

Mental Gymnastics

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I frequently get recommendations for Five on Friday topics from readers, friends, family, and colleagues. So I wasn't surprised to hear from my brother when Simone Biles, "the greatest gymnast of all time," withdrew from the individual all-around competition at the Olympics last week "to take care of her mental health."



[Photo Credit](#)

But he was the sixth person to write to me, and by the end of the week, I had no fewer than two dozen people suggesting that I write about Biles' story. As I heard from people, I was struck by the range of reactions to her plight and their confusion and misconceptions about mental health.

1. Aren't Olympic athletes supposed to know how to handle stress? Yes, they are intimately familiar with stress and lots of it. It is important to note that stress can have beneficial effects in helping us focus and motivating us to reach our goals. Stress can help us accomplish tasks more efficiently and can even boost memory. But chronic and extreme stress can take its toll and cause significant mental health problems for all of us, including elite athletes.

2. Can't she just power through? When asked about the biggest misconception of her condition, Biles said, "That I was at no risk and mental health isn't a serious issue...That it was basically a cop-out." If Biles tore a ligament in her knee or broke her arm, we would not expect her to power through. No one would call her a quitter. No one would expect that simply mustering up more willpower would be sufficient. We need to understand that the same is true for mental health conditions.

3. So is it mental or physical? Simone Biles talked about getting "the twisties." When gymnasts get the twisties, they lose the ability to gauge where they are in the air relative to the ground. This breakdown in proprioception is real and life-threatening for a gymnast. Her mental health symptoms of anxiety are just as real and life-threatening. When we ask if something is mental vs. physical, we are perpetuating a false dichotomy. Where does our mental health reside, if not in some physical reality in our brains and bodies? Mental health conditions have a physical reality in our bodies as much as any other health condition. In Biles' case, "the

twisties” offers an apt illustration of the mind-body connection.

4. The goose that laid the golden eggs. Every four years, new records are set at the Olympics. People jump higher. Run faster. Perform more spins or flips or other daring feats. We see the tendency for more, faster, and better happening not only in athletic competition but across a wide range of daily life – from math concepts that have moved from college to middle school in my lifetime to a near-infinite number of articles and workshops on increasing performance and productivity at work. The ever-increasing intensity of competition and performance comes at a serious cost to our mental health. The woeful idiom of “killing the goose that lays the golden eggs” refers to the short-sighted destruction of a valuable resource or an unprofitable action motivated by greed. When Simon Biles joins other world class athletes like [Naomi Osaka](#) and [Michael Phelps](#) in saying that the environmental conditions are toxic, we need to take heed.

5. GOATS get sick too. ‘GOATS’ is an acronym for “Greatest Of All Time.” GOATS struggle with things like stress, competition, self-doubt, insecurity, sadness, anxiety, and depression, just like the rest of us. When GOATS like Biles, Osaka, and Phelps speak out about mental health issues, they have the potential to raise awareness and push for structural changes that promote mental health and wellbeing. We are witnessing a groundswell of [awareness](#) of the need to address [mental health at work](#), and Biles has joined the growing community of elite athletes saying the same needs to happen in their world.

As the Olympics draw to a close, we can celebrate the extraordinary achievements of athletes from around the world. Their athleticism is inspiring, especially given the rocky road to these Olympic games. In my book, Biles gets the gold for taking care of herself and raising awareness about mental health.