A VERY COMMON initial response from an athlete who sustains a significant injury is “How long will I be out?” or “When will I be able to compete again?” Regardless of injury severity, many athletes who want to return to sport participation as quickly as possible develop the mentality that they will do whatever it takes to complete the rehabilitation process. Many athletic trainers may consider this type of athlete a refreshing break from having to try to convince other athletes to adhere to a rehabilitation program, but multiple risks exist for the over-motivated athlete. An abundance of research evidence and practical suggestions exist concerning motivation of injured athletes who are not adhering to rehabilitation.1,2 This report pertains to “the other side of adherence” and proposes strategies for helping an injured athlete to productively use motivation.

Overadherence to a rehabilitation program is similar to overtraining during athletic preparation. Athletes may associate a high volume of training with faster improvements. They may choose to spend free time doing extra exercise sessions in the weight room or on the practice field, even if this behavior is not promoted by the coaching staff. When such an athlete becomes injured, he or she may transfer this mentality to rehabilitation. Unfortunately, increased frequency, duration, or intensity in the performance of rehabilitation exercises can prolong recovery or may cause further injury. Ironically, it may lead to a decrease in motivation, an increase in fatigue, and eventual burnout.3

#### Working With an Overmotivated Injured Athlete

Proper goal setting has been shown to be advantageous for any athlete undergoing injury rehabilitation.3 It provides the athlete with specific direction, facilitates persistence when faced with challenges, and provides a sense of control over the situation. This approach can be beneficial for the overmotivated athlete but must be applied with a different purpose in mind. Athletic trainers must anticipate the athlete might set goals that are unrealistic and excessively challenging. It is important to convey the idea that the speed at which one achieves goals is not necessarily the best route to optimal recovery. Working with an athlete to develop a “goal window” is often useful. This involves setting a minimum goal that the athlete and the athletic trainer would consider adequate if realized, along with a dream goal. If the athlete’s status

#### Key Points

- Over-adherence to rehabilitation can be just as dangerous as a lack of adherence.
- It may result in a longer rehabilitation, unnecessary fatigue, burnout, or reinjury.
- Practical suggestions include goal windows, redirecting energy, and real-life examples of negative consequences.
falls anywhere between the lower and upper goals at the end of a specified period of time, the result would be considered a success. If the athlete’s performance capability exceeds the dream goal at the designated point in the rehabilitation process, the result would be considered a failure. Labeling overachievement as a failure may help to slow down the athlete. If the volume and intensity of the rehabilitation effort is too great, the athlete does not achieve the agreed-upon goal.

Use of a rehabilitation partner is a valuable strategy for injured athletes who need an extra source of motivation for rehabilitation adherence. This strategy may fail when used with an overmotivated athlete, however. This athlete may view his or her partner as a competitor, constantly comparing their respective performance capabilities and progress rates as a result of feeling the need to recover faster.

The athletic trainer can use an athlete’s high level of motivation to achieve a positive result. Rather than trying to eliminate the athlete’s motivation, develop strategies for redirection of energy. For example, the highly motivated athlete could devote time to studying plays, engaging in mental imagery, watching video of competitive events, or other activities that may enhance performance when return to sports participation is possible. A female gymnast who is recovering from rotator cuff surgery might replace upper extremity strength training exercises with leg or core strengthening exercises. If the athlete’s competitive weakness is in the area of floor exercise, time can be spent on imagery that is specific to those routines. The injured gymnast may direct some portion of her motivation to performance enhancement that might be realized from critiquing videos of her past performances. Injured athletes can be encouraged to evaluate mental or physical abilities that need improvement, such as flexibility, stress management, or improved focus in the presence of distractions. The time away from sport can be positively presented as an opportunity to devote extra time to improving aspects of performance that would not normally be a priority. Redirecting the highly motivated athlete’s energy can also help to diminish the common fear that he or she is falling behind opponents or teammates during the rehabilitation process. The key is to help the athlete feel that he or she is still being productive without having to focus all of his or her energy on performance of rehabilitation exercises. Any alternative physical activities that are suggested for overmotivated athletes should also be monitored to ensure that they are done at an appropriate level of volume and intensity.

Finally, athletic trainers may find it necessary to use “scare tactics” as a last resort to get the overmotivated athlete to slow down. This approach has not been found useful to enhance rehabilitation adherence of the undermotivated athlete, but the overmotivated athlete may need to learn about some examples of athletes who have tried to progress through the rehabilitation process too quickly with negative consequences. If the athlete’s goal is to return to sport as quickly as possible, the realization that overcompliance may result in a prolonged recovery period may affect his or her behaviors.

**Summary**

Overadherence to a rehabilitation program may present a problem that is as great or greater than a lack of adherence. It may result in a longer recovery period, unnecessary fatigue, mental burnout, or reinjury. The following suggestions may be helpful when working with an overmotivated injured athlete:

1. Develop an appropriate goal window—communicate that exceeding the upper limit of the window may be just as detrimental as failure to achieve its lower limit.

2. Avoid pairing the athlete with another injured athlete—the practice may promote counterproductive competitiveness.

3. Redirect the athlete’s energy to productive alternative activities.

4. Provide examples of the negative consequences that may result from excessive volume and intensity in the performance of rehabilitation exercises.

**References**


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