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Recovering From Injury

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One of the biggest challenges (and hardest lesson for me to learn personally) is when to simply let the body heal. It wasn't hard because I didn't understand that the body needed time to recover per-se, but it was hard simply because I hated the idea of not exercising. I thought that if I didn't exercise constantly, that I would wither away and die... and I am not alone in that kind of thinking either.

Recently there was a question on our message board (thanks to *brandisher* for the question) regarding how to train while recovering from an injury, to which I replied – as any good trainer should – to first check with your doctor or health professional regarding whether it is beneficial at this point to engage in any training at all yet. For those of you reading this article, please check with your doctor before engaging in any exercise program, be it here or on any other website or information system. Especially after an injury, strenuous or improper use of exercise can damage the body and it is vital to get a health care professional's opinion before starting any exercise or training.

The truth about rest and recovery

Before we go any further, we need to grasp the basic concept of rest and recovery. I know that there are many of you out there, who like me, thought or used to think that if you aren't exercising 24/7, you are losing muscle mass and will shrivel into a weakling before you can blink. This is simply not true.

After exercise, the muscle will be strained and need time to heal before it can be worked again. By exercising 24/7 you will actually be over-training, which will hurt the muscle and increase the likelihood of an injury.

That being said, depending on the type of training you are doing (bodybuilding, toning or athletic) The rest-period can vary significantly, and over-resting is not good either, so you should check with a training professional to see how much rest you should be getting in-between exercise sessions.

The one exception to this is an injury. When the body is injured, it tends to divert a substantial amount of energy resources to repairing whatever part is injured. This is why when I was hospitalized, they fed me Salisbury steak almost every day and I hardly gained a pound, while still being bed-ridden most of the time. While some muscle mass may be lost during the longer recovery times, it is nothing terrible and the lost muscle can be regained quicker afterwards than trying to exercise hard during the healing process,

further injuring oneself and then having to stay in recovery even longer.... which I have done before.

One of the sayings we use often in the martial arts is “listen to your body”, give it the recovery it needs.

Exercise as part of recovery from injury

Depending on the type of injury, recovery and rehabilitation may take the form of stretching, working with light resistance working without any resistance (trying to flex the muscles) or any combination there-in.

Typically this exercise will come after the injury itself is healed or mostly healed and the muscles or tendons need to be “re-awakened”.

It is again vital that this exercise not be too strenuous, as this could easily re-aggravate the injury and cause sometimes a worse injury than the original. Light resistance must be very light (typically less than 5 pounds (2.26 kilograms) and the motions used should be very slow and controlled to avoid hyper-extending the joints or tearing tissue.

Example of rehabilitative exercise

Below is an example of exercises that can be used for rehabilitation and recovery purposes. Before attempting any exercises, please consult your doctor or health care professional. As with any exercise, there is serious risk of injury if the exercises are performed incorrectly or a previous injury is aggravated by performing an exercise when the body is not ready for it. The practitioner assumes all risk of injury by performing these exercises.

Non-weight resisted: If the injury in question is a broken limb which has healed enough to again begin light training, I would personally start with simply practice flexing the effected muscles. Work through the entire range of motion of the limb very slowly with controlled motion and breathing and just continually flex the muscles and then release. In this simple way, all of the effected muscles can be worked by applying as little or as much resistance as required without any kind of weights or equipment. The muscles are worked against other muscles in the body.

If the injury in question has to-do with the neck, the same principle can be applied as with the arms above. Simply focus on flexing muscles and move the neck through its entire range of motion slowly with control of movement and breath. Do not whip or fling or attempt to sped-up in any way, as this will mostly like cause stress, strain and injury to the muscles.

For a back injury, I would stick with stretching as this can also strengthen the back and core to some extent. As there are many different muscles in the back. Consult your doctor

or health care professional to obtain a stretch that fits your specific injury, as I can not list them all here.

Conclusion

An injury can put us out of training for a while, but that is no reason to panic. Many times I have found that when I am injured, I usually had not been resting enough to begin with and the injury provides me with a needed opportunity to do so.

Regardless of the reason for your injury, try to view it for what it is, an invitation to rest. Do not stress out over the missed training; in-fact in some cases I have talked with others and experienced personally that after the rest I more often than not, emerge stronger than when I went in.

Take care, and may you all continue to rise to the challenge!

James