

Understanding the Recovery Timeline

By Patrick Martchink, MPT

When recovering from surgery, a patient needs to consider their full timeline, not simply from surgical date forward. By doing so, they'll better understand their recovery plan and have a more firm grasp on realistic expectations. There are many variables that patients, surgeons, and rehab specialists must take into consideration before and following surgery. Comorbidities such as diabetes, arthritis, and osteoporosis may impact a patient's ability to recover at a rate as someone that may not have any preexisting conditions. Motivation and prior level of fitness can also play critical roles when predicting a patient's future success following surgical intervention. A lesser-discussed variable, yet still very important, is *time*.

For example, when an individual's knee arthritis worsens over 10 years, joint deterioration, muscle atrophy, and general deconditioning often occur simultaneously. A knee replacement addresses the joint deterioration (arthritis) but doesn't address the muscle atrophy, deconditioning, and flexibility impairments that have set-in over the 10 years it has taken the patient to get to the point of having a surgery. Oftentimes, a patient may see their surgery date as the unofficial "start date" on their road to recovery. While that's not necessarily a bad way to look at it, it's also very important to take into consideration how much time has passed since their symptoms began.

From a patient's perspective, it's sometimes difficult not to look at a rehab protocol and become frustrated with a lack of progress. "At six weeks, my protocol says I'm supposed to be able to ...", a patient might say. Rest assured, from a therapist's perspective, it's frustrating to look at a rehab protocol and see a lack of progress as well. Protocols are often based on average tissue healing times and how an average individual may progress as time passes following surgery or intervention. In today's world, the question must be asked, who's average? With so many variables that are being taken into consideration, physicians are recognizing that protocols need to be seen more as general recommendations and less as rigid expectations of progression. It's unrealistic to expect a 73 year-old with diabetes and a history of smoking two packs of cigarettes per day to progress at the same rate as a healthy 23 year-old athlete with no preexisting conditions, yet they're often given the same rehab protocol.

Rehab specialists, such as physical and occupational therapists, are able to tailor each individual's plan of care by taking into account their unique variables including comorbidities, age, motivation, prior level of function, mechanism of injury, and time since onset.

We've all heard the classic dad joke:

Patient: Doctor, will I be able to play the piano after the operation?

Doctor: Yes, of course.

Patient: Great. I never could before.

Having realistic expectations is important when developing goals for recovery following a surgery. To do that, acknowledging one's prior level of function is critical. If you never ran a marathon prior to your surgery, you may not want to have that as a goal after your surgery... or at least not as an immediate goal.

During a recent treatment, a patient expressed frustration that after nearly two months following double knee replacement surgery, she was only able to walk about .75 miles before needing to rest. After further discussion she realized that it had been years since she last walked over a mile. Her complaints were primarily centered around poor cardiovascular endurance and general muscle fatigue. By looking at their full timeline and taking into account their prior level of function, the patient was able to better understand the reason behind why she may not have been progressing as quickly as she would've liked.

There's a general theme that is seen frequently in rehab clinics. *No one ever recovers as quickly as they'd like*. It doesn't seem to matter how old the patient is or how severe their injury may be, nearly everyone wants to recover faster than they are. As a physical therapist, I'm always encouraging my patients to take into consideration everything leading up to the time they first walked into the clinic and not simply what has happened since. By doing so, they have more realistic expectations and better understand *their* full recovery timeline.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact Estes Park Physical Therapy at 970-236-2535.