The Role of ATs in Helping Coaches to Facilitate Return to Play

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ATHLETES’ injury rehabilitation is the primary focus of most athletic trainers and therapists (ATs). An AT has many roles, but he or she can serve as an important resource for coaches by identifying the psychological component that is part of the injury response and the emotions associated with return to play (RTP). Although physical signs of injury may be diminished or nonexistent, psychological issues that plague athletes during injury rehabilitation (i.e. confidence, motivation, and anxiety) often remain.1 By acknowledging the relationship between psychological factors and successful rehabilitation, ATs can help coaches by developing training sessions that address the athlete’s concerns in the final stages of rehabilitation. ATs must realize when working with coaches that they should have a patient mindset and recognize that their suggestions, however pertinent, might not be used by coaches. Understanding and applying self-determination theory can help coaches facilitate the athlete’s successful RTP. Relating to coaches the importance of meeting the athlete’s needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness will facilitate attainment of optimal performance.

The self-determination theory suggests that people have three distinct needs that are linked to self-motivation: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.2 An athlete’s self-motivation contributes to optimal performance, including RTP from an injury. Emotions experienced by athletes returning from injury can range from unrealistic expectations of the ability to remain competitive with former opponents to questioning the ability to return to a preinjury level of performance. Inability to successfully manage stressors and negative thoughts can result in frustration, poor performance, and decreased confidence.3

Helping Athletes Develop Competence

The need for competence is fulfilled when an individual determines that he or she can effectively bring about desired outcomes.4 Feelings of competence can be threatened when athletes fear reinjury, worry that they will not perform at preinjury levels, and experience frustration when they cannot meet their performance expectations. These emotions may lead to decreased self-efficacy.3 To build feelings of competence, coaches should engage athletes in the appropriate levels of training and competition, which are based on an accurate assessment of the athletes’ current abilities, needs, and limitations. Coaches should not be excessively conservative in guiding the athletes’ training sessions, nor should they allow recovering athletes to be overly optimistic. ATs are in the unique position to aid coaches in this assessment, because they have knowledge of specific injury characteristics and can provide insight about the appropriate level of training. This assessment can also help athletes avoid excessive anxiety, build confidence, and develop accurate perceptions of their own performance capabilities.5,6 ATs can help coaches create or modify sport-specific activities that help athletes gain confidence during the RTP process.7 Furthermore, ATs can provide coaches with the necessary medical information to create a realistic set...
of physical performance expectations, which helps to build a sense of competence.

Coaches can contribute to athletes’ feeling of competence by helping them regain sport-specific skills through individual training sessions during the recovery period. The sessions should include both physical activities and objective assessments of the athletes’ progress. By monitoring athletes’ activities and gradually introducing skills that are increasingly complex, coaches can facilitate an effective return to sport participation after injury. ATs can help coaches to communicate more effectively with their athletes by providing information they have acquired from interactions with athletes. ATs can inform coaches about the manner in which the athletes’ progression through the injury rehabilitation process is monitored; this can enhance the ability of coaches to empower athletes with feelings of competence. By sharing insights with coaches, ATs can contribute to a smooth transition from the initial stages of rehabilitation through the athletes’ return to full participation. The information provided to coaches about athletes’ injury rehabilitation will help coaches to make wise decisions about the process of reintegrating athletes into a team environment. ATs have the responsibility to share relevant physical and psychological information about athletes with coaches, but coaches have the responsibility to determine the best use of the information. An optimal relationship between ATs and coaches allows them to use their respective expertise to guide athletes back to health and preinjury athletic performance capabilities. This relationship can create an environment that fulfills injured athletes’ need for competence.

Helping Athletes Develop Autonomy

The need for autonomy is fulfilled when individuals perceive that their activities are similar with their sense of self. Athletes may experience external RTP pressure from different parties, including coaches. ATs should consult with coaches when athletes are physically and psychologically prepared to RTP. ATs can relate successful psychological strategies that were used during the initial stages of injury rehabilitation, including coping strategies. Athletes who responded well to realistic rehabilitation goals set by ATs are likely to respond well to realistic goals set by coaches. Continuity in goal setting, and the accompanying sense of increasing competence, can facilitate achievement of the ultimate goal of RTP. Psychological skills that athletes can develop when dealing with injury include goal setting, self-talk, stress inoculation, and motivation. Other skills that can facilitate RTP include team building, biofeedback awareness, attention control, and relaxation. ATs have reported that development of psychological skills is an effective strategy for facilitation of the rehabilitation process.

ATs and coaches can provide athletes with the opportunity to exercise autonomy by taking control over when and how they choose to RTP following an injury. By being aware of the psychological strategies that athletes use during the rehabilitation process, and creating RTP plans that incorporate these strategies, coaches can create a positive environment that allows athletes to assume ownership and experience autonomy.

Helping Athletes Develop Relatedness

Relatedness is a need that is fulfilled when individuals experience feelings of closeness with significant others. Athletes may experience a sense of isolation or alienation from teammates during the rehabilitation process. To facilitate fulfillment of the need for relatedness, ATs can encourage coaches to keep injured athletes involved in team activities in meaningful ways. This allows injured athletes to maintain a feeling of connection to the team. By identifying ways that athletes with physical limitations can remain connected, ATs provide an avenue for athletes to interact with their social support system. Recommendations can be made for ways in which injured athletes can contribute to the team through leadership opportunities that may be unrelated to sport participation. ATs may identify personality characteristics that emerge through the rehabilitation process that coaches do not notice in the athletic environment. For example, an athlete who exhibits patience during the rehabilitation process might play a supportive role to a teammate who is struggling to master a specific skill on the playing field. By communicating this strength to the coach, ATs can help the coach discover ways in which athletes can relate to teammates. Through meeting the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, athletes can achieve a greater level of self-determination in the process of RTP.

Conclusion

ATs are in a unique position to provide coaches with recommendations about the most effective way for