



Exercising While Injured

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“We’re going to have to shut you down for six weeks.” These were the words that came from the doctor I consulted with after an MRI revealed a partial tear of the patellar tendon in my left knee. Prior to this point, I had been experiencing pain in my left knee for several months. Like so many other fitness enthusiasts, I tried to work through the pain instead of around it. My volume of exercise (officiating three basketball games, teaching two group exercise classes, and three days/week of strength training) was high- in retrospect, too high for what my body could tolerate. One of the most frustrating situations that those who exercise typically battle at least once in their lives is dealing with an injury. Let’s examine a few ways to maintain a regular exercise regimen while dealing with an injury.

Acknowledge Your Injury – Whether it be minor muscle soreness from overuse or an acute injury, the first step is to accept that something is not right. It is very common for individuals of all fitness levels to try and work through pain and injuries. But what we fail to do is heed this classic piece of excellent advice: ‘Listen to your body.’ Outside of common muscle soreness that should only last up to a few days, discomfort that lasts longer than a week- that doesn’t begin to subside or that worsens may very likely require medical attention.

Seek Medical Attention – This is often the most frustrating part for people- and often one people with injuries skip (they may simply not want to go to the doctor, it may take longer than they want to get an appointment, etc.). Getting medical advice from a clinician is important. Often your PCP may treat you himself or herself, may refer you to an orthopedic specialist, or simply write a prescription for physical therapy.

Consult Your Network – I have built a network of intelligent minds in my field (athletic trainers, strength coaches, etc.) who I can consult with when I have questions. This has worked out tremendously for me as I've battled various ailments over the years. What I advise to those of any fitness level, is to also connect with your colleagues, friends, and family to see if they have had similar injuries and have any good recommendations for physical therapists and other providers you may be referred to. Do your research and make an informed choice about your care. A limiting factor will typically be which providers accept your health insurance.

Create a Realistic Timeline – Creating a timeline with specific short-term goals based on your symptoms is a very helpful exercise. With consultation from your PCP and other providers, create your short-term goals for treatment and recovery. I typically re-evaluate things every 1-2 weeks, and allow myself to alter my timeline based on symptoms. We must listen to our bodies and adjust our treatment plan accordingly. Be sure your goals are both realistic and safe. Progress forward with your treatment plan only when your body is ready.

Focus on What You CAN Do – This is arguably the most critical component of the recovery process. We can all agree that dealing with an injury is physically stressful, but it's so critical to care for ourselves mentally during this process as well. Outline your workout program based on what you can do. For example, if someone has a knee injury and is unable to use that particular limb, they should set up a plan that engages every other muscle group. Think about it: if I break my right leg, I can still do exercises with my left leg, both arms, and my torso. A simple routine of chest presses, seated rowing, and couple exercises for the lower back and abdominals would be an acceptable routine to engage in while the injured leg heals. We tend to focus on our limitations, but we should really think about placing our focus on what we can do. Eventually, you will get back to exercising the injured area, but for the short-term it's important to exercise smart and stay confident and optimistic.

Reward Yourself – Being injured can be an extremely stressful situation. Depending on the severity of the injury, It can exhaust you physically, mentally, financially, and spiritually. Be gentle with and good to yourself during the recovery process. Using food as a reward can be effective if the choices are healthy. I like to recommend people reward themselves with nourishing activities such as going for a massage, a mani/pedi, or even seeing a new movie at the theatre. Simply put, do something that brings you joy, is relaxing or fun, and is healthy too! You deserve it!

