

Name: _____

Date: _____

Identifying Stress

Objective: to examine Simone Biles’s decision to confront stress and anxiety and control her mental health.

Stress and Anxiety

Stress and anxiety are similar to one another but slightly different. According to the American Psychological Association, while both are emotional responses, “stress is typically caused by an external trigger,” whether that trigger is short-term, like an upcoming test or basketball game, or long-term, like a challenging relationship with a loved one or a chronic illness.¹

Anxiety is defined as “persistent, excessive worries that don’t go away even in the absence of a stressor.”

Both stress and anxiety can create the same mental and physical symptoms: people experiencing stress or anxiety might be tired, frustrated easily, experience muscle pain from tension, have headaches, find it hard to sleep, and be inattentive.

1. What is the primary difference between stress and anxiety?

2. What are some stressors or external pressures that are often experienced in high schools? If you are stress-free, what are some things that might cause others stress at school?

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¹ “What’s the difference between stress and anxiety?”, American Psychological Association, February 14, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/anxiety-difference>

Identifying Stress (Continued)

3. As you read the following article about celebrated athlete Simone Biles, underline details that explain some of the stress that Biles felt in this moment.

Taking a Stand: Simone Biles and the Tokyo Olympics

Simone Biles is often considered the best gymnast in the world. She is the world's most decorated gymnast in history, having won over 30 medals combined in various world championships and the Olympics.

Given the number of elite gymnastic competitions Biles had competed in and dominated, the world was shocked in July 2021, when she announced she would be withdrawing from the Olympics in Tokyo. Biles, who was 24 at the time, had qualified for all four core gymnastic events (vault, uneven bars, balance beam, and floor competition), and she was expected to win gold in several of them.

While performing her vault, Biles found herself in midair with a case of the twisties. This is a phenomenon where athletes lose all spatial awareness while tumbling and experience an inability to make the spins they usually make. The twisties have led to significant injuries for some gymnasts. Biles's plan was to twist 2.5 times in air before landing, but she cut her twist down to 1.5 times and jumped forward when she landed, trying to stay upright.²

After the twisties incident, Biles was shaken. She left the mat and changed into her warm-up clothes, announcing to her coaches that she wanted to withdraw and would not be competing with her team in the finals.

In an interview, Biles explained her decision: "I can't risk a medal for the team, so I need to call it. And you usually don't hear me say things like that because I usually persevere and push through things," Biles said. "Today has been stressful. I've just never felt like this going into a competition before. I tried to go out here and have fun...but once I came out here, I was like, 'no, mental is not there, so I just need to let the girls do it and focus on myself³.'"

Every competition can be stressful, and the Olympics, a massive global event, is one of the most demanding. Additionally, the conditions in Tokyo made these Olympic games even more stressful: because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Tokyo Games, which were supposed to take place in 2020, had been postponed for a year and were held with strict COVID-19 restrictions in place. For example, family and friends who usually travel to the games to support the athletes, could only attend virtually. In addition, Covid restrictions meant there was no audience to cheer the athletes on—an integral component of most competitions, and often another



Simone Bile's Vault at the Tokyo Olympics

² Juliet Macur, "Simone Biles makes a mistake on vault," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/27/sports/olympics/simone-biles-vault-leaves-floor.html>.

³ Merrit Kennedy and Russell Lewis, "Simone Biles Says She Pulled Out Of Gymnastics Finals Due To Mental Health Concerns," *NPR*, updated July 27, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/tokyo-olympics-live-updates/2021/07/27/1021090180/u-s-womens-gymnastics-team-gold-final-simone-biles-sunisa-lee>.

helpful support for the athletes. As Biles noted “There was no audience. We thrive off of the audience. We get energy from the audience. And I also feel like it’s just a little bit better on the pressure when the audience is there.”⁴

Biles was one of four decorated national gymnasts who was slated to testify in front of Congress in September of 2021, shortly after the Tokyo Olympics, in a case about the FBI’s mishandling of the Larry Nassar case. Nassar, the team doctor of the United States national women’s gymnastics, was arrested in 2016, accused of sexually abusing over 500 current and former gymnasts. Biles was one of the gymnasts who had experienced sexual abuse. In her testimony, she acknowledged that the legacy of Nassar’s abuse had affected her, saying “The scars of this horrific abuse continue to live with all of us.”⁵

4. What resonates with you from this article? What do you find to be most surprising, perplexing, remarkable, or eye-opening about this moment in Simone Biles’s life?

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5. A journalist in *The New Yorker* noted:

“To many spectators, Biles’s decision not to compete [in the rest of the Tokyo Olympics] is a heartbreak, but it is also a welcome example of an athlete setting her own limits.”⁶

a. Why might her action be seen as both “a heartbreak” and “a welcome” response?

b. Think about Biles “setting her own limits.” Why might her decision to withdraw from Olympic competition have been difficult for Biles on a personal level? On a professional level? Jot some ideas below:

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⁴ Simone Biles, “Simone Biles Reflects On Her Life-Changing Moments,” *Vanity Fair*, YouTube video, January 10, 2024, 8:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfZvFyKxkVc>.

⁵ Tom Lutz, “Simone Biles says ‘burdens’ of Nassar abuse remained with her at Olympics,” *The Guardian*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/sep/15/simone-biles-larry-nassar-abuse-senate-hearing-fbi-investigation-gymnastics>.

⁶ Eren Orby, “The Radical Courage of Simone Biles’s Exit from the Team U.S.A. Olympic Finals,” *The New Yorker*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/sports/replay/the-radical-courage-of-simone-biles-exit-from-the-team-usa-olympic-finals>.

Identifying Stress (Continued)

6. As a world famous athlete, Biles has often been asked to explain her decision during interviews, in press conferences, and on social media. Read this interview that Biles gave with NBC News anchor Savannah Sellers in October 2021.

Simone Biles, NBC Now Interview⁷

Savannah Sellers: When an athlete has a cast on or has torn their ACL, we give them a break. It's like, "They can't do it." When it's something we can't see because it's something that's going on in your head—and by the way, with the twisties, it had an actual, physical representation for you—we don't give it the same grace. What do you think about that? And what was it like to know that, not only was this something affecting your mental health, but physically, you could have harmed yourself?

Simone Biles: I think that's what people don't understand, because, like you said, if we have a cast or an ACL [injury], you take that time off, you get to recover. And mental health, that journey is so unique and different for everybody. But since people couldn't physically see it or grasp it, then [they think] "It's no problem...why don't you just go out there and do it?" And it's like, one, I'm doing this for myself, not you guys. I get that we're entertainers, but at the end of the day, we're human too, and you guys have to respect that. So I got a lot of great feedback from that, but it is hard to talk about mental health because people can't see it, they can't grasp it. For them, it's not an injury—but it almost is and it has a worse effect on you on a daily basis.

7. Consider both Sellers's question and Biles's response.
- a. How might this new information add to your response from Q5b—the difficulty of Biles' decision?

- b. How might this information highlight Biles's emotional strength?

⁷ Simone Biles, "Simone Biles Speaks Out on Championing Mental Health," interview with Savannah Sellers, *NBC News Now*, YouTube video, 10:28, October 21, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjHQ5TgyPuc>.

Apply Your Learning for *Identifying Stress*

8. Consider some of the aspects in your life that might impact your emotional well-being and/or your physical health.
- a. In what spaces in your life do you think you might set limits to protect your own mental well-being and/or physical health?
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- b. What might be some of the difficulties or challenges that you would feel by speaking out and advocating for yourself?

Stamp Your Learning for *Identifying Stress*

9. a. What is something you learned today about stress or anxiety?
- b. In 2-3 sentences, explain why Simone Biles could be a role model for setting limits or advocating for yourself.
