Even Fighters Get the Blues

Randy Borum, *University of South Florida*
Fighters are known for their toughness. Either they have it or they develop it. They have to be tough to succeed in a sport that’s all about giving and receiving pain and dominating an opponent.

But fighters are also human, and fighting is an emotional sport. Fighters are at least as vulnerable as everyone else to experiencing depression and other psychological problems.

At 6’2” and 270 lbs you can tell right away that Vincent Lucero – a professional mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter – is not a ‘weak’ dude. But when he is depressed, that is how he says he feels – “weak and pathetic”. Vince’s struggle with depression began when he was a child. At six years old, he can vividly remember wanting to die.

His childhood was rough. After authorities took young Vince away from his abusive parents, he bounced between foster homes and psychiatric hospitals.

He was even abused by a foster parent who told him, “nobody cared for me or loved me, and if I said anything, nobody would care anyway.” All this before his seventh birthday. During his adolescence, he had “three ambulance rides and two helicopter rides” as a result of his multiple suicide attempts.

Even in his adulthood “the depression never left,” he says. When his first daughter was about two years old, Vince remembers calling on the phone to talk to her, “crying with a gun, thinking I’ll say bye and I’m done. But I would hear her, and she would say ‘I love you DaDa’, and I always put the gun down.”

Vince is a tough guy, with a tough disease that affects tens of millions of people every year – depression. He speaks openly about his struggle and is approached often by others who say they have endured similar challenges.

Dr. Margaret Goodman chairs the Medical Advisory Board of the Nevada State Athletic Commission. She believes that “Mental health disorders are just as important as any other health issue facing our boxers, but are frequently overlooked. Why? There is still a stigma attached to insinuating a weakness. This could not be further from the truth. Excuses come...
EVEN FIGHTERS GET THE BLUES

Terrance Real, author of I Don’t Want Their Bodies Are Telling Them to Slow Down.

How do we know? The symptoms are clear. The first step is recognizing them and then seeking treatment. The symptoms are worse for some people than others, but they are still real. When depression goes untreated, it can also interfere significantly with athletic performance. Depression can disrupt concentration and focus. It can deplete energy levels and motivation. When people are depressed, they often are plagued by negative thoughts that can seriously undermine their confidence. Sleeping and eating patterns get disrupted. Motor skills and reaction times can slow down. It is a bad deal if you are competing or preparing for a fight. Few who saw it will ever forget watching former WBC heavyweight champion Oliver McCall as he refused to fight and began weeping during his bout with Lennox Lewis.

Despite the risks, researchers say that most people with depression never get the help they need. Some cases go unrecognized, but other times people feel too ashamed to reach out for help. Without treatment, those who have one depressive episode, are much more likely to have another. The disease may get worse. Depression may take its final toll – collapsing the fighter’s spirit and casting upon the mind a seemingly boundless shadow of hopelessness. In the US, someone commits suicide every 16.2 minutes. Eight of every ten of them are men. A half million people in America and over 140,000 in England and Wales alone attempt suicide each year.

The stakes are high, but there is good reason to be hopeful. Whether or not there is a ‘cure’, depression is very treatable. Success rates exceed eighty percent. Therapy helps many people. A new generation of medications are very effective and have far fewer side effects than the early antidepressants. They are non-addictive and typically do not cause people to feel out of it, just ‘normal’.

If you think someone you coach or train with may be struggling with depression, experts encourage you to reach out. If you are worried they may be thinking about hurting themselves, they say it is OK to ask. You won’t ‘put the idea in their head’. The key, professionals say, is to listen, express your concern, and encourage them to seek treatment. Ignoring the hurt or dismissing it – for example, by saying ‘It can’t be that bad’ – or talking about your own problems just adds to the feelings of isolation. By being supportive and willing to listen, you may be the key to helping a friend or training partner win the toughest fight of his life.

Depressed men also may be more prone to have physical symptoms – unexplained fatigue, headaches, stomachaches, general soreness, pain and physical discomfort. Instead of appearing clinging or needy, depressed men tend to isolate themselves socially and try to keep their negative feelings inside. ‘Some experts call it covert depression,’ Redman says. ‘One author calls it Irritable Male Syndrome.’

Guys may also be more prone to cover or escape from their depression by self-medicating with drugs or alcohol or even exercise. Physical exercise may help as a short-term strategy, but for some it becomes a compulsion. They cannot seem to work out hard enough or long enough, even when they are injured or their bodies are telling them to slow down.

Terrance Real, author of I Don’t Want Their Bodies Are Telling Them to Slow Down.

OCTOBER 2007