

Why Isaiah Wilkins decided not to stay quiet when he struggles

Isaiah Wilkins has been outspoken about his struggle with depression and anxiety. Amber Searls-USA TODAY Sports

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If there is one constant about Isaiah Wilkins, it is the way he plays: relentless hustle on defense, unselfish awareness on offense, the consummate team player holding everything together for No. 2 Virginia.



But there are some days Wilkins does not want to hold everything together. Some days, he wants to stay in bed in his darkened bedroom. Some days, he wants to escape inside himself, to be left alone. On days when these feelings hit, Wilkins becomes a study in contrasts: the ultimate "glue guy," going through moments when he feels as if he is coming unglued.

"It's just tough, just a lot going on inside of my head," Wilkins said in a recent interview. "I feel like I live inside of my head a lot. There's a lot going on upstairs. Don't really feel like doing things. ... Kind of feel hopeless, like, 'What's the point?'"

Wilkins is not embarrassed to talk about this struggle, about the years he has battled clinical depression and anxiety. When he decided in October to open up about his inner turmoil with local reporters, his mother cried with pride and relief.

These are often the most difficult subjects for anyone to share, let alone male athletes. Mental illness comes attached with a stigma, suggesting those who suffer from it are somehow weaker and feeble-minded. Wilkins understands all this, and that is why he wants to keep talking. Because he believes talking is the only way to begin reversing centuries-old stereotypes about the way men should behave.

In 2014, the NCAA published "Mind, Body and Sport: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness." In a study of 19,733 student-athletes, 21 percent of males reported depression over a 12-month span, while 31 percent felt anxiety.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports young adults ages 18-25 are 60 percent more likely to have depression than people age 50 or older.

In 2015, the National Center for Health Statistics found nearly 9 percent of men had daily feelings of anxiety or depression, but less than half took medication or saw a therapist for these feelings.

The NCAA has put together a guide entitled "Managing Student-Athletes' Mental Health Issues" with resources for help.

"There are times when I'm struggling, but if I speak out and somebody sees my story, they can maybe do something with it," Wilkins said. "I'm just trying to spread a little light to it because I know it's such a tough subject to speak on and a lot of people don't want to talk about it. So, if somebody can maybe use me or talk with me, it can be positive."

Wilkins went through his fair share of adversity growing up. Robin Collins (now Wilkins) had her son, Isaiah, when she was 16. Unable to care for a child on her own while she was still in high school, her parents stepped in to help raise him. The man Isaiah calls Granddad, James Taylor, became the one male figure on whom he could always depend.

Isaiah and his granddad quickly bonded over sports. Taylor first introduced Isaiah to baseball, and eventually coached him. Isaiah became an excellent pitcher with a mean fastball, but his friends in the neighborhood loved basketball, and soon Isaiah started to play, too. Nearly every day, Isaiah would place his small hand in Taylor's hand, look up and nearly burst into tears. Isaiah thought he would never get any bigger.



Isaiah Wilkins with his brother, Jacob, and sister, Jolie. Courtesy of Robin Wilkins

While he was still in elementary school, his mother married Dominique Wilkins. The NBA legend soon adopted Isaiah and the couple had two more children; the youngest, Jolie, was born with spina bifida, a birth defect that affects the spinal cord.

Basketball became a common thread for Isaiah and Dominique, though they could not be more different as players. Unlike his slam-dunking stepdad, Isaiah thrived on the defensive end, relishing the opportunity to grab a rebound or block a shot.

At home, though, everything was far from rosy. Dominique was gone for long stretches during the NBA season and left Robin to adjust to her new high-profile lifestyle mostly alone. Though Robin had struggled with anxiety most of her life, she says it grew as her relationship with her husband deteriorated. She began abusing painkillers.

Isaiah had a difficult time managing what was happening at home, so he moved back in with his grandparents at age 15. Soon, his own depression and anxiety surfaced. Wilkins remembers moments in high school when he stepped outside class to breathe into a brown paper bag to relieve his panic attacks. He felt lost and alone and coped the best way he could -- turning up the volume on his music or finding solace with a basketball in his hands.

"Just because it looks pretty, because it's handsome, whatever it is, doesn't mean it's perfect," Robin said. "The truth is, you don't know how many people are really struggling."

Robin and Dominique divorced while Isaiah was still in high school. Taylor took Isaiah on his official visit up to Virginia, where he felt most at home. After Isaiah left for Virginia, the depression and anxiety came in waves. Robin recalls getting a phone call from him, either his freshman or sophomore season.

"Mom," he told her, "something's wrong."

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Something's wrong."

"I felt it over the phone," Robin says. "Because I know that feeling. There is nothing physically wrong, but you just want to crawl out of your skin. I told him, 'We can do this. I've done it. We can do it.'"

Wilkins has clinical depression, which includes feelings of worthlessness or guilt, restlessness, fatigue, impaired concentration and a depressed mood most of the day. He began seeing a therapist at Virginia, and when he is going through a bad day, he knows he can discuss his feelings with family, teammates and coaches.

"Sometimes, every day is an uphill battle," Wilkins said. "It's tough, because as an athlete, you have a lot of different responsibilities, and you're not really allowed to say, 'I'm struggling, I don't really want to get out of bed,' because you have these things that are keeping you in school. If I could give a message I would say, even if you're doing well, seek out therapy. It helps. I think guys around the team can help, too."

Wilkins does not have bad days every day. They come and go. But when he does have a bad day, he has asked to be treated normally.

"Basketball serves as a safe haven for me," he said. "Everything feels OK when I am on the court. I don't think it's a secret inside our family here that I struggle. Everybody does an amazing job reaching out to me and checking on me, and I really appreciate it."

Wilkins credits teammate Jack Salt for being especially supportive.

"There's definitely a bad stigma that's associated specifically with male sports, but your mind is so important in athletics. You can be the most talented athlete, but if you don't have a good head set, you're not going to get anywhere," Salt said. "For him and me, we just talk, say what's on our mind, and I think that helps the team. If you go a little further than just talking about physical aspects of the game and go into mental things of how you're feeling -

- some people think that's stupid and that's the stereotype that's out there, but hopefully that will be gone soon, and people will continue to open up and be real with each other."

This past August, Wilkins decided to take a more regular role with local schoolchildren as a way to reach out and share his story. He has a group of six fourth-graders he tries to mentor on a weekly basis, when anything is up for discussion.

Coach Tony Bennett says he often gets emails from people in the community, with photos of Wilkins sharing a special moment with a child.

"We showed [the team] a video about trying to figure out what your gift is and then every day using it," Bennett said. "Isaiah, he's a guy that knows what his gift is on the court, but he understands his [other] gift, and he does try to give it away. Those are the things, as a coach, you step back and say, 'That's going to last.'"

On the court, Wilkins' approach to playing defense on the best defensive team in the country has drawn raves from coaches, teammates and opponents. His importance as the "glue guy" became clear around this time last season, when Wilkins came down with mono-like symptoms that turned into double pneumonia. He pushed through it and played, until he no longer had the energy to do much at all. Wilkins sat out the team's second-round NCAA tournament game against Florida that Virginia lost 65-39.

In all, Wilkins lost between 30 and 35 pounds, and it took months before he regained his strength, weight and shape. Despite recent back troubles, Wilkins has started every game this season for a Virginia team that has steamrolled opponents with stellar defense.

Unsurprisingly, Wilkins leads the team in rebounds and blocks and ranks second in steals. Granddad texts him after every game, usually with a brief message to let him know he watched. When they see each other, Taylor will always put his hand up.

"Now put your hand up," he tells Wilkins. "When I grow up, I want to be just like you."

"If anybody could play the film back of what life was really like for him ..." Robin said before pausing. "The idea that he's willing to embrace the truth of, 'yes, I struggle with anxiety, yes, there's still dark days, nothing is perfect.' ... It's humbling to think that we're some middle America family, and I have a kid who has a heart of gold and the fight of a tiger."