Mental Health Daze

- Post Column Reprint: “What Naomi Osaka’s silence tells us”
- Post Column Reprint: “Recognizing the greatness in Biles’s decision to step back”
- Post Reprint: “Gauff has a platform and plans to use it”
- Student Activity: Three Professional Athletes | Three Perspectives on Mental Health
- Post Column Reprint: “Kids get need for mental health days”
- Student Activity: Closer Read | Columnist Petula Dvorak
- Student Activity: My Proposal For a Healthier Me
INTRODUCTION

No Longer Silent

In May, tennis player Naomi Osaka used Twitter and Instagram to explain why she dropped out of the French Open. In July, Simone Biles withdrew from the Tokyo Olympics after a disappointing vault execution. In August, Coco Gauff, who could not participate in the Olympics because of a coronavirus diagnosis, talked about the importance to her of journals, racial and social justice and mental health.

“I’ve been watching everything unfold,” Gauff explained. “I just feel like the media and everyone forgets that a mental injury is just as painful as a physical injury. Mental health is invisible, but it’s a very real issue.”

Nick Asante, the Montgomery County Public Schools’ student school board member, 2020-21, proposed a student mental health day. He listened to students and himself. And read studies: “More than a third of high school students in the United States experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019,” according to the CDC. Add to the statistics concerns of what distance learning and returning to school in Fall 2021 might mean to students’ mental well being.

Teachers may use the articles about young professional athletes to start discussion. Students make take a closer look at the impact of being back to school — parents at school board meetings, interactions of students at school and the blending of in-school and remote learning — on their emotions and health. Interview school officials about a mental health day and decide on their stand on the daze of mental health issues.

In the summer of 2021 athletes were no longer silent about their mental health needs. To what extent do our students have a voice in expressing their mental health concerns?
By refusing to speak, tennis player Naomi Osaka has opened any number of important conversations:
About a generational divide in talking about matters of mental health.
About effective communication in the age of social media. And, perhaps most fundamentally, about what we should be allowed to demand from our sports heroes.

Osaka, at 23 the second-ranked women’s tennis player and the most highly paid female athlete in the world, withdrew from the French Open on Monday. Her step came after a week of volleys with the tournament’s organizers over her refusal to attend media events, citing the challenge they posed to her mental health.

Osaka first said she would not participate in the tournament’s customary post-match news conferences. Then, after a $15,000 fine and a warning from organizers that she would be suspended, she took the extraordinary step of removing herself.

“The truth is that I have suffered long bouts of depression since the U.S. Open in 2018 and I have had a really hard time coping with that,” Osaka explained on Twitter and Instagram. “I was already feeling vulnerable and anxious so I thought it was better to exercise self-care and skip the press conferences.”

This is not your father’s French Open — or your mother’s. Issues of mental health, among public figures such as athletes or among the rest of us, used to be only whispered about, if that. Suffering from mental health issues was viewed as shameful.

No more — in part, perhaps, because depression and anxiety seem to be so prevalent among younger Americans. One in eight American 18-to-25-year-olds — Osaka’s Gen Z — has experienced a major depressive episode, a rate significantly higher than that of even one generation older.

Osaka’s generation is among the first to speak freely, or at least more freely, about mental health issues; it is also a cohort that is accustomed to doing its speaking on
social media, where a candid post about mental health feels like an unexceptional way of explaining oneself and connecting to fans.

To older generations, however, Instagram is still seen as a less-than-professional tool. This approach may have lent Osaka’s announcements an unintended air of disrespect. The medium affected the way we understood — or misunderstood — the message. Perhaps this disconnect is what led to such escalation from Grand Slam officials.

Here is where Osaka’s May 26 post on social media, with its dry tone and multimedia additions, may have gone astray. “If the organizations think that they can just keep saying, ‘do press or you’re gonna be fined,’ and continue to ignore the mental health of the athletes ... I just gotta laugh,” she wrote. Accompanying her now-deleted Instagram post were two video clips: one of a 14-year-old Venus Williams being asked over and over by a reporter why she believed in herself; another of the delightfully truculent NFL player Marshawn Lynch answering press questions during the run-up to the 2015 Super Bowl with variations on the phrase, “I’m here so I won’t get fined.”

Osaka was issuing a plea for understanding, if not for help, but it was read by many as a cheeky challenge to authority. Commenters “you-go-girled” and cracked jokes. Roland-Garros responded with a subtweet from its official Twitter account; it posted images of other players submitting to interviews, with the line, “They understood the assignment.” It was only after Osaka’s second post, with its added revelations about the real state of her mental health, that her position was taken seriously.

But how seriously, really? This gets to the deeper question of what athletes, or other celebrities, owe their public. Osaka’s willingness to acknowledge nonphysical challenges stands in contrast to the stiff-upper-lip mentality still expected by an older generation in positions of power.

Gilles Moretton, president of the French Tennis Federation and a former men’s tour player himself, sniffed to a French sports daily that Osaka’s decision was a “phenomenal error,” one that was “very damaging to sport, to tennis, to her probably.”

And even as they attempted to signal their sympathy, an older generation of athletes and fans echoed Moretton: Osaka signed up for media pushback; it’s part of the job. Surely all that money and fame should be consolation for a few rude questions from a quote-hungry sportswriter.

But money isn’t our only measure of well-being, nor should it be. When conservative personality Laura Ingraham told NBA star LeBron James to “shut up and dribble” in 2018, her comment was rightfully seen as dehumanizing and rejected out of hand. James had the right to speak out, or, more precisely, later kneel down; Osaka has a parallel right to stay quiet and play her sport, especially if subjecting herself to press inquisition is painful and damaging to her mental health.

Athletes are human, too; it may be their job to play, but they do not exist solely for our entertainment. By sitting the French Open out and reminding us of that truth, Osaka is doing not just herself but also “the sport” a favor — whether Grand Slam organizers realize it or not.

Christine Emba is an opinion columnist and editor for The Post. Before coming to The Post in 2015, Christine was the Hilton Kramer Fellow in Criticism at the New Criterion and a deputy editor at the Economist Intelligence Unit.
Recognizing the greatness in Biles’s decision to step back

The most dramatic image at the Tokyo Olympics thus far wasn’t the spectacle of the opening ceremonies or a photo finish in the pool. Rather, it was the crooked line of Simone Biles’s tightly sealed lips as she walked to the sidelines after a disappointing vault performance in the gymnastics team all-around competition.

On Tuesday, Biles withdrew from that contest and has not yet decided whether she will proceed with other events. It’s a development that upends one of the biggest stories of the Games.

The idea that the Olympics pit the best against the best has always been more dream than reality, whether it’s geopolitical competition, a pandemic or simple bad luck that keeps some athletes out of competition. But every blow against that ideal of a perfect meritocracy is heartbreaking — both for the athletes who are excluded or eliminated, and for those of us rooting for them.

Yet if anything good can come out of Biles’s withdrawal and Naomi Osaka’s early elimination from the women’s tennis competition, it would be this: Maybe we fans can learn to embrace more expansive definitions of excellence and courage.

Rooting for Biles to dominate the Tokyo Olympics has long been about more than the United States’ medal count. Her greatness has redefined the very contours of her sport. She has mastered skills so difficult that judges seem determined to dissuade less-gifted athletes from attempting them. And in addition to her athletic excellence, Biles has hoisted heavy symbolic burdens onto her 4-foot-8-inch frame.
Biles has been a role model for Black girls in a predominantly White sport. Her excellence has also served as a rebuke to USA Gymnastics, which failed to protect her and her teammates from the predations of Larry Nassar. She moved from Nike to Athleta in search of a sponsor that would help her fund an independent exhibition tour, so she and other athletes would be less reliant on that organization.

As Juliet Macur put it in the New York Times, despite the betrayals she has experienced and the exhaustion and pain she feels, Biles “has managed to set aside those feelings and harness the newfound power of an independent Black woman who knows her worth and answers to no one.”

Osaka has assumed a similar role in women’s tennis, representative of both a new generation of Black female tennis stars and a more diverse vision of Japan. Osaka’s decision in May not to participate in the French Open’s news conferences, and then the tournament as a whole, made her a symbol of new ideas about mental health care and old fights against sexism in sports media. Seeing Osaka triumph in Tokyo would have been a powerful demonstration that mental health care is a key element of athletic training, rather than a sign of weakness.

Of course, it didn’t work out that way.

As Osaka herself acknowledged, “the scale of everything is a bit hard because of the break that I took.”

Osaka’s experience illustrates why mental health may never fit comfortably into our conventional narratives about the obstacles athletes overcome on the road to greatness.

Cheering for athletes to triumph over mental barriers means asking even more of competitors than their sports normally demand of them: that they defy not merely gravity, but the weight of their own humanity.

Sometimes, those requests for transcendence are just too much. In a sport like gymnastics where small misjudgments can result in catastrophic injuries, it’s grotesque to ask an athlete to sideline her own mental health for the sake of some heartwarming, overcoming-every-obstacle story.

“I’ll admit to briefly thinking maybe she could have just tried because even her worst day is really good,” Slate columnist Jenee Desmond-Harris remarked after Biles withdrew. “But then I remembered that if you mess up in gymnastics you can break your neck.”

Maybe not everyone will recognize it in the wellness and sports cliches that Biles invoked when she explained her decision — among them a plan to “work on my mindfulness” and “take it a day at a time” — but it should be clear that her choice to set limits involves tremendous courage. This was not weakness. It may even be a spark of a very different revolution than the ones she has already taken upon herself to effectuate.

Sports may strike blows against ills like racism, and individuals can deliver biting reprimands to institutions. But athletes can’t do the painful work of social change alone. And their only tools aren’t perfectly executed vaults or dominant tennis sets. There can be greatness, too, in saying no.
In a wide-ranging interview, Coco Gauff spoke about how she manages pressure as a highly scrutinized athlete and a female athlete of color and her advocacy of social and racial justice.

BY LIZ CLARKE

• Originally Published August 11, 2021

Coco Gauff was 9 or 10, as she recalls, when her mother gave her a journal, explaining that it was important she have a private place to write down her feelings or anything she wanted.

Gauff has kept a journal ever since, scribbling a few sentences when she has the urge, skipping entries for weeks at a time and writing expansively on other occasions.

She keeps all of her completed journals in her bedroom at her family’s home in South Florida and brings the one in progress with her when she travels to tennis tournaments. Its unfilled pages are a packable, trusted friend and confidant who listens without judging.

But Gauff said she never understood the true value of journaling until the past few weeks — a span in which a coronavirus diagnosis scuttled her participation in the Tokyo Olympics, gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from most of her competitions and Gauff reflected on the mental health challenges and weight of expectations shouldered by professional athletes.

“I’ve been watching everything unfold,” Gauff explained in a recent interview. “I just feel like the media and everyone forgets that a mental injury is just as painful as a physical injury. Mental health is invisible, but it’s a very real issue.”

And in Gauff’s case, when Biles said the outpouring of support made her finally realize, at 24, that “I’m more than my accomplishments and gymnastics,” it struck a nerve.

“That’s something personally I had to
work through and deal with, and I would imagine that other people feel that, too,” Gauff said. “It’s important for us to know that our worth isn’t defined by how well we do in our sport.”

If trophies, tournament titles and winnings are the tangible rewards of Gauff’s achievements at 17, her journals reflect her inner growth.

For years, journaling has been a means, she said, of maintaining her mental health.

“For me, when you’re writing out your problems, you can kind of figure out what you’re feeling,” Gauff said. “Once you know what the problem is, you can fix it.”

Re-reading her old journals, as she said she does from time to time, is also a means of taking stock of how far she has come.

Gauff’s career has taken off since she emerged on the tennis scene in 2019, when she toppled her idol, Venus Williams, in the first round of Wimbledon at 15. That moment was built on years of steady, systematic development under the coaching of her father, Corey, a former Georgia State basketball player, and the tutelage of her mother, Candi, who competed in track at Florida State.

In a wide-ranging interview while in Washington last week, Gauff spoke about how she manages pressure as a highly scrutinized athlete — and a female athlete of color — and her advocacy of social and racial justice.

In Washington to headline the Citi Open women’s invitational, Gauff practiced at Rock Creek Park Tennis Center, conducted a clinic and played two matches in a red, white and blue dress she explained was her tribute to U.S. Olympians, then flew to Montreal for the National Bank Open, where she opened play Tuesday with a 6-1, 6-4 win over Anastasija Sevastova.

The packed, three-day schedule was a slice of the itinerant life of the world’s 24th-ranked female player, whose country-hopping itinerary complicated her attempt to get vaccinated for the coronavirus. She tested positive, she explained, the week she had planned to get the first of two shots in the brief July window between Wimbledon and the Tokyo Games. She now plans to get her shots once back on U.S. soil, before and after the U.S. Open.

From the outset of her pro career, Gauff had a vision of doing more than climbing the rankings and winning titles. In signing a multiyear sponsorship deal with New Balance at 14, she said wanted to be a role model to as many young athletes as possible.

Today, at 17, she also wants to use the platform tennis gives her to advocate for justice on racial and social inequity. It is a responsibility she feels comes with the privilege of having a large platform on social media, despite being too young to vote.

“I’m not the only one in the world who believes in this message, but not many people have the opportunity to reach as many people as I can,” Gauff said. “I try to be the voice for those who don’t have one.”

The inspiration comes from her grandmother on her mother’s side, she explained, who has spoken with her seven grandchildren about what she went through as a young Black girl who was first to integrate her Florida high school decades ago.

“That is how she became resilient,” Gauff said. “So having someone so close to pave the way for me, I feel like I want to pave the way for my future kid and grandkids.”

After the May 2020 killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, who has since been convicted of murder, Gauff posted links on social media to resources to support Black Lives Matter and urged others to spread awareness. She also spoke at a Black Lives Matter rally in her hometown of Delray Beach, Fla.

“Everybody was hurting,” said Gauff, who noted that she was 8 when Trayvon Martin, an unarmed high school student, was shot and killed in Sanford, Fla. “No one wants to go out there and protest on the street, because it’s not an easy issue. I’m sure people would much rather go to a parade. But it’s something we have to bring light to.”

The killings of unarmed Black men, women and youths serve as one part of the unseen weight Black athletes carry, Gauff said, in addition to microaggressions that often go unremarked but are felt acutely.

“Unfortunately every Black kid in America has at least one story they can share,” Gauff said. “But that’s the reason why I do what I do — for myself, and because the Williams sisters did that for me. Seeing someone that looked like me holding up all the trophies in a sport that not too many Black people play definitely meant a lot. I hope that one day somebody else can say that I did the same for them.”

MICHAEL BLACKSHIRE/THE WASHINGTON POST

Coco Gauff missed the Tokyo Games but headlined the Citi Open in Washington.
Three Professional Athletes | Three Perspectives on Mental Health

In the summer of 2021 three young professional athletes voiced their concerns about mental health from personal experience and that of other athletes. Each had a different perspective. Each saw the need to give mental health attention.

You will read “What Naomi Osaka’s silence tells us” by Post columnist Christine Emba, “Recognizing the greatness in Biles’s decision to step back” by columnist Alyssa Rosenberg, and “Gauff has a platform and plans to use it: Mental health, social justice are on tennis star’s mind” by Post sports reporter Liz Clarke. After reading each article, in that order, answer the questions and annotate the article.

1. You will begin with reading the first paragraphs, also called the lede of an article. The traditional news lede has the 5Ws and H of the story: Who, What, Where, When, How and sometimes Why. Each of our three articles begins with a non-traditional or variety lede.

2. Next you will annotate the nut graph. This is the one sentence to two paragraphs that give the main idea or summary of the article. Placed after a feature or variety lede it provides the so-what, stating what the rest of the article is about.

3. You will provide a statement by the reporter or a quotation that you find interesting. It provides an idea or action that you think requires discussion. If this concept is supported by other details in the article or column, include them.

4. News stories do not have a planned conclusion because the cut-off test may be applied to last paragraphs to shorten the article. Columns, however, are like essays with a conclusion meant to emphasize the theme, provide a pertinent quotation, support events or ask the reader to think further or to act.

5. You will then evaluate the idea that the writer presents and the success of the structure used to communicate it to you.

You will need to use your own paper for most of your responses. Do the annotation on the text of the article.
CHRISTINE EMBA

What Naomi Osaka’s silence tells us

The Lede

By refusing to speak, tennis player Naomi Osaka has opened any number of important conversations:

About a generational divide in talking about matters of mental health. About effective communication in the age of social media. And, perhaps most fundamentally, about what we should be allowed to demand from our sports heroes.

Osaka, at 23 the second-ranked women’s tennis player and the most highly paid female athlete in the world, withdrew from the French Open on Monday. Her step came after a week of volleys with the tournament’s organizers over her refusal to attend media events, citing the challenge they posed to her mental health.

— June 13, 2021

1. The first sentence provides a contrast. Underline the two parts and explain how it sets up the article.
2. Number the main “conversations.” As you read the article, can you find all of these points addressed? Annotate the article where found.

The Nut Graph
3. The third paragraph is the nut graph. Box the verbs. Circle the adjectives. If you are unfamiliar with Osaka, what do they reveal about her?
4. Highlight the appositive. Why do you think Emba thought this was important to tell readers near the beginning, but placed the information in apposition?
5. Note the reverse chronological order. What question is answered by this structure?
6. What is the main idea in the nut graph — and what do you expect to be the focus of the article?

Significant Concept
7. After reading the article, select the idea that you found most interesting. Quote the sentence or paragraph. Tell why this is a compelling idea to you.

Conclusion
8. What do you think of the reaction of other athletes, the president of the French Tennis Federation and fans?
9. Do you think the last paragraphs pull the ideas of the column together? Explain.

Your Evaluation
10. How effective is Christine Emba in communicating her ideas about Naomi Osaka’s actions, other athletes’ initial reactions and the influence of Osaka on sports? Support your response with examples.
Recognizing the greatness in Biles’s decision to step back

The Lede

The most dramatic image at the Tokyo Olympics thus far wasn’t the spectacle of the opening ceremonies or a photo finish in the pool. Rather, it was the crooked line of Simone Biles’s tightly sealed lips as she walked to the sidelines after a disappointing vault performance in the gymnastics team all-around competition.

On Tuesday, Biles withdrew from that contest and has not yet decided whether she will proceed with other events. It’s a development that upends one of the biggest stories of the Games.

The idea that the Olympics pit the best against the best has always been more dream than reality, whether it’s geopolitical competition, a pandemic or simple bad luck that keeps some athletes out of competition. But every blow against that ideal of a perfect meritocracy is heartbreaking — both for the athletes who are excluded or eliminated, and for those of us rooting for them.

— July 28, 2021

1. This is a contrast lede. Underline the contrasting images. Explain the different elements of the contrast.
2. Explain the fantasy of the Olympics games as presented by the columnist.

The Nut Graph

3. The nut graph is the fourth paragraph. What is the main idea?

4. Were you surprised to read Naomi Osaka’s name as well as Simon Biles’s? Why do you think Rosenberg included her in the nut graph?

Body of the Column

5. In the column, check mark the ideas presented about Biles’s real and symbolic importance to sports. Why do you think Rosenberg included all these examples?

6. A writer for another newspaper is quoted. How is this an example of journalistic integrity? And what way is the quotation a transition in the column?

7. Osaka is reintroduced in the column. Number ideas presented in those paragraphs. Summarize what concept is highlighted through Osaka’s experience.

Significant Concept

8. After reading the article, select the idea that you found most interesting. Quote the sentence or paragraph. Tell why this is a compelling idea to you.

Conclusion

9. Do you think the last paragraphs pull the ideas of the column together? Explain.

Your Evaluation

10. How effective is Alyssa Rosenberg in building her argument for her theme?
Gauff has a platform and plans to use it

By Liz Clarke
August 11, 2021

The Lede
Coco Gauff was 9 or 10, as she recalls, when her mother gave her a journal, explaining that it was important she have a private place to write down her feelings or anything she wanted.
Gauff has kept a journal ever since, scribbling a few sentences when she has the urge, skipping entries for weeks at a time and writing expansively on other occasions.
She keeps all of her completed journals in her bedroom at her family’s home in South Florida and brings the one in progress with her when she travels to tennis tournaments. Its unfilled pages are a packable, trusted friend and confidant who listens without judging.

1. Why did Coco’s mother give her a journal? What do you think of this idea?
2. How does Clarke know about the journal, then and now? Underline words in the lede that give the clue.
3. Put a box around words that reveal the life style of a tennis star.
   Does Clarke provide another dimension to the journal’s role in her life? Explain.

The Nut Graph
4. The main idea is presented twice. Highlight where stated. What is the main idea?
5. Why is Simon Biles included in the nut graph?

Body of the Article
6. The next paragraphs provide background to get to know Gauff. Number the different ways Clarke does this.

7. What vision has dominated her pro career? Who influenced this decision to use her name recognition?

Significant Concept
8. After reading the article, select the idea that you found most interesting.
   Quote the sentence or paragraph. Tell why this is a compelling idea to you.

Conclusion
9. Do you think the last paragraphs pull the ideas of the column together? Explain.

Your Evaluation
10. How effective is Liz Clarke in profiling Coco Gauff and giving voice to her aspiration?
Kids get need for mental health days

Nick Asante was flooded with messages, texts and Instagram comments as soon as he took office.

They were the same cries for help he was hearing in his own head, the stuff he was shoving back down, trying to ignore.

“Lots of students were reaching out about mental health, the issue of taking care of yourself,” said Asante, 18, the 2020-21 student member of the Montgomery County school board. “And it’s something I’ve struggled with for a while.”

He’s one of those superstar kids, Asante. A leader in everything he did at Richard Montgomery High School, in student government since middle school, headed to Cornell University this fall, an outspoken advocate for social justice. He’s so confident, he’s a teenage guy who lobbied for easy access to menstrual hygiene products in schools. And won. Wow, right?

But, like so many high achievers, he was spit-shining a happy, confident veneer while struggling with the difficulty of the coronavirus pandemic deep inside.

Asante ran his campaign for the school board position, finished his junior year and started his senior year “all down there, locked in my basement,” he said. And it took a toll on him.

“I’m super critical of myself. And I’m the kind of person who wouldn’t take a mental health day off,” he said.

Until he had to. And then he understood what his peers were talking about.

It’s what the world is talking about this week thanks to tennis star Naomi Osaka, 23, who bowed out of the French Open to address her mental health.

“The truth is that I have suffered long bouts of depression since the US Open in 2018 and I have had a really hard time coping with that,” Osaka said in a statement she posted on Instagram.

She first tried to simply step aside from news conferences without explaining her struggle. And she took some heat for that. But once she opened up with a statement that explained her social anxiety and need to work on her mental health, the world had an a-ha moment on what it means to take care of our heads.

“As athletes we are taught to take care of our body,” tennis legend Martina Navratilova wrote in a tweet, after initially criticizing Osaka’s step back from the spotlight before Osaka explained why she was withdrawing, “and perhaps the mental & emotional aspect gets short shrift.”

We’re used to marveling at high achievers as they slay the universe in dazzling ways, then gulp down their memoirs years later, when they confess to the mental anguish they hid all those years.

Asante was seeing this in his own universe.

Sure, it’s easy to take a mental health day when you don’t call it that. Tell your parents you’ve got a tummy ache, and they’ll write you a note.
When I was a teenager, working weekends as a waitress, applying to college, trying to keep my grades up, navigating the mean girls, I struggled with depression. I didn’t understand what it was. But what helped was skipping class to have a picnic by the lake, hitting the slopes or shooting cans with my dad for a day. We called it a ditch day.

Asante wants today’s students to be able to call it what it really is: a mental health day.

And the idea was one of the first things he brought to the board right after he took office in September. Vice President Brenda Wolff gave the one dissenting vote to Asante’s proposal, saying that parents could already excuse a child as unwell without explanation. She said that being explicit about mental health was policy busywork and a paperwork nightmare. The rest of the board, however, was willing to hear Asante out.

Increasingly, the mental well-being of our nation’s students is being taken more seriously when it comes to less tangible conditions such as anxiety and depression.

More than a third of high school students in the United States experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019, a 40 percent increase since 2009. In 2019, about 16 percent of youth reported making a suicide plan, a 44 percent increase since 2009, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That’s 1 in 6, like one member of every high school hockey or volleyball lineup coming home from practice and making plans to kill themselves. That’s not something to dismiss.

Even before the pandemic and the grinding toll it has taken on everyone’s psyches, school boards in New Jersey, Oregon and Utah discussed or passed mental health day measures.

Just nine months after Asante first brought it up in Maryland, the proposal is being implemented in Montgomery County. And board member Patricia O’Neill explained why.

“It gives parents permission to pay attention to their child’s well-being, to really be in tune with their child,” she told me, remembering the days when her grown daughters were in high school and needed a day to unplug, but permitting it was taboo.

“We heard all year from parents about the impact of the pandemic,” she said. They were talking about learning loss, curriculum, sports events, the prom. “I’m not sure anyone even realized this discussion about mental health was happening among the students.”

She said that officially making mental health a reason to take a sick day from school codifies the importance of mental well-being.

“A lot of adults joke about taking a mental health day off from work, going golfing or something,” she said. But they didn’t always get that kids may need that, too.

Asante needed to hear it from his peers — not only to make a sweeping policy change in one of the state’s largest school districts. He also needed to know that he could take a day off to take care of his well-being, too.

What did he do on his mental health day?

He caught up on work, he said, adding: “But I also like to just stay in bed for part of the day and watch Netflix.”

— June 4, 2021
Closer Read | Columnist Petula Dvorak

The METRO section of The Post takes a look around the neighborhood and around the region. Its reporters, columnists and photographers focus on the people, places and events that affect the lives of the Washington metropolitan community. Columnists Theresa Vargas, Courtland Milloy, John Kelly and Petula Dvorak share their reporting and glimpses into their past and current personal lives. Readers feel they know them.

Read Petula Dvorak’s “Kids get need for mental health days.” We will look for how she uses the techniques of the reporter — interviews, research of reliable sources and inclusion of data — as well as her personal experience and opinion to structure the theme of this column.

1. She gives readers a name. Nick Asante. What do you know about him in the first two sentences?

2. The third paragraph gives more concrete information.
   a. What does the appositive tell readers?
   b. What does Asante reveal in the quotation?

3. Sum up the information Dvorak gives in the fourth and fifth paragraphs.
   a. Note the specific details.
   b. “But” introduces a qualifier or contrast. The word “veneer” reinforces the idea.
      What is it?

4. The next section places Asante’s story and Dvorak’s theme in a larger context. Give two examples.

5. Evaluate how well Dvorak summarizes Naomi Osaka’s actions and reasons.
   Would you have added or deleted any information or used a different quotation?

6. Dvorak includes her personal experience using the first person. What does this add to the column?
   To which readers would this appeal?

7. Read through the statistics and sources of data. As a student, how do you react to the numbers?
   Do you think this is different than parents and other adults would react?

8. Why is it important to include school board action on Asante’s proposal?

9. Why is a mental health day for students important? And why important to call it that?

10. How does Dvorak conclude her column? In what way do beginning and ending work together or book-end the essay?
My Proposal For a Healthier Me

Think about your thoughts and actions. Consider the influence of outsiders, family and friends — and social media on you. Do you pay attention to advertising? Have you established a healthy diet and exercise routine? Which provide support? Who negatively influences your self-image and sense of worth?

BRAINSTORM

Brainstorm topics that you might pursue for writing a journal entry to help yourself. Or think about your home and school community’s needs. What is happening that disrupts a healthy environment? Write an essay, a proposal to your principal or school board, or write a letter to your parents. Topics might include:

- Activities to do together for physical health
- Activities to do together for emotional health
- Need for a mental health day
- Dealing with weight loss or increase
- The influence of Instagram on self-image
- Obsession with online influencers
- Unrealistic standards of beauty
- Being pressured to use drugs
- Smoking tobacco to be accepted by others
- Drinking and liking it
- Feeling anxious or depressed
- Ways to deal with stress at home and school
- Dealing with bullying or being the bully
- Expressing feelings of being LGBQ or T
- Understanding classmates who are transitioning
- Being supportive of others

CHOOSE A TOPIC AND UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT IT

- Begin by gathering your thoughts on the chosen topic.
- Read reliable sources and studies to learn more about the topic.
- Decide if there are personal experiences you would want to share.

WRITE A JOURNAL ENTRY TO CLARIFY THOUGHTS

- What do you know? What do you not understand?
- Who could you talk to get more understanding of the topic, especially as it relates to your community?

THINK ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR ESSAY

- What are the best first paragraphs to grasp your reader’s attention?
  - Direct statement of the topic, an anecdote, or a variety lede?
- Outline the body of the essay. Will you use statistics, quotations, personal experience, or reference to current events?
- Plan your conclusion. Leave no doubt about your concerns, your proposal or what you want your reader(s) to do.