

Virtual Mindfulness-Based Interventions for College Athletes' Mental Health: A Narrative Review and Implications for Sport Social Work Practice

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The mental health and well-being of college athletes have increasingly been identified as critical concerns within collegiate athletics. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have been explored as an approach to support psychological well-being and performance among this population, with most existing studies examining in-person delivery. However, limited research has explored the use of virtually delivered MBIs for college athletes. The purpose of this narrative review was to examine the existing literature on MBIs among college athletes and, from a translational perspective, consider implications related to intervention delivery and accessibility. A literature review was conducted between January and August 2025 using databases available through Tulane's Howard-Tilton Memorial Library. Gray literature was also consulted to provide contextual information regarding college athlete mental health. Findings suggest that MBIs are associated with improvements in outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and depression among college athletes. However, gaps remain in the literature regarding the use and accessibility of virtual MBIs within collegiate athletic contexts. Further research is needed to examine the practicality, accessibility, and implementation of virtual MBIs for college athletes.

Keywords: college athletes, mental health, virtual delivery, mindfulness-based interventions, sport social work

Background

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (2024) has acknowledged the importance of understanding and supporting college athletes' mental health and well-being. In 2013, based on the recommendation from an interprofessional mental health coalition, the NCAA released guidelines outlining best practices for addressing the mental health concerns of college athletes. In 2019, these efforts expanded requiring member institutions to provide athletes with access to mental health services. More recently, the NCAA has developed a comprehensive mental health and wellness initiative and published an *Inter-Association Consensus Document* to guide institutions in implementing best practices that are evidence-informed, developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive to the mental health needs of college athletes (NCAA, 2024). At the focus of the NCAA's efforts is an emerging awareness of the unique social, academic, psychological, and performance-related challenges that college athletes face, which may increase their risk for mental health concerns (NCAA 2021; Chang et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2018).

Addressing barriers and promoting well-being, particularly among vulnerable populations, is central to the mission of the social work profession (NASW, 2021). College athletes may not always be recognized as a vulnerable population (Gill, 2008); however, emerging research suggests that college athletes have elevated instances of stress, anxiety, identity issues, and help-seeking barriers. Social workers' perspectives are particularly relevant within the collegiate athletic context, considering that performance-related demands, time constraints, and institutional culture may impact mental health risk and access to care (Chang et al., 2020; NCAA, 2024). Social workers can bring a unique lens to the field of college athletics, emphasizing the interconnected impact of individual, institutional, cultural, and systemic factors, as well as the importance of a strength-based, person-in-environment approach (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2021). As the NCAA continues to expand its efforts to address the mental health needs of college athletes, it is imperative that social workers and other helping professionals working with college athletes are aware of evidence-informed best practices in mental health care that are responsive to the college athletes' contextual realities to promote overall well-being.

In addition to addressing systemic barriers, college athletes require access to evidence-informed mental health support and treatment that are both practical and effective. Within this manuscript, treatment effectiveness is reflected in the extent to which evidence-informed interventions are associated with improvements in mental health outcomes (e.g. decreased anxiety, stress, and depression), as measured by validated assessment tools and supported by existing empirical literature. The literature suggests that Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are of particular interest due to their accessibility and their potential to support the mental health and well-being of college athletes (Petterson & Olson, 2017; Anderson et al., 2021). However, within the college athlete literature, MBIs have most often been examined through in-person delivery formats, typically facilitated by trained professionals. Comparatively, there is limited attention to virtual modalities (Mistretta et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023). This gap is worth noting considering post-COVID pandemic shifts in service delivery and the scheduling demands that may impact college athletes' ability to engage with in-person interventions (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025; Cheese et al., 2025; Eberman et al., 2024).

A growing body of research has examined virtual MBIs in general and non-athlete populations. However, little is known about how these findings translate to the unique contextual needs of college athletes (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025; Cheese et al., 2025; Gao et al., 2024).

Given this developing and uneven evidence base, there is a need to synthesize what is currently known, identify where evidence is absent, and consider how findings from adjacent populations may inform future research and practice with college athletes.

Accordingly, the purpose of this narrative review was to examine the existing literature on MBIs with college athletes, with particular attention to delivery methods (in-person versus virtual), mental health outcomes assessed, and gaps in the current evidence base. Thus, rather than determining the comparative effectiveness of virtual versus in-person MBIs, the researchers sought to highlight the extent to which virtual MBIs have been studied with college athletes, the outcomes that have been examined, and implications for future research to inform accessible, evidence-informed mental health care for college athletes.

Methods

Design

A narrative literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on MBIs with college athletes, with particular attention to intervention modality (in-person versus virtual), mental health outcomes assessed, and gaps in the current evidence base. A narrative review approach was selected due to the emergent and heterogeneous nature of the literature, including variation in populations studied, intervention type, outcomes assessed, and study design. This approach was deemed most appropriate for examining the scope of available evidence, identifying gaps and overlap, and informing future research and practice rather than determining which intervention is superior or comparative effectiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Search Strategy

Peer-reviewed literature searches were conducted between January and August 2025 using EBSCO through Tulane's Howard-Tilton Memorial Library. Databases searched include Academic Search Complete, APA PsychArticles, APA PsychInfo, CINAHL Complete, MEDLINE, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Social Work Abstracts, SocINDEX with Full Text, and Sport Periodicals. Search terms reflected three primary concept areas: (a) college athletes, (b) mental health outcomes, (c) MBIs and delivery modality. Boolean operators and equivalent terms were used to broaden the scope of retrieval.

Search terms included combinations of *college athletes*, *student-athletes*, *mental health*, *anxiety*, *depression*, *mindfulness*, *mindfulness-based interventions*, *mindfulness-acceptance-commitment*, *mindful sport performance enhancement*, *virtual*, *online*, *in-person*, *intervention*, and *randomized controlled trials*. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed academic journals published between 2015 and 2025.

Study Identification and Selection

The search strategy was implemented across three phases to reflect the evolving focus of the review. Initial searches examined mental health interventions broadly among college athletes, followed by targeted searches specific to MBIs, and subsequently, searches addressing virtual and in-person delivery modalities. Across all phases, articles were screened for relevance based

on population, intervention focus (mindfulness-based interventions), and relevance to mental health outcomes.

A total of 8 peer-reviewed articles directly informed the core findings of this review. Additional peer-reviewed articles were included to support conceptual framing and interpretation. Gray literature, including reports and consensus documents from the NCAA, was consulted to provide contextual information regarding policy priorities and the mental health landscape within collegiate athletics (NCAA, 2021; NCAA, 2024). Contextual sources were used to inform background and discussion sections and were not treated as empirical evidence of intervention effectiveness.

Quality Appraisal

A formal quality appraisal of included studies was not conducted, as the purpose of this narrative review was not to evaluate intervention effectiveness or determine comparative effectiveness, but rather to synthesize the existing literature, identify gaps, and examine patterns in intervention modality and outcome focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach aligns with the review's translational and gap-identification aims.

Findings

Mental Health Concerns Among College Athletes

Recent literature highlights growing concern regarding the mental health and well-being of college athletes (Chang et al., 2020; NCAA, 2024; Eberman et al., 2024). While participation in competitive sport has historically been viewed as a protective factor, research continues to demonstrate that the interaction of social, environmental, academic, and performance-related demands may contribute to elevated mental health risk among this population. Therefore, professionals working with college athletes must attend not only to individual symptoms but also to contextual influences that shape mental health outcomes (Chang et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2022; NCAA, 2024).

Findings from a large-scale virtual study conducted by the NCAA (2021) indicated elevated rates of anxiety, mental exhaustion, and depressive symptoms among college athletes. Additionally, there were disproportionately higher concerns reported by athletes from historically marginalized backgrounds. Participants identified academic pressure, future planning uncertainty, and financial stress as primary contributors to psychological distress. While approximately 30% of respondents were aware of available campus mental health services, fewer than half reported feeling comfortable accessing support. These findings highlight persistent barriers related to stigma, help-seeking, and institutional culture, supporting the need for accessible, acceptable, and contextually responsive mental health interventions within collegiate athletics (NCAA, 2021; NCAA, 2024).

Mindfulness-Based Interventions with College Athletes

MBIs emerged as a frequently studied approach for supporting college athlete mental health and well-being across the reviewed literature (Mistretta et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023). Among these studies, mental health outcomes most assessed

included anxiety, stress, depressive symptoms, emotional regulation, psychological distress, and general well-being; some studies also assessed sport performance-related outcomes.

Several studies examined the acceptability and perceived utility of MBIs among college athletes. Mistretta et al. (2017) found that college athletes expressed interest in MBIs for reducing stress and anxiety, as well as improving psychological well-being outside of sport. Similarly, Economou et al. (2025) found that college athletes generally perceived mindfulness as acceptable and a beneficial practice for promoting well-being and sport-related performance. Though the authors noted limited literature exploring college athletes' perceptions of mindfulness-based interventions.

Empirical studies that employed structured MBIs with college athletes have primarily used in-person delivery methods. Gross et al. (2018) compared the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) intervention to an active control Psychological Skills Training (PST) condition among female college athletes. The authors observed greater reductions in psychological symptoms, emotional distress, and behavioral disturbances among MAC participants. Glass et al. (2019), in a randomized controlled trial with Division III athletes, demonstrated that participants who received a Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) intervention experienced stabilization or improvement in depressive symptoms relative to a waitlist control, with effects maintained at six-month follow-up. Hut et al. (2023) further compared MSPE and PST using a mixed-methods design and found improvements in well-being across both interventions. However, among participants, the MBI was perceived as particularly beneficial for focus and sport performance.

Collectively, these findings posit that MBIs delivered in-person are associated with mental health and well-being outcomes among college athletes. However, several studies also identified practicality and acceptability concerns, including time burden, scheduling conflicts, perceived formality, and discomfort with group-based personal disclosure. These concerns center on the importance of considering intervention modality and delivery logistics when implementing MBIs in collegiate athletic settings (Mistretta et al., 2017; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023).

In-Person Versus Virtual Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Evidence and Gaps

Notably, no studies were identified that directly compared in-person and virtual MBIs among college athletes. This absence of comparative evidence represents a central finding of the present review. While MBIs have been examined extensively with athletes in in-person formats (Mistretta et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023), and virtual MBIs have been studied in other populations (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025; Cheese et al., 2025), the literature does not currently support conclusions regarding the effectiveness of delivery modality for college athletes.

Several studies examining delivery modality in adjacent populations provide limited translational insight. Schwartz-Mette et al. (2025) compared in-person and virtually delivered MBIs among nursing students and found no significant differences in outcomes across modalities. In contrast, Cheese et al. (2025) reported greater improvements in resilience, life satisfaction, and mindfulness among college students receiving in-person MBIs compared to those receiving virtual interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gao et al. (2024) examined a virtual MBI among international college athletes and found no significant

intervention effects, though the study did not include an in-person comparison and was limited by sample homogeneity.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate inconsistencies across populations and study design, as well as a lack of athlete-specific comparative research. While virtual MBIs may offer advantages related to flexibility and accessibility, particularly for populations with demanding schedules (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025; Cheese et al., 2025; Gao et al., 2024), current evidence is insufficient to determine whether virtual MBIs are comparable to in-person interventions for college athletes. The absence of modality-comparison studies within collegiate athletics highlights a critical gap in the literature and illuminates the need for future research to examine delivery format, practicality, and outcomes in collegiate athletic contexts.

Table 1 presents a summary of the primary empirical intervention studies included in this review. Additional sources were used to provide contextual and conceptual grounding.

Table 1

Summary of Empirical Mindfulness-Based Intervention Studies Included in the Narrative Review

Economou et al., 2025	NCAA Division I college-athletes	The study used 4 survey items to assess acceptability of a MBI intervention (Pilot study)	Survey delivered virtually	Acceptability of MBIs among Division I student-athletes	Two-thirds of the athletes found MBIs acceptable	Findings not generalizable, limited to Division I student athletes who were predominantly white; limited empirical outcome data; pilot design
Mistretta et al., 2017	NCAA Division III college-athletes	Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE)	In-person	Expectations, experiences, engagement, psychological benefits for depression, anxiety and stress, focus, satisfaction with life, mindfulness, psychological flexibility, flow, sport anxiety, sport performance	Athletes reported benefits for sport-related and general psychological functioning (reduced stress, improved focus, mental toughness, self-confidence), as well as mindfulness and flow skills; most athletes intended to	Limitations included small sample size; self-report bias; some participants disliked session format (length, timing, group dynamics, content); no control group; limited to in-person delivery

					continue practicing mindfulness and would recommend MSPE	
Gross et al., 2018	NCAA Division III female college-athletes	Mindfulness Acceptance Commitment approach (MAC) vs. Psychological Skills Training (PST)	In-person	Psychological symptoms (depression, generalized anxiety, social anxiety, academic distress, eating concerns, family distress, hostility, substance Abuse, psychological distress), psychological flexibility, emotion regulation, mindfulness, sport performance	MAC reduced distress, anxiety, eating concerns, substance use and hostility; improved emotion regulation and psychological flexibility; increased sport performance; no change in mindfulness; PST showed no significant improvements	Limitation included small sample; variability in performance scores; no change in mindfulness; limited to in-person delivery
Glass et al., 2019	NCAA Division III college-athletes	Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) vs. wait-list control	In-person	Depression, anxiety and stress, satisfaction with life, mindfulness, psychological flexibility, flow, sport anxiety, sport performance, coach-related sport performance	MSPE reduced depressive symptoms (particularly for athletes in the control group after receiving the intervention); decreased sport related worry; improved flow, mindfulness, self-rated sport	Generalizability limited (Division III athletes only, participants primarily female and white); mixed-team groups and scheduling conflicts may have reduced engagement; limited to in-person delivery

					performance and life satisfaction; benefits were maintained at follow up	
Hut et al., 2023	NCAA Division III varsity track and field college-athletes	Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) vs. Psychological Skills Training PST active control	In-person	Flow, depression, anxiety and stress, sport anxiety, mindfulness, emotion regulation, avoidance tendencies, sport performance satisfaction, and program evaluation	MSPE and PST improved psychological outcomes; MSPE showed stronger effects on mindfulness and flow; both interventions supported reduction in anxiety and enhanced focus	Findings not generalizable due to small, sport-specific sample; unclear impact on performance; reliance on self-report; variability in intervention engagement; limited evidence of long-term effects; scheduling and practical challenges noted; limited to in-person delivery
Gao et al., 2024	International college-athletes	WeChat app (Therapist-guided mindfulness-based intervention) vs. Control (received mental and physical health informational pamphlets only)	Virtual	Dispositional anxiety, Pre-competition anxiety, anxiety during competition, and mindfulness	No statistically significant reductions in anxiety compared to the control group; no significant improvement in mindfulness; the intervention was practical and acceptable, but limited effectiveness was observed	Sample homogeneity; generalizability limited; Participants were not selected for elevated levels of anxiety; variability in sport schedules may have impacted engagement; No in-person comparison

Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025	Nursing school students, faculty and staff	Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)	In-person vs. Virtual	Perceived stress, burnout, positive and negative affect, satisfaction with life, mindfulness	MBSR reduced stress, burnout and improved select mindfulness skills; there was no difference between virtual and in-person delivery	Non-randomized design; potential selection bias and self-selection effects; homogenous sample; limited generalizability; limited follow-up data
Cheese et al., 2025	College students	Mindfulness-Based Intervention Course	In-person vs. Virtual	Mindfulness, life satisfaction, resilience	In-person group saw significant improvements in mindfulness, life satisfaction and resilience; virtual group saw improvements across outcomes, but statistical significance for resilience only; Overall MBIs appear beneficial for student well-being; in-person delivery demonstrated stronger effects than virtual delivery	Small sample size; potential selection bias due to self-selection into the course; non-randomized design; no long-term follow up data; limited generalizability

Discussion

Virtual Mindfulness-Based Interventions and College Athletes

There remains a dearth of research directly comparing the effectiveness of virtual and in-person MBIs for college athletes. The literature used in this review is mostly characterized by in-person MBI delivery, which limits conclusions regarding the practicality and evidence-informed use of virtual MBIs for this population (Mistretta et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2018; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023). This narrative review provides a translational synthesis of the available evidence, highlighting both the potential benefits of MBIs for college athlete mental health and the practical challenges associated with their delivery.

Findings across studies in this review examining virtual and in-person MBIs suggest that virtual delivery is a practical and adaptable approach to supporting mental health outcomes. Nonetheless, the modality's effectiveness and practical implementation remain mixed. For example, Gao et al. (2024) highlights that while virtual MBIs align with the scheduling demands of college athletes, engagement challenges may impact effectiveness. Similarly, research by Cheese et al. (2025) shows that virtual delivery was practical within the academic context, though in-person delivery was associated with stronger outcomes across several well-being measures. In contrast, findings from Schwartz-Mette et al. (2025) suggest comparable outcomes across delivery modalities, indicating that virtual MBIs may be an appropriate alternative when in-person participation is not practical.

From a translational perspective, both in-person and virtual delivery modalities may be appropriate approaches for supporting college athlete mental health. Findings from this review demonstrate that virtual MBIs show promise as accessible interventions. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of coordinated, interprofessional collaboration in the development and implementation of mental health initiatives involving college athletes (Moore et al., 2022), which is aligned with the NCAA (2024) recommendations that mental health programming be developed in partnership with licensed mental health providers. This is particularly relevant because, although the reviewed studies suggest that MBIs may be a suitable evidence-informed approach for supporting college athletes' mental health, a recurring theme across the literature highlights inconsistencies and challenges related to practicality, engagement, or both in in-person and virtual delivery modalities (Mistretta et al., 2017; Glass et al., 2019; Hut et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2024; Cheese et al., 2025; Schwartz-Mette et al., 2025). As such, further research is needed to better understand what is influencing engagement, effectiveness, and implementation within collegiate athletics.

Moreover, based on included studies, the professional backgrounds of facilitators were often unspecified, and none of the primary authors identified as social workers. This observation is not presented as a critique of existing literature, but rather as an opportunity to highlight the value of interdisciplinary collaboration and the role of ongoing evaluation in intervention design and implementation, which are core competencies within social work practice (Moore, 2018; Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Given increasing concerns regarding college athlete mental health (Chang et al., 2020; NCAA, 2024; Eberman et al., 2024), the evaluation of current literature suggests that alternatives to exclusively in-person MBI delivery warrant further exploration. Thus, leveraging interprofessional collaboration among sport social workers, sport psychologists, certified mental performance consultants (CMPC) and other licensed mental health professionals who are all qualified to deliver MBIs can help optimize MBIs for college

athletes, ensuring they are practical, engaging, and tailored to the unique mental health needs of this population (NCAA, 2024; CSWE, 2022; Gill, 2008).

Implications for Practice

Access to Virtual Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Access to virtual MBIs for college athletes remains mostly unknown due to limited empirical investigation. However, existing literature indicates that in-person MBIs may be perceived as inconvenient or burdensome for college athletes, particularly given demanding schedules and competing academic, personal, and athletic responsibilities (Mistretta et al., 2017; Hut et al., 2023; Glass et al., 2019). Thus, virtual MBIs may represent a promising avenue for increasing accessibility and reducing logistical barriers to mental health support.

Implications for practice include the potential development of web-based or app-based mindfulness platforms that are affordable, easily accessible, and tailored to the unique needs of college athletes. Interprofessional teams may include software developers, sport social workers, sport psychologists, nutritionists, psychiatrists, and mindfulness-based researchers, as well as current and former athletes willing to contribute to program development. Ensuring that virtual MBI content is evidence-informed, culturally responsive, and sport-specific may enhance acceptability and engagement among college athletes. Following development, pilot testing with college athlete samples and appropriate comparison groups may allow for the incorporation of participant feedback and refinement of intervention components prior to broader dissemination.

Interprofessional Collaboration and Best Practices for College Athlete Mental Health

The NCAA emphasizes collaboration as a foundational component of college athlete mental health support (NCAA, 2024). In line with this position, greater collaboration within collegiate athletic departments may enhance the quality and effectiveness of mental health services available to athletes. Professionals working with college athletes bring distinct expertise to the athletic environment, and coordinated collaboration allows for more comprehensive and contextually responsive care (Moore et al., 2022; Eberman et al., 2024).

A core element of social work practice involves ensuring that individuals and communities are connected to accessible, appropriate, and culturally responsive services. Social workers possess the training and skillset necessary to identify barriers to care and facilitate connections to resources that align with the needs of the population being served (National Association of Social Workers, 2021; Council on Social Work Education, 2022). This approach aligns with NCAA principles of collaboration and continuous improvement (NCAA, 2024) and reflects a core competency of social work education and practice known as interprofessional collaboration (Council on Social Work Education, 2022).

Additionally, sport social workers recognize the intersectionality that exists in collegiate athletics (Moore et al., 2018). College athletes navigate multiple intersecting identities, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, and athletic role. These intersecting identities interact with institutional and sport-specific contexts, and the cumulative demands associated with balancing these identities may contribute to increased psychological strain, barriers to help-seeking, and disparities in care. As such, sport social workers are uniquely positioned to address the complex social, emotional, environmental, and contextual factors influencing college athletes' mental

health. Integrating social work perspectives alongside other professional expertise is essential to fostering holistic and culturally attuned, athlete-centered approaches to care, particularly in addressing the diverse and intersecting needs of this population (Moore et al., 2018; NCAA, 2024).

Limitations

Several limitations of this narrative review should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the literature was limited to selected databases, and relevant studies may not have been captured. Second, study selection was not conducted systematically, which may have introduced selection bias and limited comprehensiveness. Third, a formal appraisal of study quality was not undertaken, restricting the ability to assess methodological rigor across included studies. Finally, heterogeneity in study populations, intervention types, outcome measures, and delivery formats limited direct comparison across studies.

These limitations are consistent with the aims of a narrative review, which prioritize conceptual synthesis and identification of research gaps over systematic comparison (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite these limitations, this review provides a useful synthesis of the existing literature and highlights critical directions for future research.

Conclusion

Further research is needed to examine the impact of virtual MBIs on college athletes to address persistent gaps in the literature. College athletes face unique contextual challenges that should be considered when developing best practices for accessible, evidence-informed mental health interventions (NCAA, 2024). In addition to the development of college athlete-specific virtual MBIs, future research should examine athletes' perceptions, engagement, and sustained use of virtual MBIs.

Mixed-methods research designs may be valuable for qualitatively exploring perceptions of virtual MBIs while quantitatively examining engagement patterns, perceived effectiveness in addressing depression and anxiety symptoms, duration and frequency of use, cognitive and emotional engagement, and the relative importance of specific intervention features. Such research is necessary to determine whether virtual MBIs are comparable to in-person delivery and to inform the development of accessible, athlete-centered mental health supports within collegiate athletics.

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