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MY VIEW BRIAN HAINLINE

Tennis can help combat youth mental health challenges

By Brian Hainline

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U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy warns that today's youth mental health crisis is the "defining public health issue of our time."

He's right. American adolescents are experiencing unprecedented levels of mental health challenges.

Fortunately, there's a way to reverse these trends. I've spent my career studying the intersection of sports and mental health, including roles as the chief medical officer at NCAA, co-chairman of the International Olympic Committee Consensus Meeting on Mental Health in Elite Athletes, and fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine. Sports can help kids combat depression, become more resilient and find a strong sense of purpose.

Encouraging more kids to get involved in youth sports — and particularly in tennis, which offers several unique advantages — could help solve the mental health crisis.

Kids are experiencing mental health challenges at shockingly high rates. More than 4 in 10 high schoolers report ongoing feelings of sadness and hopelessness.

Sports offer an antidote. Participating in sports is linked to lower rates of depression and anxiety. This is especially true for girls. Girls who participate in sports experience mental health disorders at rates up to 2½ times lower than their inactive counterparts.

Sports help young people build self-worth. The ability to set goals — getting faster, stronger or fitter — and then put in the hard work to achieve them provides a sense of accomplishment.

Tennis is especially equipped to help young Americans grow up mentally resilient. As president of the U.S. Tennis Association, I have seen firsthand how the sport can connect individuals and open doors of opportunity for those who might otherwise be left on the outside looking in.

Tennis has one of the lowest barriers to entry of any sport. Unlike other sports that require costly gear and a field full of players, all a kid needs to start is a \$20 racquet, a few balls and a partner. There are more than 250,000 tennis courts across the United States.

Tennis also promotes family bonding. People can play tennis well into their golden years — meaning parents and even grandparents can play with kids. Research shows depression rates are lower among children who report close relationships with their parents.

The sport also promotes stronger communities. Local clubs, tournaments and events create opportunities to connect. The USTA recreational league has 330,000 players from all backgrounds and walks of life. By encouraging intergenerational interaction and inclusivity, tennis fosters a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Strong community cohesion is associated with positive mental health outcomes.

Tennis has physical health benefits, too. Playing tennis for three hours a week can lower the risk of heart disease by over 50%. Another long-term study discovered playing tennis could extend one's life by up to a decade —longer than any other sport.

Nelson Mandela, who made great use of sports in bringing South Africa together, famously declared, "Sport has the power to change the world. ... It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair."

We need that hope more than ever. For many kids, it can be found on their local court.

Brian Hainline is a doctor and chairman of the Board and president of the United States Tennis Association. This piece originally ran in Detroit News.