

Super Bowl Mental Health

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With over one hundred million viewers, the Super Bowl is one of the most widely watched American broadcasts of the year. It is the quintessential sports spectacle of strategy and strength. Football players are famous for their size and muscle, but some are making headlines in another important way.



[Photo Credit](#)

These big, burly athletes are speaking up about mental health.

1. Mental health among football players is not new. [Terry Bradshaw](#) played his last game for the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1983. He was hailed as one of the greatest players of the sport and inducted into the

Football Hall-of-Fame with four Super Bowl rings to his credit. After retiring from the field, he went on to have a successful career in sports broadcasting. Bradshaw was also one of the first NFL players to speak publicly about his mental illness. He has shared with many audiences his thoughts on what it means to achieve success mentally and physically. Diagnosed with clinical depression, Bradshaw recognizes the important role that medication has played in his staying well. He also acknowledges that sharing his feelings with his support system is equally important. Bradshaw felt he had to stay silent about his mental illness until he retired from football because of the stigma surrounding mental illness in the league at the time.

2. Dawkins, Smith, Haley and Griffen. These NFL players are changing the conversation about mental health. Breaking the silence, former Eagles safety, [Brian Dawkins](#) shared his personal experience of depression and suicidal thoughts at his induction speech to the Hall of Fame. Following Dawkins' speech, former Panther and Ravens Receiver, [Steve Smith, Sr.](#) wrote an open letter on NFL.com entitled, [My personal battle with depression](#).

Pro Football Hall of Fame linebacker [Charles Haley](#), who has five Super Bowl rings to his name, has bipolar disorder. Retired from pro ball, he mentors kids and professional athletes as a mental health advocate. His book, [Fear No Evil: Tackling Quarterbacks and Demons on My Way to the Hall of Fame](#) is a painfully honest read of the personal costs associated with his undiagnosed and untreated mental illness. And just this season, [Minnesota Vikings defensive end](#) Everson Griffen has been facing serious mental health challenges that have taken him off the field for a stretch. The team is standing by him.

3. Former players experience higher rates of depression compared to the general population. These individuals' stories represent a much larger story. Between 15 - 25% of retired players report current or lifetime depression. This may in part be related to the high rates of concussion associated with football. As I discussed in [Knockin' your Noggin](#), it's no surprise that an injury to the brain can worsen existing mental health issues or bring about new mental health problems affecting mood, concentration, memory and personality. And making matters worse, men are less likely than women to seek treatment for mental health problems.

4. Messages about masculinity interfere with getting help. There is virtually nothing more masculine than football. Taken to an extreme, the narrow and rigid definition of what it means to be a "real" man in many societies, including the United States can become toxic. In a recent post, [Masculinity, Toxic Masculinity and the Best Men Can Get](#), I talked about the costs to individuals, families and society when masculinity is defined in terms of strength, status, and aggression. If emotional vulnerability is attacked as feminine, only a sissy would ask for help. And while we are on this topic, for those who watch the Super Bowl to see the ads, rumor has it that the [Gillette's The Best A Man Can Get ad](#) will officially launch during this Sunday's game.

5. The therapist is "in." Tish Guerin is director of player wellness for the Carolina Panthers and the [NFL's first in-house therapist](#) - meaning she's in the building just like any other Panther employee. Another sign that teams are starting to understand that mental health is an essential piece of overall wellness for everyone on their team.

Whether we are rooting for the Patriots or the Rams, and even if we couldn't care less who wins Super Bowl LIII, perhaps we can all cheer for those athletes who are bringing to light the very real mental health concerns of the guys on the football field. Owning our vulnerabilities is an inspiring expression of a different kind of strength.