

Changing the Conversation Around Mental Health

An Interview with Kevin Love, Professional Basketball Player, Mental Health Advocate, and Founder, Kevin Love Fund

EDITORS' NOTE Over the past decade, Kevin Love has taken the National Basketball Association by storm. A unique superstar, Love's career has been highlighted by five NBA All-Star elections, an NBA Championship in 2016, an Olympic gold medal in 2012, and a FIBA World Championship in 2010. He has also become an undeniable force beyond sports as he helps normalize the conversation surrounding mental health and create an opportunity for others to do the same. After documenting his experience with depression and anxiety in a powerful personal essay in *The Players' Tribune*, Love quickly evolved into the public spokesperson for mental health awareness among athletes. Continuing his advocacy in this space, he founded the Kevin Love Fund (KLF) in 2018, a fund dedicated to inspiring people to live their healthiest lives while providing the tools to achieve physical and emotional well-being. Since then, Love has been awarded the ESPY Arthur Ashe Courage Award, Change Maker Award by the Child Mind Institute, the NBA Cares Assist



Kevin Love

Award, and was an ESPY Muhammad Ali Sports Humanitarian Award finalist, all due to his work in mental health awareness.

FUND BRIEF After publicly sharing his personal story about his challenges with mental health, Kevin Love established the Kevin Love Fund (kevinlovefund.org) to inspire people to live their healthiest lives while providing tools for both mental and physical health. Through a unique combination of education, research, grantmaking, and advocacy, KLF is breaking the stigma around mental health and ensuring people who are suffering have the support needed to thrive. One by one, fans and other high-profile celebrities began to share their own stories of fear and struggle, and a national conversation had begun. Kevin Love Fund is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. EIF is a Charity Navigator 4 Star Charity that meets all 20 BBB Charity Standards and carries the Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency.

What was your vision for creating the Kevin Love Fund and how do you define its mission?

Mental illness is one of the single greatest thieves of human potential today, but it doesn't have to be. Back in 2018, I published my personal story about challenges with mental health in *The Players' Tribune*. This came several months after I experienced a massively public panic attack during a basketball game. When sharing my story, I had no idea the movement it would create. There had never been another moment in my life where I was approached by more people – fans, friends, teammates, and other high-profile celebrities – sharing their own struggles, and that they too were too afraid to talk about it and address it. It was life-changing for me in the sense that I finally felt like I could truly be me and that I had shared my truth.

My vision for the Kevin Love Fund is to change the conversation and stigma around mental health to ensure that people struggling have the tools and confidence needed to be healthy and thrive. For far too often and for far too long, people have avoided getting the help they need out of fear of how they will be perceived. Our mission is to end that fear, but also to find real solutions and create resources that make an impact.

How have your own personal challenges with mental health impacted the way you approach the work of the Fund?

I think it is key to bring your own authenticity to the work. Our theory of change incorporates bringing vulnerability and storytelling to everything we do. My personal journey is imperfect and ever-changing. You do not need to suffer alone. Everyone is going through something, and I hope that by sharing my own story, it helps others reach out for help.

Will you highlight the four pillars of the Kevin Love Fund and how the Fund addresses these core areas?

The four pillars we focus on are education, research, advocacy, and grantmaking.

In the education space, our recently launched curriculum aims to normalize mental health issues and model emotions as an important dimension of our common humanity. Designed with an emphasis on 9th and 10th graders, students learn how to cultivate empathy for others and themselves, understand the link between gratitude and well-being, harness creativity to support the healthy expression of emotions, and more.



Kevin Love with students



Kevin Love speaking with the Cleveland Cavaliers organization (above) and at a meet and greet (right)

Teachers are trained to be vulnerable in order to model the behavior they seek from their students, and work as mentors and collaborators with each child in the program to best address their specific challenges.

Our research efforts are in direct response to the impact of COVID-19, as it wreaked havoc on the mental health of people of all ages. We know that additional research is needed to improve how these issues are diagnosed and treated. To respond, we endowed the Kevin Love Fund Centennial Chair in UCLA's psychology department – a first of its kind – to enable scholars

to advance more personalized treatments for people living with anxiety and depression.

As for grantmaking, we provide organizations around the country with the resources and tools needed to provide direct mental health programming in their communities. Over the past year, we have supported leading nonprofits including Just Keep Livin Foundation, Morgan's Message, the Born This Way Foundation, the Chris Paul Family Foundation, and more. We also provided emergency COVID-19 grants in 2020 to more than 1,000 arena workers in Cleveland to help them weather the financial impact of the pandemic.



Kevin Love speaking on panel at All-Star weekend in Chicago

When it comes to advocacy, in partnership with Headspace, we launched a television and radio PSA campaign to amplify our ability to reach people at-risk or currently facing mental health challenges. Through the TV PSA, we reached nearly 341 million people, and our radio PSA aired over 30,000 times.

Will you elaborate on KLF's education program and its approach to social emotional learning?

In collaboration with K-12 educators and social emotional learning experts, we recently launched a high school curriculum that supports students in expressing emotion and destigmatizing challenges with mental health. Our approach is unique in a few ways. Educators model vulnerability by sharing their own life experiences. Students are encouraged to express emotions through creativity and project-based learning. Video clips from celebrities, artists, and other young people allow students to see that they are not alone



in their feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, grief, or other challenging emotions. Teachers and school counselors tailor the curriculum in a way that will feel authentic to their classroom community. Our comprehensive teacher training supports educators in developing a social justice perspective on storytelling and vulnerability.

Over the course of 14 lessons, students learn to destigmatize emotions often labeled as "negative" by our culture and understand that the search for authenticity and identity is a central aspect of adolescent development. They explore various artistic mediums such as photography, drawing, writing, and collage as a way to express emotion. They cultivate empathy for others and recognize that thoughts and feelings are connected and distinguish between kind thoughts and critical ones. Lastly, students better understand the connection between gratitude and well-being, and recognize that kindness and service are linked to happiness.

How did the pandemic impact KLF's work?

The past few years have not been for the faint of heart. People around the country are hurting, making our work more important and urgent than ever before. We have the programs and platform in place to make an outsized difference, and we are on a mission to reach one billion people in need over the next five years.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of KLF's work?

I have always believed that if you can't measure it, you can't change it. That is why my Fund invested in naming the first ever endowed chair at UCLA to research anxiety and depression.

How valuable has it been to the work of the Fund to have assembled such strong organizational talent to lead its efforts?

The team that we have assembled is exceptional. I'd like to specifically call out Sara Hahn and Ellie Foster, our two Directors of Education. It's an accomplishment on its own that they developed such a phenomenal SEL curriculum; but in the past year, they've already onboarded 250 schools, in which nearly 10,000 students have experienced and completed our program. We expect that our free curriculum will reach thousands more over the next year as we onboard schools nationwide.

The Kevin Love Fund has made a major impact since its founding. Do you take moments to reflect and appreciate what KLF has accomplished?

Absolutely. I try to practice the lessons taught through the Fund's curriculum, and at the heart of it is gratitude. I'm incredibly grateful for the work and accomplishments of our Fund, but I'm also grateful for the thousands of teachers and students that were vulnerable enough to tell their own stories in the classroom and do the work for themselves. I look back at my own childhood and know that if I had had the opportunity to openly talk about my experiences and feelings, the impact



The KLF curriculum in-action at Camp Harbor View in Boston



Self-esteem and trust-building activities at Camp Harbor View in Boston (above and below)

it would have had would have been life-changing. Our hope is that kids know they aren't alone and that they don't need to "go down the hall" to talk about their struggles, but can turn to a friend, neighbor, or teacher, and feel comfortable doing so in that very moment.

What are your priorities for the Kevin Love Fund as you look to the future?

Our priorities are to expand and scale our SEL curriculum nationwide to reach as many teachers and students as possible. We are also in the beginning stages of developing an elementary school program that will include a children's book series. Additionally, we are excited to expand our work with college age students with an emphasis on student athletes. We are grateful to all the donors and partners that continue to support our efforts and we look forward to expanding that network in the years to come. ●

