

Kevin Love

Everyone Is Going Through Something

Kevin Love is an American professional basketball player who plays for The Cleveland Cavaliers. The article was published on *The Players' Tribune*, a media platform that provides content written by professional athletes, on March 6, 2018.

On November 5th, right after halftime against the Hawks¹, I had a panic attack.

It came out of nowhere. I'd never had one before. I didn't even know if they were real. But it was real – as real as a broken hand or a sprained ankle. Since that day, almost everything about the way I think about my mental health has changed.

5 I've never been comfortable sharing much about myself. I turned 29 in September and for pretty much 29 years of my life I have been protective about anything and everything in my inner life. I was comfortable talking about basketball – but that came natural. It was much harder to share personal stuff, and looking back now I know I could have really benefited from having someone to talk to over the years. But I didn't share – not to my family, not to my best friends, not in public. Today, I've realized I need to change that. I
10 want to share some of my thoughts about my panic attack and what's happened since. If you're suffering silently like I was, then you know how it can feel like nobody really gets it. Partly, I want to do it for me, but mostly, I want to do it because people don't talk about mental health enough. And men and boys are probably the farthest behind.

15 I know it from experience. Growing up, you figure out really quickly how a boy is supposed to act. You learn what it takes to "be a man." It's like a playbook: *Be strong. Don't talk about your feelings. Get through it on your own.* So for 29 years of my life, I followed that playbook. And look, I'm probably not telling you anything new here. These values about men and toughness are so *ordinary* that they're everywhere...and invisible at the same time, surrounding us like air or water. They're a lot like depression or anxiety in that way.

20 So for 29 years, I thought about mental health as someone else's problem. Sure, I knew on some level that some people benefited from asking for help or opening up. I just never thought it was for me. To me, it was a form of weakness that could derail my success in sports or make me seem weird or different.

Then came the panic attack.

It happened during a game.

25 It was November 5th, two months and three days after I turned 29. We were at home against the Hawks – 10th game of the season. A perfect storm of things was about to collide. I was stressed about issues I'd been having with my family. I wasn't sleeping well. On the court, I think the expectations for the season, combined with our 4–5 start², were weighing on me.

I knew something was wrong almost right after tip-off.

¹ Atlanta Hawks, a basketball team

² 4–5 start: the Cleveland Cavaliers had won 4 games but lost 5 to start the season

30 I was winded within the first few possessions¹. That was strange. And my game was just off. I played 15 minutes of the first half and made one basket and two free throws.

After halftime, it all hit the fan. Coach Lue² called a timeout in the third quarter. When I got to the bench, I felt my heart racing faster than usual. Then I was having trouble catching my breath. It's hard to describe, but everything was spinning, like my brain was trying to climb out of my head. The air felt thick and heavy.
35 My mouth was like chalk. I remember our assistant coach yelling something about a defensive set. I nodded, but I didn't hear much of what he said. By that point, I was freaking out. When I got up to walk out of the huddle, I knew I couldn't reenter the game – like, literally couldn't do it physically.

Coach Lue came up to me. I think he could sense something was wrong. I blurted something like, "I'll be right back," and I ran back to the locker room. I was running from room to room, like I was looking for something I couldn't find. Really I was just hoping my heart would stop racing. It was like my body was trying to say to me, *You're about to die*. I ended up on the floor in the training room, lying on my back, trying to get enough air to breathe.

The next part was a blur. Someone from the Cavs³ accompanied me to the Cleveland Clinic. They ran a bunch of tests. Everything seemed to check out, which was a relief. But I remember leaving the hospital thinking, *Wait...then what the hell just happened?*
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I was back for our next game against the Bucks⁴ two days later. We won, and I had 32⁵. I remember how relieved I was to be back on the court and feeling more like myself. But I distinctly remember being more relieved than anything that nobody had found out why I had left the game against Atlanta. A few people in the organization knew, sure, but most people didn't and no one had written about it.

50 A few more days passed. Things were going great on the court, but something was weighing on me.

Why was I so concerned with people finding out?

It was a wake-up call, that moment. I'd thought the hardest part was over after I had the panic attack. It was the opposite. Now I was left wondering why it happened – and why I didn't want to talk about it. [...]

This was new territory for me, and it was pretty confusing. But I was certain about one thing: I couldn't bury what had happened and try to move forward. As much as part of me wanted to, I couldn't allow myself to dismiss the panic attack and everything underneath it. I didn't want to have to deal with everything sometime in the future, when it might be worse. I knew that much.
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So I did one seemingly little thing that turned out to be a big thing. The Cavs helped me find a therapist, and I set up an appointment. I gotta stop right here and just say: I'm the last person who'd have thought I'd be seeing a therapist. I remember when I was two or three years into the league, a friend asked me why NBA⁶ players didn't see therapists. I scoffed at the idea. *No way any of us is gonna talk to someone*. I was 20 or 21 years old, and I'd grown up around basketball. And on basketball teams? Nobody talked about what they were struggling with on the inside. I remember thinking, *What are my problems? I'm healthy. I play basketball for a living. What do I have to worry about?* I'd never heard of any pro athlete talking about
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¹ (in sports:) when a player or team has control of the ball

² Tyron Lue, coach of the Cleveland Cavaliers at the time

³ nickname for the Cleveland Cavaliers

⁴ Milwaukee Bucks, a basketball team

⁵ *I had 32*: I had scored 32 points

⁶ National Basketball Association

65 mental health, and I didn't want to be the only one. I didn't want to look weak. Honestly, I just didn't think I needed it. It's like the playbook said – figure it out on your own, like everyone else around me always had.

But it's kind of strange when you think about it. In the NBA, you have trained professionals to fine-tune your life in so many areas. Coaches, trainers and nutritionists have had a presence in my life for years. But none of those people could help me in the way I needed when I was lying on the floor struggling to breathe.

70 Still, I went to my first appointment with the therapist with some skepticism. I had one foot out the door. But he surprised me. For one thing, basketball wasn't the main focus. [...]

One of the biggest breakthroughs happened one day in December when we got to talking about my Grandma Carol. She was the pillar of our family. Growing up, she lived with us, and in a lot of ways she was like another parent to me and my brother and sister. She was the woman who had a *shrine* to each of her grandkids in her room – pictures, awards, letters pinned up on the wall. And she was someone with simple values that I admired. It was funny, I once gave her a random pair of new Nikes, and she was so blown away that she called me to say thank you a handful of times over the year that followed.

When I made the NBA, she was getting older, and I didn't see her as often as I used to. During my sixth year with the T-Wolves¹, Grandma Carol made plans to visit me in Minnesota for Thanksgiving. Then right before the trip, she was hospitalized for an issue with her arteries. She had to cancel her trip. Then her condition got worse quickly, and she fell into a coma. A few days later, she was gone.

I was devastated for a long time. But I hadn't really ever talked about it. Telling a stranger about my grandma made me see how much pain it was still causing me. Digging into it, I realized that what hurt most was not being able to say a proper goodbye. I'd never had a chance to really grieve, and I felt terrible that I hadn't been in better touch with her in her last years. But I had buried those emotions since her passing and said to myself, *I have to focus on basketball. I'll deal with it later. Be a man.*

The reason I'm telling you about my grandma isn't really even about her. I still miss her a ton and I'm probably still grieving in a way, but I wanted to share that story because of how eye-opening it was to *talk about it*. In the short time I've been meeting with the therapist, I've seen the power of saying things out loud in a setting like that. And it's not some magical process. It's terrifying and awkward and hard, at least in my experience so far. I know you don't just get rid of problems by talking about them, but I've learned that over time maybe you can better understand them and make them more manageable. Look, I'm not saying, *Everyone go see a therapist*. The biggest lesson for me since November wasn't about a therapist – it was about confronting the fact that I needed help. [...]

95 I want to make it clear that I don't have things figured out about all of this. I'm just starting to do the hard work of getting to know myself. For 29 years, I avoided that. Now, I'm trying to be truthful with myself. I'm trying to be good to the people in my life. I'm trying to face the uncomfortable stuff in life while also enjoying, and being grateful for, the good stuff. I'm trying to embrace it all, the good, bad and ugly.

I want to end with something I'm trying to remind myself about these days: Everyone is going through something that we can't see.

I want to write that again: *Everyone is going through something that we can't see.* [...]

Mental health isn't just an athlete thing. What you do for a living doesn't have to define who you are. This is an everyone thing. No matter what our circumstances, we're all carrying around things that hurt – and

¹ Minnesota Timberwolves, a basketball team and Love's former club

105 they can hurt us if we keep them buried inside. Not talking about our inner lives robs us of really getting to know ourselves and robs us of the chance to reach out to others in need. So if you're reading this and you're having a hard time, no matter how big or small it seems to you, I want to remind you that you're not weird or different for sharing what you're going through.

Just the opposite. It could be the most important thing you do. It was for me.

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