

OUR EXPERT PANEL

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New thinking on the block

MENTAL BLOCK IS an expression that is often used lightly, but it really can get in the way of a full recovery from a sports injury, as *Christian Lattanzio* explains

HAVE you ever heard the expression 'having a mental block'? It is a phrase often used in sport to point out a lack of performance. However, it is also used to mean, and highlight, an incomplete recovery from injury. Think, for example, of those athletes that, coming back from an injury and despite being physiologically fit, find it difficult to perform again at the same level of intensity they were used to before the injury occurred. What happened? It is quite common, in those cases, to talk of a

mental block. With this article, I want to show you what a mental block really is, and how mental strength training can be used to have a quicker and more effective recovery. As we all know, body and mind form a system and therefore, like any other system, a lack of strength in one part of it determines a lack of strength in the whole system. Because of this basic principle, every time we injure the body we also, inevitably, injure the mind. However, how many times do we follow this principle? How many times do we really take care of the mind during our physical rehabilitation?

WONDER FOODS

Chillies

Eating chillies can prevent the onset of common colds, as well as help you take in 10 per cent fewer calories when eaten before a meal.



10 min fitness task

Write out a list of everything that needs to go in your kit bag. Never forget your shoes or lucky track mitts again

Beating the block

INJURIES AREN'T JUST about broken bones and pulled muscles — your mind is also significantly affected. We look at how mental strength training can help you make the most of your physical rehabilitation

FORGETTING to focus on mental rehabilitation can be a key point when recovering from an injury and it is also, by far, the most common factor in developing a mental block during recovery.

Usually, a mental block is the way our body-mind system tells us that we did not fully recover from the injury. Specifically, the mental block, as the name itself suggests, tells us that we did not recover mentally from the injury. The reason is very simple: very few people undergo a mental strength training programme during their rehabilitation from an injury. Usually people go to great lengths to cure the physical side of their injury; however, far too often they neglect to train or retrain their mind, which was equally, albeit differently, injured.

To give you an example: if a rider breaks their leg while racing, they would not dream of letting the injury heal by itself. Presumably, they would seek

expert help and would work on a rehabilitation programme with a physiotherapist. However, this is not how we usually approach our mental rehabilitation; the vast majority of people tend to let that side of the injury to heal by itself. By doing so, one part of the system (the body) moves forward while the other part (the mind) remains blocked to the time when the injured occurred. Such negligence is the primary cause of mental blocks and can lead to long and incomplete recoveries.

What can you practically do to train your mind when recovering from an injury? Mental strength training can provide a number of techniques and programmes that are specifically designed to support rehabilitation. Extensive medical research shows how effective it is to combine mental strength training to physiotherapy.

In practical terms, one effective way of using mental strength training when recovering from an injury is, for example, to have and apply an effective goal plan in

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regards to the recovering process. Having outcome, performance and process goals helps to feel in control of our injury. In other words, it is extremely useful and effective to re-frame the way we think about our injury. We need to become proactive towards our rehabilitation rather than to see ourselves as passive victims.

Injury mapping

Another great tool we can use when recovering from an injury is to understand and map our physiology in relation to the injured part of our body.

Let me give you a practical example. I was working with a rider who sustained a serious injury to his right knee. Despite recovering well, he felt he had a mental block and could not stretch or relax his right knee. The rider himself used the expression mental block because his doctor and his physio told him that from a physiological perspective he was completely healed. They also told him that from their point of

view he could start training and racing at full pace. Despite that, he did not feel like before.

When I met the rider, we began to work on the mental side of the recovery that, until then, he had not considered. I asked the rider to concentrate on his left knee and to notice how he felt, and to be specific about how he felt. I asked him to rate, using a scale from one to 10, how he felt about his left knee. He sharply said nine. I then asked him to pay close attention to how his body responded when concentrating on his left knee; did he see any images? Did he hear anything (ie, internal dialogue or perhaps any other sound)? How did other parts of his body feel? Were those parts of his body tense or relaxed? And so forth. We then repeated the same process, this time paying close attention to his right knee and we noticed a very different response.

For a start, he gave his right knee a rating of five. By analysing and comparing how specific parts of his body felt, we could change his experience and effectively change his perception of his injury. Almost immediately, his evaluation of his right knee went from five to eight! In addition, in less than a fortnight he was back training at full pace.

Very often, the way we see our injury plays a big part in our rehabilitation and can determine the quality and the speed of our recovery. The only way of eliminating mental blocks is to train and/or retrain our mind, to emerge not just as fit as we were before, but even stronger.



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After a big pile-up, just getting back on the bike can be a challenge

IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE

Calling all racers

ANDY Kirkland, a sports scientist at Canterbury Christ Church University, is looking to recruit actively competing male cyclists aged 18-45 years, for a number of cycling-related research studies.

As part of Andy's PhD research, he is trying to identify, physiologically, why some riders are more able to tolerate variation in power output than others, and he wishes to apply his findings to pacing strategy within cycle time trialling. Volunteers will be asked to attend the laboratory for regular tests over a two-month period. Although this requires significant commitment, there are considerable benefits for those involved.

For example, VO2Max, Wingate anaerobic performance and body composition tests will be included, and full feedback/training intensity prescription will be given.

Follow-up tests will also be offered, to enable the riders to monitor training and performance progression, where appropriate.

A further study is comparing SRM cranks with the Ergomo Pro bottom bracket power-measuring device. Volunteers will be required to attend the laboratory for one-off testing session and pedal at a wide range of power-outputs.

If you are interested in participating, or wish to know more about this research, full details are available at www.kirklandcycling.org.uk or by contacting Andy directly on 07811 213666 or email ak68@cant.ac.uk.