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Sports psychology awareness

Louise Ellis explores the psychological responses footballers experience after injury

By Givemefootball .com June 18, 2010

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Most of you will be familiar with the 'standard terms' you often hear associated with sports psychology and football performance, such as confidence, concentration, anxiety, fear & choking and so fourth.

Whilst these are all areas a sports psychologist can support a player with, today I wanted to discuss the psychological responses to injury and the impact on the healing process as this is an area most footballers experience at some point in their career, either directly, or by observing the psychological effects injury can have on a team mate.

Footballers, like any other group, can experience loss in many ways; loss of form, loss of speed or loss of not being able to perform at the expense of an injury.

The 'grieving responses' and impact on the 'healing process' are often ignored or misunderstood by coaches, fitness trainers and to a certain extent footballers and athletes themselves.

Over the last twenty years a great deal of research has been conducted on professional athletes in a range of sports, and findings have shown that after sustaining an injury, professional athletes experience the same psychological responses as individuals who are grieving the loss of a loved one.

This holistic research over the last two decades has looked at grief and loss models and typically found that professional athletes go through similar stages: i) shock / denial; ii) despair; iii) anger; iv) depression; v) pre-occupation and; vi) re-organisation, until the vii) acceptance phase is reached.

The acceptance stage still does not mean the footballer is in a happy psychological state, it merely means he has got to a point where there is less emotion involved.

Of course the magnitude and extent to which a footballer or professional athlete experiences and stays in the first four stages depends on the following factors; the timing of the injury and what's at stake; the severity of the injury; the player's injury history and how the injury was caused.

For example, a player who sustains a minor injury niggle and misses a couple of training sessions will experience less intensity with the psychological responses (depending on the individual's baseline) than a player who will miss a major match or tournament.

Re- occurring injuries on the other hand can cause more frustration and tension, whereas a player who is injured by an opponent's malicious tackle may have increased anger. The research on injury response in professional athletes also shows that an athlete's psychological state will fluctuate, especially between the first four stages during the rehabilitation process.

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Louise Ellis

Footballers, like any other group, can experience loss in many ways

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How do these responses impact upon the healing process?

To determine the severity of these states, careful monitoring of the athlete's psychological and psycho-physiological states via biofeedback (e.g. stress / emotional levels / muscular tension) from the onset of injury to return to performance and beyond is essential. Scientists have found that psychological stress, often bought on by worry can increase the levels of some hormones in the blood.

These hormones can slow the delivery of certain compounds called cytokines to the origin of the injury to start the healing process.

Studies have also demonstrated that psychological stress is associated with slower repair and healing of surgery wounds because psychological stress is shown to impair the inflammatory response and matrix degradation processes in the wound immediately following surgery.

Since professional footballers who undergo surgery may already be in a 'state' of despair, psychological monitoring and interventions to facilitate healing from the outset is even more important.

Longer term, ongoing interventions and psycho-physiological monitoring to support the footballer with the healing process are a must.

At the latter stages of injury rehabilitation the footballer must be supported with interventions to reduce any further worry about returning to performance and also alleviate any conscious and subconscious concerns they have over further injury.

This is particularly important as we have already identified that stress related hormones slow compounds to help the healing process which is also critical in between vigorous return to training and matches.




Quite often, we see footballers sustain other injuries when returning to performance, whilst these additional injuries could be caused for a variety of reasons, one shouldn't rule out the importance of full mind to body recovery and the impact of these psychological responses during the rehabilitation process.


However, upsetting and frustrating injury can be for the player at the time, these experiences and having to cope with adversity can make the player mentally stronger, especially if they are learning more about the interaction of their mind and body during rehabilitation and return to performance.

By Louise Ellis (www.louiseellis.com)


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Fixtures	Results	Table
TEAM		P W D L GD Pts
1. Chelsea	38 27 5 6 71	86
2. Manchester United	38 27 4 7 58	85
3. Arsenal	38 23 6 9 42	75
4. Tottenham Hotspur	38 21 7 10 26	70
5. Manchester City	38 18 13 7 28	67
6. Aston Villa	38 17 13 8 13	64
7. Liverpool	38 18 9 11 26	63
8. Everton	38 16 13 9 11	61
9. Birmingham	38 13 11 14 -9	50
10. Blackburn Rovers	38 13 11 14 -14	50
11. Stoke City	38 11 14 13 -14	47
12. Fulham	38 12 10 16 -7	46
13. Sunderland	38 11 11 16 -8	44
14. Bolton Wanderers	38 10 9 19 -25	39
15. Wolverhampton Wanderers	38 9 11 18 -24	38
16. Wigan Athletic	38 9 9 20 -42	36
17. West Ham United	38 8 11 19 -19	35
18. Burnley	38 8 6 24 -40	30
19. Hull City	38 6 12 20 -41	30
20. Portsmouth	38 7 7 24 -32	19

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