



Pressures of success can ripen chances of mental health issues

Top athletes such as Pats' Gordon more vulnerable to mental health, substance abuse issues

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By Alexi Cohan

Top athletes like Patriots wide receiver Josh Gordon are more vulnerable to serious mental health conditions and substance abuse issues, according to Boston-area psychologists.

The talented wide receiver announced Thursday he would be taking a step back from football to focus on his mental health — a move that clinical psychologist Dr. Natalie Cort said should be praised.

“When I see people who take time out of their life to get care and support, I applaud them. Those are people you just want to praise and lift up,” said Cort, an assistant professor of clinical psychology at William James College.

Cort said Gordon’s move was “incredibly courageous” and noted that a spotlight on Gordon’s mental health may help others who are struggling.

“With achievement comes pressure, you have to maintain it. People are watching you,” said Cort.

Cort said individuals who have achieved a high level of success can have a difficulty reaching out for help. “There’s a level of judgment,” said Cort.

“It’s even harder to then admit a significant vulnerability because you know you’ve been capable — so just admitting you’re struggling takes courage,” said Cort.

According to the NFL Player’s Association, a variety of mental health resources are available to players including counseling and screening for anxiety, insomnia, trauma and depression along with other wellness resources for stress and performance management.

Gordon has a long history of substance abuse, admitting in a 2017 interview with GQ that he started abusing drugs in seventh grade. Dr. Craig Murphy, an associate

professor in the school psychology department at William James College, said Patriots fans claiming Gordon has shown “wasted potential” are “callous.”

“Players are more apt to turn to substances than many other people ... they have a lot more pressure and a lot more eyes on them,” said Murphy. “Mental illness is simply not a lack of motivation.”

Murphy said Gordon’s decision can be used to remind others that sports can be a cause of stress at a young age.

“We should be using all these examples to remind ourselves to look at kids and look at how we are supporting athletes at young ages,” said Murphy.

In a recent mental health symposium hosted by the NFLPA called “Beyond the Physical: A Symposium on Mental Health in Sports,” the association encouraged players to get the help they need.

The symposium, hosted in May, highlighted the availability of eight free therapy sessions offered to players, an “NFL Lifeline” with access to a team clinician and a “Your Mind, Your Body, Your Health” campaign to raise awareness about mental health conditions.

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