



The Psychology of an Injured Athlete: An Overview

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Abstract

Health status or conditions often prevents athletes from their training and competitions. When athletes get injured or become ill, there are almost negative consequences with respect to their participation or performance in sports. No matter what the level of involvement in the sports, an injury is a blow to not only playing efficiencies but also to other aspects of athlete's life. The impact of the injury can range from effecting the thoughts, feelings, emotions, as well as, impacting socially and psychologically. Physical rehab and a strong work ethic is standard practice for recuperating from injury but there is a mental side to dealing with an injury as well. Psychological factors increasingly have become recognized factors in sports performance, injury, prevention and rehabilitation. This articles deals with the psychological factors in the onset, rehabilitation and principles of prevention of sports injuries.

Important Terms: Athlete, Injury, Psychology, Rehabilitation, Mood, Goal Setting, Performance, Kinesthetic, Mental Imagery,

Introduction

Injury is part and partial of every sport and is a frequent consequence of being an athlete or participating in sports. The psychological reaction to an injury is subject to a degree of individual variation. Athletes have a strong sense of body awareness and take great pride in the capabilities of their bodies. Therefore, injuries can be psychologically as well as physically devastating. The ability to train and compete well involves enormous ego. Athletes often identify themselves by who they are as an athlete and are proud of themselves. Thus injury places considerable stress on this self identification. The more severe the injury and therefore the longer recovery-rehabilitation period, the more prolonged and profound the mood disturbance is also.

Psychological Response to an Injury

Injured athletes commonly experience at least three emotional responses i.e. isolation, frustration and disturbances of mood.

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- The injury forces the athlete to become separated from his teammates and coaches. Other team members may provide little support, and in fact, they may shun their injured teammate to avoid reminders of their own potential frailty.
- The athlete becomes frustrated because he or she perceives the loss of months of training and skills mastery, although there are many instances where athletes have used recovery period to master mental and physical skills to return successfully to competition.
- Mood disturbances are common reactions in an injured athlete. He may be temporarily depressed, or become upset by minor annoyance.

Other Reactions

- **Identity Loss** - The athlete experiences a threat to/loss of his or her personal identity. The injury forces them to disengage from an activity that is central to making them what they are, and they lose an important part of themselves.
- **Isolation** - The athlete generally feels lonely and experiences separation from the team and his/her team-mates. An important element of the player's social support system is lost.
- **Fear and Anxiety** - The player faces an uncertain future and often worries about making a full recovery, possibilities of re-injury, regaining a place in the team and in extreme cases, the ability to play again.
- **Lack of Confidence and Performance Decrements** - The player start questioning about his/her physical status, believing on himself or herself to be more vulnerable to injury. The individual may become more tentative and cautious in play, trying to protect the injury. This result into performance decrement, which can further erode confidence and lead to more anxiety and frustration.

The health care team must be aware and include psychological support as an integral part the treatment and rehabilitation processes. At the onset of psychological responses to an injury, the athlete must be fully informed about the nature and severity of the injury, the prognosis for recovery, recommend course of therapy and rehabilitation and an estimate of the time needed before training can be resumed. The complete involvement of the athlete is very important in the treatment and recovery process and he can be given responsibility for therapeutic activities that can be carried out at home easily. The medical team must discuss openly the psychological changes that accompany an injury and reassure the athlete that this is to be expected. Reassurance and supportive measures are generally adequate, but a visit from an athlete who has recovered from a similar injury may be of great value.

The entire process can be facilitated by a supportive and understanding medical staff. The formula:

Genuine Caring + Skills + Courage = Positive Outcome for the Injured Athlete

Psychological Rehabilitation from an Injury

Psychological factors increasingly plays an important role in rehabilitation, particularly for sports where there are greater times pressures to return the athlete to optimal peak performance as quickly as possible. There are five key psychological factors- goal setting, mental imagery, positive self-talk, relaxation training and social support that play an integral role in the recovery process of an injury.

When athletes become injured, physical limitations are much more obvious than mental limitations. An adequate rehabilitation program, including both physical and psychological interventions, is essential for most athletes to reach full recovery. Due to a high percentage of non adherences (30-91%) to sports injury rehabilitation programs, psychological skills may be used to increase adherence and subsequently decrease recovery time.

- ✦ **Goal setting:** It can be used to improve adherence, the most common behavioral problem following sports injury. Along with improvements in adherence to integrating mental skills into the rehabilitation program, athletes could experience an increase in self confidence and motivation, as well as a reduction in anxiety and pain associated with rehabilitation. Injured athletes often need daily encouragement to keep going to therapy sessions: goal setting can be their regimens.
- ✦ **Mental Imagery:** Athletes can use mental imagery to imagine their rehabilitation exercises before actually performing the task. This technique may improve their concentration on the exercise and can lead to an increase in effort throughout the rehabilitation process. Research Studies found those that athletes who tried to see or feel their body heal or imagine themselves fully recovered and performing their sports again, recovered faster than if they don't excessively replay their injury.
- ✦ **Positive Self talk:** This is the process by which the athlete's negative thoughts are redacted into positive, task oriented thought and affirmation. Many athletes have the tendency to dwell on negative or irrational, thoughts and beliefs about themselves their injury, or their return to playfield or arena. Following injury, self-talk techniques are useful to help counteract the problem of low self confidence in athletes.
- ✦ **Relaxation Training** is a psychological tool that is recommended for use with injured athletes during rehabilitation in conjunction with the other techniques to relieve pain. Staying loose and relaxed facilitates recovery.
- ✦ **Social support** systems for athletes include family and friends, and relationships with the teammates, coaches and therapists. Social support is believed to be effective in helping the athlete to make a better appraisal of their situation i.e. towards positive imagery through the emotional adjustment process.

General Principles for Psychological Rehabilitation

Many of the suggestions are important for reducing the athlete's feeling associated with the perceived loss of self control in preventing injury and in treating the injured athlete.

- **Early detection-** It is important to detect early changes in physical, emotional and behavioral signs of stress or reactions to injury.
- **Act quickly-** Engage the athlete in psychological counseling as soon as the signs and symptoms are observed.
- **Establish a positive relationship-** During consultation, establish a positive relationship by listening with interest, placing yourself on an equal plane, being flexible in the treatment plan , and altering plan it to fit the individual's needs.
- **Continuity of care-** Individual may experience a sequence of reactions such as denial, flight to health, depression and anxiety. The reaction may differ between time of the accident, pre-surgery, post-surgery hospital recovery, return home, resumption of normal

daily activities and/or return to sport. One session may not give the practitioner an adequate picture. In addition, one session rarely provides the type of support needed for significant change in the patient. Be sure to provide adequate feedback.

- ***Small doses of information-*** Do not overload the athlete with informations. Remember that under stress or injury, the ability to listen, assess information, and recall directions is impaired. Giving support care, and advice in small doses has a high probability of positive impact.
- ***Provide support-*** It is essential that the athlete feels supported throughout the rehabilitation process. Frequent brief visits while in the hospital, and occasional telephone calls assist in this supportive.

Specific Guidelines for Psychological Rehabilitation

- ***Physical evaluation:*** Make certain the individual is screened medically before referral for psychological evaluation and treatment. Stay in contact with the treating physician or physical rehabilitation specialist.
- ***Understanding dynamics:*** Understand the underlying dynamics and importance of exercise and the consequence of the injury to the person. Discover the meaning and connotations itself.
- ***Assess developmental issues:*** Be aware of the life cycle developmental issues. To a younger athlete the injury may symbolize rejection by his or her peer group, whereas for a middle-aged recreational athlete the injury could signify declining physical adequacy.
- ***Explore existing coping skills:*** Explore in depth the range of personal strengths, competencies, coping strategies, and ego defenses the person has.
- ***Support moderation:*** Evaluate the intensity level of the athlete's feeling, training schedule, and thinking patterns: Assist the athlete in controlling intensity, being appropriately committed, developing a consistent but flexible training schedule, and having broad base of interests and activities in addition to the focus on training or rehabilitation.
- ***Increase kinesthetic cues:*** Increase kinesthetic cues by establishing physical contact or eye contact.
- ***Provide task-relevant activities:*** Guide the individual towards task relevant activities such as relaxation for pain control and physical exercise programs for non injured portion of the body.
- ***Practice mental skill training:*** Have the athlete practice mental skill training that can enhance performance while he or she is out of commission physically. The athlete can practice such techniques as mental rehearsal, concentration training, tension control, and goal setting.
- ***Develop pleasant activities list:*** Provide the athlete with a list of potential pleasant activities and encourage him or her to carry out several pleasant activities a day.
- ***Provide reading material:*** Provide relevant reading material to combat depression.

Psychological Factors in Injury Prevention

Participation in sports keeps the athletes in a situation in which an injury is likely to occur. Fortunately most injuries are not serious and lend themselves to rapid rehabilitation, but the sports therapist must be capable of dealing with any type of trauma or catastrophic injury.

Athletes need to be psychologically prepared for practices and competition in order to reduce the risk of injury. Research studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between stressful life situations, especially those with high negative stress, and injury occurrence. In understanding the stress-injury relationship, Nideffer (1983) points out that muscle tension increases in response to stress. Increased tension in the antagonist and agonist muscle groups results in reduced flexibility and loss of motor coordination. Increased muscular tension also slows reaction time, which reduces the athlete's ability to respond.

Mental as well as physical fatigue can contribute to injury occurrence. The attention factor — the ability to maintain a high level of concentration — requires a large amount of energy; when combined with a rigorous training program, can be resulted into low concentration or attention. This may lead to slowed reaction times and loss of neuromuscular coordination, thus increasing the potential for injury, ready for return to sport to avoid risking re-injury. The role of attentional focus and muscular tension can be a major problem. Fear and/or worry about a second injury can cause stress and increased muscular tension. Preliminary studies have addressed hardiness (commitment, control, and challenge) of the athlete as a moderating factor in the stress-injury relationship. Athletes who exhibit greater qualities of this trait may be better able to control the attentional processing of information and in turn reduce the potential for occurrence of a second injury.

Beside the psychological factor of injury prevention there are some other factors which are equally important in the prevention of an injury.

Physical Conditioning: Appropriate conditioning programs can decrease the risk of injury, degree of injury, and can help in preventing re-injury. The chance for safe athletic performance can be maximized by providing adequate muscular strength and balance, power, endurance, neuromuscular coordination, joint flexibility, cardiovascular endurance, and good body composition for sport. Improving specific components of fitness and conditioning reduces the risk of injuries.

Appropriate Training Methods: Ensuring proper, efficient mechanics requires practice and effective coaching, including a systematic series of specific, repetitive, and progressive exercises and drills. Faulty mechanics must be corrected and good fundamentals ingrained. Exercises should include strength, relaxation, and flexibility specifically geared to the demands made on the body.

Rest and Recovery: Adequate sleep is important for good mental and physical health, and becomes critical for recovery after intensive workouts. Chronic over-exertion and fatigue can make the athlete more susceptible to injury.

Muscle Soreness: Muscular over-exertion may present in body as muscle soreness, muscle stiffness, and muscle spasm. Proper massage may aid in reducing tissue edema and decreasing accompanying muscle spasm. Ice applications or other forms of cryotherapy, and hydrotherapy, may facilitate the body's healing response. Appropriate rest will allow microscopic damage of the tissue to heal.

Appropriate Equipment: Shoes are the most critical piece of a track and field athlete's equipment and should be individually and carefully selected. Proper fitting shoes can mean the difference between a low and a high risk of injury for a track and field competitor.

Training in Extreme Conditions: Athletes and coaches should take into account the temperature and humidity during training, and the need to acclimate after travel to a different, extreme climate or altitude. Extreme heat and humidity, cold, and altitude can adversely affect performance in many athletic events. To avoid dehydration and fatigue that can occur from inadequate fluid replenishment, athletes must drink extra water, juices, and other fluids.

Summary

It can be summarized that this article gives an insight into the psychological aspects of an injury, its reaction and rehabilitation. Rehabilitation programs must consider the physical and psychological aspects of injury, if recovery is to be expected successful. Moreover, coaches have an important role to play in this process. Even a small amount of social support can have a profound and significant facilitating effect on a player's recovery. Conversely, doing nothing can also have a profound effect - damaging the recovery of the very same player that the coach desperately wants to be fit again. It is expected that greater understanding of the psychology of an injury offered within this article, will provide coaches and trainers with some key recommendations and strategies can be used to make the psychological rehabilitation of their players more effective.

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