



ATHLETES INSPIRATION

Coaches, you may want to consider reading through the next sections and the list of athletes and their quotes. You may want to highlight a couple athletes and their mental health story or you may want to add their quote to another chat you have planned. Simply speaking about a couple of these athletes often triggers other coaches on your staff to discuss their own or a close friend's mental health journey. These brief stories can be powerful for your athletes to hear. Sometimes it starts a conversation by a player. Coaches, most importantly, simply bringing up a mental health discussion can lead to an athlete reaching out for support as they now feel safe to.

As coaches we realize that we have a responsibility to help all of you become a little more aware that your teammates, friends, and family may be experiencing some emotional challenges or mental illness and that we all have the power within us to help each other become more aware of our mental health. We feel it is important that you learn more from us than just the X's and O's and strategy of our sport. Being a good player and teammate involves more than just the "game".

In no particular order, here is a list of well accomplished athletes who have struggled with their mental health. It is believed that up to 35% of "professional" athletes have mental health challenges that require support and treatment. In reality, this is probably only the tip of the iceberg. This list would be endless if it included all the celebrities that are popular in our media world. The point is that mental health challenges do not spare anyone, no matter how proficient they are in their chosen sport. They are human, just like all of us. All of these athletes reached out and received help and are normalizing the discussion around mental health. All of them wish they would have spoken about their struggles earlier in their lives and careers. All of them could have benefitted from more open discussion and less stigma surrounding mental health. All of them would have appreciated their friends and teammates reaching out to talk about the day to day challenges and emotions we all feel. That could have led to a seed being planted that may have helped them sooner. That is why we are talking about Buddy Checking each other. Let's normalize the conversation around mental health. Let's make it so some day it isn't such a "big deal" when people reach out for help. Let's teach ourselves and our society to be compassionate, less judgmental, and more tolerant. Remember, we never really know what someone else is going through and being supportive has the potential to make a positive difference in someone's life.

Simone Biles (gymnast): "I say put mental health first because if you don't then you're not going to enjoy your sport and you're not going to enjoy your sport as much as you want to".

Carey Price (hockey): "Asking for help when you need it is something we encourage our kids to do, and it's what I needed to do"

DeMar DeRozan (basketball): "It's one of them things that no matter how indestructible we look like we are, we're all human at the end of the day...we all got feelings...all of that. Sometimes...it gets the best of you, where times everything in the whole world's on top of you."

Naomi Osaka (tennis): "I do hope that people can relate and understand it's OK to not be OK, and it's OK to talk about it. There are people who can help, and there is usually a light at the end of any tunnel."

Stephanie Labbe' (soccer): "You always think you're alone. You sense nobody can possibly understand what you're going through. But I've seen the reaction to opening up because other people are suffering in their own ways. Sometimes just one word in your story sparks a connection."

ATHLETES ON MENTAL HEALTH

Robin Lehner (hockey): “Hi. My name is Robin Lehner and I’m bipolar 1 and have PTSD. I take medicine and I have a psychiatrist that I talk to once a week. I’m in the NHL program and on top of that I’ve fought through hell to be here. And I’m pretty good at stopping pucks. Not perfect. Bless you all.”

Kevin Love (basketball): “Everyone is going through something that we can’t see. Mental health isn’t just an athlete thing. What you do for a living doesn’t have to define who you are. This is an everyone thing. No matter what our circumstances, we’re all carrying around things that hurt — and they can hurt us if we keep them buried inside. Not talking about our inner lives robs us of really getting to know ourselves and robs us of the chance to reach out to others in need. So if you’re reading this and you’re having a hard time, no matter how big or small it seems to you, I want to remind you that you’re not weird or different for sharing what you’re going through.”

Corey Hirsch (hockey): “There is nothing wrong with you morally or spiritually if something is misfiring in your brain. You just need to tell someone. The term “mental illness” complicates matters because of the associated stigma. We’ve separated the mind and the body, but your brain is a physical piece of the body, like the heart or the liver. We expect everyone’s brains to function perfectly, when it’s the most complicated thing we have in our body.”

Michael Phelps (swimming): “The hardest thing to understand is you can’t just put your mental health on a timeout. As a male athlete, I always thought it was a sign of weakness if I showed I was being vulnerable. It’s not weakness. If we’re injured, they’re going to fix our broken bones, but if we’re mentally struggling, we have to get help.”

Lindsey Vonn (alpine ski racer): “Everyone assumes that athletes are so strong and tough and, you know, physically, they’re strong, but you know, mentally, it’s, it’s not always the case. You make assumptions, and you don’t talk about it, and then it becomes a problem and athletes can’t cope... Talking about it and allowing athletes to have the support they need is really important. I think something that people don’t realize is, sports and athletes, it seems like such a glamorous life, and especially if you’re successful, but at the end of the day, you still come home, and when the lights go off, you’re by yourself.”

Dwayne Johnson (football/wrestling): “Asking for help is not a weakness. As a matter of fact, asking for help is our superpower. And I feel like the most important thing, obviously, is communicating and realizing that asking for help when you’re down and you’re feeling wobbly or when you’re depressed is actually the most powerful thing you can do. Asking for help is not a weakness. As a matter of fact, asking for help is our superpower, and men, especially us, we fall into this trap of being really adverse to vulnerability, because we always want to be strong and feel like we can take on the world. But the truth is, you have to, and hopefully over time, learn to embrace vulnerability and learn to embrace this idea that you can’t always solve everything. A lot of times in life, as you head down the road, you’re going to need help, and it’s all a part of life.”

Colin Wilson (hockey): “I want to tell this story because, really, it’s not about me. It’s about what happened to me, yes—but it’s not about me. It’s about, hopefully, getting people help. Even just one person. I know, without a doubt, that there are athletes and people all around the world suffering from the same thing I do, or something similar. Because I understand what OCD, if left untreated for too long, can do to a person.”

Ronda Rousey (UFC fighter): “We need to take the stigma away from everything suicide and make it actually acceptable for people to talk about and look for help and not feel ashamed of themselves for it. It’s not a weakness we should condemn. I’ve never shied away from talking about suicide or anything like that. It’s really heavily affected my family, and anything that I could do to make sure it affects as few people as possible, I’d be happy to do that.”

ATHLETES ON MENTAL HEALTH

Venus Williams (tennis): “Mental health and self care are so important. And I am glad there’s a bigger conversation happening right now.”

Paul Pierce (basketball): “In retrospect, I wish I had listened to the Celtics and talked with a mental health expert. My decision to deal with my post-traumatic stress on my own heightened my depression and isolated me from friends, family and teammates. I should have opened up earlier than I did. It was eating me alive. Once I finally started talking to a family member, it helped me. I realized I should have done this sooner. I would tell everyone to get the help they need. My depression was bad—really bad. I never want to feel that way again.”

Kelly Hrudey (hockey): “Whatever we’re all going through, don’t discount it; it’s real. Your feelings, your stress, your anxiety, your angst, it’s all real and we’ll get through it, but please talk to somebody about it. ‘This affects all of us.’”

Abby Wambach (soccer): “As soon as I started talking about it, I immediately felt like this is what I’ve been needing to do. The number one thing anyone should ever say to somebody is that they’re not alone.”

Amanda Beard (swimming): “I was really, really awful at communicating, at opening up and sharing my feelings. Whenever I heard anything negative about myself, it hit me so hard, but I never allowed anybody to know what I was thinking or dealing with. Once you open your mouth and start to talk to people, you really start to go on the right path of getting healthier.”

Allison Schmitt (swimming): “I have been diagnosed with depression and here I am, I’m happy, you would never be able to tell from the outside that I have depression. The misconception that people have is, ‘If you’re feeling this way, why don’t you do this, this and this to not feel this way? Help is available.’”

Sebastian Coe (President of World Athletics): “The advice I would give is to reach out, to colleagues and friends...don’t be afraid to show vulnerability, it’s a badge of honour in a way to want that help.”

Harry Miller (Football): “I had no intention of this happening the way it did. People have called me brave, but to me it just felt like not dying and it felt like being honest. Maybe bravery is just being honest when it would be easier not to. And if that’s bravery then so be it. But I’ve just been really grateful to, one, receive the help I have. And then, two, to have learned some things that I can share with others. The dilemma is that nobody has to say something, but that is precisely why somebody has to say something.”

The players on this team are the ones who can make a difference in each other’s lives. You are the ones who can have a positive impact on our society. You are the ones who can destigmatize mental health challenges and allow more of us to reach out for help.

Green is the color of “mental health.” We have green tape/laces/t-shirts, wrist bands etc (mention what your team has here) that shows we support each other and are trying to initiate and amplify positive change. We are more than just the sport we play.

There are some printed cards for each of you. Keep it handy. Educate your friends and family about our discussion. Hopefully they can help you or someone you know feel supported and less alone—without judgement, feeling bullied or treated unfairly. Never hesitate to do a “Buddy Check”. You may end up making a huge difference in someone’s life.