



Top athletes with mental health problems encourage men to ask for help when they need it

June is Men's Health Month

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

If there is stigma around mental illness – and there is – that stigma is perhaps double for men. While very few people feel comfortable discussing their mental health problems in general, cultural traditions that say men should be tough, stoic and strong, can make it even more difficult for men to ask for help when they need it. And too many men suffer in silence as a result.

Mental health problems are more common than many people realize – one in five people will experience a mental illness in their lifetime – and men are not immune.

According to Mental Health America, 6 million American men suffer from depression each year (more than 30 percent of men will have depression in their lifetime), while more than 3 million experience an anxiety disorder. Men are also three to four times more likely to die by suicide than women.

But perhaps the biggest challenge facing men when it comes to mental health is asking for help – and then being able to talk openly about their problems when they do.

Earlier this year, Cleveland Cavaliers center Kevin Love wrote a very candid essay in The Players Tribune about his own mental health struggles. In it, Love describes how his insecurity about mental health made it difficult for him to talk about his problems:

“Call it a stigma or call it fear or insecurity – you can call it a number of things – but what I was worried about wasn't just my own inner struggles but how difficult it was to *talk about* them.”

It's a sentiment likely well understood by any man. Talking about your feelings can be terrifying when you've grown up in a culture where men might be seen as weak for expressing sadness, worry or self-doubt.

Fortunately, Love is one of many male athletes that has begun talking about his personal mental health challenges in hopes of encouraging other men to get help. Former Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback and two-time Super Bowl MVP Terry Bradshaw has likewise opened up about his depression and anxiety.

Closer to home, former UGA football star Herschel Walker has spoken out about his struggles with dissociative identity disorder. More recently, swimmer Michael Phelps, the most decorated

Olympic athlete in history, has talked about his struggles with depression, and even contemplating suicide.

In a culture where athletes are often idolized and can earn millions of dollars, the message these athletes are sending is important: no matter what you do in life, or how much money you make, or how popular you are, mental illness can happen to you. There simply is no such thing as a perfect life, but getting help when you need it can help you have a good life.

If you are concerned about your mental health, talk to your doctor about seeing a therapist – he or she may be able to recommend one. You may also be able to find a therapist through your company's employee assistance program (EAP).

Likewise, if you have health insurance, there are often many mental health providers that participate whom you can find online at your insurance company's website. Finally, there are community mental health agencies and other providers you can likely find with a quick online search.

I want to close by again quoting Kevin Love, and the words he used to close his essay:

“...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. Just the opposite. It could be the most important thing you do.”

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