

Emotion Mapping: Understanding the relationship between emotion and space in long-term injured athletes

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Long-term injury is a regular occurrence for professional athletes. It has been well documented that athletes experience psychological and emotional vulnerability when injured. However, to date there has been little understanding of the interactions between the working environments that athletes inhabit and their emotional responses within them. This is critical to explore as research demonstrates that the articulation of emotion is intertwined with the space within which it occurs, as well the people who occupy it. Throughout their rehabilitation, athletes experience the same spaces but in a different way. For example, a 'fit' athlete in a physiotherapy room receiving preventative care experiences this space very differently from an injured athlete who has to live in there for months receiving treatment.

To date, there has been limited research in sport psychology that serves to understand the relationship between space and affect. However, art-based methodologies offer an opportunity to illuminate the complexity of this relationship. Emotion mapping is one such method that enables participants to create maps of the spaces they occupy and identify their associated emotional landscapes. Therefore, this study utilised emotion mapping in order to elucidate the relationship between the working spaces of long-term injured athletes, and the emotions they experienced in those spaces. Ethical approval was given prior to the commencement of the study. Nine professional male athletes who had experienced a long-term injury participated in the study using the method of emotion mapping to uncover the relationships between space and emotion.

Using this novel lens, the study further supports existing literature that details the psychological and emotional damage that can be induced by long-term injury. Therefore, emotion mapping as a method was useful and instrumental in revealing previously unknown interactions between affect and space within the context of long-term injury in professional athletes. Thus, this study highlighted the space-specific-emotional-states experienced by long-term injured professional athletes. A finding of particular note is the prevalence and intensity of negative emotions such as anger, fear and sadness in the physiotherapy room. This, alongside other findings from the study, has numerous implications for practitioners working with injured athletes and will enable practitioners to have new conversations about recovery and how negative affect may be impeding it.