

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE INJURED ATHLETE

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DISCLOSURES

- None

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OVERVIEW

- Look at the mental journey of an injured athlete through recovery
- Recognizing identity loss in the injured athlete
- Discuss interventions for helping athletes through the journey of the rehabilitation process
- Strategies for helping athletes overcome fear avoidance

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SPORTS AS A LIFESTYLE

- "The amount of time, effort and energy an athlete puts into their sport exceeds almost anything else they've ever done in their life." (Crum, 2016)
- A 2018 study in the Journal of Amateur Sport found that NCAA Division I student-athletes spend up to 40 hours a week on sports, twice the weekly hours mandated for participation by the NCAA. (LIZ HENDERSON liz.henderson@gazette.com, 2020)
- Sports can be a full-time job and kids are starting earlier
- Youth on average are spending 12 hours a week on their sport (Institute, 2019)

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INJURIES ARE INCREASING

- More than 3.5 million children ages 14 and younger get hurt annually playing sports ("Sports Injury Statistics")
- Among NCAA Division I athletes, 29.3% of injuries resulted from overuse
- Over the past 10-15 years, there has been a large increase in the occurrence of injuries to young athletes
- Shoulder and elbow injuries are up 500% in baseball and softball players
- Anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries have increased 400% ("The Rise of Youth Sports Injuries | Active Health KC Chiropractic")

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"FOOTBALL BECOMES YOUR IDENTITY YOUR FAMILY BUYS INTO IT, YOUR FRIENDS BUY INTO IT, THE ALUMS FROM YOUR COLLEGE BUY INTO IT. AND THEN IT IS GONE. YOU ARE GONE."

~GEORGE KOONCE, A FORMER NFL PLAYER WHO ATTEMPTED SUICIDE

(LIZ HENDERSON liz.henderson@gazette.com, 2020)

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IMPACT OF LOSING THEIR SPORT

- "So many athletes are used to internally processing and sucking it up when experiencing personal adversity. When it comes to the mental part of it, they're used to not expressing weakness. Because to them, that's a failure on their part to 'handle things.'" —Christine Pinalto, executive director at Sideline USA
- The struggle has become so widespread that researchers have given it a name: Identity Foreclosure
- It's the psychological equivalent of losing a loved one, but very few know a healthy way to grieve it.

(LIZ HENDERSON liz.henderson@gazette.com, 2020)

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IMPACT OF LOSING THEIR SPORT

Loss of not only the sport but the lifestyle

Miss the respect they got for being an athlete

The attention from peers

Being praised by teachers/parents about their game

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IDENTIFYING IDENTITY LOSS

Athletes often tie their self esteem with self-confidence

Ask the athlete about other activities that interest them

"What are you going to do with this extra time?"

Athletes—"I don't know who I am anymore"

Parents—"I don't recognize my kid anymore"

Isolating from friends/family

Depression symptoms: irritability, sadness, low motivation, substance use, excessive video games

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ASSESSMENT TOOLS

**PHQ-9
Depression
Screener (Free)**

**GAD-7
Questionnaire
for Anxiety
(Free)**

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EARLY ON IN RECOVERY JOURNEY

- Athlete can feel overwhelmed with how long they will be out of their sport
- Can start to lose motivation in other areas
- Grieving the loss of their sport—anger, sadness, denial
- Have a lot more time to be stuck in their heads with their thoughts

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EARLY INTERVENTIONS

DREAM GOAL POST-INJURY- "What's the heading to your story in a year?"

SHORT-TERM- "What do I need to do in these next couple months to get in line with my dream?"

DAILY BEHAVIORS- "What do we need to work on daily to be there in a couple months?"

- Create measurable, controllable behaviors to assess each day for accountability
- Are your behaviors in line with your long-term goal?
- Focus on daily behaviors and not overwhelming long-term goal

Accountability & Motivation are Key

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EARLY INTERVENTIONS

- Try to find meaning and value in their lives outside of sport
 - What's important to you—find values
 - Any other activities that interest you
- Give hope and see how other athletes have risen above adversity
 - Books
 - Documentaries
 - Movies
- Get them connected
 - Teammates
 - Friends

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EARLY INTERVENTIONS

- Keeping them competitive & focused mentally
 - Video games
- MentalUp App—free games to increase focus & attention
- Engage them in mental training for their return
 - Advanced Brain Training
 - Mindfulness Training

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COMMON BARRIERS AS THEY RETURN TO TRAINING

Fear of re-injury-anxiety while playing, focusing too much on recovered body part

Playing cautious or safe—holding back

Avoiding plays or skills similar to what got them hurt

Lack of trust in your skills or recovered body part

Feeling isolated from the team-feel they are no longer a part of the team or mission

Worries of not performing up to your preinjury level

Worries of letting down the team, coach or parents

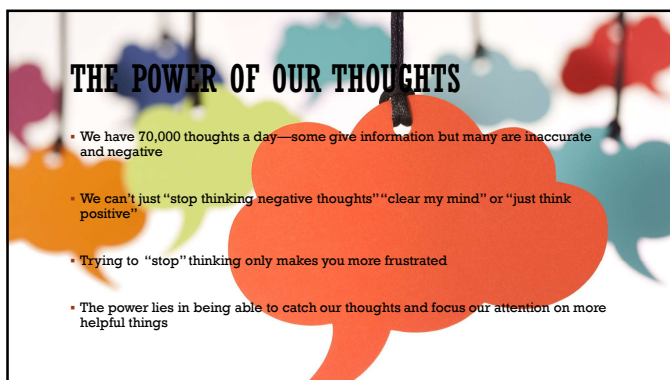
Worries of losing the reputation as the player they once were

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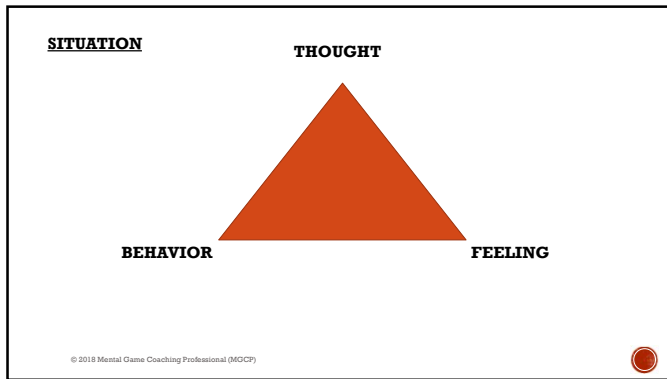
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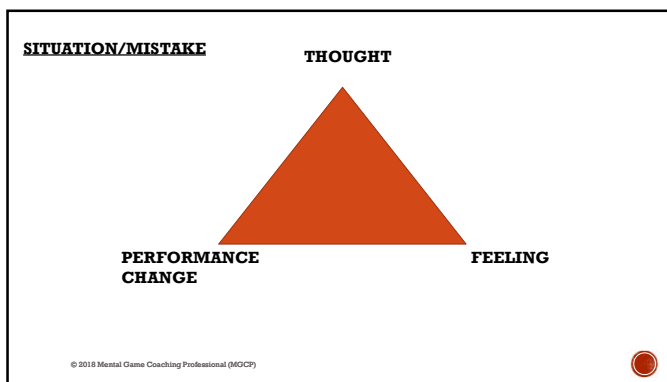
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BULLY THOUGHTS

- Bully thoughts are unhelpful thoughts that start the cycle in our head!
- Some people's bullies are louder and meaner than others
- If you give them attention they will grow and block your way
- You get them before, during and after games
- **EVERY ATHLETE DEALS WITH THEM!**



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BULLY THOUGHTS: OUTCOME FOCUSED

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- Many athletes returning to sport place high, strict, perfectionistic demands or expectations on their play
- "I should play at the same level I did before injury"
- "I should play through any pain"
- "I should play at the same level of confidence I had before"
- "I need to catch up to my teammates because of the time I've missed."
- "Others think I should be playing at my previous level"
- "I have to prove myself and be the leading scorer again"

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FOCUSING TOO MUCH ON OUTCOMES CREATES PRESSURE

Basketball Story

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WHAT YOU'D SEE...



EASILY FRUSTRATED
WITH MISTAKES



CRYING, ACTING
OUT, ARGUING WITH
REF, COACHES



"I'M LOSING THE
LOVE OF THE GAME"



IF I CAN'T BE
PERFECT, WHY TRY

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INTERVENTION: FOCUS ON PROCESS---NOT OUTCOMES

- Process goals are 100% controllable and if you do them every time they increase your chances of getting the results that you want
- What helps me execute right now? This is how do I choose to play
- W. I. N.
- Focus on now—short-term memory
 - EXAMPLES:
 - Baseball Story

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Bully Thought:

"I'm going to get hurt again"

Avoidance
Hesitation

Fear
Anxiety

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STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH FEAR AVOIDANCE

We all have anxiety & need it—body can confuse certain situations believing it is unsafe

#1 behavior with anxiety is avoidance

Exposure Therapy

Have them start where they feel confident to complete the skill—Diving Story

The more you push through the avoidance--the more confident you become

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"WHERE DO YOU LOSE TRUST?"

- Find specifically where they lose trust in their skill
- Give them a cue or process goal to focus on
- Totally immerse in that cue—simplify



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OTHER POWERFUL INTERVENTIONS FOR SUPPORT

- Find meaning in this injury & what you can learn from it—patience, working through adversity, discipline
- Visualize how you want to see yourself performing—"I choose to play aggressive, decisive & confident today"
- Stay connected with friends—they need support throughout recovery and reintegration
- Mindfulness exercises to stay present moment focused & aware of thoughts
- Create a mantra to live by and hang it up in room to keep focused & motivated

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QUESTIONS?



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RESOURCES

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