

## ***The Psychology of Injury Recovery***

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Even though we do not like to think about the physical injuries that can occur in youth sports, the reality is that your son or daughter is always “one play away” from a potentially serious injury. Fortunately for most kids when an injury does occur, the rehabilitation process is short and without complications. Kids are typically pretty resilient, and often their eagerness and excitement to get back on the playing field helps them get healthy again pretty quickly! However, as a parent it is vitally important that you keep an eye out for some of the more common psychological issues that are often associated with sports injuries - just in case your son or daughter has trouble returning to action.

When an athlete experiences an injury, the physical pain and discomfort are almost always the immediate focus. Fortunately, sport medicine physicians and athletic trainers today are well-equipped to diagnose and treat most sport-related injuries, and in most cases the athlete eventually returns to action at full-strength in a short period of time. Sadly, in other cases where the injury may be more severe, athletes often experience a very stressful period in their life as they come to accept their injury and related course of rehabilitation.

Common issues athletes face as they begin their rehabilitation process include uncertainty about their future in sports, developing trust with helping professionals, elevated stress level, increased anxiety, and sometimes even clinical depression. Oftentimes the athlete feels isolated in the rehabilitation process and is left to cope by him- or herself, making the process that much more difficult.

This extra “free time” away from teammates can leave the athlete to think a lot about the future, and it is common for athletes to ponder the following questions:

- Will this be a career-ending injury?
- If I am able to play again, will I still have my starting position?
- If/When I do come back, can I play as hard as I once did – or will my lack of confidence prohibit me from going “all out?”

Additional common concerns athletes have during rehabilitation include confusion over medical treatment, and developing healthy and effective coping strategies to deal with the extra stress. It is very important to watch athletes, especially young kids, develop coping strategies that do not include substance abuse, anger, and violence.

Tips for helping your child through the injury rehabilitation process:

- Be sensitive to your child’s athletic identity. Even if it is a minor injury your child is dealing with, being away from the team can be very traumatic as oftentimes the identity of being an athlete is temporarily lost. If your child is really troubled by being away from his or her teammates, be sure to take his or her concerns seriously!
- Become an ACTIVE Listener. Ask your child open-ended questions and allow him or her to talk – be sure to listen closely and offer warm responses that offer comfort.
- Offer inspiration to your child by sharing success stories of athletes who have recovered from the same injury
- Maintain open communication with the “healing team,” including physicians, PT’s, other Trainers, etc
- If something seems “odd,” investigate the issue further. If you feel as though your child may be depressed, consider seeking professional assistance.
- Keep your child involved in as many of his or her customary patterns as possible (i.e. attending practices, watching game video, etc)
- Help your child set realistic rehabilitation goals and write them down!

By providing a strong support system for your child he or she is far more likely to make a speedy (and healthy) return to action! For most kids, the psychological aspect of injury recovery is more challenging than the physical aspect, especially when it is an injury with a long rehabilitation timetable for recovery. Being attentive and showing you care will really help your child, but if you feel your child is really struggling please don’t hesitate to seek professional advice!

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Dr. Chris Stankovich, known as “The Sports Doc” for his segment on Ohio News Network and featured column in Columbus Parent magazine, is a national expert in the field of sport psychology and offers an entire line of peak performance educational training products for student athletes, coaches, and parents. Please visit [www.drstankovich.com](http://www.drstankovich.com) to learn more.