

# Supporting mental wellbeing in community sport

## A toolkit for sporting organisations

This is a four-part suite of resources designed to help sporting organisations support the mental wellbeing of young people aged 12-24 years.

It includes a:

**toolkit:** containing eight actions, this toolkit aims to provide sporting organisations with a clear framework and some practical tools to ensure that they are supporting young peoples' mental health and wellbeing

**checklist:** once you have read the toolkit, use the checklist to tick off the ways your club can provide a safe and inclusive environment for players

**guide:** a practical guide to identifying and helping young people with signs of mental ill-health

**video:** a discussion featuring a young person, coach and research expert on how to have conversations about mental health in community sport.

### The relationship between sport and mental health

Mental illness is the most common health issue in young people, with 75% of mental illness having its onset before the age of 25<sup>1</sup>. Australian data suggests that one in four people aged 16-24 have experienced mental ill-health in the past 12 months<sup>2,3</sup>.

This is not simply typical adolescent stress. In fact, mental health problems are the leading cause of disability for young people<sup>4</sup>.

Mental ill-health is associated with poorer academic outcomes, unemployment, poor social supports, and substance use<sup>5</sup>. Those with mental health problems are at increased risk of thinking about or dying from suicide<sup>6</sup>.

Intervening early improves outcomes for young people and ensures they can access support from a range of sources in the community<sup>2</sup>.

### Why are community sports important?

Sports play a central role in Australian culture, and this is reflected in the fact that a majority of young people participate in organised sport<sup>7</sup>. Participation in sport can have direct benefits for physical and mental health by encouraging regular exercise<sup>8</sup>.

Community sporting clubs, associations, and leagues also have the potential to provide indirect benefits toward mental health via the social support and resources they offer to their members. However, young people don't always look for help or speak up when they need help.

# About the toolkit

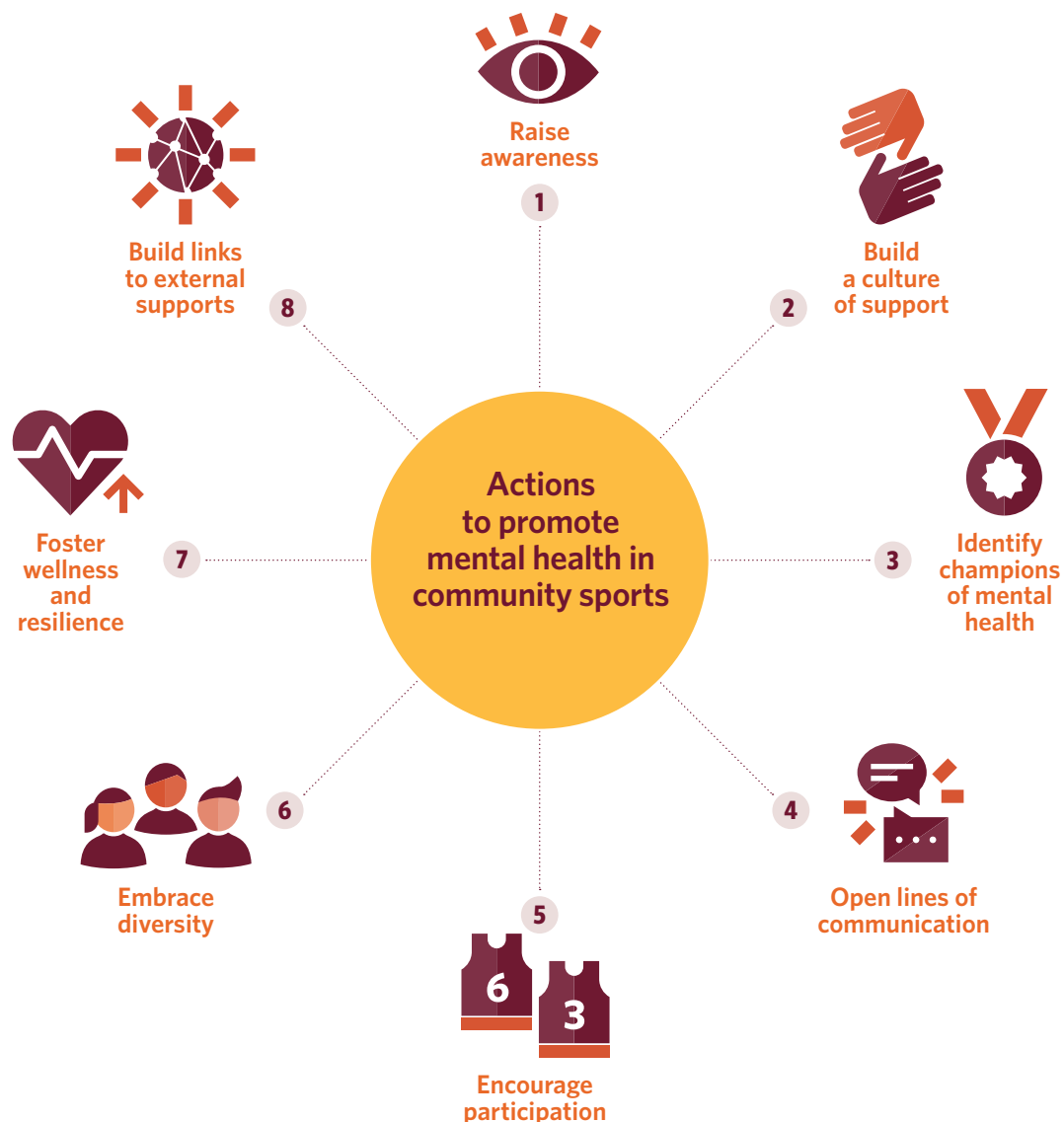
This toolkit aims to provide sporting organisations with a clear framework and some practical tools to ensure that they are supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing.

The eight actions described in *Figure 1* offer some key priorities. For each of these actions, the toolkit explains what the issue is, why it is important, and provides some practical ideas about implementation.

In your setting, there are likely to be aspects that we outline that are already well implemented, and others that need work. This toolkit can be used as a basis for recognising areas of strength as well as priorities for change. Your sporting club can use the [Supporting mental wellbeing in community sport: a checklist for sporting organisations](#) in addition to this guide.

It's also important to note that this advice might not easily apply to your setting. At the end of the toolkit, we offer some additional support options for those wanting more advice or guidance.

**FIGURE 1** A toolkit to promote mental health in community sports





# 1. Raise awareness

## What is this and why is it important?

Building the capacity of sporting organisations to support mental health begins with ensuring that there is a common understanding of what mental health is and why it is important. Awareness of mental health is not the end point, but it forms a key foundation to other changes that ensure your organisation promotes mental health and supports those in need.

### Key mental health messages to convey at your club

- Mental health is an important aspect of general health.
- Adolescence and early adulthood are key periods when mental health problems can develop.
- Mental health problems in young people are common.
- Recognising mental health problems as early as possible is important.
- Early help-seeking offers the best chances for recovery.
- Early and effective treatment is available and has good outcomes.

## How do we implement this?

Reflect on the current level of mental health awareness and understanding in your organisation. Take a moment to look at *Figure 2: organisation self-assessment of level of awareness and understanding about mental health*. Place your club along the spectrum using the indicators.

You can also use the [Supporting mental wellbeing in community sport: a checklist for sporting organisations](#) to help get a clearer idea of what you're already doing and where you can improve.

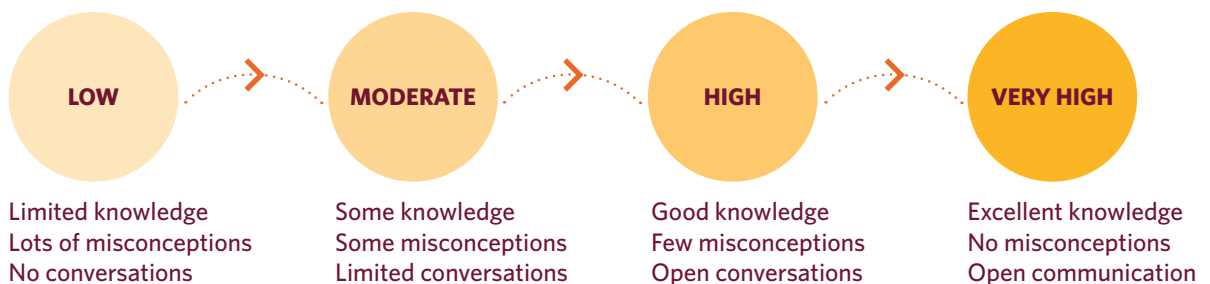
Once you have made an assessment, you can determine what types of activities might help raise awareness and knowledge within your organisation. If you have rated yourself as 'very high', consider these activities as maintaining a high level of awareness and understanding among the organisation and ensuring that new participants are able to access the same high-quality information.

### Example activities to raise mental health awareness at your club

It is important to think through a range of activities so that the club and athletes are exposed to a range of messages and information across the year. Here are some examples:

- Events with a mental health focus.
- Guest speakers who are experts in the field.
- People sharing experiences of mental ill-health and recovery.
- Information sharing such as disseminating information about mental health in written or online form.
- Fundraisers for mental health charities.
- Having an annual mental health week or month.
- Promotion of local mental health services and supports.

**FIGURE 2** Organisation self-assessment of level of awareness and understanding about mental health





## 2. Build a culture of support

### What is this and why is it important?

There is potential for some tension to exist between apparently opposing forces in sport. On one hand there is the drive towards competitiveness and excellence, and on the other hand the importance of supporting those who are struggling.

Building a culture of support is about changing perceptions to show that supporting mental wellbeing promotes, rather than impedes, sporting excellence.

As demonstrated in *Figure 4: cycle of excellence and support*, a culture of support ensures that those needing assistance receive timely and expert care. This means that individuals recover, and are in good mental health, which assists in optimal sporting performance.

### How do we implement this?

Changing culture is a very complex and challenging task that goes beyond simple solutions. [VicHealth](#) describe some of the features of healthy sporting clubs that may be used to help foster a culture of support<sup>9</sup>:

- Celebrate history with pride: cultivate an understanding of the club's history, promote it through memorabilia and stories.
- Family focus: your club can do this by involving families in all areas from junior players, family-friendly events, and scheduling.
- A social spirit and commitment to helping others: your club can do this by including all members of the community, and by sharing facilities with the broader community.
- Active communication and promotion: your club can do this by having strong communication with internal participants, and the broader community.
- Recruiting and retaining volunteers: your club can do this by providing a range of volunteering opportunities, building relationships with volunteers, and acknowledging their work.
- Club ethos: your club can build pride by demonstrating that it is an open, supportive, and healthy place to be involved.

**FIGURE 3** Excellence and support represented as being in tension



**FIGURE 4** Cycle of excellence and support





## 3. Identify champions of mental health

### What is this and why is it important?

Supporting mental health takes a lot of work, and although it is a collective effort it is important to have key people driving the mental health agenda. We call these people 'champions' of mental health, and their role is to perform tasks such as:

- being a source of information and support to others
- being involved in their organisation's events and initiatives that relate to mental health
- being a role model in promoting a positive culture around mental health
- paying attention to issues or behaviours that might need a response
- continuing to develop their own understanding and skills in the area of mental health
- promoting changes that are implemented.

As outlined in *Figure 5: a network of mental health champions*, we recommend that champions come from all areas of the sporting community. It is vitally important to have young people involved and to ensure that they are heard and respected as key participants and leaders. At the same time, club leadership also has a responsibility to take an active stance in promoting mental health.

### How do we implement this?

It is possible that informal mental health champions have already emerged in your organisation. Perhaps these are people who have a lived experience with mental ill-health themselves, or they have cared

for or known people with mental ill-health. Perhaps they have done some study or reading about the issue of mental health, or they may simply have an interest or passion for this area.

Although having these informal champions is great, we recommend a more organised process for selecting champions. This process would involve asking for volunteers from each of the areas outlined in *Figure 5: a network of mental health champions*, and arranging a regular meeting time between the different people involved. Who might be involved and how regularly they meet will depend on your context. But in general, we encourage an inclusive approach to all those who are interested in playing a role.

#### What can mental health champions do at your club?

- Promote their role and mental health initiatives throughout the organisation so that people know who to discuss ideas or concerns with.
- Meet regularly with other champions across the club – such as those from different codes within your club – and support one another in implementing initiatives or changes.
- Commit to being the organisation's mental health champion for a certain period, and then move on from the role if desired.
- Communicate to everyone around the organisation that mental health is a key priority.

**FIGURE 5** A network of mental health champions





## 4. Open lines of communication

### What is this and why is it important?

One of the biggest hurdles to timely recognition and support of mental ill-health is the stigma associated with it. People can feel shame and confusion about their experience and not want to share, or they may want to share but not know who to talk to. Your club can break down mental health stigma by encouraging open communication about mental health in sporting clubs the same way that people would talk openly about physical injuries.

Open communication about mental health in sporting clubs can take place:

- between staff, leadership, and players
- among young people
- among family, friends, and other club supports.

### How can open communication reduce mental health stigma?

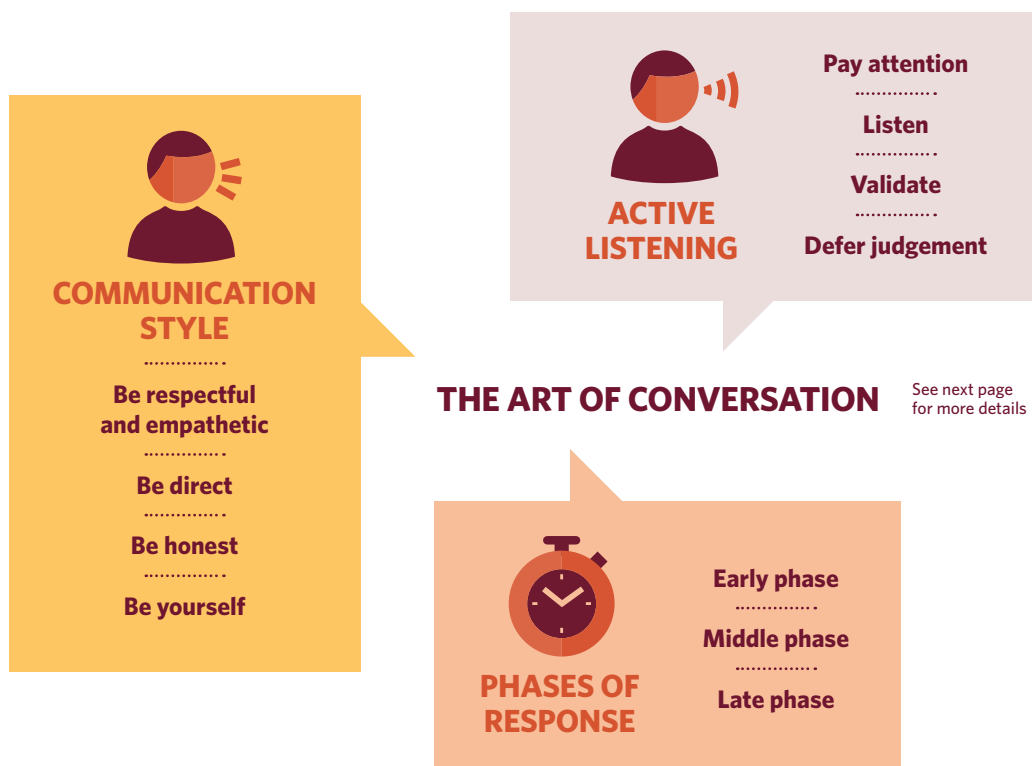
When you encourage open communication about mental health in and around your sporting club, it can reduce mental health stigma by:

- ‘normalising’ discussions about mental health so that people talk about it as they would talk about physical health
- offering opportunities to exchange ideas and experiences about mental health
- helping to notice those who are struggling
- building awareness and mental health knowledge
- ensuring that support is available from multiple people within the club.

### How do we implement this?

Figure 6: *the art of conversation* shows some practical tips for talking with young people about their mental health in a sporting context. For more information, please download Orygen’s *Supporting young people with mental health problems in community sports settings: a guide for responding*.

FIGURE 6 The art of conversation



**FIGURE 6** The art of conversation (continued)



**COMMUNICATION STYLE**

**Be respectful and empathetic**

- Convey the sense that you care and are available as a support
- Focus on making the young person feel comfortable

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**Be direct**

- Use clear language
- Don't be afraid to ask questions, in a respectful way

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**Be honest**

- About what you can and can't offer them
- About limits of confidentiality. This means you can keep their information private but not if it will impact on their, or someone else's safety

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**Be yourself**

- Speak in your own language
- Use your own strengths in connecting with young people



**ACTIVE LISTENING**

**Pay attention**

- Give your undivided attention to process what is being said
- Be flexible - some young people may prefer to talk while walking, or kicking the footy

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**Listen**

- Ask open ended questions (e.g. How are you feeling? Rather than are you angry at someone?)
- Focus on hearing what the young person is communicating

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**Validate**

- Show you are listening by reflecting back what you are hearing
- This might include repeating, paraphrasing, or reflecting
- Communicate that you appreciate and acknowledge their experience

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**Defer judgement**

- Beware of the "righting reflex" - you don't need to fix things
- Try to be understanding and non-judgemental



**PHASES OF RESPONSE**

**Early phase**

- Greet the young person
- Ask for permission to chat (it's ok to take no for an answer)
- Check in on how they are doing

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**Middle phase**

- Mention things that have concerned you
- Listen to their experience
- Convey hope & understanding

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**Late phase**

- Come up with a shared plan
- Agree on when you will follow up



## 5. Encourage participation

### What is this and why is it important?

When young people experience mental ill-health they often disengage from activities like sport. This can lead to a vicious cycle of disengagement from exercise and social interactions, which can lead to worsening mental health<sup>10</sup>. Encouraging young people to participate and maintain engagement with their sporting activities is a key priority in supporting their wellbeing.

### How do we implement this?

#### Tips for retaining young people in sports

- TIP** Call the young person and discuss what is happening for them and ask what you can do to help.
- TIP** Ensure that all players are given a reasonable amount of 'on field' time.
- TIP** Emphasise the aspects of sports that are about enjoyment and de-emphasise a focus on winning.
- TIP** Maintain communication with young people who need to take some time off from participating.
- TIP** Incorporate non-sports related events into the calendar, like social events.
- TIP** Ensure your awards reflect overcoming challenges, fair play, and team participation - not just excellence in performance.
- TIP** Offer flexibility in terms of engagement, e.g. offering some flexibility in terms of minimum training requirements to play.
- TIP** When young people disengage, have a discussion with family to see what the appropriate action is.
- TIP** Offer/facilitate transport to sports.
- TIP** Survey your young people and families to ask what they think will help with retention and engagement.





## 6. Embrace diversity

### What is this and why is it important?

There are many different reasons to celebrate each person's uniqueness and embrace the identities and experiences that they bring to your organisation. When it comes to mental health, we know that people who come from minority groups – including those with diverse sexuality, gender identity, cultural background, and physical abilities – can all be at increased risk of mental ill-health. Importantly, experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and victimisation can exacerbate these issues.

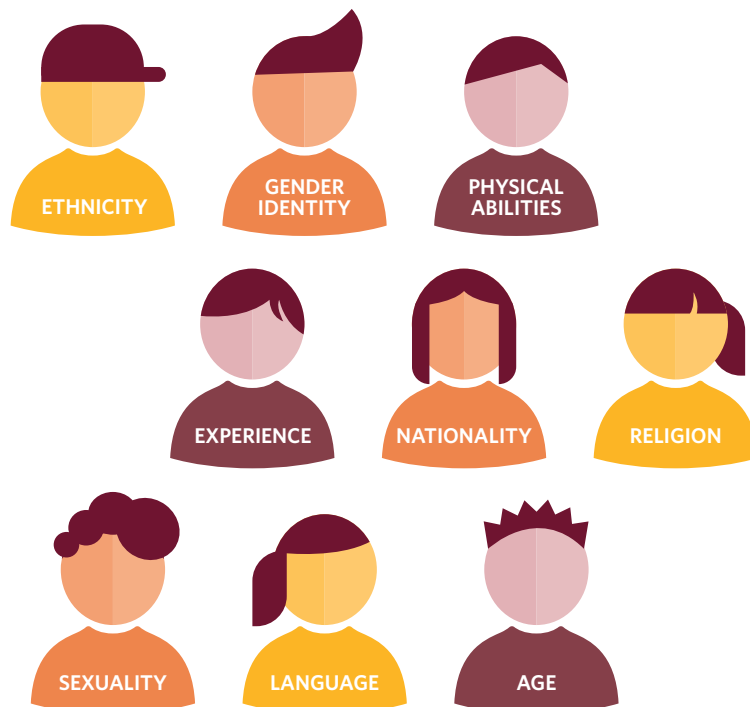
By contrast, creating an atmosphere that starts with inclusion, but also goes beyond it and celebrates differences, helps to facilitate positive mental health, and leads to a more rewarding experience for all parties.

### How do we implement this?

The Centre for Multicultural Youth<sup>11</sup> has developed a [Game Plan Resource Kit](#) that offers some very useful advice for embracing diversity in sports clubs. Although their focus is on cultural diversity, these suggestions can apply more broadly. They include the following:

- Be flexible in catering to different people's needs.
- Don't tolerate bullying, racism, vilification, or intimidation.
- Hold 'come and try' days.
- Incorporate celebrations and social activities relevant to all members.
- Incorporate diversity at the staff, administrator, and umpire level, as well as the player level.
- Learn more about relevant cultural groups or minorities that are part of your club.
- Consult with young people about what will help them feel included and involved.
- Use inclusive language.
- Have processes to welcome new people and offer them support.

**FIGURE 7** Diversity that could be relevant at your club or organisation





## 7. Foster wellness and resilience

### What is this and why is it important?

Promoting mental health is about more than just reducing suffering or treating disorders. Addressing someone's symptoms of mental ill-health – e.g. anxiety – is an example of a deficits-based model that aims to get people 'back' to where they were before they became unwell.

By contrast, a strengths-based model is about building wellness and increasing resilience.

Implementing a strengths-based model:

- builds wellness, resilience, and mastery
- can be used both inside and outside of sports settings
- builds on the unique strengths of those experiencing mental health difficulties.

### How do we implement this?

#### Tips for fostering wellness and resilience in your setting

**TIP**

Focus on a young person's strengths and unique capabilities.

**TIP**

Normalise periods of challenge, mistakes, and losses.

**TIP**

Encourage young people to come up with their own solutions to issues, with your support.

**TIP**

Empower the young person to set their own goals.

**TIP**

Ensure that it is an expectation that all young people are active in taking care of their wellbeing.

**TIP**

Try to set goals that are realistic and achievable.



## 8. Build links to external supports

### What is this and why is it important?

The ideal model of support for young people's mental health involves a broad system of supports that work collaboratively with each other. This ensures that there are multiple people who can detect mental health issues in young people and also act as sources of support.

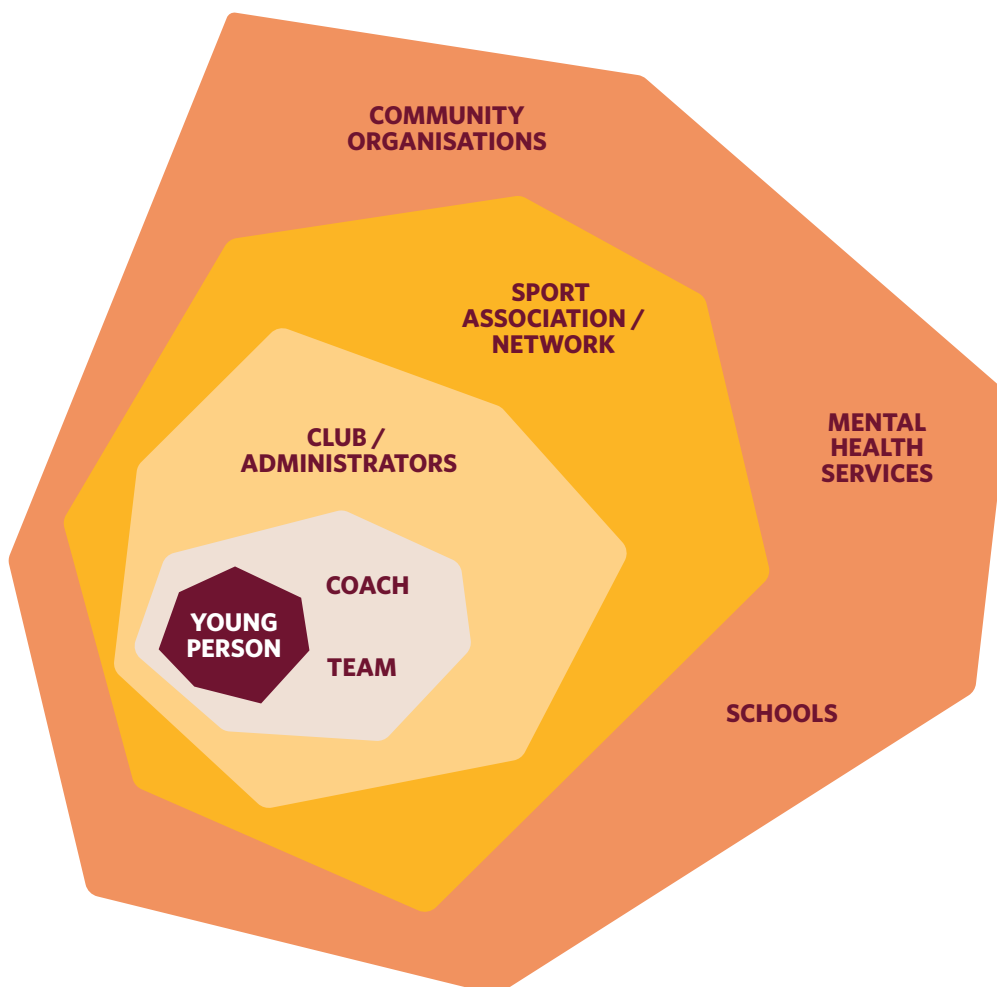
Coordination between different members of this community of support ensures that young people receive consistent messages and responses.

### How do we implement this?

Clubs and associations need formal and informal processes to ensure that they are well linked with external supports. Your club can do this by:

- arranging meetings with local schools, mental health services, and community organisations to learn what they do and how you can collaborate
- compiling a written list of key supports that appears on your website where club staff and players can easily access it
- ensuring that it is clear who has the responsibility to maintain these external relationships
- promoting these external supports regularly among your sporting organisation
- inviting external organisations to your club events and asking them to introduce themselves – perhaps at one of your 'come and try' days.

**FIGURE 8** A broad network of support for young people



# Where do we go next?

This toolkit can be used as a resource for reflecting on areas where your sporting organisation is thriving, as well as areas for improvement. Consider selecting one or two priority areas and start working on implementing some of the changes suggested. Make sure to embed regular reviews and discussions of progress so that you can stay on track.

Be sure to check out the other resources within this suite, including the [checklist](#), [guide to responding](#) and [video](#).

## Additional support

If there are challenges specific to your context that need additional support, we can assist.

Orygen offers a consultation service in the area of mental health and sports. Our staff include leading researchers in the area of youth mental health and sports, as well as clinicians and educators who are experienced in working with sporting bodies at the community and elite level. Please email [training@orygen.org.au](mailto:training@orygen.org.au) to start the conversation.

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