Collegiate Athletes' Responses to Medical Retirement

Extent research examines the psychological risks of athletic injury and traumatic experiences separately, but no strong connection between these areas has been established. To link these ideas, the current research uses the stress and coping and post traumatic growth theories as frameworks to examine collegiate athletes whose injury resulted in medical retirement. The benefits of social support were assessed through a case series approach examining the experience of medically retired athletes in a support group designed for athletes in transition. Recently medically retired female collegiate athletes (n=3) were interviewed before and after attending the support group. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a narrative thematic analysis conducted with an a priori constructed codebook. Emotional responses to medical retirement were largely dependent on the severity and pain of the injury, changes in athletic identity, changes in social status and relationships, the nature of the decision to medically retire, and the perception of social support. Individual cases differed on severity of injury, individual versus team sport, and pre-injury dedication and connection to the team and sport. Overall, negative experiences included loss of connection to the team, frustration, and feeling pushed into medical retirement. Consistent with the stress and coping theory, many of the negative experiences were linked to an external locus of control, leading to an emotion-focused rather than problem-focused coping response. Positive experiences included a new outlook on life, a newfound inner strength, a new job, and a rewarding feeling from helping other athletes transition (e.g post-traumatic growth).