

# Supporting an athlete's emotional and mental health after a concussion

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For coaches and sport administrators

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- Many coaches and sports administrators will work with an athlete who has suffered from a sport-related concussion (SRC)
- There is a higher risk of SRCs in collision sports (Emery et al., 2017)
  - For example, in football, rugby and ice hockey



- Health care professionals primarily assess an athlete's physical symptoms (like headaches and dizziness) when making a decision about an athlete's return to play



- ➔ While this is very important, it doesn't always tell us everything we need to know about an athlete's recovery and readiness to return to play

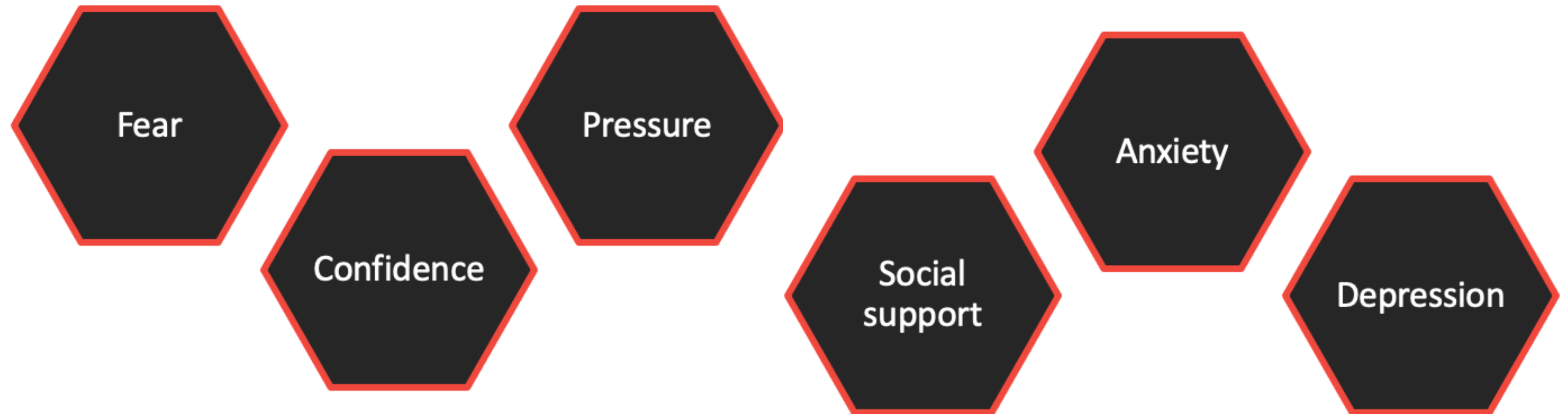
- Athletes often experience psychosocial consequences after a SRC
  - More simply, after a concussion, an athlete may experience **emotional** and **mental health challenges** which can impact their readiness to return to play

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**The goal** of this presentation is to provide more details on the mental and emotional consequences that athletes may experience after a SRC. This presentation will also highlight some practical tips to help you support your athletes after this injury.

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- Common emotional and mental health challenges faced by athletes after a SRC include:



## Fear

- Athletes can be fearful of getting another SRC when returning to sport

**"I think the first game back was a little nerve-wracking. Just in the sense of you kind of think of everything, kind of the fear [of wondering whether] you are actually okay, if it was just going to happen again or, because second impact syndrome is pretty serious."**

- Female soccer athlete



**Tip:** Keep in mind that there are many reasons why an athlete can be fearful after a concussion. Talk to the athlete about their worries so that you can better support them during their recovery.

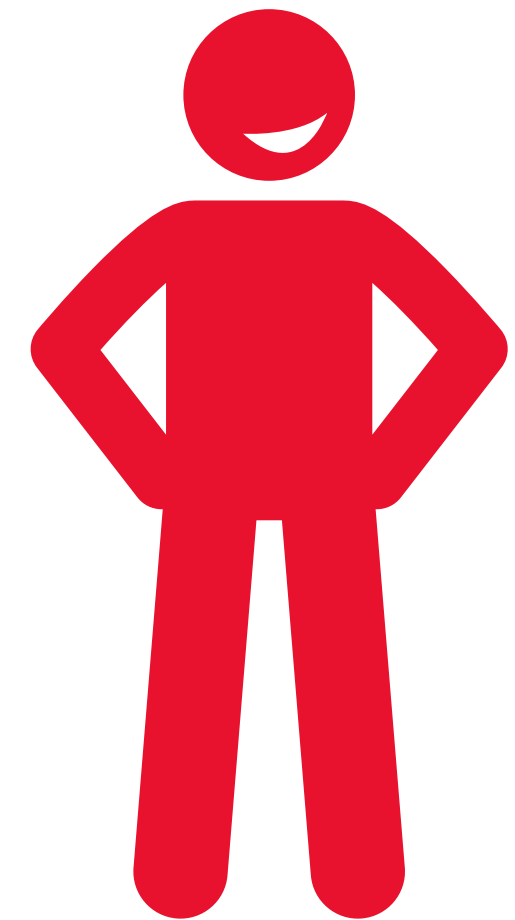
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## Confidence

- As athletes regained confidence, they felt more ready to return to sport

**“ You're just as good as you were, or you're just as healthy as you were, just as capable as you were. ”**

- Male american football player



**Tip:** Value your athletes' recovery process, highlight their resiliency and progress to increase their confidence as they return to play.

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## Pressure

- Pressure from coaches, parents and teammates can impact an athlete's recovery, not to mention their mental and emotional health

**"People were just wondering 'are you ready to come back? Does your head hurt really bad?' People didn't know when I was coming back and [they would] get kind of impatient for me to come back because they wanted me out there."**

- Male basketball athlete



**Tip:** Learn about concussions with your team. This way everyone will know the return to play process and will understand the importance of not pressuring an athlete to return to play too soon.

## Anxiety and Depression

- Athletes can feel anxious or depressed by missing playing time after a concussion.

**“Anxiety. Absolutely. That year was the worst I’ve ever felt. [...] Everything was going too fast for me.”**

- Male ice hockey player



**Tip:** If you see big changes in athletes’ behaviours or thoughts, encourage them to seek appropriate professional care, for example, from a psychologist.

## Social Support

- Support from coaches, parents and peers can help athletes cope with their injury



**“It would be nice to have social interactions because it’s almost like a sideline—well you are on the sidelines. But it’s almost, like, your whole life is on hold, right? Because you can’t go out and see your friends. [...] You are almost isolated.”**

- Male basketball athlete



**Tip:** Check in on your athletes to see how you can support them throughout their recovery. Communication is key!

- ☑ Coaches and sport administrators play an important role in athletes' recovery. You are a pillar during positive moments and challenges.
  - **Recognize** that your support and your reassurance can make a difference in helping your athletes.
- ☑ All athletes have different experiences with SRCs (for example, length of symptoms).
  - **Adapt** your support to every athlete to meet their needs.
- ☑ Communicate with athletes to see how they are doing and how you can support them.
  - **Provide** a safe space for athletes to voice any concerns or fears.

If you are interested in learning more, reading the papers below is a great place to start.

- 1) Bloom, G. A., Trbovich, A. M., Caron, J. G., & Kontos, A. P. (2022). Psychological aspects of sport-related concussion: An evidence-based position paper. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 34(3), 495–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2020.1843200>
- 2) Caron, J. G., Bloom, G. A., Johnston, K. M., & Sabiston, C. M. (2013). Effects of Multiple Concussions on Retired National Hockey League Players. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 35(2), 168–179. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.35.2.168>
- 3) Caron, J. G., Benson, A. J., Steins, R., McKenzie, L., & Bruner, M. W. (2021). The social dynamics involved in recovery and return to sport following a sport-related concussion: A study of three athlete-teammate-coach triads. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 52, 101824. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101824>
- 4) Emery, C. A., Black, A. M., Kolstad, A., Martinez, G., Nettel-Aguirre, A., Engebretsen, L., Johnston, K., Kissick, J., Maddocks, D., Tator, C., Aubry, M., Dvořák, J., Nagahiro, S., & Schneider, K. (2017). What strategies can be used to effectively reduce the risk of concussion in sport? A systematic review. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 51(12), 978–984. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2016-097452>
- 5) Lassman, M. E., Rathwell, S., Black, A. M., & Caron, J. G. (in press). Exploring student-athletes' perceptions of their psychological readiness to return to sport following a concussion. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*
- 6) Tjong, V. K., Baker, H. P., Cogan, C. J., Montoya, M., Lindley, T. R., & Terry, M. A. (2017). Concussions in NCAA varsity football athletes: A qualitative investigation of player perception and return to sport. *Journal of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Global Research & Reviews*, 1(8). <https://doi:10.5435/JAAOSGlobal-D-17-00070>