

“Don’t Wait to Lose Everything”: Former Patriot Ted Johnson on Injury, Addiction, and Recovery

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BOSTON, MA.-- Three-time Super Bowl champion and wellness ambassador for Maritime Behavioral Health Management (MBHM) Ted Johnson spoke tonight at WBUR CitySpace about his journey with injury, mental health, and addiction and advocated for mental health resources and concussion research.

“What you are going through is not unique to just you ... you can get help when you decide to, don’t wait to lose everything,” Johnson said.

In conversation with Paul Cherchia, assistant director of college mental health education programs at BU’s Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, and Derek Fullerton, director of government and professional relations for MBHM, Johnson shared the impact of his upbringing.

Raised by a single mother in what he called a traumatic home, Johnson experienced emotional and at times physical abuse. Football, he said, became his way out.

“I owe a lot to football because it gave me an identity, it gave me a purpose, it gave me stability that I didn’t have at home,” Johnson said.

When Johnson left home to play at the University of Colorado, he saw it as his ticket to a better life. Education was not important to his parents and neither of them attended college. Johnson said he always wanted more.

At CU, Johnson was a linebacker and earned a communications degree. He was drafted by the New England Patriots in the 1995 NFL Draft and served as team captain for five years.

Audience member Elizabeth Cherchia, was moved by Johnson's belief that if you see someone's potential, tell them, and it could change their life just as Johnson's coaches' encouragement changed his.

In the summer of 2002, Johnson suffered two concussions back to back which he identified as the genesis for his addiction.

To remedy headaches, Johnson's friend gave him Adderall. Johnson said he continued increasing his dosage and when he could no longer get prescriptions, he turned to cocaine.

Johnson said years of helplessness turned to hopelessness. He lost money, relationships, and was having thoughts about harming himself. For the sake of himself and his family, he knew he had to stop.

"I was raised by an abusive mom and I didn't want to be that for my kids," Johnson said.

Johnson now advocates for mental health resources and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) research.

"I would say the NFL doesn't really want me talking about that stuff," Johnson said when asked if he had been involved with advocating for mental health within the NFL. He continued, "The things that scare NFL owners more than anything are concussions and the threat of the game going away."

Tonight's event was partnered with BU's CTE Center.

CTE is a neurodegenerative disease caused by repetitive head injuries that leads to negative cognitive effects.

Michael Alosco, clinical neuropsychologist and associate professor of neurology at BU, educated the crowd on the research being conducted to detect and diagnose CTE. Johnson was the first to sign up for their brain bank in 2008.

Johnson also discussed the honesty and unity within his experience at treatment centers. Therapy helped him discover his behavior's origin and the medical protocols he needed.

With many career accomplishments and also battles, Johnson now defines success as feeling healthy, content, and present for those he loves. He shares his journey so others can find that same success.