

# It's no longer automatic when it comes to injury

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**Editor's note:** This is the second of a four-part series on athletes coping with injuries, stress and related problems.

It's natural to feel awkward, and perhaps even uncoordinated, as we begin a new activity or sport.

Think of how awkward it feels to attempt your first solo on a bike, or to drive a car for the first time, or to learn to ski or bowl. Certainly we don't feel upset because we can't yet execute a particular skill.

At this stage, we are learning about the sport or activity and how to best help our bodies meet particular neuromuscular, physiological and psychological demands.

As we move into and through the beginning phase of a sport, our perceptual pathways and patterns become automatic through conscious learning, direction and practice.

This is called learned automaticity and also is applicable to daily life, as in learning to drive. As new drivers, we initially are very deliberate, slow, awkward and conscious of every action. Over time, however, driving becomes totally automatic. Our neuromuscular pathways then operate subconsciously and we may daydream, converse with passengers, listen to the radio, talk on the phone or be otherwise absorbed.

Likewise, when we've mastered the basics of a sport and continue to hone our skills through practice, then the automatic unconscious neuromuscular programming often enables us to succeed or to use the sport to accomplish a variety of goals.

## Thinking too much

There is some truth to an oft-voiced criticism that an athlete was "thinking too much." For instance, if we

were to consciously think about just how to dribble a basketball or how to pick up a baseball and throw it, or how to swing a bat and hit the ball, then our normal automatic action would become stilted, very likely causing our performance to suffer.

Automaticity in sports frees athletes from unduly concentrating on the mechanics of their sports. It allows them to focus on the execution of their game plans and strategies which enhance their potential for success.

But what happens when an injury occurs and interrupts that automaticity? It may have been caused by biomechanical imbalances in the body, by an accident, by an overly-driven performance without attention to the body's needs for rest, or by risk-taking, but the result is the same. We have once again become like the inexperienced, deliberate and overly-cautious new driver.

Those of us who are athletes may become awkward because the pain often forces us to consciously and deliberately either work through it or, if the pain is really intense, to compensate for it. We're suddenly forced to use other automatic neuromuscular pathways to compensate one part of the body for what is happening because of the injury and pain in another part.

Just as a driver whose car suffers a blowout is abruptly forced into concentrated action, so too is an athlete whose automaticity is interrupted by injury. What was one moment part of a routine activity suddenly becomes a new situation which can no longer be handled automatically.

## Emotional reaction

Because our minds and bodies operate as an inseparable unit, once physical injury becomes a fact, there is an inescapable emotional response and psychological stress. You don't label yourself as crazy when you're physically injured; nor should you interpret your emotional response to that injury as crazy.

This response, like the blowout in the car and the psychological fear and upset that accompany it, is an effect of the interruption or a previously automatic activity. It's noteworthy that this automaticity is not only neuromuscular in nature but is also mixed with whatever psychological functions the activity has served. These can be competitive motives, health and fitness motives, aesthetic motives, social motives or even the attendant benefits or exercise related to self-esteem or quality of life.

If these benefits are reduced or lost, the emotional response is likely to be one of grief — the same grief that accompanies the loss of a loved one, the loss of our faculties, the failure to achieve or the knowledge that some dreams and aspirations will remain unrealized. We might feel shock, helplessness, denial, anger, depression and sadness. After all, as adults, we're supposed to be able to do things reasonably well and not have to learn to do them again, like children.

But injury robs us of that learned automaticity. Just as we don't stigmatize ourselves as crazy or neurotic when we grieve over real, personal losses, neither should we do so if we're emotionally, or psychologically upset because of a sports injury,

nor should we fall prey to our own or others' criticism that we're overreacting or making too much of it.

We might also thus be encouraged to seek psychological help to deal with these inevitable "uncrazy" feelings and decrease their intense psychological connection to the injury. We should be able to work, move exercise or master the areas unaffected by pain. If we do what "can" be done and don't worry about what "can't" be done, we'll be less preoccupied with the pain or loss and can use reasoned emotional responses that will help strengthen what is physically sound.

This is displacement — substituting an equally psychologically-rewarding experience for one that's been lost or may no longer be performed.

The psychological uplift that we'll bring to ourselves will gradually help provide us the physical strength needed for successful rehabilitation.