

## **Mental health among elite sportspeople: Lessons for medical education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Leading sportspeople across 2021, such as Simone Biles (US gymnast), Naomi Osaka (Japanese tennis player) and Ben Stokes (English cricketer), have talked openly about the pressure of performing on the highest stage, including the challenge of managing mental health when engaged in elite competition. The withdrawal of Simone Biles midway through the women's team competition at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games propelled what was seemingly a debate within sport, into what is increasing becomingly wider societal conversation around mental health. The stories of sportspeople struggling to perform at the highest level with mental health contributing to their difficulties, has inevitably prompted much reflection within medical education among teachers and students alike, about parallels in our domain around assessment, feedback and support. The stories demonstrate that mental health problems affect everyone, including those who are at their peak physically, and those who are among the finest on the planet in terms of physical and sporting ability. The same is true within medical education of our students, who are also our future doctors. However, curriculum conversations about assessment, feedback and student support may not be as student-centred as they could be, or perhaps as they should be, with mental health possibly still being a taboo-subject or something associated with stigma within medical education. Here is another opportunity for medical education to learn from other disciplines, such as sports psychology, and now is the time for taking and applying those lessons: not just those around improving technical performance, but those around properly caring, being compassionate, and looking after our future Olympian equivalents.**

Leading sportspeople across 2021, such as Simone Biles (US gymnast), Naomi Osaka (Japanese tennis player) and Ben Stokes (English cricketer), have talked openly about the pressure of performing on the highest stage, including the challenge of managing mental health when engaged in elite competition. Never before has the conversation about mental health in sport been so prominent across so many different disciplines, with the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic likely playing a role in exacerbating problems, but also empowering individuals to draw attention to the issue. The withdrawal of Simone Biles midway through the women's team competition at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games was perhaps the event that propelled what was seemingly a debate within sport, into what is increasing becomingly wider societal conversation around mental health. The reason for this global conversation likely stems from the criticism she received on social media after her decision to withdraw and the diversity of reaction to that decision. Naomi Osaka drew similar criticism after her refusal to take post-match questions from the press during the French Open

tennis championship. She was attempting to highlight that the anxiety of taking part in post-match interviews was a significant trigger for her declining mental health. The withdrawal of Ben Stokes from the England cricket team prior to a major Series due to mental health was particularly significant as it demonstrated the problem was also one that affected men, confounding various stereotypes about who can suffer from, and succumb to mental illness. The stories of sportspeople struggling to perform at the highest level with mental health contributing to their difficulties, has inevitably prompted much reflection within medical education among teachers and students alike, about parallels in our domain around assessment, feedback and support.

The case of Simone Biles who controversially failed to return to the floor after scoring her lowest score on the vault apparatus, provokes questions about whether medical students would feel able to do the same when performing under similar circumstances, such as in the middle of an OSCE. Whilst there may be differences in physical exertion levels of athletes performing on the vault and medical students performing a clinical skill, the high-stakes nature of the performance in both contexts is somewhat comparable. The 'fight, flight or freeze' phenomenon described in medicine is not just well-known among students because its core knowledge in the curriculum, but also because it's the same visceral experience some individuals go through as they undergo assessments such as the OSCE (Rudland et al. 2020). Furthermore, being able to perform under pressure is a necessary attribute for students to achieve by the point of graduation so getting used to it is also part and parcel of training to become a doctor. However, it is also equally necessary and important for individuals to recognise when they may not be well enough to undertake clinical duties in order to keep themselves and their patients safe. Crucially, there was recognition by Simone Biles that continuing on may have led to harm for herself due to her inability to safely complete her gymnastic manoeuvres, prompting the decision to withdraw due to illness (Munro 2021). Whilst there are procedures for medical students to not attend for assessment by claiming extenuating circumstances when suffering from mental health problems during their study or in preparing for assessment, the ease with which individuals can withdraw from examinations is not as simple or straightforward. There could also be repercussions related to academic or professional misconduct were medical students to leave halfway through an exam, whereas some may also face progression and subsequently financial consequences for withdrawing from a diet of assessments altogether. As a consequence, medical students often have to suffer in silence rather than talk openly about their struggle with mental health, continuing on the course in spite of significant ill health and often due to the perceived fear of consequences that disclosure may have on their chances of gaining future employment. (Royal Medical Benevolent Fund 2018).

In the case of Naomi Osaka, who wanted to highlight the impact of being subjected to questions about performance in the aftermath of defeat as a trigger for declining mental health (Bero 2021), there are also parallels with what individual students have to go through at medical school. Specifically, Naomi Osaka felt that the process of receiving a barrage of questions about her performance following defeat was like 'kicking a person while they are down'. In an educational context, medical students are often instructed to reflect on their performance by observers – either peers or teachers – following a task. However in general, some individuals feel the urge to actively avoid having to practice or demonstrate their competence in front of others, so that they can protect their sense of self, or self-worth and well-being from this experience. Nevertheless, creating opportunities for individuals to reflect-on-action remains the cornerstone of many undergraduate medical education interventions with individuals ritualised into a debrief protocols and structured questions immediately fired at them after performance on a task. One of the challenges for teachers learning from Naomi Osaka's experience above, is how best to identify those individuals who prefer getting feedback straightaway and also finding ways to personalize feedback to those who do not, in

more constructive ways. This is not to say Naomi Osaka was not wanting to receive feedback on her performance, or not wanting to receive negative comments either. Rather she was questioning the need for questions not intended for improving her future performance on the court, but ones that served the entertainment purposes of the media or their wider readership. Likewise, for some medical students, the experience of debrief or being asked about performance immediately in the aftermath of a 'bad' one may be seen as having little educational value for them at all. Instead teachers need to evolve their one size fits all approach to giving feedback on performance, especially for struggling medical students who stand the most to gain from structured reflection and feedback, however, may avoid turning up to receive it in much the same way Osaka did, and suffer academically and professionally as a consequence.

Finally, Ben Stokes' 'indefinite break from all cricket' (England and Wales Cricket Board 2021) to focus on his mental health allows some final reflection for educators around the impact of undergraduate training time on individuals' well-being in general. Whilst the demands of preparing for, and playing elite sports are widely appreciated, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on top of these, in particular, the restrictions on time with family after the death of his father, were acknowledged to be the trigger in his case. His withdrawal under the constant challenge of training in these conditions was also seen as reasonable under the circumstances by both those within the sport, as well as by commentators outside it. In the case of medical students undergraduate training in the later years especially, is very much about long periods of time away on remote and rural placements studying continuously for hours on end without much opportunity for a break. Furthermore, gaps between placement can often be filled with revision for the next assessment, therefore time with family and friends may not be available in practice, leaving little space for recharging batteries or focusing on optimising well-being. In contrast to some sportspeople, medical students can often be younger in age, experience and without the same levels of support around them, when away on placement. They also do not have access to the types of 'comforts' afforded to sportspeople, and the costs associated with studying away from base can be significant, especially for food and travel. Students also cannot generally take indefinite leave from their course to focus on their well-being without affecting their progression, despite spending more than two years continuously under similar described conditions to Ben Stokes. Nevertheless whilst Ben Stokes was able to take a break with little or no notice, medical students in contrast often have to endure a long and protracted process in order to formally take time away from their training and may even be denied it altogether.

These three stories of three different sportspeople demonstrate the diversity of individuals affected by mental health problems and the importance of managing wellbeing effectively for performing at the very highest level. The stories also demonstrate that mental health problems affect everyone, including those who are at their peak physically, and those who are among the finest on the planet in terms of physical and sporting ability. Finally the examples demonstrate the failure to perform under the glare of others or in front of global audiences, are powerful drivers to open up the conversation about the impact of mental health on humans. Perhaps most importantly, the stories also demonstrate that we are all human, and even champions are not invincible. The same is true within medical education of our students, who are also our future doctors. The comparisons with medical student experiences and their journey through medical also serve as an important reminder that they too are also human. High profile cases of mental health struggles within medical schools have not necessarily triggered the level of conversations about the impact of mental health on medical students' performance during their training. Furthermore, curriculum conversations about assessment, feedback and student support may not be as student-centred as they could be, or perhaps as they should be, with mental health possibly still being a taboo-subject or something

associated with stigma within medical education. There are often calls for medical education to practice what it preaches and learn more from other disciplines, such as sports psychology, and perhaps now is the time for taking and applying those lessons: not just the ones around improving technical performance, but those around properly caring, being compassionate, and looking after our future Olympian equivalents as well.

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