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Moving from a serious knee injury back into a healthy exercise regime: Mapping the rehabilitation experiences of older persons in the UK

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Knee injuries are by some margin the most commonly-sustained in all athletic pursuits. While there is a strong body of contemporary research exploring the physiological and psychological rehabilitation/recovery of individuals who have sustained serious knee injuries, it would be uncontroversial to propose that the great majority of such studies have been concerned with the elite athletic domain.

Considerably less research has addressed the comparable experiences of amateur athletes and exercisers, despite the much greater numbers thereof, and less still has explored how physically active older persons negotiate the journey from initial injury back to regular exercising. With ever-larger numbers of individuals in the UK (and elsewhere) now remaining active into later life than ever before, this is a matter that will likely need much more dedicated investigation in the future, in order to assure the best quality of care for a category of persons with a diverse set of needs, but diversity of needs rather different to that of young professional sportspeople. The study reported here, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), therefore, takes some steps to qualitatively identify key features of the rehabilitative journeys of N=5 individuals aged between 50 and 70 years, all of whom identified as very physically active. Each of these individuals had sustained a knee injury which

(a) required suspension of all rigorous physical activity while (b) undergoing structured professional rehabilitation. With full institutional ethical approval, these participants were recruited to sit for extended semi-structured interviews to assess their experiences of being injured, their rehabilitation programme and their reflections on their personal pathway to recovery. All collected data were stored in line with GDPR, transcribed in full and analysed using the established techniques of IPA. Provisional superordinate themes to emerge from this analysis are: (1) the multifaceted experience of pain; (2) anxiety around reinjury, and its impacts on future choices of activity/surface; (3) unhealthy social influences that contribute to poor management of older people during exercise; (4) the social and psychological support provided by nominally physiological rehabilitators. The findings, at this stage, both confirm some existing research themes, while also offering some novel insights on the particular participant group. It is contended that they can contribute positively to a small but growing body of research in the area, with potentially constructive practical applications.