

# THE MENTAL SIDE OF RETURNING TO PLAY

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# THE CONTEXT OF INJURY

Serious athletes come in two varieties: those who have been injured, and those who have not been injured...yet



*Success in an athletes career will be influenced by how well she or he copes with injuries and setbacks, as opposed to expecting to avoid them altogether. When athletes adopt this perspective, an injury is no longer a catastrophe but merely another anticipated aspect of their athletic career*

# RESPONSES TO INJURY

For the majority of athletes, injury produces an immediate imbalance in life:

- A disruption in efforts towards health and fitness
- Loss of good feelings of health and a sense of accomplishment
- Jeopardies confidence, self-esteem & sense of identity
- Loss of opportunity / dreams / livelihood
- Permanent loss of physical ability

**These changes can result in:**

Anxiety, stress, depression, poor sleep, relationship problems, anger/frustration, denial, treatment compliance problems, problems with concentration & attention, exercise addiction

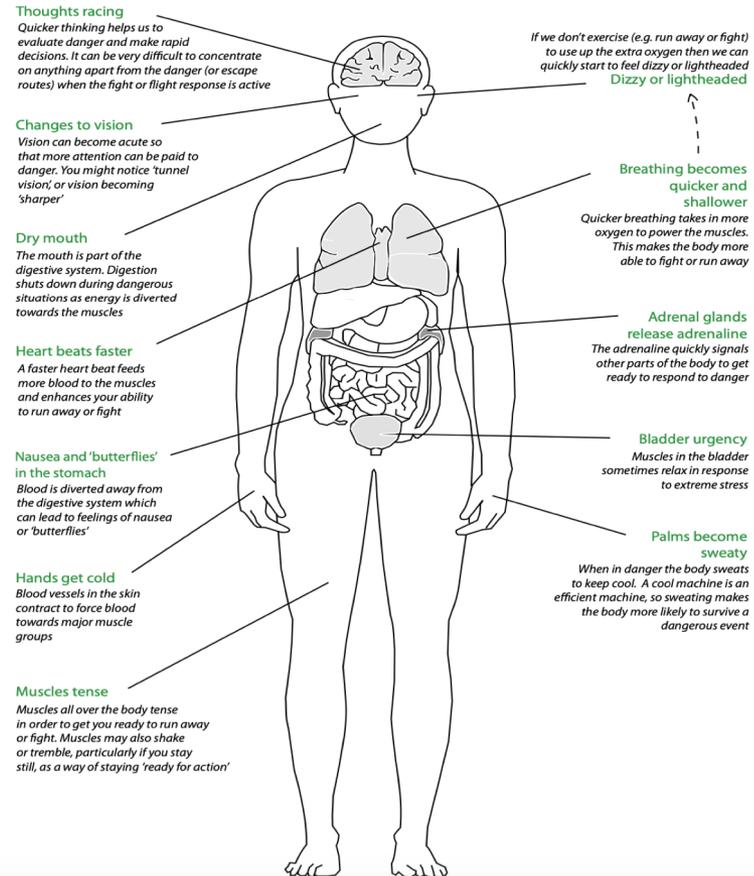
# STRESS, ANXIETY & INJURY

## The stress response & sport

- Unnecessarily protecting injuries "bracing"
- Avoiding play associated with injury
- Chronic stress = lowered immunity
- Less focus / distraction
- Compromised energy & hydration levels
- Decreased confidence
- Increased pain awareness

## Fight Or Flight Response

When faced with a life-threatening danger it often makes sense to run away or, if that is not possible, to fight. The *fight or flight response* is an *automatic* survival mechanism which prepares the body to take these actions. All of the body sensations produced are happening for good reasons – to prepare your body to run away or fight – but may be experienced as uncomfortable when you do not know why they are happening.



# EFFECTIVE METHODS OF RECOVERY

➤ Aim to optimise recovery to quickly return to play & maintain performance levels

Biological	Social	Psychological
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Surgery</li><li>• Physiotherapy</li><li>• Medication &amp; pain relief</li><li>• Sleep</li><li>• Diet</li><li>• Illness</li><li>• Understanding pain</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social support &amp; connection</li><li>• Team approach, involving the coach, teammates, family, &amp; health professionals</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Commitment &amp; adherence to rehab</li><li>• Seek information &amp; knowledge</li><li>• Motivation (readiness to engage)</li><li>• Goal setting (SMART) 'one step at a time'</li><li>• Imagery (relaxation, confidence, &amp; skill execution)</li><li>• Relaxation, distraction &amp; self-soothing</li><li>• Thought management - positive &amp; more <i>helpful</i> self talk, disarming the inner critic</li><li>• Sense of purpose &amp; achievement</li></ul>

# WHO IS MOST AT RISK?

## **Vulnerabilities**

- Negative life stressors
- Daily hassles
- Previous injuries (including returning before psychologically ready)
- Poor coping resources (stress management skills, healthy life habits, social support)
- Personality factors - trait anxiety; limited optimism

## **Practical implications for coaches & players:**

- In times of major life stress, avoid introducing new or high risk situations
- Provide or learn stress management as a preventative (problem solving, mindfulness, imagery, relaxation)
- Address psychological aspects of injury rehab before returning to play (restoring comfort & confidence in performance situations)
- Don't assume physical and psychologically readiness occur at the same time, an athlete may be physically ready, but are they psychologically ready?

# WHEN TO GET FURTHER HELP

**Ongoing** issues in:

- Mood & sleep disturbance (anxiety/stress/depression)
- Avoidance of training / sport
- Disruption to daily living & quality of life
- Persistent pain
- Addiction (eating disorders, pain medication, exercise)

## References

- The Sport Psych Handbook (2005). Murphy, S. Human Kinetics.
- Psychosocial factors in sport injury rehabilitation and return to play. Podlog et al. (2014). Phys Med Rehabil.