



IMAGE: AGENCIA BRASIL



Athletes Learn to Open Up About Hidden Stressors

OLYMPIC AND PRO ATHLETES SHARING THEIR STORIES REDUCES STIGMA

Olympic swimming legend Michael Phelps is a tireless advocate for mental health and frequently comments about the stigma that exists about mental illness.

On his website, Michael Phelps said "Over the past couple of years, I have become a lot more open about my struggle with depression and have shared my mantra that 'it's ok to not be ok.' I am so grateful that I've been able to positively impact the lives of those struggling with their own mental health by simply sharing mine."

Other athletes who have shared their struggles on the world stage include gymnast Simone Biles, tennis stars Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams, the NBA's Kevin Love, and skier Lindsey Vonn.

High profile athletes who encourage others to speak up and get help can have a positive effect on young athletes who experience mental health challenges.

"Olympic and professional athletes can often be perceived as "indestructible" or "super human." The impact of these elite athletes sharing their stories is a powerful one, in that it allows these athletes to reveal themselves as human beings, who are vulnerable and share similar struggles to athletes on all levels,"

said Kellie Peiper, M. Ed., CMPC, Assistant Athletic Director, Student-Athlete Wellness, University at Buffalo, Division of Athletics.

Continued on Page 2

“We know that sport can be a protective factor for mental health in the social support, confidence, self-awareness, and life skill development that can come from the experience. At the same time, the continued pressures and rigors of the lifestyle of a student-athlete can lend itself to higher levels of mental health concern.”

Peiper will be a presenter at a Facebook Live on February 16 from 12 p.m. – 1 p.m. focusing on athletes and mental health.

“The State of Stigma: Athletes Learn to Open Up About Hidden Stressors” is free and open to the public. Panelists will accept questions during the event.



Other presenters are Nikoleta Antoniou, senior, University at Buffalo and a member of the Women’s Tennis Team and Anne Nowak, M.S. LMHC, director, Family Support Center, Sweet Home School District.

According to Nowak, targeted campaigns from the NBA and NFL with other athletes sharing their stories have tremendous impact on young athletes.

“The fact that Olympic athletes in a variety of sports like Michael Phelps, Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles have come forward publicly with their personal struggles, emphasized that it is not something to be ashamed about, and how setting limits and boundaries to protect your mental health also protects your physical performance is invaluable,” she said.

“Mental health experts can preach this but I believe it is the ones that kids can see themselves in that have the most impact,” Nowak said.

There’s a tremendous value and power in shared stories and experiences, especially amongst our peers. Our stories and journeys are the threads that connect us as human beings, and allow us to be vulnerable together. One of the biggest challenges around mental health has continued to be the stigma attached to it, and the more student-athletes speak up about their mental health challenges, the more we can begin to normalize it.

KELLIE PEIPER, ASSISTANT ATHLETIC DIRECTOR, STUDENT-ATHLETE WELLNESS, UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO, DIVISION OF ATHLETICS

In 2019, University at Buffalo basketball standout Hannah Hall chronicled her battle with anorexia in a YouTube video. Now playing for Team Canada, she continues to be a strong voice for mental health awareness.

“Athletes are human, we all struggle in our way. Reach out, use your resources, be uncomfortable, just don’t be silent. Don’t give up—reach out,” Hall said.

“As athletes, we are surrounded by people and messages that are always telling us we have to work harder and go harder than the person we are going against. There is no time to be mentally weak or tired.

“It’s easy to get caught up in all of this—the work of athletics is competitive and in order to reach your goals you have to push past your comfort zone. What I failed to realize for a very long time is that athletes are humans—we struggle, and we hurt.

“We can’t do it alone. We can’t see people struggling and ignore the issue because, for so long, mental health has been such an uncomfortable conversation. The stigma has to end,” Hall said.

Continued on Page 3

According to Nowak, optimum physical health is promoted, always spoken about and the focus of athlete training. Physical and mental health is all tied in together—it's referenced as getting in the zone, clearing your head, being focused to perform in your sport.

"However, if we label any of this with a feeling or say depression or anxiety in relation to an athlete, all of a sudden it is taboo, it is stigmatized and something athletes need to be ashamed of," Nowak said. "We have to be consistent, start these healthy physical and mental habits now so students can be not only successful on the field or competition venue but off and in life, as adults."

Raising awareness of mental health needs has resulted in more support offered to student athletes at all levels. Peiper says that student-athletes at UB are offered ongoing mental health education modules, as are coaches and support staff.

"Our student-athlete leadership group (Student-Athlete Advisory Committee), has committed to making Mental Health Awareness their platform for this year, and supports this through social media posts and other awareness campaigns," Peiper said. "We also offer wellness education resources for self-care, coping, and healthy lifestyle, as well as having a sports counselor embedded part time in our athletics department."

At Sweet Home, middle and high school have access to school counselors and social workers to get support for day-to-day issues as well as the Family Support Center to link them with a therapist either in or out of school to assist with more significant or persistent issues.

"We have therapists from Gateway-Longview and Mobile Counseling of NY providing onsite mental health counseling weekly at our middle school. For our high school students we have Gateway-Longview, BestSelf, Williamsville Wellness, Mobile Counseling of NY and Be Embodied providing the same weekly therapy," Nowak said. "We work closely with our Athletic Director and our coaches when there is a concern about an athlete as well because often they are the first to see or the first a student will share their struggles with."



THE ACC, BIG TEN, AND PAC-12

Raising awareness nationally, the ACC, Big Ten, and Pac-12 has an initiative entitled "Teammates for Mental Health" which is designed to raise awareness about the importance of mental health and wellness among their more than 27,000 student athletes.



THE NEW JERSEY DEVILS

The New Jersey Devils are encouraging an end to the stigma around mental health. Hear from members of the team and @HockeyinNJ discuss the importance of mental health awareness.



THE NFL

In collaboration with the NFL Players Association, the NFL is committed to helping build a positive culture around mental health by providing players and the NFL family with comprehensive mental health and wellness resources and equipping them with the tools to succeed, on and off the field, over the course of their lives.

A Q&A with GLYS

GLYS provides a safe and positive environment for LGBTQ+ youth to learn more about themselves through peer interaction and educational experiences. The organization creates opportunities for emotional growth and community awareness. Through GLYS outreach, other agencies learn about and increase their sensitivity to the needs of gender and sexual minority youth. GLYS provides LGBTQ+ youth with positive role models and a safe space, while promoting positive self-esteem and the integration of these youth into the larger community. GLYS can also assist youth and their families by providing resources and referrals.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



We recently spoke with **Susan Frawley**, community and parent outreach services coordinator.

How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

For LGBTQ people, the immediate stigma that comes from pathologizing their very existence is a reason many do not seek treatment for issues. National statistics tell us of the rate of suicide, self-harm, trauma, and substance abuse among LGBTQ people. It is also hard for LGBTQ people to find qualified mental health practitioners who are able to speak in a culturally sensitive manner, use proper pronouns, and understand complex gender identity issues.

What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

The involvement and inclusion of appropriate LGBTQ terms and concerns goes a long way to assist in reaching out to LGBTQ people and inviting them to seek care. The well roundedness of the campaign to reach BIPOC, women, handicap able and historically marginalized communities is a positive in creating a healthier community.

UPCOMING EVENTS

FEBRUARY 16 / 1-2PM

Facebook Live: The State of Stigma:
Athletes Learn to Open Up About Hidden Stressors

FEBRUARY 23 / 7-8PM

Relationship Abuse: The Pandemic within COVID

Visit letstalkstigma.org/events for more

NEWEST MEMBERS



Visit letstalkstigma.org/current-members for more information on our current members.

ERIE COUNTY
ANTI-STIGMA
COALITION

ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION FOUNDING MEMBERS

BryLin Behavioral Health System • Children's Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc.
Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County
The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P. Lee Foundation
Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation