

What is Injury?

To understand how to exercise with an injury, we first need to understand how and why this injury occurs.

An injury is a result of more load being applied to a tissue than that tissue can resist.

Injuries are broadly categorised into chronic (or overuse) and acute. A chronic injury comes about because of repeated long-term dysfunction – often an underlying problem that wears away at a tissue. An acute injury is a one-off trauma that causes immediate damage.

Imagine a rope, from which hangs your health. A chronic injury takes a nailfile and slowly saws through the rope, fibre by fibre. An acute injury takes an axe and chops through the rope in one swing. The process may be different, but the end result is the same.



Our Initial Mental Response to Injury:

Injury in sport is perhaps one of the most challenging obstacles for an athlete to overcome, and, potentially, one of the most damaging factors to mental state. This psychological damage is often more disruptive than the physical damage, and the way in which the athlete responds to injury often determines their success (or not) going forward. In this section we give a practical template for how to respond to injury.

We don't control what happens to us, we control how we respond to what happens to us.

In sport and exercise, like in life, there are many strategies that can be used to deal with hardship. Although we may not be able to control every element of our environment (and what happens to us), we can control how we interpret and respond to our environment. This approach can teach us much about dealing with adversity.

There are of course many elements of our environment that we CAN control, and in an exercise setting we can swing 'chance' in our favour and 'make our own luck'. But for those factors out of our control, a measured and deliberate approach can teach us much about how to respond to injury.

In 'The Obstacle Is The Way', the author Ryan Holiday proposes three key elements of turning obstacles to our advantage: Perception, Action and Will. We can apply these three stages to injury in sport to create a template to respond to injury.

Perception:

"If we can see an obstacle in the right light, we can reveal the hidden possibilities we can use to our advantage." (Holiday).

Immediately following an injury, it's natural to enter a period of negativity. This negativity comes from our perception of the injury, and a focus on what we cannot do, not what we can do. This approach is problem focused, not solution focused. The injury has happened, and that is out of our control. But we can control the perception. We must shift our view to seeing the obstacle as an opportunity.

By changing our perception, we can look for opportunities that may otherwise have not been presented to us.

Action:

*"But perception alone is not enough. When you are faced with an obstacle, you also need to respond with the correct action. The correct action is born from the combination of creativity and flexibility."
(Holiday).*

The actions we take in our training allow the physical manifestation of our perception. They allow us to continue to improve (or at worst maintain) our physical abilities. Actual strategies are numerous and we cover some of them in this book, including strategies to modify training around injury, minimise strength loss in an injured limb, improve weaknesses, develop strengths, build work capacity, improve technique and build and develop new skills.

Will:

"After identifying the best way to perceive an obstacle and the best action to overcome it, we use our will to persevere until the obstacle has been overcome." (Holiday).

With a solid plan of action, 'will' should not be difficult for athletes. Lack of perseverance can often be caused when the athlete feels lost or unsure of what steps to take. By being organised and systemised in their actions, and by having a solid plan of attack, an athlete will be able to maintain motivation and focus on what they can improve.

The Benefits Extend Far Beyond Exercise:

How we react to external events can be hugely valuable not just when dealing with injury, but when dealing with any hardship. Apply these principles to all elements of your life to become more in control of your thoughts and actions.

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The Importance of Exercising with Injury:

All too often, injuries cause us to stop training. This 'all or nothing' approach stems from a belief that if we're not doing something perfectly, we shouldn't be doing it at all. If we focussed our attention on 'just turning up', and measuring the success of exercise based on whether or not we did it (rather than how good it was), the long-term benefit would be much greater. When we get injured, our routines collapse. And often this causes a domino effect where our training, nutrition, sleep (and any other health habit) collapse too.

You know exercise is important, or you wouldn't be reading this. But it's worth reminding ourselves of the benefits of exercise, and the benefits of continuing training even when injured. We can separate these benefits into the mental and the physical.

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Mental Benefits of Exercising (with Modification) Through Injury:

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