



Liam's a good Samaritan

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Liam Pitchford has added his voice to efforts to get people opening up about mental health to try to end the stigma surrounding it.

The England No 1 has become an advocate for the work of Samaritans, who provide 24-hour emotional support to people experiencing distress or struggling to cope.

He will help to promote the charity's work, including [The Big Listen](#) campaign on July 24th – the date of 24/7 was chosen to highlight the fact that the Samaritans are there to listen 24 hours a day, all year round.

Liam has had a brilliant year on the table so far, with a string of victories over opponents ranked in the top 25 in the world.

Among many highlights, he spearheaded England's bronze medal-winning performance at the ITTF Team World Cup in London, picked up a series of impressive scalps at the World Team Championships, won three medals at the Commonwealth Games and reached the last 16 of the China Open, as part of arguably the strongest field ever assembled for a World Tour event.

His mental strength and self-belief have been evident during that run, but what is not so well known is that Liam has struggled with anxiety and depression at times during the last four years and has done a lot of hard work off the table to overcome that.

He has now decided to share his personal experience publicly in the hope that it will help others who are experiencing difficult periods in their lives.

Liam said he first became aware of his problems when he was based at the Ochsenhausen club in Germany when the sudden death of the club president, who was a close friend and supporter, left him overwhelmed and struggling to cope with grief and the changing political landscape at the club.

He said: "It was about four years ago I realised something wasn't right and I wasn't happy. I was rocked by the

club president's death and I felt my table tennis had kind of got stuck and I'd lost a bit of love for the sport.

"I didn't want to be in the practice hall, I felt low about myself and I wanted to kind of withdraw.

"I'm not a guy who likes to talk about things, I just tried to keep it inside. I didn't know about mental health back then. I was just trying to do the same things every day and trying to get through it. I didn't really speak to anyone about it."

Liam continued to perform well in matches, both for the club and for England, including as part of the bronze medal-winning squad at the World Team Championships in Kuala Lumpur in 2016. However, his mental well-being off the table was still cause for concern.

He said: "About a year, a year-and-a-half after it first came up, I was really struggling and I spoke to Simon (Simon Mills, Performance Director) and Cookie (Alan Cooke, England Coach) and said I wasn't happy with my situation and needed to make a change.

"A couple of months after that, they put me in touch with Ceri-Ann (performance psychologist Ceri-Ann Davies) and we spoke and everything just came out.

"That was when I knew I had made a step towards making myself better and getting back to the person I was.

"When I understood more about mental health and that it can affect anybody, even though I knew I wasn't better straight away, it immediately made me feel like a weight had lifted just by talking about it."

Ceri-Ann has worked with Liam ever since, helping to devise personal strategies which he can use before and during matches and also during practice to recognise and cope with anxiety.

As well as Simon Mills, Alan Cooke and Ceri-Ann, Liam says he has had tremendous support from his parents, his partner Agnes and his England team-mates.

He said: "They've got my back and are there to support me and knowing that helps me to go on the table with no pressure."



Liam in action at the Team World Cup in London this year

The results on and off the table are there for all to see, but although it has at times been a difficult journey, Liam believes the first step of talking about things was the most important and that is why he wants to share his experience and encourage other people to open up.

He said: "There's a stigma around mental health and not talking about it. I would just encourage people to talk.

"When I first opened up and spoke, I didn't imagine I would feel better straight away, but actually I did feel like something had been lifted and that there's a way you can get out of it.

"I would encourage people to speak. It doesn't have to be people you know, there are people willing to help."

Liam plans to visit Samaritans headquarters to talk about their work and has also given an interview to Esquire magazine, which will be published later this month.

He added: "The whole experience has shaped me and made me the person I am today and I want to share that and try to help others that are in a bad situation. I've been through it and I know how hard it is.

"They are there 24/7 and you can pick up the phone and that epitomises my situation – it was just picking up the phone and just talking about it."

Ceri-Ann, who continues to work with the England squad and is the England Performance Manager, said Liam's story shows that it is possible for people to be high functioning and managing mental health challenges at the same time. So, it's not unusual for performance athletes to play well, despite dealing with trauma in the background.

She said: "I'm sure there will be people who know Liam and have watched him perform who will not know this side of him and may be a bit shocked.

"But it's a very normal part of the human condition to feel vulnerable at times, we can all get stressed. For Liam, it's about him being empowered to take control of where he is at, on and off the table and making small adjustments. So, we've worked together on securing a good foundation of health and wellbeing, then strengthening his character and now in the past year some of the details around his performance. He is an incredible athlete to work with because he is so open to new ideas and very courageous, he's a quick-learner.

"The result is him being able to perform at a high level, much more consistently. He's able to express himself better now, opening up and allowing people to get to know him more and that's brave and exciting, because a lot of men really struggle with that."



Simon Mills, Ceri-Ann Davies and Alan Cooke from the Performance team

Ceri-Ann also feels that some credit is due to Table Tennis England taking a proactive approach during a time when athlete welfare in general was under the spotlight.

She said: "When I was a consultant, I worked with a lot of organisations struggling to strike the balance between wellbeing and performance. But Table Tennis England never saw their athletes as commodities, and genuinely cared about them. It's testament to Simon and Alan for putting Liam and I in touch and supporting us continue to work together. It made joining this team a very easy decision for me."

"They realised that performance sport is a pressurised environment and people can learn the skills to thrive within it. If our athletes are not the best versions of themselves off the table, it's harder for them to consistently be the best they can be on the table."

Anyone experiencing emotional distress can contact Samaritans free of charge, 24 hours a day from any phone on 116123. To get involved in The Big Listen, to find our listening tips, or to find out how to help Samaritans be there for people struggling to cope visit: <https://www.samaritans.org/>

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