

England Rugby captain's decision to prioritize mental health could inspire more athletes to do the same

December 12 2023, by Victoria Wilkinson



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England Rugby Union captain Owen Farrell [recently announced](#) he was deciding to step away from international duties. The 32-year-old said his

decision to sit out of the 2024 Six Nations tournament was so that he could prioritize his and his family's mental well-being.

Farrell's decision to step back, especially as an elite athlete, was undoubtedly not an easy one to make. Not only do [professional athletes](#) face intense pressure to perform their best at all times, many still find it difficult to speak up when it comes to voicing their own [mental health](#) concerns.

Although athletes have better physical health compared to the [average person](#), they experience [similar rates of mental health issues](#).

Most [elite athletes](#) are at the peak of their sport when they're already already at higher risk of experiencing poor mental health. Research shows that common mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety, are most likely to present in males [between the ages of 25 and 34](#).

Elite athletes experience numerous [critical, life-changing moments](#) throughout their short career—such as transitioning to the first team, living away from home for the first time, sustaining long-term injuries that may affect their ability to play, contracts not being renewed, and—eventually—retirement.

These can all have a [negative affect](#) on well-being. For example, a 2022 study on Olympic and Paralympic athletes found that [more than one-fifth](#) had experienced high levels of psychological distress. Most of these athletes said they experienced the greatest levels of psychological distress when planning to retire or they had sustained an injury.

In 2018, the UK government produced a [mental health and elite sport action plan](#) to promote improvements in well-being support for professional athletes. As a consequence, various initiatives have been created—such as the one promoted by [England Rugby](#)—to provide

mental health education to players. The UK Sports Institute also founded a team to [provide mentoring](#) services to athletes.

Barriers to support

Yet despite these initiatives, [research continues to suggest](#) that elite athletes don't feel they have a safe space at their club to talk about their mental health. Family remains their [main support network](#)—which can be problematic, especially when training or playing away.

In a study conducted with elite rugby players, it was found that the perceived stigma of having a mental health issue was one of the [most common reasons](#) why players avoided seeking help. Athletes also lacked knowledge on where to seek support.

This stigma is also a shared barrier to athletes feeling confident in seeking mental health support. While this mindset is becoming less prevalent now, athletes continue to [fear disclosing mental health problems](#) out of a concern that it will be regarded as a sign of weakness.

Another problem is that most elite athletes' [mental health isn't monitored](#) on the same level as their physical health. Since [mental health problems](#) can't be detected as easily as injuries, it's clear that improvements are needed in how all professional athletes' mental health is screened.

Clubs also need to go further than relying on [young athletes](#) to know when they need help. Instead, clubs should make sure they're monitoring athletes and regularly providing them with well-being support. [Increasing evidence](#) suggests that screening could better ensure players get the [support they need](#) before reaching crisis point.

Hiring qualified [occupational therapists](#) may be one way to ensure that players get the support they need. Occupational therapists would be able

to assess athletes holistically and help them engage with activities that are meaningful to them outside of their career. This could help provide more balance in an athlete's identity, and better prepare them for life after sport.

Farrell's decision to step away from his international duties to spend more time with his family accentuates the need to help athletes engage more often in [purposeful pastimes](#) that can promote their well-being.

It's especially important that athletes are assessed during major transitions—such as retirement and when they experience an injury. These are periods when an athlete's normal routine has been disrupted, which can have a [major affect on them](#) as many athletes are used to having followed a strict routine from a young age.

Some athletes also [experience anger](#) when they leave a club or retire from the sport altogether, which can inhibit them asking their former club for help. Helping athletes throughout their career to have a better sense of identity outside of the sport may help them to better cope when they are deselected or retire.

There are probably many elite athletes today that still don't have the confidence to speak out about their mental health struggles. But a growing number of athletes are—including tennis player Naomi Osaka, Olympic gymnast [Simone Biles](#) and English footballer [Harry Kane](#).

Farrell's decision to prioritize his mental health has been met with support by his teammates—with some saying his decision to prioritize his mental health [could inspire](#) more athletes to do the same.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: England Rugby captain's decision to prioritize mental health could inspire more athletes to do the same (2023, December 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-england-rugby-captain-decision-prioritize.html>

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