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Simone Biles' Olympic Pullout May Start a Trend

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By: Marisa Herman

Jaws dropped when Olympic gold medalist gymnast Simone Biles — one of the highest-profile Americans competing in Japan — shockingly underperformed her vault and then benched herself for the remainder of the Tokyo Olympics team finals on Tuesday because she "wasn't in the right headspace" to compete.

The reaction was similar last month when Tennis star Naomi Osaka — who was ousted from the Olympics with a third round loss on Tuesday — stunned fans by withdrawing from the French Open due to what she said was a battle with anxiety and depression. She had earlier told tournament officials that she wouldn't do post-match press conferences because of questions that "bring doubts to our mind."

And as athletes face immense pressure from an ever-expanding pool of media outlets, as well as fans and critics on social media, mental health professionals say more athletes are likely pull out of events and sessions with reporters over mental health concerns.

"I do believe this is a trend that will continue," said Holly Schiff, a licensed clinical psychologist.

While professional athletes aren't immune to mental health issues, "especially given the extreme pressures they are under," Schiff said it is becoming "all too common" and "almost easy" for athletes to "step down or withdraw when they are not feeling mentally up to it or in the correct headspace."

Psychiatrist Carole Lieberman said Osaka and Biles may have started a trend where others who are in the spotlight in sports, acting, politics, or other occupations that come with a prominent public profile could "announce they are walking offstage because they are feeling pressure or depressed or anxious or some other 'mental issue' to get attention and not ruin their image."

Clinical psychologist Andrew Mendonsa, however, said it's a "relief" that athletes are becoming more comfortable talking about mental health issues.

"We forget the amount of pressure that our athletes are under," he said. "Our athletes don't go home at 5 p.m. They are on 24/7."

Mental health professionals say social media is part of the problem — and solution — when it comes to addressing mental health.

In one sense, it is fueling the pressure and stress that athletes feel they have to live up to when they perform. They are constantly hearing praise from fans and want to live up to their expectations and also prove their harshest critics wrong. But social media also provides a platform for a topic once regarded as taboo that's now being destigmatized and discussed openly.

Schiff said social media has played a big role in offering communal support when an athlete shares they are going through a mental health concern. She said that coddling and overenthusiastic support, however, can also "make it too easy for people to give up and walk away when things get hard."

On Sunday, Biles helped the U.S. qualify for the team final. But her execution was far from perfect. Following the shaky performance, she posted on social media that she was feeling the pressure of the Olympics.

When it came time for the actual competition, she wasn't able to complete her planned vault routine and landed awkwardly, drawing a low score. She ultimately withdrew from the rest of the events after the first rotation, leaving her teammates to earn the silver medal without her help.

Lieberman said if Biles genuinely withdrew because she didn't want to hurt the team's chances at winning a medal, that the move to bow out was "generous." But, if she really pulled out because she was afraid of performing poorly and ruining her image, "that's being a spoiled coward."

After the Russia Olympic Committee took the gold, the attention was on Biles, who told reporters she has to "focus on my mental health and not jeopardize my health and well-being.

"It just sucks when you're fighting with your own head," she added.

Her fans, celebrities, and other Olympians immediately cheered Biles' decision to exit the competition on social media.

While Schiff doesn't believe that athletes who opt out of performing because of a mental health concern should face a penalty or punishment, she said when they "pull out or quit or give up, they are missing an opportunity to strengthen themselves and gain resilience in order to face adversity and associated challenges."

Mendonso said it is possible that the world's greatest gymnast pulled out because she didn't think she was going to do her very best and didn't want to settle for a bronze or, worse, not medaling at all. But he believes it is likely she had every intention of pushing through.

"Nobody wakes up in the morning and says after years and years of work of conditioning and prep that they aren't going to go through," he said.

Schiff said the recent moves by Osaka and Biles also show the "lack of mental health care and support" for athletes and others in "extremely stressful occupations."

"With the right interventions and therapeutic support, these individuals can learn healthy coping skills and strategies, relaxation techniques, and how to identify and correct unhealthy and unrealistic thought patterns," she said.

"Therapy can also help them realize any negative thought patterns they are having that contribute to chronic stress and thereby modify their behaviors, thoughts and feelings concerning stressors and change them to more realistic, helpful ones."