The Mental Health Toolbox: presented by the uOttawa Student-Athlete Mental Health Initiative (SAMHI) Campus Team

Changing what it means to be mentally tough. #HuddleUp
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Scouting Report: SAMHI

Our Vision
We are striving to ensure that all Canadian student-athletes flourish in and out of competition, across all life domains.

Our Mission
As a champion for student-athlete mental health, SAMHI's mission is to eliminate mental illness stigma in post-secondary sport, facilitate access to the resources needed to maintain and improve mental health, and advocate on behalf of student-athletes experiencing mental illness.

Our Strategic Directions
- Adopt a student-athlete centered approach.
- Reduce harmful mental illness stigma in sport through communication campaigns and media work.
- Connect student-athletes to the tools and resources needed to support mental health.
- Work with governing and administrative bodies in Canadian sport to address policy and service gaps.
- Collaborate with Canadian post-secondary institutions to establish SAMHI as a leading mental health resource for student athletes.

To learn more about our work click here!
**Mental Health 101**

What does mental health feel like?

Meet Sammy! He’s big, tough, strong and has a wicked flow going on under that helmet.

When he is mentally healthy, he feels:

- Socially integrated and accepted, connected to a community
- That he accepts himself
- That he has a purpose in life
- Interested and satisfied with life
- Happy much of the time

When Sammy is not mentally healthy he:

Consistently has great difficulty functioning normally over an extended period of time, i.e. maintaining healthy relationships, fulfilling his role in society, taking care of his body and hygiene, planning ahead and meeting deadlines.

Does this mean I should never be stressed?

Of course not! Life can be stressful, hard and sometimes unfair! But mentally healthy individuals are able to cope with these stressors in healthy ways and carry-on functioning at a high level – whatever that means for them! Read the basics of coping.

I have a mental illness, will I ever be considered “mentally healthy”?

Don’t despair! Mental health and mental illness are not mutually exclusive! While people with mental illness must manage their disease throughout their lifetime (kind of like diabetes), with the right combination of support, therapy, lifestyle choices and maybe some medication, mentally ill people can be some of the most successful members of society. Don’t believe me? Check this out: http://gsappweb.rutgers.edu/centers/stigma/people.php
“By 2020, mental health issues are going to be the leading cause of disability at Canadian universities.”
- David Turpin, President of the University of Victoria

One-third of university students display hazardous or harmful drinking patterns.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst university-aged students. 7% of university students have seriously considered suicide. 1% have actually attempted it.

Suicide is just the tip of the iceberg, indicative of a much larger spectrum of mental health challenges faced by many on campuses everywhere.
"When it’s a broken bone, the teams will do everything in their power to make sure it’s OK. When it’s a broken soul, it’s like a weakness.”

- Ricky Williams, Heisman Trophy Winner

Student-athletes are at the same if not greater risk of experiencing mental health challenges as their non-athlete peers.
In 2011, the hockey world was stunned by three sudden deaths. First Derek Boogaard, then Rick Rypien, and Wade Belak shortly after. In the span of less than an off-season, three professional athletes had died by suicide. I remember these tragic events acutely, partly because I am a hockey player and fan, but mostly because they prompted me to dedicate the next 20 months of my academic life to understanding male mental health and illness in the context of elite athletics. Much of this work would ultimately underpin many of the strategic directions for the Student-Athlete Mental Health Initiative.

When I sat down with the young men participating in my study, I showed them this video featuring Michael Irvin who is one hell of a competitor and NFL Hall of Famer.

I still get chills when I watch it, especially when Irvin says: “We don’t talk. We shut up, and we be quiet, and we don’t say a word and we implode.” Irvin is basically describing a learned pattern in many athletic and non-athletic males known as the “pain principle” or the denial of authentic physical or emotional needs (Sabo, 1999). Social conditioning, particularly in a competitive environment, teaches men that when they discuss their pain, either physical (“suck it up, dude”) or emotional (“what are you, soft?”), they are regarded as weak, so from childhood into adulthood many guys learn to shut up about their problems. I want to stress that this is a learned pattern, and patterns, even those that are shrugged off as “the way things are”, can be changed. More on that later.
In sport, the “suck it up” mentality is often called mental toughness and is encouraged to help define an athlete's identity. Absolutely, there are situations where our ability to “suck it up”- to finish those last two reps, to wake up early for practice and stay late for individual skills work, to get beat and come back the next day fresh and ready for the fight- sets us apart from others. We get good at mental toughness, we have to.

Until recently, however, we haven’t really talked about mental health and illness in the general population. Even less attention is focused on these issues in a sport environment. But wait, don’t they say, “90% of the game is mental”? Sure, but often that 90% encompasses the mental toughness needed to perform in your sport, to score more goals, to finish the big plays, to not choke. The problem with getting good at this type of mental toughness is sometimes we miss the signs of a real problem, or maybe we see it, but for whatever reason - be it shame, fear, embarrassment - we put ourselves in isolation and try to cope on our own. Like Irvin said, “It’s the worst thing in the world for a man to do”. This retreat into isolation or reluctance to speak about or seek help for issues (not just mental illness) has perhaps led to suicide rates for males in Canada being three times higher than the rate for females (Navaneelan, 2012).

In fact, suicide in Canadian males has been described quite accurately as the “Silent Epidemic” and in 2009, almost 3,000 men committed suicide (Navaneelan, 2012). There are a number of risk factors that could account for these types of statistics. One factor I believe that we have the power to change as a community are social norms and expectations around masculinity and health. In other words, those learned patterns touched on earlier. A lot of unwillingness to talk about problems perhaps stems from the inability to articulate what the problem is or what are your needs. Not because men can’t do it, but because maybe they didn’t have the opportunity or the right teacher to learn those communication skills. Instead, healthy coping skills seem to be replaced with unhealthy alternatives that are more accepted/expected like drugs and alcohol, violence, and risk taking (Addis, Mansfield, & Szydek, 2010).
On the other hand, some theories posit that because things like asking for help or caring for one’s health have tended to be strongly associated with femininity, men will avoid such behaviours as a way to define their masculinity, or to position themselves as stronger than woman or even other men, i.e. “the most powerful men among men are those for whom health and safety are irrelevant” (Courtenay, p. 1389, 2000).

The Shift
The Movember Foundation stated, “Masculinity is often negatively portrayed as the cause of men’s poor health behaviours and is viewed as something to be changed rather than accepted” (p. 2). I completely agree with this and with others who have suggested that masculinity can be a positive driver in changing unhealthy behaviours (Addis, Mansfield, & Szydek, 2010). I bet you can think of some great male role models or unsung heroes in your own lives. We need to tap into and grow these resources, but if we continue to shrug it off as “the way things are” or “he’s a guy, what do you expect?”, nothing changes. We lose.

Educate yourself and talk to your buddy. No one is going to erect a monument in your honour, but making the effort to be there for someone is substantive, maybe even life-saving.

Do you have innovative ideas about how to engage the men around you - your brothers, your fathers, your friends, your teammates - to think differently about their mental health?

Tweet at us or email Sam at the address below!

And as always #HuddleUp

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Twitter: @Mentally_Tough

Self-stigma is when a person internalizes the negative messages the public has about mental illness (in this case), and is often cited as more harmful than the illness itself (Hartman et al., 2013; Vogel, Wade, & Haake, 2006). As a friend or teammate, you have the power to be that unsung hero to someone who might be experiencing mental illness, whatever the severity. Don’t be derisive- be attentive, put down your phone.
When the half-filled beer cans and the empty chip bags are all that accompany you in the shadow of competition, when every stranger has screamed themselves hoarse and left to reunite with their own passions and obligations, you are alone with it. Tired and sore, bursting with the swell of victory or the emotional Armageddon of defeat, you are the only one responsible for rebuilding the fragile balance that is your existence as a student athlete. And for many, that is exactly what it is. An existence.

As a male varsity athlete you tell yourself for the millionth time that it’s worth the toil, that the inevitable decline of your grades isn’t part of the bigger picture.

You stand in a trance, watching your interest and participation in classes wane before it eventually stops altogether. Every morning you feel your body give out in its old familiar way, asking when enough will be enough. The truth for many male student athletes is that you come to define yourself and your life through your sport, and not the other way around. You are the soccer player, not the Arts student. You are the swimmer, not the third year struggling to get into Engineering for the second time. And this stigma, this defining of oneself not as a student or even a human being but as an athlete, rules your life. It is reinforced by the person holding the scholarship, the varsity colors striped across your chest; and the flood of attention every game day.

It isn’t lacing up a pair of carefully endorsed Nike’s.
It isn’t getting showered in Gatorade while screaming to a sea of anonymously wild faces.
It is your life.
What is not talked about is the emotional toil that comes with these expectations and the mental burden carried by every varsity athlete, particularly athletes drowning in the macho-bravado of the men’s locker room. For many of these young men the reality of varsity sport is drastically different than advertised, and is a burden shouldered alone.

“The issue with this is when the final whistle blows, when all the strangers have left and you’re in the fading of the lights, there is no Nike endorsement. No Gatorade shower. You weren’t your sport; you were a student and a person the entire time. So now what?”

This was the exact situation that I was faced with as a student athlete at the University of Alberta. An eighteen year old kid out of high school doing what I thought was the responsible thing, playing soccer and getting an education. As a kid growing up I dreamt of stadium lights, the smell of cut grass being my office and the ease of waking up every morning and kicking a ball as a profession. These dreams quickly became haunting, however, as I was completely underequipped for the transition of dedicating my life to a sport for the ultimate goal, and adapting to the reality of balancing academic responsibilities as well as the demands of varsity sport. The depression, crippling anger, and frustration of slowly realizing I was now responsible for building a new life with different ambitions to strive for, was a frustration I had never encountered, and one that I shouldered alone.

Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with teammates before game-time it is easy to feel indestructible. You are a team, a unit dedicated to a common goal. But when the jerseys are all packed and the last teammate has left the locker room you are an individual again, and you are alone to handle your own emotions and mental state of wellbeing. This shift from indestructible unit to fragile individual reaped havoc on my emotional state of well-being during my time as a varsity athlete, and was due to not knowing how to balance the transition between my sport and my life as a young man. There was no guiding hand or written rule book on how to navigate this difficult terrain, and as a result I turned to the only thing available, the societal expectation of what I should be as a man in sport.
The overly macho societal expectation of how a male athlete should behave is what I turned to in order to deal with the pressures of balancing my life, and is what I feel many male student athletes revert to in order to cover their own insecurities and fears. The expectation that as a man and an athlete you must conform to traditional gender biases, that you must constantly be the confident and hardened athletic veteran who is stoic as a stone, is an identity that does not leave room for weakness nor the admitting of fear. That many male athletes, including myself, feel the need to impersonate this confident mask is a major issue, as it leads to an imbalance in the priorities set by these young men and the inability to accept and deal with these issues in the long term.

“By adopting this mask and self-belief that I was indestructible, I was putting myself in a position where my mental health was not a priority.”

Coupled with the feeling that as a man I should have been able to handle my own emotional well-being and not seek help or guidance, my private life was a place of depression and self-resentment. I think that many male athletes feel this burden of maintaining the stereotypical macho façade, while trying to privately deal with their own emotional demons. For myself it felt like being pulled in multiple directions, slowly stretching to a point that my emotional state of well-being was left threadbare. It was only after I made the conscious decision to step outside the shell of masculine bravado, and acknowledge that as a student and a person I was vulnerable and tired, that these feelings changed. After doing this my mental health and emotional well-being improved, and eventually got to a point where I could openly discuss the strain I felt as a student and as an athlete. Taking off that mask and stepping outside of the athletic mould was the most difficult decision of my life, and one that continues to be a struggle. It is a struggle that many male varsity athletes feel however, and one that needs to be addressed.

Because at the end of the day, you aren’t the Nike advertisement, or the Gatorade shower, you’re a human being that deserves more than to simply exist as a sport or a socially created mask.

“And sometimes as a man in sport the hardest thing to do is convince yourself of that fact.”

- Glynndon
Pilar’s tips for new recruits!

By Pilar Khoury: University of Ottawa Women’s Soccer, 2014-15 OUA First Team All-Star, OUA East Division Most Valuable Player, uOttawa Athlete of the Year & CIS Championship Tournament All-Star

1) The academic program is more important than the athletic program. You’re a student-athlete for 5 years. But the program you choose shapes the rest of your life.

2) You are responsible for your career. If you want to play for a team you must take charge and talk to the coach. Coaches don't have enough time on their hands to scout every player. Most recruits are players who have sent in highlight videos and emails to coaches. Tell them when you play and which tournaments/showcases you’re going to participate in so they can attend.

3) Keep your options open. Don’t look at just one school. You don’t always get to play where you originally wanted to. But it doesn’t mean the experience will be any less amazing.

4) Get out there! Go to ID camps, do your research, visit school campuses to get a feel for them.

5) Watch the teams you want to play on. Does your playing style suit their philosophy? The top team doesn’t mean it’s the best school for you.

6) Be confident when you speak to coaches. Don’t be afraid to ask questions and make conversation.

7) If coaches don’t respond to your emails, it’s more than normal! Give them time. Some might not be recruiting at that time, or might be in season and are too busy. Follow-up with a phone call, like you’re trying to get a job.

8) Look at which teams can offer you more of a role. Look at which positions are graduating. How many players play your position. Don’t be afraid to ask coaches which players they’re losing. Ask them what they normally expect from rookies.

9) Ask questions! Ask about the number of practices. Are players allowed to miss practice once in a blue moon because they have too many exams in one week? How do players balance school and sport? Do academics come first?

10) Take your time! Don’t rush.
Being a sports coach today is a lot more complex in terms of expectations than it was even a decade ago. As in teaching, you’re often faced with a myriad of different personalities, levels of parental involvement, diverse skill sets, psychological baggage (yours too!) and pressure to excel in spite of all that. Kudos to you for sticking it out anyway because you love the game, and the work with athletes! And, if you’re at all wise, you know the lessons learned in sport will enhance the chances of a worthwhile life for athletes long after the playing is over.

**So how far do you go to ensure the success and well-being of your team?** This is an important question, because it helps coaches to define their boundaries. All good relationships have healthy boundaries, and the relationship between a coach and the team is no exception. The answer to “have far will you go?” directly relates to another key point to consider: *Why am I coaching?* By the way, there is no correct answer to this one— it's just imperative that you are clear about why, because your answer will dictate every interaction you have with every athlete on your team. Your response to each player’s attitude, energy, discipline and performance is all a reflection of what you want from this coaching experience. In other words, it’s all about YOU. If you can’t take ownership of this reality and recognize the potential impact you can have on people, another profession might be in order.

Happily, many coaches are in the game because they truly love sport and its opportunities to set high standards and surpass them. Competition is energizing, team efforts are rewarding, and helping a whole generation of young people develop into confident, strategic, disciplined and passionate people is…well, FUN.
So what do you do when someone on your team is not “doing their job” and messing with your team’s efforts to win? Your response to this dilemma totally depends on the answer to those earlier questions: Why am I coaching? And how far will I go to ensure success? Since we’re talking about mental health issues in this toolkit for SAMHI, let’s use the example of high potential athletes who fall prey to genetics and experience in their young adult years, and suffer with depression, an eating disorder, bi-polar disorder, or anxiety. Playing at the varsity level is going to be a challenge, but if handled appropriately, it can turn into the perfect opportunity to develop skills that will benefit your team now, and the athlete’s life forever! Not a bad legacy for a coach to leave upon retirement.

If, on the other hand, the coaching does not revolve around development of players, then it’s certainly easier to rationalize not investing in the person you find more challenging on the team. The tone you set, the expectations you articulate, and the attitudinal response you show to their struggle will not only affect the individual, but the rest of your team as well. They are taking their cues from you, and if they see that you are not open to going further, they won’t either. So how far should you go? Only you can answer this one based upon your values. Here are some tips (below) that may help you discern an appropriate course of action:

1. Know your athletes as people. What motivates them? What kind of learners are they?
2. When a new athlete joins the team, make note of the baseline levels of their technical AND mental/psychological skills. If you don’t know how to assess these, get a professional to assist.
3. As the season progresses, notice any patterns that begin to change. What’s going on with the Post who was racking up 20 points a game and is now distracted and angry when she’s on the court?
4. Use your captains- and if you don’t have any, get some! They are invaluable in terms of being aware of team dynamics that can wreak havoc with your chances of success. They also have ways of resolving things that are not within your control.
5. Educate yourself (and your team) about physiological and psychological health and how to maximize it. Be familiar with the sorts of conditions/experiences that your particular age group is affected by. Again, you don’t have to be the expert at everything. (God help the team who expects me to show them how to improve their jumpshot!) Bring in resources to add to the mix.

6. Finally, know what’s out there in your community that can help you- and your athletes- carry out the mission- ie to WIN. Thanks to SAMHI, people are becoming more aware of the abundance of resources available across Canada and the US. Here in Ottawa we have sports psych professionals, doctors, psychiatrists and an assortment of people keen to support the hard work of coaches. USE them.

My final words on coaching: Thanks for your commitment to our kids. Parents and coaches have something in common. We both benefit from getting others involved in the care of our athletes. I hope you will keep coaching as long as it feeds your soul!

Kelly Adams
M.Ed (psych) ACC (International Co-Active Coaches Federation)

Kelly Adams has been actively involved with athletes and sports teams for more than a decade, beginning with club basketball teams (Ottawa Shooting Stars) and moving on to the Ontario JUEL League, Carleton Ravens Women’s team, St. Francis Xavier X-Women (Halifax) Algonquin Thunder Basketball and Volleyball teams (Ottawa), Memorial University Seahawks (NL), and currently her first college Mens team in Quebec. Her previous background in competitive tennis and her degree in Music Performance have made her a valuable resource in terms of teaching performance preparation and mind mastery skills. She also has a Masters degree in Educational Psychology/Counselling, and this unique combination enables her to assist individuals, teams and coaches in working through issues that may be preventing them from reaching maximum performance potential. Kelly was a key component of the success of Algonquin Thunder Women’s Basketball team (four time Provincial Champions) from 2010-2014. Her sports psych work with athletes focuses on affirming key strengths, setting individual and team goals, encouraging ownership of performance results, and utilizing visualization exercises, yoga breathing, and positive self-talk as tools to promote the attainment of performance goals. Her website (below) outlines the many workshops and services she offers both inside and outside of the sports world. She is currently completing her first book, The Art of Masterful Coaching: a Guide for Coaches, Athletes and Parents.

Kelly can be reached at insightsinc@bell.net or 613 407 7487. Her website: http://trustingtheinnerview.com/
MENTAL HEALTH ACTION PLAN: A TOOL FOR COACHES & ATHLETES

Mental health can be a difficult subject to tackle in sport, the SAMHI MHAP guides coaches and athletes through a collaborative process that aims to keep the student-athlete healthy and create an open line of communication between coach and athlete. Together, a coach and athlete will answer the following:

1. When I am feeling well, I am:
2. What are my triggers?
3. In competitions, what are signs that my mental health is declining?
4. As my coach, what can you do when you see the warning signs?
5. What is my position on disclosing my mental illness/mental health status to teammates? How would we go about doing this in a safe and informative way?
6. What is the best way to approach me as a player and as a person?
7. Making a plan to maintain my mental health – in and outside of competition
8. Crisis plan – before the season starts, a coach and athlete should mutually agree upon a fair and healthy course of action in the event the athlete’s mental health compromises his or her ability to perform.

Download the SAMHI MHAP here: http://www.samhi.ca/introducing-the-new-samhi-mental-health-action-plan-mhap/
With science-based training and activities, Trainwave's interactive and easy-to-understand exercise booklets are accessible, practical, and aligned with Canada's Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model.

TRAINING THE MINDS OF ATHLETES.
Eating disorders (ED) are often forgotten when discussing mental illness, yet athletes, especially those competing in sports focused on body weight and shape, are at a greater risk than any other group in society of developing an ED or disordered eating. The stress of athletics is further amplified when an athlete is also coping with mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder or perfectionism. This in turn can lead to unhealthy ideals about shape and weight along with disordered eating which could lead to a full blown ED. Food is essential for providing energy to fuel training and recovery. ED’s can compromise food intake leading to decreased performance and interfere with social life, leading to isolation and increasing and individuals risk of self-harm and suicide.

Eating Disorders vs. Disordered Eating
ED’s are as diverse as the group of people they affect; however, the most common ED’s are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Individuals who suffer from anorexia nervosa are classified as low weight, have an extreme fear of gaining weight and a distorted image of their body weight and shape. Bulimia nervosa is classified as a disorder in which an individual will secretly binge (consume abnormally large amounts of food) followed by a compensatory behaviour to maintain weight such as self-induced vomiting, laxative or diuretic use or excessive exercise to purge what was consumed. Bulimia nervosa patients are often of normal weight.

Warning signs:
• rigid food intake,
• excessive focus on weight, eating and food
• strict food rules or rituals

Disordered eating on the other hand, occurs when an athlete does not meet the criteria of having clinical ED but is conscious of food and calories, participates in weight cycling and is cautious of food intake. Although disordered eating is not clinically classified, it is still of concern as adequate nutrition in athletes is essential in both health and performance.

There is no question that weight and body composition are important aspects of sport performance, however, healthy approaches that provide enough energy to fuel activity, should be used to change overall body composition. When athletes participate in extreme short-term dieting to lose weight quickly are often unhealthy and use unsafe methods to do so including laxative abuse, vomiting, excessive sweating, fasting and diuretics, which can cause electrolyte imbalances, and gastrointestinal problems.
Signs and Symptoms

**Anorexia Nervosa**: significant weight loss, boney protrusions, dry skin, down like hair (lanugo), low energy, often cold, have poor circulation, hair loss, low blood pressure and heart rate, dizziness, constipation, bloating and abdominal discomfort. In females, loss of menstrual cycle can occur and can cause permanent bone loss.

**Bulimia Nervosa**: Electrolyte imbalance due to vomiting or laxative abuse, gastroesophageal reflux disease, heart rate abnormalities, dental damage, eat and purge in secret, feel a loss of control when they eat.

**Treating ED’s**

The quicker the ED is identified and treated, the better the chances of recovery. An eating disorder has many layers, which often include mental illnesses as co-morbidities. It is best if a team is working with the athlete to address multiple including consultation with a registered dietitian and psychologist specializing in eating disorders along with a medical team for supervision of treatment and health of the athlete.

Down below are some effects of energy deficiency in relation to sport performance and health regardless if whether it is caused by an eating disorder or simply not enough nutrition.

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**Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S)** is a new term that describes men and women who suffer from the syndrome of having low energy availability or in simple terms not consuming enough fuel to match the energy output. Without proper nutrition you can see changes in metabolic rate, menstrual function, hormonal balance, bone health, immune function, protein synthesis and much more, which can ultimately result in a decrease in physical performance and cognitive functioning.

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Anastasia’s Story: Coming Out, Falling Down, and Getting Back Up

Hi. My name is Anastasia Bucsis and I’m a Canadian Long Track Speed Skater. You probably don’t know my name and you wouldn’t recognize me on the street, but within my 22-year career of skating around in circles, I’ve started in two Olympics, six World Championships, and 42 World Cups while wearing the Maple Leaf.

I’m not famous. I’m simply an ordinary person that has had the privilege of opportunity, working hard, and of chasing my dreams. I’ve celebrated the beauty of sport - I’ve felt some of the highest highs, and I’ve lived the lowest lows. I’ve been on top of the world, and have been yesterday’s news. I am also an ordinary person that has had an extraordinary struggle with self-acceptance and self-love.

My journey starts in Vancouver 2010. Although I had been skating for over 15 years, my success seemed to come overnight and surprised both the general public and myself. I was 20 when I was selected to an Olympic team that was heralded as one of the strongest Canada had ever produced. I was “the rookie” in a field of heavy hitters like Clara Hughes, Kristina Groves, Cindy Klassen, and Jeremy Wotherspoon… athletes that transcended simply speed skating and were the collective face of a nation’s athletic legacy. Although I was out of place—Clara could have easily been my mom—my teammates became my family, and welcomed me with open arms. I would love to sit here and tell you that it was the best time of my life, but it was bittersweet dichotomy.
Although a million doors of opportunity were opening for me, I felt like a complete fraud. In my mind, I was a kid—so incredibly naïve and green—I wasn’t an Olympian. Olympians were infallible. They were famous. They won medals. They were indestructible. They didn’t have problems, their closets were always clean, and they lived in the emotional montages that CBC produces to recap the glory of the Olympic Games. I was just a kid who sometimes skated fast, and sometimes won races... but in general, I viewed my success as a fluke and far from deserving of Olympic status. I wasn’t going to win a medal; I knew it. Everyone knew it. I came in 34th. I wasn’t a superstar, and although I’m embarrassed to admit it, I grew incredibly uncomfortable with this new label that was placed upon my identity.

On top of feeling like a fraud on the ice, there was a much deeper struggle raging underneath the surface and within my brain. I was besieged with an identity crisis. Although I fought against acknowledging it, I had come to the painful revelation that I was gay.

It makes me embarrassed and ashamed to admit that I didn’t want to be gay, but being born and raised in a very conservative and Catholic family, I was incredibly ignorant, alone, and afraid. I had absolutely nothing “alternative” in my life and certainly no gay friends to connect to. I felt a loneliness that didn’t leave regardless of how many people I surrounded myself with. It quickly destroyed my usually sunny disposition and replaced it with panic attacks and anxiety. I was scared. I thought God was punishing me (for what, I have no idea), but I hated the fact that I felt different. I wanted to live a “normal”, white-picket fence life, and as I was so alone and confused, I didn’t know how I could happily live while being gay.

I hated the fact that although I had numerous personality traits that made up my identity, in my mind, the label of being “gay” would erase everything – it would probably be the first and last thing associated with my name. I was so incredibly anxious and confused off of the ice that this unease quickly became debilitating on it. My results- as did my mental health- quickly began to tailspin. Especially as I felt I was being dishonest to the people surrounding me, I started to solely base my self-worth off of my results as a speed skater— something that every athlete understands will rob you of your happiness and internal peace. My anxiety became so incapacitating that my sport psychologist believes it accumulated into a psychosomatic lower back injury in the Winter of 2012. I was nearly out of commission for two months, and limped to the season’s finish line with a fighting yet broken spirit.
It took me nearly three painful years to come out to my family and close friends. Although everyone in my life has been completely supportive and loving, for years I struggled with being comfortable in my own skin. Even with such an amazing support system built-up with my family, friends, coaches, teammates, and being blessed to live in a country that prides itself on celebrating diversity, I struggled to accept myself. In retrospect, it seems so silly, but when I was fraught to come out of the closet, it was an all-encompassing issue.

I wish I could write a “how-to” manual to conquer the battle of self-acceptance. Whatever your struggle may be, I can promise you that with time, surrounding yourself with love, and utilizing therapy (either with a professional or at least someone objective), life becomes better.

Unfortunately for me, I waited far too long before becoming proactive and asking for help. Although I was finally comfortable, proud and celebratory of my identity, I had dug myself into such a deep rut from the years of struggle that it became impossible to climb out of without help. After years of thinking negatively of not only myself, but of the world around me, I simply couldn’t turn my negative thoughts into positivity. I am here to tell you that if I hadn’t have sought help, I probably wouldn’t be here to write this story. In Spring 2013, the lowest time of my life, I had absolutely no ambition, had lost all hope in life, was physically ill (depression is more than a “mood”), and would rather have been dead. I had no thought of going to the Olympics; I had no interest in any worldly thing. It was only when I had hit absolute rock bottom that I decided to go on medication. It was an absolute blow to my self-concept, as being an athlete, I felt as though I was fundamentally weak for not being able to figure out my problems and fight through the adversity on my own.

Going on medication was mentally and physically a struggle but with time, I started to gradually improve. Medication didn’t provide me with all the answers to life, but it gave me a quiet calm that allowed me to eventually start living in the direction I intended to. I have since gone off medication and am living a happy and fulfilled life, while remaining in communication with my therapist and self monitoring. I try to always stay on top of my sleep, surround myself with people that are uplifting, and take time to recharge and maintain an internal calm. At first I tried to write about my life and struggle with depression in an almost lighthearted tone. I tried to come off as funny and charming, as if to put you at ease and diminish my struggles.
But depression isn’t something that is tongue and cheek. It’s not charming. It isn’t given the respect that it deserves; our silence and the stigma associated with mental illness is stifling and only further serves to flame an already raging fire of societal passivity. Depression is debilitating and a killer.

As athletes—and although we hate to admit it—there’s a part of ourselves that is directly linked to our fleeting results. Our outlook is tainted by how we perform; our esteem linked to how we execute and showcase a lifetime’s worth of work in a matter of minutes or a single game. As athletes, we are taught to be strong—to fight through adversity, to always push through, be self-assured and competent. As athletes, we’re programed to shy away from asking for help—we’re calibrated to “cowboy up”. Our egos have been built to be self-sustaining and individualistic in any and all given environments.

I am begging you, if you are feeling depressed, or alone, or confused, to ask for help.

If I would have had the wherewithal to ask for help earlier, I would have not only been happier off of the ice, but I would have been a stronger skater on it as well. We all struggle. We all have problems. Regardless of fame, money, or success, we all have our individual issues that are made better through reaching out and asking for help. Even if you are in an individual sport, life is a team effort. This story may come as a surprise to a lot of people that aren’t in my “inner circle” or know in-depth of my past. I usually have a sunny disposition, love to socialize, am extroverted, and enjoy a good laugh. When I was struggling, I fooled a lot of people by wearing a lighthearted mask to hide my internal war. You never know what may be going on inside of someone’s life. Love yourself, and love one another because at the end of the day, that’s all that really matters.
I’m sad all the time for absolutely no reason…

I cannot get over this breakup…

I can’t keep up with my school work…

I’m so homesick…

$50 in the bank? How am I going to eat this week?

It’s OK not to be OK. Ask for some help.

Carleton: Student Academic Success Center (SASC) Paul Menton Centre (PMC)

Peer to Peer Support: Ottawa Peer Recovery Centre (OPRC) Carleton Gender and Sexuality Resource Centre uOttawa Pride Centre

uOttawa: Access Service – adapted exam services Student Academic Success Service (SASS)

On Campus: University of Ottawa Health Services (UOHS) Carleton University Counselling Services

Alcohol & Addiction Treatment
Alternative Nights out: Paint Nite

Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) - Self-guided continuing care

Man Therapy – therapy the way a man would do it

I cannot get over this breakup…

On your phone:
Good2Talk – the post-secondary student hotline (bilingual) Centre d’aide 24/7 (French) 819-595-9999
Distress Centre Ottawa (English) 613-238-3311
APPS: MindShift, SuicideSafety, MindYourMind

Ottawa Rape & Crisis Centre (ORCC)

Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) – be prepared to help a friend/teammate

Ottawa Good Food Box

Campus Care Packages

Online: Big White Wall
Take out your SAMHI Card!

Come to the SAMHI booth in section 115 to win awesome prizes!

Winning #19
Winning #87
Winning #51
Winning #83
Winning #27
Winning #48:
Winning #68
Winning #52:
Winning #10
Winning #3
Winning #99
Winning #89