If you would like additional information on psychological reactions to and recovery from injury, please feel free to contact the Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Enhancement at 940-369-SPORT or www.sportpsych.unt.edu. Additionally, the following are good sources of information.


Coping with sports injuries is high, over 30% of the student-athletes may be injured in any given year, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars spent on treatment. Further, injury rates tend to be higher during competitions, in contact vs. noncontact sports, and while playing unorganized sports. Clearly, injuries are serious and costly health problems.

So why do injuries remain such a health problem? The “stress response” is defined as a bi-directional relationship between how athletes appraise or experience competitive situations (e.g., a game, vying for a starting spot) and their physiological (e.g., increased muscle tension) and attentional (e.g., inability to pick up visual cues in the periphery, distractibility) responses. This “stress response” is considered to be central to the process of becoming injured and is influenced by certain psychosocial variables, such as current life stress, coping resources (e.g., social support) and personality (e.g., anxiety levels). Depending on the extent to which the psychosocial variables are present, athletes’ stress responses are lessened or heightened. For example, during an important game, a soccer player who had high levels of life stress, low levels of social support, and was highly anxious might view the situation as threatening or overwhelming and believe that she won’t perform well. Viewing the game this way, the soccer player might experience bodily changes, such as increased heart rate, upset stomach, or tightness in her muscles, or disruptions in attentional functioning, such as a narrowing of the visual field (i.e., “tunnel vision”).

If she was physically tight and could not pick up peripheral visual cues, her risk of injury would be likely to increase substantially. On the other hand, a field hockey player who has a well-established support system and has had few stressors in the recent past might view competing for a spot on the team as a challenge that she can handle rather than a situation that is going to make her feel anxious and overwhelmed. By viewing the situation in this way, she is not as likely to experience disruptions to her attentional processes or physical changes in her body. She would be at a lower risk for experiencing injury.

How athletes view sport situations influences their physiological and attentional responses, but the reverse is true as well. Take for instance the football player who, in the locker room prior to a game, notices that his hands are shaking a little and that the muscles in his shoulders are a little “tight.” Such awareness might lead him to wonder what is wrong. He may begin to question his physical readiness, his team’s game plan, or his ability to settle in the room. He would be more likely to increase substantially. On the other hand, athletes who worry (e.g., “I hope I don’t screw up”) or those who seem to become physically tight, they may benefit from learning how to physically relax and view the situation in a more positive way. Such changes may help them reduce their risk of injury.

Second, be aware of the stressors and resources that are present in your athletes’ lives. If an athlete has experienced a considerable number of negative life events, such as a death in her family or failing an exam, you might consider having them talk to someone (e.g., school counselor or a sport psychologist) about these events and the stress they may be experiencing. Also, pay attention to those athletes whose support systems (e.g., family and friends) are limited in their ability to respond to the athlete’s needs. Athletes who are isolated (e.g., have few people with whom they can talk) or don’t seem to get much help in handling their stressors may need some outside assistance.

Finally, don’t be afraid to ask how your athletes are doing or encourage them to seek help when needed. By nature, athletes are independent, tough-minded individuals who are used to handling things on their own. As a result, they may be less inclined to seek out help themselves. Instead of having the end result be injury, intervene early so the athlete can get the help he/she needs.

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In the rehabilitation process, injured athletes often experience pain that may lead to disconnection from the team and lack of motivation. For example, injured athletes may experience an increase in free time and feel unsure how to fill the void of practice and competition (Petitpas & Danish, 1995). Athletes may also feel left out, unimportant, and guilty for letting the team and coach down, due to the adverse impact of their injury. Psychological reactions to injury are normal, there are several signs and symptoms that can be observed in athletes demonstrating these signs may provide emotional support, particularly along with the use of psychological skills. Coaches and sports medicine personnel can help injured athletes reframe negative thoughts and feelings leading to decreased levels of confidence when they are able to return to play. Psychological Reactions to Injury

Overall, Dustin believes sport psychology has brought him closer to understanding the mentality of the injured athlete. Dustin’s role as a trainer and his sport psychology knowledge are significant in helping injured athletes cope with the pain of rehabilitation. Collectively, the visualization and breathing techniques allow athletes to go to a “different place where they are not in pain.”

Scherzer, 2001). Finally, while injured, athletes may lose physical skills and fitness leading to decreased levels of confidence when they are able to return to play. Some athletes may also be cautious in their play when they do return, doubting their recovery, questioning their skill level, and fearing reinjury. Signs of Poor Adjustment during Recovery

While psychological reactions to injury are normal, there are several signs that may indicate athletes are having difficulty accepting and adjusting to the reality of their injury. Signs of difficulty include high levels of anger, an obsession about returning to play, denial about the injury or severity of injury, repeatedly returning to play too soon, braggadocio about one’s previous athletic accomplishments, feeling guilty for letting the team and coach down, and withdrawing from one’s friends and family (Petitpas & Danish, 1995). Injured athletes demonstrating these signs may need additional help in dealing with their injury and recovery. Sport psychology consultants, sport medicine personnel (e.g., athletic trainers, physical therapists, sports medicine physicians), and school counselors can help athletes who are struggling to cope with and recover from injury. Psychological Recovery

While athletes, coaches, and sports medicine personnel spend much of their time focusing on physical rehabilitation and recovery, it is important to consider psychological aspects of recovery as well. Social support and the use of psychological skills can help in the overall recovery of injured athletes. Social support plays an important role in athletes’ recovery from injury. Social support can come from sport medicine personnel, coaches, teammates, and family and friends. Sports medicine personnel can listen to athletes’ concerns and provide not only injury- and recovery-related information, such as expected length of recovery and common challenges in recovery, but also emotional support by reassuring athletes about their progress. Coaches and teammates can provide support by including injured athletes in team functions, keeping injured athletes involved in practices and games, and providing a network of friends during athletes’ rehabilitation and recovery. For example, injured athletes could be included in practice by moving rehabilitation equipment (e.g., bikes, weights) near the team practice area. Family and friends outside of sport also may provide emotional support, particularly along with the use of psychological skills (Walsh & Llanos, 2004). Athletes who are capable of adapting to and managing stress associated with injury are more likely to recover. Psychological Reactions to Injury and Recovery

Injured athletes may also benefit from using a variety of psychological skills, such as goal setting, self-talk, and imagery. Goal setting can be useful to help injured athletes stay motivated during their rehabilitation, keep track of progress, and focus on the future. Self-talk strategies can help athletes reframe negative thoughts into more productive ones. For example, an athlete thinking “I’ll never recover” can stop that thought and replace it with a more productive thought like “It may take time, but I am making progress in my recovery.” Social support, backed by a rehabilitation plan will help me work towards my goals.” Finally, athletes can use imagery during the recovery process to mentally practice their skills and performances to stay sharp, to facilitate the implementation of physical rehabilitation strategies, and to remain positive, confident and focused.

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