

# “I CAN'T SWIM AT THE MOMENT, I'M INJURED”

**Helen Davis** explains how to overcome injury, maintain a positive outlook and get you back in the water sooner

**A** few years ago, I remember hearing Jonny Brownlee, professional triathlete and Olympic medallist, talk on BBC television about what it was like being injured and not being able to do triathlon. It has stuck with me ever since. His view was to become 'the best-injured athlete he could possibly be.' Instead of feeling angry about his situation, or questioning whether he would ever get back to triathlon, he looked at his situation through a different lens, a lens that shifted his focus towards recovery. Your individual psychology and how you think about recovery can make an impact on how you cope and, in some cases, how quickly you recover.

## REACTIONS TO INJURY – WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT

We can all react differently to injury, and it is important to recognise that you might experience a mixture of reactions and emotions that continually shift. If you are injured and not able to swim, these reactions can take many forms: denial; identity loss; anger; relief; bargaining; anxiety; depression; lack of confidence; acceptance; and worry.

For many swimmers injury is characterised by a range of emotions,

usually they tip to the negative, especially in the early days of injury. Swimmers who choose to confront the emotional challenges of rehabilitation with determination, intensity and resourcefulness can establish a positive emotional momentum, just like Jonny Brownlee.

## IT'S ALL ABOUT PERCEPTION

Your perspective on your injury will impact how well you cope and, in some cases, how quickly you recover. Swimmers that do best:

- **Have a positive attitude and outlook, intrinsic motivation, a high belief in succeeding and a low fear of re-injury**

- **Show a willingness to listen and learn about the injury and rehabilitation techniques**
- **Are dedicated towards their rehabilitation and exercises**
- **Have good strong levels of social support**

Open water swimming offers many benefits to athletes as well as presenting many challenges to overcome. Injury removes many of the benefits and increases the challenges. Though an injury may deprive you of the opportunity to swim and complete your open water swimming goals, it can give you the benefit of looking at your swimming in a new light: you might gain a new perspective on its

meaning and the role it plays in your life. So how can you become a Jonny Brownlee and be 'the best injured athlete you can be?' Here are nine suggestions to help overcome your injury, maintain a positive outlook and get you back in the water sooner:

## 1) INJURY EDUCATION

Learn as much as you can about the nature of your injury and treatment. Understanding the 'what' and 'why' of injury management enables you to fully engage in rehabilitation and feel more empowered.

## 2) REHABILITATION AND RETURN TO SPORT GOALS

Create your own 'road map to success'

and map out a pathway that will lead towards recovery and return. Just as you set goals in swimming, set goals for your recovery. Ensure your goals are realistic, and include short, medium and longer-term goals that guide the day-to-day process of training and treatment.

## 3) BUILDING A TEAM AROUND YOU

Building a team to meet the challenges and demands of rehabilitation will help you overcome feelings of isolation. You might feel separated from your usual group of swimmers and friends, but they can help build your confidence in recovery and your return to swimming. Bringing the idea of teamwork into your rehabilitation can help you to normalise the need to rely on others and see it as

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a group process, friends can be happy to help.

## 4) MANAGING EMOTIONS

Understanding how to identify and cope with the distress that comes with your injury will help improve mood, cultivate confidence and enhance motivation to recover. Work through feelings of loss and threat that follow an injury, channelling and recognising thoughts that are both positive and negative can energise the rehabilitation process.

## 5) SEEING IS BELIEVING

Cultivating a positive future perspective on the recovery process can help to foster confidence in your ability to cope with adversity and endure rehabilitation. Use mental rehearsal as a way of anticipating the challenges ahead and practise coping skills to help pave the way to your recovery.

## 6) FOCUS AND DISTRACTION

Pay attention to the finer details of your recovery. Practise skill execution and progressive skills that can lead to gains, however small they seem. Use these small steps of progress to let go of self-defeating thoughts and other distractions to concentrate on the task in hand – getting yourself recovered.

## 7) BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Accepting fear and treating it as a tool to guide your decision making, cultivating trust in those that are treating you and trusting in yourself, will all help you build confidence in the rehabilitation process.

## MENTAL TOUGHNESS AND THRIVING IN ADVERSITY

Thriving in the face of adversity begins with controlling personal thoughts, feelings and actions. Toughness means using mental skills when tired, hurt, discouraged and distressed. Taking control will enable you to move through injury and gain skills to help cope with adversity.

## CHAMPION MIND-SET

The desire to improve and get better is a fundamental element of human spirit that sport celebrates. Learning lessons from injury and re-embracing the aspirations that drive sport participation can reaffirm your identity and provide an opportunity to grow as an athlete and person 🏊‍♀️

