

#EndTheStigma and #DamWorthIt campaigns encourage student-athletes to talk about mental health

Andrew Nevue | Oct. 6 2018

College students are often busy with their day-to-day lives, whether that is managing school, work and/or extracurricular activities. While traditional college students are balancing their lives, student-athletes are trying even harder to organize their lives. Student-athletes struggle to manage their studies, lives and committing to 40-hour weeks for conditioning and traveling to games. With the recent deaths by suicide of several college athletes across the United States, universities and sports associations have committed to addressing the need for mental health awareness. Universities, including Oregon State and Washington State, are addressing the need for awareness through the #DamWorthIt and #EndTheStigma campaigns.

Student-athletes manage these commitments and more. Tyler Hilinski, a successful Washington State University quarterback, died by suicide in January 2018. Hilinski showed no signs of mental illness to his family, friends or teammates. This event was shocking to the Washington State University community and the entire college-athletics community. A successful athlete who was presumably NFL bound silently struggled and decided that he could not seek help.

The NCAA and other organizations saw Hilinski's suicide as the final straw and demanded more mental health access for student-athletes. University Administration started talking to their players about the once taboo subject. Moving to a university setting from high school is already an adjustment, and life becomes more difficult when athletics and higher-standards are thrown into the mix.

"They are student-athletes, and they come with the same baggage that other students have," said Christopher Miles, associate professor of family and community medicine at Wake Forest University. "They just have a lot more stressors because of their expectations and time commitments." The #EndTheStigma campaign is utilized across social platforms for individuals to share their stories.

In the past year, Oregon State University developed the #DamWorthIt campaign to show student-athletes that their self-worth and mental health is of the utmost importance. University officials said that the campaign is not a direct result of the suicide of Tyler Hilinski, but nonetheless reinforces the importance of mental health. During the Oregon State vs. Washington State football game on Oct. 6, Oregon State athletes took time to challenge the stigma of mental health and discuss their #DamWorthIt Campaign. Gymnasts, basketball players and football players shared their experiences with mental health issues, letting others know that they are not alone in their struggles. Taylor Ricci, a former Oregon State University gymnast and founding member of #DamWorthIt shared her experience of balancing mental health and sports at Saturday's game. "This campaign aims to end the stigma of mental health by utilizing sporting events to bring awareness to the fans and the community," Ricci said. Thousands of game attendees wrote why they are #DamWorthIt and shared their stories on posters throughout the game.

Mental health should no longer be the taboo subject it once was. Universities have continued awareness efforts in the past year to bring students and communities up-to-date with accessibility to assistance and how to help

others. The #DamWorthIt and #EndTheStigma campaigns give a platform for people to share their stories. Student-athletes feel pressure now more than ever to be the best and display their perfect lives across social platforms. Suicide should not be the only option for those struggling to balance it all. So what does all of this information mean? Reach out to neighbors, students or friends because one never knows who may be suffering. Those who are the busiest are often the ones struggling the most.