



Strong Minds

Strong Minds helps Special Olympics athletes strengthen their coping skills. Competition provides a natural opportunity to develop active strategies for maintaining emotional wellness under stress, such as: thinking positive thoughts, practicing calming routines and connecting with others. Athletes try a few different strategies as they move through the station. Before exiting, athletes identify the strategies they like best and volunteers provide them with visual reminders to use these tools in competition and in real life. Each athlete also receives a resource packet that includes tips for coping with stress, resources for further exploration and information sheets for caregivers and coaches.

Strong Minds was developed in collaboration with The Center for START Services (University of New Hampshire) and the TeleCopes Project (University of Colorado).

IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT:

Strong Minds screenings found that a large percentage of Special Olympics athletes face significant stresses on a daily basis, but have access to only a few coping strategies.

12% have no coping strategies

62% mostly use avoidant strategies (e.g., not think the stressor), which is associated with increased depression¹.

26% mostly use active strategies (e.g. doing something to help themselves to feel better), which is associated with increased well-being²

GOALS:

1. Increase awareness about active coping strategies that can be used in competition and in life
2. Support athletes to identify coping strategies that they like and think they will use
3. Provide resources on good coping for athletes, coaches & caregivers
4. Start conversations about coping and mental health

In The Field

Jeremy, a 17-year with Down syndrome, was initially very proud to see his photograph on the program for his statewide games. "That's me!" he said gleefully, pointing to the photo of a basketball game. A moment later, his smile faded into a frown, as he said "We lost...very bad...I missed...I am not good (at) basketball." Jeremy then turned to his coach and asked if he could please throw all the programs into the trash. As much as his coach tried to re-assure him that it was a good picture, that it didn't matter if his team lost that day, Jeremy became increasingly upset, continuing to rehash his missed shot and his team's defeat.

Like many individuals with an intellectual disability, Jeremy becomes overwhelmed by his emotions very quickly. The coping strategy he tries (throwing away all of the programs) is not an effective strategy, and won't help him to manage his emotions long-term. Teaching Jeremy some active coping strategies – things he can do for himself to manage strong emotions – will help him to remain calm under stress. It will also help him to see himself as capable of handling his feelings, instead of being overwhelmed by them. The tools he needs in competition are also the tools he will need for managing the emotional challenges of real life.