

Social Support in the Athletic Training Room: Athletes' Expectations of Staff and Student Athletic Trainers

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Objective: Social support has been identified repeatedly in the literature as being beneficial to individuals suffering from injury or illness. Because of the frequent interaction between athletic trainers and student athletes, the athletic trainer is in a unique position to provide a variety of social support to the athlete. The purpose of the study was (1) to identify the degree to which athletes actually receive each of eight types of social support; (2) to identify the types of social support athletes need or expect to receive from staff and student athletic trainers; and (3) to compare the athletes' satisfaction with the quality of the support received from athletic training staff and students.

Design and Setting: A questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. It was administered at a Division I university.

Subjects: Eighty-five student-athletes at a Division I university.

Measurements: The survey consisted of 24 questions that used a five-point Likert rating scale.

Results: There was no significant difference in the amount of social support received by athletes from staff and student athletic trainers, in athletes' expectations of staff and student athletic trainers with regard to provision of social support, or in the athletes' level of satisfaction with staff and student athletic trainers' provision of social support.

Conclusions: Examined collectively, the findings indicate that athletes do not differentiate between staff and student athletic trainers with regard to the provision of social support. However, finding that athletes do not differentiate between staff and student athletic trainers in this area is significant in itself and has implications for athletic training education programs.

Key Words: sport psychology, psychology of injury

Athletic trainers are quite often an injured athlete's first and most frequent point of contact with the health care system. They see the athlete on almost a daily basis from the time the athlete is first injured until he or she returns to competition—a period that can include physicians' appointments, medical testing, surgery, and rehabilitation. Furthermore, because of the sheer number of athletes for whom the athletic trainer is responsible, student athletic trainers are often involved in the injury and rehabilitation process. As a result of the consistency and frequency of contact between the athlete and athletic trainer, the rapport established between the two individuals can have far-reaching effects. This places the athletic trainer (either certified or student) in a position to significantly affect the athlete's psychological recovery from injury, in addition to physical recovery. Social support has repeatedly been found to be one tool for enhancing a patient's psychological recovery.

Social support has been defined as "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient"¹ and "information from others that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligations."² A variety of names and definitions have been used to identify social support, an idea that has been prevalent in research for quite some time. Using early definitions of social support, Pines, Aronson, and Kafry³ identified six specific components of the

process, which were expanded to the current eight categories by Richman, Rosenfeld, and Hardy.⁴ Their definitions for the eight categories of social support were used in this study and are as follows:

1. Listening Support: the perception that an other is listening without giving advice or being judgmental;
2. Emotional Support: the perception that an other is providing comfort and caring and indicating that she or he is on the support recipient's side;
3. Emotional Challenge: the perception that an other is challenging the support recipient to evaluate his or her attitudes, values, and feelings;
4. Reality Confirmation: the perception that an other, who is similar to the support recipient and who sees things the same way the support recipient does, is helping to confirm the support recipient's perspective of the world;
5. Task Appreciation: the perception that an other is acknowledging the support recipient's efforts and is expressing appreciation for the work she or he does;
6. Task Challenge: the perception that an other is challenging the support recipient's way of thinking about a task or an activity in order to stretch, motivate, and lead the support recipient to greater creativity, excitement, and involvement;
7. Tangible Assistance: the perception that an other is providing the support recipient with financial assistance, products, and/or gifts;
8. Personal Assistance: the perception that an other is providing services or help, such as running an errand or driving the support recipient somewhere.⁴ (©1993 by Sage Publications. Reprinted by permission.)

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Within the health care context, social support has been studied in a wide range of areas. Patients recovering from stroke,⁵ heart attack,⁶ and cancer,⁷ as well as patients with psychiatric illnesses⁸ and patients with spinal cord injuries,⁹ have all been the focus of studies investigating the nature of social support and its effects on individuals and groups. A summary of the findings of these studies leads to the following conclusions: (1) There is a need for social support among individuals suffering from health problems. (2) The presence of adequate social support is positively related to improved recovery and decreased stress. (3) A lack of adequate social support is linked to poor recovery and poor stress management.

Providing social support is one way in which an athletic trainer can enhance an athlete's psychological recovery. However, providing social support, while simple at times, can also become quite complex. For example, Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce¹⁰ suggested that there may be some types of support that are more beneficial in certain situations and that the individual recipient benefits only to the extent that the support provided is accurately matched with the type of stress he or she is experiencing. Therefore, knowledge of the types of social support to provide for an athlete, or rather, which types of support an athlete needs or desires, can be quite valuable to the athletic trainer. Rosenfeld, Richman, and Hardy¹¹ studied the composition of athletes' social support networks and the sources from which athletes receive social support. However, they did not specifically address athletic trainers in their study. Furthermore, there is no information in the social support literature regarding which types of social support athletes need, or expect to receive, from athletic trainers.

The current social support literature contains no evidence to suggest that professionals in any field are held to a higher standard of providing social support than students in that field. That is, there have been no attempts to compare professionals' provision of social support with that of students. However, given the close proximity to athletes in which student athletic trainers work, athletic training is one profession in which these comparisons are very worthy of study.

Richman, Rosenfeld, and Hardy⁴ stated that task appreciation and task challenge can be provided only by "individuals who understand the demands, complexities, and technicalities of [an athlete's] vocation." Although student athletic trainers have begun to develop this understanding, we assumed that certified staff members, through their education and experience, would be more qualified to provide these types of support. We expected that athletes would share this view and would, therefore, report receiving and expecting to receive more task appreciation and task challenge from staff members than from students.

We also expected that athletes would associate listening, emotional support, and emotional challenge with professional staff members. These types of social support tend to consist of more involved communication with the athlete and, to some extent, may involve an emotional investment in the athletic trainer-athlete relationship. Although student athletic trainers can certainly provide these types of support, we believed that the athletes would view these efforts to be more within the job description of the certified staff member. Therefore, we hy-

pothesized that athletes would report receiving and expecting to receive more of these types of support from staff members than from students.

Finally, we expected to find that similarities in age and shared life experiences (eg, classes and college social life) that exist between student-athletes and student athletic trainers would lead athletes to report receiving and expecting to receive higher levels of reality confirmation and personal assistance from student athletic trainers than from staff members.

In summary, we conducted this study (1) to identify the degree to which athletes actually receive each of the eight types of social support; (2) to identify the types of social support athletes need or expect to receive from staff and student athletic trainers; and (3) to compare the athletes' satisfaction with the quality of the support received from athletic training staff and students.

METHODS

The participants were 85 intercollegiate athletes (age range, 18 to 25 years) from a midwestern Division I university, representing the football, softball, baseball, women's volleyball, men's and women's tennis, and women's track and field teams. With the permission of the athletic director and approval of the Human Subjects Committee at the university, coaches for each of the 16 athletic teams were contacted in writing to request assistance with the study. With follow-up phone calls, we arranged to visit a team meeting or practice to administer the questionnaire. Coaches from the eight teams listed above agreed to have their athletes participate. One coach was not willing to have his team participate. The remaining coaches either could not be reached or could not arrange their schedules to accommodate the questionnaire.

Upon arrival at the meeting or practice site, we distributed the questionnaires and reviewed the instructions. To ensure that the athletes had had more than just casual contact with the athletic training staff within a reasonable period of time prior to the study, the athletes were asked whether they had been treated for an injury or illness during the current school year. Those responding affirmatively were asked to continue. Athletes who had not received treatment within the past school year were instructed to return their questionnaires without completing them.

We had constructed the questionnaire based upon ideas and definitions contained in the Social Support Survey.⁴ This instrument was developed by Rosenfeld, Richman, and Hardy,⁴ from whom we obtained permission for its use. They conducted extensive studies to determine the validity and reliability of this instrument and reported their findings in the literature. To determine validity, the authors tested the measurement of each of the eight types of social support and found acceptable levels of content, construct, and concurrent validity for all eight types. Regarding reliability, the authors felt that the results of the test-retest were encouraging but cautioned that "in light of low test-retest reliabilities found with many other social support measuring instruments given over extended periods of time, it may be that perceptions of social

LISTENING SUPPORT: People who listen to you without giving advice or being judgmental.

1. In general, to what degree did members of the athletic training staff provide you with listening support?

	very little support provided			a great deal of support provided	
Certified Staff Members	1	2	3	4	5
Students	1	2	3	4	5

2. In general, to what extent did you expect or hope to receive listening support from members of the athletic training staff?

	very little expectation			very high expectation	
Certified Staff Members	1	2	3	4	5
Students	1	2	3	4	5

3. In general, how satisfied are you with the overall quality of listening support you received from members of the athletic training staff?

	very dissatisfied			very satisfied	
Certified Staff Members	1	2	3	4	5
Students	1	2	3	4	5

Page 1 of questionnaire.

support are not as stable as perceptions of other aspects of an individual's relationships."⁴

Our questionnaire was composed of one page for each of the eight categories of social support. Each page began by defining the type of social support, followed by three questions designed to assess (1) the degree to which the athletic training staff and students provided the indicated type of support; (2) the extent to which the athlete expected or hoped to receive that type of support from the athletic training staff and students, and (3) the athlete's satisfaction with the quality of the support received from athletic training staff and students. Athletes were asked to focus only on their interactions with the athletic training staff and students when answering the questions. A copy of the first page of the questionnaire is reproduced in the Figure. Each subsequent page was identical in form to the first page, with the only changes being those necessary to identify and define each category of social support. The questionnaire was reviewed by a jury of experts in the fields of athletic training, sport psychology, sport sociology, and physical education and was found to have logical validity.

Athletes responded to each question by circling a number on a five-point Likert scale (1 = low rating, 5 = high rating). For each question, one scale addressed certified staff members and one scale addressed student athletic trainers. Distinguishing between certified staff members and athletic training students was deemed important for a number of reasons. First, it allowed for more specific answers from athletes and eliminated confusion as to whom the questions referred. Second, it

allowed for independent evaluation of the quantity and quality of social support provided by staff and student athletic trainers. Third, it allowed staff and students to become more aware of the types of social support they are providing and of which types athletes feel they would benefit from were they to receive more.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The Table contains the means and standard deviations of the athletes' responses to the questionnaire (based on a five-point Likert scale). Using *t* tests for independent samples ($\alpha = 0.05$), each category of social support was examined for differences in the amount of social support expected and received by athletes from staff and student athletic trainers. Differences in athletes' satisfaction with social support received were also examined.

RESULTS

Student athletic trainers scored slightly lower than certified staff members on each question. However, there were no significant differences found in the amount of social support athletes received or expected from staff and student athletic trainers. There were also no significant differences in the athletes' satisfaction with the social support received from staff and student athletic trainers.

Table 1. Values for Social Support Received and Expected and Level of Satisfaction

	Received		Expected		Satisfaction	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Listening support						
Certified staff	4.01	1.09	3.82	1.29	4.24	0.89
Students	3.92	1.06	3.69	1.24	4.24	1.01
Emotional support						
Certified staff	3.51	1.23	3.40	1.29	3.74	1.11
Students	3.43	1.17	3.20	1.29	3.74	1.06
Emotional challenge						
Certified staff	3.07	1.75	2.90	1.42	3.52	1.14
Students	2.77	1.67	2.81	1.37	3.34	1.15
Reality confirmation						
Certified staff	3.33	1.28	3.22	1.33	3.60	1.12
Students	3.40	1.25	3.19	1.27	3.66	1.11
Task appreciation						
Certified staff	3.73	1.18	3.57	1.27	3.83	1.14
Students	3.55	1.12	3.40	1.16	3.81	1.11
Task challenge						
Certified staff	3.43	1.35	3.36	1.46	3.82	1.15
Students	3.34	1.35	3.27	1.37	3.74	1.08
Tangible assistance						
Certified staff	2.33	1.49	2.27	1.59	3.13	1.54
Students	2.23	1.43	2.29	1.54	3.09	1.57
Personal assistance						
Certified staff	2.80	1.47	2.52	1.48	3.35	1.50
Students	2.96	1.50	2.56	1.42	3.44	1.38

Athletes reported receiving mostly listening support and task appreciation from both staff and student athletic trainers, while tangible assistance and personal assistance were received the least often. Athletes also reported expecting more listening support and task appreciation from both staff and student athletic trainers, while expecting the least amounts of tangible assistance and personal assistance. Satisfaction with social support received by the athletes was highest for listening support and task appreciation from both staff and students athletic trainers. All satisfaction values fell above 3.0 on the five-point Likert scale.

Student athletic trainers provided athletes with slightly lower levels of social support than staff athletic trainers in six of the eight categories. However, there were no significant differences found in the amount of social support athletes received from staff and student athletic trainers.

Athletes reported receiving similar amounts of social support from both staff and student athletic trainers in the areas of listening support, emotional support, emotional challenge, task appreciation, and task challenge. Athletes also reported receiving similar amounts of tangible assistance and personal assistance from staff and student athletic trainers; however, these two types of social support were reported with less overall frequency.

DISCUSSION

Because this study was conducted at only one university, the amount of social support provided to the athletes and their level of satisfaction with that support are, perhaps, more specific to the athletic training staff involved in this study and less generalizable to the athletic trainer population. However, the

most important and applicable findings from this study relate to the athletes' expectations, particularly when we consider that those expectations often arise from the athletes' needs.

Interestingly, the level of the athletes' expectations across the different categories of social support varied depending upon how applicable that type of social support is to injury rehabilitation. Injured athletes particularly need athletic trainers to take the time to listen to them. They also need to know that the exercises and work they accomplish as part of their rehabilitation are appreciated (task appreciation). This is not to say that the athletic trainer should watch and praise passively. We have all experienced the value of task challenge in a rehabilitation setting. As in their sports, most athletes need and want to be pushed to succeed in their rehabilitation. Certainly the need for emotional support during an injury period is high for athletes, as is the need to know that others understand what they are going through (reality confirmation).

Athletes feel less of a need to be challenged emotionally by athletic trainers. This is not surprising because there is probably no good time to be confronted about one's values and attitudes. However, many of us have experienced times when an athlete does not have the proper attitude toward rehabilitation or toward the athletic training staff or students. Although the athlete may not feel the "need" to be challenged about his or her attitude and may not appreciate such a confrontation, it becomes clear that it is necessary. If the athlete responds appropriately to this type of emotional challenge, the end result is usually enhancement of the rehabilitation process.

Finally, the areas of tangible assistance (eg, money or gifts) and personal assistance (eg, running an errand) are not particularly applicable to an athletic training setting, and it is generally unacceptable for athletic trainers to provide these

types of support to athletes. Athletes appear to recognize this and, thus, have much lower expectations of staff and student athletic trainers in these areas.

It is important to note that the differences in age and professional credentials of staff and student athletic trainers do not have an impact on the types of social support the athletes expect to receive. Those differences also do not affect the sources from which athletes wish to receive that support. Athletes expect (and need) to receive social support from student athletic trainers just as much as they do from certified staff. Student athletic trainers need to be educated about the importance of their role in helping to provide social support to injured athletes. The following is a list of strategies that athletic trainers and educators may employ to help educate student athletic trainers about social support and to help encourage them to provide that support to athletes.

1. Students are already taught to observe staff members working with athletes for the purpose of learning psychomotor techniques (eg, evaluation, treatment, rehabilitation techniques, etc). Certified athletic trainers should demonstrate the provision of social support to athletes through their own verbal and nonverbal communication. Students should be encouraged to make note of the psychological aspects of the athletic trainer-athlete relationship and to incorporate them into their own interactions with athletes.
2. Offer inservices, classes, and lectures on the psychological aspects of injury, including the importance of social support in the rehabilitation process. Include role playing to practice providing social support to athletes.
3. Although sometimes difficult, it is important to make every effort to maximize travel experiences for students. There are few better ways for student athletic trainers and athletes to get to know each other than by being "on the road" together. This shared experience provides an excellent opportunity for the student athletic trainers to become "members of the team" and establish themselves as sources of social support for the athletes.
4. Emphasize the importance of confidentiality to student athletic trainers. Have them, in turn, assure athletes that not only are injuries and treatments confidential, but so too are conversations.
5. Encourage lower-level student athletic trainers to establish a rapport with athletes. Lower-level student athletic trainers may not have the technical knowledge to discuss a specific injury with an athlete, but they can play a valuable role in listening to and being supportive of the athlete. Encourage lower-level students to play this role when needed. This benefits athletes and helps student athletic trainers feel useful as well.
6. Assign mid- to upper-level student athletic trainers to follow athletes through their daily rehabilitation protocols. This provides athletes with a source of task appreciation and challenge, in addition to listening and emotional support, and establishes consistency in the athlete's treatment. It can also help the athlete become more comfortable with the athletic training room envi-

ronment, enhance enjoyment of the rehabilitation process, and increase the motivation to work harder. Finally, it provides the student athletic trainer with an excellent learning experience, in addition to the opportunity to build a strong rapport with the athletes.

The findings of this study clearly have implications for clinical supervisors and athletic training program directors. These individuals must realize the importance of educating athletic training students in the psychological aspects of sport and injury rehabilitation. Just as students learn the medical knowledge and psychomotor skills necessary to become athletic trainers, they must also be exposed to the basic psychological aspects of working with athletes (eg, social support). As with other material in the curriculum, educating students in the psychological aspects of athletic training can be accomplished through a combination of coursework, seminars, and clinical experiences. Clinical supervisors and program directors are encouraged to consider the results of this study in developing this facet of their programs.

Athletic trainers have many athletes to care for and often not enough time to do so. When the athletic training room gets crowded, it is sometimes easier to give out exercises or use a modality and move on to the next athlete. But the athletes' needs go beyond physical care. They need to know that there are people in their corner who understand the frustration they are experiencing, the physical pain their injuries are causing, and the emptiness they are feeling from not being able to do what they love so much. It is unfair to the athlete for the athletic trainer to assume that someone else is providing them with the needed support or that the athlete "just understands" that he or she is cared for. Staff and student athletic trainers, as much as anyone, are in a position to provide the variety of social support that athletes need. Both groups must be aware of the importance of social support to athletes and its value in enhancing not only injury rehabilitation but also the overall athletic experience. The extra time needed to provide social support to athletes is minimal compared with the potential results. Through a team effort by both staff and student athletic trainers, this valuable resource can be provided to every athlete.

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