

# OVERLAPPING WORLDS

EXPLORING HOW NATURE  
SUPPORTS THE MENTAL  
HEALTH OF ELITE ATHLETES

OLIVIA GRACE BARNES



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*Exploring How Nature Supports the Mental Health of Elite Athletes*

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# INTRODUCTION

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Imagine a beach. Imagine an empty horizon and beautiful waves that crash upon the shore. Imagine the calls of seagulls and the quiet solitude of the ocean breeze.

Now add cargo ships to that horizon. Add silt to the waves and replace their blue color with a murky brown. And instead of the quiet solitude of an ocean breeze, add the inescapable noises of cars, traffic, restaurants, and people. Welcome to Galveston Beach.

Unlike the beaches east of the Mississippi River, Galveston Beach is not blessed with white sands and clear water, but regardless of how obstructed and trashed this piece of nature is, without fail, I have always found peace in its rocking waves. The sounds of seawater rushing to meet my feet and the songs of the open ocean have always filled me with a quiet calmness, almost like the waves themselves as they ripple with the tranquility of the ocean wind.

And on a typical day at Galveston Beach, as I lay within the waves, I saw my first dolphin.

The moment was pure and sincere. I was not watching that dolphin from a film, a zoo, or an aquarium, nor from a whale-watching boat. It was simply me and the dolphin in the murky waters, both at peace in the soothing waves. It was almost as if, for the briefest of moments, the untouched and flawless world of nature showed me its beauty and grace.

I had spotted its dorsal fin first, sleek and gray as it crested the waves, and although I had originally thought a shark was swimming in the waters in front of me, I soon realized I was seeing my first wild dolphin. The fear that had initially rushed through my veins was quickly replaced by a feeling of wonder as it swam only a couple of feet away from my fingertips.

Although my life and the life of that cloudy charcoal-gray dolphin overlapped only for a second, that moment was one of the most defining moments in my life. In that brief instant, it was as if I became part of something bigger and more beautiful than I could ever imagine. But not only was I part of this bigger something, but I also belonged there as well. That dolphin awed me to the point of reverence, and as its dorsal fin slipped below the surface and vanished below the waves, I began to cry.

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Mental illness is a global pandemic.

Unlike the world-flipping COVID-19, this pandemic is not frequently talked about, there are few international efforts to end its presence, and those who suffer from it suffer in silence. But very similar to the coronavirus, mental health

issues affect individuals in almost every country and can make people extremely vulnerable to sickness and death.

And although a wide range exists in the severity of mental illness, *everybody* is susceptible, including athletes. A heart-breaking statistic acknowledges that around 80 percent of Olympic athletes struggle with some kind of post-Olympic depression, and on this stage, I have begun to explore how to end the silence around mental illness in athletic communities and support those who need help.

As I look back on that day when I saw my first wild dolphin, I know now that my tears originated from a place of true and genuine awe: the combination of fear and happiness. It was the kind of awe inspired by the power and beauty only the natural world contains.

Over the course of my lifetime, I have had many experiences in nature, and I observed a common factor. Almost every time I spend time in nature, I return with an improved mental state. Whether it is simply the prolonged presence of peace or something more profound, nature has proven itself to have the power to affect the mind positively.

But why are these mental powers of nature important? And how do they play a role in ending the pandemic of athletes with mental illnesses?

Well, if athletes need help mentally, and nature can positively affect the mind, what if nature could be a remedy? What if it could help support athletes' mental health and change their lives for the better? I believe that nature itself has the

potential to lower the presence of mental illness drastically in athletic communities, but I also know that until the social stigmas around mental health fade, athletes will continue to struggle in silence.

I write this book through the lens of nature as a psychological power and mental illness as a global pandemic, as I explore the topics of athletics, mental health, and the environment. And while these three topics might seem disjointed, their intersection sheds light on the beauty and strength of these three overlapping worlds. Being a competitive swimmer since the age of six, an environmental enthusiast from the time I was born, and a victim of mental health issues myself, I am compelled to write this book for fellow competitive and elite athletes because I believe that three things need to change:

1. Awareness and open conversation around mental health must become normal.
2. Spending habitual and quality time in nature needs to become a priority.
3. Support of athletes, both mentally and physically, in athletic communities must become a *necessity*.

Through interviews, stories, and research from experts, I hoped to uncover a world where these changes can become common practice. My desire to address these issues has led me from a simple interest to a calling to speak up and speak out. With my unique platform, along with the support and guidance of others, I hope this book will shape and inspire change in our world.



Throughout *Overlapping Worlds*, I will uncover how nature affects the mental health of athletes and explore how it can help strengthen, maintain, and support the health of elite competitors. And while I geared this book toward my fellow competitive athlete, I hope *any* reader can find use and inspiration from the compiled stories, interviews, and research within.