Working with Injured Athletes: Integrating Psychology into your Practice

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But I have to play!

Athletes often feel they must participate after injury or they are letting others down (teammates, coaches, family)
Integrating Psychology into your Practice

• Psychological tools in your practice
• Musculoskeletal and concussion injuries – differences for the athlete
• Head injury in sport – a new challenge
Integrated Rehabilitation

“I’m 100 per cent physically. I just need to get the race head back.”

Factors:
- Physical
- Psychological
- Sport

Integrated Rehabilitation

“I’m 100 per cent physically. I just need to get the race head back.”

• We concentrate on the physical rehabilitation, but with few adjustments, we could include both psychological and sport factors in our rehabilitation.

• Athletes will then be ready to participate and get ‘game fit’ rather than making psychological and sport adjustments after they are physically ready to play.
Integrated Rehabilitation

• Typically, Athletic Therapists shy away from using psychological strategies due to perceived time restraints and fear of causing harm.

• Both time concerns and fear of a lack of knowledge become non-factors when simple to use techniques and approaches to psychological interventions are used.
Whole person approach

*Injured athletes do not become their injuries...*

See the person who has the injury – not just the injury.
Psychological Reactions to Injury

- Recognize what is ‘normal’ for athletes when they are uninjured.
- Recognize how an injury changes what is ‘normal’.
- Injury affects an athlete’s whole life and we need to recognize these influences.
- ATs must be open to communicating about feelings related to the injury and rehabilitation.
Pre-injury Status

- Physical condition
- Sport factors
- Social factors
- Psychological/Emotional
- Goals
Pre-injury Status

Fit - “on top of the world” – Olympic Champion - in control - dominant - independent
Post-injury Status

• Physical factors
• Social factors
• Sport factors
• Psychological/ Emotional factors
• Goals
Psychological Reactions to Sport Injury

Athletes are individual and reactions to sport injury vary according to the athlete’s situation (level of skill, investment in the sport) and the environment (game or practice, championship).
Psychological Reactions To Sport Injury

What should we consider when working with injured athletes?

• The individuality of each athlete (level of skill, investment in the sport, etc)
• What is *normal* for athletes
• The injury scenario (how it happened, importance of the event, etc)
So what are athletes telling us?

- Mind-body dissociation (sometimes distance themselves from the injured body part)
- Loss of control
- Need to know information (process and outcome)
- Sense of identity
- Sense of belonging
- It is not fair!
Elite Level Football Player

“My body had never been a barrier to me before.”
“It wasn’t a lack of effort holding me back. It was just that my body simply was not doing what I was willing it to do. That was frustrating. It drove me crazy. My body had never been a barrier before.”
Female Elite Level Basketball Player

Her first injury involved every ligament and meniscus in the knee.
Female Elite Level Basketball Player

“I couldn’t believe that it was my own body letting me down.”
Negative Thought Patterns

1. Blaming (self or others)
2. “Should” statements
3. Polarized thinking
4. Catastrophizing
5. Control fallacies
6. Emotional reasoning
7. Filtering
8. Entitlement fallacies
Keys for Recognizing and Integrating Psychological Factors in Your Practice

- **Listen** to the athlete
- Consider the **situational factors** influencing athletes
- Recognize the **pressures** to compete
- Help the athlete gain a **sense of control** over the situation (rehabilitation, life events)
- Help the athlete maintain a **sense of belonging** through meaningful team contact *if appropriate*
- Provide both procedural and outcome **information** (what is going to happen and how it can turn out)
- Use an **integrated approach** to sport injury rehabilitation (physical, psychological, and sport factors)
Deciding:

• Can a strategy be added to my treatment with the athlete (brief intervention)?
• Can this be done without adding time to the treatment?
• Can this be done with the knowledge base that I now have?
Brief or Extensive Interventions

Possible brief interventions:

• **Goal setting** (used already in rehabilitation design)
• **Education** on how the body heals and what rehabilitation entails
• **Counselling** on how to adjust to the effects of the injury
• **Visualizations** about healing, how modalities work
• **Brief relaxation** (centering, focus, breathing)
• **Modeling** or seeing others who are successfully recovering from the same injury
Education and Counselling

- Easy technique to use
- Research suggests this is an important aspect helping the athlete recover
- Information is ‘old’ to you but new to a first time injured athlete
Brief or Extensive Interventions

Deciding:

• Need to recognize the athlete’s situation before and after the injury.
• Must evaluate what the problem areas are.
• Does this athlete need an extensive intervention?
• Who can provide the interventions.
• How can this extensive intervention be added to the treatment of the athlete?
• Must ensure a collaborative approach to treatment and eventually discharge.
Brief or Extensive Interventions

Possible extensive interventions:

• Counselling and Education
• Macro goal setting (overall recovery and return to play)
• Relaxation
• Thought stoppage (recognizing negative thoughts)
• Goal Setting (daily, weekly, related to effort in rehabilitation activities)
• Modeling
• Visualization
Psychological Tools in your Practice

• Whole person approach (physical, psychological, sport)
• Observation and recognition
• Communication
• Visualizations
• Goal setting
• Modeling
Observation and Recognition

• Recognizing changes in an athlete’s behaviour and demeanour
• Recognizing warning signs of depersonalization
• Recognizing warning signs of depression
• Hear what the athlete is saying (or not saying), particularly hurtful ideation and actions
What is scary about open lines of communication?

We are often frightened that someone will actually reveal something personal to us and we will have to respond!!!
Goal Setting

Set goals for all aspects of recovery:

– Physical rehabilitation (swelling, range of motion)
– Psychological aspects (sense of control)
– Sport factors (keep up with the team or improve skills – still need to be ‘game fit’)

Goal Setting

S  Specific
M  Measureable
A  Applicable to needs
R  Realistic
T  Timelines
E  Evaluate
R  Re-establish goals
Modeling is an excellent technique to help injured athletes believe recovery is possible.
A Comparison of Psychological Implications of Musculoskeletal Injury Rehabilitation and Concussion Recovery
Comparing Musculoskeletal Sport Injury with Concussions

Very clear acute physiological reactions to musculoskeletal sport injury – body part specific
Comparing Musculoskeletal Sport Injury with Concussions

Very specific phases of physiological healing and rehabilitation
Comparing Musculoskeletal Sport Injury with Concussions

- **Musculoskeletal injury** – treat the injury and then if necessary, recondition the entire body
- **Concussion** – is a systemic injury since it affects the whole body
- **Concussion** – seems to be significant overlap with symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia and personality change
## Comparing Musculoskeletal and Sport Concussion Injuries - Psychological

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musculoskeletal</th>
<th>Sport Concussion</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Red Badge of Courage”</td>
<td>No visible injury thus no “excuse” for not playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical advice – keep athlete involved with sport</td>
<td>Concerns about keeping athlete involved with sport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can establish goals for rehabilitation based on</td>
<td>Can not establish set goals based on physiological</td>
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<tr>
<td>physiological stages of healing</td>
<td>stages of healing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can provide injury-specific activity</td>
<td>Inactivity cause for frustration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fairly established timelines for return to play</td>
<td>No established timelines for return, thus more</td>
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<tr>
<td>provides hope</td>
<td>frustration</td>
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What do Athletes Tell Us about Being Injured?

• “I can’t stand watching the team I love playing”.

• “Once I got back to the field, it was 10 times worse because I was in a place where most of us feel most comfortable and I couldn’t participate...I didn’t know how I was going to go on...watching these guys ...running and doing drills and everything and I’m not a part of it...”
What do Athletes Tell Us about Concussion?

• “My teammates were the ones who noticed that something was wrong”.
• “The more you think about whether your head is going to hurt today, the more chance it will”.
• “For two and a half years, my head felt like a basketball that was over-inflated”.
What do Athletes Tell Us About Concussions?

- Mind-body dissociation is quite common with musculoskeletal sport injury – concussions?
- Extreme frustration especially with setbacks – no guidelines – trial and error approach to RTP
- Models are available in musculoskeletal injury – concussion models are typically ones who continued to play when they should not have
- Loss of control with concussion
- Need to know (process and outcome) but no firm information available
- Sense of identity
- Sense of belonging
How Can We Help Injured Athletes Recover From Concussion?

- Recognize concussion signs, symptoms and severity
- Refer to appropriate specialists
- Recognize their psychological state
- Reaffirm your support for their recovery
How can we help injured athletes recover from concussion?

- Remember their pre-injury status (fit, in control, dominant, independent)
- Involve athletes in the recovery process – help with a sense of control
- Provide some tangible ideas or protocols on things that the athlete can control (food intake, amount of sleep, etc)
Concussion – a new psychological challenge

Challenges ahead:
• Parents and athletes questioning sport involvement
• Rule and equipment changes
• Attitude changes must occur

ATs will be asked their opinions on concussion and sport involvement.
Sport Psychology and Working with Injured Athletes

• Listen
• Communicate
• Educate
• Integrate
Integrate psychological approaches and techniques into your everyday practice.