Coping after a concussion: Advice for parents and relatives

Introduction

Sustaining a concussion can be frightening, both for the injured person and their parents and extended family. Given the wide-ranging nature of symptoms and the variability in recovery times, it is common to experience fear and uncertainty. When am I going to feel better? When can I return to sport again? What about my upcoming exams?

As a parent or relative of someone who has experienced a concussion, you may well share similar anxieties, and witnessing your loved one struggling with ongoing symptoms or concerns about the impact of their injury can be difficult and distressing.

Studies have shown that parenting techniques can have a significant impact upon recovery, though. Outlined below are some tips that you might want to consider when supporting a child and young person following a concussion.

What can you do to help?

1. Reassurance

Reassurance can be incredibly powerful following a concussion. Research confirms this, whilst also demonstrating that a prolonged recovery is closely correlated with perceived parental anxiety and stress. There is huge psychological involvement in concussion recovery, and this is one of the main drivers of persistent, prolonged symptoms. It is very normal to feel worried as a parent, but maintaining an outwardly calm and reassuring demeanour can be hugely beneficial, even if you are not feeling it on the inside!

2. Monitoring of symptoms

It is important to be aware of any ongoing symptoms, as in many cases this will guide treatment and subsequent recovery. But it's important to maintain a balance. Constantly being asked 'how are you feeling?' or 'how is your headache?' can lead to a hyperawareness of symptoms, difficulty returning to normality, and associated anxiety.

3. Return to exercise

A degree of rest after a concussion is important, and for the first week after a concussion the focus should be on returning to normal day to day activities. From day 8 though, light, low risk exercise is not only safe, but has been shown to enhance recovery. It is normal to be apprehensive about this, particularly if exercising triggers or worsens symptoms, but encouragement to attempt this in a safe and controlled manner can be hugely beneficial.

4. **Screen usage, seeing friends, and 'having fun'**

Avoiding excessive screen usage in the early phase following a concussion makes sense; it is often reported as a trigger for worsening symptoms. But completely banning all access to screens is not only potentially impractical, but can also be detrimental. Young people might already be feeling isolated as a result of not being able to take part in team sport, and removing the ability to stay in touch with their friends can potentiate this. Research suggests that a return to normality and structure is preferable to 'cocooning', and complete avoidance of normal activities.

Engaging in fun activities such as seeing friends and spending time outdoors is also important, and has been shown to reduce psychological distress in the context of a concussion.

What to do if you are concerned

If you have concerns about your child's symptoms, you can book a review with any Return2Play clinician to discuss. Injuries are generally followed up at around the 14-day mark, but if you are not seeing any improvement in symptoms after the first week or so, please do book an earlier appointment to discuss this. Management of concussion has evolved significantly, and a proactive approach is far more effective than simply waiting for symptoms to settle.

If you have any immediate concerns about your child's safety, or their symptoms deteriorate significantly, you should call 111 or attend your local Accident & Emergency