



Olympic medalist shares story of perseverance through mental health challenges

October 9, 2021

Trisha Koriath, Staff Writer

Article type: [AAP National Conference & Exhibition](#)

Topics: [Psychiatry/Psychology](#), [Sports Medicine/Physical Fitness](#)

Editor's note: For more coverage of the 2021 AAP National Conference & Exhibition, visit <https://bit.ly/2021-AAP-Virtual-Conf-News>.

Sometimes, it takes the strength of an Olympic athlete to put mental health first. Gold medal gymnast Simone Biles shared how it felt to withdraw from competition at the Summer Olympics in Tokyo for the sake of her health and safety — in front of a global audience.

Biles, 24, is a seven-time Olympic medalist and the first woman to capture five All-Around World Championship titles. She spoke with AAP President Lee Savio Beers, M.D., FAAP, at the [AAP plenary on Saturday](#) about her platform to help advocate for mental health and support initiatives that provide education and assistance for children and young adults associated with adoption and foster care.

Biles' decision to put her own health and wellness first is one that pediatricians also have struggled with throughout the pandemic. "You have been an incredible example to kids, to my kids, to our patients and to us," Dr. Beers told her. "We have seen you be brave, humble, honest, strong and most importantly, yourself. As pediatricians, we want nothing more than to see young people grow up and thrive."

Biles told Dr. Beers that in Tokyo, she had expected her decision to generate "a lot more backlash than what I got." Instead, she was overwhelmed by an outpouring of support, love and understanding.

"That was quite a twist for me, and that's when I sat down that night and I was like 'Wow, I'm bigger than gold medals... I'm a person at the end of the day and people respect that and understand,' and it made me feel whole, as a person and as an athlete," she said.

Last month, Biles and her teammates testified before Congress as survivors of abuse from the former team doctor of the U.S. women's national gymnastics team. She told Dr. Beers that all adults need to have difficult conversations to teach kids that it is OK to speak up when something is uncomfortable.

"From a very young age, a lot of us are thrown in these sports and we don't know what's right from wrong unless somebody sits down and tells us, or we have adults looking after us," she explained. "Sometimes, that's what we need — just somebody to believe what we say, as individuals, as kids, as adults, and someone to have to protect us ... and I think that's what you guys do, as pediatricians, so well."

Biles credits her grandparents — who became her legal parents when they adopted her out of foster care at a young age — for giving her the courage to pursue her career as a competitive gymnast.

During the conversation, Biles offered encouragement and answered an aspiring gymnast's question about how she stays motivated and overcomes fears. She said she takes a deep breath, trusts herself and trusts her training. "Good luck this season. I'll be rooting you on," Biles told her. "Never give up, dream big, have fun and don't let anybody tell you you can't do it."