

Reflection

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.3008013>

SEEKING CONNECTION THROUGH FOOTBALL:
SELF-DETERMINATION AND THE DRIVE TO BELONG

Gary Barclay

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of
Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

© 2023 the authors; © illustrations, the artists or other copyright owners.

SEEKING CONNECTION THROUGH FOOTBALL: SELF-DETERMINATION AND THE DRIVE TO BELONG

Gary Barclay

In this autoethnographic article, the experiences of the authors' attempts to re-engage with football eight years after a serious injury are explored, and an insight to the thought process experienced in considering a return to a sport he once enjoyed are provided. This article follows on from a previous publication, *I'm screwed: A Client's Perspective on the Influence of Schema in Response to and Recovery From Serious Injury* (Barclay & Middlemas, 2016) in which the current author discussed the physical and mental challenges he faced following a fractured cervical vertebra suffered during a football game, and subsequent recovery including 12 weeks wearing a halo brace and vest.

SATURDAY JUNE 2021: LOCAL FOOTBALL GROUND

I am standing at the local football ground with my son on a cold, dreary afternoon. We are watching the local over-45s football team. Why are we here? In part, it is an opportunity to support my son's learning, but it is also an opportunity for me to stay connected to my old football club and imagine what could have been, had I not been injured.

I am watching men I have played football with, running around, having fun on the football field that I nearly died on approximately eight years ago. As I watch today's game, I see a player who was in my high school first eleven team; another who I played with in the more competitive grades; another who I played with in the social grades; and four who were playing with me in 2013 when my neck was broken by a violent act. "There's no need for that", I heard one of them say, as I lay there on the ground, fearing for what my life might look like and how possible paralysis might affect me, my wife, and my children.

Yet, here I am, again, watching, thinking, is there some way that I could play too? This is not the first time my son and I have been along to watch a game of football this season, and it is not the first time that I have felt *the itch* to play again; but it is the first time that I have entertained taking action. Previously, I have come away from watching games feeling a mixture of emotions, including sadness that I no longer play. This sadness is based on the feeling of missing out on the opportunities for social connection, the enjoyment of playing the game, and the opportunities to use skills that were developed over years of playing. I also experience feelings of anger due to the aforementioned benefits being *taken away from me* through a needless assault (for further understanding of the assault and its impact on my psychological wellbeing in the early years after it happened, see Barclay and Middlemas, 2016). Petitpas and Danish (1995) identified a variety of feelings that can indicate poor adjustment to injury, including anger. Even after eight years and extensive psychological support to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) there are still times that I feel anger over the assault. According to the National Health Service this is a common feeling following an assault (National Health Service, n.d.).

Could the difference today be that I also see 'Steven' [pseudonym] on the field? Steven must be around 70 years old and has limited movement in his legs which causes me to wonder if he is experiencing a musculoskeletal

problem. Yet, he is out there, playing football! It appears the other team are taking it easy with him, nothing rough, they give him a little space and do not go shoulder to shoulder as they try to get the ball from him. Could teams treat me like that as well, play non-contact with me?

Seeing Steven playing has me thinking that perhaps I could do this too! Self-efficacy is the belief that we can perform a task successfully (Bandura, 1986) and can be thought of as a situation specific form of self-confidence. Self-efficacy theory suggests that self-efficacy enhancing information can come from, among other things, vicarious experiences or seeing others performing that which we are striving to achieve (Bandura, 1986). Seeing Steven out there playing is certainly boosting my self-efficacy for playing football again (Bandura, 1986). I used to be able to do a lot of the things that I am seeing other players do during this game. Therefore, my perceptions of my previous performances and capabilities, another powerful source of self-efficacy enhancing information (Bandura, 1986), is further boosting my self-efficacy for playing football again.

In addition to seeing the familiar players running around on the football field, I also see large men, some at least one and a half times my weight again, running at speed and occasionally bumping into each other. That scares me, and has me questioning, "what if they ran into me? What would happen?" My thoughts drift away from efficacy enhancing information to anxiety, "what if I get hurt again?". Petitpas and Danish (1995) identify that fear of re-injury is a common occurrence for previously injured athletes. Or is this my *vulnerability to harm schema* working hard again to keep me safe and out of an imagined harm's way? Schema can be described as self-defeating emotional and cognitive patterns that begin at a young age and repeat throughout life (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). Previous treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder following my neck injury identified an ongoing tendency towards over protectiveness where I would respond to perceived dangers with heightened levels of anxiety despite minimal chance of harm to myself or others I care about. Alternatively, could my anxiety be based on logical thinking considering potential benefits and risks of re-engaging in football based on the information available?

SATURDAY JUNE 2021: BACK HOME

Once back at home I continue to think about the possibility of playing football again. When I consider my health and my potential capabilities for playing football, from the shoulders down, I think "yes, I could do that!" My general aerobic fitness would be sufficient due to our family being regularly active. My ball skills would be sufficient due to kicking the ball around with my son regularly. I acknowledge I might not be as agile as I once was, however, I know that I could work on my agility, strength and flexibility to overcome this area of weakness.

In contrast, when I think about my health and potential capabilities for playing football, from the shoulders up, I think quite differently. Questions I am asking myself include: "what if I get hit in the head and receive another concussion? What if my neck got broken again? What if I get paralysed? What if I die?" To keep my thinking on track with the possibility of re-engaging in football, I identify a variety of strategies that could help maintain my safety which include not get involved in body contact and the possibility of wearing a neck brace while playing.

Before dinner, I look for suitable neck braces on the internet that I might be able to use to give my neck further protection. In addition, I email a physiotherapist who is a fellow football player, as well as the orthopaedic surgeon who oversaw my recovery to see if they know of any braces or protective equipment that might help protect my neck. I also message one of the players from today's game to see if his team has a practice session during the week that I might be able to attend "for a VERY gentle run around." He soon gets back to me and informs me that the over-35s and 45s usually have a run together on a Wednesday night. He suggests that I "Let them know to wrap you in cotton wool and it will be fine" I respond to his text message with enthusiasm: "Excellent! Thanks. The *itch* may have passed by then but watching you guys play today did spark something." But the 'enthusiasm' is also accompanied by anxiety.

I go upstairs to retrieve the old soft collar neck brace that I wore after the halo brace and vest were removed back in August 2013. What am I thinking? Is it worth the risk? No! Is there a risk? Possibly? But how much of a risk is it?

“Why do I want to do it?” I ask myself. The answer I come up with is social opportunities and reconnecting with old friends. Perhaps this is more salient to me now due to the recent deaths of two close family members. I can see the contrast in support that a widower has from friends since the passing of his wife compared to that of a widow whose husband died just one year earlier. In comparison to the widower, the widow is less social and seems to have fewer friends and support as she continues to grieve the loss of her husband. Maybe that is why it feels important to connect socially with others now. Social connection was one of the reasons I tried to re-engage with football back in 2013. It has been eight years since my injury, yet, never has the pull to play with old friends been so strong. Research in sociality and support for the importance of social connection is so strong that the Ministry of Health (2021) have identified this as one of the ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ which are widely promoted for holistic health. It is possible that having a wider base of social support outside of my immediate family will provide an extra sense of social connection and security should anything happen to the people I hold most dear, my family.

The prospect of attending practice with the over-35s leads to some anxiety. I have seen the over-35s play recently and they look a lot faster, and the games appear to involve more contact than the over-45s grade. Again, I ask myself, “will I be safe in this environment?” Again, I identify strategies to help me remain safe. I would have to tell them to “be gentle with me.” I could wear a coloured bib, so I stand out and they know to be careful around me. Perhaps wearing a neck collar would be a sufficient prompt to be careful with me. But is that fair on the opposition? If I were playing well the opposition would want to mark me closely by reducing the amount of time I have the ball and reduce my opportunities to pass. Can they do that without body contact?

Again, I am ambivalent, yet I keep identifying potential strategies to enable me to take part. Is the motivation for social connection and participating again so strong that it is making me find a way back to the game?

I look to my wife and children to gauge how they feel about me getting involved in football again. My daughter instantly says “No!” I explain I would not do it without precautions such as talking with the opposition prior to each game explaining my injury and asking them to “take it easy on me.” My wife and son seem to be in support, so long as I can do it safely.

FOLLOWING MONDAY JUNE 2021

I receive an email reply from my orthopaedic surgeon’s office asking if I had seen him via public or private practice. I respond that it was through public practice. They said that they would forward on my email to the public system. Instantly I begin to doubt that I will hear back from them any time soon, if at all, such is the stress on our health system.

In the afternoon I receive an e-mail from the physiotherapist “[It’s] great to hear you are keen to return to playing football and a good idea to look at a neck brace for your own peace of mind.” He included a couple of internet links to options for neck braces.

FOLLOWING WEDNESDAY JUNE 2021

The physiotherapist emails me again, this time with some neck strengthening exercises and orders a neck collar for me. Thanks! Awesome! Maybe ...

This has me thinking at least I will have the protective equipment if I do decide to go ahead with a return to football. But the voice in the back of my mind is still saying... "after all you have been through, are you sure it is worth the risk of re-injury? Possibly death?" It is obvious that the answer is "No!"

The question remains, what are the chances of injury if I have a neck brace on and stay away from contact? My drive to return to play has found another way to keep me safe. If it looked like a game was becoming too rough, I could simply leave the field.

The practice session is tonight. I have a pair of near new boots, a soft collar that I could wear in the meantime, but no shin pads. Should I take part in this practice, or should I just observe, or nothing at all?

I go to the garage and get my football boots and then go upstairs to get my soft collar neck brace. My heart is pounding as I bring them into the room where my wife is working. I start to get a sense of excitement in my chest and shoulders.

I put the collar on and test my range of motion. It seems to be a lot less in three out of four directions but only slightly less looking up. That is the direction my head went when I was injured, the least protection seems to be in the direction I need it most! I remember that even the orthopaedic surgeon said he could not tell what would happen if I had another significant collision.

My wife tells me she feels okay with me going to practice for a gentle run around but does not feel the same about the prospect of me playing.

I try my boots on and walk around with them on. I start to get excited about the prospect of attending practice. My heart rate has increased. My wife is right, I should be fine at practice so long as I tell the guys to take it easy. In my mind, I am still visualising the over-35 grade players running around flat out. That is scary!

In considering my choice to play or not I think of the following:

- The things I do not enjoy about football – people being disrespectful to referees, people doing silly things like late tackles, dangerous tackles and people being unnecessarily rough.
- The things I enjoy about football – being active, running around, being reasonably good at it, being with people who have a similar interest, the general social aspect.

At around 4.30 pm the children and I go to the park to have a run around and kick the football. I wore my football boots which felt quite strange and treated the session as a kind of warm-up to my practice.

LATER ON WEDNESDAY JUNE 2021: PRACTICE!

The excitement was building on the drive to practice and while sitting in the car waiting for others to arrive.

As I sat waiting, I wondered if they had decided not to practice. I felt comfortable with that possibility, rather than disappointed with the prospect of the session not happening. It would simply enable me to go back home to my family and be with them for the evening. How I have changed! If a practice session had been cancelled in my earlier years, I would have been very upset that I had missed out on an opportunity to play!

Most of the players did not get to practice until 6pm or after. I introduced myself to some people that I did not know and had a nice wee catch-up with another player who was in my team back in 2013. He and the others were very welcoming which made me feel at ease and comfortable in the environment. As it turned out, I knew most of the people there.

Practice consisted of playing a six-a-side game for approximately one hour. I experienced a combination of nervousness and excitement as we started playing. It took a while before I got my first touch of the ball. I got into space well and made myself available to receive passes. I seemed to cope well with having the ball at my feet and knowing that people were coming towards me from in front or behind, looking to make a tackle or force an error. Interestingly, it felt very natural to be there. It was almost like I had never been away from the game. It did not take long before I was telling people that I or others were available to receive a pass. There were a couple of moments where I was in a tackle situation and felt comfortable enough with receiving the odd small shoulder to shoulder bump. Everyone was quite gentle, nothing aggressive or threatening. Sticking to my plan I purposely did not head the ball in an effort to protect my brain and neck and I usually passed the ball before anyone got near me.

I made sure to keep my distance from 'Bill' [pseudonym] who is a big man that I did not want to run into me. I felt vulnerable when a ball came to me at head height. Rather than head the ball, as I would have pre-injury, I swerved away from it. In this situation I felt like I was not being a fully committed team member, but I had other priorities, so it did not bother me.

Near the end of practice, I had an accidental collision with one of the players who defends with his elbows quite wide out. One of these elbows caught me in the chest, knocking the wind out of me. I gathered my breath after a minute or so and continued with the game. He apologised for what happened. I have learnt the hard way to keep my distance from this player who I now realise can be a bit rough.

I thoroughly enjoyed my practice experience, running around and utilising my skills. Not all aspects were pretty, but I was proud of my performance considering it was my first time playing since the 2013 injury.

At the end of practice, I thanked them for a fun time and then left. As I was leaving, 'Martin' [pseudonym] told me to "come along next week." I might just do that!

REFLECTION ON WEDNESDAY JUNE 2021: AFTER PRACTICE

Returning home from practice I thought "it was great fun! Nice to have a run around". I iced my ribs a couple of times during the evening before bed.

Once in bed I initially felt tired and expected that I would fall asleep quickly, but that did not eventuate. As is normal for me I kept replaying the game in my mind, the passes I did well, the tackles I missed, and what I could improve for next time. Maybe I could take on some defenders, bring out my *step over* trick and side steps. Maybe I could use a burst of my speed after warming up my hamstrings well.

Taking part in this practice session has been a great progression for me. Maybe I do not need to play in Saturday games, perhaps I could continue to join in on Wednesdays and avoid the more competitive Saturday games.

Having gone to bed at 10.15pm, which is later than normal for me, I am still awake after 11pm. I go to the toilet at 1am; have I been asleep? I am not sure.

FOLLOWING THURSDAY JUNE 2021

I wake to the alarm feeling a little sore in the rib where I was hit and in my right hip which may be due to doing more agility type running. I am also feeling tired, possibly due to taking so long to get to sleep last night.

I remind myself; I need to get a pair of shin pads! Last night I used my son's which only covered a small portion of my shin. If I am going to continue with football my legs need to be properly protected.

I am feeling well mentally. I am feeling positive about my experience at practice and the possibility of going again next week. I feel confident in my ability to participate in practice, knowing that I have done this successfully, which further highlights the connection between previous performance and my enhanced sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). I know that I am not out of place; I feel like I belong in that environment and can be successful. As I said yesterday, it felt so natural to be there. And it felt like I was accepted and valued by the people around me. Self-determination Theory posits that people are motivated to satisfy three general needs, these being to feel competent, to have a sense of autonomy and a sense of social connection or belonging (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Upon reflection, I feel that my most recent football experience catered to these three motivational needs.

I have been away from the football environment for such a long time due to a potentially catastrophic injury and now that I have ventured back into that environment, I feel a strong sense of competence based on having a perception of my skill set being at a comparable level to others in the group. I feel this has been entirely my choice to get involved and that I have the freedom or autonomy to choose what I do and how much I get involved regarding tackle situations, choosing not to head the ball and the choice I have to be in that environment at all. Further, I feel a sense of belonging and relatedness due to knowing so many people there and being made to feel welcome back in this environment. From my experiences so far, I seem to have found a way, through football, to meet my personal need for self-determination.

On the way home from work, I buy a pair of adult-sized shin pads.

FOLLOWING MONDAY JUNE 2021

On the way home from work, I pick up the new neck collar the physiotherapist ordered for me. When home, I try it on and find that it is contoured to fit the neck and fits well. I briefly imagine myself playing football while wearing it. I wonder if wearing the collar would hinder my ability to look around for passing opportunities and gaps in the opposition's defence. With the collar on I test its ability to prevent flexion and extension of the neck and find that it appears to work reasonably well. However, the one direction that it seems least supportive is in neck extension (tilting the head backwards) as this is where the join is in the collar at the back of my neck. Unfortunately, this is also the direction my neck took when it was broken. Will the collar protect me if, for some reason, my neck was forcefully extended?

Finding the potential gap in the protective capabilities of the collar has resulted in me losing some confidence in my ability to participate with the utmost safety. I am again questioning whether I should be playing at all. Again, I am battling with thoughts of the potential consequences if I were to be re-injured. Is this my vulnerability to harm schema overreacting again or is there merit in my thinking? I also consider that practices appear reasonably non-contact and I question whether it would be necessary to wear the collar at practice. Maybe the neck strengthening exercises the physiotherapist gave me would be enough in a practice context. I am obviously continuing to experience ambivalence regarding my return to playing football.

At this point I decide that a compromise is best. I will continue to attend the Wednesday practice nights thereby experiencing the potential social, physical, and psychological benefits of being involved again, but in a relatively safe and non-competitive environment.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

During the period discussed, it appears I have moved swiftly regarding partial re-engagement in football. However, early on in this piece it was acknowledged that this was not my first experience of watching football games this season. This decision took between eight weeks and eight years as I moved between feelings of loathing and loving the game. In relation to behaviour change the transtheoretical model suggests that people

move through various stages of change in a cyclical manner ranging from pre-contemplation (not considering change), contemplation (considering change) through to preparation, action and maintenance of behaviour change (Prochaska et al., 1992). Transtheoretical model research has suggested that people can remain in the contemplative phase of decision making for approximately two years (Prochaska et al., 1992). However, over the eight years since my neck injury took place, there have been times when I briefly thought about the possibility of playing again but never acted on these initial thoughts, leaving football to drift out of consciousness again due to fear of re-injury.

Presently, the potentially powerful impact of self-efficacy enhancing information, regarding my capabilities (Bandura, 1986), and my associated perceived competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985), appear to have had a substantial positive influence on my decision making towards partial re-engagement in football. Observing former teammates and others playing football aided in the development of a sense of belief in my ability to re-engage. Upon reflection, my desire to experience social connection appears to have been the most salient motive for re-engagement in football, with self-efficacy and competence-based information supporting and facilitating the decision-making process. Further, as previously discussed, within the space of ten months, two close family members have experienced the rather sudden loss of their spouses. Perhaps it is the contrasting experiences of one family member with limited social connection and her struggles to adapt to her new circumstances, with those of another family member who has breadth and depth of social connection that has highlighted the value of sociality and created a drive to connect through the familiar activity of football.

There is a robust body of research in support of the value of social connection for various aspects of health and wellbeing. For example, Frieling et al. (2018) discuss the positive impact of social connection on mental and physical health, mortality, employment outcomes, social adjustment, and educational outcomes. Further, research has found that positive social support can protect against and aid in the recovery from depression (Cruwys et al., 2013). Those with larger social support networks have been found to have improved cognitive health, are less vulnerable to cognitive decline and experience less anxiety (Frieling et al., 2018). In addition, a causal relationship has been found between social support, wellbeing and stress relief (Frieling et al., 2018). Lastly, Scott et al. (2020) suggests that better social support following sudden bereavement is associated with greater psychological wellbeing.

A review of the research above shows a variety of benefits that could accrue from the drive to reconnect with old friends through football. My recent experiences of observing and then becoming involved in the football environment again appear to highlight a personally significant drive to connect with friends from the past. The excitement of playing football with old friends and having the support of my family provides some of the motivation and confidence needed to re-engage in this environment that was once a significant part of my social connection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Laura Munro and Helen McDermott from the Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health at Otago Polytechnic, Te Pūkenga for their feedback in the development of this article, their time and effort was greatly appreciated!

Gary Barclay is a Principal Lecturer in sport, exercise and health related psychology at Otago Polytechnic's Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health. Gary currently enjoys coaching youth sport, advising and researching in a variety of areas including the influence of physical activity on mental health and psychological recovery from injury.

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6071-2726>

Correspondence to: Gary Barclay, Gary.Barclay@op.ac.nz

REFERENCES

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Foundations of thought and actions: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Barclay, G., & Middlemas, S. G. (2016). I'm screwed: A client's perspective on the influence of schema in response to and recovery from serious injury. *Journal of the New Zealand College of Clinical Psychologists*, 26 (2), 25–34.
- Cruwys, T., Dingle, G., Haslam, C., Haslam, S.A., Jetten, J., & Morton, T.A. (2013). Social group memberships protect against future depression, alleviate depression symptoms and prevent depression relapse. *Social Science and Medicine*, 98, 179–186.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behaviour*. Plenum Press.
- Frieling, M., Krassoi Peach, E., & Cording, J. (2018). *The measurement of social connectedness and its relationship to wellbeing*. Ministry of Social Development.
- Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (2021). *Five ways to wellbeing: Connect, me whakawhanaunga*. <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/five-ways-to-wellbeing/connect-me-whakawhanaunga>.
- National Health Service (n.d.) *Open doors: Common reactions to assault*. <https://www.opendoors.nhs.uk/content/common-reactions-assault>.
- Petitpas, A., & Danish, S. (1995). Caring for injured athletes. In S. Murphy (Ed.), *Sport psychology interventions* (pp. 255–281). Human Kinetics.
- Prochaska, J. O., DiClemente, C. C., & Norcross, J. C. (1992). In search of how people change. *American Psychologist*, 47, 1102–1114.
- Scott, H.R., Pitman, A., Kozhuharova, P., & Lloyd-Evans, B. (2020). A systematic review of studies describing the influence of informal social support on psychological wellbeing in people bereaved by sudden or violent causes of death. *BMC Psychiatry* 20, 265. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02639-4>
- Young, J. E., Klosko, J. S., & Weishaar, M. E. (2003). *Schema therapy: A practitioner's guide*. The Guildford Press.