

Q&A: Physician discusses protecting athletes' mental health from social media risks

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Recently, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy wrote an op-ed in the New York Times to raise the alarm about the impact social media is

having on the mental health of our youth.

Athletes of all ages and levels are at risk of mental illness. To better understand the impact of social media on athletes' mental well-being, we interviewed UC Davis family and sports medicine physician Marcia "Marcy" Faustin.

Faustin is the co-head physician for UC Davis Division 1 athletics and the U.S. Gymnastics Team. She has cared for star athletes like Simone Biles and Sunisa Lee and is headed to the Summer Olympics in Paris this month. Faustin also practices at the UC Davis Health Sports Medicine Clinic in Sacramento.

What do you advise athletes to do in terms of social media use around competitions?

I take care of athletes at all levels, from recreational sports to the young 4-5-year-old kiddos, all the way up to the collegiate level, and then at the Olympic level. Across the board, my message is to be mindful of how much time you spend on social media. For example, before you have a competition, it may not be the best idea to hear so many people's opinions about what can go wrong.

We advise them to really focus on their community and the people they trust. They can talk to them about their fears and concerns, their anxieties about the competition that appropriately are there. One strategy we try to implement is encouraging the athletes, even at the Olympic level, to take time to process their experience before getting on social media.

Who do athletes go to when they are facing online backlash or are being targeted?

They mainly go to their trusted sources. These may be their parents, teammates who understand what they're going through, and coaches with whom they spend most of their time. They will also come to the [medical staff](#), their athletic trainer or whoever that trusted person may be. Sometimes, if there is a need to escalate and for somebody to know to stop online bullying, then we can raise those concerns.

How can sports medicine physicians help athletes cope with the pressure from traditional media and social media?

First and foremost, it is important for sports medicine physicians to understand the significant impact that both traditional and social media can have on athletes. These athletes have significant pressure on them, especially those with more visibility. Unfortunately, people aren't always very kind.

We need to be aware and mindful of those negative impacts so we can help guide our patients through them.

Do you find any social media bias among athletes in terms of gender and race?

There are a lot of biases, whether that's racial and ethnic, sexual orientation or gender biases, to name a few. For example, individuals of minority backgrounds experience bias both in their everyday lives and on social media.

We know for women, there is the pushing of this ideal of what their bodies should look like, which can be more pronounced in certain sports. But we can't forget that men also face similar pressures to look a certain

way.

How can athletes protect themselves from the pressure and negativity of social media and traditional media?

Athletes should be mindful of how much social media they absorb and how it can impact their emotions. It is important to set boundaries on how much time they spend on social media and at what time of day. They need to make sure not to allow social media use to take away from their everyday activities and [self-care](#).

There are times when athletes are obligated to be present at press conferences. The managers, coaches and medical team play a role in reminding the athletes that they can decline questions or, if possible, choose to decline interviews.

We've seen athletes in different sports come out to talk about their mental health. Does it encourage people, especially athletes, to seek help when someone famous says they're struggling or pulling out from a competition?

Vulnerability is powerful. It requires bravery, self-awareness and willingness to reveal yourself to help others around you feel less isolated. We've seen it across the NBA, NFL, Olympic sports and professional tennis, to name a few. When an [athlete](#) of that magnitude says, "It's okay to not be okay," it opens the door for others to do the same, which is beautiful. These stories lead to breaking down the stigma of mental illness. Progress is being made to destigmatize mental illness.

Is there something from a health care perspective that you would like reporters to know or wish they would be mindful of when interviewing these athletes?

Reporters play an important role in sharing an athlete's story and influencing the audience perspective of that athlete. Encouraging training in aspects such as diversity, equity and inclusion or trauma may create a psychologically safer environment for athletes. In collaboration with sports medicine physicians, we proposed a few considerations for improving the interaction between the media and athletes.

You're already in the Olympics with the team. How are you feeling about that?

I recently returned from an exciting and exhilarating U.S. Gymnastics Women's and Men's Olympic trials. We are now in Paris prepping for the Olympics.

It's exciting to return for a second Olympics and to help support these incredible athletes. They inspire the world with their talent in and out of the gym. It's an honor and blessing to be a part of Team U.S. Less than 2% of physicians are black females, so if I can inspire even one person to pursue a career in medicine, I'd call that a success.

Provided by UC Davis

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