

Vol 2, Issue 4: Overcoming Injury

Overcoming Injury

During every week of sport competition, thousands of athletes experience sport-related injuries, which can range from minor, acute problems, such as a slightly pulled muscle or sprained ankle, to more severe, chronic concerns, such as a blown out knee or an overused joint. Because injuries, by their nature, are physical events, the primary focus of sports medicine personnel will be on the physical condition of the athlete (e.g., how severe is the sprain, has full range of motion returned to the joint). But injuries also are psychologically traumatic events that are associated with a range of reactions, including:

- emotions, such as depression/sadness, anxiety/tension, anger, or guilt
- isolation and alienation from teammates and coaches
- loss of confidence in playing abilities
- fears of re-injury, loss of playing status/time, and not reaching pre-injury performance levels

How athletes think about and understand their injuries strongly influence their reactions. In turn, these emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions strongly influence athletes' rehabilitation and recovery and can determine how smoothly and quickly they return to practice and competition. In fact, it is not unusual for athletes to be physically healed and ready to return to play but still not believe they are able to do so.

So what can coaches, parents and athletic trainers do to help their injured athletes? It's important to:

- recognize that injuries are physically *and* psychologically traumatic,
- know that athletes will respond differently to their injuries and thus must be understood as individuals,
- recognize that injured athletes may experience a wide range of distressing emotions and fears that can undermine their confidence and interfere with their recovery,
- encourage injured athletes to stay involved with the team to gain support and assurance, which may include giving them new responsibilities on the team for while they are injured,
- talk with injured athletes about how they are doing emotionally as well as physically, and don't assume that just because the physical injury is healed the athlete will be psychologically ready to return to play.

Although coaches, parents, athletic trainers and teammates can be great sources of support and guidance for injured athletes, some may benefit from talking with a sport psychologist about their injury and their rehabilitation. At the Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence we have a staff of highly trained consultants who understand how athletes respond psychologically to injuries and can assist athletes in their rehabilitation and return to sport. For more information about our services and how we can work with you and/or your team, contact us at (940) 369-SPORT (7767). Or you can visit our website and send us an email at www.sportpsych.unt.edu In closing, we leave you with the sport quote of the week:

“The mental approach to things is what separates players at every level.” Lisa Leslie, WNBA All Star