

## Mental Health Stigma

### *What Biz Leaders can Learn from Tennis Star*

**W**hen Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open on June 5 after refusing to speak to the media, *she did it to protect her mental health*. Mark Goulston, MD, says she may also have struck a blow on behalf of **all** who feel the need to downplay or even hide their depression, anxiety, grief, and other issues in the interest of meeting work obligations. *Editor's note: Gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from the Tokyo Olympics for mental health reasons.*

“Osaka’s courage in speaking up on this issue is a huge step forward in helping break down the stigma surrounding mental health issues,” says Dr. Goulston. He is co-author, along with Diana Hendel, of *Trauma to Triumph: A Roadmap for Leading Through Disruption and Thriving on the Other Side* (HarperCollins, 2021). “It has inspired a lot of others to tell their own stories. Leaders need to take note.”

Dr. Hendel adds, “[They] need to not only prepare for future crises but also bring psychological well-being out of the closet. Everyone won’t be as brave as Naomi Osaka, which is why [business] leaders need to get intentional about destigmatizing mental health issues. If we don’t, people will be afraid to acknowledge they are struggling. This will cause bigger problems down the road. It’s not good for employees or for your company.”

#### Recommendations

Advice from Drs. Goulston and Hendel include:

❖ **First and foremost, make sure employees feel comfortable accessing the**

**organization’s EAP.** Not everyone is aware of the role that EAPs play in assisting employees with issues that affect their health and mental and emotional well-being. Make sure colleagues and supervisors know the services it offers, and that they can access those services *confidentially*. Further reinforce the message that there is *no shame* in using an EAP.

❖ **Talk up the subject of mental health.** Don’t assume people “just know” you care about this issue. They probably don’t. Say, *“I want you to be mentally and emotionally healthy. Please come to me if you need help. My door is always open.”* And don’t just say it once. The EAP and business leaders need to say it, announce it, write it, and reinforce it over and over.

❖ **Regularly meet with employees one-on-one so you’re more likely to be aware of their personal struggles.** This is a good leadership practice anyway as it builds strong connections between leaders and employees. But *especially* in tumultuous times such as exist today, it helps a business leader to know if they’re grieving a loss, or their spouse has lost a job, or their child is struggling in school. The better a boss knows their employees, the more likely they will be to intervene when they need it.

❖ **Be aware of the signals you’re sending. (People need to feel psychologically safe to tell the truth.)** It’s crucial for leaders to allow people to feel their emotions and to talk about it when they are having a tough time. They must pay attention to the signals they

are sending. Never penalize people, overtly or subtly, for bringing their secret struggles into the light. Never imply that this is a sign of “weakness” or that they are finding a reason to shirk their duties. And if you think you’d never do this, know that it’s possible to subconsciously push people away through stigmatizing them.

“We often stigmatize others because sometimes what others are going through hits too close to home about our own mental and emotional issues,” says Dr. Goulston. “It seems that most of the world copes with anxiety and depression—as opposed to healing from it—by trying to run away from it by keeping busy. Hearing about someone else’s issues can get in the way of our being able to run from ours.”

❖ **Show your own vulnerability.** It is okay for a business leader to admit that you too are afraid, stressed, and exhausted at times. In fact, being vulnerable with one’s own feelings frees others to do the same. Not only does this level of transparency normalize conversations about mental health, but it also helps to be seen and heard, which supports your own mental health. (Remember, leaders are also human!)

❖ **Model empathy for others’ experiences.** The ability to show empathy truly is one of the most powerful leadership skills. Not only should you listen to people’s experiences, but the leader must also let them know that you really care and feel for them. Further, let it be known that the organization will not tolerate the teasing or bullying of those who are visibly struggling to carry on. That is the opposite of empathy. Put a stop to any and all criticism or gossip immediately.

❖ **Handle workplace shake-ups *carefully*.**

When a crisis, disruption, or trauma happens at work, how leaders respond really matters. COVID is an obvious example, but in a chaotic world, all sorts of disruptive events can—and eventually will—happen. These events can exacerbate mental health issues, which is why leaders must approach them the right way. For instance:

➤ *It’s impossible to communicate too much.* When leaders acknowledge and speak about what is happening during a crisis (particularly the bad stuff), employees feel safer to speak up, ask questions, and make their needs known.

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➤ *Fear, stress, and anxiety ARE the elephants in the room.* Address them head-on. “We often think if we talk about stress, fear, or anxiety that we’ll dwell on it and make it worse,” says Dr. Hendel. “In my experience, the opposite is true—being able to express feelings and speak about fears in a psychologically safe environment leads to less isolation, which can be detrimental to our well-being.”

➤ *Cut out the pithy platitudes or superficial pep talks.* Workers’ fears and anxieties

must be acknowledged as real and understandable. They don't need to be told to "get over it" or "buck up." Their feelings are not unfounded or delusional.

➤ *Make sure you are always listening.*

When we're under great stress, it can be very difficult for any of us—particularly business and other organizational leaders—to hear the angst, pain, resistance, and sometimes anger of others. Or to have it directed at us. But bearing witness to others' feelings is often what is most needed during and in the aftermath of a traumatic episode.

❖ **Offer a peer-to-peer support group.**

Teamwork can greatly benefit health-care workers, *especially* those who have encountered traumatic experiences together. "When groups share similar suppressed and repressed thoughts and feelings during and following a trauma, they are immersed in the bonding hormone, oxytocin, which is associated with emotional connectedness and emotional safety," says Dr. Goulston. "If your organization does not already have a formal support group, consider forming one now. They can meet once or twice a week for sessions in person or even by video conference."

❖ **Emphasize self-care.** Talk openly to employees about how to keep stress and pay and practice the basics of self-care. At first glance, practices like getting enough sleep, eating well, exercising, and so forth may seem overly simple or self-evident. However, they're more important than most realize in keeping us mentally, emotionally, and of course, physically healthy. The more you talk about such matters, the more it will dawn on employees that you care about their well-being.

## Summary

"None of this [advice] is over the top," asserts Dr. Hendel. "Many people feel mental health issues are the next big epidemic people will face. It is a leader's place to get involved and try to neutralize the problem before it really takes root in the organization. Making 100 percent sure people aren't afraid to raise the alarm is the first crucial step."

*The EAP can play a crucial role in assisting leadership in making this more than a "good idea", but a reality. ■*

*Dr. Diana Hendel is the co-author of *Trauma to Triumph: A Roadmap for Leading Through Disruption and Thriving on the Other Side* (HarperCollins Leadership, Spring 2021) and *Why Cope When You Can Heal? How Healthcare Heroes of COVID-19 Can Recover from PTSD* (Harper Horizon, December 2020). She is an executive coach and leadership consultant, former hospital CEO, and the author of *Responsible: A Memoir*, a riveting and deeply personal account of leading during and through the aftermath of a deadly workplace trauma.*

*As the CEO of Long Beach Memorial Medical Center and Miller Children's and Women's Hospital, Hendel led one of the largest acute care, trauma, and teaching hospital complexes on the West Coast.*

*Dr. Mark Goulston is the co-author of *Trauma to Triumph: A Roadmap for Leading Through Disruption and Thriving on the Other Side* (HarperCollins Leadership, Spring 2021) and *Why Cope When You Can Heal? How Healthcare Heroes of COVID-19 Can Recover from PTSD* (Harper Horizon, December 2020). He is a board-certified psychiatrist, fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, former assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA-NPI, and a former FBI and police hostage negotiation trainer. He is the creator of *Theory Y Executive Coaching* that he provides to CEOs, presidents, founders, and entrepreneurs, and is a TEDx and international keynote speaker.*

*He hosts the *My Wakeup Call* podcast, where he speaks with influencers about their purpose in life and the wakeup calls that led them there and is the co-creator and moderator of the multi-honored documentary *Stay Alive: An Intimate Conversation about Suicide Prevention*.*

## Mental Health Finally Turning a Corner?

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has placed a spotlight on mental health like never before. Many companies have quickly pivoted to adding resources. Roughly 53% of 256 employers surveyed by the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions reported providing special emotional and mental health programs for their workforce because of the pandemic, with offerings including virtual care, apps, and EAPs.

Headspace says it's seen a 400%-plus increase in requests from companies seeking support for their employees' mental health. Big Health cites that same triple-digit increase in employer interest in the same timeframe. Both firms are offering their products free to employers for a limited time to help during the pandemic.

Many experts predict that a majority of employers that add or make changes to resources in response to COVID-19 will likely do so long-term. That especially might occur if employers get positive feedback from employees who stay healthy, more productive and tend to have better morale as a result. Increasing communication about available benefits offerings also stands to be a permanent move.

But perhaps the biggest change that may become permanent is simply making it OK to address the issue, industry experts say. Many employers that had unspoken policies to not talk about or address employee struggles—with the exception of pointing them to an EAP—are now changing their tune.



Compelled to support employees who have been struggling during the pandemic—on top of the employees who *already* had mental health issues—they're encouraging openness and asking managers to lead with empathy.

Kathie Patterson of Ally Financial, says that while her company offered mental health resources, the pandemic caused her – and other company leaders – not only to talk about employees' problems and stresses more, but to think about how to help in a new fashion. *Part of it involves being more open*, Patterson states.

In summary: Mental health issues were already on the rise among employees before the pandemic, and they certainly won't just disappear post-pandemic, according to experts. ■

*Additional sources: Human Resource Executive; Kathryn Mayer, HRE benefits editor and chair of the Health & Benefits Leadership Conference.*