

“The Psychology of Rehabilitation”:

What anyone needs to do after a traumatic injury or operation

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If you have had a nasty injury or accident or surgery for disease, then you will probably need some physical rehabilitation. It is now widely understood that there are many normal psychological aspects to good rehab. These pages provide a quick summary of those issues.

1. Responsibility

As patients, we need to have a good understanding of how much we are responsible for our own outcomes and how much responsibility is in the hands of our health professionals. For instance, when we have surgery, about 100% of the responsibility lies with the medical team. But when we are doing rehabilitation for a long-term issue, we need to become an expert in our own health and it is up to us to look after ourselves while also allowing the right health professionals to contribute with their expertise, experience and knowledge. Have a think about what you expect of the health professionals that help you and also what you expect of yourself. Is it the right mix for you? If you are not sure, then ask your health professional.

“The longer we have a physical injury or medical condition, the more we need to educate ourselves about it. It also helps to accept that how well we are functioning in another two years from now is to some large degree up to ourselves.”

For Rehab to be effective we need to appreciate that successful Rehab depends on the balance between our own effort and that of the health professionals. The key is not to become dependent on a carer. Things a person can do for themselves, even when their injury is very bad include taking medications just as prescribed, maintaining an optimal baseline of fitness and physical activity regardless of difficulties, managing social relationships, taking steps to optimise mobility (how we get around), doing physical exercises that are recommended (like stretching or strengthening), not letting others do too much for us, when we know we need to practice.

2. Determination to Adapt.

The idea of 'adaptation' is the most important in the psychology of rehabilitation and it involves other ideas as well: (i) determination, (ii) acceptance and (iii) flexibility. All this is explained.

To 'adapt' means that we *change* some aspect of our self or our life in order to accommodate changes that are forced upon us. Depending on our injury, we may need to do some activities differently or slower than we used to. It might mean that we can no longer do that same activity at all and it is now up to us to find an alternate activity. There are many degrees and versions of changing or adapting. When we do it successfully, it means that we reduce our level of disability; we increase our functioning.

To 'adapt' sounds very positive the way it is worded here. But it is hard and has its emotional downsides too, as you might have already figured out. Part of adapting means to accept that *THIS* is the way things are now and *THIS* has happened to me. So **acceptance** is necessary - but it can make us feel sad and annoyed. This is why it takes **determination**. We need to be willing to tolerate the emotional discomfort of doing things differently from now on. We need to be willing to be **flexible**. If we think that we should not have to alter how we do things (for instance because we never deserved this condition in the first place), then we will fail to adapt and our potential functioning remains low. Adaptation will allow you to do more for yourself and feel good about that acquired independence.

So, if we are **determined** to have the best future we possibly can, and if we are willing to **accept** this is the way things are, then we can find the **flexibility** to adapt and create the best life that we can have in these circumstances – and we won't stay stuck, merely wishing that this had never happened in the first place.

3. Motivation

There will be plenty of times when your motivation to go to appointments or to do your rehab exercises will be low. Rehab takes time and sometimes money. And it can cause short-term discomfort and pain - for the longer-term good, of course. Some people also find that physical rehabilitation sessions are confronting – it reminds them of how hard things are now, or reminds them of a traumatising accident. However, there are ways to keep your motivation up enough to stay engaged in good rehab.

Here are some ideas on how to keep your motivation up...

I Keep a chart of your exercises and progress. Monitoring what we do (and don't do) gives us feedback and hopefully we get a sense of reward and accomplishment seeing what we have done. It is also a reminder that we need to do it.

II Set a series of goals and write them out. For instance, 'Mike' was an upper-limb amputee and his goals for three months from now included cooking dinner for his family and dressing independently. Seeing his bigger goals written on Post-It Notes meant that he remained determined to keep up his smaller, short-term goals and daily exercises. His one-month goals were to practice doing things with his left arm daily and to meet with his OT twice a week for problem-solving and practice.

III Think about life in 12 months from now and ask these questions:

If I do all the exercises and appointments that are recommended, how good will things be?

If I don't do all that I can, what will my functioning be like?

If I do all the exercises and appointments that are recommended, how will I feel about myself?

If I don't do all that I can, how will I feel about myself (proud or disappointed)?

4. Manage feelings of Injustice and Anger

It is almost inevitable that, at times, you will feel angry and resentful that things have ended up as they are. We can't help but feel that it is not fair that this happened to me. These thoughts and feelings might be common, but they are not very helpful for a couple of reasons. Firstly, they get us feeling negative and down. Secondly, they lead us to "take the eye off the ball" – the more I feel angry or look for justice, the less energy and time I have left for my active rehabilitation.

We can do this in a number of ways. One popular way to not let anger and resentment get in the way of good rehab is actually to focus on it in small, deliberate bursts. Spend one minute each week, acknowledging how unlucky you feel or say "why me" to yourself five times quickly. The idea here is to acknowledge the feelings but to get it out of the way. Your mind will be less likely to lock onto it the next time that feeling or thought pops into your mind.

Focus on how far you have come in the last few weeks or months. Perhaps focus on your next one to three goals. What do you intend to achieve next in terms of your adaptation inside or outside your home? These sorts of focus help you to feel good about what is happening NOW, and shift your attention away from unhelpful points of focus, like (a) comparing yourself to everyone who does not have an injury like you or (b) comparing yourself to life before your injury or illness.

Another hint for dealing with anger and injustice feelings is to find something every day to feel grateful for or appreciative of. Maybe even make a list of all the people who have been a little helpful or generous or thoughtful recently. Have your recent medical problems taught you anything positive?

Remember that anger is inevitable and the main thing is to notice it and avoid dwelling on it.

5. Dealing with feelings of loss and sadness

These feelings are just as natural as and common than the sense of anger or injustice mentioned above. We feel sad when we lose something we value, like being able to do certain things in our life. An injury or illness or surgery often changes our life more than we could have imagined and we lose a lot.

Some ways to deal with this include:

- (a) Acknowledge the sadness as it is – a natural emotion. Maybe even say to yourself occasionally “I notice how sad I feel at times”. These statements make it real. And at the same time we remind ourselves that it is a feeling – it is not a fact – just something we can notice, among many other things.
- (b) Spend some time making a list of all the things in your life that you can still access or that have not changed too much. People still will admire you and you have some relationships (a neighbour, pet, child or friend). Ask yourself: Has your character changed? Have the reasons that people like or love you changed? What did the people close to you used to admire about you – have you lost those things? Do you still have some relationships? How about your intelligence, problem-solving capacity or personal values and qualities, like honesty and integrity? Can you still enjoy art, like music and cinema? So. . . do you choose now to focus on the things that you have lost or focus on all the things that you still have?? Are you ready to move onto the next chapter of your life focusing on the things that you can achieve and that you do have going for you?

(It's hard. It is easier and more natural to focus on what we have lost and how good things were before. Therefore, acknowledge your frequent feelings of sadness and try to ideas presented here to help you get on with your rehab, even though there is a lot of sadness and loss).

6. Self-evaluation and self-esteem

After an injury, it is easy to feel inadequate in some powerful ways. If our appearance changes, we can feel bad or even ashamed. If we lose our job or reduce our income, that can make a person feel a bit useless. Not being able to help out at home or needing people to do things can make a person feel very negative about themselves. Here are some ideas to help:

- Make a list of all the things that you can still do and get someone else to add to this list.
- Make a set of achievable, realistic and clear goals of things that you intend to achieve.
- Make a list of the things that you have achieved in your recovery & rehabilitation recently.
- Use the “other-person test” If someone else was in the same medical and social predicament as you, would you be judging them the way you are judging yourself?
- Think of three people who you admire, respect and trust. Why do you hold them in such regard? What qualities do they have? And now – can a person like you still have the same qualities whether they are injured or not? What does this say about your qualities?

SUMMARY

These pages are designed for anyone who has had a significant injury or surgery and who needs rehabilitation. It describes some of “The Psychology of Rehabilitation”. These are issues that affect just about anyone who needs rehab. The main points could be summarised like this:

- **The patient must get involved actively and take responsibility for things like communicating well with their health professionals and doing their exercises and tolerating discomfort along the way;**
- Motivation always goes up and down; and when your motivation goes down you can try envisioning the future, writing down small goals, and charting your progress or exercises and seeing your progress on paper;
- **The key to good rehab is adaptation. This means it is how we alter what we do and how we do it, in order to optimise our functioning, given how things are now. People who fail to adapt are the ones who get stuck focusing on injustice, blame or wishing that it all never happened. It helps to have the right mix of determination, acceptance and flexibility;**
- Several emotional difficulties are very common, including sadness, anger and low self-worth. There are things that you can do to manage these feelings.
- **If you are willing to consult with a rehab psychologist, ask your doctor or therapist.**