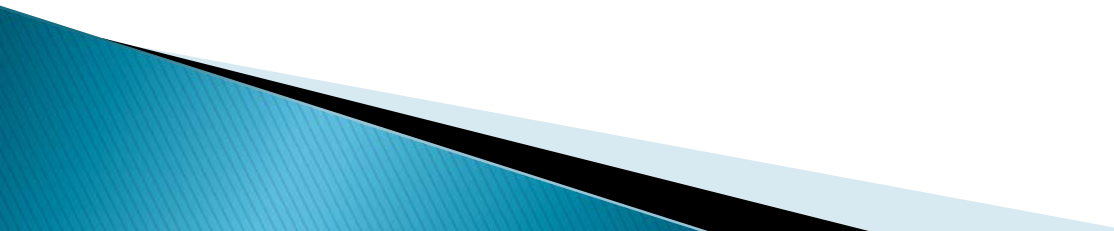


Connecting with Athletes: Understanding and Addressing Barriers to Effective Communication

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Outline

- ▶ Importance of Effective Communication
 - Unique role of Athletic Trainers
 - ▶ Effective Communication with Athletes
 - Importance of GEW
 - Techniques
 - ▶ Barriers to Communication
 - Concealment of Physical Injury/Illness
 - Concealment of Mental Health Concerns
 - Secondary Gains
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Importance of Effective Communication

- ▶ **Why is Communication Important?**
 - Increased feelings of support facilitates better athletic performance
 - Increases disclosure from athletes
 - Athletes who do not disclose may be at a greater risk for pain, more serious injuries/illnesses, and long-term disabilities
 - Athletes experiencing untreated injury/illness underperform
- ▶ **Unique Role of Athletic Trainers**
 - Often the only healthcare professional at practices/competitions
 - Broad understanding of the importance of recognizing and addressing injuries/illnesses in early stages
 - Athletes might be more likely to disclose injuries/illnesses to athletic trainers, compared to coaches/teammates

Effective Communication

- ▶ Effective communication leads to better rapport and increases the quality of relationships
- ▶ Remember to have GEW
 - Genuineness
 - Empathy
 - Warmth

Effective Communication

▶ Be Genuine

- The ability to authentically share emotional reactions to the athlete's problems and experiences
 - **Athlete:** *"I can't believe I got sick right before the end of season game. I am so angry and disappointed."*
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *"I completely understand why you're mad. I am also shocked and upset that this happened."*

Effective Communication

▶ Be Empathetic

- The ability to understand and reflect what the athlete is feeling
- Example
 - **Athlete:** *“Why am I still injured? I’ve done everything I’m supposed to do. I feel like I’ll never be able to play again”*
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *“I know this process is frustrating and can feel like it takes forever. I can imagine that you’re feeling a little hopeless. Let’s review some of the progress that you have made.”*

Effective Communication

▶ Be Warm

- Demonstrating unconditional positive regard, or a non-judgmental acceptance of the athlete's thoughts, emotions, and experiences.
 - **Athlete:** *"I'm so upset with my coach. I can't believe he still won't let me play. I'm not even in that much pain anymore."*
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *"So you're feeling pretty frustrated"*
 - **Athlete:** *"I'm so frustrated. I just want to be able to practice."*
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *"I can definitely understand that, injuries are really stressful. What are your thoughts on waiting to practice until you don't have anymore pain"*
 - **Athlete:** *"I mean that would probably be better for me in the long run."*

Effective Communication

▶ Techniques

- Open-ended Questions
 - Questions that athletes cannot easily answer with “yes”, “no”, or other one-word responses
- Purpose
 - Indirectly convey genuine interest and support
 - Motivate the athlete to communicate with you
 - Elicit more information from the athlete
- Examples:
 - *“What’s on your mind today”*
 - *“How are you feeling about...”*
 - *“What are your thoughts on...”*
 - *“What are your reasons for saying that”*
 - *“Tell me more about that”*

Effective Communication

▶ Techniques

- **Reflective listening:** listener follows the athlete's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions and responds with reflective statements
- **Simple reflection:** repeating or paraphrasing what the athlete says in a neutral manner
 - Conveys empathy and understanding
 - **Athlete:** *"I don't want to practice today, I'm feeling really tired"*
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *"So you're feeling exhausted today"*

Effective Communication

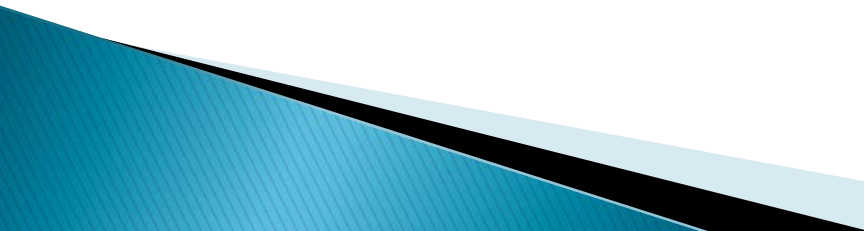
▶ Techniques

- **Double-sided reflection:** Acknowledge what the athlete is currently saying and also remind them of contrary things he/she has said in the past
 - Requires the use of information that the athlete has previously offered
 - Gently challenges the athlete using their own language
 - Develops discrepancy between two contradictory statements
 - Useful when athlete is bringing in a maladaptive thought/plan
 - **Athlete:** *“I’m tired of waiting, I’m just going to run this weekend even if I’m in pain.”*
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *“On one hand you’re telling me that you feel pressure to get back into competition and on the other hand you’ve mentioned that you want to wait and heal properly. How do you resolve these two sides?”*

Barriers to Communication

- ▶ Concealment of Physical Injury/Illness
 - ▶ Concealment of Mental Health Concerns
 - ▶ Secondary Gain
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Concealment of Physical Injury/Illness

- ▶ Concealment is multifaceted
 - The frequency of athletes to continue to play while injured/ill
 - The amount and duration of pain/distress necessary to report the injury/illness
 - Which individuals the athlete conceals the injury/illness from
 - The underlying motivations for concealing
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Concealment of Physical Injury/Illness

- ▶ Groups at-risk
 - Youth athletes
 - College athletes
 - Athletes with less “visible” injuries (e.g., concussions)

Concealment of Physical Injury/Illness

▶ Reasons

- Protection of playing time/position
- Don't want to "let teammates down"
- Sense of responsibility for their health and feel at fault for their injuries/illnesses
- Fear of negative evaluations from teammates/coaches
- "Sport Ethic" reinforces the concept of playing with pain
- Fear of losing athletic identity
- Withholding of salary in professional athletes
- Inadequate knowledge of injury

A Note on Concussion Concealment

- ▶ Research suggests that approx. 47% of student athletes report concussive symptoms
- ▶ Motives for concealing a concussive injury are consistent with previous slide
- ▶ Inadequate knowledge plays major role
 - A concussion can occur without loss of consciousness
 - People who experience one concussion are more likely to experience another
 - Recovery is not dependent on how hard the person works at recovering
- ▶ Culture surrounding sport also plays major role
 - 54% of student athletes report that playing in the NFL is worth chance of brain damage
 - 51% of student athletes would want their star player to continue playing rather than sit out after experiencing concussive symptoms

Concealment of Physical Injury/Illness

- ▶ Preventative Strategies for Athletic Trainers
 - Educate athletes on importance of disclosing injuries/illness
 - Consultation with coaches
 - Administration of *Willingness to Report Scale (WRS)* to determine at-risk athletes (lower scores = higher risk to conceal)
 - Implementation of tracking sheet
 - Used with athletes currently recovering from injuries or maintaining rehabilitation for previous injuries
 - Helpful to have objective data throughout the entire course of rehabilitation
 - Increases the likelihood that athletes will disclose negative outcomes (i.e., maintenance of pain, deterioration of progress)

Willingness to Report Scale

Example:

If I were experiencing _____ following an injury, I would tell my athletic trainer.

1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree

Swelling	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Point Tenderness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A headache	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Numbness or Tingling	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Blurred Vision	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Dizziness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Joint Pain	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Loss of Consciousness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Abdominal Pain	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Mild Aching/throbbing in my arms or legs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Memory Problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Nausea	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fever	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
An obvious deformity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ringing in my ears	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A bruise	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Seeing stars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sensitivity to light	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sharp severe pain in my arms or legs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Tracking Sheet

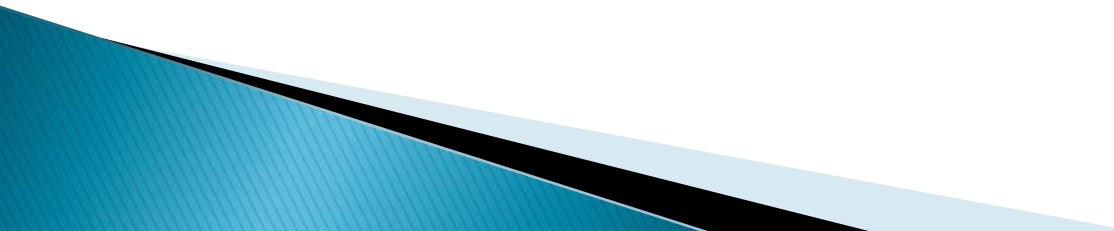
Tracking Sheet: Physical Injury/Illness

Range of Motion	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Strength	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Stability	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Coordination	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Balance	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Swelling	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pain	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Function	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Daily Activities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sport Participation	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Health	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sleep	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Concealment of Mental Health Concerns

- ▶ Most Common Concerns
 - ▶ Depression
 - ▶ Anxiety
 - ▶ Eating Disorders
 - ▶ Substance-use Disorders
- ▶ At-Risk Groups
 - ▶ Athletes experiencing a physical injury/illness
 - ▶ Particularly important to assess for mental health concerns in this population, as mental health issues can negatively impact rehabilitation
 - ▶ High life stress, low coping strategies, low social supports
 - ▶ Male athletes (less likely to disclose mental health concerns)

Concealment of Mental Health Concerns

- ▶ Reasons
 - ▶ Same as physical injury/illness
 - ▶ Stigma surrounding mental health concerns
 - ▶ Decreased likelihood of linking mental health concerns to underperformance (compared to physical injury/illness)
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Concealment of Mental Health Concerns

- ▶ Preventative Strategies
 - ▶ Implementation of tracking sheet
 - ▶ Particularly useful for athletes experiencing significant physical injury/illness
 - ▶ Increases likelihood of disclosure
 - ▶ Important to check in on a change of 3 or more from week to week
 - ▶ Be familiar with warning signs of mental health concerns
 - ▶ Refer to sport psychologist or clinical psychologist when necessary

Tracking Sheet

Tracking Sheet: Psychological Factors

Focus	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Expectations	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Worry	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Emotions	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Identity	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Adherence	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Understanding	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pain Tolerance	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Social Support	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Confidence	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Motivation	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Anxiety	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Concealment of Mental Health Concerns

- ▶ Warning Signs of Mental Health Concerns
 - Depression
 - Low mood
 - Irritability/anger
 - Eating/sleeping disturbances
 - Decreased energy
 - Decreased concentration
 - Social withdrawal or avoidance
 - Negative thinking
 - Underperformance

Concealment of Mental Health Concerns

- ▶ Warning Signs of Mental Health Concerns
 - Anxiety
 - Excessive worry
 - Sleep disturbances
 - Shaking/trembling
 - Impaired concentration
 - Excessive nervousness before competition/practice
 - Fidgeting behaviors
 - Underperformance

Concealment of Mental Health Concerns

- ▶ Warning Signs of Mental Health Concerns
 - Eating Disorders
 - Preoccupation with body image
 - Dietary restraint
 - Low body weight
 - Rapid decrease in weight
 - Amenorrhea
 - Increased fatigue
 - Irritability
 - Compensatory behaviors (e.g., fasting, purging, extra workouts)
 - Underperformance
 - Female athletes who have been out of training due to an injury are particularly at-risk. This is especially true for sports in which low body fat is associated with better performance outcomes (e.g., cross-country, gymnastics)

Concealment of Mental Health Concerns

- ▶ Warning Signs of Mental Health Concerns
 - Substance Use Disorders (SUDs)
 - Increased irresponsibility
 - Increased temper
 - Increased chance of substance use in situations that are dangerous
 - Propensity for getting into trouble when consuming substance (i.e., fighting, legal problems, etc.)
 - Social withdrawal (many individuals with SUDs use alone)
 - Underperformance

Concealment

- ▶ Communication Techniques to Address Concealment
 - Stating observation + open-ended question
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *“I’ve noticed you grimacing during workouts, tell me about what you’re feeling?”*
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *“You’ve seemed a little down lately, what’s been on your mind”*
 - Double-sided Reflection
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *“I can absolutely understand the motivation to suck it up and play. You’ve told me that you’re playing with pain to protect your starting position and we’ve talked about the importance of resting to prevent a more serious injury. What are your thoughts on this?”*
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *“I’m hearing that you don’t think your anxiety is that bad and you’re telling me that it’s getting in the way of your performance. How does that sit with you?”*

Secondary Gain

▶ Definition

- Benefits that injured athletes receive during rehabilitation
- Generally operates outside of the athlete's conscious awareness
- Often the gains necessary for effective recovery
- Can be a disincentive to recover and return to sport
- Examples
 - Extra attention and support
 - Increased sympathy
 - More time for other activities
 - Avoidance of negative emotions associated with return to sport
 - Continued use of medication

Secondary Gain

▶ Causes

- Fear of returning to sport
 - Unconscious fear that the athlete will not be able to perform at a high level
 - The “gain” is not having to face a performance situation in which they will experience negative emotions (i.e., anxiety, panic, disappointment, frustration)
 - Most likely to occur in athletes with highly developed athletic identities and those who have a lot invested in their sport
- Need for attention
 - When injured, athlete receives more attention from important people
 - Most likely to occur in athletes who are less talented

Secondary Gain

▶ Warning Signs

- Discrepancy between reported pain/discomfort/disability and objective results of diagnosis and evaluation
 - Cause
 - Need for attention
- Unintentional resistance or lack of cooperation in diagnostic evaluations
 - Cause
 - Fear of returning to sport
- Poor compliance with rehabilitation
 - Cause
 - Fear of returning to sport

Secondary Gain

- ▶ **Communication Techniques to Address Secondary Gains**
 - **Overall Goal:** bring these issues to athlete's conscious awareness and to determine cause
 - Double-sided reflection
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *"I hear that you're still feeling quite a bit of pain and you're also telling me that your physician has cleared you for play. How are you making sense of this?"*
 - Providing education
 - **Athletic Trainer:** *"Sometimes there is a part of an athlete that enjoys being injured for a variety of different reasons. However, the athlete is often not consciously aware of it. This can sometimes lead to unintentional behaviors that interrupt or slow down rehabilitation. What are your thoughts on this?"*

Secondary Gain

- ▶ Interventions to Address Secondary Gains
 - Fear of Return to Sport
 - Referral to sport psychologist (if available)
 - Discussion of elite athletes who have successfully recovered from injury/illness (most helpful if it is the same injury/illness)
 - Use of performance imagery (i.e., have athlete visualize successful performances)
 - Need for Attention
 - Referral to sport psychologist (if available) – less important than fear of return to sport
 - Increase social supports
 - Discuss ways athlete could continue to receive attention/support following recovery

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