

Tokyo 2020 – Simone Biles' withdrawal is a sign of resilience and strength

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We all have a choice to safeguard our mental health and that sometimes means saying no. That is the decision American gymnast Simone Biles made when she [withdrew from](#) the vault at the Tokyo Olympic Games

after receiving her lowest tournament score. Speaking to the press later she said: "After the performance I did, I just didn't want to go on. I have to focus on my mental health."

Her withdrawal has divided opinion, with some saying that quitting shows poor mental toughness and resilience; while others say it's characteristic of her courage and strength to safeguard her wellbeing.

[My research](#) shows that it is the latter and that making that decision is part of remaining resilient and competitive—resilient people make clear decisions based on self-compassion and future success over immediate external satisfaction.

Imagine this: the vault is one of your favourite events. It's what you have invested time and effort into for years, and you make it to the Olympic Games. But something just doesn't feel right. For the last few weeks, you've had doubts about your performance and the anxiety and stress of participating at the Olympic Games has become overwhelming. You decide to compete anyway and then things go horribly wrong. You slip and break your neck.

In that one instant, your life (and your family's life) changes forever, when you could have just withdrawn because you knew something wasn't right. This is the true story of [Julissa Gomez](#) at the 1988 Olympic Games who, like Simone Biles, is from Texas and complained that things didn't feel right before the same event—the vault.

The importance of choice

The injuries Julissa sustained led to her becoming a quadriplegic, and three years after the accident she died as a result of those injuries, aged 18. As a researcher working in the field of performance psychology, I often start by working with individuals to recognise potential triggers

that may cause stress and anxiety, such as a penalty kick or when an athlete loses a series of points.

My research has shown that an athlete's [performance can be enhanced](#) by collaborating with them to develop strategies that manage their thinking ([such as](#) negative internal chatter or imagining how the event will play out) and recalibrate their behaviour (such as breathing techniques). The same approach has been used for [the military](#) to increase resilience and [in healthcare](#) to support individuals who are struggling with their [mental health](#) to improve their quality of life.

While handling stress is important, a vital part of enhancing an athlete's resilience, and thus performance, is also recognising when they reach a point that a decision like Simone's has to be made—should they continue or step back? Understanding the point at which this question has to be asked and the motivations behind the decision is key because it ties your motivation to your intrinsic values.

For Simone, her intrinsic value, her priority, is to safeguard her mental health through self-compassion, and this eclipses her passion to win. Therefore, her motivation is greater to withdraw than to compete. If the event becomes too stressful, for Simone, withdrawal is always an option because her wellbeing, rightly, comes first.

Importantly, the decision must be supported in a non-judgmental environment. This promotes safety and builds meaningful connections. This could be why many Olympic athletes originate from the same club, because the environment is supportive, especially during times of challenge.

If the team provides support and acceptance during times of challenge and adversity, members are likely to adhere to and thrive in tasks because of the constructive culture. If support and acceptance are not

present, the members of the team will likely burn out and leave the sport earlier than they might have if they had been given the choice.

The strength of withdrawal

Simone's withdrawal is a beacon of strength and courage for other athletes and onlookers. The notion that the show must go on is outdated and can be detrimental to general health and holistic wellbeing. I have had the privilege to work with Olympians who competed at Beijing, London and Rio, some of whom are now at the Tokyo Olympics, and there has been an increase in athletes seeking support to manage their mental health. Team GB even has a dedicated mental health support line for athletes and staff.

Maybe the rise in cases is due to an upsurge in social media attention, or higher expectations from sponsors, the press and governing bodies. Or it could be because we are all doing a better job at raising the awareness of and recognising potential mental health triggers and supporting immediate action.

It's okay to withdraw from any event, be it the Olympic Games or, as Japan's Naomi Osaka did in tennis, the French Open. We all have a choice and control over what we do. If you perceive that your choice has been removed, it restricts your ability to be creative, feel safe and perform to an optimal level.

But if we (including businesses, schools and universities, governing bodies and the like) are supportive of every individual's choice, it has the connective power to enhance resilience, mental toughness and grit in a way that safeguards mental and physical [health](#). This will only increase a person's passion and perseverance.

Thankfully, US Gymnastics realise this, and in a [supportive statement](#)

said: "We wholeheartedly support Simone's decision and applaud her bravery in prioritising her wellbeing. Her courage shows, yet again, why she is a role model for so many."

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