

OWN YOUR ROAR

Own Your Roar is an initiative created by student athletes for student athletes that unites mental health and athletics to utilize sport as a platform to increase mental health awareness. The nature of the NCAA conditions student-athletes to withhold displays of weakness, while balancing the stressors that accompany performing at a high level academically, athletically, and socially. While there may be no tangible, physical proof to accompany mental and emotional pain or setbacks, mental illnesses are just as valid, and just as detrimental to performance as physical injuries. Athletes have access to top physical therapists, athletic trainers, massage therapists, and other modes of healing for physical injuries, but what they lack is the support for the injuries, illnesses, and struggles that we face internally. At Towson, and across the NCAA, many student-athletes do not have mental health professionals to see within the confines of their athletic department.

Own Your Roar aims to eradicate the glaring disconnect between the support

and treatment received for physical injuries versus those for mental health illnesses. Mental health challenges are elevated in the realm of athletics, and with a slogan of "Mental Health, Cultivate Resilience," Own Your Roar works to achieve mental wellness and build mental strength. Every day, student-athletes take care of their bodies to be able to excel in practice and competition, under the care of a plethora of athletic trainers and physical therapists, so why do we neglect to take care of our mental health to the same extent? Own Your Roar exemplifies its mission of cultivating resilience by hosting student-athlete forums to reciprocate support, creating events, bringing national speakers, and dedicating athletic games to mental health awareness. Creating an environment in which student-athletes are comfortable to openly express themselves serves to increase their competitive advantage on and off the field.

Own Your Roar has earned national social media attention for its unique efforts as a

model for other institutions. It has inspired the creation of similar initiatives such as James Madison University Athletics' "Dukes Let's Talk," and University of California - Los Angeles Athletics' "Bruin Brave." Starting in the Fall 2019 semester, Own Your Roar will expand through implementation of a trained mentorship program. The program is designed to equip student-athlete mentors with enhanced leadership skills and resiliency tailored to athletics to extend to their mentees. While financial budgetary restrictions prohibit many athletic departments from increasing support staff for mental illness, implementing a program to advance peer support is a strong alternative. Own Your Roar is prioritizing eradicating stigma by increasing awareness with a model campaign and aiming to develop, fulfill, and evaluate a mentorship program with curriculum to improve well-being and self-efficacy of student-athletes.





FAST FACTS:

- Own Your Roar has united over seventy student-athletes of all grades and sports at Towson University for a mentorship program.
- Own Your Roar hosts relaxation nights with de-stress activities on a semesterly basis to promote student-athlete well-being before final exams and dedicates multiple athletic events and games to mental health awareness.
- Own Your Roar serves as a model for other institutions, inspiring the creation of UCLA Athletics' "Bruin Brave" and James Madison University Athletics' "Dukes Let's Talk."



OLIVIA LUBARSKY

 @ownyourroar
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EDUCATION IS THE AGENT TO REDUCING STIGMA AND CHANGING NORMS THAT GOVERN SOCIETY. ADDRESSING CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH WITH UNITY IS PARAMOUNT TO SUPPORTING YOUTH AS WE PROGRESS INTO OUR CAREERS.

GETTING STARTED

The nature of a highly-competitive athletic environment conditions student-athletes to withhold displays of weakness while facing the stressors that accompany performing at a high level academically and athletically. Immersed in this aura, I suffered serious depression during my freshman year. Mental illness is a hidden epidemic; that simple phrase speaks volumes. As I hid it from the world, I relentlessly tried to hide it from myself. Unable to satisfy my perfectionistic standards, I believed I was worthless. Through my journey to wellness, I learned to utilize athletics as my outlet, releasing my mental struggles into the freedom of my physical sport. That is, before I ruptured my Achilles tendon two days before my NCAA debut in my sophomore year. Immediately, I noticed a glaringly obvious disconnect between the support and treatment that I received from my struggles with depression versus my torn Achilles. Less than 12 hours after my Achilles was surgically repaired, this frustration propelled me to phone the university administration to begin concrete planning for a mental health initiative I was determined to create. I founded Own Your Roar: a program devoted to eradicating the disparity between how mental illness and physical injury are portrayed and perceived.

Conversations break barriers. With an understanding of the power of social media in communication delivery, a campaign video was created with the help of my fellow student-athletes. This video received national attention and boosted Own Your Roar in its launch. In its first month of existence, Own Your Roar worked with Towson Athletics to dedicate several team games to mental health awareness. In September 2018, my application, on behalf of the university, prompted Towson to be chosen as one of fifteen universities for a campus tour centered around mental health awareness by the nonprofit organization, We're All A Little Crazy. I was invited to be a keynote speaker at the event, alongside the company's CEO, ESPN reporter Darren Rovell, WNBA player Imani McGee Stafford and NFL player Hayden Hurst. The opportunity to express my personal experiences, observations, and ambition behind the Own Your Roar initiative was invaluable. Additionally, it was remarkable to participate in a compelling panel discussion about mental health disparities from professional, cultural, economic, and media-driven social perspectives. Starting the

conversation and creating an environment in which student-athletes are comfortable to openly express themselves will only serve to increase their competitive advantage on and off the field. Furthermore, building solidarity to get rid of obstacles that athletes from various communities face is of paramount importance. It was gratifying to have several of my fellow student-athletes approach me following the event, vulnerably sharing their struggles and noting that hearing my words gave them the confidence to acknowledge their truth and seek help. This event, which shed light on mental health struggles and the journey to overcoming them, increased Own Your Roar support and meeting attendance tremendously. Leading Towson Athletics in the movement to ending the stigma around mental illness is unifying our community and setting an example across the NCAA about the validity of mental illness and necessity for support and resources.

POTENTIAL BARRIERS

During development, it may be tough to acquire support from administration. Stigma fuels societal indifference and lack of concern about mental illness, which is reflected by tendencies to not prioritize mental health initiatives. However, while one in five adults suffer mental illness, all people have mental health, and we do not want to isolate subgroups. Fortunately, Own Your Roar caught the interest of key administrators all over campus and beyond, who assisted in driving change to boost Own Your Roar to its potential. It is valuable to be persistent, and work to connect with campus leaders across different sectors.

Regarding athletics, it is challenging to engage student-athletes due to the demands of their daily schedules. Between practice, weight room conditioning, classes, study hall, and more, student-athletes are hesitant to add something else to their busy lives. It is sometimes difficult to present meetings and events as opportunities, rather than obligations, especially due to the sensitivity of the topic of mental health. To combat this, try to schedule meetings and events in locations that are convenient and customize the topics discussed.