

Dealing With Injury:

What Makes The Psyche of a Winner?

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How do people recover from a difficult experience? How do they rebound, get back on their feet and move forward? Is it possible to predict who is going to make it, and who isn't? Who will have an easier time? These are important questions that become especially pressing when you're trying to recover from an injury.

Jason, a 36-year-old triathlete, was training for his first Ironman when he took a corner too aggressively and fell from his bike. His shoes failed to unclip and down he went, crashing directly on his right knee. The diagnosis was a torn posterior cruciate ligament (PCL). His injury cost him three months of training.

Amy, a 28-year-old runner and triathlete, suffered an acute hamstring tear while doing speed work. She felt a pop and that was it, she couldn't run anymore. The diagnosis was a torn proximal hamstring. Her time away from running was five months.

Jason took the news of his injury very hard. He'd been planning on doing his first Ironman—his heart was set on it. After our initial visit, I ordered an MRI, which confirmed the suspected diagnosis. Although he was clearly depressed, I sat down with him and mapped out the plan for getting him back. We went through the plan, we met once a month for three months, and he wore a brace and kept his fitness through biking, physical therapy and swimming. Although the initial news hit him hard, once he accepted the injury, and the path to recovery, he was fine. Although he had to pull out of the Ironman race for this year, he is all set for his next one with minimal regret.

Amy, on the other hand, had a much tougher time. Although an explanation and MRI were helpful in getting the correct diagnosis, she had a very hard time accepting her injury. Always trying to push her limits, she made it difficult for her body to heal by constantly pushing herself, and not responding to her body's cues of pain. When her hamstring felt better for a day or two, she'd be out running, again setting herself back to the initial spot.

Only after a serious sit-down chat with me

and her physical therapist did she realize that she was jeopardizing her entire future of running, or even walking. "Amy, if you don't pay attention, your career is going to be over," I told her. When at last she became a committed patient, her injury healed, but instead of one or two months, it took five.

A better understanding of Amy and Jason's response to their injuries comes from the work of the famed Swiss psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who described the five stages of dealing with loss: denial, anger, depression, acceptance and hope. On some level, every person who suffers a loss goes through these stages.

For athletes, an injury is a serious loss, and the response pattern often follows these same steps. Denial that the injury is serious, followed by anger that it has happened, followed by self-pity, followed by the acceptance that this is the reality, and finally, the hope that it can be cured.

The quicker an athlete gets through the initial steps towards acceptance and hope, the better the outcome. With Jason, although he was upset, he quickly moved to acceptance, especially when we discussed his MRI and mapped out a plan to get him back. Amy, however, was stuck for many months in both denial and anger, and then in depression, and it took time and several conversations to finally get her to the acceptance stage.

What makes an injury easy to accept? "Honestly, injuries suck," I tell my patients. That's the truest thing I can say. My patients know I'm an athlete, and hopefully, they leave feeling that I am determined to get them back because I understand the importance of being active.

For all athletes, even those who have very little medical knowledge, it's important to feel that your doctor is balancing out the risk-reward ratio. Meaning that he or she is balancing the potential risk of doing more activity with an existing injury and potentially making it worse against the reward of being able to do something active. Ideally, the doctor does what's best in terms of finding a happy medium between healing and activity. The doc doesn't have to be an athlete (although I think it helps), but he or she certainly has to understand the athletic mentality.

So what can you do to be the best patient possible? Hopefully, you and your doctor will talk about these steps, or at least get an understanding of the expected course of healing. With a plan in place, the finish line seems closer. Also, it's very important to keep fit. Whatever the injury, always try to discuss with your doc acceptable exercise alternatives. If it's a knee injury, swimming is great; if it's a shoulder, sometimes running or biking is fine. Keeping the body moving, when possible, helps both mind and body alike.

If you suffer an injury, and chances are you will, think about these steps, and about how you can safely get to the stage of acceptance and hope. Jason got there quickly, and he was fine. Amy took several months, and for her it was much tougher. With a winner's psyche you will always reach the finish line of full recovery faster. S

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