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The Taboo Side of Injury: The Emotional and Psychological Side Effects in Injured College Athletes

Introduction

Depression, anger, frustration, anxiety, tension, increased stressed, loss of identity, low self-esteem and many more are among the side effects that any athlete, especially college athletes, can experience when they suffer and injury.² Injuries are a very common and unfortunate experience that most athletes go through during their athletic career. If the injury is severe enough to keep the young and eager athlete out of play, it may cause difficulties and challenges in the athlete mentally and emotionally as well as the physical damage. For this paper, I am going to focus on how out of play injuries mentally and emotionally effect collegiate student athletes.

Athletic injuries vary in severity which determine how long the athlete will be sidelined to ensure that they have fully healed and have essentially eliminated the likely chance of reinjury. Athletes can be out of play for a week with a sprained ankle, a couple of months for a concussion, and even a year for a torn ligament that requires surgery and extensive rehabilitation. College athletes depend so much on being able to play their sport. Either they are on scholarship and need to perform well enough to renew the scholarship for next year or

they have the dream to play professionally and cannot afford time off being injured. Not being able to participate in the games and in practice will increase the chances of the scholarship not being renewed as well as decreasing their chances of being scouted to play at the professional level. This alone will create a heavy emotional burden on the athlete without even digging deep into the several physiological issues that may arise from the injury.

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), injury can trigger or unmask serious mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, disordered eating, and substance use or abuse.⁸ When an athlete becomes injured, they may feel a loss of identity when they are not able to do the activity that they love, especially when they have to watch their friends and teammates play without them. Student athletes have much more at stake than their athletic career. They need to also be able to perform well in the classroom, however, the emotional response to the injury may prohibit them from doing the best of their ability academically. This creates deeper problems for the athlete because if they aren't able to play their sport and they aren't doing well in school they may begin to question who they are and lose all self-confidence.

When an athlete suffers an injury, the primary focus for them and the training staff is to physically rehab, and their mental health is often overlooked and not seen as a priority. This is what needs to change. It is important to not only undergo the best treatment plan possible but to work with them mentally and stick with them through this difficult time because they lost a

part of themselves and need the support of others to get them back to being where they were physically and mentally.

Psychological Side Effects

College athletes are young, they haven't figured out who they are and what they are bound to do with their life. Everything up until their point of injury all they knew was their sport and their team. Depression is the most popular side effect because the athlete may begin to realize that all they know is their sport and when it is taken from them, they have nothing. When the student athletes become depressed, they are at a substantially higher risk of experiencing another side effect because depression magnifies everything. Athletes can be expected to experience a variety of emotional responses and stress after being injured. They will attempt to interpret injury-relevant medical information, come to terms with being injured, and engage in coping mechanisms. There is no predictable set and stone series of emotional reactions to athletic injuries. For many athletes, exercise and physical activity serves as a primary coping mechanism and outlet for dealing with psychological issues.² In these athletes, an injury may result in even greater emotional upheaval.

There are several types of injuries that athletes suffer from every day. Some of those are more severe than there's and may prevent you from walking or just going through your daily life. Not being able to walk or carry through daily activities like they used to can create a tremendous mental block on a young and eager athlete. They were used to being so active and now, they can barely move on top of not being able to play their sport. A study that was

measuring the post injury depression in both male and female athletes found that that clinician-based depression ratings for athletes with injuries exceeded those of healthy athletes at one week and remained elevated above healthy controls up to one-month postinjury.¹ This means that both male and female college athletes who suffer an out of play injury had higher rates of depression compared to those athletes who have not suffered and injury. Out of the study, the results showed that 12 out of the 44 injured athletes were depressed one-month post injury.¹ Depression can arise from this situation because of many reasons. Everything is still new to the athlete one- moth post injury. Most of their friends are on their team and they would spend their free time practicing. And now, they have no choice but to sit on the side-line and watch their friends and teammates play without them, in their position. Because the game still has to go on, the coach fills the injured athlete's position on the field, and they see that they weren't as important as they thought they were. Overtime it may be more difficult for the athlete to feel like they are still a part of the team because they are missing out on so much while they are on the side-line during practices and games. The depression rates decreased as the athletes approached three months post injury. The study showed that 5 out of 27 athletes were depressed three months following their injury.¹ They notice that they are becoming distant to their teammates because they are missing out of the bonding time in practice and they are losing the connection that comes out during games between the players. To an athlete, nothing is as exciting than playing the sport you love with your best friends and winning. However, once the athlete's see's their team succeeding without them, they don't have the same excitement anymore.

Eating disorders can also become a difficult problem for injured student athletes. Before the injury, they had to make sure they were taking in enough calories and nutrients to be able to perform at the level they need to physically. Now, they aren't as active, so they don't need as many calories.^{8,10} Since the athlete is not able to be as active as they used to, they will start to get out of shape and may fall behind their peers physically. To try and prevent this from happening athletes think that if they don't eat as much, they will not become out of shape.^{8,10} The term for this eating disorder is anorexia nervosa. It is defined by persistent caloric intake restriction, fear of gaining weight, persistent behavior impeding weight gain, and a disturbance in perceived weight or shape, since they decide to cut their calorie intake down they may also cut their nutrients intake down.¹⁰ Cutting out nutrients during their recovery time can elongate the rehabilitation process because the body is not getting what it needs to heal. It is important for the athlete to maintain a good diet so their body can recover from the trauma and for them to be able to get back on the field doing what they love.

Physical Injury vs. Concussion

Injuries vary in type and severity. Physical injuries may consist of a broken bone, sprained ligament, or even more severe injuries that require surgery like torn and ruptured ligaments or muscles. These are the injuries that are noticeable and will immobilize the student athletes. However, head injuries are also very serious. Concussions are commonly described as the invisible injury.⁶ Although the athlete may not physically look injured and appear to be okay, concussions are very serious and require a rigorous rehabilitation process. Athletes who suffer

from a concussion are at a very high risk of becoming depressed as well as other emotional responses.⁶ Because nothing is noticeable injured, the athlete can become very frustrated as to why they cannot play. Concussion protocol is unique to every patient because each concussion is different. Because of this, there is no set recovery timeline for the athlete to work towards. No physical activity is allowed during the early stages of a concussion because it is important to limit further injury to the brain and skull.

The study conducted on concussed athletes and those who had an orthopedic injury determined that, the concussed group reported significantly lower coping scores for denial, substance abuse, behavioral disengagement, venting, planning, humor, religion and self-blame than both the orthopedic and control groups. The concussed group also showed significantly lower coping scores for active coping, instrumental support, and acceptance as well as lower coping scores for self-distraction and positive reframing.⁶

Concussions take a huge toll on any athlete; however, student athletes also have to worry about their academic life and social life. Students with a concussion may experience memory loss and confusion.⁶ The memory loss and confusion may lead to a decreased performance in the classroom. Now, the student athlete is not only side line from their sport but they are also struggling academically. Because they aren't able to perform their sport, or do well in school, the student athlete may begin to isolate themselves from their friends and family.⁶ Nothing is going their way at this point in their life and they feel at a complete loss. This change may alter their mood and they may seem to be angry or sad. Even though the athlete is going

through all of this, they may not realize everything that is happening so they cannot do anything to prevent it which is why outside support is so important during the rehabilitation process.

Coping Mechanisms

Athletes have a different mentality and way of living than not athletes. They look to their sport and physical activity as a stress relief. When athletes are injured and unable to engage in physical activity, they may have difficulty dealing with their daily stresses.⁸ They view seeking psychological help as a sign of weakness and think they can push through mental obstacles the same way they push through physical ones.⁸ When an athlete struggles emotionally, they tend to keep everything bottled up inside and pretend like nothing is wrong because that's what they do when they are on playing. However, when the athlete is injured and not able to play, they have no way to mask and improve their emotional well-being. Not having their sport as a scape goat, the athlete's stress increases which can affect their rehabilitation process.^{8,9} When stress accumulates and the athlete doesn't know another way to relieve it besides physical activity, they may go into a depression and get stuck in a funk.⁸ While they are stuck in the funk, they may not care about getting better which in the long run can be very detrimental to the athlete considering all they have at stake both in their sport and academically at the college they attend.

Coping mechanisms vary and are unique to every individual, sex and gender are important factors in emotional response to injury. Several studies have examined the emotions of male athletes versus female college athletes that have been injured. In a study of coping strategies among long-term injured competitive collegiate athletes, injured female athletes became more

anxious and tense. They also are more likely to use emotion-focused coping strategies (Johnson, 1997). On the other hand, injured male athletes tend to keep their emotions in and develop a degree of depression because they let their mental health go untreated and have their psychological issues eat at them and don't seek for help or show emotion.

Returning to play after experiencing an injury and going through the recovery process can be very scary for athletes. They are coming back from not playing for an extended period of time while everyone else hasn't stopped playing. They may feel embarrassed that their level of play isn't the same as is used to and that they are out of shape. A loss of confidence and self-esteem can arise from other players taking over their position and now that they are back, they may not get the same playing time because while they were out everyone else was working hard and getting better.^{3,9} Fear of reinjury can also play a big factor in an athlete's hesitant return to play. The athlete may be fully healed physically, however, they may have a mental block of fear that is having them play scared and not to their fullest potential. Playing scared is possibly the worst thing an athlete can do after returning from an injury. They aren't training at full intensity while everyone around them is and that can result in reinjury or in a new injury.³ Being scared of playing again is just another stage in the recovery process. Without the right support system athletes may never get over their fear and may never return to their sport or the same playing level they used to play at. This may result in losing a scholarship and the opportunity to play at the professional level.

A study was conducted to determine the relationship between time-loss and fear of re-injury in athletes after having an out of play injury. Injured athletes rated their fear of returning to sport and re-injury on a scale from 0 to 10. Athletes who had major injuries produced a significantly greater fear of re-injury compared to athletes with moderate and minor injuries.³ Results from this study indicate that fear of re-injury continues after athletes return to play. A total of 525 injuries were recorded over the study period. Major injuries produced a significantly greater number of injured athletes who feared returning to their sport than moderate injuries. This study found that injuries with time-loss of greater than 3 weeks resulted in greater fear of returning to sport among injured athletes than moderate or minor injuries. Moreover, major injuries also resulted in the athlete fear of re-injury compared to athletes who only incurred a minor injury. Individuals who had greater fear of re-injury were associated with lower return to sport participation one year following ACL surgery. Other research suggests that fear of re-injury may be a form of avoidance due to the pain an athlete experiences at the time of injury and throughout their rehabilitation. This is important because it shows that the psychological rehabilitation of the athletes must be examined as well as the physical rehabilitation before they are cleared to play again. The coaches need to be aware of the athlete's attitude throughout rehabbing and watching their confidence level. If the athletes are afraid of reinjury while they are playing, they will not be playing to the best of their ability and may end up reinjuring themselves because they are playing scared or get taken off the field by their coach which may deepen the psychological effect.³

Crushed Dream of Playing Professionally

Athletes who have suffered a tremendous injury that changes their game and playing intensity may not be able to continue their career. Those elite college athletes who had knee or back injuries know that coming back from those injuries and being able to play at the same level and even at a higher level is extremely difficult. Many elite college athletes have a dream and goal to play their sport at the highest level possible professionally. However, those injured athletes may have that dream crushed at the moment of injury.⁸ A career ending injury is difficult for anyone to go through, but when you had your goal to make your sport a living it can be extremely difficult to overcome. A study conducted by sport psychologists determined that college athletes who suffered a career ending injury had lower life satisfaction from 5 to 10 years after injury than those who didn't.¹³ Several college football players are a great example of athletes who suffered injuries and had to end their career and their dream to play professional football in the National Football League (NFL).

Stanley Doughty is a prime example of an athlete who needed to retire early because of injury. He was considered one of the top defensive linemen in college football before suffering a spinal injury during his final season.¹² Doughty suffered a spinal injury when he played for the University of South Carolina. During his senior year, he was signed by the Kansas City Chiefs, however, after his injury their training staff said that he wasn't going to be cleared to play. He missed out on the NFL career that he has dreamed and worked toward for his entire life. Doughty said that his whole life he has worked toward being the best football player he could be, and he achieved that goal by playing Division 1 football and then getting drafted by a professional team in the National Football League. However, all his work meant nothing after his injury. Everything

he has worked for in his life was stripped from him because of a spinal injury. Having to rehab the injury and figure out how to start his new life without being an athlete was very difficult for Doughty to do.¹² He felt lost as a person and didn't know what to do with his life. Another example of a college athlete who was injured and never able to play professionally is Derrick Roland. Roland was a star basketball player at Texas A&M University. He was on track to be drafted to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA) until he suffered an injury breaking both his tibia and fibula.¹⁴ Roland dedicated his life to basketball, so his injury left him with nowhere to turn. He basically had to start his life over again which created several psychological issues with his quality of life and confidence. All of this was because of an injury.

Beyond College

The detrimental emotional responses go beyond college athletes. Although college athletes are at a very stressful part in their life in college trying to balance both school work and their rehabilitation plan to be able to play again, professional athletes suffer the same issues. For professional athletes, playing their sport is their life, it's how they make their money to support their family. Injuries can affect their income and destroy their mental wellbeing. For example, Kenny McKinley who was a wide receiver for the Denver Broncos suffered a serious knee injury. He had undergone surgery and was expected to be sidelined for the entire season. After surgery and rehabbing his knee, McKinley was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He could no longer take the emotional and psychological burden of his injury and decided to end his life, leaving behind his family. Friends of McKinley shared that they noticed him having a hard time with not being able to play football or be around his teammates every day.¹¹but they didn't know

any better to do anything about it. On a lesser scale, Rob Gronkowski, a former tight end for the New England Patriots had to end his career because of an extreme injury. Gronkowski shared with news reporters that he spent weeks crying in bed not being able to sleep after his Super Bowl LIII victory.¹² Over a four-week period, Gronkowski had to have one liter of blood removed from his quad which is not normal. At age 29 with such a successful career Gronkowski had to stop playing football because of the damage it was causing him. Not being able to sleep or even walk made destroyed Gronkowski quality of life and ultimately made him end his career of doing what he loved⁴.

Seeing that not only college athletes are affected emotionally by injuries shows how important that something has to be done in order to save the mental health of all athletes who undergo injury at any point in their career. This is why having a great support system is crucial for recovering athletes.

Support System

Having a solid support system is vital in an injured athlete's recovery process. The support can vary between friends, teammates, coaches, parents, trainers, doctors and even teachers. Because athletes have unique coping skills it's important for those who surround them to be aware of signs of emotional distress from the injury. Coaches and trainers play a huge role in this aspect.⁸ A number of factors should be considered when treating injured athletes. These factors include Building trust with the injured athlete. Injured athletes often experience a range of emotions that make it difficult for athletic care network members to establish trust. Injured athletes must understand and process injury-relevant information, often at a time when they are

emotional, they need explanations they can understand. An effective method to assess this understanding is to ask the athlete to provide their interpretation of information given to them. It is also important to identifying misinformation about the injury. Injured athletes often come up with inaccurate information from either friend, parents, or the internet that lead to an emotional state. The athlete and coach should be educated that an injury is best managed on an individualized basis. In addition, coaches should be encouraged to help the injured athlete avoid isolation from the team. Encouraging the use of specific stress coping skills.⁸ Injured athletes can experience considerable stress throughout the injury and rehabilitation process. Psychological as well as physical strategies will enhance the recovery process.

Players look up to their coaches and go to them for advice so if they knew that their coach was in their corner and rooting for them to get better it may make the recovery easier on the emotionally. Trainers are also in a good position to notice the mental health of the athlete because they are the ones who work with one on one with the athlete during the rehabilitation. Friends and teammates are able to show support in other ways from coaches and trainers. When an athlete is injured, they may feel disconnected from the team because they aren't with them as much and losing out on the bonding time during practice and on the field.⁸ It's important for the team to not exclude the athlete from anything because it will only do further damage to the injured because what they are thinking is starting to become true.

Conclusion

At a young age it is important to explain to everyone, not only athletes, that their mental health is important. Athletes hold themselves to a standard and they may be afraid to reveal their

symptoms and may view counseling as a sign of weakness. Their whole life they have working through pain, but what they don't know is that mental health is different. If you leave mental health untreated and try to push through it you are just going to worsen your symptoms, quality of life⁴, and elongate recovery processes. They may also view being injury as a sign of failure, which it is not. Injury is almost inevitable when you are playing sports at any level, it's just a part of the game. Some injuries are more intense than others which may create a sense of failure in the athlete because they couldn't do anything to prevent it from happening. In addition, many student-athletes have not developed their identity outside of being an athlete. So, when they become injured, they lose who they are. This makes the role and coaches and parents important in raising an athlete. They need to know that there is more to the world than their sport. The world is much bigger than them and their athletic career.

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