

The Need for Sport Psychologists in the Athletic Training Room

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Despite advances in athletic injury prevention, on average 11,375 collegiate athletes and two million high school athletes experience a sport-related injury per year [1,2]. While most have the potential to fully recover physically and return to their pre-injury level of performance, many do not. Often, this discrepancy between physical ability and actual performance is due to psychological issues that have developed as a result of the injury and/or during the rehabilitation process that were not appropriately addressed and treated. The lack of available sports medicine team members with full competence to address psychological issues in the injured athlete, such as the sport psychologist, is a shortcoming in the treatment of injured athletes that needs to be remediated in order to further enhance athletic injury recovery.

A number of models have been developed offering an understanding of the psychological responses of athletes to injury [3,4]. These responses include anger, frustration, loss of identity, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and depression – ranging anywhere on a spectrum from mild or non-clinical to severe [5-7], all of which have negative effects on injury recovery. With the increased acceptance of the importance of recognizing negative psychological responses to injury, there has been a push toward increasing the ability of certified athletic trainers to work with the psychological side of the rehabilitation process [8]. This push is evident in the 2012 CAATE accreditation competency area of psychosocial strategies and referral [9].

While counseling the injured athlete on noncontroversial issues or administering basic psychological skills training (e.g., goal setting, imagery, etc.) may pose no inherent ethical or legal danger to the athletic trainer or team physician, the more emotionally charged and/or clinical issues (e.g., eating disorders, drug abuse, depression) should certainly warrant treatment only by qualified counselors and/or psychologists [10]. Herein lies the problem – many athletic trainers report feeling unprepared to address even the most basic counseling component of athletic training and can assist athletes' psychological recovery in only limited capacity [11]. Further, only 25% of athletic trainers have access to a sport psychologist to whom they can refer, and only 23.9% report ever having made a referral, despite 71% reporting that athletes commonly encountered stress and anxiety [8] and 47% believing that every injured athlete suffers from some psychological trauma [12]. Gordon et al. found similar views among physical therapists, where many recognized the importance of addressing the psychological aspects of injury but felt unprepared to do so [13]. Hamson-Utley, Martin, and Walters found that a majority of ATs and PTs identified interest in gaining knowledge necessary to use psychological skills in rehab, but cited almost a complete lack of formal educational opportunities for doing so [14]. Negative psychological responses to injury can slow or impede full recovery, even if not at a severe clinical level, highlighting an important need for more sport psychologists to be made available to injured athletes immediately after injury and during the rehabilitation process since what the current system seems to be relying on is inadequate.

In a review of the literature, most articles on addressing the psychological issues of injured athletes to enhance recovery conclude with a suggestion to increase the training of the sports medicine team members (most commonly athletic trainers) on recognizing psychological issues and administering psychological skills training.

While that is indeed necessary, as helping professionals we cannot continue to just call for additional training to sport medicine team members who already “wear many hats”, especially when there are ethical and legal boundaries to consider in psychological treatment. There is a great need to have a sport psychologist as a member of the sport medicine team in the athletic training room. Every university and professional sports team has a team physician employed to address the physical component that athletic trainers are not qualified to do – why are there not more sport psychologists employed to address the psychological component that athletic trainers are not qualified to do? Applied practice in the athletic training room must move toward the inclusion of sport psychology professionals on the sport medicine team if we intend on enhancing the ability of athletes to fully recover from athletic injury.

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