

OPINION

The U.S. Open and open minds on mental illness

By Udai Tambar and Caroline Gelman
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As the U.S. Open returns to New York this week, tennis fans are looking forward to seeing the sport's biggest stars. While the focus of the sports world will be on Flushing, many players are using their platform to discuss the importance of mental health support. Serena Williams drove this point home when announcing her retirement, stressing the importance of mental fitness and of putting one's well-being first.

Serena isn't alone. Last year, Naomi Osaka — who learned how to play tennis in Queens — pulled out of the French Open, conceding to underlying bouts of depression. Australian pro Nick Kyrgios opened up about his struggles, saying he hated his life and had “spiraled out of control.”

Their challenges are not exclusive to tennis elites but signal the wider need for mental health supports — and they send a welcome message to our youth that, like their athletic role models, they should not feel alone when experiencing depression, stress and anxiety.

Recent studies illustrate how the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated previously rising rates of mental health conditions experienced by youth, noting the multiple disruptions to their lives, such as the loss of family income, death of a parent or guardian, and disruption to their education. The U.S. surgeon general noted that depressive and anxiety symptoms doubled across the globe during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms.

Emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts rose by 51% for adolescent girls and by 4% for adolescent boys in our country. And more of our youth were living in poverty. One study of just a five-month period found that an estimated 325,000 children were pushed into or near poverty as a result of the economic downturn.

As the need for mental health support has grown during the pandemic, New York Junior Tennis & Learning (NYJTL) needed to take a close look at how to adapt to meet the needs of those we serve, and this required incorporating mental health support to recognize the warning signs that students are struggling so we can connect them with services.

We needed a new, creative approach that addresses these obstacles. Last year, NYJTL and the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, the oldest and largest public school of social work in the city, piloted an innovative solution to identify and respond to mental health challenges faced by our youth.

At five of our 34 sites where we provide free school-based after-school tennis instruction to youth, our site directors worked to identify students displaying increased anxiety, depression and stress. Hunter then dispatched graduate social work student interns to each location three days a week to talk with students, consulting with their parents and guardians, too. We initially began with 10 social work students to ensure they and the youths had ample quality time together.

Such psychosocial support has focused on the interrelation of social factors and individual behaviors, and interns discovered that the youths' experiences reflected circumstances that predated the pandemic and worsened since its inception. Opening up and being able to talk with an adult was only a first step; the next was connecting those who are struggling with resources, such as counseling.

Addressing these needs cannot be accomplished in a silo. We need the consistent support of school leaders, parents and guardians as well. All of us bear this responsibility as the new school year approaches — even if it starts with an acknowledgment that we may need to take that first step instead of expecting students to broach their mental health first. Our youth need people they trust, such as teachers and coaches, who can listen in a non-judgmental way.

Our first year signaled encouragement. The students we supported have shown personal growth, greater self-esteem and confidence. So, this fall, we are expanding our program to another two schools (and hope to expand to more in the future), thanks to funding from the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development and New York State Office of Children and Family Services. Our vision is to reach even more students in the coming years.

We should consider the words of Naomi Osaka, who said, “Each of us, as humans, is going through something on some level.” By being there not only for our budding tennis stars, but all youth, we can provide a hand and a heart and help our students to succeed both on and off the court.

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