It is not uncommon for an athletic training facility to be packed with athletes waiting for an expected treatment before a normal day of team practices. Some of these athletes have already fully returned to play after an injury, whereas others are still recovering from injuries and are participating in practices and training on a limited basis. Furthermore, some athletes might be recovering from more severe injuries, making even the slightest participation impossible. Whatever the severity of injury, the athletic therapist’s primary task is to assist athletes with their physical rehabilitation. The injury process can also be emotionally devastating, however, especially for athletes who derive a significant degree of self-esteem and personal satisfaction from their ability to perform. As a result, absence from competitive play can trigger a number of emotional responses by athletes. Because emotional responses can directly affect the extent to which an athlete is able to effectively and efficiently return to play, some athletes will need reinforcement, support, encouragement, guidance, and empowerment to successfully complete their rehabilitation.

Because a great deal of time is required to care for the physical aspects of most injuries, the psychological and emotional aspects of an injury can, and often do, go unattended. Yet, a fundamental quality of successful health-care practitioners is the ability to meet both the physical and the emotional needs of their patients. Athletic therapists are educated to be sensitive to the physical and emotional needs of their athletes, and these skills are an inseparable part of their job. Nonetheless, the vast majority of athletic therapists probably do not have adequate training to “counsel” athletes in regard to many psychosocial issues that might surface. To make matters worse, many schools, colleges, and universities lack a sports counselor or psychologist who is trained to deal with these issues. In the end, athletic therapists remain in a unique position to influence student athletes in terms of counseling. The purpose of this article is to identify 10 specific counseling strategies that can be effectively used by athletic therapists to better understand the important emotional responses experienced by injured athletes and help foster the athletic therapist–athlete relationship, which can aid in more holistic, positive treatment for injured athletes.

Practical Counseling-Skills Considerations

Counseling in its most basic form involves active listening and effective communication skills. More advanced counseling entails the
understanding of and an active progression through a counseling process that terminates in various forms of behavioral changes, decision making, problem solving, or conflict resolution. Although athletic therapists should not attempt to engage in many forms of advanced counseling, they can use information gained from active listening and their own professional expertise to help athletes change behavior, make decisions, solve problems, and resolve conflicts related to their injury experiences. For instance, helping athletes set goals and adhere to rehabilitation can be seen as behavioral change. Also, helping athletes manage their relationships with coaches who are pushing them to play with an injury can be viewed as conflict resolution. Athletic therapists must always keep in mind, however, the practical and ethical boundaries of their professional expertise, and they should refer athletes who need more in-depth counseling to a professional counselor. Engaging in advanced counseling without an adequate background or specific training would be unethical and unprofessional.

Focus on the Athlete First and the Injury Second

Effective counseling skills start with developing genuine and trusting relationships. In these relationships, it is important to strive for understanding and to be empathetic to the feelings and emotions athletes might be experiencing. Being empathetic to an injured athlete is critical. Empathy refers to “putting oneself in the athlete’s shoes” and attempting to understand the injury and situation from the athlete’s perspective. By focusing on the person first and establishing empathy, it is more likely that a strong rapport and a more genuine relationship between the athletic therapist and athlete will develop. Building stronger and more personal athletic therapist–athlete relationships requires effort, assertiveness, and a willingness to open the lines of communication between the athletic therapist and athlete. From the first day of practice, the athletic therapist can begin developing trust and rapport by speaking to athletes on a personal level and showing a genuine interest in their lives (i.e., both in and out of sport). Showing an interest in the athletes’ everyday activities will likely, over time, lead them to feel cared for and supported. When an injury occurs, these athletes will more likely listen and adhere to what is suggested or advocated because they have already established a personal relationship with their athletic therapist.

It is also important to understand an athlete’s emotions and their impact on the athlete’s life. Shelley, by way of qualitative analyses from in-depth interviews with athletes, athletic therapists, and coaches, found several common emotions and potential sources for them that athletes experience throughout the injury treatment and rehabilitation phases. Table 1 summarizes these common emotions and possible sources.

After identifying an athlete’s most prevalent emotions and their source or sources (e.g., unfulfilled expectations, blocked goals, lack of support), it is important to convey to the athlete that he or she is understood. Empathy, as simple as it might seem, is often the first step in building strong interpersonal relationships. A single spoken sentence can help the athlete feel understood: “You feel ________ because ________.”7 You feel should be followed by the emotion being experienced, and because is followed by an indication of the experiences and behaviors that underlie the emotion. For example, “You feel guilty because you can no longer help out your teammates.” Through this empathy process, athletic therapists should strive for an accurate understanding of the athlete’s emotions, experiences, and behaviors. It is important to note that interpretation at this stage might interfere with the development of the athletic therapist–athlete working alliance. Even if the empathetic statement is not completely accurate, however, it still provides athletes with opportunities to clarify their emotions and experiences so that the athletic therapist can better understand their unique experiences.

Probe to Understand the Athlete’s Unique and Changing Perspectives

Every athlete will likely respond to injury in a different manner, and one athlete might respond differently to two separate injuries. Never assume what an athlete is thinking or feeling. If an athlete’s thoughts or feelings are unclear—ask. Trust and rapport are established by communicating an understanding of what the injury means to an athlete from his or her perspective. A primary means of establishing trust and rapport is to ask open-ended questions pertain-