



# ONE TEAM

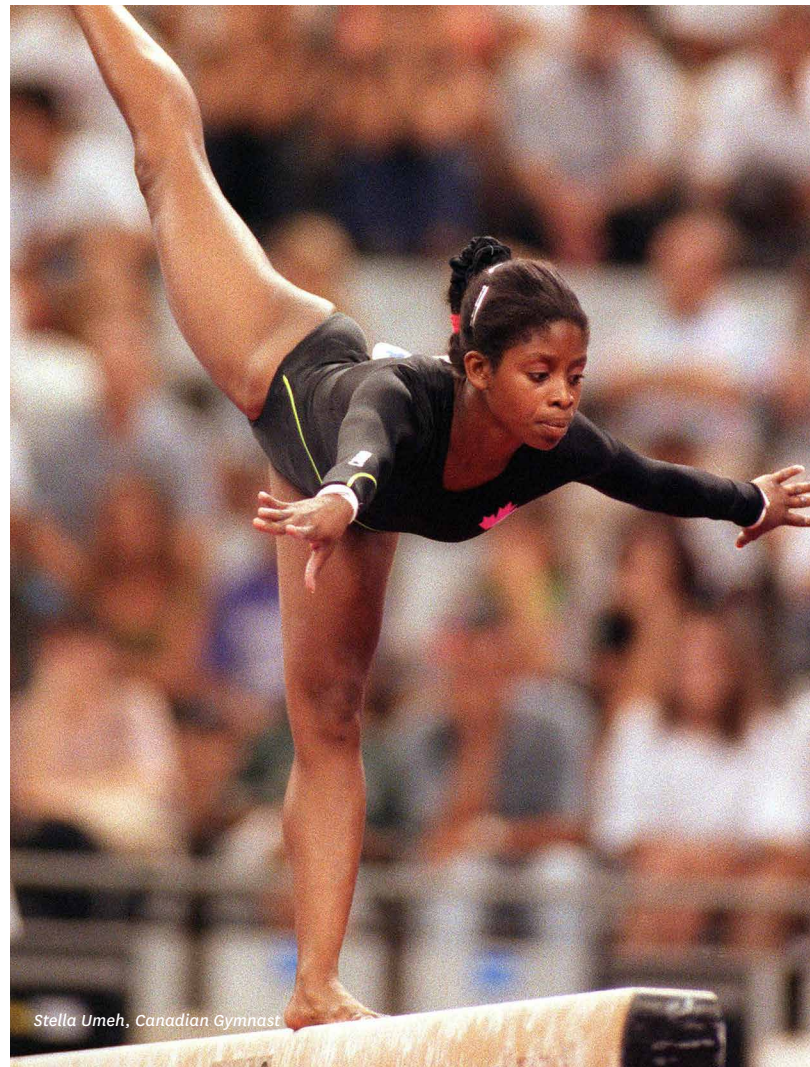
**MENTAL FITNESS**



# FOSTERING MENTAL FITNESS IN LGBTQ+ STUDENTS

**CHILDREN AND YOUTH** who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender creative face unique stigma and discrimination that can increase or intensify the amount of negative thoughts they have every day. The presence of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heteronormativity and cisnormativity in our society and schools means that every day, LGBTQ+ and gender creative individuals are bombarded with messages that they are bad, wrong, evil, not worth it, not enough, etc. Imagine what it's like to look in the mirror and dislike who you are because of the things your friends, your family, your school curriculum, your teachers or the media say about people like you – or because no one ever mentions LGBTQ+ people. Imagine not wanting to share who you really are with anyone. That is a big burden on top of the already thousands of negative thoughts. In addition to these overt or covert negative messages, there are also messages about who we should like and what activities and sports we should enjoy or want to play. The realization that their sport interests and gender expressions challenge society's norms can cause poor academic or athletic performance, isolation, depression and increased suicidal ideation for LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth.

In addition to the negative messages and gender norms and stereotypes, when people don't stand up and speak up against these messages and beliefs, or stand up when someone is being bullied for their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, it reinforces these negative messages. Silence can have equally devastating effects as outward behaviour.



Stella Umeh, Canadian Gymnast

**MENTAL FITNESS IS LIKE PHYSICAL FITNESS. WE NEED TO WORK AT MAINTAINING OR IMPROVING OUR MENTAL FITNESS EVERY DAY, SIMILAR TO OUR PHYSICAL FITNESS. IF WE PLAN TO RUN A 10KM RACE, WE NEED TO TRAIN FOR IT. WE BEGIN WITH 1KM, THEN 2KM, INCREASING TO A 5KM RUN, THEN EVENTUALLY TO A 10KM. THIS TAKES TIME, DETERMINATION, MOTIVATION, A POSITIVE FOCUS, SUPPORT AND REQUIRES A PLAN. JUST LIKE PHYSICAL FITNESS, WE NEED TO HAVE A PLAN TO IMPROVE OUR MENTAL FITNESS. RESEARCH SAYS THAT AS HUMAN BEINGS, WE HAVE ANYWHERE FROM 50,000 TO 70,000 THOUGHTS A DAY (COLE, 2011). WHAT RESEARCH ALSO SHOWS, IS THAT ON AVERAGE, 70% OF THESE THOUGHTS ARE NEGATIVE. WHEN YOU DO THE MATH, THIS EQUALS 35,000 TO 49,000 NEGATIVE THOUGHTS PER DAY.**

*(Cole, 2011). "Give Your Everything: Be a Champion for Life, 2013*

# OUR THOUGHTS WE BECOME WHAT WE THINK ABOUT AND OUR EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS RESULT IN OUR BEHAVIOR/PERFORMANCE



**THE NEW BRUNSWICK** Wellness Strategy (2014-2021) defines competence, autonomy and relatedness in the following ways:

“Competence refers to our need to be recognized for our talents and skills, and to have opportunities for using our own strengths in achieving personal and collective goals. Fulfillment of this need provides us with a sense of purpose, achievement and accomplishment.”

If LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth are not allowed to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them, or to participate in activities in which they are interested, or if they don’t feel safe to do so, they are not able to explore their strengths and gifts or reach their personal goals. This means they could miss out on a meaningful sense of purpose, achievement and accomplishment, as well as being recognized for their abilities in these areas.

“Autonomy refers to the need to have a choice, express ideas and opinions (a voice), and have the ability to make decisions about things that are important to you. When this need is satisfied, in conjunction with other need areas, people tend to make choices that demonstrate respect for themselves and the people around them.”

If LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth can’t be and express who they are, they can’t use their voice for the things that are important to them without fearing to do so. LGBTQ+ safer

**MENTAL FITNESS HAS BEEN DEFINED AS A “STATE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING DERIVED FROM OUR THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS, AND IS BASED ON OUR NEED TO BE VALUED OR APPRECIATED FOR OUR STRENGTHS AND POSITIVE QUALITIES (COMPETENCE), NEED TO BE INCLUDED OR BELONG (RELATEDNESS) AND THE FREEDOM TO MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES (AUTONOMY)”**

*(Health and Education Research Group, 2007; Deci and Ryan, 2007).*

and inclusive environments allow for the expression of ideas and opinions. Affirming and supportive environments help foster a sense of self-worth and healthy self-esteem, which allow us to demonstrate respect for ourselves and others.

“Relatedness refers to the need for connection to and closeness with family, peers and other significant individuals. Fulfillment of this need is met through interaction with others, membership in groups, and the support and encouragement received from others.”

If LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth are afraid to express who they are, they don’t feel supported. This can negatively impact their interaction with others as well as their participation in groups, and they may withdraw and feel isolated. LGB youth are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (33% vs 7%), while almost half (47%) of trans youth have attempted suicide (Saewyc, 2007; Scanlon et al, 2010)). When youth exist in unsupportive environments, this number increases by another 20% (Hatzenbuehler, 2011).

**“ATHLETES STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH OR THEIR SEXUALITY (OR BOTH) OFTEN FEEL IMMENSE PRESSURE TO KEEP THEIR STRUGGLES HIDDEN DUE TO FEARS OF NOT BEING ACCEPTED, AND HOW THAT WILL IMPACT THEIR ATHLETIC DREAMS. WHEN MY MENTAL HEALTH FIRST STARTED TO DETERIORATE, I ISOLATED MYSELF FROM THE PEOPLE AND THINGS I LOVED, AND IT MADE ME FEEL UNBEARABLY ALONE. ONCE I BEGAN OPENING UP TO THOSE CLOSE TO ME, SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP FOR MY ILLNESS, A WEIGHT WAS LIFTED OFF MY SHOULDERS GIVING ME THE ENERGY I NEEDED TO GET BETTER.”**

—Nadia Popov

Research by Deci and Ryan (2008) shows that when our environments provide opportunities for us to satisfy the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, we are more motivated and engaged, our overall wellness is improved, and we are more apt to make healthy lifestyle choices. We have stronger supportive social networks, we are more ready to take advantage of opportunities that arise, and we are able to make positive choices for ourselves and our families.

## PORTRAIT OF RELATEDNESS

- I like going to school/work; I feel good there
- I have my place at school/work
- I have friends in my class/workplace/community
- I am committed and involved
- I like interacting with others
- I take part in a variety of activities (sports, art, etc.)
- I am enthusiastic
- I feel encouraged and supported by others
- I feel that I am liked and accepted
- I respect others
- I am respected
- I am generous with others, and I pay attention to them
- I help others
- I am authentic in my relationships with others

## PORTRAIT OF COMPETENCE

- I am able to use my strengths and talents constructively
- I have the feeling that I have accomplished something
- I feel efficient and capable
- I like challenges; they do not frighten me

- I am motivated and interested
- I persevere
- I make an effort when faced with a new task
- I am committed
- I feel like I am worth something
- I am optimistic
- I am proud of myself
- I believe in myself
- I have high self-esteem

## PORTRAIT OF AUTONOMY

- I am curious and interested in learning
- I agree to make an effort at work
- I put the necessary time into my learning
- I am motivated
- I feel free to make decisions
- I make choices that are important to me
- I accept responsibility for, and the consequences of, my choices
- I feel free to do, or not to do, certain things
- I can find solutions to certain problems
- I am responsible for my behaviour
- I respect myself
- I am respectful of others

For LGBTQ+, gender creative and genderqueer children and youth, the three components of mental fitness are tightly connected to the presence of LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive schools and classrooms. Without LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia can compromise mental fitness and mental health.



“I WAS INCREDIBLY LONELY AND UNFORTUNATELY IT TOOK A HUGE TOLL ON MY MENTAL HEALTH. I STRUGGLED WITH ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION FOR YEARS. I STILL STRUGGLED TO ACCEPT MYSELF TO THE POINT OF HAVING VERY UNHEALTHY AND NEGATIVE THOUGHTS. REGARDLESS OF ORIENTATION WE ALL FEEL LONELY; IT’S ONE OF THE TOUGH THINGS ABOUT BEING HUMAN.”

—Anastasia Bucsis

“It is widely accepted that lesbian, gay, questioning and two-spirited youth are at higher risk than their heterosexual counterparts with respect to isolation, low self-esteem, destructive behaviours, and even more extreme problems such as suicide and peer violence. These youth are more likely to commit suicide than their straight counterparts, and one in four youth who disclose their sexual orientation experience rejection by their families. When the environment of sport is safe, it has the potential to address many of these adverse conditions and improve the situation of at-risk youth.”

– CAAWS 2012

## TIPS ON FOSTERING MENTAL FITNESS

The following chart provides tips that help foster mental fitness in schools and communities. Creating an awareness of mental fitness and the conditions that focus on children and youths’ strengths and positive qualities must become embedded in Canadian school and sport cultures. At the same time, LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces must also become part of these landscapes so that the specific challenges and needs of LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth are not overlooked.

### MENTAL FITNESS – FOSTERING POSITIVE BODY-IMAGE

**STUDENTS WILL BE INTRODUCED TO CANADIAN OLYMPIANS WITH A FOCUS ON ADOPTING AND MAINTAINING HEALTHY ACTIVE LIFESTYLES AND HAVING A POSITIVE SELF-PERCEPTION OF THEIR OWN BODY.**

*(Link to resource <https://olympic.ca/education/resources/mental-fitness-fostering-positive-body-imag/>)*

## COMPETENCE

Encourage students to be involved in a wide range of activities that emphasize their interests and preferences. Discuss and challenge gender norms and stereotypes with your students in order to create safety for children and youth who have interests and preferences that don't necessarily align with society's expectations of their gender.

Provide opportunities for students to identify and use their strengths in and out of school, keeping in mind that some students will need greater support in order to do so if their strengths challenge gender norms.

Empower students to collaborate with their peers in the development of their own solutions for specific problems. Include discussions about homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heteronormativity and cisnormativity so that students can be involved in the creation of LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces and environments.

## AUTONOMY

Suspend judgement and encourage the expression of students' thoughts and feelings in classroom and home discussions. Ensure that your classroom is LGBTQ+ inclusive so that LGBTQ+ and gender creative students feel safe to share, and their peers know how to support them. Keep in mind that for some LGBTQ+ and gender creative students, their home environments may not be a safe place to have these discussions.

Reach out and involve students or specific groups who do not feel part of the school community. Creating LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive classrooms and schools helps to create more positive environments for everyone, since people who are perceived to be LGBTQ+ are also targets of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and those who witness bullying are also impacted (Egale, 2011).

Emphasize fairness and social inclusion in small groups, classrooms, and school-wide learning activities. Help students to become aware of and to understand homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, and how to intervene, as well as how to identify and challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity.

## RELATEDNESS

Focus on developing positive working relations with parents and other members of the community. Educate and engage parents about the need to respect LGBTQ+ diversity among students and families as members of the whole school community. Highlight, the role of schools and teachers in fostering a safer and inclusive environment for all students. LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces benefit all members of the school community, including parents. They create opportunities for connections with LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations who can serve as role models for children and youth.

# THE OLYMPIC VALUES AND MENTAL FITNESS

**ENCOURAGING YOUNG PEOPLE** to participate actively in sport and physical activity and make healthy decisions was one of the Baron de Coubertin's original goals. De Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympic Games was inspired by the model of the education for young people in ancient Greece. For the ancient Greeks, a healthy body was considered to be a temple of a healthy mind.

The Olympic values support mental fitness in the following ways:

## STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE (COMPETENCE)

Feeling like you have the strengths, qualities and skills to be able to perform at your best.

LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth who are not supported in their identities and who do not feel safe may find it challenging to explore their interests, talents and gifts – making it difficult or impossible to strive for excellence. Children and youth who do participate in the sports in which they are interested may endure bullying and teasing about their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, which can cause significant stress and also impact their ability to strive for excellence. Creating LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive environments can help set the stage for participation and a more positive experience.

## CELEBRATING FRIENDSHIP (RELATEDNESS)

Feeling included and that you belong – relationships with classmates, friends, family members, teammates, coaches, etc.

LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth who are not accepted for who they are (or who are afraid that they won't be accepted for who they are) will not feel included or have a sense of belonging, which blocks the development of relationships. Whether the exclusion is real or perceived, it's impossible to develop friendships with people who you fear won't accept you. Creating LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces fosters awareness, understanding and acceptance, which allows LGBTQ+ and gender creative students to feel they belong and to develop meaningful friendships.

## DEMONSTRATING RESPECT (AUTONOMY)

When we respect someone, we look to engage and invite them to share what they are thinking.

Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are disrespectful. Not standing up or speaking up against them doesn't demonstrate respect either. LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces acknowledge and value LGBTQ+ identities by including them in curriculum, by raising awareness about bullying and harassment and what we can do about it, and by intervening when LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment occur. Breaking the silence around LGBTQ+ identities and realities demonstrates respect by acknowledging that LGBTQ+ individuals exist and are a valuable part of society. Intervening demonstrates respect by not allowing homophobia, biphobia and transphobia to continue, and being clear that it is unacceptable. Feeling good about oneself allows one to respect oneself, one's body, others, the rules and regulations, and sport and the environment..

## MENTAL FITNESS - BE A CHAMPION FOR LIFE

**WITH A FOCUS ON MENTAL FITNESS NEEDS (COMPETENCE, AUTONOMY AND RELATEDNESS) AND THE OLYMPIC VALUES (EXCELLENCE, FRIENDSHIP AND RESPECT), STUDENTS WILL EXPLORE THEIR PASSIONS, INTERESTS AND SKILLS WITH AN EMPHASIS ON INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY.**

*(Link to <https://olympic.ca/education/resources/give-your-everything-be-a-champion-for-life/>)*

**“LGBTQ+ ATHLETES OFTEN DON’T FEEL SAFE OR COMFORTABLE IN MANY SPORT ENVIRONMENTS. THIS MEANS THAT IT MAY BE HARD TO COME TO PRACTICE, MAKE FRIENDS, TO PERFORM AT YOUR BEST EVERY DAY, OR EVEN TO FEEL THAT YOU WANT TO COME BACK TO SPORT AT ALL. IT’S SO HARD TO PERFORM AT YOUR BEST WHEN YOU FEEL THAT YOU CAN’T BE YOUR TRUE SELF. SO, IN A LOT OF WAYS BEING A GOOD TEAMMATE IS ALLOWING AND ENCOURAGING YOUR TEAM MEMBERS TO BE THEIR TRUE AND BEST SELVES.”**

*-Una Louder*

## **THE COC ALSO HAS A SET OF VALUES WHICH ARE TIED IN TO MENTAL FITNESS AND SUPPORT THE NEED FOR LGBTQ+ SAFER AND INCLUSIVE SPACES.**

**EXCELLENCE: WE BELIEVE IN THE RIGHT OF ALL PEOPLE TO PURSUE THEIR PERSONAL LEVEL OF EXCELLENCE.**

**FUN: WE BELIEVE IN SPORT BEING FUN.**

Being teased for the sport or game you want to play, your skill level, because of your real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity does not make for a fun experience. Not feeling safe to be who you are and fearing what will happen if teammates find out your sexual orientation or gender identity impacts one’s ability to pursue a personal level of excellence. Creating LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive sport climates and teams could help to bring the fun back for LGBTQ+ and gender creative athletes.

**FAIRNESS: WE BELIEVE IN FAIRNESS ON AND OFF THE FIELD OF PLAY, AS CHARACTERIZED BY EQUALITY, INTEGRITY AND TRUST.**

**RESPECT: WE BELIEVE IN FREE AND OPEN COMMUNICATION AND RESPECT FOR THE VIEWS, ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF ALL.**

Treating people fairly and with respect is the hallmark of LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces. While the focus is on LGBTQ+ inclusion, the environment created benefits everyone since it challenges gender-based assumptions and biases that affect all of us. Fostering LGBTQ+ inclusive and safer spaces aims for respect of differences, everyone treated fairly and with integrity, and the recognition that we are all equal. An LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive environment builds trust because LGBTQ+ and gender creative athletes know that they are supported and that if they experience homophobia, biphobia or transphobia, it will be addressed.

**HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: WE BELIEVE THAT THE SHORT AND LONG TERM PHYSICAL, SOCIAL, MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL WELLBEING OF ALL SHOULD BE ENHANCED THROUGH APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR AND PRACTICES.**

LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive spaces in schools and teams can help to ensure that the wellbeing of all athletes on the team is enhanced, and that behaviour and practices are appropriate and inclusive. It also provides the opportunity for leadership around maintaining safer space as well as for LGBTQ+ athletes to become leaders. When this environment exists, competence, autonomy and relatedness are supported.

**LEADERSHIP: WE BELIEVE THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE IN SPORT HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO TEACH AND APPLY THE VALUES OF THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT, INVOLVING OTHERS IN THE OLYMPIC EXPERIENCE AND INSPIRING AND EMPOWERING THEM TO REACH THEIR POTENTIAL.**

When LGBTQ+ athletes are supported, valued and acknowledged, and when the team and sport environment is LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive, then LGBTQ+ athletes and all participants can reach their potential and be who they are. This will contribute to teaching and applying the Olympic values and inspiring others – most notably, other LGBTQ+ and gender creative children and youth - who will see them as role models. This responsibility also applies to coaches, who are a crucial component of creating and maintaining an LGBTQ+ safer and inclusive environment among their players.

**LIVING UP TO THE OLYMPIC VALUES MEANS CREATING LGBTQ+ SAFER AND INCLUSIVE SPACES SO THAT ALL STUDENTS CAN PARTICIPATE IN SPORT TO THEIR FULLEST.**