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## The Role of Sports Psychology in Managing Concussion Recovery and Return to Play



Jiantang. Yang<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Seyed Alireza. Saadati<sup>1</sup>, Maximus Monaheng. Sefotho<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Rehabilitation, York Rehab Clinic, Toronto, Canada

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, Coventry University London–University House, London, United Kingdom

<sup>3</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

\* Corresponding author email address: [jian.yang@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jian.yang@sheffield.ac.uk)

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study explores the role of sports psychology in managing concussion recovery and facilitating athletes' readiness to return to play.

**Methods and Materials:** A qualitative research design was utilized, involving semi-structured online interviews with athletes who had experienced concussions, sports psychologists, and medical professionals. 36 Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software through an inductive thematic approach, allowing for the emergence of key themes. Reflexivity and researcher triangulation were employed to ensure the rigor and reliability of the findings.

**Findings:** Four main themes emerged: psychological interventions, mental barriers and facilitators in return to play, the role of support systems, and the long-term psychological impact of concussions. Psychological interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral techniques and mindfulness practices, were effective in reducing anxiety and enhancing resilience. Fear of re-injury and performance anxiety were significant barriers, while confidence restoration and motivation levels facilitated recovery. Social support from family, teammates, and coaches played a crucial role in alleviating psychological distress. The long-term impact included identity crises, chronic symptoms, and ongoing mental health concerns, emphasizing the need for holistic support.

**Conclusion:** The findings underscore the importance of integrating psychological interventions in concussion recovery. Addressing fear, anxiety, and identity loss, while enhancing confidence and social support, is crucial for a successful return to play. This study highlights the necessity for comprehensive recovery protocols that consider both physical and psychological readiness. Practitioners should prioritize individualized

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psychological assessments and foster supportive environments to improve recovery outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Concussion recovery, sports psychology, return to play, psychological readiness, fear of re-injury, social support.*

## 1. Introduction

Sports-related concussions have gained significant attention over the past decade, not only due to their immediate physical repercussions but also for the long-term psychological and emotional challenges that athletes face during recovery. Concussions can cause a wide range of physical, cognitive, and emotional symptoms, which may persist long after the initial injury (1). These symptoms impact both the athlete's physical recovery and psychological well-being, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses mental and emotional health. Evidence suggests that fear of re-injury and anxiety about returning to competitive environments are pervasive among athletes post-injury (2). The mental state of athletes, including their confidence and psychological readiness, can significantly dictate the outcome of their recovery and performance once they resume their sports activities (3).

The psychological readiness to return to sport has been linked to several biopsychosocial factors, including self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and perceived social support (4, 5). For example, athletes who report higher levels of social support from teammates, coaches, and family members are more likely to exhibit a positive outlook and reduced anxiety when returning to play (6). Conversely, a lack of support or pressure from external sources can exacerbate stress and hinder recovery (7). The complex interplay between physical and psychological recovery requires a multidisciplinary approach, as highlighted in the literature.

The relationship between physical function and psychological readiness has been extensively documented in athletes recovering from anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries (8). Aizawa et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of both physical function and mental preparedness in successful return-to-play outcomes (9). Similarly, Lambert et al. (2023) found that psychological readiness, such as confidence in physical capabilities and reduced fear of re-injury, is pivotal in facilitating athletes' return to high-risk sports like judo (10). However, significant gaps remain in addressing these factors during the recovery process. For instance, Kvist and Ardern (2022) discuss how psychological barriers, such as fear of movement and avoidance behaviors, are often underestimated yet play a

crucial role in prolonging recovery (4). Athletes may experience a sense of vulnerability or a diminished sense of self, which complicates their efforts to re-engage with sport (11). This emotional turmoil, coupled with persistent symptoms, can lead to chronic psychological distress, as indicated in recent studies (12, 13).

A central theme in concussion recovery is the concept of psychological readiness, defined as an athlete's mental and emotional state of being prepared to return to competitive sport. García (2023) conducted a systematic review showing that psychological factors, such as anxiety and self-doubt, are substantial determinants of whether athletes successfully return to play (14). The "return-to-play" decision is rarely straightforward and requires the careful assessment of both objective physical markers and subjective psychological factors (15, 16). This perspective is echoed by Oladeji et al. (2023), who argue that neglecting psychological readiness can lead to poor outcomes and increased risk of re-injury (17).

Tools such as the Return to Sport After Injury Scale (SIRSI) have been developed to quantify psychological readiness, providing valuable frameworks for clinicians (18, 19). However, the subjective nature of psychological assessments poses challenges, as athletes may underreport their anxiety or overestimate their readiness due to external pressures (20). O'Connor et al. (2021) highlight that fear-avoidance behaviors are particularly prevalent in contact sports, where athletes are constantly reminded of the potential for injury. This fear can manifest as reluctance to engage in full contact or perform at pre-injury levels, ultimately affecting performance and increasing the likelihood of re-injury (21).

Social support is another critical factor that shapes recovery outcomes. Forsdyke et al. (2022) note that perceived social support can mitigate the psychological distress associated with injury and boost an athlete's confidence in their recovery process (6). Moreover, studies by Rollo et al. (2020) emphasize the interdisciplinary approach, combining sports psychology and sports nutrition, to support athletes holistically. This approach is crucial for optimizing both physical and psychological recovery, especially in high-stress environments like professional soccer (22).

Athletes also grapple with identity issues post-injury. Losing the ability to participate in sport can lead to a crisis

of identity, as many athletes derive their self-worth from their athletic performance (23). Gómez-Espejo, Olmedilla, Cano, García-Mas, and Ortega (2022) illustrate how psychological interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, can aid in re-establishing a sense of self and preparing athletes for life beyond their sports careers. The emotional toll of such transitions underscores the necessity for robust psychological support throughout the recovery journey (24).

Furthermore, emerging research highlights the use of digital interventions to support athletes' psychological well-being. The BANG (Back iN the Game) smartphone application developed by Ardern and Kvist (2020) exemplifies innovative strategies to facilitate the transition back to sport. These digital platforms provide accessible resources and promote adherence to psychological rehabilitation programs, illustrating the potential for technology to complement traditional therapeutic approaches (2). The current study aims to explore the role of sports psychology in managing concussion recovery and facilitating athletes' readiness to return to play.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of sports psychology in managing concussion recovery and facilitating a safe return to play. The research aimed to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and perceptions of athletes, sports psychologists, and medical professionals involved in concussion management. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who had relevant experience or expertise. The sample included athletes who had experienced concussions, sports psychologists specializing in concussion recovery, and medical professionals overseeing concussion protocols. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, ensuring that no new themes emerged from additional interviews.

### 2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews, which provided flexibility to explore

participants' experiences while maintaining a structured focus on the research objectives. An interview guide was developed, encompassing key areas such as psychological interventions during recovery, the role of mental skills in return-to-play decisions, and the impact of psychological support on athletes' well-being. The interviews were conducted via a secure online platform, ensuring participant confidentiality and data security. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and all sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent for accurate data transcription.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software to facilitate systematic coding and theme identification. An inductive approach was adopted to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data. The analysis involved multiple stages: initial open coding, categorization into broader themes, and continuous comparison to ensure consistency and rigor. Researcher triangulation was employed to enhance the reliability of the findings, with team members reviewing and discussing the coding framework. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis process to acknowledge potential biases and ensure transparency.

## 3. Results

The study included 36 participants, comprising 20 male and 16 female athletes. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years, with a mean age of 26.5 years. The majority (n=22) were amateur athletes, while the remaining 14 participants were professional athletes engaged in various sports, including soccer (n=10), basketball (n=8), rugby (n=6), ice hockey (n=5), and other contact sports (n=7). The time since the participants' most recent concussion ranged from 3 months to 2 years, with an average recovery period of 8.5 months. Additionally, 25 participants had experienced one or two concussions, while 11 had sustained three or more concussions throughout their athletic careers. Most participants (n=30) had access to sports psychologists or mental health support during recovery, whereas 6 reported limited or no psychological support resources.

**Table 1.** The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
1. Psychological Interventions in Concussion Recovery	1.1 Cognitive Behavioral Techniques	- Thought reframing - Stress management strategies - Coping mechanism development
	1.2 Mindfulness Practices	- Meditation exercises - Breathing techniques - Present-moment focus
	1.3 Goal Setting	- Establishing short-term objectives - Long-term recovery planning - Monitoring progress
	1.4 Emotional Regulation	- Anger management - Anxiety reduction techniques - Mood stabilization practices
	1.5 Psychoeducation	- Understanding concussion symptoms - Knowledge about recovery process - Awareness of activity limitations
2. Mental Barriers and Facilitators in Return to Play	2.1 Fear of Re-injury	- Anxiety about physical contact - Hesitation in performance - Overcautious behavior
	2.2 Confidence Restoration	- Building self-efficacy - Positive self-talk - Trust in physical abilities
	2.3 Motivation Levels	- Intrinsic motivation factors - Extrinsic rewards - Goal alignment with personal values
	2.4 Risk Perception	- Awareness of potential consequences - Acceptance of inherent risks - Decision-making processes regarding return
	2.5 Mental Readiness Assessment	- Psychological evaluation tools - Readiness scales - Professional feedback
	2.6 Performance Anxiety	- Self-assessment questionnaires - Managing pre-game nerves - Techniques for pressure management
3. Role of Support Systems in Recovery	3.1 Family Support	- Emotional encouragement from family - Practical assistance at home - Family education about concussions
	3.2 Team Dynamics	- Relationships with teammates - Inclusion in team activities - Peer support networks
	3.3 Coaching Influence	- Open communication with coaches - Coaching strategies for support - Trust-building with coaching staff
	3.4 Medical Staff Collaboration	- Interactions with healthcare providers - Adherence to medical advice - Trust in the medical team's expertise
	3.5 Psychological Services Access	- Availability of counseling - Utilization of sports psychologists - Referral systems for mental health services
4. Long-term Psychological Impact of Concussions	4.1 Identity Issues	- Loss of athlete identity - Role confusion post-injury - Changes in self-perception
	4.2 Chronic Symptoms Management	- Dealing with persistent headaches - Strategies for adapting to symptoms - Ongoing medical treatments
	4.3 Career Transition Planning	- Considering retirement options - Exploring alternative career paths - Future life planning
	4.4 Mental Health Concerns	- Risks of depression - Anxiety disorder symptoms - Post-traumatic stress indicators
	4.5 Cognitive Functioning	- Memory impairment issues - Difficulties with concentration - Cognitive rehabilitation exercises
	4.6 Social Reintegration	- Re-establishing social connections - Involvement in community activities - Participation in support groups

### 1. Psychological Interventions in Concussion Recovery

Participants highlighted various psychological interventions that aided their concussion recovery. The use of Cognitive Behavioral Techniques emerged as a key strategy, with athletes emphasizing the importance of "reframing negative thoughts to remain optimistic" and utilizing stress management techniques to enhance resilience. Additionally, Mindfulness Practices such as meditation exercises and breathing techniques were widely adopted to promote a sense of calm. One athlete noted, "Focusing on the present helped me reduce anxiety about what might happen if I played again."

The process of Goal Setting played a significant role in maintaining motivation during the recovery period. Participants discussed how setting short-term and long-term goals, along with monitoring progress, provided direction and purpose. An interviewee shared, "Breaking down recovery into achievable steps kept me going, even when the process felt never-ending." The ability to regulate emotions was another theme, with Emotional Regulation techniques helping to manage anger, reduce anxiety, and stabilize mood. Finally, Psychoeducation empowered athletes to understand their symptoms better and set realistic expectations. One participant remarked, "Knowing what to expect reduced my fear and frustration."

### 2. Mental Barriers and Facilitators in Return to Play

Returning to play after a concussion brought forth numerous mental challenges and facilitators. The Fear of Re-injury was a pervasive concern, with athletes expressing anxiety about re-engaging in physical contact. As one participant described, "I was constantly afraid of getting hit again, so I hesitated in every move." Building Confidence Restoration through positive self-talk, skill reinforcement, and trust in one's abilities was seen as essential. A sports psychologist noted, "We worked a lot on restoring belief in their physical capabilities."

Motivation varied significantly among athletes, with Motivation Levels influenced by both intrinsic factors and external rewards. "I had to find my own reasons for returning to the field," one athlete mentioned. Risk Perception was another theme, as athletes balanced awareness of potential consequences with their passion for sports. Decision-making processes were deeply personal, guided by each individual's assessment of readiness. The Mental Readiness Assessment process involved using tools like psychological evaluation scales and feedback from professionals. "Being mentally ready was just as important as physical readiness," a participant explained. Lastly, Performance Anxiety was

managed through techniques designed to reduce pre-game nerves and improve focus.

### 3. Role of Support Systems in Recovery

The presence of strong support networks was highlighted as crucial to the recovery journey. Family Support provided emotional encouragement and practical assistance, with one athlete noting, "My family kept me grounded and supported me every step of the way." Team Dynamics played a dual role, as positive relationships with teammates and inclusion in team activities fostered belonging. However, some athletes felt disconnected. "Staying involved with the team helped, but it was hard to watch from the sidelines," shared one participant.

The impact of Coaching Influence was evident, with coaches who maintained open communication and supported the athlete's well-being being highly valued. "My coach made me feel understood and never pressured me to return prematurely," an athlete recounted. Collaboration with Medical Staff was another significant theme, as participants trusted medical experts to guide their recovery. Access to Psychological Services was also pivotal, with many utilizing counseling and sports psychology resources. One participant mentioned, "Having a sports psychologist made a huge difference in understanding my fears and learning to cope."

### 4. Long-term Psychological Impact of Concussions

The long-term impact of concussions extended beyond immediate recovery. Identity Issues were common, with athletes feeling a loss of identity when they could no longer participate in sports. "I didn't know who I was without the game," reflected an athlete. Chronic Symptoms Management involved coping strategies for persistent headaches and ongoing treatments. One participant stated, "Dealing with symptoms every day made it hard to focus on anything else."

Career Transition Planning became necessary for many, as they contemplated retirement or explored alternative paths. "I had to start thinking about life beyond sports, which was scary," shared one interviewee. Mental Health Concerns were prevalent, with some athletes experiencing depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. A participant emphasized, "The mental toll was as severe as the physical one." Cognitive Functioning challenges, such as memory impairment and difficulties concentrating, were also reported. Finally, Social Reintegration was discussed, with athletes working to re-establish social connections and participate in community activities. "Getting back into a

social routine was crucial for feeling normal again," an athlete noted.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this qualitative study provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors influencing concussion recovery and the readiness to return to play. Participants highlighted the significant impact of psychological interventions, the barriers and facilitators in the recovery process, the role of social support systems, and the long-term psychological consequences of concussions.

Our findings revealed that psychological interventions, including cognitive-behavioral techniques, mindfulness practices, and goal setting, are crucial in helping athletes manage the psychological burden of concussion recovery. Cognitive-behavioral strategies, such as thought reframing and stress management, were particularly effective in reducing anxiety and fostering resilience. This aligns with Aizawa et al. (2020), who found that cognitive-behavioral interventions significantly improved athletes' psychological readiness following anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction (8). Similarly, mindfulness practices like meditation and breathing exercises were effective in reducing anxiety and promoting focus, as echoed by Forsdyke, Madigan, Gledhill, and Smith (2022), who emphasized the importance of mindfulness in reducing reinjury anxiety among soccer players (6).

The role of goal setting was also emphasized in our study, with participants finding motivation through the establishment of short-term and long-term objectives. This finding is consistent with García (2023), who demonstrated that structured goal-setting interventions facilitated athletes' confidence and motivation to return to sport after shoulder instability surgery (14). Emotional regulation techniques were critical in managing intense emotions such as anger and anxiety, a theme similarly identified by Gómez-Espejo et al. (2022), who highlighted the role of emotional regulation in minimizing psychological distress during the recovery phase (24).

The fear of re-injury emerged as a pervasive theme, with participants expressing significant anxiety about returning to full-contact sports. This result is supported by O'Connor et al. (2021), who documented high levels of fear-avoidance behavior among collegiate athletes following injury (21). The psychological barrier of fear not only delayed the return to play but also influenced performance, consistent with Kvist and Silbernagel (2021), who found that fear of

movement was a substantial impediment to athletes' full recovery (5).

Confidence restoration was another key factor facilitating the return to sport. Athletes benefited from interventions aimed at boosting self-efficacy and trust in their physical abilities. This is consistent with the findings of Lambert et al. (2023), who demonstrated that psychological readiness and confidence were crucial in promoting a successful return to judo after injury (10). Motivation levels varied among participants, influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Aizawa et al. (2021) underscored the significance of motivation in return-to-sport decisions, emphasizing that intrinsic motivation is a more sustainable driver than extrinsic rewards (9).

The assessment of mental readiness through psychological evaluation tools was deemed essential. Participants highlighted the need for comprehensive psychological assessments, a finding echoed by Rossi et al. (2022), who developed the SIRSIS score to quantify psychological readiness before returning to sport (18). Performance anxiety, another significant theme, was managed through techniques designed to reduce pre-game nerves, a finding that aligns with studies by Zarzycki et al. (2021), who demonstrated the efficacy of anxiety reduction strategies in ACL rehabilitation programs (25).

Social support systems were pivotal in the recovery process, with family, teammates, and coaches playing integral roles. Participants noted that family support provided emotional encouragement and practical assistance, a finding corroborated by Lubega et al. (2021), who emphasized the positive influence of family involvement in sports injury recovery (23). The dynamics within sports teams were also highlighted, with peer support fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion. This result is consistent with Forsdyke et al. (2022), who found that strong relationships with teammates significantly reduced psychological distress (6).

The influence of coaching was mixed, with supportive coaches playing a crucial role in facilitating a smooth transition back to sport. Coaches who maintained open lines of communication and prioritized the athlete's well-being were highly valued. This finding aligns with Rollo et al. (2020), who emphasized the importance of coach-athlete relationships in creating a psychologically safe environment for recovery. Collaboration with medical staff also emerged as a key facilitator, with participants trusting healthcare providers to guide their recovery process. The accessibility of psychological services, such as counseling and sports

psychology, was highlighted as a necessary component of comprehensive concussion management, a theme supported by Slagers et al. (20).

The long-term psychological impact of concussions included identity issues, chronic symptoms management, and mental health concerns. Athletes reported a sense of loss and identity crisis when unable to participate in their sport, a finding consistent with Longo (2023), who noted that the loss of athletic identity significantly contributed to post-injury depression (13). Chronic symptoms such as persistent headaches and cognitive difficulties continued to impact athletes' daily lives, underscoring the need for ongoing psychological support. This finding aligns with Reis-Júnior et al. (2022), who emphasized the long-term consequences of untreated concussion symptoms (7).

Mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, were prevalent among participants, supporting the work of Gómez-Espejo et al. (2022), who found similar trends among athletes with recurrent injuries (24). Cognitive functioning issues, such as memory impairment and difficulties with concentration, were also reported, echoing the findings of Webster et al. (2019), who highlighted the cognitive challenges faced by athletes post-injury (15). Social reintegration was another critical theme, with participants working to rebuild their social networks and engage in community activities. This finding is supported by Rossi et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of social support in facilitating a sense of normalcy and belonging (18, 19).

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was limited, and the findings may not be generalizable to all athletes recovering from concussions. The reliance on self-reported data from interviews could introduce bias, as participants may underreport or overstate their experiences. Additionally, the study was conducted using semi-structured interviews, which, while providing rich qualitative data, may lack the consistency of structured assessments. Another limitation is the focus on psychological factors, which did not allow for a comprehensive analysis of how physical rehabilitation and psychological readiness interact.

Future research should address the limitations mentioned above by conducting longitudinal studies with larger and more diverse samples to increase generalizability. It would be valuable to explore the interplay between physical and psychological recovery using mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative interviews with quantitative assessments. Additionally, research could investigate the efficacy of specific psychological interventions, such as

cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness practices, in improving recovery outcomes. Further studies should also examine the role of emerging technologies, such as mobile applications and virtual reality, in supporting psychological rehabilitation.

Practitioners working with athletes recovering from concussions should adopt a holistic approach that integrates psychological and physical rehabilitation. Providing access to sports psychologists and counselors is essential, as psychological support can significantly enhance recovery outcomes. Coaches and medical staff should receive training on the psychological aspects of injury recovery to better support athletes. Developing individualized return-to-play protocols that consider an athlete's psychological readiness, rather than just physical markers, is crucial. Finally, fostering a supportive environment within sports teams and involving family members in the recovery process can help alleviate psychological distress and promote well-being.

### Authors' Contributions

J. Y., S. A. S., and M. M. S. contributed equally to this study. J. Y. was responsible for designing the research framework, conducting interviews, and analyzing data using NVivo software. S. A. S. assisted in developing the qualitative research methodology, ensuring the rigor of the data analysis process, and contributed to the interpretation of the findings. M. M. S. provided expertise in sports psychology, contributed to the development of interview questions, and reviewed the manuscript to ensure accuracy and depth in the discussion of psychological interventions. All authors participated in writing and revising the manuscript, and they approved the final version for publication.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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