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How Naomi Osaka, Advocacy Groups Normalize Conversations on Mental Health

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Naomi Osaka of Japan attends her press conference during the Mutua Madrid Open 2022 at La Caja Magica on May 01, 2022, in Madrid, Spain. (Photo By Oscar J. Barroso/Europa Press via Getty Images)

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Mental health has been a growing part of the conversation in the U.S., especially in the past two years. When the coronavirus pandemic shut down much of the world in 2020, a staggering number of people struggled to cope. The World Health Organization noted a 25 percent increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression in people across the globe. Since then, there has been a concerted effort to draw attention to the wide impact on mental wellness.

The conversation became even more magnified as people around the world watched four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka pull out of the 2021 French Open after being fined for skipping press conferences that she said negatively impacted her mental wellbeing. The tennis star has since become a poster child for advocating for mental health. Now that she's back to competing full-time, Osaka continues to put her own health above the demands of sports reporters so that she can be the best version of herself and continue to be a role model for young athletes.

"I really don't think they look to me as a symbol of perfection but more as someone they can relate to. So balancing my own mental health is just one more step in helping to destigmatize the conversation around mental wellbeing and also show young people who might look up to me that it's okay to sometimes ask for help," Osaka told Cheddar.



Naomi Osaka, of Japan, attends a training session on the occasion of the Italian Open tennis tournament, in Rome, Friday, May 6, 2022. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

And she isn't the only pro-athlete that has drawn attention to the impact that media, fans, and their own performance can have on mental health. When four-time Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles pulled out of gymnastics competition at the 2020 Tokyo Games, the conversation around mental health truly elevated to a level it had not seen previously. Biles, who many would believe to be the textbook definition of the perfect athlete, suffered from a bout with the "twisties," a mental condition that clouds an athlete's perception of where they are in space. "For anyone saying I quit, I didn't quit," she would post in an Instagram video. "My mind & body are simply not in sync as you can see here."

Brooklyn Nets point guard Ben Simmons has also been thrust into the spotlight after sharing details of his own struggles that played a part in his performance during the 2021 NBA playoffs. For Simmons called his hesitancy to shoot the ball during the playoffs and his no-show this past season a mental block.

While Simmons has not attributed any of his difficulties to media chatter around his ability to play, Osaka, on the other hand, has noted that press conferences can be a challenge and there should be a more healthy way to assess and critique an athlete.

"Those comments often impact the next match or game or routine. I do feel that things have gotten better and the more we all support each other and speak up, the better the climate will be around the way athletes are spoken about," she said.

Breaking the Mental Health Stigma

Osaka's advocacy in mental health has afforded her the opportunity to partner with Modern Health, an online platform that provides mental health and wellness services for employees. CEO and founder Alyson Watson said to Cheddar that she built her platform to get professional help to people who truly need but cannot afford it. She noted that Osaka was the ideal candidate to link with partly because of her "fearless personality" and her willingness to be vulnerable about the struggles she faced as a professional athlete.

"By being so transparent and honest, Naomi has really helped reframe and normalize the conversation of mental health," Watson said. "And with Naomi's vulnerability and reach along with our clinical expertise, I know we are going to make a huge and positive impact around mental health and encourage folks to get the support they need."

Modern Health sees Osaka's contribution to the cause as an effort to quell the shame that is often associated with mental health. Watson said one of the company's goals is to help people stop shying away from the topic and have it become part of regular conversation in the same way that physical health is discussed. The hope, she said, is that people who look up to athletes like Osaka feel empowered to speak up and seek help if they need it.

To make the topic part of everyday conversation, Watson said employers, for their own benefit as well as for their employees, should create workplaces that enable open communication.

"It's been reported that depression causes an estimated 200 million lost workdays each year at a cost of \$17-[\$44] billion to employers. Providing better mental health support for your employees is not just the right thing to do, it's essential to your business," she added.

For National Alliance on Mental Illness CEO Daniel H. Gillison, Jr. the sentiment on the stigma around mental health is identical. He called the lack of normal conversation on the topic "a huge barrier" to people that truly need professional help. His group is a major grassroots mental health organization committed to mental health advocacy, support, and public awareness.

While professional athletes, some of the physically strongest people on the planet, have successfully drawn attention to the subject of mental health, children, among the most mentally fragile and dependent groups, have not historically been taught how to manage their own mental wellness on a broad scale.

"We are in a youth mental health crisis. In March, the CDC reported that nearly half of students felt persistently sad or hopeless during the pandemic; and in just the first few months of 2022, we have seen an alarming number of young people tragically lose their lives to suicide," Gillison said. "The need to start investing in young people and giving them the tools they need for their mental health is urgent."

Much like Osaka and Modern Health, Gillison and the National Alliance of Mental Illness look to keep the conversation going. He said in order to normalize the topic, it is important to learn how to recognize signs, seek early care, and be ready to help prevent loved ones from experiencing severe crises.

Mental Health's Many Triggers

The COVID-19 pandemic was just one of many events that could trigger a disruption in a person's mental health. A number of factors including inherited traits, exposure to environmental stressors prior to birth, and the natural make-up of the brain also can come into play.

Dr. Regine Muradian, Psy.D and National Debt Relief Financial Wellness Board member said even today's cost of living can drive people to begin struggling mentally.

"When the cost of goods and services increase, it creates stress and anxiety as the unknown settles in. More specifically, if salary rates remain the same but cost is going up, the fear of not being able to hold the same lifestyle can create a feeling of instability, fear, and depression," she told Cheddar.

With inflation at its highest rate in 40 years, the number of people unable to sustain their everyday lives has also increased. According to one poll, 70 percent of Americans establishing relationships, people have to be willing to openly communicate on topics like finances "so there are no surprises down the road" that could ultimately lead to mental health triggers.

"When people don't have financial independence, they may feel trapped in a relationship they no longer want to be in, which can lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues," she noted.

Regarding mounting debt, Muradian said there are a number of red flags that could signal when someone is in a mental health crisis, which includes impulse shopping and showing an obvious loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed. Being able to assess what is triggering the change in behavior can be difficult but showing concern and providing support are good first steps to stop the decline, she added.

Muradian also noted how important it is to practice self-care when facing financial challenges. It's important to offset potential triggers and take steps to maintain a good mental state. Reframing thoughts, creating a plan to get out of debt, and taking daily personal time are among some of those steps.

"Debt is overwhelming, and people feel as if they have lost control of their lives," Muradian said. "These emotions lead people to feel they have lost control. To regain a sense of stability, establishing a plan is the foundation of getting yourself back in control."

Updated on May 11, 2022, at 10:16 a.m. ET with the capitalization of 'Board' in 'National Debt Relief Financial Wellness Board.'

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