

## **A Look into the Needs of Injured Athletes: Implications and Recommendations**

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### **Abstract**

Athletes are dependent on the optimal functioning of their physical skill, therefore sport injury can have a profound effect on the athlete. Throughout the healing process the athlete has a wide range of needs. Eighteen athletes ranging from provincial to national team level filled out questionnaires, and shared information about the needs of injured athletes, at an injury support group meeting. Unstructured in-depth interviews were then conducted with eight athletes to obtain a more in-depth view. Based on these sources of information (questionnaires, interviews and support group meetings) eight categories were created that summarized the needs of these injured athletes. Recommendations on how to support athletes more fully through injury, and address their needs, are discussed along with implications for future research.

### **Introduction**

Think of an athlete who has spent many years and countless hours training in the hope that one day he/she would be able to represent his/her country in the Olympic games. Imagine the feelings of pride and accomplishment associated with making it through the many competitions and qualifiers that is necessary to earn a berth on the Olympic team. Now picture that same athlete sustaining an injury a month before the Olympics that literally shatters his or her dreams.

As in the example presented above, sport injury can be a very difficult experience for an athlete. In the pursuit for excellence athletes are very dependent upon the optimal functioning of their physical skill, thus injury can end an athletes career at any time. This can prove to be very difficult since

some athletes totally immerse their identity into sport (Heil, 1993). In general, sport injury can have a profound effect on the physical, mental and emotional state of the athlete.

Research has shown that athletes often react to injury with a grief response similar to Kubler-Ross's (1969) stages of death and dying (Grove, Hanrahan, and Stewart, 1990; Lynch, 1988; Rose, Baudin, and Dunlop, 1990; Botterill, Flint and Ievleva, 1996). The first stage of denial is used as a defense mechanism. The athlete will play through the pain or ignore the fact that it is not going away. When denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger. Athletes often ask themselves "why me" or "why now". After this stage comes bargaining, which is an attempt to postpone the inevitable. The ath-

lete usually offers something, such as rest, in return for recovery. Once the athlete realizes that nothing can be done they may go into a state of depression. In this stage the athlete may become withdrawn and focus on self-pity (Lynch, 1988). With the last stage comes acceptance of the injury. The athlete finally realizes their fate and is now ready to start the healing process.

Throughout this healing process the athlete has a wide range of needs, depending on the scenario and the severity of injury. There are also a variety of coping mechanisms and strategies that athletes use to fulfill various needs, and deal with the trials and tribulations of injury. This exploratory study was conducted to gather data on psychological effects, needs and recommendations from injured athlete subjects.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants in the study were 18 athletes who ranged in level from provincial to national team. The sample consisted of 8 males and 10 females representing 9 different sports. These sports included, basketball, cycling, field hockey, ice hockey, Nordic combined, track and field, speed skating, water polo, and wrestling. All participants had at some point been involved with a peer support group for injured athletes, where permission to participate in the study was obtained.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Information was collected through a variety of mediums. To begin, a short questionnaire was completed by each athlete. Its purpose was to provide information about their present physical condition, determine the needs of these injured athletes and the type of support that felt would help with their recovery.

To obtain a more in-depth view and additional insights, unstructured qualitative interviews were conducted with the eight participants who volunteered to be a part of this process. In this interview, athletes were asked to discuss the challenges that they faced as a result of the injury. They were also asked about any specific needs they had, and about any thoughts they had on how recovery could be enhanced.

With the groups' permission, information was also gathered from the dialogue and exchange at peer group support meetings. These meetings were conducted once every 6 weeks. The purpose of these meetings was to provide support and education for injured athletes through a group of peers who could relate with what they were going through. Some of these meetings simply provided an open medium in which the athletes could share whatever they wished to share. Other meetings revolved around certain themes based on feedback from the athletes (i.e. mental skills for injured athletes).

The information that was collected from these sources was first organized according to individual response or case. It was then compiled and compared to assess the commonalities that existed among the individual responses. Based on this information eight categories were created that summarize the needs of these injured athletes.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Needs of Injured Athletes**

In looking at the basic human needs identified by Glasser (1984) (acceptance, success, sensation, and control) one could anticipate some needs that an injured athlete may have. Botterill et al (1996) pointed out that during rehabilitation these fundamental individual needs are likely to be heightened. An athlete may feel the need to be accepted and

successful at an even higher level when injured; they may search for stimulation and feeling of enjoyment; and their need of control will probably be greater when going through rehabilitation.

Awareness of the basic needs is important in supporting an athlete through injury. It will provide health care professionals, family, teammates and friends with a better understanding of the feelings the athletes are experiencing. This in-turn will allow them to supply the athlete with the appropriate type of support and guidance. From the data that was collected the needs perceived by the athletes have been grouped into 8 categories. The following section will describe the categories, as well as, provides specific examples of each.

1. **Support:** Almost all the athletes stated that they needed support in one form or another. This included assistance and feeling encouragement from family, friends, coaches and teammates. One athlete stated that ‘I needed the support of my friends and teammates. Knowing that they supported me made it easier to train, it kept my motivation up.’

Various types of support were suggested by the athletes, which include some of the following: a) Mental and emotional support to help get through the ups and downs of rehabilitation; b) Material or financial support so that the athletes can seek the appropriate medical and physical treatments; c) Personal support, which involves assistance with the hassles of daily living, such as going shopping for groceries or getting around to physiotherapy appointments; d) Peer support from those who have gone through injury or are currently going through the same thing; e) Listening

support, which involves being able to vent to people about problems.

2. **Need for expression:** Many athletes stated that they needed to be able to vent their frustrations. For example, one athlete stated that ‘I need people to talk to about how I am doing, what sucks, and things that are going well.’ They also thought it would be helpful to talk with people who could really relate to what they were going through. This form of catharsis helps the athletes to clear their minds and focus on important aspects of their recovery.
3. **Education and Knowledge:** The athletes expressed a need for information. They wanted specific details about their injury. They want to know what is involved in rehabilitation, including rehab techniques and exercises. They wanted details on medical treatments. For example one athlete stated that ‘I would like to know about upcoming surgery and how I will feel’. Other athletes wanted to learn about others experience. One athlete mentioned that ‘I wanted to talk to others about problems, fears and concerns and how they handled each situations that came up’. Knowledge is a way for athletes to gain more control of their situation.
4. **Medical Care:** The athletes not only wanted medical attention, but also a physician and physiotherapist that they could trust. They want to get back to their sport as quick as possible, so they want the best possible care. One athlete mentioned that ‘I am having challenge with doctor searching and knowing which ones to trust. I have been getting different messages from everyone.’ They want information on good doctors

and physiotherapists from which they can solicit help.

5. **Prompt medical attention:** Since most athletes want to get back to their sports as quick as possible they need easy access to medical services. One athlete who stated ‘I need to get an appointment for surgery as soon as possible so I can get on with my rehabilitation’ illustrated this. They also wanted priority access to things like physiotherapy, chiropractors and massage. This also pertains to the issue of how much time the athlete has to recover before the next major competition.
6. **Mental strategies and professional help:** the athletes discussed the need for mental skills. One athlete commented that ‘I need mental strategies for returning to sport and staying confident.’ Others mentioned that they needed some help mentally to work through the rehab process itself. The need for professional assistance was also suggested. One athlete stated that ‘a psychologist would be very useful in order to discuss the emotional side of being injured’.
7. **Rehabilitation partners:** For some athletes’ rehabilitation can take a long time. One athlete mentioned that the biggest challenge was going through the grind of rehab since it was a long process. The athletes expressed a need for rehab partners to help motivate themselves through this process.
8. **Distractions:** Some athletes felt like they needed something to take them away from dwelling on their injury. One athlete mentioned that she needed support from others to help take their mind off their injury. Another athlete suggested that they needed to be occupied.

He needed other activities in his life to keep him busy besides his injury rehabilitation.

The information presented above has implications for coaches, support staff, family, friends and medical practitioners. Helping an athlete deal with injury goes beyond rehabilitating their physical ailment. It is important to be aware of the impact that injury may have on the athletes thoughts, feelings and behavior. To increase effectiveness when providing assistance it is also valuable to be aware of the specific needs the athletes may have.

### Recommendations

At the National Sport Centre in Calgary (NSCC) a few measures have been taken to support athletes through injury. The idea to provide support was initially brought forth by a NSCC athlete. It was further developed by the Athletes Advisory council and Sport Psychology Alberta. Collectively a model was created and was used as a guideline in the organization and development of programs to help athletes and coaches cope with injury. The following are examples of some of the action that has taken place.

### Workshops

Workshops are used as a vehicle to provide the athlete with information regarding the psychology of injury. They are also used to provide tools that will help athletes cope with injury, and as a way to link athletes’ with other athletes who can relate with their experience. Examples of themes for workshops include: presentation of a model on the psychosocial process associated with injury; athlete testimonials and sharing circles; how to support an athlete through injury; and mental skills that can be utilized during injury rehabilitation.

### **Resource Library**

In the NSCC's 'room with a view' an area was created where athletes, coaches and other service providers could access resources regarding injury rehabilitation. There are an abundance of articles that deal with injury, the rehabilitation process and how to enhance recovery. There is also a list of medical resources (such as doctors, physiotherapist, chiropractors, message therapists etc.) that athletes can access within the surrounding area. Lastly, the resource library includes a database of athletes with specific reference to their injury (with athlete's permission). The purpose of the database was to provide a resource where athletes can link up with other athletes as rehab partners. They can get together to do workouts, or just share their experiences with injury.

### **Coach Education**

Since coaches play an important role in the life of the athlete it was suggested that they were educated on the injury process. To facilitate this a presentation on the coaches' role in injury rehabilitation was given to a group of coaches. The purpose was to provide information on the psychology of injury, and to discuss and share ideas on how coaches can support athletes through injury. The content of such presentations may include things such as; model on psychology of injury, athlete and coach testimonials, and recommendations on how coaches can facilitate social support for injured athletes.

### **Peer Support Group: 'Rapping about Rehab'**

Rapping about Rehab was a support group made up of injured and recovered athletes. The purpose of this group was to provide a vehicle for athletes to get together to discuss thoughts and feelings revolving around injury, rehabilitation and things affected by the two. It provided an opportunity for ath-

letes to share experiences and obtain information from others who really understood what they were going through. It was also a place where athletes could link up with other athletes to do work outs and rehab sessions. Rapping about rehab also provided a venue where various themes could be addressed such as; coping with loss and dealing with identity, mental skills that can be used for injury rehab, injury prevention, and emotional management.

In regards to the structure, the meetings usually had two parts to them. The first would involve the 'rapping' portion. This allowed time for the athletes to share experiences and challenges as a result of being injured. In the second portion of the meeting various themes would be addressed. The topics for each meeting were based on the suggestion and needs of the athletes. It should be mentioned that not all meetings contained the second portion. At times, the dialogue of the athletes facilitated the most valuable sessions.

The four areas mentioned above are recommended as ways to support athletes through injury. It is also important to be aware of the psychological impact and the specific needs of each athlete when helping them cope through the rehabilitation process (Brewer, Raalte, Linder, 1991; Ermler and Thomas, 1990; Rose, 1992). Measures such as these could potentially help to enhance the healing, and the general well being of injured athletes.

Recommendations for further research include testing the information gathered on the needs of injured athlete's against a larger sample size, with a more diverse sporting population. Other areas of interest would be to investigate the emotional dynamics involved in injury and the effects this has on recovery and general well-being.

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