

IMPORTANCE OF INJURY REHABILITATION FOR HIGH LEVEL PERFORMING ATHLETE

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Introduction:

It's a reality in sports today that despite advances in injury training techniques, coaching, facilities, physical conditioning and equipment, the incidence of athletic injuries continues to rise. Between three and five million athletic and recreational sport injuries are estimated to occur annually in the United States. Of high school-age athletes, nearly half sustained at least one injury during their athletic careers. At the elite level of sport, most athletes today have an extensive injury history.

To deal with this reality, good coaches have effective strategies to help their athletes through the rehabilitation process and back to the playing field. A proven way coaches can help is by providing social support. Indeed, having a social support network helps athletes reduce stress, speed healing and increases the probability that they will stick with their rehabilitation programs.



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TIPS FOR COACHES DEALING WITH INJURED ATHLETES

1. Know your athlete.

Some coaches have difficulty understanding how one athlete can take much more time to recover from an injury than another and assume that he/she may not be mentally tough or does not care about rehab. It is important for coaches to reconsider such assumptions, since many factors other than mental toughness or character can influence the injury recovery process. If you're in doubt about how your athlete is doing or what he/she needs, ask.

2. Involve your athlete in team activities.

Many times, athletes rehabilitate their injuries in the training room at the same time their teams are practicing at another location. This can create a sense of isolation and distance. Talk with athletic training staff about rehab programming that can be done on-site while the team is practicing.

Within the limitations of the injury, encourage athlete involvement in drills that he or she is capable of performing. Injured athletes can also assist coaches by monitoring their or other's positions during training and competition.

3. **Team up with the athletic trainer.**

Research with injured athletes shows there is a wide disparity of responses when it comes to coach involvement with their athlete's rehabilitation. Some coaches assume that helping an athlete through a rehabilitation program is a task best left to the athletic trainer, and they wait for the time when the athlete is healthy enough to return to the team. Regular communication with your athlete and his/her trainer sends a positive message to the athlete and allows you to help an athlete deal with rehab obstacles or other issues.

4. **Promote trust.**

The time during an athlete's rehabilitation is a learning opportunity for the athlete to gauge the strength of your relationship with him/her when the chips are down. Is caring about the athlete unconditional, or are you sending subtle (or not so subtle) messages that your athlete is less valued now that he/she is injured?

5. **Help the athlete to be positive and look forward to returning to sport.**

Athletes generally benefit from hearing their trainers and coaches say that they will get better (if that is in fact, the case), and that they are making progress toward their rehabilitation goals. Coaches who communicate with athletic training staff and reinforce rehabilitation progress can help motivate their athletes to continue to work hard on their rehabilitation programs. It is important, however, to recognize and respond appropriately to athletes who may construe such encouragement as pressure to return to play before they feel ready.

6. **Communicate support of injured athletes to the team.**

Consistent injury-related research suggests that injured athletes often feel unsupported by their teammates. This situation may be due in part to teammates not knowing how to act around their injured colleagues or competition for the injured athlete's role on the team. Developing a team culture that supports injured teammates eases an athlete's eventual return to the team, sends a positive message to other team members about how they will be treated should they become injured and promotes better teamwork.

7. **Encourage mental training as part of rehab.**

Even if an athlete is unable to train or compete, mental skills used by an athlete when healthy can help during the rehab process. During rehabilitation, have injured athletes view competition tapes and encourage them to imagine themselves in competition situations. During painful

rehabilitation exercises, athletes can benefit from using relaxation exercises and task-focused, positive self-talk. Consult with a sport psychologist for more tips on how to incorporate mental skill use during rehabilitation.

Sports injuries are a part of most athletes' lives, and helping injured athletes to deal with psychological and physical rehabilitation should be a priority for coaches. Build emotional, informational and tangible support for injured athletes into your coaching plan. It will be a win for the whole team!

Importance of Injury Rehabilitation for High level Athletes.

In the athletes life many times he suffer different types of injuries. Injuries cause discomfort (severe pain in many instances), disrupt training routines, negatively impact fitness level, and can take you away from an activity you enjoy. Given all this, who in their right mind wouldn't find injuries to be a drag?

Unfortunately, injuries are a relatively common occurrence in athletic. Whether you are a recreational or competitive athlete, chances are you have experienced some sort of injury – a sprained ankle, pulled hamstring, stress fracture, broken bone, torn rotator cuff, or some other injury.

Many times rehabilitation is an important step in getting back out on the playing field. But besides taking time off, is there anything that can be done to facilitate the injury rehabilitation process. After all, the quicker you can get past the injury the quicker you can get back to your training routine and back to pursuing your performance goals.

Why are we discussing injuries in the Mind Games column? These articles are supposed to address the psychological aspect of training and performance. A discussion on injuries would be more relevant in a sports Medicine article, right? Not necessarily, as you'll learn below.

Psychological Aspects of Injury Rehabilitation

Years ago, injuries were strictly viewed as a physical issue; rehabilitation for used entirely on doing what was necessary to facilitate the physical recovery process, including rest, ice, muscle stimulation , physical therapy, and even surgery. The psychological aspect of injury rehabilitation was very rarely considered. Over the years, however, from talking with athletes, and from talking with athletic trainers, that psychological factor – such as motivation, attitude, goals, optimism, and imagery – play a role in the rehabilitation process. Actually, it makes intuitive sense that mental factors can influence performance in sport, exercise and other achievement endeavors, it seems reasonable to suggest that the same hold true for rehabilitation. To illustrate this point, compare the following two scenarios and identify which athlete you would guess is going to rehabilitate more

successfully.

During Indian athlete during practice session landed wrong on his ankle after grabbing a rebound and hobbled off the court. The doctor told him it was an ankle sprain. A physical therapist provided him with at home strengthening and mobility exercises for his ankle and he begrudgingly completed most of the exercises, although he couldn't see how many of the exercises would help his recovery. It was just going to take time. And, he was probably going to have to pull out of the upcoming 3 on 3 tournaments, so he lacked the motivation to really get after it.

Another athlete wasn't paying attention when he was out for his run. He stepped in a pothole and also sprained his ankle. It occurred at a bad time as he had been training for months for a local 10 k road race that was now only three weeks away. His doctor told him if he worked on maintaining his fitness level through cross training and committed to his rehabilitation, he might be able to run the race. Kyle did just that – he switched to swimming and biking and dedicated himself physically and mentally to the rehabilitation process. All along he recognized that the rehabilitation was a necessary and critically important, step in getting back out onto the road so he kept a positive attitude towards the whole thing.

These examples clearly illustrate how mental factors can influence rehabilitation. A betting person would predict that second athlete is going to recover faster. He maintained a positive attitude, stayed motivated, and was confident in the rehabilitation process. Let's now direct our attention to three strategies you can implement to address and take advantage of the mental aspect of injury rehabilitation.

Strategies to Get You Back to your training Routine:

Education:

As the injured athlete, a critical step to help you successfully navigate through the rehabilitation process is to educate your self. Too often, athletes take a passive role and allow rehabilitation to happen to them rather than being actively involved in the process. By educating yourself, you can have more of a direct influence on the process.

Get answers to question such as:

- How severe is the injury?
- What muscle, tendon, ligament or bone is damaged?
- How will the injury impact my training and other activities?
- What is the rehabilitation program and timeline?
- What can be expected in terms of symptoms and potential setbacks?
- What are my limits?

Having answers to these and other questions, can enhance your understanding of the rehabilitation process, spark your motivation, and help you maintain a positive attitude. In the scenario above, athlete lacked motivation, in part, because he didn't understand what he was doing in rehabilitation and why. Education can facilitate a positive attitude, as you'll have a sense of what to expect and won't be derailed by setbacks.

Rehabilitation and return to training goals

You already know how beneficial goals are in your pursuit of performance accomplishments. Goals provide you with direction (where do you want to go?) a plan (how will you get there?) and feedback (how are you doing/progressing?). These same benefits can, and should, be applied to injury rehabilitation. You are simply shifting your focus from athletic performance to rehabilitation performance. Based on your understanding of the injury and rehabilitation, identify daily and weekly goals regarding rehabilitation (i.e., increase strengthening exercises by five repetitions, increase to two sets of mobility exercises). Keep track of your goals and goal accomplishment. This will force you to recognize incremental improvements that may otherwise go unnoticed and help keep your attitude positive and your motivation high.

As rehabilitation progresses, shift your goals from a focus on rehabilitation to a focus on your return to training. A common mistake made by many athletes is jumping back into training at the level they were at prior to the injury- trying to lift the same weight, run the same distance or cycle at the same intensity. Re-injury or incurring another injury due to over-exerting one's self is a frequent result. It is important to set goals that focus on slowly getting yourself back to normal training loads. Not only does this keep "reined in" and prevent you from overdoing it, but such goals also provide you with more realistic expectations regarding your performance. Setting progressive post-injury goals helps you recognize improvements made since being injured and avoids the comparison with pre-injury performance.

Use psychological skills applied to rehabilitation

The psychological skills that you use to enhance your athletic performance- once we've discussed in this column previously should be applied to your rehabilitation. Mental skills and strategies such as concentration, confidence, self-talk, imagery and anxiety management have been found to be beneficial in enhancing athletic performance and can be applied to rehabilitation "performance" with similar success. For example, as an athlete, you have undoubtedly worked on managing your self talk (that internal chatter in your head) so it helps rather than hurts your performance. You've probably used cue words or positive affirmations to direct you're self-talk and keep it productive and positive. Take the same approach with your self talk related to rehabilitation

by trying to manage your internal dialogue. Be kind to yourself as opposed to critical; tell yourself what you can do, not what you can't do.

The use of anxiety management strategies presents another good example. Prior to a competition, test set, or maximum training effort, you have probably needed to use various strategies to help manage your nervousness – strategies such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, imagery and self-talk can help you manage cognitive and somatic anxiety. Do the same regarding the anxiety experienced in rehabilitation. Purposefully apply anxiety management strategies if you find yourself anxious about rehabilitation or your return to training (which is common reaction).

TYPES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

There are as many different types of social support as there are people, but support generally fits into the following three categories:

1. **Emotional support** helps an athlete express his/her emotions, to feel understood and receive compassion from those giving support.
2. **Informational support** provides the athlete with relevant information and an understanding of the rehabilitation process. Knowing what is ahead also may provide a challenge to the athlete and help him/her accept the reality of the situation.
3. **Tangible support** includes material and personal assistance.

In addition to these types of support, everyone has their preferred way of supporting others. The recipients of support each have their own preferred support needs depending upon the situation. Coaches' social support efforts are beneficial to the extent that the support they provide matches the needs their athlete has as a result of the injury. This is important, since research suggests that over time the wrong kind of social support can actually have more negative effects than no support at all.

SOCIAL SUPPORT NEEDS — FROM INJURY TO RECOVERY

Social support is important throughout the rehabilitation process, and it can be useful to consider this process as occurring in stages.

1. **Injury stage:** when athletes are first injured or, in the case of a chronic injury, decide that they cannot go any longer without treatment.
2. **Rehabilitation stage:** when athletes accept that they are injured and begin to cope with day-to-day rehabilitation.
3. **Recovery stage:** when athletes start to anticipate their recovery and return to competition.

It is not a simple process for an athlete to progress from sustaining an injury, completing a rehabilitation program and eventually returning to play. Athletes move through emotional

highs and lows, periods of optimism and progress, followed by setbacks. It is not surprising, then, that athletes' social support needs may vary throughout the course of injury rehabilitation.

The injury stage is typically a period of relatively high emotion as athletes cope with the shock of injury, pain, lessened mobility and the loss, either temporarily or permanently, of their athletic role. Social support research has found that all three sources of support—emotional, informational, and tangible—are highly valued during this period. Athletes often need help coming to terms with their sometimes volatile emotional reactions after an injury. Often, there is also a high need to understand the specifics of the injury, and how it will affect their ability to return to sport. Finally, athletes may need to learn to use crutches or other rehabilitation equipment as well as relying on others for physical assistance.

As athletes adjust to the idea of being injured and move into the rehabilitation stage, they often report that their need for social support diminishes, unless there are setbacks. Informational support remains relatively important as the rehabilitation program moves forward. There is a tendency for emotional support levels to drop off over time as family, friends and others acclimate to the injured athlete's plight. Without the urgency of the injury to serve as a reminder, there is potential for others to take the injury for granted or to assume that all is well. When social support is diminishing and rehabilitation progress slowing, some athletes report that this period can be emotionally difficult.

Recovery, the third and last stage, generally coincides with an upswing of both positive and negative emotions as athletes contemplate their return to the team and competition. Often, athletes fear returning to competition and testing their newly healed injuries on the field of play. Others may be tempted to "try out" their abilities in training and competition earlier than advised. Returning to a training and teammate situation that may have changed since the injury also may be a source of stress for many athletes. In addition, they typically have high needs for information about what to expect physically and psychologically when they start testing their injury.

An important message to coaches is that contrary to how it might appear, athletes need your social support during rehabilitation. Even athletes with strong support networks can benefit from a coach's involvement during the rehabilitation process. Coach reinforcement of rehabilitation goals increases athlete motivation and commitment to the rehabilitation process. When rehab is difficult, coach encouragement can help athletes who may be wondering about their status with the team.

Conclusion:

While it is my hope that you are injury-free in your pursuit of sport and exercise goals, this article has attempted to “arm” you with information to facilitate the rehabilitation process should you become injured-whether you strain a calf muscle, have planter fascistic, or break your leg. As a starting point, it is imperative for you to recognize that psychological factors can influence the rehabilitation process. Next, take advantage of psychological skills and strategies by implementing them in rehabilitation- optimize your rehabilitation performance by taking control of the mental aspect.

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