Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 33:

Is a sports injury affecting your mental health?

Suzy:
Hello and welcome to Talking Therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for Psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker, and I'm the editor-in-chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. We've all experienced injury and most of us have experienced one when playing sport. Whether that's professionally or recreationally, a sports injury can have a real impact on our mental wellbeing.

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Suzy:
That was UKCP psychotherapist Gary Bloom. Gary started his career as a football commentator at Radio City Liverpool in the 1980s, before moving on to work for the likes of Sky Sport and Channel 4. Gary trained as a psychotherapist after recognising the need for psychological support in sport. Now the host of *On The Sporting Couch*, a podcast for talkSPORT that addresses mental health issues in the industry, Gary works with elite athletes and football clubs to provide psychotherapeutic support. When we experience an injury doing something we love, it can often affect how we see ourselves. Feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and anxiety can overwhelm us when we're injured. In this episode, UKCP CEO Sarah Niblock will be sitting down with UKCP psychotherapist Gary Bloom to understand how a sports injury can affect us.

Sarah:
Gary, a sports injury affects us physically, but how does it affect us psychologically, whether we're an athlete or just an ordinary jogger?

Gary:
That is a huge question to start with because it depends on so many factors, like the severity of the injury; the age of the athlete; are they male or female; are they professional; are they amateur; what are they expecting to do in their athletics or professional sports careers. So it's a really wide topic. And for example, a young man maybe 15 or 16, who has maybe an ACL playing football is a very different proposition to a player playing football may be aged 32-33, who has an ACL, then it can turn into a career ending injury. So psychologically, we're looking at very, very different things. And therefore, it's too wide a question for me to drill down and say, well, that is the psychological effect. For example, is all your earnings predicated on the fact that you can play football, play rugby, play cricket, run for GB Olympic team? So that could be a financial implication into the injury as well. So, there's just too many different variables about how injuries come about, and their psychological impact on the athlete.

Sarah:
I think most people listening to this may be everyday kind of athletes, people who are doing some kind of fitness, and particularly at a time like this when we're recording may just be working out at home or online. I suppose for some of us, it is a bit of a release, isn't it? A way of maintaining healthy levels of stress. Could you talk a little bit about what it's like for the non-professional, everyday exerciser?

Gary:
Yeah, so for what I would call the amateur athletes or the semi-pro or whatever stage they see themselves at, I think you have to see that an injury is a message that our body is giving to us. And rather than see it as a catastrophic thing, 'well I'll never jog again, I'll never run again, I'll never play badminton, again', we have to think about ways of returning to that sport. And just because we do a certain sport in a certain way doesn't necessarily mean we have to give up all physical exercise, because we have that particular complaint. So, for example, I've been working with people who might have lower body injuries, strains on their knees or their ankles, or toes, they can still work the upper body. I think we have to be slightly open minded to the nature of the exercise that we do. And psychologically, as human beings, we are creatures of habit and that means we think, 'Oh, well, that's the only way I can get exercise.' 'I can only play golf, that's the only thing I can do.' 'I can only play badminton.' 'I can only run.' There are so many different ways that we can exercise to keep ourselves fit. The other thing I'd say, it's a joke in our profession that what happens to the brain when we exercise, however we exercise, and the dopamine hit that we get through exercise, if we could bottle that as psychologists and psychotherapists and psychiatrists and sell it, none of us would ever have to work again. We'd be sitting on a beach somewhere, sipping pina coladas. It is such a vital aspect for wellbeing, physical exercise, it can't be stressed enough.

Sarah:
And I would imagine that for those who are professional athletes, a sports injury could leave them quite traumatised. I mean, how deeply do people become affected by injuries or accidents that may leave them out of their sport for some time or indeed, indefinitely?

Gary:
Yeah, that's a really good question. Again, it depends on the personality, it depends on the support system that goes on around that individual athlete. For example, if they're part of a rugby, or cricket or football team, they'll have a whole group of medical people, or maybe even psychological people like me to help them. A bit harder if you're a tennis player, a bit harder if you're a golfer, or you play an individual sport, where you might just have to work with one person. There's something that I work with, which is an aspect that I call the tyranny of success, that goes on inside sports clubs. Nobody can bear to hold the idea that you might get beaten at the weekend, or you might lose your next game, or that your next match could even be your last one because of injury. And this is something that I think sport is really bad at, that no rugby player who was told in three days' time, 'you're going to have a career ending injury,' would even contemplate going on to the pitch. The role I play inside a football club, I hold the uncertainty, I hold the middle ground, I hold the area where players can't verbalise their uncertainty about life or the fact that they are one injury away from a career ending incident, which will significantly alter their lives.

Sarah:
And they must be pushing themselves so hard to get over those injuries, probably more quickly than they should. I mean, what kind of impact could that have rushing back into the game before you're ready?

Gary:

That is one of the hardest things that any professional club or even amateur athlete has to decide: how quick do you rehab? Well, the answer is, all our bodies are completely different and how quickly you might recover from an injury might be a different length of time for how long I would recover from exactly the same injury. Because there's different loads strains on that particular joint or that particular area, how much wear and tear has there been on that particular joint. So, it's really difficult. And this is where the excellent work that physios, medical staff, strength and conditioning people at sports clubs, that's where they earn their money. They load players, athletes to a certain degree. Interestingly, the theory is you overload slightly on a rehab to allow the player to get to a point where they have got over the injury and they have strengthened that joint to a point that if you got another knock on it, if you got another strain on it, it would withhold that trauma that maybe originally caused the injury. So, we go slightly beyond the strength element to a point where it doesn't break down, but we super strength that joint so it can cope with further trauma.

Sarah:

Do people find it difficult to accept that there can be mental health effects from a physical injury, given the sector you're working in, which is very, very fierce and competitive?

Gary:

I think it's a growing area of expertise, the area of injury and the psychological fallout of injury is just beginning to come to the fore. I mean, we've had a lot of work in football about head and brain injuries from heading the football over a period of time. The rugby authorities are looking at how they play their sport. So, I'd say yes, we're getting in there, but I think there's an awful lot more work we can do to really understand what happens to the psyche of an individual in professional sport when they can no longer do their sport. Let me give you for instance here, so if you, heaven forbid, broke your arm tomorrow, you'd still be able to do your job in some shape or form, and likewise me, I could still be a therapist with a broken arm. If you're a bowler or a tennis player, and that is your sport, your value diminishes catastrophically overnight with that injury. So, a footballer who breaks his leg, for argument's sake, could be worth ten million pounds the day before the injury, but his value would decrease maybe by half to five million pounds the day after the injury because nobody would ever know if he was ever going to come back the same player. And if you can think of what that would do to your brain, 'I'm going to be half the worth to the world after this injury', that will give you some indication of the insights people might have in professional sport and how they have a relationship with potential injury.

Sarah:

That's horrendous. That impact on someone's sense of identity must be absolutely profound. When you're injured and can't get involved like you used to, do you have to give up the sport you enjoy totally?

Gary:

Well, again, that's a very, very wide question, if you don't mind me saying so. It depends how old you are, how long you would have left anyway in the game. A football or picking up a major injury to his ankle or his knee at the age of 33, well, he'd only probably have another year or so left in his professional footballing life even if he didn't have an injury. So, again, a young person picking up an injury, they would say, well, you know yourself physiologically, at the age of 16-17, maybe younger than that, the body repairs much quicker. So, there's again, a whole raft of different ways of looking at how an injury might affect a sportsman or woman. I still play football and I'm well into middle age, but I know that if I were to have a serious injury, that would probably be it. When I was 15, or 14 and I broke my arm, I thought, 'well, I'll be back in a few week's time, it's just a six-week hiatus in what I want to do.'

Sarah:
How can psychotherapy help someone trying to overcome the trauma of injury? And how can it help those coming to terms with the kinds of changes you described?

Gary:
Well, I think the role of psychotherapy in sport is a really interesting one and I don't know of another sports psychotherapist working in the same way as I do, not with that title anyway. The way I work is that improvement in performance or getting over an injury is the by-product of my work, not the goal of my work. So, if I were to work with somebody who had been seriously injured, I would look at what the injury actually meant to them in terms of their personality, how they viewed themselves, what is their personal history, what was it like when they were incapacitated before, and then get them to come to terms with what has happened to them. A sports psychologist would look at trying to get over the injury. Mine is a by-product of my work.

Sarah:
That's such a fascinating and I'm sure very, very quick glance at the huge amount of expertise and variation that goes on in your role. Something that we hear a lot from psychotherapists is how there is no one size fits all, that everyone is an individual. And that I would assume you have a very unique relationship with each of your clients, athletes that you work with, based on who they are, where they've come from, and where they're heading to.

Gary:
Yeah, and then I was integratively trained as a psychotherapist and that gave me a whole bunch of tools to work with sports people in different ways. Also, the big difference in sports psychotherapy, you don't get 50 minutes in a quiet room, you might get five minutes by a coffee machine, you might get three minutes walking with that player off a training ground, you might get an hour of their time and a different set of circumstances or two hours of their time, because you've travelled the length and breadth of the country to be with them and therefore 50 minutes session isn't appropriate. As a sports psychotherapist, the important thing for me is to be flexible in my working practices, because sports people are flexible in how they act out their professional lives and I have to follow and mix in with them. Otherwise, people like me would be rejected immediately by sports clubs and organisations and practitioners.

Sarah:
That was absolutely fascinating. Thank you very much indeed.

Suzy:
That was UKCP psychotherapist Gary Bloom speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for psychotherapy. If, after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk. We'll also be discussing injuries and their effects on mental health in Psychologies magazine this month, or you can find us online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCPs psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find us too. So, join us again next month. Till then, thank you so much for listening and take good care of yourselves.