When and How to React to Interpersonal Violence as a Bystander: A Coaches' Practical Guide

This guide aims to:

1) Better understand interpersonal violent behaviour,

2) Debunk myths and stubborn beliefs on interpersonal violence,

3) Provide strategies on how to react as an active and positive bystander in violent situations,

4) Create space for your self-care.

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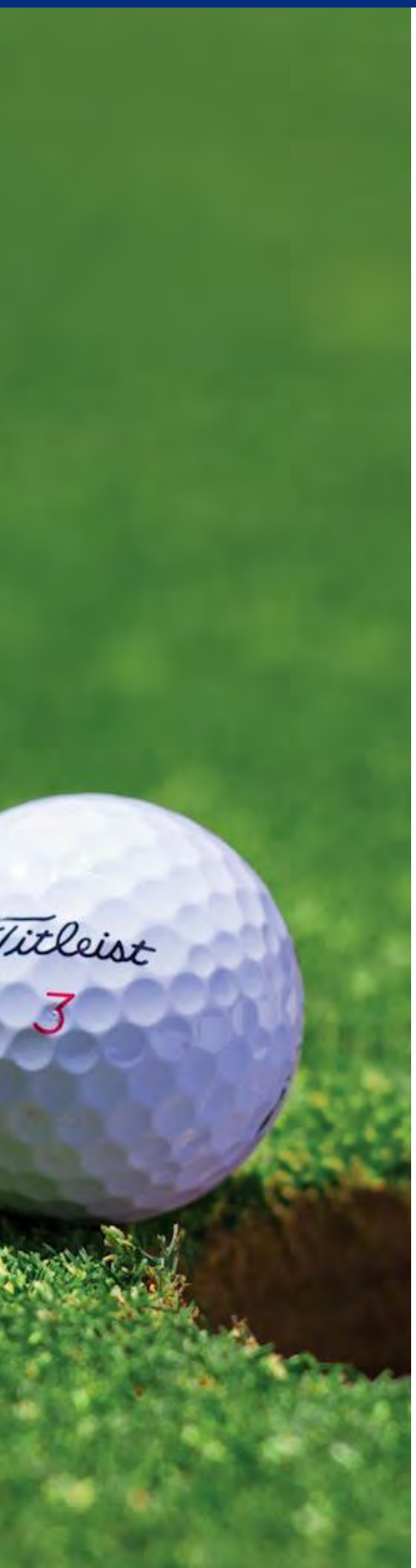


Interpersonal violence

What is interpersonal violence

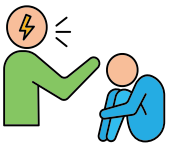
Every person, and therefore every athlete and coach, has their boundaries. These boundaries are not always visible and differ from person to person or social group. When you cross someone's boundaries, you harm their integrity.

For more information on **healthy boundaries with athletes**, view this guide.

Interpersonal violence involves the **intentional use of physical force or power** against other people by an individual or a small group of individuals. It **can occur online**, be **perpetrated by different actors** and **take different forms**. Experiencing interpersonal violence can lead to **harmful consequences** such as pain, emotional damage, developmental issues or even death.

There are four types of interpersonal violence. Therefore, these behaviours are always off limits and must be prohibited to ensure a healthy and motivated sport community.

Psychological violence:



- Yelling, humiliating, ridiculing athletes,
- Rejecting or deliberately excluding an athlete,
- Excessively criticizing, for example, an athlete's performance or attitude,
- Forcing or pressuring an athlete to undergo excessively intense training, sometimes as punishment, until they are extremely exhausted or even to the point of vomiting,
- Forcing training despite injury or exhaustion,
- Imposing unhealthy weight-loss practices,
- Enforcing doping use.

Neglect:

- Withholding water or food, lack of safe equipment,
- Abandoning an athlete during a training session, competition or sport trip,
- Allowing or forcing an athlete to participate in training/competition despite an injury, even against medical advice,
- Asking an athlete to put their sport before their education.

Physical violence:

- Shaking, pushing, grabbing or throwing an athlete,
- Hitting an athlete with a hand or an object,
- Punching or kicking an athlete.

Sexual violence:

- Sexual harassment: unwanted sexual comments or jokes, intimidating sexual propositions,
- Sexual behaviours that make an athlete uncomfortable (e.g., brushing against, whistling, giving a massage), voyeurism (e.g., intentionally appearing in the locker room while athletes are changing), sending undesired sexual texts or pictures via social media (sexting), filming or photographing an athlete while they are undressing or masturbating,
- Touching genital or non-genital parts, kissing a minor athlete, penetrative and non-penetrative sex.

Consent can **never** be legally invoked **when a minor** is involved.

Refer to your jurisdiction's current laws such as the one established in Québec **(click here)**

These four types of behaviours can take place within a relation of trust, power or dependence. In sport, this refers to relationships between a coach and athlete, between athletes (e.g., team captain bullying an athlete in the team), or between supporting staff and athletes.

How present is interpersonal violence in sport?

It has been established that interpersonal violence is a widespread phenomenon in sport, observed all over the world, with relatively high numbers. In the table below, international estimates of athletes experiencing a type of violence at least once during their sport career can be found. The numbers of Québec stem from a recent study asking adolescent athletes (14-17yo) if they experienced a type of violence during their sport career.

Type of interpersonal violence	International estimates (min and max) [1]	Numbers in Québec (most recent) [2]
Psychological violence	21-79%	46%
Neglect	27-69%	-
Physical violence	0,5-78%	25%
Sexual violence	4-66%	18%

Interpersonal violence occurs in all types of sport, at all levels and in all regions. The types of violence often do not occur separately; often a person will have experienced more than one type of violence.

These high numbers show that it is important to use a preventative strategy for interpersonal violence, recognize a violent situation and intervene to limit the impacts of the situation.

1. Tuakli-Wosornu, and colleagues (2024)
2. Parent and colleagues (under review)

Debunking myths on interpersonal violence

Myth: Female athletes are mainly the victims of interpersonal violence.

Female and male athletes experience interpersonal violence at **similar rates**.

This is a common assumption, but research paints a different picture. Female athletes are indeed at greater risk for experiencing sexual violence and neglect. In contrast, male athlete experience more physical violence.

For psychological violence, findings differ: some studies found more risks for female athletes and others show higher risks for male athletes. It seems both male and female athletes are equally at risk of experiencing psychological violence.

Myth: Interpersonal violence only occurs at the elite level.

Interpersonal violence happens at every level, **from community to elite sport**.

One study found that 68%[3]of recreational athletes experienced at least one type of interpersonal violence. While elite sport can be of higher risk to experience interpersonal violence, because of more training hours, intense performance pressure, and a culture that normalizes violence, the reality is that interpersonal violence occurs at all levels of sport participation.

Myth: It is usually the coach who commits controlling or violent behaviours.

Anyone around athletes or working with athletes can use controlling or violent behaviours.

Contrary to this popular belief, it is not always the coach who uses violent behaviours. Violence against athletes can come from different people in an athlete's environment. Think for example of peer athletes, who may engage in exclusion or bullying (psychological violence and neglect), physical aggression (physical violence) or sharing personal or intimate images without consent (sexual violence).

Other authority figures can also misuse their position, for example medical staff (e.g., physiotherapists) or mental-health professionals (e.g., sport psychologist). Parents and spectators may show violent or harmful behaviours towards athletes as well.

3 Hartill et collègues (2021)

Myth: Coaches humiliating an athlete is not as bad as other types of violence.

Every type of interpersonal violence can cause negative outcomes.

Just because a coach does not use physical or sexual violence does not necessarily mean their behaviour is acceptable. All types of interpersonal violence can cause short- and long-term harm, even neglect and psychological violence.

Athletes all experience situations differently. Even if a situation only happened once (like hitting an athlete) or seems "less severe" but happened repeatedly (like ignoring or mocking an athlete during every practice), it can cause long-lasting harm. These experiences can affect athletes' motivation to train, their mental health (e.g., lower self-confidence, higher feelings of anxiety or depression), physical health, and overall quality of life. They can also influence sport performance, such as a loss of concentration during key moments.

Myth: Most people who experience interpersonal violence report it.

Disclosing and reporting experiences of interpersonal violence is uncommon.

Most cases go unreported. Some athletes do disclose their experiences, usually to someone close to them (e.g., a friend or family member). But after this first disclosure, athletes rarely move forward with formal reporting through official complaint mechanisms. As a result, sport organizations often lack a full picture of how often interpersonal violence occurs.

Talking about what happened, or what someone witnessed, is difficult. Athletes may feel ashamed, fear retaliation, or simply not know who they can turn to for help. Some believe that what they have experienced or witnessed is normal, or part of the sport experience. That is why it is crucial that every athlete, even the youngest, understand what interpersonal violence is, know who to turn to with questions or concerns, and feel safe seeking help.

Coaches and volunteers should also pay attention to warning signs, such as sudden changes in behaviours, freezing when touched, or avoiding certain people or situations. While not every change signals violence, these are important moments to start a supportive conversation. When athletes do disclose a negative experience, it is important to listen to the athlete and react with empathy. The reaction of the person athletes disclose to is crucial and can make a difference between deciding to continue disclosing or withdrawing. Staying alert and approachable can make all the difference.

Myth: Touching athletes will lead to false allegations of abuse.

Coaches can use **appropriate forms of physical contact during practice** without a heightened risk of false allegations, **when this contact is transparent, justified, and respectful of boundaries**.

Many coaches experience stress or uncertainty in situations where physical contact is part of teaching or supporting performance, because of the belief that any touch could lead to false allegations of (sexual) abuse. This concern can also extend to other coach-athlete interactions, creating the feeling that “you cannot do anything anymore” without putting yourself at risk.

In reality, false allegations of sexual abuse are rare, and research shows that athletes are generally able to recognise the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. When used appropriately, physical contact is often perceived by athletes as an essential part of quality coaching that will improve their performance. Rather than avoiding physical contact altogether, coaches are encouraged to explain their intentions (e.g., for safety, technique or support) and use physical touch (pedagogical touch or celebratory gestures such as high fives), while remaining attentive to athletes’ comfort levels and consent.

In practice, coaches may encounter many “grey zone” behaviours, such as using physical touch. These are seen as interactions that can be interpreted differently depending on context, intent, relationship, and individual perceptions. In these situations, the impact on the athlete is not always immediately clear and can vary. Avoiding all grey zone behaviours out of fear of crossing boundaries, damaging relationships, or facing false allegations is not an effective strategy. Instead, coaches should aim to build healthy, trust-based coach–athlete relationships in environments that encourage open communication, empower athletes to speak up, and allow for ongoing dialogue about boundaries and expectations.

For more information on **healthy boundaries with athletes**, view this guide.

Myth: A harsh coaching style is necessary to achieve top results.

Coaches achieve better results through safe and motivating approaches.

In sport, it is often believed that being tough, yelling, or humiliating athletes is part of pushing them to the top. These types of behaviours are often normalized; everybody thinks this is part of the game. Research shows the opposite: harsh and/or violent coaching behaviours harm athletes, both their well-being and their performance.

Importantly, behaviour does not necessarily have to be violent to be harmful. Demotivating or controlling coaching styles can already have lasting negative effects. Athletes who experience this are more likely to feel performance anxiety, have lower self-esteem, and even burn out. They often make less individual progress, perform worse and report more negative coach-athlete relationship. These effects can last well beyond one training season.

Research consistently shows that supportive, autonomy-building and structuring coaching predicts stronger performance and greater well-being. Creating a safe and motivating sport climate allows athletes to thrive, enjoy their sport, and reach their full potential.

For more information on **how to implement a motivating climate**, view this guide.

Myth: It is not my role as a coach to intervene in a situation between athletes.

If you **sense something, do something**. Everyone can be an active bystander.

It is the responsibility of everyone involved in the sport community to step up and intervene when witnessing an inappropriate or violent situation. As a coach, you play an important role in creating a safe environment. That means you can – and should- act as an active and positive bystander (continue this guide to learn more about what a bystander is and how to respond).

Being an active and positive bystander does not always mean stepping in directly during a conflict. Your response can take many forms, such as checking-in on someone after an incident. Even small actions can make a big difference. You do not have to risk your own safety or handle a situation alone, but **doing nothing is never neutral**.

For more information on **conflict prevention and resolution**, view this guide.

Everyone can be an active and positive bystander. Want to learn how to recognize and respond as a bystander? Keep reading this guide.

Sense something, do something

As a coach, it is important to stay alert to signs of any form of inappropriate behaviour and/or interpersonal violence. Knowing how to respond if a situation arises during training, camp or competition is crucial.

What is a bystander?

Bystanders are people who directly witness or indirectly find out about a (inappropriate) situation but are not directly involved. In sport, this could for example be another athlete, a parent, a spectator, a coach, a therapist, etc. As can be seen in the table below, by handling a concerning situation, bystanders can have a positive (or negative) impact during, after or outside of an incident.

Action / Impact	**Reactive** *(during or right after an incident)*	**Proactive** *(Outside an incident)*
Positive	• During: stop the situation by intervening. • After: support the individual(s) directly involved in the situation, contact parents, speak to the individual committing controlling or violent behaviour, etc.	• Educate yourself on the topic, set a good example, give athletes a voice (e.g., ask how they feel at practice, include them in decision-making).
Negative	• During: encourage, applaud, participate yourself, document the situation (filming) • After: not believing, minimizing, discrediting, etc.	• Blame people with lived experience of sexual violence, reinforcing gender inequality, not allowing young athletes to have a say, etc.

An **active and positive bystander** is someone who chooses to not ignore the situation, but to step in, speak up and help stop the behaviour.

How to react

Violent behaviours can take many forms and occur at different levels of severity. Everyone has their own idea of what is okay or not okay, and how serious it is often depends on the situation and the people involved. Their subjective opinion on the situation can also change over time. This makes it hard to judge the situations or to have one single rule of how to react that applies to every case.

However, the **key message is "sense something, do something".**

If a situation feels inappropriate or violent, through disclosure or direct observation, an active and positive bystander will act. **Acting means intervening to stop or de-escalate the situation, when it is safe to do so.** It also means making sure the concern is reported so it can be handled properly.

Being an active and positive bystander **does not mean investigating** what happened, deciding who is right or wrong, or trying to solve the situation on your own. These responsibilities belong to the appropriate people or structures within your or an external organization (see more on this at *Refer*).

You can find the process of bystander behaviours below:

1. **Sense**
2. **Recognize**
3. **React**
4. **Record**
5. **Refer**
6. **Reflect and care**

1 Sense

Often the start of an intervention is a **suspicion or "gut feeling" of the bystander** themself. Sometimes an athlete might disclose something to you, other times you walk in on a situation taking place.

Marie is a 15-year-old gymnast who suffered a serious back injury right before an important competition. You, a coach of the younger group of gymnasts, overhear a conversation between Marie and her coach Céline. Coach Céline is urging Marie to keep training and to compete this weekend. She emphasizes how important the event is for Marie's ranking. Despite Marie's pain and the medical advice to rest, coach Céline convinces her to push through.

2 Recognize

Notice and recognize signs or negative interactions between athletes, or between adults in charge (e.g., coaches, parents, healthcare professionals, sport administrators) and athletes. Even if these signals do not necessarily indicate violence, be vigilant for them and do not ignore them or look away. Examples of signals:

Person experiencing controlling or violent behaviour	Person committing controlling or violent behaviour
• Having unexplained or unusual injuries, e.g., bruises, scars, scratches,	• Ignoring or making fun of codes of conduct and not acknowledging this is a problem,
• Continuing training, despite clearly stating to be in pain; or taking pain-reducing medicine to be able to continue training,	• Not respecting athletes' privacy, e.g., in the locker room, during one-on-one conversations, on social media,
• Reporting one feels worthless,	• Using inappropriate language, e.g., sexual remarks or 'jokes',
• Isolating themselves from the team, friends or other peers,	• Leaving a peer athlete out of social events or group chats,
• Showing sudden changes in behaviour or mood, e.g., lack of interest or motivation in the sport, becoming aggressive, withdrawing, feeling ashamed,	• Regularly making negative comments on performance of the same athlete, or ignoring athletes not meeting performance expectations,
• Acting secretive, e.g., stopping a story or going quiet when an adult enters,	• Selecting athletes for "special treatments",
• Avoiding certain situations or specific people,	• Focusing only on results, without considering athlete well-being,
• Someone reporting having seen, heard or experienced a violent situation.	• Seeking out situations where (peer) supervision or social control is limited or impossible, so it is possible to act without being monitored or sanctioned,
	• Not caring about what the athletes are doing, or where they are.

As a bystander of the conversation between Marie and coach Céline, you recognize several signs that the situation is not appropriate. Coach Céline is only focused on the ranking (performance outcome) and is ignoring Marie's well-being.

The coach is also disregarding medical advice, something you know can lead to further harm. You notice Marie is very quiet, with her shoulders tense and her hands clenched. She appears uncomfortable even though she verbally agrees with her coach.

3 React

When you recognize a violent or potentially violent situation, **respond as an active and positive bystander**.

How you respond will depend on the context, such as who is involved (person committing violent behaviour or person experiencing it), their age (minor or adult), your role or function, and the severity and urgency of the situation. These factors can guide what action feels most appropriate and safe.

As a bystander, your **primary role is to de-escalate a (potentially) violent situation** when possible and safe, and to report the incident so it can be followed up by the appropriate people or structures within your or an external organization (see *Refer* on page 13).

Disclosure

Sometimes, an athlete may disclose an experience of violence they have lived through, rather than you witnessing the situation yourself. This can be a spontaneous disclosure, where the athlete may not realise they are disclosing something, or a deliberate disclosure, where the athlete understands what has happened and chooses to disclose to you. **When a disclosure occurs, your role is to listen and respond in a supportive and responsible way, not to investigate**.

If an athlete discloses to you:

- Stay calm and present, so the athlete feels safe,
- Listen attentively and without judgement,
- Thank the athlete for telling you and reassure them that speaking up was the right thing to do,
- Acknowledge and validate what they share (e.g., "*I believe you*"),
- Be transparent about limits to confidentiality: do not promise to keep what they share a secret, especially when safety or mandatory reporting may be involved,
- Avoid questioning or probing for details; let the athlete share at their own pace and in their own words.
- Offer further support, but let it be on the athlete's term. Ask for example: "*How would you like me to support you in this situation?*".

Witnessing a violent situation

The **5Ds approach** provides different options for bystander intervention that can help stop or de-escalate a situation you are witnessing, while always prioritizing your own safety. Not every "D" might feel as appropriate or safe in every situation. As a bystander, you select the response(s) that best fits the situation, rather than to use all the "Ds".

Distract: shift attention away from the situation and towards you (e.g., ask someone directly involved in the situation an unrelated question, such as what time the competition starts).

Delegate: get help from others, as you are stronger together. Involve another adult bystander, the safeguarding officer (or other people responsible for safety) or the person in charge (e.g., coach, referee).

Direct: when safe and appropriate, speak up and clearly tell the person committing violent behaviour that this behavior is unacceptable, not funny and/or might have negative consequences for the individual experiencing violent behavior. You may also refer to the club's code of conduct (e.g., "*the code of ethics you agreed to follow requires respect for others*"). Keep your message clear, firm and focused on the behaviour.

Delay: intervene at the right time. Do react when you see something, but make sure the situation is safe for you first. In some situations, waiting until emotions have settled, people have calmed down or support has arrived, may be the safest option. When appropriate, check in with the individual(s) involved afterwards.

Document: take factual notes about what you observe (what, when where, what is said or done). Where appropriate and permitted, documentation may support reporting and follow-up.

If you do not feel safe or if it is not appropriate to intervene directly, remain present if possible. Stay nearby and offer your support to the people directly involved in the situation afterward.

In **certain situations, it may be inadvisable to intervene directly, as this could interfere with mandatory reporting obligations or contaminate evidence**. This is especially the case when minors are involved in situations of (suspected) sexual abuse, physical abuse, serious negligence or other situations involving immediate danger to a **minor**.

In these cases, your responsibility as a bystander is to immediately **signal to child protective services and/or police**, who can provide immediate guidance on how to handle the situation and will take over the formal follow-up. In such situations, do not attempt to manage or resolve the situation on your own.

Rumors

Sometimes, you may hear rumors or notice signs or patterns that lead you to suspect that violent behaviour may be or has been occurring, even if you have not directly witnessed it. These signals should not be ignored, but they must be handled with care and discretion.

As a bystander, it is not your responsibility to investigate, verify facts, or confront the person involved. Acting too quickly or informally on rumors may expose suspicions, potentially damaging reputations, putting individuals at risk, or interfering with appropriate procedures.

When concerns are based on rumors or suspicions, your role is to share these concerns with the person responsible for safety, integrity and/or ethics in your club, federation or organization (e.g., safeguarding officer). Together, you can determine appropriate preventive actions, such as increasing supervision, limiting one-on-one situations, or monitoring the situation more closely, in line with organizational procedures.

The goal is to reduce risk and protect athletes, while ensuring that any further action is taken by those who are responsible and authorised to do so.

After the conversation ends and coach Céline resumes working with other gymnasts, you set your group of younger gymnasts up with an activity and walk over to Marie. You check in with her by asking a few questions: how are you, how is the back pain, are you sure you want to continue to train and compete. You also remind Marie that it is acceptable to say no to her coach, explaining that what she is being asked to do is not appropriate and goes against medical advice (delay).

Marie remains hesitant – she doesn't want to disappoint her coach. Based on this, you decide to speak with the head coach (delegate). You disclose what you heard and express your concern. You ask the head coach to join you in addressing the situation with coach Céline in a private meeting, emphasizing that pressuring Marie to train and compete is not acceptable and violates the club's code of conduct regarding athlete safety and medical decisions. You also request that the head coach informs Marie and her parents, since you believe that if no adult intervenes, Marie may continue training.

The head coach agrees. Together, you first meet with coach Céline to explain the concerns (direct). Afterward, the head coach and coach Céline meet with Marie and her parents to discuss what happened, apologize for the inappropriate behavior, and develop a safe plan for Marie's rest and return to training.

You make a note to check in with Marie the next time you see her.

4 Record

After responding to a situation – whether through witnessing an incident, receiving a disclosure or hearing rumors – **take time to write down what happened**. Note the date, time, location, individuals involved and a **short (factual) summary** of what you saw, heard or were told. Also record the actions you took in response.

After the conversations, you write down what happened. You include details on the date and time, what you witnessed, who was there, the steps you took yourself, what was said during different conversations and the outcomes of these conversations. At the head coach's request, you share these notes with her.

5 Refer

To ensure appropriate follow-up, **signal or report what you have observed and how you have responded to the individuals or structures responsible within your club or organization**. This may include, for example, informing the head coach, members of the club's board, a safeguarding officer, or the person responsible for safety, integrity and/or ethics in the organization.

When there are reasonable indications that physical, psychological or sexual violence or neglect has occurred in a sport setting, **you may choose to file an official complaint**. As a bystander, you may file a complaint **even if you were only indirectly involved**. Consult the complaint mechanisms, regulations and procedures that are available to you.

For example, coaches in Québec can file a complaint with the Protecteur de l'intégrité en loisir et en sport **(PILS)**.

If you have **knowledge of, or witness signs that a minor is in danger, you have a legal obligation to report this to child protection services**, regardless of internal reporting procedures (e.g., code of conduct in the club). A minor is considered in danger in situations of severe abandonment or neglect, psychological abuse, (risk of) sexual abuse, (risk of) physical abuse, or serious behavioural problems. In Québec, coaches must contact the Director of Youth Protection **(DYP)** to report such situations.

If you are unsure whether a situation is "severe enough" to file as a complaint or warrants a report, you can contact the relevant complaint mechanism (e.g., PILS) or child protection services (e.g., DYP) to seek advice and guidance. Seeking information or guidance does not automatically lead to a formal report - an official complaint is only made if you decide to proceed and an investigation is warranted. Reporting ensures that appropriate steps are taken to protect the safety and well-being of the athlete, which must always be the priority.

The head coach asked for the note of the incidents, since this is not the first time concerns have been raised about coach Céline. The head coach decides to bring this issue to the club's board members and discuss a development plan to help coach Céline adopt safer and more supportive coaching practices.

6 Reflect and care

When an inappropriate or violent situation occurs, this will have an impact. Not only will this impact the individuals directly involved in the situation, but also those more indirectly involved. As a bystander, it is also important to take some **time to reflect on the situation and take care of yourself (and others) afterwards**.

These questions can help with the reflection process, and in the end can help you grow as a coach and an active and positive bystander.

- What did I observe?
- What did I feel?
- What did I do?
- What could I do differently next time?

Take time for **self-care** as well. To learn more about self-care and how to integrate this in your daily routines, read the section on Self-care.

After everything is handled, you go home and reflect on the situation. You feel happy that you recognized the warning signs and took the appropriate steps. Marie will not compete this weekend and will be able to rest and recover from her injury. After dinner, you relax and watch your favorite movie, feeling relieved and content.

Build a safe environment

Although it is important as a coach to know how to react to and handle an incident, prevention of interpersonal violence is as important. Create a positive and safe culture in your training group, by

- Listening to your athletes,
- Talking with your athletes about the importance of a safe environment,
- Making clear agreements on the code of conduct with your athletes,
- Setting a good example yourself,
- Knowing where you can find information and help yourself,
- Knowing how to react to a concern, complaint or case,
- Informing athletes on setting boundaries,
- Explain to athletes where to complain and how the complaint mechanism works.

This way, athletes will feel safe and supported to talk to you about their concerns.

And remember, everyone can be an active and postive bystander, even athletes. If you feel confident as an active and postive bystander yourself, you can also inform athletes how to become one. To this end, inform athletes on the different types of interpersonal violence, boundary-setting and respecting boundaries and how to say and respect 'no'. Next, let them know what actions they can undertake when athletes hear or see something inappropriate. Inform athletes on who they can turn to when seeing, hearing or experiencing an inappropriate situation.

Click here, if you want to have ready-to-use tools on educating athletes bystander behaviors: Safe Sport Allies.

Self-care

As a coach, your role is anything but easy. You are constantly working with athletes to support their development and let them perform in the most optimal conditions. This also includes protecting their integrity and handling the pressure.

As a role model, you might also challenge power structures (e.g., head coaches, administrators, etc.) and drive a positive change in your sport environment. This demands not only sport-technical expertise, but also pedagogical knowledge and emotional resilience.

People dealing with sensitive cases, and (second-hand) experiencing interpersonal violence, have an increased risk of facing:

- **compassion fatigue** (i.e., physical and emotional exhaustion that comes from caring for others);
- **secondary trauma** (i.e., psychological distress resulting from indirect exposure to a traumatic event);
- **moral stress** (i.e., stress when you feel uncertain to fulfill moral obligations or need to make choices in conflict with personal values).

You could feel helpless, cynical, exhausted, over-involved or emotionally detached. Without adequate support or recovery opportunities, this could even lead to burn-out.

Therefore, **self-care** as a coach is not optional, it is **essential.**

What is self-care?

Self-care means **intentionally creating time and space for activities that align with your values and interests**. It is necessary to maintain ethical judgement and empathy.

Work on self-care in a holistic way. Think of, for example, physical, psychological, social, spiritual and emotional ways to increase your health and wellbeing, and your work and life satisfaction.

Examples of self-care

Physical	Exercise, take a walk, do a bike-tour, go dancing, work with your hands, etc.
Psychological	Journal, engage in mindfulness, read, learn a new activity, etc.
Social	Spend quality time with friends or family, avoid people who don't give you joy, etc.
Spiritual	Meditate, pray, practice gratitude, etc.
Emotional	Do something that make you happy, listen to music, watch a movie, express your emotions, etc.

Paying attention to your self-care will help you fulfill your role as a coach safely and sustainably.

According to the Coaching Association of Canada, self-care is therefore a core responsibility for coaches in their mental health in sport **(link to module).**

How to take care of your self-care

Taking care of your **self-care is different for everyone**, it is deeply personal. Therefore, there is not a ready-made list of self-care tips. Research even shows that a one-size-fits-all approach would only lead to frustration rather than support your self-care. Every coach needs to discover their own path to self-care. Take a moment to reflect on these questions:

- What do I need right now?
- What would I like to improve?
- What might be standing in the way?
- What can I put in place to protect my health and well-being?

Here are some **practical habits that could support your self-care practices**:

- Take time to **decompress after a disclosure or incident.** Talk to another coach, go for a walk, or practice mindful breathing. If you want, consult other appropriate resources (e.g., psychologists, mental health professionals),
- **Take care of your body.** Sleep well, stay active, eat regularly, take breaks when things feel overwhelming,
- Be mindful **with social media** and after-hour contacts. The availability of a coach should not be limitless,
- Create a **personal self-care plan** with activities that help to relax, recover, and recharge.

However, coaches should pay attention to warning signs that self-care alone may no longer be enough, such as persistent stress, trouble concentrating, physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, muscle tension, stomach issues, rapid heart rate, exhaustion, trembling), or feeling disconnected from their work or job as a coach. If these arise, seek professional support.

Research highlights these **key pillars to maintain a good well-being**:

- Set-up regular supervision and peer consultation with peer-coaches,
- Set clear boundaries around availability and emotional involvement,
- Build recovery time after emotionally demanding work.

Be aware that a safe sporting environment begins with a safe workplace. Every coach deserves support, recognition, and space for their self-care. That is how coaches stay resilient and remain strong for those who need them the most.

For more information on **resilience building**, view this guide.

For more information on **emotion regulation**, view this guide.

Every coach can make a difference. Recognizing, responding to, and preventing interpersonal violence is not about perfection but about awareness, care, and collective responsibility.

Want to lean more?

This page lists resources on reporting, self-care, and other resources.

Points of contact and information on reporting

Complaint mechanism Quebec
(PILS)
Click here

Reporting a situation
(Director of Youth Protection)
Click here

What to do in case of a doubt

Click here

Self-care and self-management

Getting better my way tool

Click here

Mental health e-learning

Click here

Mental health literacy e-learning

Click here

Others ressources

Practical Guides for Coaches

Click here

IOC Safe Sport Unit

Click here

Safe Sport Allies toolkit

Click here

5D model in soccer
(in French only)

Click here

Putting it into practice

We now invite you to apply the principles and ideas presented above to your own coaching practice. To do so, try the following exercise.

Read the following scenario, think how you would react, remembering the six steps you can undertake as an active and positive bystander (see *How to react on page 7*).

1. **Sense** - start of the situation: During practice you overhear Ethan and Nathan, two of your athletes, teasing a younger athlete, Noah. At first, their comments sound playful, but the tone quickly shifts – their jokes become increasingly sarcastic and even hurtful. Ethan and Nathan are laughing and seem to enjoy themselves, but Noah is not joining in. He stays quiet, avoids eye contact, and does not participate in group interactions or talk to anyone.

2. **Recognize:** What type of behaviour do you observe with Noah, and with Ethan and Nathan?

3. **Respond:** If you decide to react, how will you do this? Remember the 5D's, which one(s) would you use?

Distract  Delegate  Direct  Delay  Document 

4. **Record:** How will you write down this situation? What information will you include in your summary?

5. **Refer:** Do you need to talk to someone afterwards? With whom and what will you tell them?

6. **Reflect and care :** What practices can you put in place to take care of your self-care?

Now think about a situation in your own practice session.

- **Describe** a situation where you saw or heard inappropriate or violent behaviour but did not react.

- **Reflect** on the reason that made you choose not to react. Did you not recognize the behavior, did you not know how to respond, where you not motivated to respond…?

- How would you handle this situation now? Would you **recognize** the situation better, do you know how to **respond** now, would you **record** and **refer**?

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