

WHAT IS THE GAME PLAN FOR MENTAL HEALTH?

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Former Marquette player Alex Gambacorta writes about the need for teams to address mental health issues openly.

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If I showed you my broken arm and said “I’m injured,” you wouldn’t say to me, “you’re fine,” “suck it up,” or “shake it off.” You would say, “how can I help you make this better?” or ask, “How can I help you heal?” And if I said to you “I feel anxious,” “I feel depressed,” “I’m stressed,” or “I’m nervous,” you shouldn’t tell me to “shake it off,” or to deny those feelings

either. Our minds and our bodies are one and the same. The difference is that a physical injury can be seen, and our mental health is invisible.

There is an urgent need in the sports world, and in our world in general, to talk about our mental health. To talk about the thing we all have, our minds.

Throughout my collegiate career, this need grew. Playing a sport in college was tough. A lot of the time it felt like constant anxiety and pressure to be perfect in every way and it felt like we were missing something to try and navigate those feelings. I watched myself, my teammates, and peers struggle alone to understand how we were feeling, trying to navigate telling our coaches that we didn't feel right, that something was wrong, scared of looking weak in their eyes, of losing playing time, of being treated differently by our teammates. The stigma of talking about mental health became an overwhelming barrier to feeling healthy and performing at the highest level.

These conversations have been going on for some time, this need has always been there, but those conversations ended in the locker room.

We saw what other schools were doing to tackle the stigma against mental health and what tools they were providing to their student-athletes in order to promote positive coping skills. In response to this need, a fellow student athlete and I, along with our academic advisor, started SHAPE (Student Health Allies and Peer Educators) at Marquette. The goal of SHAPE is to help athletes know they are not alone, to connect them to mental health resources on campus, to recognize the signs of mental crisis, and to help our peers recognize the signs as well. We knew we wanted SHAPE to be peer lead because our teammates and peers are usually the first ones who hear about or recognize when something is not right.

These conversations are just beginning to make headlines and generate attention. More and more professional and collegiate athletes are starting to open up about their struggles and share their stories in order to help others see that they are not alone, to end the stigma about mental health, and to create change. We crave these conversations. We want to talk about this. It is just a matter of creating the space and the environment to do so. So, what can we do?

COACHES:

- Talk about mental health with your team.
- Educate yourself about the warning signs of mental health conditions ([NAMI National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) has many resources).
- Tell your team you are comfortable talking about mental health with them. This statement automatically opens the door to begin those hard conversations. And if you are not comfortable having these conversations, you need to identify someone who is – an athletic trainer, an advisor, or other coaches.
- Encourage your team to have those conversations with each other.
- Understand what your athletics department is doing about Mental Health. Know their game plan.
- Find out your campus resources and educate and encourage your athletes to use those resources (i.e. the counseling center).

ATHLETES:

- Encourage your coaches to talk about mental health.
- Create a positive and welcoming space for your peers to come forward and be vulnerable about their struggles.
- Educate yourselves about the warning signs of mental health conditions ([NAMI National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) has many resources).
- Find out your campus resources and educate and encourage your peers to use those resources (i.e. the counseling center).

We have a lot of work to do in order to break the stigma surrounding mental health and start these important conversations. However, we can do these small things, right now, to begin. If you are struggling, you are not alone.

Editor's Note: Following graduation from Marquette in 2018, Alex Gambacorta joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest as academic support at St. Charles Mission School on the Crow Reservation in Montana. She recently completed her service year, moved to Missoula, Montana, and is looking forward to new adventures in Big Sky country.