Numerous studies have examined physical and psychological factors associated with sport-related injuries. Many athletic trainers and therapists (ATs) are incorporating psychological research and behavior-change strategies for injury management. This report reviews a framework for understanding the role of psychological factors in injury prevention and recovery, which is specifically focused on an injured athlete’s social support.

Stress-Injury Model

Williams and Andersen developed the stress-injury model, which is the theoretical basis for many studies on psychosocial factors related to injury in sport. The stress response is influenced by a number of factors that include stressful situations (i.e., demanding practice, crucial competition), a previous history of certain stressors, personality characteristics, and coping mechanisms. An individual is more likely to consider a situation stressful if he or she has a previous history of stressors, has personality characteristics that exacerbate the stress response, and lacks coping resources. There is an association between stress reactivity and risk of sport injury.

Many factors can influence the stress response. Stressors include life event stress, daily hassles, and previous injury. Personality characteristics of hardiness, locus of control, sense of coherence, competitive trait anxiety, and achievement motivation have also been related to stress and injury risk. Coping resources include general coping behaviors (e.g., sleep patterns and nutritional habits), social support systems, and psychological coping skills (e.g., stress management and mental skills). A positive relationship has been identified between a previous history of stress (including negative and positive life events) and occurrence of sport-related injury. Multiple studies have identified a link between general coping resources and sport injury.

Coping resources include a variety of behaviors and social systems that help the individual deal with stress. Resources can be environmental, such as a social support system or personal, such as emotional control. Individuals who possess coping resources (i.e., general coping behaviors, social support, and psychological coping skills) can better deal with stress, and they are less prone to injury. Social support has been shown to be very effective for stress management, which is particularly relevant to ATs who can help athletes develop coping resources.
Social Support and Injury Risk and Prevention

Shumaker and Brownell define social support as “an exchange of resources between at least two or more individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient.” Family members, partners, peers, teammates, coaches, and others who are close to an athlete can influence the athlete’s behavior. An athletic trainer or therapist can serve as a social support resource for the athlete, and in many cases, an AT is the primary source of social support for many athletes during the injury recovery process.

Multiple studies have demonstrated that athletes who lack social support are more prone to injury and that those with a high level of social support have fewer injuries. Others have identified a link between negative life events and injury among athletes who lack social support and poor coping skills.

Maddison and Prapavessis found that social support, coping habits, and previous injury interacted to strengthen the relationship between life stress and injury. When analyzing a single factor in isolation, the relationship to injury was relatively weak. Petrie presented the idea that social support influences the effect of a high level of life stress. An athlete who has a high level of social support seems to be protected from injury, but a low level of social support can significantly increase vulnerability to injury during life stress.

Sport injury can produce a variety of stressors for the competitive athlete. Coping with stress can take an emotional toll on an athlete and may adversely affect recovery (e.g., loss of independence, diminished social status, decreased capacity to perform, exposure to pain, threat of disfigurement, potential for permanent disability, risk of death). Consequently, there is a need to help athletes cope with stressors while recovering from injury.

Types of Social Support

A functional and disaggregated approach may maximize the positive effects of social support. Social support is grouped into three major categories: (a) emotional support, (b) informational support, and (c) tangible support (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category + Subcategory</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening support</td>
<td>Listening without giving advice or judgment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional comfort</td>
<td>Comforting and caring behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional challenge</td>
<td>Challenging behaviors that produce self-reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality confirmation</td>
<td>Knowing people share similar views and perceptions of the world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task appreciation</td>
<td>Being acknowledged for your work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task challenge</td>
<td>Being challenged in your ways of thinking and doing your work to improve your skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material assistance</td>
<td>Monetary or material rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal assistance</td>
<td>Getting help in the form of time, expertise, and knowledge, etc., to help with accomplishments.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Providing emotional support requires active and empathic listening, demonstration of trustworthiness and understanding, and creation of an accepting and open environment for the injured athlete. The informational support provider must have context expertise and must provide immediate feedback that is focused on the daily rehabilitation goals, rather than the desired long-term rehabilitation outcome. Small peer groups that include injured athletes who have successfully recovered from similar injuries can share experiences with recovering athletes. This group experience permits the injured athlete to connect with people who understand and can empathize with what he or she is experiencing. When social support is provided, the athlete should never be made to feel indebted to the provider.

Specific circumstances may require different types of social support. For example, material assistance would not be beneficial when an athlete needs emotional comfort. Injury can present many different types of adverse effects on an athlete’s life; therefore, the availability of a broad range of types of support is needed to meet individual needs.

The support provider must be someone with whom the athlete has frequent contact and who is available when needed. The provider must be someone the athlete feels he or she can rely upon, who understands the athlete’s potential (as well as limitations), and who can be given something in return. If an athlete is completely dependent on external support, he or she may feel powerless. The athlete needs to be self-reliant in setting clear goals for his or her recovery process.

Athletes can experience a range of emotions after becoming injured that can vary according to the type of injury, time of year, type and intensity of pain, and the unexpected occurrence of the injury. Athletes may experience fear, anxiety, hopelessness, loss of identity, guilt, decreased self-esteem, lack of self-efficacy, or loss of confidence. These emotions increase stress, which can produce muscle tension, excessive arousal, and attention disruption that retard rehabilitation and may increase risk for re-injury.

Social support has been shown to facilitate injury recovery. Social support comes from those who are close to the athlete (e.g., coaches, teammates, family members, friends), people who are present in the rehabilitation setting. Lakey and Heller have emphasized the importance of the recipient’s satisfaction with the support he or she has received. Bianco found that both the timing and the type of the social support are important considerations. Emotional support should be the primary initial consideration, and the type of support that is needed most will change during the recovery process.

Enhancing the Social Support Network

An athlete can have access to different types of coping resources from different people in a support network. Support from coaches can be vital during injury treatment and rehabilitation. Coaches can help to relieve distress, restore confidence, and motivate the injured athlete. Conversely, lack of support from coaches can negatively affect an injured athlete (e.g., decreased sense of self-worth, decreased self-confidence, loss of motivation, decreased commitment to the sport).

Crossman stressed the importance of the AT’s relationship with the injured athlete during the rehabilitation process. The AT is in the ideal position to assess the unique social support needs of the injured athlete. The intimate nature of the support provided by an AT can have a profoundly positive effect on the athlete’s recovery. During the immediate post-injury phase of the recovery process, informational support is critical to address the injured athlete’s concerns. With the athlete’s consent, the AT should communicate rehabilitation goals to the athlete’s broader support network (e.g., parent, coach, partner, teammates). During phase 2, the injured athlete should be introduced to other athletes who have similar injuries (i.e., peer modeling). If peer modeling and support group strategies prove to be beneficial, they should be continued into phase 3 of the rehabilitation process.

The AT could encourage coaches and teammates to provide social support by scheduling weekly or monthly contacts with the athlete. Conducting rehabilitation activities in close proximity to team practice sessions can help the injured athlete to feel connected to the team, and the team can recognize and support the effort the athlete is displaying.

Family members play an extremely important role in meeting the social support needs of the injured athlete, and they are particularly important for emotional support. An AT might consider informing family members, coaches, and teammates about the...
roles they can uniquely fulfill in supporting the injured athlete.

**Summary**

Research has demonstrated that social support is a factor that influences both sport injury occurrence and recovery from injury. An AT can play a key role in providing social support throughout the injury treatment and rehabilitation process.

**References**


Rennae A. Williams is an Athletic Trainer and an EdD candidate in Kinesiology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She received her master’s degree at the University of Georgia and is a 2001 graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Renee Newcomer Appaneal is an assistant professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her research interests include psychological aspects of sport injury, behavior change/adherence, mental health concerns in sport and exercise, and graduate training / professional issues.