

GUEST ESSAY

Venus Williams: The Thing That Has Really Made Me Tough

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By Venus Williams

Venus Williams is a professional tennis player who has won seven Grand Slams and four Olympic gold medals.

I'm sitting at my desk after having to pull out of this year's U.S. Open with a leg injury. Managing physical ailments is always difficult, but it's part of a professional athlete's job. I have always understood this.

But my body is only half of it. I still remember the first time my mother told me this: If I wanted to thrive in this sport — and in life — I needed to take care of my “whole self.”

We had traveled to Oakland for my first professional tennis tournament. I was 14. She was aware that I was entering a new phase of my life, one that would bring heightened visibility and more intense demands. She saw the pressures gathering on the horizon.

Until then, putting myself in a position to perform at my best had always meant physical training, physical preparedness and physical health. The extent of my understanding of the psychological side of things was to be mentally tough on the court in the name of winning. I made sure never to show any weakness.

What my mom was telling me that day in Oakland was that none of those elements of winning would work unless I also tended to my mental health. I needed to have a balanced life and not identify myself solely as a tennis player. Even though I was beginning to have success as a young pro, I had to remain committed to my education, stay connected to my religion and enjoy the experience of improvement — not be so driven that I would miss it all.

In other words, my life wasn't just about how well I hit the ball. And neither was my success on the court. We've all seen professional athletes whose performances have fallen off because of things happening to them off the fields of play that mess with their mental state.

A few years ago, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. There was no book I could read to tell me how I could manage and overcome this illness. There was not, and is not, a straight line to the solution.

But after years of thinking holistically, I knew how to get started. I set about working not only with doctors on the physical aspects of my disease, but I also sought out mental health professionals to help me see more clearly — not to let my fears distort my reality — and to develop my ability to learn to stay in the moment. Also, and perhaps most important of all, I learned to be kind to myself every day as I faced this new obstacle.

I may be a professional tennis player, but I actually don't think I'm that different from everyone else. All of us face mental health challenges resulting from the inevitable setbacks and uncertainties of life. We also live in a culture that glorifies being a workaholic, where the risks of burnout are often ignored, and where, let's face it, whether you're on or off the court, winning is everything.

It doesn't matter who you are. You need support. You can't divorce mental health from anything you do. It impacts your physical well-being, your decision-making, your ability to cope with difficult moments.

I grew up running down every last ball on the hot, hard courts of Compton. My sister Serena and I were taught that we'd have to fight harder than other players to get the respect we deserved. That's what I thought “tough” meant.

But admitting you're vulnerable is no joke. It isn't easy to ask for help or confide in people about having emotional struggles. I have been lucky to have a sister who has gone through similar challenges; we have always been able to share our experiences and support each other.

Paying attention to my psychological well-being has allowed me to love the game of tennis for this long. I guess you could say it's the thing that has really made me tough.

I am fortunate to have family and coaches who let me lean on them. For me, open and positive communication is essential. It has been wonderful to see so many athletes, such as Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles and Michael Phelps, talk about the need to tend to the inevitable psychological issues that bubble up for all of us.

But it is incredibly frustrating to me that only an estimated half of those who have mental illness get the treatment they need. As we confront the devastating impact of the pandemic, support for our mental health is more urgent than ever. I would imagine that if you're reading this column, you know someone who was or is struggling emotionally. I know I do.

I have partnered with the therapy service BetterHelp and the Women's Tennis Association, which are providing \$2 million toward free therapy to anyone who signs up and are supporting efforts to remove associations of shame attached to mental illness.

I am excited to lend my voice to destigmatizing mental illness, and it starts here: Let's show up for ourselves and for one another and recognize what it takes to be truly strong.

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