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Psychological Readiness Effect on Return-to-Play in Collegiate Athletes

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**INTRODUCTION**

Psychological readiness and the effect that it has on the return to play of athletes has recently begun to peak interest in those involved in the athletic population. Current research has consistently shown two sets of factors that directly affect the psyche of athletes after an injury that causes them to miss time from their sport. These factors are known as intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The Webster's Dictionary definition of intrinsic factors are defined as a form of motivation to do something based on an internal reward, consequence, or feeling. They also define extrinsic factors as a form of motivation to do something based on external factors, such as the expectation of reward or fear of punishment. Currently, research has specifically looked at individual risk factors and the effect they have on the psychological return to play process. However, no studies have looked at both intrinsic and extrinsic factors and correlated the athlete's responses to the extent of time they missed. The purpose of this study was to see what psychological extrinsic and intrinsic factors combined will do to the return to play of collegiate athletes.

**METHODS**

The survey was distributed to every NCAA sanctioned institution's head athletic trainer in the state of Ohio. Those head athletic trainers were to distribute the survey to their athletes that met the inclusion criteria and distribute it to their assistants to also hand out the survey to those athletes who qualified. The inclusion criteria for this study were; they had to currently be a student athlete, they must have missed at least 6 weeks of sport related activity due to their injury, and they must have fully recovered from said injury. Sixteen student athletes from Division II and Division III institutions met the inclusion criteria for this survey. There were 12 males and 4 females who responded (Figure 1.1). Out of the 16 responses there were 13 Division II and 3 Division III athletes (Figure 1.2). The sports that were represented in this study was baseball, football, basketball, soccer, and track and field (Figure 1.3). Before participating in the study, all subjects read and signed an informed consent form approved by the University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, which also approved the study.

**RESULTS**

When comparing gender and level of participation to the AMRS there was no statistical difference. When comparing the gender and level of participation to the remaining quantitative questions there was no significant difference. Qualitatively we found many common themes regarding multiple questions where the subject was given the opportunity to respond. The athletes who claimed not to follow what their athletic trainer told them do to was because they claimed to have done more that what was cleared by their athletic trainer. Athletes who stated that they did not feel at their preinjury level of participation attributed this feeling to the fact that they never felt completely healed and no longer possessed the same power and explosiveness. Subjects were also asked if their coach pressured them to return to sport sooner than they felt comfortable with. The common theme to this question was that their coach did not have a good understanding of what the injury was and the severity of the injury. They also said that their coach needed more patients and pushed them for return. When the athletes were asked how they knew they were ready to compete again they responded by saying that they knew they were ready because they could, for the most part, remain absent minded from their injury while they were competing. They also stated because they trusted what their did with their athletic trainer and trusted their athletic trainer's judgment in allowing them to return to participation. When asked how they felt psychologically when they were cleared to play most stated that they were always anxious or nervous about reinjury, worried about whether or not they would be as good as they were before, or even if they would be accepted by their team again. The others said that they were extremely excited and ready to return to sport again. When they were asked to explain overall how their rehabilitation process went the majority proclaimed of having an overall good and successful experience. Almost all claimed of having days that were harder than some, but they are glad to be better again and are happy with the work they put in to get better. Finally, when athletes were asked to select which feeling and emotions were most prevalent when they first acquired their injury (Figure 1.4) motivation was shown to be the most common response.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to identify and compare gender differences and level of competition difference between a complete survey which looks at all aspects of psychological readiness which included quantitative and qualitative questions. The results of our quantitative data was incoherent. This can be attributed to the lack of responses and the lack of participation from both females and from Division I and Division II schools. However, there were some noteworthy results from the qualitative data.

When athletes responded as to why they did not follow the exact protocol that was given to them they explained it was because they wanted to do more in order get back to participation sooner. Over-enthusiasm to rehabilitation protocols is a common issue among athlete’s who extremely identify themselves with their sport (Podlog, 2014). This identity is found because of their need to be involved in sport (Rodrigue, 2014). They feel that without their sport they have no who they are and how other people see them (Podlog, 2014). The athletes who felt that they could not return to their pre-injury level of participation due to their lack of explosiveness, power, and coordination. It has been shown that a fear of reinjury results in both a physiological and psychological change that impacts performance and ultimately increases the risk of reinjury (Ogi, 2013). This underlying physiological and psychological fear of reinjury may be prohibiting the feeling of power and explosiveness even though they are physically capable of their previous abilities.

Coaches were also said to have been pressuring athletes to return to sport faster than they were cleared to. Athletes felt that their coach had a lack of understanding and knowledge of the severity and seriousness of their injury. Social support has been shown to be a contributing factor in the success of an athlete with suffering an injury (Reese, 2010). Athletes felt that the social support from their athletic trainers was more satisfactory, easier to access, and contributed most to their overall well being (Reese, 2010). However, social support from family, teammates, and coaches have been found to have a negative effect on the rehabilitation process (Zent, 2012) (Podlog, 2006).

When athletes were asked how they psychologically knew they were ready to return there was a plethora of different responses. Responses ranged from feeling nervous, convinced, relaxed, and excited. Research has shown that a factor dealing with athlete outcomes is their attitude towards the rehabilitation process and their motivation for getting healthy (Podlog, 2010). Those athletes who feel that they are returning to sport to meet personal aims and objectives has shown to have a positive outcome and experience when they could return (Podlog, 2010). Whereas, those who presented with more autonomous reasons showed doubt and anxiety when to return to their sport came (Podlog, 2010). A limitation of this study was the lack of responses from all athletes. It was too difficult to target the survey to the athletes due to the criteria. There were no responses from Division I schools and only 3 responses from Division III schools. Future research can continue off this current research and look into more depth of the differences between divisions in school. They could also compare and contrast the differences between professional athletes and college athletes as well.

**CONCLUSION**

Athletes will continue to struggle with psychological readiness. It is our job as athletic trainers to be able to identify those who are more predisposed to psychological injuries. Athletic trainers need to be aware that both males and females struggle with this issue but in different ways. They need to know the different pressures that each gender is undergoing. It is also important to know the demands that are being placed on your athletes depending on the division. Athletes who are competing at a higher competitive level will receive more pressures to return quickly and perform at a higher level than before. Psychological readiness will continually be a problem that athletic trainers will face, and it is our responsibility to be well trained and invested in our athletes’ lives and recovery process to help encourage and identify psychological problems in our athletes.