



Psychological Issues of Athletic Injury Rehabilitation:

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Athletes can experience a variety of emotional responses and stress upon being injured. There is no predictable sequence of emotional reactions to injury.

Typical emotional responses to injury include:

- Sadness
- Feelings of isolation
- Irritation
- Lack of motivation
- Frustration
- Anger
- Feeling disengaged



Problematic emotional responses occur when symptoms do not resolve or worsen over time, or the severity of the symptoms seems excessive relative to other injured athletes.

Warning signs characterising poor adjustment to injuries include:

- Unreasonable fear of re-injury
- Continued denial of injury severity and response to recovery
- General impatience and irritability
- Rapid mood swings
- Withdrawal from significant others
- Extreme guilt about letting the team down
- Dwelling on minor physical complaints
- Obsession with the question of return-to-play



Individual differences in response to injury

Individual responses to injury vary in accordance with several psychological factors. For example, athletes whose sense of self is strongly defined in terms of their identity as a sports person tend to experience a loss of self-esteem when they cannot perform. For these athletes, the fact that personal identity has only one basis means that time out can cause feelings of anxiety, depression, confusion and hopelessness – usually precipitating a return to training before they are physically ready (young athletes should be encouraged to entertain a range of interests in order to develop a sense of self that is not totally reliant on identity as an athlete).

The way in which athletes appraise their injury also plays a role in injury response. For example, an anxious personality style is more likely to produce a catastrophic appraisal ('this is the worst thing that's ever happened to me – it'll probably mean the end of my career'). This type of negative appraisal is likely to be followed by an overly emotional or hysterical reaction whereas a more positive appraisal ('this sort of thing happens to most athletes – I'm sure I'll be OK soon if I get the right help') is more likely to invoke a more balanced emotional reaction.

Characteristics to consider:

- Sense of identity (ie. Are they a footballer, or do they play football?)
- Typical responses to stress
- Coping styles (ie. problem-focused or emotion-focused or avoidant)
- 'Anxious' person
- 'Negative' person
- History of substance use



Maximising Recovery

In recent times, professionals have employed a holistic approach to athlete recovery which incorporates both body and mind. Strategies implemented by psychologists to achieve optimum rehabilitation focus on three areas:

1. Goal setting

- Set short- and long-term goals to maintain motivation and a sense of achievement.
- *Examples:* Attend a certain number of recovery sessions per week; set a return date to competition which can be up-dated according to progress.

2. Positive self-talk

- Replace negative thoughts with constructive/realistic ones to promote a positive attitude and assist emotional control.
- *Examples:* Use positive affirmations such as "I can do it;" view the injury as a challenge to overcome rather than questioning "why did this happen to me?"

3. Imagery

- Employ relaxation and visualisation techniques to promote healing, facilitate sleep, and imagine performance.
- *Examples:* Regularly engage in relaxation before going to bed each night; visualise yourself executing a skill when you are fully recovered.

Whilst these three strategies are used predominantly to develop coping skills during injury rehabilitation, it is important to acknowledge the following considerations:

- Maintain a strong support network during recovery.
- Avoid isolation from other athletes and coaching staff by attending training sessions regularly.
- Learn about the physiological nature of your injury to better understand the recovery process and set appropriately timed goals.
- Use the injury as an opportunity to perfect the tactical side of performance.
- Watch videos of before the injury to gain a clearer image during visualisation.
- Take advice from other athletes who have experienced injuries, and use their personal anecdotes as a source of inspiration during set-backs.