



Home / Tips & Training / *ABCs of Mental Training Archives*

[BACK](#)

I IS FOR INJURIES



BY AIMEE C.

KIMBALL, PhD//Sport Psychologist

When you work hard, push yourself to your limits and engage in physical activity, you are not only competing with other swimmers, you are also competing with your body.

If you have ever been injured, you know how stressful and life-altering it can be. Whether it's the disappointment of having trained so hard and no longer being able to compete or the feeling of being an outsider rather than a part of the team, there are many sources of injury stress.

It is important to know how to cope with this stress and what mental skills you can use to help throughout the recovery process. This article is about how to cope with injuries so you can get back in a pool ASAP.

Relax!

When you have physical tension or mental stress, your body uses its resources to fight the stress rather than to heal your injury. Also, if you go to physical therapy, and your muscles are tense (which occurs because you are stressed) you won't be as flexible as you do your rehab exercises. This limits the progress you can make. If you are stressed about the injury or about other things in your life and you bring this to your physical therapy sessions, your focus will be on the stressors rather than the exercises. Because of this, you may not be pushing yourself and you may not be doing the exercise correctly, both of which can keep you from progressing as quickly as possible. Thus, it is important to know how to relax and to take the time to de-stress periodically throughout the day, especially before rehab.

Social Support

Make sure you have people you can talk to about the injury. You might find it helpful to talk to someone who has experienced a similar situation and is now back competing again. You may find just being around the team helps you, even if you are unable to swim. There are also mental training consultants and sport psychologists who understand what you are going through and who can be a "neutral" source for you to get out your thoughts and emotions and who can teach you how to refocus more positively.

Set Goals

Make sure you have goals for rehab. Most athletes set goals for improving their times or winning events. However, when injuries strike, all of those goals you were striving for change. As an athlete, you are used to working towards accomplishing something, so it's important to channel that drive into your rehab and into goals you have in school or other areas of your life. For example, if you had shoulder surgery, make sure you talk to your surgeon and physical therapist about what the rehabilitation process is like. Have them educate you on milestones you are likely to experience throughout the recovery as well as obstacles you might face. If you can, at least once a week (if not every day) talk to your physical therapist or athletic trainer about what muscles or ligaments you are strengthening and write down goals that you want to achieve for each exercise. It's important to recognize that with injury, small changes are big deals. Don't just emphasize major accomplishments like the day you can swim at full speed, acknowledge range of motion improvements or increases in the number of reps you do while lifting. These goals provide you with motivation by letting you know you are getting closer to your ultimate goal and can provide that extra push on the days when you are mentally and/or physically struggling. Goals also can also help to diminish fear of reinjury when you return. Comparing what little you were able to do when you were first injured with the day you are fully cleared will give you greater confidence that you are well on your way to returning to full speed.

Keep an Injury Notebook

Some athletes find it very helpful to keep a notebook throughout their injury as a way to get their thoughts out of their heads. In this notebook, you can keep track of your goals each week. Chart what you are working on and what is improving. Make note of how your mood might be improving, what helps you to deal with pain, fatigue and stress. Take notes about what the coaches are teaching other swimmers so you can learn new things and recognize what the coaches want from their swimmers. The reason for doing this is: a) writing things down can serve as a stress reliever, b) setting goals can keep you focused during rehab and c) keeping track of improvement is a great motivator and confidence booster. This injury book can also

provide encouragement after you have returned from injury. If you ever start to feel burned out you can always look at this notebook and remind yourself that you didn't go through all of this to give up now.

Do Imagery

There is a lot of research within sport and other domains that shows how effective imagery can be in speeding up the recovery process. Some studies show that imagining yourself healing influences blood flow, optimism and sense of control, which can all help you to get back in the pool sooner. Additionally, by having vivid images in your head and essentially "feeling" yourself swimming, you keep your muscle memory in tact and your skills won't decrease as much as if you sit around and don't think of swimming at all.

The above suggestions are just a few ways to address the mental aspects of injury. While no one wants to get injured, it is unfortunately a part of sport. By choosing to view the injury as another challenge to overcome, you will develop a very valuable life skill-the ability to succeed in the face obstacles. You can also learn a lot about yourself and about your sport while injured. Thus, while dealing with an injury can be a very stressful experience, you can return a stronger competitor and a more mentally tough individual once you're back in the water.

Make it great!

Dr. Aimee

About Aimee C. Kimball, PhD

Dr. Kimball is the Director of Mental Training for the UPMC Center for Sports Medicine. She is an Association of Applied Sport Psychology Certified Consultant, and is a member of the American Psychological Association, the United States Olympic Committee's Sport Psychology Registry, the USA Swimming Sports Medicine Network, and the NCAA Speakers Bureau. She works with athletes, coaches, and parents to help them achieve success in sport and life.

*For more information contact: kimballac@upmc.edu, 412-432-3777,
<http://sportsmedicine.upmc.com/MentalTrainingProgram.htm>*

BACK