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PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE AFTER INJURY

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INTRODUCTION

1. In the professional approach to sport psychology it is of paramount importance to focus on different critical issues of sport participation. One of these areas which are easily overlooked is the care after injury.
2. During my work with sport participants it became clear that the emotional experience of an injury has a direct influence on the rate of recovery, rehabilitation, return to active participation and success thereafter.
3. The aim of this paper is to couple the experience with descriptive theory. This paper is not aimed at the psychologist but rather at the coach and administrator who has a limited psychological background.

THE SCOPE OF THE PAPER

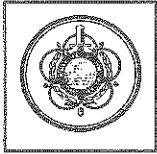
4. The following areas will be covered in the paper:
 - a. Severity of the injury.
 - b. Shock.
 - c. After-reaction.
 - d. Psychological rehabilitation.
 - e. Military application.

SEVERITY OF THE INJURY.

5. To classify the severity of an injury is very difficult. It depends on factors like the kind of sport, the position in the team, previous history of injury ...
6. During the work on after-care it however became clear that the most important factor is the perception of the participant. How the person experiences the injury is directly coupled to his perception of the injury. This perception might not be in line with the medical appreciation, but it will override such an appreciation. The importance of this statement is that, whoever deals with the injured player must start off at this premises. The golden rule is: FOLLOW THE PLAYER.

SHOCK

7. When a player is injured there will be a degree of shock present. The intensity of the shock will again be coupled to the player's perception of the severity of the injury. It is difficult to assess the initial shock because at this early stage we usually find a sense of denial which will be addressed later in the paper.



During this initial shock all the roleplayers must be very sensitive in respect of what they communicate to the player not only in words but also in gesture. The reaction of the captain, first aid personnel, coach and manager will offer the injured player a frame of reference, to form a perception of what is happening to him. The golden rule is: **STAY CALM IN SUCH A WAY THAT THE PLAYER FEELS YOU ARE IN FULL CONTROL OF THE SITUATION.**

AFTER-REACTION

8. To describe the after-reaction of an injured player different models or theories can be listed. These models are however very compatible and describe the reactions in different terms but the undercurrent stays the same. I find the model of Kübler-Ross a practical and understandable frame of reference. This model describes the emotional reaction of people after loss or perceived loss. In my work with athletes exactly the same phases occurred, which will now be discussed with reference to sport injury.

a. Denial. The first phase after injury is a phase of shock and denial. The player experiences feelings of disbelief and disappointment. They will express these feelings with words like "I can't believe it happened to me" or "I am OK, just give me a chance to regain my breath" or "Don't worry it is not serious". As the reality of the situation, the facts in time starts to sink in the feeling starts to change and the player moves into the next phase.

b. Aggression. During this phase the players experience strong feelings of aggression. This aggression can be directed towards himself or his environment. The aggression can be direct, camouflaged or suppressed. The player will tend to place the blame for his injury on something or somebody. They are irritable and can get short-tempered. In this phase they are very critical of the people around them and even rebellious. These feelings are accentuated by an inability to practise. As the person realizes that this does not create answers to his situation the behaviour starts to change and the next phase is observed.

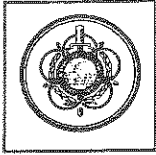
c. Bargaining. The athlete will now start to bargain in an effort to overcome what happened to him. Here we will find the athlete bargaining with his medical doctor to start training again or with his coach to regain his place in the team. This also include bargaining for financial support or compensation. As the player realizes the influence of the injury and the implications there of he moves into the next phase.

d. Despair. The athlete experiences feelings of despair and even depression. The future seems bleak and they start to question the meaning of their sport participation. When an injury takes more time than expected or he experiences a fall back the despair is intensified. As the player re-evaluates his position and hope starts to set in he breaks through into the final phase: Adaptation.

e. Final Adaptation. The player goes through the process of adaptation, works through the different feelings and are able to put the injury behind him. He feels that he can give his full potential without fear that the injury will reoccur.

PSYCHOLOGICAL REHABILITATION

9. As set out during the introduction the present paper is not directed at the registered psychologist but at the role-player who does not have the deeper psychological background. The professional psychologist will help and guide the injured player with specific techniques and approaches, like imaging, positive reframing, defusion ... The other role-players can however play a positive role to facilitate the player's psychological rehabilitation. The following golden rules can be applied:



- a. For the player who is in denial it is necessary to offer correct in time information. This information should be communicated in a clear open way. Facts must be stated as facts and opinions.
- b. The player in the aggressive phase needs options. They tend to become one-sided in their views and don't appreciate other options. As soon as the injured player can start to evaluate the different options he feels the ability to take control over his own circumstances.
- c. The player who goes into the bargaining phase needs clear boundaries and a statement as to what is realistic and what is not realistic. As soon as they start to negotiate, the players get the feeling that the sky is the limit and at times that the coach or management owes them something.
- d. When the players start to experience despair and depression they need hope: The light at the end of the tunnel. When a player experienced a serious injury the gaining of hope should be tackled in a creative and honest way.
- e. It should be remembered that these phases will differ from person to person and from situation to situation. We should also not see the phases as watertight entities but rather as dynamic phases interacting with each other.

MILITARY APPLICATION

10. Being a soldier is a high-risk job, and the soldier is constantly under threat of injury. Through sport the soldier can be taught how to assimilate or "digest" physical injury. He can also be led to understand that it is normal to experience these feelings which were mentioned and that these feelings are important to help him through the trauma experienced.

REFERENCE: Kübler-Ross, E (1970) - On Death And Dying.
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