about problems is associated with lower mental health distress and more positive well-being**





## Focus on Players aged 12 - 17

# PLAY IN MY BOOTS

*This section aims to offer guidance to juvenile players including tips and advice on how to look after your own mental fitness.*

The worst thing you can do is bottle it all up and tell no one. You may think it is only happening to you but in fact 1 in 4 people go through a tough time at some stage of their life. So if this is you, you're not alone.

Players are subject to a unique set of challenges and circumstances that can make a person vulnerable to a mental fitness problem like depression or anxiety.

If you think you are having difficulties with your mental fitness, here are some do and don'ts that might help you.

According to the Gaelic Players Association (GPA), since 2010 over 100 county players have made contact with the GPA counselling service and received support. If you need some support, don't be afraid to follow in their footsteps and reach out too.

**You don't always need professional help;  
sometimes self-help can work...**

### DO...

#### COMMUNICATION

- Do talk to someone you can trust
- Do listen to someone you trust
- Do arrange to meet with a friend

#### LIFESTYLE CHOICES

- Get some fresh air, go outdoors when you can
- Eat good food
- Make room for some quality relaxation time
- Be included and include others
- Get a good night's sleep
- Arrange a kick-around/puck about

#### POSITIVE ATTITUDE DEVELOPMENT

- Explore additional interests as well as GAA
- Be patient
- Be aware of how your thoughts influence your mood
- Take deep breaths
- Accept mistakes
- Know that you can't win them all
- Give yourself a pat on the back

### Don't...

#### COMMUNICATION

- Don't isolate yourself or spend too much time alone
- Don't keep things bottled up

#### LIFESTYLE CHOICES

- Don't exist within a social media bubble
- Don't avoid friends, family, coaches and team mates
- Don't take on too many commitments

#### POSITIVE ATTITUDE DEVELOPMENT

- Don't give up
- Don't criticise yourself negatively. Be constructive with your self-reflection
- Don't put too much pressure on yourself
- Try not to be impatient
- Don't worry what others might think
- Don't let bad performances get you down
- Don't feel guilty – it's not your fault!



There's a perception that sports people can overcome any obstacles but we are no different to anyone else. We give it our best and sometimes we succeed, sometimes we fail. What really matters is what you do next. There's always hope and there's always help at hand."

**Valerie Mulcahey**  
Cork Ladies Footballer

*Talking about Mental Health is important.  
A simple conversation can make a big difference.*



## Focus on College Players

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*This section is for players dealing with the additional stresses of college life. Included you will find tips and advice on how to look after your own mental fitness.*

Starting college can be both exciting and stressful. You're juggling so much with training/matches, living on your own for the first time and figuring out what you want out of life. It's no surprise that many feel overwhelmed!

This is a time of transition (significant changes) and psychological disorders can often develop during transition periods i.e. leaving home, changing colleges, relationships ending, playing for new teams, new academic and financial pressures.



### DID YOU KNOW?

46% of college GAA players regularly feel overwhelmed by all of their commitments i.e. academic and sport participation etc.

Only 15% of college GAA players find it easy to manage all of their commitments.

10% of college GAA players feel that their college does not support them academically.

(GPA, 2013)

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a challenging time **especially for young sports people**. It may include heading off to college, entering the workforce or **becoming part of new GAA teams**. For the more than 1 in 4 young adults with mental health difficulties, this phase of life poses even greater challenges.

### Alcohol and Mental Health

For students, drinking alcohol has become an integral part of the college social life. Because of this, binge drinking has become more prominent in college students. Harmful drinking can have serious impacts on mental health as it increases levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

\*Recommended weekly alcohol intake;

**Men = 17 standard drinks**

**Women = 11 standard drinks**

### Know what your drinking...

1 Standard Drink contains 10g of pure alcohol



...and some drinks are more than one Standard Drink 10g of pure alcohol



\*Terminology & guidelines vary between the North & South of Ireland. Please see [nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol](https://www.nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol) for information relative to Northern Ireland.

"The one bit of advice I would give to anyone feeling down or suffering with their mental health is to surround themselves with close friends, family and positive people. Having a close knit group who you feel safe around will make talking easier and will give the people who care about you the opportunity to help you and make sure you don't have to go through anything alone."

**Darren O'Sullivan**

Kerry Footballer & Sigerson Cup Winner with DIT





## Focus on College Players

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*Some mental health problems for players can be triggered by taking on too much - including increased sport participation and increased life and work commitments overall.*



### Here are some **Do & Don'ts** for dealing with the added pressures of college life

#### DO

1. **Learn to talk** to your roommates and classmates, explore the campus together; go for a coffee.
2. Connect to your **teachers and lecturers**. They are there to help you get through tough classes, tough decisions and tough times.
3. Communicate with your coaches. Let them know if the sport vs academic pressures are getting too much. **They will understand and can offer support.**
4. Remember that there are **help services on campus to help you**. Chat to your students union, the college GP or your tutor for information.

#### Don't

1. **Don't commit** to too much i.e. if you're playing for your college and club and possibly county don't let yourself become stressed juggling these with your studies. **Know your limits!**
2. When playing for a lot of teams and having extra commitments/pressures in college, players can be prone to injury. **Poor mental health has been shown to be a response to an injury.**
3. As well as that players can develop **"overtraining syndrome"** which can lead to a decrease in their performance and in turn cause depression, stress or anxiety in players.

"The more we bottle our problems up the more exaggerated they can become in our own head, it's okay to tell someone you're not okay."

**Conor Lehane**  
Cork Hurler

& Fitzgibbon Cup Winner with UCC

*Tell someone - talking about mental health is important. A simple conversation can make a big difference.*



# Watch out for the warning signs

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HOW TO SPOT THE SIGNS? WATCH OUT FOR YOURSELF, YOUR FRIENDS, FAMILY AND WORK COLLEAGUES  
IF YOU RECOGNISE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WARNING SIGNS IT'S TIME TO SEEK HELP

## FEELINGS

Watch out for signs of the player feeling:

- Sad and hopeless without a reason for a long time
- Angry, crying, over-reacting most of the time
- Feeling worthless or guilty often
- Regularly feeling performance was inadequate in a match and significant others will be disappointed
- Being anxious or worried often...maybe feel it before a match
- Extremely fearful, unexplained fears
- Concerned about physical appearance or physical problems
- Tired or exhausted due to other symptoms
- Feeling life is too hard to handle/ having suicidal thoughts
- Negative emotions before, during or after matches

"Before I thought I was the only person on the planet with this problem but I know now I'm not alone and by talking and sharing our feelings we can all stay free from a bet."

**Niall McNamee**  
Offaly Footballer

## EXPERIENCE

- Increasingly declining performances in school, college, work, sport
- Unable to cope with the loss of someone or something important
- Losing interest in things once enjoyed...like playing your sport
- Unexplained changes in sleeping patterns
- Unexplained changes in eating patterns
- Avoiding friends, family, team mates or coaches
- Wanting to be alone all of the time – missing training or matches
- Daydreaming too much, poor concentration or easily distracted
- Frightened that his/her mind is out of control or controlled
- Hearing voices that cannot be explained
- Persistent nightmares

## BEHAVIOUR

- Poor concentration/unable to think straight
- Inability to sit still or focus attention
- Over talkative, disjointed conversations
- Frequent complaints of fatigue, illness, or injury
- Becoming more irritable
- Loss of emotion or heightened emotion
- Withdrawal from social contact or sporting activities
- Not asking for help for fear of what other people might say, or of getting dropped

"Maintaining your mental fitness is no different to maintaining your physical fitness - you need to work on it constantly. Your lifestyle and having a positive outlook is important, but so is taking time for yourself and having a good network of family and friends you can turn to for help and support when life throws you a curve-ball or things don't go as planned."

**Eoin Cadogan**  
Cork Dual Player

## ACTIONS [CAUSING PROBLEMS]

- If you notice signs of player using/ abusing/ depending on alcohol or drugs
- If their gambling has become a problem
- Dieting/ Exercising excessively
- Excessive risk taking
- Doing things that can be life threatening





## Focus on Coaches & Mental Fitness

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*This section is for Coaches and Mentors providing tips and advice on how to improve mental fitness within a team environment and guidance on how you can help if a player is experiencing a problem with their mental fitness.*

Coaches have a special relationship with their players and this places them in a unique position when it comes to contributing to their mental fitness. Coaches should never underestimate the potential they have to positively influence a player's development off the field as well as on it.

Players are used to receiving positive lifestyle messages from coaches, they respect them, and they take onboard their advice. The regular face-time spent with players affords coaches an opportunity to detect problems early and then to offer support to those who may be in need of assistance. You don't have to be a counsellor, just know where to find help and encourage players to seek it.

The presence of **One Good Adult** is a key indicator of how well a young person is connected, self-confident, future looking and can cope with problems.  
(Headstrong and the UCD School of Psychology: My World Survey 2012)

### How can I help / What can I do?

- Be aware of what's happening in players' lives off the field
- Become informed about mental health services and difficulties
- Model a positive attitude towards mental fitness
- Promote a safe environment where players can discuss problems
- Connect with players families

### DO

- Use respectful Language
- Put the player first
- Talk about mental health concerns
- Be informed about mental health & resources available to you and your players
- Get support, don't try to do everything on your own
- Spend time with the player or arrange for someone to spend time with that person
- Listen and give positive feedback
- Be supportive & understanding
- Offer participation for everyone

"Mental health is a very precious commodity. As coaches we need to be very cognisant of the fact that what we do and how we do it can have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of the players' we work with. Life is not a game of perfect, every player will have up times and down times over the course of a season, for me coaches need to be aware of the issue of mental health and be ready to support the players under their care"

**Jim McGuinness**  
Donegal Manager

### Approaching a situation

When dealing with players and mental health, a coach may be the **first step in the process of finding a solution.**

Coaches should be positive, concerned and involved:

- 1 **Listen** – most important part of communication
- 2 **Accept** – accept what the person is saying; for clarification ask questions if needed. Don't be dismissive
- 3 When the player stops talking **ask** if there is anything else they need to say
- 4 Indicate you are glad they came to you and that you **want to help** them
- 5 Make necessary referral / **signpost** them in direction of support

### Don't

- Use disempowering language ("Sure there's nothing wrong with you...just play on")
- Refer to people by their illness in a negative way
- Gossip; be judgemental
- Keep the information or concern to yourself
- Underestimate the young player's abilities
- Assume someone else is dealing with the issue
- Be focused on winning



## Where to seek help

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### St. Patrick's Mental Health Services Contacts

**St. Patrick's Mental Health Services**  
Support and Information Centre  
Helpline: 01 249 3333  
[www.stpatricks.ie](http://www.stpatricks.ie)

**Dean Clinic**  
Providing Mental Health Assessments  
Helpline: 01 249 3590

### Northern Ireland Contacts

#### LifeLine

Crisis response helpline service for people who are experiencing distress or despair  
24Hrs. Helpline: 0808 808 8000  
[www.lifelinehelpline.info](http://www.lifelinehelpline.info)

#### Eating Disorders Association

Offering advice for people affected by eating disorders. Helpline: 028 9023 5959  
[www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk](http://www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk)

#### Samaritans Helpline

24HR support line for anyone who needs to talk to someone, about anything. Official mental health partner & support service for the GAA  
UK Helpline number: 08457 90 90 90  
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

#### NIAMH

Promoting supporting and exploring positive mental wellbeing throughout society  
Helpline: 028 9032 8474  
[www.niamh.co.uk](http://www.niamh.co.uk)

#### Cruse

Promoting the wellbeing of bereaved people: for adults children and young people  
Helpline: 028 9079 2419  
[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

#### Zest

Family outreach support for self-harm  
Helpline: 028 9066 8333  
[www.zestni.org](http://www.zestni.org)

#### Cara-friend

Providing information and support to the lesbian gay bisexual and transsexual community  
Helpline: 028 9089 0202  
[www.cara-friend.org.uk](http://www.cara-friend.org.uk)

### Republic of Ireland Contacts

#### Aware

Helping defeat depression  
Helpline: 1890 303302  
[www.aware.ie](http://www.aware.ie)

#### Bodywhys

The eating Disorders Association of Ireland  
Helpline: 1890 200 444  
[www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie)

#### ReachOut.com

An online service to help young people aged 16-25  
[ie.reachout.com](http://ie.reachout.com)

#### Samaritans Helpline

24HR support line for anyone who needs to talk to someone, about anything. Official mental health partner & support service for the GAA  
Helpline: 1850 116 123  
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

#### Shine

Supporting people affected by Mental Health  
Helpline: 1890 621 631  
[www.shineonline.ie](http://www.shineonline.ie)

#### National Office of Suicide Prevention

A point of contact for people seeking help in relation to suicide or those affected by it  
[www.nosp.ie](http://www.nosp.ie)

#### Console

Bereaved by suicide  
Helpline: 1800 201 890  
[www.console.ie](http://www.console.ie)

#### Pieta house

Centre for prevention of self harm & suicide  
Helpline: 01 601 000  
[www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie)

#### National LGBT

A non-judgemental and confidential service providing listening, support and information to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.  
Helpline: 1890 929 539  
[www.lgbt.ie](http://www.lgbt.ie)





## PLAY IN MY BOOTS



'Play in My Boots' is an adaptation from St. Patrick's Mental Health Foundation's 'Walk in My Shoes' Campaign which began after a 16 year old said he wished his friends could put themselves in his shoes.

'Play in My Boots' was established in 2014, by St. Patrick's Mental Health Foundation and the GAA as a mental health resource for players, coaches, clubs and communities.

If you or your club would like find out more or to get involved and raise funds to support vulnerable young adults in Ireland with mental health difficulties please log onto [www.playinmyboots.ie](http://www.playinmyboots.ie) or call **01 249 35 96**.

*Thank you.*



### **WorkOut App**

**WorkOut** is a free mental fitness app available for iOS and Android devices. Developed by ReachOut.com in conjunction with the GAA Community & Health Section, it is a tool to help measure and improve mental fitness. **WorkOut** uses practical, action-oriented missions to move past negative thinking which can impact on our mood and outlook. **WorkOut** targets thinking in relation to problem-solving, getting time to do the things you enjoy, regulating your sleep, identifying your social support networks and lots more. The **WorkOut** app is available by going to [ie.reachout.com/workout](http://ie.reachout.com/workout) or by scanning the QR code below.

[ReachOut.com](http://ReachOut.com) are grateful to our Australian colleagues who developed the **WorkOut** concept and to the Health Service Executive, National Office for Suicide Prevention, Ireland who funded the development of this app.



**WorkOut** is a free app,  
scan QR code or go to [ie.reachout.com/workout](http://ie.reachout.com/workout)

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[www.stpatsfoundation.ie](http://www.stpatsfoundation.ie)



[www.gaa.ie](http://www.gaa.ie)

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