

Wellbeing in sport and life: Riches and fame can't stop doubts creeping in

Do you remember those days before Covid-19 came onto the scene? Back then, when I was approaching my 80th birthday, I asked St Mary's University, Twickenham (SMU) if they would be willing to take over the work of the charity I had founded in 2010. They welcomed me with open arms. So it came to pass that the John Paul 2 Foundation 4 Sport is now at home in SMU within SWIFT, a research and development centre whose name is an acronym for Sport, Wellbeing, Inclusion, Faith and Teaching.

Sport and wellbeing – and mental health – have only recently come together in the public domain. It's hard for athletes to admit mental health struggles because it's simply hard to be vulnerable. That's why it's encouraging to hear when athletes do speak up.

On March 24th 2022, I read how Paul Pogba revealed he suffered depression "several times" at Manchester United when Jose Mourinho was boss. "I have been through it, but we don't talk about it. Sometimes you don't even know you have depression, you just want to be isolated, to be all alone," he said.

Pogba stated that his reported wage of £300,000 a week does not make him immune from mental health issues. "In football it is not acceptable but we are not superheroes, we are only human being(sic)."

The 29-year-old midfielder, who cost £89 million in 2016, looks likely to leave Manchester United for nothing this summer.

On April 1st – and it was not an April Fools joke – Lewis Hamilton, seven-time F1 world champion, admitted his sown struggles on Instagram. " (It's) hard some days to stay positive. I have struggled mentally and emotionally for a long time, to keep going is a constant effort," he wrote. "I am writing to tell you it is okay to feel the way you do; just know you are not alone and that we are going to get through this."

Michael Phelps – the most decorated Olympian of all time – revealed in 2018 that he struggled with depression and contemplated suicide after the 2012 Olympics. "For the longest time, I thought asking for help was sign of weakness because that's kind of what society teaches us," he said. "That's especially true from an athlete's perspective."

"If we ask for help, then we're not this big macho athlete that people can look up to. Well, you know what? If someone want to call me weak for asking for help, that's their problem. Because I am saving my own life."

"We're human beings," Phelps said. "Nobody is perfect. It's OK to not be OK. It's OK to go through ups and down and emotional rollercoasters. The biggest thing is, we all need to ask for help when we go through those times. It was hard



Paul Pogba: A reported £300,000 a week salary cannot stop him becoming depressed.

for me to ask for help."

In April 2018 The Secret Footballer, an anonymous former Premier League player, talked about his depression. In May 2018, Andrés Iniesta revealed that he suffered from depression before the 2010 FIFA World Cup due to his injuries and the death of his friend Daniel Jarque.

Among professional athletes, data shows that up to 35 per cent of elite athletes suffer from a mental health crisis which may manifest as stress, eating disorders, burnout, or depression and anxiety. Key factors are the impact of injury, overtraining, social media scrutiny and ongoing competitive pressure to perform.

Participation in regular physical activity can increase self-esteem and reduce stress and anxiety. Physical activity can help play a role in preventing mental health problems and improve the quality of life of

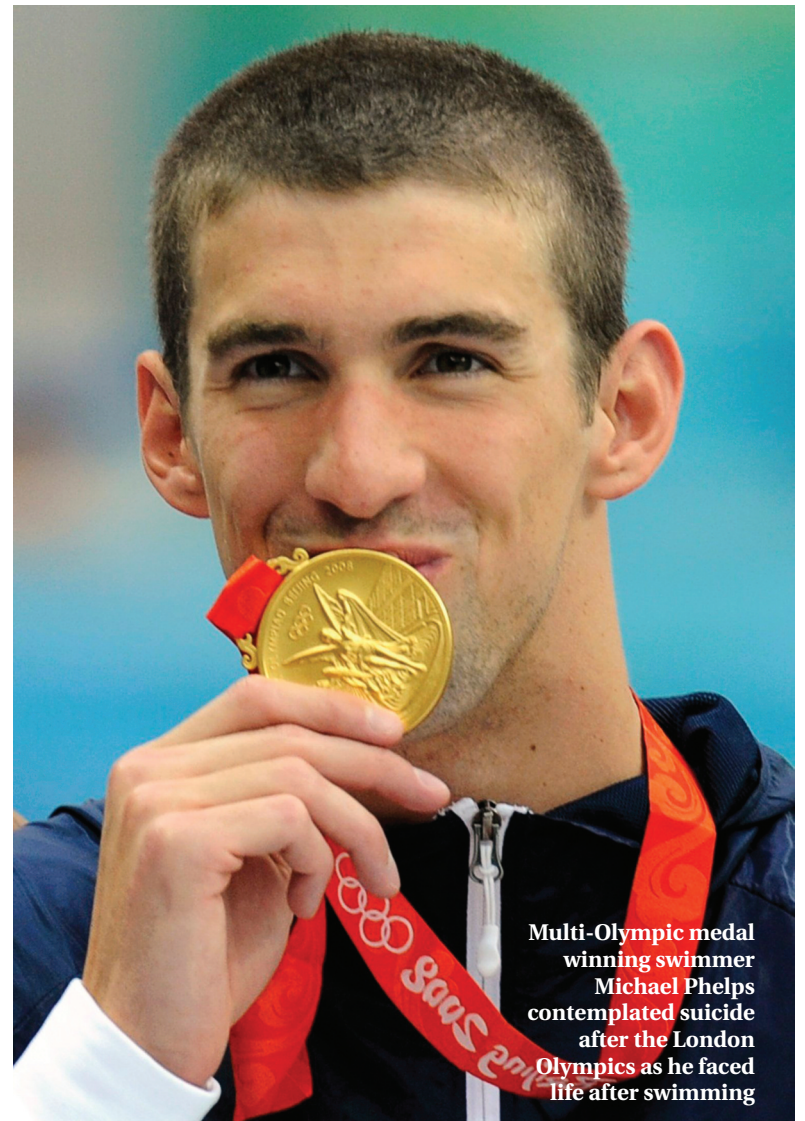
those experiencing them. Living virtues increases self-esteem and lowers stress. Hard work on the physical, curiosity on the intellectual, kindness on the emotional and Honesty on the Spiritual keeps the PIES of life tasting sweet.

Words, such as "I'm proud of you", "I believe in you" can light up a dark period in your friend's life.

There are two key behavioural components to sports anxiety. The first is the physical component (somatic anxiety) – with its increased heart rate, tension, sweating and trembling, and the second is the mental component (cognitive anxiety) – with its negativity, self-doubt and worry.

Seven steps are listed below to help you and your friends cope with chronic stress

1. To avoid 'burn out', re-balance work, home and hobby time. Be kind to yourself. Do you enjoy



Multi-Olympic medal winning swimmer Michael Phelps contemplated suicide after the London Olympics as he faced life after swimming

gardening, reading, listening to music or some other creative pursuit? Engage in activities that bring you pleasure and joy. Research shows that these can reduce stress by almost half, as well as lowering your heart rate.

2. Bring regular exercise into your weekly – if not daily – agenda. Movement balances the nervous system, increases blood circulation, helping to flush out the stress hormone, cortisol. A daily 20-minute walk will make a difference. In case you are wondering, the mental benefits of aerobic exercise do have a neurochemical basis. Exercise reduces levels of the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. It also stimulates the production of endorphins, chemicals in the brain that are the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators.

3. Watch your diet. Alcohol, nicotine and caffeine may temporarily relieve stress, but tend to make it worse in the long run. A healthy diet, with more organic fruits and vegetables and fewer processed foods and sugar, will make you feel better. Drinking plenty of water helps dilute and eliminate toxins in your blood.

4. Link up with positive-minded

people. A conversation with optimistic friends and allies-in-life releases hormones that reduce stress. Lean on those good listeners in your life

5. Practice meditation, prayer. Living – and consciously speaking with God – have certainly helped me to stay young at my old age.

6. Get enough sleep. If you get less than seven to eight hours of sleep, your body won't tolerate stress as well as it could. Sleep repairs your brain and helps you reduce the dangers of dementia.

The later years of Margaret Thatcher – who used to sleep just four hours a day – warned me of the dangers of trying to work long hours – and do too much.

7. If you do not have a close human companion, get a pet. Clinical studies show that spending even a short time with a companion animal can cut anxiety levels almost in half.

As they say, 'never judge a book by its cover.' My ministry has taught me that the many people who put on a brave face and appear to be 'fine' are actually in need of help with their mental health.

If you are honest and open about issues you may have – or have had – you might be able to help.