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## Sport psychology and concussion

# Sport psychology and concussion: new impacts to explore

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In recent years, there has been great interest in examining the psychological effects of athletic injuries. This has also extended to interventions in which coping strategies have been suggested to enhance recovery. Concussive injuries, which are common to many sports, hold particular problems in this regard. For example, a concussed athlete may be prone to experience isolation, pain, anxiety, and disruption of daily life as a result of the injury. This may be a problem for individual sport athletes—for example, professional skiers—who do not have the support of team mates to help them through their rehabilitation and recovery, as well as team sport athletes whose team mates may inadvertently pressure them to return to play.

Besides the physical loss resulting from an injury, there may also be psychological distress. Commonly reported emotion responses resulting

from athletic injury have included anger, denial, depression, distress, bargaining, shock, and guilt.<sup>1-5</sup> These are particularly seen in career ending injuries. Such emotional distress can negatively affect the athletes' recovery process.

"...concussed athletes in team sports seem to have fewer long term problems"

Injured athletes have also reported feelings of isolation and loneliness. Researchers found that athletes prevented from participating in their activity have lost contact with their team, coach, and friends.<sup>6,7</sup> For example, Gould *et al*<sup>6</sup> examined the emotional reactions of US national team skiers to season ending injuries and found that 66.6% cited lack of attention and isolation as a source of stress during their injury. In another study of injured

athletes, Brewer *et al*<sup>2</sup> surveyed 43 sports medicine practitioners to discover side effects of psychological distress. These side effects included exercise addiction, weight control problems, family adjustment, and substance abuse. These problems have been reported individually as well as being associated with depression and anxiety and have been shown to cause severe health complications.<sup>7</sup>

Injured athletes have reported different levels of satisfaction with the social support they have received after injury. In particular, team mates have been shown to have a greater affect on the emotional state of injured athletes than coaches or medical professionals.<sup>8</sup> This leads one to speculate that individual sport athletes may experience different adjustment difficulties while recovering from a concussion. This may also suggest why concussed athletes in team sports seem to have fewer long term problems, such as persistent post-concussive symptoms. In an environment in which team mates are likely to have experienced similar injuries, there is a greater corporate memory of such injuries and hence more reassurance as to the likely recovery time frame and validation of subjective symptoms experienced by the injured athlete.

## UNIQUENESS OF CONCUSSION INJURIES

A number of unique characteristics of concussion injuries exist. Firstly, a concussion is an "invisible injury". This