

The Other Side of Sport Injury Part 1

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Ever hear or feel that snap, crackle, pop, and you knew it wasn't a bowl of rice krispies? In a given instant you just knew and thought to yourself, this is not good. Perhaps something started out as an uncomfortable annoyance only to progress into something intolerable and impairing. Injury is an inherent risk in sport and any physical activity and also one of the most dreaded consequences of participation.

People engage in sport and fitness activities for many reasons. Given this, injury can impact the recreational athlete as much the high performing athlete. Physical impairment, whether temporary or permanent, can be emotionally challenging and often individuals are not prepared to cope with the repercussions, which can range from minor to catastrophic.

For example, Kenny McKinley, wide receiver for the Denver Broncos, played only 8 games in his rookie season before a knee injury sidelined him. He started the 2010 season on the injured reserve list. In September of 2010 he committed suicide. This is not to say his death was specifically due to his injury, but the stressor of the knee injury coupled with his own psychological predisposition and lack coping resources resulted in tragic consequences.

It is important to keep in mind that it is not just elite athletes who experience emotional distress due to injury. Since many people depend on exercise or sport for stress management and wellbeing, injury can mean the loss of an important coping strategy. Studies have shown that injured recreational runners experience significantly more depression, anger, confusion, and low self-esteem than non-injured runners.

When athletes get injured, the immediate focus is on the physical damage. What is often overlooked are the emotional/psychological repercussions. Individuals may experience significant losses related to routine disruption, impaired abilities, athletic identity, future competitive dreams, delays in meeting competitive goals, income, and social networks to name a few.

Difficulties may also arise in relation to coping with pain, loss of independence, and isolation. Other responses such as loss of confidence, feelings of letting the team down, assault on one's personal identity, and feelings of worthlessness are also not uncommon. Youth athletes may become isolated from friends or unable to achieve their competitive goals.

Though one can never predict the psychological impact of sport injury, it is still important for friends, family, and health care providers to pay attention not only to the physical but

also coping. If we do not look at injury holistically an entire part of the athlete necessary for successful recovery is ignored.

In our culture, negative stigma tends to be attached to psychological and emotional difficulties. In sport culture, where physical injuries are seen as needing the utmost attention, emotional difficulties and distress are often ignored or labeled as weakness. Athletes tend to underreport emotional and physical distress, fearing the perception of coaches, teammates, and even fans. Athletes expect to play in pain, be stoic, and give 110%. When the inability to do so comes from emotional distress, shame may get in the way of letting anyone know that they are suffering.

Given that athletes are less likely to report emotional distress only reiterates the importance of inquiry by friends, family, and health care professionals. Just asking how the person is sleeping and eating, or whether they are isolating themselves or feeling supported by others are important sources of information. Pay attention to drastic changes in social patterns, motivation levels, and adherence to rehabilitation routines. Notice whether the person's thinking is catastrophic or reality based.

Since higher levels of overall general wellbeing have been associated with more positive rehabilitation outcomes, counseling may be helpful in establishing healthy coping strategies, promoting adherence to physical rehabilitation programs, promoting better recovery outcomes, and aid in returning to sport with confidence. Counseling post injury can also help to create the opportunity for personal growth, challenge, and performance enhancement.

Symptoms that may signal someone is having difficulty coping with injury include but are not limited to anger, grief, anxiety, confusion, depression, frustration, feelings of loss, self-doubt, and fear of re-injury. Those who strongly identify with the athlete role tend to be more at risk. Some symptoms to be aware of if you or someone you know is coping poorly with injury and may benefit from counseling and support include:

- Feeling down or depressed
- Experiencing anxiety and /or irritability
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Experiencing a decrease in motivation
- Avoiding friends and teammates
- Experiencing feelings of loss and lowered self-esteem
- Difficulty sleeping
- Appetite changes