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### Tyson Fury & Mental Health Activism

Mental health awareness is a topic that has been at the forefront of activist movements in recent years. Given that there are millions of people around the globe that deal with mental health issues, there has been a push in society to break the stigma that those issues should not be talked about or addressed. It is a subject that has only recently begun to be talked about by public figures in the last decade, as it was previously something that people viewed as a weakness or something that made people “weird.” Many athletes have been vocal about their own experiences with mental health issues in an attempt to rewire how society thinks about this subject. While there have been dozens of members in the world of sports that have become mental health activists, one unique athlete that has been a major face of the movement is boxer Tyson Fury. Fury has used his platform to share his own experiences as a form of motivation for other people that may be going through similar or more severe situations. He has also been a public ambassador for mental health organizations, has donated to charities that support people who are struggling with these specific issues, and has used social media to spread awareness about the severity of the subject.

Tyson Fury sharing his own story and speaking about the subject of mental health has been one of the major parts of his activism; him simply speaking about his own issues goes a long way in breaking the stigma that mental health is something that people should be ashamed to talk about. Fury is a white male athlete that competes in boxing, which is one of the most

stigmatized sports when it comes to the way boxers are framed as violent and masculine. Society has been led to believe that people with identities similar to Fury's are not supposed to be mentally ill; rather, they are expected to be both physically and mentally strong, and are expected to compete in their sports with violent intent. According to researchers Joey Ramaeker and Trent Petrie, "Sport also reinforces traditional masculine norms (Messner, 1990a; Steinfeldt et al., 2011), including denial of pain (Sabo, 1992) and using one's body as an instrument of violence (Messner, 1990b). Through their immersion in sport environments boys and men may internalize masculine ideologies that can be detrimental to their health and well-being (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005)," (Ramaker & Petrie). This quote emphasizes that males are less likely to be public about their issues, especially mental health, because they are led to believe that it will make them less masculine in the eyes of society. There is also the notion that being public about their pain diminishes their legitimacy as a weapon, making them less of a "violent threat" within their specific sport. However, Fury's vocalness about his own experiences is one of the most prominent examples in sports of an athlete humbly admitting that they have had their own struggles, which in turn helps break the stigma that men should mask their mental health-related problems.

While any athlete that speaks out as an activist about mental health can make a difference, the way in which Tyson Fury has done so is both unique and influential in actually making an impact. One of the earliest examples of Fury sharing his story came on a 2018 podcast episode from *The Joe Rogan Experience*. For over twenty minutes, he shared the specifics of his battle with mental illness, detailing how he contemplated suicide, abused alcohol and drugs, gained an unhealthy amount of weight, and had no motivation to get up each day. A major notion in society is that successful men are not supposed to struggle with these things, as they are

framed as weaknesses. Fury, though, was as successful as an athlete can be in his sport, yet his mental illness was still something that was largely out of his control. In a YouTube clip from the podcast, Fury says, “I’d wake up and I’d think, ‘Why did I wake up this morning?’ This is coming from a man that had everything: money, fame, glory, three titles, a wife, a family, kids, everything. But, I felt as if I had nothing. I felt I was an empty, gaping hole that was just filled with gloom and doom,” (“JRE Clips” 00:49-01:06). Fury being so specific about how mentally ill he was in this quote helps reinforce the fact that no matter who you are or what you have accomplished, mental illness does not discriminate and can affect anybody. Even though he was a man with tons of success, his mental health struggles overshadowed all of that. Despite the fact some people argue that individuals with a high amount of success cannot mentally struggle the same way that the “average” person does, Fury’s very open humility pushes against that argument. As of April of 2022, the video has over 73,000 likes and 6,000 comments, mostly in support of Fury and his openness about his issues. Those numbers prove that Fury’s honesty about his mental health issues is something that people admire, as they likely relate to him and benefit from him sharing his story. Through using this platform to share his own experiences in the blunt fashion that he did, Fury displayed activism for mental health awareness, and quickly became one of the major sports faces in the overall mental health activist movement.

While Tyson Fury has certainly made an impact through sharing his story, the fight for mental health awareness is still an active one. Even though athletes like Fury have been so outspoken about the severity of the issues surrounding mental health, a good chunk of the media and society remain ignorant to the severity of mental health and are unwilling to break the stigma. According to Dr. Jennifer Keal, ““Media outlets can positively influence the perception of mental health by using direct quotes from those with mental health problems or including

experiences of recovery and rehabilitation. However, newspaper reporting of mental health problems appears to be less frequent than of physical problems, with the majority of reports being negative in tone [5, 6],” (Keal). Keal notes that even though the media has the power to have a positive impact on mental health activism, they do not frequently do so. When they do, it is often “negative in tone,” (Keal), which means that they are framing it as something that is either a weakness or something that should not be discussed. For example, NFL quarterback Dak Prescott came out about his own mental health issues in 2019; while many people praised Prescott for being open, there were members of the media that claimed it made him look “weak” and would negatively impact him on the football field. Fury has experienced similar criticism, as the media frames boxing as a sport that has no room for people that are “mentally weak.”

While mental health is not something that is not often positively reported on by the media, physical injuries get reported as just news. When an athlete comes back from a physical injury or plays through one, they are often praised and framed as heroic. This is especially true in sports that are more violent than others, like football, rugby, and boxing. In a 1995 report on masculinity in sport by Nick Trujillo, it is stated, “[Football] Players who played with injuries, especially those who played in pain, were complimented as tough, as reflected in Al Michaels’s description of what Buffalo running back Thurman Thomas did the previous week: Thomas ‘gets hurt early, has bruised ribs, he has trouble breathing the rest of the game, and winds up carrying the ball 30 times,’” (Trujillo 412). The example that Trujillo provides here is just one of hundreds of examples over the past few decades of athletes being praised for playing through physical injury; however, athletes that play through mental illnesses do not get reported on as frequently and are not praised as “tough” in the same way that athletes with physical injuries are. This is an issue that society has created for mental health activists like Tyson Fury, as it has

created the notion that having a mental issue is a weakness, while showing adversity against a physical injury is something that is impressive. While Fury has received much support for his mental health activism, the media's lack of support for athletes that struggle with those kinds of issues has made it difficult for the overall movement of mental health awareness to get promoted in the world of sports. However, that has not stopped figures like Fury from continuing their activism.

In the years that followed Tyson Fury's initial openness about his own mental health issues, he began taking his activism a step further by donating to charities and pairing up with organizations. In June of 2021, it was reported that Fury donated seven million pounds of money to help create homes and provide resources for individuals that struggle with drug and alcohol addictions (Khoury). Fury himself struggled with alcohol and drug abuse when he was experiencing his own depression. Substance abuse is one of the common side effects that people with mental health problems experience, and it often turns into an addiction, which is a mental health disease in itself. Fury's financial activism proves that he is willing to give up his own fortunes to help benefit others that may be struggling. That helps prove that he is serious about making an actual impact for many of those that struggle with mental health-related diseases. Additionally, he has become an ambassador for the Frank Bruno Foundation, a British organization that provides online services and programs for those that may need them to help cope with their mental health problems. In the name of the organization, he helps get their services out there using the strong social media pull that he has. According to the Foundation's website, "Tyson continues to speak about his mental health on his social media platforms and the media work he does. He often responds to fans and projects messages of positivity. We'd like to thank Tyson for helping to #clearthecloud and #knockout the stigma of mental health," (FBF).

Through both the charitable contributions he makes and the work he does with the Frank Bruno foundation, Fury remains a consistent activist for mental health awareness. His actions are evidence that his activism does not stop at just creating awareness, but extends into actually making a difference in the lives of others in need.

Among Tyson Fury, there are many other athletic figures that have spoken out and have joined the movement as activists in the fight to change the stigma around mental health, as well as help those who struggle. Sports provide athletes and other figures the opportunity to be outspoken about issues that they deem relevant; in fact, most athletes are expected to be involved in some type of activism or charity. What makes sport such a great platform for mental health activism, though, is it helps people realize that even the toughest or most successful athletes in the world are just as vulnerable to mental health problems as anybody else; however, mental health is a form of activism that some athletes do avoid speaking on because they are led to believe that it is not their role as athletes to speak on such a vulnerable topic. According to the research conducted by author David Carless, “Resisting a culturally dominant narrative is, however, never easy and rarely without costs. One cost is the risk of being excluded or ostracized from a culture on the basis of perceived difference from ‘norms’ or expectations. For elite and professional athletes, this kind of exclusion has the potential to lead to loss of earnings and/or career development through, for example, de-selection or loss of sponsorship,” (Carless). This citation emphasizes that athletes are pushed to believe that they have a certain role and standard to uphold in society. Many of those athletes fear that speaking up about a subject like mental health will go against society’s norms and expectations for athletes, which in turn, may lead to damage to their reputation, career, salary, or endorsement opportunities. Fury in particular has become such an influential figure because of his tremendous success in the ring, polarizing

physique, and dominance in the tough, violent sport he participates in. The dominant narrative that society has on athletes with those traits is that they are supposed to be mentally, physically, and emotionally strong regardless of what experiences they may be going through. If an individual that had no knowledge on Fury's background were to hear him described as a strong, successful championship boxer, they would likely not assume that he is an individual who struggled with mental health; however, Fury helps prove that even though he is those things, he is still a man that has struggled with mental health just as severely as millions of people around the globe have. He goes against the dominant narrative that society places on athletes, and then takes it a step further by using his platform that he gained through boxing to actually become a coherent activist.

All in all, mental health has become a major subject that athletes have begun to both raise awareness and make a difference for over the past decade or so, and Tyson Fury is one of the most prominent faces in that activism. Through the charitable contributions he has made and the voicing he has done on behalf of people that struggle with mental health issues, he has made a difference in the lives of many. His consistent work to change the view on the subject and actually help people that need it make him one of the most influential mental health activists in the world of sports. Despite the narrative that society expects athletes with his identity to uphold, he still speaks out as an activist for an issue that he relates to. To this day, Fury continues to work as a mental health activist and push against the stigmas that surround the movement.

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