



Thriving Through Sport: The Transformative Impact on Girls' Mental Health Report Highlights

America's youth are experiencing a mental health crisis, and their futures are on the line. As the nation has witnessed an alarming rise in mental health challenges among young people, including increases in depression and anxiety, the need for urgent action to prioritize mental health is more important than ever. It is essential to share how sports participation impacts girls, offering far-reaching benefits beyond physical fitness as it can serve as a cornerstone for nurturing positive mental health and promoting holistic development in girls.

For 50 years and counting, the Women's Sports Foundation has recognized the powerful connection between sports and physical and mental health. Our new research report – 'Thriving through Sport: The Transformative Impact on Girls' Mental Health' – provides new evidence that underscores the critical role that sport can play in boosting positive mental health for girls. It offers an examination of how sport can protect against anxiety and depression and promote protective factors such as social connectedness and meaning and purpose.

The following are findings from the report.

Sports Participation Can Lower Depression and Anxiety

- Mental health disorders are **1.5 to 2.5 times lower** for girls who play sports vs. those who never played.
- **29%** of girls who never played sports have moderate-to-high levels of depression symptoms vs. **17%** of girls who currently play sports.
- **21%** of girls who never played sports have moderate-to-high levels of anxiety symptoms vs. **11%** of girls who currently play.

Sports' Promotive and Protective Benefits

- Girls who play sports report **stronger peer relationships (1.5 times higher scores)** compared to those who have never played.
- Girls who play sports report **1.5 times higher levels of meaning and purpose** compared to those who never played.
- Sports provide a boost to mental health for all girls from all backgrounds across race, family income, parent education, sexual identity, and disability status.

Quality of Sport Settings Impact Mental Health

- In sport settings that focus on effort, improvement and teamwork, depression symptoms are **significantly lower (9.3%)** vs settings where winning is the main goal and success is defined by ability compared to others (**24.7%.**)



- In sport settings where girls have more “voice and choice” over goals and activities, depression symptoms are **significantly lower (10.4%)** vs settings where they don’t have that opportunity (35.1%.)

Coach Relationships Matter

- Girls who have strong relationships with their coach report lower levels of depression (13.4%) and anxiety (8.9%) symptoms compared to girls who don’t (28.9% and 21%, respectively.)

Multiple Sports and Long-Term Play

- Rates of clinical depression are **3.3 times lower** for girls who play more than one sport compared to those who don’t play.
- Girls who play sports for 5+ years are **3.6 times less likely** to be clinically depressed than girls who don’t play.
- Rates of mental health disorders are **5 times lower** for girls who play multiple sports and have played sports for 5+ years, compared to girls who don't play.

Involvement in Extracurricular Activities

- **40%** of girls who play sports are more likely to be involved in other extracurricular activities in school, compared to 26% of girls who don't play sports.
 - **35%** of girls who play sports are more likely to be involved in community service, compared to 21% of girls who don't play.
 - **23%** of girls who play sports are more likely to be involved in academic enrichment activities, compared to 15% of girls who don't play.

Inequities in Sports Participation Persist

- Girls who identify as white are much more likely to be playing sports than their non-white peers.
- Girls with disabilities are significantly less likely to be sports participants.
- Girls identifying as LGBTQ+ are also significantly less likely to be sports participants.

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