

# SIRIUS MUSINGS



Siri Lindley

## Siri Lindley

A world champion athlete herself and now one of the most revered triathlon coaches in the world, Siri enables athletes to become the champions and the people they were born to be. With an ability to see things in people they cannot see in themselves, Siri is driven by a unrivalled passion for triathlon and the people within.  
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## The psychology of an injured athlete, and how to manage it

**P**icture this: You are a dedicated triathlete who has been doing the sport for a couple years, maybe many years. You have worked so hard to learn all three disciplines and improve in all three, to now find yourself at the top of your game, and starting to get the results that you have worked so hard to achieve. Through this process, your family, and friends, are inspired by your dedication, your work ethic, your consistency and your ability to balance life with this sport that is your passion.

You love this sport, and it is what you do! Because of this, you have almost defined yourself through this sport. An athlete. A hard worker. Determined. Never giving up. Always ready for the next challenge ahead. Working hard to reach that next level.

Then one day, out training, you feel something not right. It hurts, it's tight, and it is causing you to run funny. This is where you will either make, or break the next few weeks, or months of your training. Do you decide to finish the session, or do you say to yourself, "something's up, this isn't

normal, I am going to give myself a couple days of rest, get some massage, see a physiotherapist and hopefully be back in three days running again"?

The correct choice was the latter. I have sadly watched many athletes make the wrong decision. They are out training, they feel something wrong, but they keep going. "I will tell coach if it gets any worse, but for now, I need to finish my last 8 x 800s on the track". They finish those 800s after making the niggle far worse, and are subsequently out for weeks, or even months trying to heal

an injury that could have been avoided, if the session was aborted in those first five minutes of warm up.

The right choice, is deciding that having a couple days off running to fix this slight niggle is definitely way better than running through the niggle, turning it into an injury and dealing with it for the coming weeks, months or even years.

Be present in your training. Know how to listen to your body. You must know the difference between good pain and bad pain. Be smart. Be proactive. If something feels "off", get off it, have it looked at, and do what it takes to get it feeling 100% again. Most likely just a couple days off from training.

If you run through that niggle, that then turns into an injury, you will be dealing with something far more difficult to endure.

Dealing with an injury is so very difficult. I have been there, and I have had athletes who have been there. Although by now, they know my stand on niggles. Because of this, injuries happen less and less. They subscribe to the belief of taking three days off now, instead of three months later, and end up back in action a lot quicker.

Being a psychology major, it always fascinates me that the stages of dealing with injury are basically the same as those dealing with death and dying – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

I do not underestimate the strength of all these feelings and absolutely understand why you are feeling them all. It is human, and normal to be so angry after working so hard to get to the level you are at, before an injury strikes.

In my experience, first the athlete refuses to believe that this is an injury, that will keep them from training and racing. They don't want to believe it, so they assume each day when they try again to run on it, it will have magically disappeared. Most times it has not, and in

that run searching for the magic fix, the athlete instead causes more damage.

My athletes in the past, have tried using their bargaining skills - "Just five minutes coach, and if it hurts, I will stop. I promise." Five minutes pass, and they are still running, five minutes more, and they are still running. "How is it?" I yell out. They respond with "Oh not good." I then yell out, "Why in the world are you still running on it?"

So as coaches, we have to not allow the bargaining. When your gut so strongly tells you that the athlete is injured and must stop the madness. Get off of it, diagnose the problem, and go about fixing

much harder to achieve now, due to lost time, and lost confidence.

At this point in time whether you are a coach to this athlete, or you are the athlete and want to make the right decisions for yourself, you have to surrender to the fact that this injury is real and needs to be fixed. The goal now, focus all your energy on getting healthy. Your normal training goals each day will now be replaced with rehab goals. Goals that can include doing whatever else you can do, to the best of your ability, while the injured part is being healed.

Coaches, you will find that the athlete will get angry and often take on an attitude

*Do you decide to finish the session, or do you say to yourself, "something's up, this isn't normal,*

it! Trust your gut. Trust your instincts. Trust your intelligence and be strong and do not allow them to make the same mistakes over and over again. They need you at this time, to be strong in your stance, and to demand they take time to heal. Going slowly now, will get them back to health quicker. Whereas trying to rush the recovery will only lead to constant setbacks and then ultimately a much later return to action.

Once the athlete understands that they are indeed injured, they become angry, and upset, and a lot of times, inconsolable. I feel for them at this point, because I understand how hard it is to basically have to stop what you are doing, when things were going so well. The athletes, always overly pessimistic in this situation, will feel as though all their dreams are slipping away. That everything they wanted to achieve is going to be so

of "why me, why now"? They often get resentful towards all those around them as it gets seemingly harder everyday to see your training partners still able to work hard towards achieve the goals they have, those same goals the athlete shared. The injured athlete often then gets depressed, especially if this is an injury that looks to have a very long recovery time. They realize the nature and seriousness their injury, and the loss now associated with not being able to train or race.

The depression can then lead to sleep and eating disturbances, low energy and, just a general loss of well-being. For some it makes them feel like they want to just quit. For others, it's more difficult than that. Triathlon defines them, and is their identity and they would feel lost without it. This is where it is important to put them back in touch with the other things in their life that are important to them. Encourage them to

# SIRIUS MUSINGS

spend time getting involved in the other interests in their lives, whether it is learning, or reading, or music or coaching young kids in the sport that they love so much.

Knowing the deep effect a bad injury can have on the athlete, it is so important to come up with a game plan. The athlete is used to having a plan to follow each and every day – one for swimming, cycling and running that will see them continually progressing and getting closer and closer to being able to achieve their dreams.

Even though they may not be able to swim, bike and run, perhaps they can still swim. GREAT! Let's focus on the swim right now. Let's get you so fit in the water, as that fitness will carry over on to the bike and run when you are back doing those things again. Your swim will be better than ever, which will only help you in your races. Use this to keep them motivated and active, while rehabbing the real problem.

Remind the athlete of all that they are, as a human being. They are not just triathletes. They may be an awesome son, or a great husband, or someone's best friend. Try to remind them that they are not defined by this sport, it is just something that they love to identify with.

The athlete may be thinking, "What am I without my sport?" These individuals have much more in their lives than just the sport. So, loved ones or coaches need to remind the athlete about all the other great interests, hobbies, or talents and abilities that they have. It is important at this time to come up with new goals, that can harness that dedicated work ethic and put it to use doing something else that interests them. Giving them something to occupy their time while rehabbing the injury.

I know one thing is for sure, as a coach I have a policy that I will never change - I will not stand by and watch an athlete trying to rush getting back from an injury. I will only send my athletes off to race if they are 100% healthy and injury free. To watch an athlete either choosing to race, or being made to race, at 50% strength or health, is just devastating to me.

They end up being half healthy, still overwhelmed by worry from the injury, and are thus unable to perform anywhere near their potential. They finish the race embarrassed by their performance, and ashamed that they are not the athletes

they were before. This now, leads to another shot of depression, anger and a deflated ego, and even worse, sending them back weeks in the recovery of the injury.

An athlete in this position needs to understand that just like racing, the perfect race, or the perfect recovery from an injury, will come only from a laser focus on the process necessary to get your best results. No straying away from the plan. Being meticulous about executing that plan, and having faith that this will lead you to the best result.

Being calm, and having faith that in managing this injury properly, you will be back and you will then have a chance to come back better than ever. Step back, take time, be patient and build your fitness and strength back up again, properly.

So what is the best way to handle an injury and how do you maintain your sanity in the process?



These are my ideas:

## 1) ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE SAD

Allow yourself to mourn and feel whatever loss you are experiencing. Your emotions are an important part of the healing process. Feeling is part of healing!

You don't have to be Little Miss Sunshine. Be real, authentic and let the people around you, help you through this process.

## 2) DEAL WITH WHAT IT IS

Stop focusing on what could have been, or should have been, and if only this didn't happen. Spending too much time and energy on this will take away from you successfully moving through the recovery and healing process.

Yes, an injury will throw a spanner in the works. It will mess with your best-laid plans and dreams. Unfortunately, this is your reality right now and you have to allow yourself to deal with what is! Find the right doctor, come up with a rehab plan, and stick to that plan through thick and thin. Take the time off, to let everything heal, and build you back up slowly, methodically and with great purpose.

## 3) SET NEW, MORE REALISTIC GOALS FOR YOURSELF

The ultimate goal is fix what is wrong, and then build back up. No rushing, but being patient. Being smart. You will have to measure your successes very differently, focusing on your body getting healthy and building up strength again. In a sense yes, you will have to start all over again. Once healed, you will be back at square one to building up strength and building up endurance.

Hopefully, you now have an understanding of what caused the injury. At this point you want to make sure you don't make the same mistakes again. Ideally, through your rehab and recovery, you have located and removed the source of the problem, and can now build up safely and effectively.

You will have to keep focused on your **new** goals and leave the old ones in the **past** for now, where they belong. Once you've come all the way back from your injury you can start entertaining your old goals, and now, they will be more achievable than ever.

## 4) YOU MUST MAINTAIN A POSITIVE ATTITUDE, NO MATTER WHAT

As difficult as this will be, try to stay as positive as possible. Understand that "If it is to be, it is up to me". In other words, your attitude and outlook is absolutely everything! When positive, your attitude can speed up the healing process and lessen the emotional pain that you have to go through.



Siri Lindley

However, when you're negative you'll slow the rehab process down to a screeching halt and make yourself miserable in the process. It's all up to you. Avoid being negative because nothing good ever comes from negativity.

## 5) HEALING NEEDS TO BE YOUR #1 PRIORITY

Be conscientious about your physical therapy. Follow the doctor's advice closely. Don't cut corners. Work as hard with your rehab as you did in your training.

## 6) PUT ALL THE AMAZING SKILLS YOU HAVE ACQUIRED THROUGH SPORT, TO USE, BY TAKING ON SOME OTHER INTERESTS WHILE YOU ARE TAKING THIS TIME TO HEAL.

Give yourself something interesting to do that gives you a sense of purpose beyond getting healthy.

## 7) MOST IMPORTANTLY, BE PATIENT

There is never a good time to get an injury. But, you will get through this.

You will be just fine, as long as you allow yourself enough time to heal properly.

If you're over anxious to get back and rush the healing process, then you may set yourself up for another, more serious injury which may cost you even more time.

Rushing the healing process so that you can get back a week or two earlier is "penny wise, pound foolish."

In rushing the healing process, you might get back a few days earlier, but then put yourself at risk of developing a chronic injury somewhere else in your body, that will keep you out even longer. Remember, sometimes the fastest way of coming back is the slowest. Go slower, arrive sooner!

Value yourself as a person, **not** just as an athlete. In doing this, you will be more likely to make the very best decisions

possible for your well being. Once you get healthy, you will be happy, and when you have both these things, everything else becomes possible!

Injuries are always so painfully disruptive. When you are healthy and get back to training and racing, it is normal to be preoccupied with worries about hurting yourself again. Fear of re-injury is absolutely normal. This tendency to focus on your fears of injury striking again, will distract you from the task at hand and actually leave you performing physically tight. This, in turn, can lead to injury.

So when you get back to training hard, make sure you address these fears. This fear actually makes you far more vulnerable to injuring yourself again. So, to counteract this natural tendency, you will need to discipline yourself to concentrate on what you **want** to have happen, **not** what you're afraid will. Focus on what you need to do in order to execute perfectly. I know this is far easier said than done, but just try to discipline yourself to maintain a positive focus on your performance, rather than a fearful approach to it.

You got this! Be patient. Be diligent in your recovery. Be mindful in your return to training and racing. Once healthy, go after it with passion, and belief and a positively focused mind. **AT**



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