

## Heal the Body, Heal the Mind

Written by Richard Ferguson, Ph.D.  
Sunday, 20 May 2018 13:37 -

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Injuries are a part of running that we would like to think will never or rarely occur. However, the longer our running careers, the greater the likelihood that any injury will occur. The harder we train will also increase the chances of some physical injury. Sooner or later the hamstring strain, tendonitis, stress fracture, or a multitude of other conditions will cause us to be forced to miss training for either a few days or for an extended period. And as we all know, when we want to run and our bodies won't let us, then psychologically we aren't the most pleasant people in the world to be around.

With any physical injury also comes a psychological reaction to the injury. How we respond psychologically to an injury may influence how fast we physically recover from the injury and how quickly we are able to train normally again. A good way to explain the psychological reaction to injury is to examine the reaction based upon Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's Grief Response Model. The model is broken into stages, and in Stage One, the injury is greeted with shock and disbelief. Common emotions when an injury has just occurred are anger and denial of the injury. We try to run through it and are very angry about getting hurt. In time we move to Stage Two, that involves a severe preoccupation with the injury, during which time we may experience depression about the injury, guilt that it may have been somehow prevented, and even insomnia. Stage Three is when we begin to think more logically and rationally about the injury. We finally accept that we are injured, we can't run, and we get down to the business of treating the injury and performing rehabilitation to limit our down time and chance that the injury will occur again. A major key in recovering from an injury is getting to Stage Three as quickly as possible. If we get stuck in Stage One or Two, we tend to not address the injury, feel pity for ourselves, and may even make the injury worse by trying to go out and run on it.

Once we reach Stage Three, there are a number of techniques used by Sport Psychologists to facilitate a rapid return to running from a mental perspective. The first technique is simple communication. When injured, try to learn as much as possible about the injury. Read up on the internet and be sure to ask the medical doctor and therapist questions and try to understand what has happened to your body and what course of action is most suitable for treating the

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injury. Open and consistent communication on the part of our sports medicine team can help us stay informed and maintain a positive attitude during treatment. Positive feedback from sports medicine professionals during rehabilitation can be a great motivator in staying with the rehabilitation program. We all need to find a sports medicine professional we feel comfortable with.

Motivation plays a key role in the recovery from injury. If we are motivated to adhere to prescribed therapy and rehabilitation, then chances are we will be back to running much sooner. No matter what the rehabilitation program, it's not going to be effective unless it is followed. A number of different psychological techniques can be utilized to maintain motivation during the recovery from injury.

One such technique is goal setting. In conjunction with sports medicine professionals, work to establish some challenging, yet realistic goals for recovery. These goals should be specific, measurable, and written down. Having both short-term daily and weekly goals, along with a long-term goal is very important. With the accomplishment of short term goals progress is seen and motivation is increased, along with the realization of the long-term goal being closer at hand.

Imagery and relaxation techniques can also be useful in the injury recovery process. Relaxation training can aid in coping with the stress and anxiety that comes with a running injury. When injured and unable to run, we often have a lot of pent-up and emotional energy. We are accustomed to being active, not a coach potato! Techniques like deep breathing, progressive relaxation, and imagery can serve to calm when we feel anxious and stressed over not being able to run.

Imagery training can be effective in being prepared for the time when training can begin anew. By using positive imagery we can prepare ourselves emotionally by actually imaging what it will feel like to run again after a layoff. By imaging some actual running during our down time we can be prepared for the emotional uncertainty that may accompany the first few runs back when we huff and puff through a couple slow miles. Those first few days back can be joyful, yet humbling, so we need to be prepared mentally to feel happy to be back running, but frustrated because our fitness has declined!

Our self-talk is another area that can influence how quickly we return from injury. Many injured runners have a tendency to produce negative, irrational thoughts concerning the return to

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running. When we say things to ourselves like, “what’s the use in rehabilitation, it will take a year to get back any fitness,” or “running is just not worth the effort anymore,” it does nothing but make our return that much more frustrating and lengthy. Negative self-talk needs to first be recognized and then replaced with self-statements that motivate and inspire us to get back out on the roads and trails. Positive self-talk can mean things like, “by working hard in my rehab I can be back out running in three weeks, not the usual five it takes with no rehab work.” We all need to be our own best friend with positive self-talk when we are injured.

Finally, we should all find individuals who offer us emotional support during an injury recovery period. Talk to other runners who have recovered from an injury and are running well again. Seeing a concrete example of a successful comeback can be a strong motivator. Runners that come back from injuries can provide all of us with honest empathy and understanding of the frustrations and self-doubts that come with being injured. People that provide negative feedback during times of injury do nothing to aid the recovery process and, if possible, we should avoid their negativity.

When we are all healed and healthy again we might just look back on that injury as a positive learning experience, even though it’s a learning experience we don’t want to repeat. A successful comeback can give us all an emotional lift from knowing we beat one our major protagonist, the dreaded injury.

Read more of Richard Ferguson articles on [www.runohio.com](http://www.runohio.com)

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