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Learning from sport burnout and overtraining

About this free course

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Introduction and guidance

Introduction and guidance

This free badged course *Learning from sport burnout and overtraining* lasts 24 hours with eight 'sessions'. You can work through the course at your own pace, so if you have more time one week there is no problem with pushing on to complete a further study session. The eight sessions are linked to ensure a logical flow through the course. They are:

1. What is burnout?
2. Perspectives of burnout
3. Exploring identity and overtraining
4. Insights into overtraining
5. What role does motivation and perfectionism play?
6. Coaches and burnout
7. Managing those on a burnout path
8. Reducing burnout using psychological strategies.

The course will give you a deeper understanding of physical and mental aspects of dedicated training such as athletic identity, overtraining, motivational climate and perfectionism. You'll also explore a number of factors affecting burnout which will lead you to understanding what contributes to sporting environments that are more likely to prevent burnout. Through being introduced to a number of sport psychology ideas you will have a better understanding of your own work or training situation and the balance between physical and emotional stress and recovery.

After completing this course, you should be able to:

- understand what burnout and overtraining are, the relationship between them and how it can affect athletes and coaches slightly differently
- describe the main factors influencing burnout and some of the key theories and models used to explain it in sport psychology
- evaluate coach and parents contribution to the motivational climate in sport and how they can help prevent burnout and overtraining
- identify strategies to help prevent and manage sport burnout and overtraining.

Moving around the course

In the 'Summary' at the end of each session, you will find a link to the next session. If at any time you want to return to the start of the course, click on 'Full course description'. From here you can navigate to any part of the course.

It's also good practice, if you access a link from within a course page (including links to the quizzes), to open it in a new window or tab. That way you can easily return to where you've come from without having to use the back button on your browser.

The Open University would really appreciate a few minutes of your time to tell us about yourself and your expectations for the course before you begin, in our optional start-of-course survey. Participation will be completely confidential and we will not pass on your details to others.

What is a badged course?

While studying *Learning from sport burnout and overtraining* you have the option to work towards gaining a digital badge.

Badged courses are a key part of The Open University's *mission to promote the educational well-being of the community*. The courses also provide another way of helping you to progress from informal to formal learning.

Completing a course will require about 24 hours of study time. However, you can study the course at any time and at a pace to suit you.

Badged courses are available on The Open University's OpenLearn website and do not cost anything to study. They differ from Open University courses because you do not receive support from a tutor, but you do get useful feedback from the interactive quizzes.

What is a badge?

Digital badges are a new way of demonstrating online that you have gained a skill. Colleges and universities are working with employers and other organisations to develop open badges that help learners gain recognition for their skills, and support employers to identify the right candidate for a job.

Badges demonstrate your work and achievement on the course. You can share your achievement with friends, family and employers, and on social media. Badges are a great motivation, helping you to reach the end of the course. Gaining a badge often boosts confidence in the skills and abilities that underpin successful study. So, completing this course could encourage you to think about taking other courses.

How to get a badge

Getting a badge is straightforward! Here's what you have to do:

- read each session of the course
- score 50% or more in the two badge quizzes in Session 4 and Session 8

For all the quizzes, you can have three attempts at most of the questions (for true or false type questions you usually only get one attempt). If you get the answer right first time you

will get more marks than for a correct answer the second or third time. Therefore, please be aware that for the two badge quizzes it is possible to get all the questions right but not score 50% and be eligible for the badge on that attempt. If one of your answers is incorrect you will often receive helpful feedback and suggestions about how to work out the correct answer.

For the badge quizzes, if you're not successful in getting 50% the first time, after 24 hours you can attempt the whole quiz, and come back as many times as you like.

We hope that as many people as possible will gain an Open University badge – so you should see getting a badge as an opportunity to reflect on what you have learned rather than as a test.

If you need more guidance on getting a badge and what you can do with it, take a look at the OpenLearn FAQs. When you gain your badge you will receive an email to notify you and you will be able to view and manage all your badges in My OpenLearn within 24 hours of completing the criteria to gain a badge.

Get started with Session 1.

Session 1: What is burnout?

Introduction

> It was a combination of many things; sport, travelling, studies, trying to maintain personal relationships … everything together, it just did not work. I wanted to do everything too good and I pushed myself so far that I almost tore myself apart.
>
> (Successful mountain biker (Engen, cited in Gustafsson, 2018, p. 2))

Feeling 'burned out' is a common idea in popular culture. In this session you will discover what burnout is from a sport psychology perspective, including some of the main symptoms. Through exploring two case studies – from cricket and swimming – you will start to see how burnout can reveal a lot about the positive and negative sides to sport.

In this first session you will begin to consider a number of insights into sport and training including viewing sport as a place of work. Throughout this course the term 'sport' is used to convey the whole range of activities that extends to training and exercise practices, including coaching.

Figure 1 Burnout is often a negative downhill experience yet studying it can reveal how sport environments can be made more positive

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- define both what burnout is and is not, including its relationship with dropout, overtraining, mental health and depression
- identify the role of stress in burnout.

First you will look at how sport and training can have negative effects on athletes as in the case of Jonathan Trott who suffered burnout through prolonged stress and imbalance between training, competition and limited downtime.

The Open University would really appreciate a few minutes of your time to tell us about yourself and your expectations for the course before you begin, in our optional start-of-course survey. Participation will be completely confidential and we will not pass on your details to others.

1 Case study: Jonathan Trott

During the winter 2013 Ashes cricket series in Australia, leading English batsman Jonathan Trott suffered poor form and taunting from the opposition. He then decided – unexpectedly – to leave the tour to return home early.

Figure 2 Jonathan Trott (foreground) was a leading England cricketer who faced difficult times in the 2013 Ashes cricket series in Australia

Activity 1 Exploring Trott's decision

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch the video at the link below in which the England cricket team director, Andy Flower, explains Trott's decision to return home, then answer the following questions.

1. What is the explanation given for Trott's decision to return home? What words or phrases were used that capture the essence of the team director's explanation?
2. Were the events or phenomena that led to Trott's departure short- or long-term in nature?

You should watch the whole video: www.bbc.co.uk/sport/cricket

Text boxes are provided in all activities. You can use these to note down your answers to the questions. Once you click Save, your answers will be stored and you can return to them at any point to view or amend your response. Your responses will only be visible to you. However, if you would prefer to make notes using pen and paper or a different format you can.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. The reasons given were connected to an unspecified 'stress-related' condition. Other terms frequently used were: 'time away', 'with family' and 'this environment'. The suggestion was that the environment of high-pressure elite cricket was closely related to the condition, hence the need to get away for rest and recuperation.
2. The use of the phrase '[for] … quite a while, he has always managed it successfully' suggests this was a longer-term condition.

Five months after this a TV documentary was aired about the cricketer's experiences with the title 'Jonathan Trott: Burnout'. You will read a critical review of this documentary next.

1.1 Jonathan Trott: the TV documentary

A review of the TV documentary 'Jonathan Trott: Burnout' was published in the British Psychological Society publication *The Psychologist* in May 2014. In the next activity you will consider the words the author of the review, accredited sport psychologist Darren Britton, used to describe burnout.

Activity 2 Reviewing the TV documentary

Allow about 15 minutes

Read the following extract from a review of the TV documentary by Britton (2014). List the main distinctive terms that he uses to characterise burnout within this review.

Hint: there are seven to ten factors in this account depending on how you interpret 'distinctive'.

> … Many quarters of the media came to the conclusion that Trott was suffering from depression …
>
> In an hour-long interview … Trott revealed that he had in fact not been experiencing depression, but 'burnout'. He had become 'physically and emotionally spent', with perceived technical weaknesses in his game causing long-term stress for many weeks leading up to the tour. Trott reported being unable to concentrate on the ball as he batted, and experiencing severe headaches. He had been offered time off to rest, but instead insisted on playing in the one-day series against Australia before the tour. His form merely dropped further, and he spent the remaining time

before the tour practising intensely in the nets, giving himself just four days off.

All this begged the question: What is burnout? … it has been described by sports psychologist Dan Gould and colleagues as 'a physical, emotional and social withdrawal from a formerly enjoyable sport activity'. More importantly, this withdrawal often occurs as a result of chronic stress, so it is fair to categorise burnout as a 'stress-related condition'. Perfectionism has been found to be a factor, and this certainly rings true from Trott's account: he responded to his poor form by toiling away for days practising … when he should have been resting.

However, an expert explanation of burn-out was unusually absent … Some journalists claimed that the interview revealed that he had simply 'cried off' and 'given up', and that he hadn't been suffering from a 'stress-related condition' because he said that he wasn't experiencing depression … the interview failed to provide any sort of expert view on burnout; perhaps [this] would have given Trott's account the added legitimacy it required.

Having consulted with psychologists since the tour, Trott now believes 'balance' and 'perspective' has been the key to his recovery from burnout and his drive to return to the England team. However, this interview was arguably a missed opportunity in raising awareness of … burnout.

(Britton, 2014)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have identified the following seven distinctive factors which characterise burnout:

1. *Exhaustion* (physical and emotional)
2. *Chronic stress*
3. *Social withdrawal* from colleagues
4. Individual *perceives weaknesses* in their performance
5. Individual suffers *concentration issues*
6. *Perfectionism*.

A final item contains four terms which can be captured in one linking phrase:

7–10. A *lack of rest, recovery, balance and perspective.*

Notice how, in the review, Britton mentions that exhaustion (1) and stress (2) might be mitigated by practices that encourage positive sporting experiences such as rest, recovery, balance and perspective (7–10).

To distinguish burnout from depression, Freudenberger (1983) identified that job burnout initially tends to be connected with the social environment; in this context, the social environment is the sporting workplace. In contrast to burnout, depression is seen to be more pervasive across all aspects of an individual's life. Sadness, guilt, hopelessness and

feelings of worthlessness are also considered basic features of depression but are not necessarily observed in burnout (Shirom, 2005).

In the following section you will find out precisely how researchers define burnout.

2 How does the research literature describe burnout?

In the 1970s, American researchers found many people working in the caring professions (e.g. nurses and teachers) became exhausted while dealing with the chronic strain associated with their roles. They reportedly felt ‘burned out’. The workers reported emotional exhaustion, a loss of empathy towards their clients and feelings of being inept at work.

Research into athletic burnout commenced in the 1980s, four decades ago. Three broad dimensions of burnout are now used by sport psychologists to help define burnout in sport, namely:

1. emotional and physical exhaustion
2. a reduced sense of accomplishment, and
3. sport/training devaluation.

(Raedeke and Smith, 2001)

Explore your understanding of what is meant by each of the three dimensions by completing the next activity. These dimensions are the central part of this session.

Activity 3 Symptoms of the three dimensions of burnout

Allow about 5 minutes

Match the symptoms to the associated dimension of burnout.

- excessively tired or lethargic
- decreased feelings of sport achievement
- question the value/meaning of sport

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Emotional and physical exhaustion

Reduced sense of accomplishment

Sport/training devaluation

Discussion

The symptoms of emotional and physical exhaustion are as you would expect and include feeling ‘tired’, ‘drained’ or having ‘fatigue’. Likewise, symptoms of a reduced sense of accomplishment are as you would expect, but notice how performing below standards is also linked with a likely sources of stress in ‘negative self-evaluation’. Perhaps you can see the beginnings of a downward negative spiral over time with such symptoms.

Arguably the most important symptoms for your understanding of burnout are those associated with ‘devaluation’. If you devalue something you begin to question its meaning and have reduced concern for it and resentment creeps in. Later in the course you’ll see how cynicism is sometimes used to describe these negative, resentful feelings towards the sporting activity.

Ideally, the media would explain these dimensions to the general public to help them understand that burnout occurs in ‘normal’ individuals as well as in elite sportsmen and women. Notice how the psychologist’s review of the TV documentary in Activity 2 did not focus on the third dimension (sport devaluation). However, the next section does – with vivid honesty from swimmer Ellie Simmonds.

3 Case study: Ellie Simmonds

Ellie Simmonds is a swimmer for Team GB who won eight medals at three Paralympic Games (2008, 2012, 2016).

Figure 3 Ellie Simmonds

Activity 4 Did Simmonds experience burnout?

Allow about 15 minutes

Watch the video of an interview with Ellie Simmonds at the link below and respond to the two questions that follow. Note that Simmonds came close to retiring from the sport two months after this video was made.

1. To what extent was Simmonds experiencing burnout with reference to the three dimensions of burnout (emotional and physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation)?
2. To what extent are the terms ‘dropout’ and ‘burnout’ related in sport?

Watch the first 1 minute 24 seconds of the video: www.bbc.co.uk/sport/disability-sport

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. It is clear that Simmonds displays strong symptoms of sport devaluation (dimension 3) in showing a resentful attitude to her sport as she said ‘I just hated swimming, I hated everything about it’. However, in this video clip there is no evidence of exhaustion (dimension 1) or reduced accomplishment (dimension 2). Therefore, it is difficult to claim Simmonds was experiencing burnout but, by showing one of the symptoms, she might be at risk of burnout.
2. ‘Dropout’ and ‘burnout’ are often used interchangeably by lay people. However, the sport psychology perspective is that ceasing sport participation is only sometimes an outcome of burnout. For example, Jonathan Trott continued in sport and only retired four years after his burnout experience. Also, there are many other reasons for sport dropout, e.g. injury, non-selection, parental/coach expectations. Therefore, burnout and dropout are not the same phenomena.

Notice how Ellie Simmonds talked about ‘finding herself’, including new identities – independent person, traveller, charity worker – when she went travelling. It is worth keeping this in mind since you will come across this again when you explore the role of identity in burnout later in this course.

At the start of this session Jonathan Trott’s condition was described as ‘stress-related’. In the next section you will explore how accurate such a description is.

4 The drip, drip, drip effect of stress

Most evidence in burnout cases points to prolonged stress – leading to anxiety and, in many cases, disturbed sleep and fatigue – as being a key factor contributing to physical and emotional exhaustion (dimension 1). This prolonged stress is often known as the 'drip, drip, drip' effect of stress, as described by Brian Rock (2018), director of training at The Tavistock and Portman NHS trust, specialists in mental health.

Figure 4 What has a dripping tap got to do with burnout?

The role of stress in burnout is also supported by leading sport psychologist Daniel Gould as you will see in the next activity.

Activity 5 Sources of stress in tennis

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch the following video of Daniel Gould whose early research into burnout in tennis underpinned some of the investigations that followed.

1. Identify the three sources of stress Gould describes.
2. Can you add any further possible sources?

You should watch the first 2 minutes 38 seconds.

View at: youtube:Wlu9LroZVXs

Video 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. Gould identified three different examples of stress, all of which are covered in detail in later sessions:
   - an **internal** source of stress – perfectionism, a personality factor that generates a constant stress to be perfect
   - **external** sources of stress – e.g. that stemming from an over-involved parent
   - **physically** created stress – related to training and/or poor recovery, e.g. sleep and nutrition.
2. Other sources of stress might be external sources such as a pushy coach or an organisation that monitors, measures and drives athletes to constantly high performance levels. Gould also makes the point about losing one's enjoyment for sport – if sport has been your passion since childhood, losing that passion can be deeply unsettling and can be perceived as a source of stress in itself.

Physical stress is created by high training loads and – when severe and coupled with inadequate recovery – is known as **overtraining**. Overtraining is often a precursor to burnout. You will return to it in more detail in Sessions 3 and 4, such is its importance.

5 Gould's research into tennis

You have already seen that burnout has three dimensions, and that prolonged stress is a key contributor. You will now explore Gould's research into burnout in tennis in a little more detail, which will help you identify a range of further conditions that have an influence on whether or not an individual suffers burnout.

Figure 5 Burnout in tennis stimulated researchers' early attention

Activity 6 Exploring burnout causes

Allow about 10 minutes

Read the abstract from the research article below (Gould et al., 1997) and make a list under two headings:

1. Burnout causes that you have already learned about in this session.
2. Burnout causes that are new to you.

Abstract

Individual differences in burnout are examined by discussing … profiles from three athletes who were identified as having burned out. … These cases were chosen as they represented different [strains] of social psychologically driven and physically driven burnout. In particular, the three cases included: (a) a player characterized by high levels of perfectionism and overtraining; (b) a player who experienced pressure from others and a need for a social life; and (c) a player who was physically overtrained and had inappropriate goals. It was concluded that although important patterns result … across participants, the unique experience of each individual must be recognized.

(Gould et al., 1997)

Table 1 Burnout characteristics

Burnout characteristics already mentioned in this session	Burnout characteristics that are new to you
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*

Discussion

Table 1 Burnout characteristics (completed)

Burnout characteristics already mentioned in this session	Burnout characteristics that are new to you
• excessive physical drive • perfectionism • overtraining.	• social psychological causes • pressure from others (e.g. parents or coach) • need for a social life • inappropriate goals.

You can see that there are numerous causes that can contribute to burnout. Human performance is a complex phenomenon and interpreting these is one of the reasons studying burnout is worthwhile. In the final section of Session 1 the two other benefits of learning about burnout are outlined.

6 What can you learn from burnout?

Burnout is often associated with the darker side of sport and exercise, yet the reason you can learn so much from burnout is twofold:

1. One of the best strategies to prevent burnout is to understand its conceptual opposite: thriving or engagement in sport environments. You will therefore explore not only the negative aspects of burnout but also how positive experiences of sport can be created. Organisations such as the English Institute of Sport (EIS) do just this, they educate coaches in how to support engagement, well-being and the thriving of their athletes.
2. As burnout is a common professional experience for many, including coaches, understanding the process will help you to develop strategies to counter its occurrence. These include personal management and awareness of environmental influences of burnout.

7 This session’s quiz

Check what you’ve learned this session by taking the end-of-session quiz.

Session 1 quiz

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you’ve finished.

8 Summary of Session 1

!Warning! Calibri not supportedThe main learning points of this first session are:

- Three broad dimensions are used to define burnout. These, derived from Raedeke and Smith (2001), are:
  - emotional and physical exhaustion,
  - a reduced sense of accomplishment, and
  - sport devaluation.
- Athletes, such as Ellie Simmonds, who only display some or part of these dimensions might be described as being *at risk* of burnout.
- There is an overlap of burnout experiences with mental health and depression; some authors have attempted to clarify the differences.
- Dropout from sport is only sometimes an outcome of burnout; they are separate concepts.
- Prolonged, long-term stress is a key factor in burnout with varied stress sources possible: internal (to an individual), external and/or physical.
- Overtraining is often a precursor to burnout.
- Numerous other factors may also contribute to burnout.

In the next session, you will discover the varied perspectives researchers have used to look at burnout and how it might be measured. You will also look more closely at the wide range of factors that contribute to it. How many contributory factors do you think there are?

You can now go to Session 2.

Session 2: Perspectives of burnout

Introduction

At the start of this session you will hear about the case of Open University student and leading cyclist, Elinor Barker, who describes her early stages of burnout. She subsequently recovered to win an Olympic gold medal. This account is used to illustrate how burnout can be understood through different perspectives, and you will build on your understanding of the stress-related burnout research that you read about in Session 1.

Figure 1 How much does looking through a different lens result in seeing something differently or more clearly?

The lens through which you look at any complex phenomenon influences the likely explanations you will provide for it. In this session, you will start to appreciate the different ways in which burnout is experienced, which will lead towards the question: 'how might burnout be measured?' and you will try out a questionnaire that attempts to measure it. You will also consider a list of fifteen factors that influence burnout. With this session's focus on burnout explanations, measurement and causal factors, you will be getting to the heart of the topic.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- explain four different perspectives of burnout and fifteen factors that influence burnout
- discuss how burnout can be gauged using physiological or questionnaire measures.

Watch this video in which Kate Goodger introduces the session further.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1

1 Case study: Elinor Barker

> I was exhausted and I just didn't want to ride my bike; in the eight years I'd been riding it was the first time and it was such an alien feeling.
>
> (Barker, 2018)

This was OU student Elinor Barker speaking in 2018, recalling a period five years previously.

Figure 2 Open University student and 2016 Olympic gold medal cyclist, Elinor Barker

In the activity that follows, Barker describes her own personal experience of the early stages of burnout, opening up new avenues for you to explore the causes and symptoms.

Activity 1 Elinor Barker in conversation

Allow about 10 minutes

Listen to this radio clip of Barker in conversation with Eleanor Oldroyd (BBC presenter) and Steven Finn (England cricketer) and respond to the following questions.

1. What were the sources of Barker's emotional and/or physical stress?
2. What else did you learn from this clip about contributing factors and recovery from burnout?

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. At that time, Barker had recently taken part in her first World Championships, completed her A-levels (including catching up on school work due to being away) and signed for a professional team. This suggests a combination of physical and emotional stress, in particular the cognitive load of juggling three different projects.
2. You may have mentioned the following contributing factors and felt that the comment about the length of time it took to recover was significant:
    a. her unease at the new, strange emotions of not wanting to do her sport after eight years of enthusiastic riding
    b. her comment about how not being on social media much helped her to escape from cycling whilst recovering
    c. the six months it took her to fully recover
    d. the comment from Finn about the guilt of not training and teaching yourself to get away from your sport to stay fresh.

This was a revealing and insightful glimpse into the early stages of burnout; had Barker and those around her not responded to these early signs, there could have been serious consequences for her well-being and ultimate success in her sport.

This is why considerable research into the causes of burnout has helped explain it in more detail. It is these explanations that you will turn to next.

2 Four main perspectives of burnout

Over the years different perspectives have emerged to explain the concept of burnout. Figure 3 in Activity 2 below outlines some of these different ways.

Activity 2 Summarising four burnout perspectives

Allow about 15 minutes

Figure 3 is a very brief overview of four main perspectives of burnout, some of which are covered in more detail in later sessions. The case of Barker is used to illustrate each.

Examine the explanations, revealed by clicking each of the four tabs, and identify the key words or phrases which will help you summarise each perspective. The first perspective, 'A perceived stress perspective', has been completed for you as an example, with the words/phrases you might appropriately identify for this task highlighted in bold. Note down the words/phrases in Table 1 below.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Figure 3 A brief overview of four main perspectives of burnout with short explanations of each

Table 1 Key words/phrases for each burnout perspective

Stress perspective	Overtraining perspective	Motivation perspective	Social perspective
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*

Discussion

This table shows some of the words/phrases you may have identified for each perspective.

Table 1 Key words/phrases for each burnout perspective (completed)

Stress perspective	Overtraining perspective	Motivation perspective	Social perspective

• stress is experienced for a prolonged period • perception • demands of a situation • perceived resources	• too much training with inadequate recovery periods • an accumulating imbalance • physiological and psychological aspects • adaptation to training demands • quality of any recovery strategies	• understanding how people are motivated • push themselves too hard • drive • goals • Self- determination theory	• a social problem • all-consuming from a young age • feel trapped in their sport • the way sports are organised • unidimensional athletic identity • identity relies upon sporting success	

(adapted from DeFreese et al. (2015), Goodger et al. (2012))

Now you know the four main perspectives that researchers use to frame their work on burnout, the next question is, how can they quantify it? There are, in fact, a range of methods that can be used to investigate the extent to which an individual is suffering burnout, such as observation, interviews, physiological markers (e.g. heart rate) and questionnaires. You will explore some of these next.

3 How can you measure burnout?

Devising ways in which a phenomenon can be measured is one of the scientific challenges with which researchers grapple. Physiological markers, such as measurements of the cortisol hormone, may be used since raised levels indicate increased stress. There is also something called heart rate variability (HRV) which measures any changes between your successive heart beats; a decrease in HRV indicates the body's increased response to stress. Another method used to measure burnout is through a questionnaire.

In the activity that follows you will get a chance to try out an online burnout self-assessment tool developed by MindTools. MindTools are a company who provide online learning for management, leadership, and personal effectiveness skills.

Activity 3 How valid is the MindTools questionnaire measure?

Allow about 15 minutes

Open the MindTools burnout self-testFor information, the Mind Tools privacy policy is available here: www.mindtools.com/privacy-policy (you may want to open this in a new browser tab or window by holding down Ctrl (or Cmd on a Mac) when you click the link).

Complete the questionnaire, then press the 'Calculate my total' button. You will need to close down the box which asks you to create a login. At this point you will see the 'Score interpretation' ranges sitting underneath the 'Calculate my total' button.

Assess how valid this questionnaire is at measuring if you are at risk of burnout. As this questionnaire concerns job-related burnout, you may want to view your involvement in sport or training as an important part of your job role.

Discussion

This type of general job-related questionnaire gives an indication of how you can assess your situation. You would be right in thinking that this is not a particularly valid way of measuring burnout in a sport context. The note below the self-test confirms that it has not been scientifically validated.

In the sport training setting you would hope to see some recognition of the stress that training can create and, in particular, the three dimensions of sport burnout from Session 1 (emotional and physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation).

Raedeke and Smith (2001) developed a fifteen-item Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) for sport and scientifically tested it to evaluate how much it really measures the burnout concept. This quality of being reliable is called 'questionnaire validity'.

As with all questionnaire measures there are some who critique their validity but the ABQ is by far the most used measurement tool in studying athlete burnout. A leading sport psychologist in this field, Gustafsson et al. (2017), suggests it is valuable for 'comparing [burnout] levels with existing data or looking at the changes of the three [burnout] dimensions over time in a set context' (p. 11). It is useful, then, primarily for making **comparisons** within a group of athletes.

Below are three sample items from the ABQ (Raedeke and Smith, 2001):

- I am accomplishing many worthwhile things in sport/fitness.
- I don't care as much about my sport/fitness performance as I used to.
- I am not performing up to my ability.

Researchers have often used the ABQ to decide who to include in their studies. Using this screening process, researchers may explore the question: what factors influence burnout? You can see how this can be answered in the next section.

4 Fifteen factors influencing burnout

So far you have looked at what burnout is, why it occurs and how it might be measured.

You will now review a list of fifteen factors influencing burnout which have been compiled from recent research reviews in this area (Gustafsson et al. (2017); Eklund and Defreese (2017)) by the authors of this course. These fifteen factors cover all the key theoretical ideas you need to be aware of – the list is a teaching tool to help your understanding, not a comprehensive evaluation.

The fifteen factors have been divided into three categories to help make sense of this complex phenomenon:

- individual characteristics (i.e. a person's attributes and personal resources)
- prolonged overload (i.e. the stress stimulus and response to it), and
- situational characteristics (i.e. the environmental and social influences).

To help you gain a deeper understanding of the burnout factors, the following activity now challenges you to categorise the fifteen burnout factors under these three headings.

Activity 4 Categorising the fifteen burnout factors

Allow about 20 minutes

Read the list of fifteen factors (1–15) below and identify which of the three categories (individual characteristics; prolonged overload; situational characteristics) each factor falls under. Use the highlight tool and select the relevant words once to colour code the list into three colours.

- Identify factors falling under the individual characteristics category in yellow.
- Identify factors falling under the prolonged overload characteristics category in green.
- Identify factors falling under the situational characteristics category in red.

The fifteen burnout factors are:

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Discussion

A colour coded summary of the categorised factors is available in Figure 4.

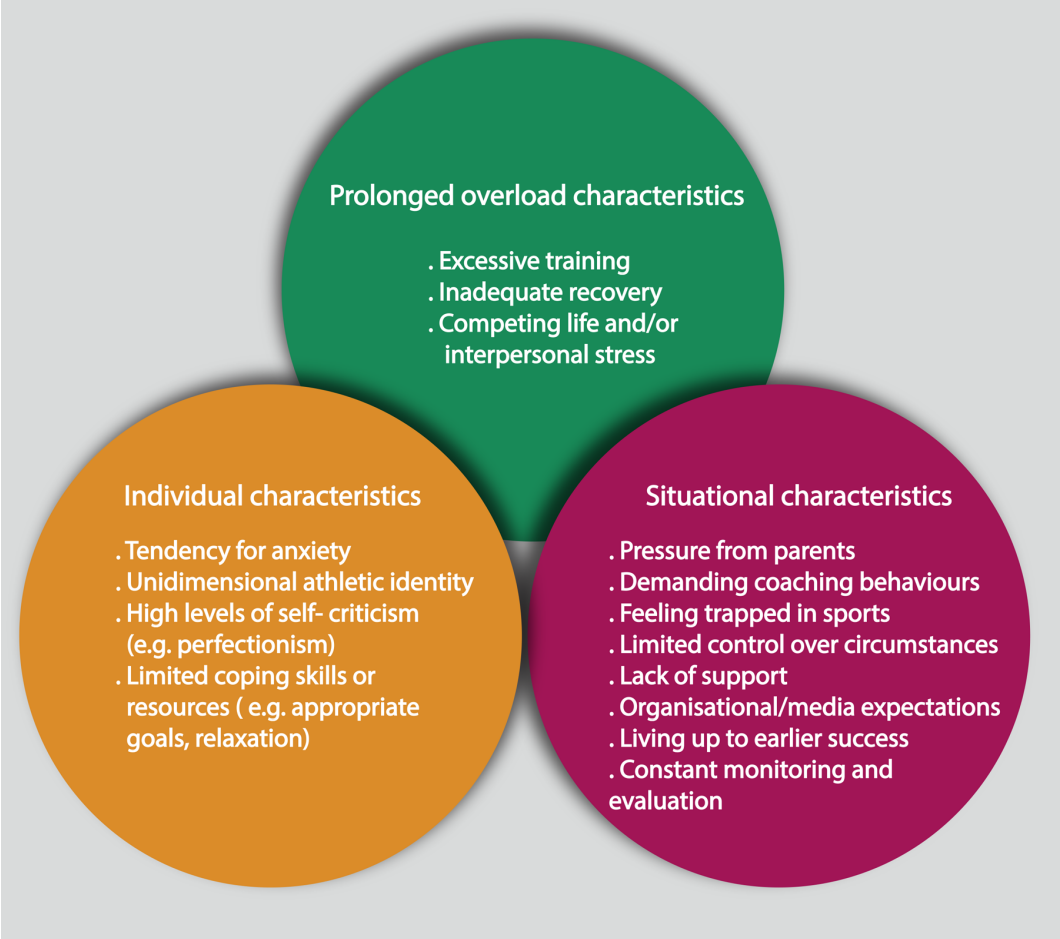


Figure 4 The fifteen burnout factors categorised into individual, prolonged overload and situational characteristics

When categorising factors you often find that there are relatively straightforward items that easily fit into a category and then those that are less clear cut. For example, you may have found those factors connected to the **individual** (yellow factors) easier to place, such as: tendency for anxiety, unidimensional athletic identity, high levels of self-criticism (e.g. perfectionism) and limited coping skills.

Deciding what are **prolonged overload** items (green factors) may be more a matter of judgement, but factors that address long-standing features of sport such as excessive training, inadequate recovery along with competing life and/or interpersonal stress perhaps fit best here.

All the other factors (**situational** characteristics, red factors) are to some extent dependent on the context and environment in which a person trains. These include: feeling trapped in sport, limited control over circumstances, lack of support, and pressures/expectations (five sources of pressure fit under this label: parents, coaches, organisations/media, earlier success and constant monitoring).

You have covered a lot of new material and ideas about burnout in this session. To help pull these ideas together in the next section you will hear from three academics talking about the varied influences and perspective on burnout covered.

5 The sport psychologist's viewpoint

A sport psychologist and two academics from the OU's Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies were asked for their interpretation of the ideas you have learned about in this session:

- Barker's case
- the four main burnout perspectives
- measuring burnout, and
- categorising burnout factors.

Listen to what they had to say in Activity 5.

Activity 5 Academics in conversation

Allow about 10 minutes

Listen to the audio below featuring Professor of Sport Psychology Iain Greenlees and the OU's Candice Lingam-Willgoss and Ben Oakley.

The purpose of this audio is to hear from experienced practitioners about burnout. This is an important summary of your learning to date. Whilst listening identify any new points that help enhance your learning from this session.

The participants also touch on other topics that you will go on to explore in later sessions.

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 2

Provide your answer...

Discussion

When this audio has been listened to by people studying burnout they all noticed different things to take away from it. Three of the more common items that they described as enhancing learning were:

1. Greenlees provides a useful summary of the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires that attempt to measure burnout. One strength he mentions is that they allow some standardisation of what burnout is, but a weakness is that it's not clear what questionnaire score can be classified as describing someone as burnt out. He terms this as the lack of threshold numbers.
2. Lingam-Willgoss reflects on her experience of teaching the topic, stating how people often relate well to the stress perspective of burnout since everyone has experienced a range of stressors and therefore find it relatively easy to understand what prolonged overload might lead to.
3. A third point is one that Greenlees makes about the list of 15 burnout factors. He suggests that this list is particularly useful when you think about preventing and managing burnout (covered in Sessions 7 and 8).

6 This session's quiz

Check what you've learned this session by taking the end-of-session quiz.

Session 2 quiz

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

7 Summary of Session 2

The main learning points of this session are:

- The case of the cyclist Elinor Barker demonstrates that stress can come from multiple sources and that recovery can take a while.
- Four of the main perspectives of burnout are:
  - a perceived stress perspective
  - an overtraining perspective
  - a motivational perspective
  - a social perspective.
- Burnout can be gauged using physiological (e.g. cortisol or heart rate variability) or questionnaire measures.
- The Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Raedeke and Smith, 2001) is a validated measurement tool which some authors (e.g. Gustafsson et al., 2017) suggest is best used to make comparisons between athletes in a setting.
- Three categories can be used to organise fifteen factors that influence burnout (there are linkages between many of the factors identified):
  - individual characteristics
  - prolonged overload
  - situational characteristics.

In the next session you will look at an interesting area: identity and its impact on training and recovery. Exploring athletic identity and overtraining is a popular topic since many of the examples provide real insights into athletes' lives. In exploring this topic, you will learn a bit more about your own situation.

You can now go to Session 3.

Session 3: Exploring identity and overtraining

Introduction

> Judge yourself based on the effort and the experience [of the training] not others' opinions of it. Adopt the mindset of a craftsperson not one of a selfie-stick.
>
> (Magness, 2017)

Figure 1 What are the implications of athletes solely responding to the question 'Who am I?' by saying 'I'm an athlete'?

The above craftsperson-related tip about preventing burnout talks about identity along with how people judge and push themselves in training. As you saw with the social perspectives of burnout in Session 2, someone with a unidimensional athletic identity may only really value a narrow range of activities (all related to their sport). Therefore, they may struggle with inadequate downtime and recovery. In addition, as any failure potentially threatens their sense of self, to fail is very stressful and may lead to inappropriate behaviours in an effort to preserve their identity. Some might respond by training harder without rest and full recovery (that is, they may overtrain).

Whilst athletes need to place a high physiological stress on themselves, the balance between stress, recovery and overtraining is a fine one. Added to this is the potential anxiety of knowing that performances are often continually being evaluated. A drop in performance sometimes threatens athletic identity and can even lead to a loss of income.

By exploring identity and overtraining in this session you will be able to identify how those driven hard to train can get the balance right. As the quote above suggests, much of it is down to thinking like a craftsperson about long-term learning and progress. Craftspeople do not expect instant results from their practice and perhaps put less pressure on themselves as a result.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- explain how personal identity, self-esteem and feeling trapped in sport all interact and often cause athletes to continue to train hard whilst experiencing burnout
- define overtraining and overreaching and why the term underrecovery and its symptoms are useful when discussing burnout.

1 Identity: what do burned out athletes say?

Researchers have recognised athletic identity as ‘the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role’ (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). Often, an exclusively athletic identity can predispose athletes to being more vulnerable to heightened levels of stress and anxiety (Martin et al., 2014), possibly because sporting success is particularly important for them. With this in mind, how does what burned out athletes say about their experiences support a social perspective of burnout, particularly in relation to identity?

Gustafsson et al. (2008) asked six hundred Swedish athletes to complete the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire that you learned about in the previous session. The ten with the highest burnout scores in the age range 22–24 years and who had dropped out of their sport agreed to be interviewed about their experiences. Out of this group of ten, seven reported poor coach–athlete relationships, six described themselves as having perfectionist traits and three female athletes reported eating disorders.

Activity 1 Sport as identity

Allow about 20 minutes

Read the following extract from Gustafsson et al.'s (2008) article entitled 'A qualitative analysis of burnout in elite Swedish athletes' in which descriptions of athletes' sporting identity and self-worth feature strongly. Then answer the questions below.

1. What is the difference between identity and self-esteem in this extract?
2. How might the combination of an athlete's identity and their self-esteem lead them to continue training and performing despite feeling trapped?

> A strong athlete identity was an important reason the athletes did not leave [their] sport despite feelings of burnout. All described sport as an important part of their identity: 'I was an athlete 24 hours a day, seven days a week.' A strong identification with sport made the athletes continue with their training longer than they otherwise would have. One explained: 'Sport has been such a big part of your life, training and competing. I guess you don't want to realize it's time to let go.' The earlier success the athletes had experienced became an unspoken pressure, part of which was felt in the expectations of parents and other relatives. As one athlete stated: ''Relatives and others saw me as an athlete, I had been performing so well for so long. There's no direct pressure, but you feel it anyway.'
>
> These findings [suggest] … that a strong athletic identity may encourage athletes to continue their training [even though] they might jeopardize their health and develop overtraining syndrome or burnout.
>
> In conjunction …, the participants also said that being good at sport was important for their self-esteem. One athlete stated, 'Performance in sport was very important for my self-esteem, that's why I felt so bad when my performance started to deteriorate.' For these athletes, athletic performance had become a vehicle for maintaining and enhancing self-esteem. … As one female athlete noted: 'Sport was what I was good at and therefore you don't just quit. Because if you quit, what are you good at then, what lifts you up?'
>
> Having a positive image about oneself is considered one of the most basic human needs. Performance based self-esteem appears to be important in the development of burnout and offers a potential explanation for why athletes push themselves into this state of ill-health. Almost all athletes describe how they had been very successful at a young age, and that this had increased their own and others' expectations. … Successful young athletes may be especially at risk for burnout, due to a combination of increased expectations and too-rapid progress in their career transition.
>
> (Gustafsson et al., 2008)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. In the extract the participants described their athletic identity and immersion in sport '24 hours a day'. This narrowly-focused, singular identity is an example of

the unidimensional athletic identity in sport psychology that you explored in the last session. Many people have broader identities e.g. a family identity, a cultural identity, or identities in different friendship groups.

'Identity' is your *description* of who you are. 'Esteem' stems from your *evaluation* of who you are; the extract talks of an 'image about oneself'. If your identity is narrowly focused on being an athlete, then any bad performances or slumps in performance may have a dramatic effect on how you value yourself. If you have a broad self-identity, then poor performances in sport may be offset by positive experiences in other aspects of your identity.

2. Feeling trapped in sport is a risk that comes from having a unidimensional athletic identity. If your identity is restricted to 'talented athlete', then the danger is that only sporting performances will give you a sense of self-esteem (e.g. 'without sport I am nothing'). This can make 'letting go' of sport difficult as an athlete may not know of anything else that will give them a sense of self-worth.

Some researchers describe this concept of athletes feeling trapped as **sport entrapment** (DeFreese et al., 2015). Athletes maintain involvement not because they want to but because they feel they have to remain in sport. As you will see, this *having to* undertake training can lead to imbalance between training stress and recovery.

Next you will hear an example of how athletic identity can easily become too closely connected to performances in an almost obsessional way.

2 Case study: Steve Magness

The author Steve Magness (whose cratfsperson quote opened this session) has spoken about his unidimensional identity as a top runner.

Figure 2 Steve Magness – adolescent obsessive runner, now recreational athlete and author who adopts the mindset of a craftsperson

This next activity adds further to your understanding of the identity–burnout relationship.

Activity 2 Identifying with athletic performance

Allow about 10 minutes

Listen to the audio below of Magness describing how his and others' identity can easily become too closely connected to running performances. He describes his athletic identity, in places, as an 'obsessive passion' and refers to an author called Vallerand et al. (2003) who has written about this topic.

Whilst listening to the audio consider the following question: what are the likely risks of identity becoming tied in with performance?

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Magness describes how, in his American high school and college years, running was all that mattered and nothing else came close. He identified a shift in motivation with this unidimensional athletic identity as he and individuals he worked with became afraid to lose or to fail. This can lead to intense anxiety and fear due to self-esteem from performance being so closely associated with their identity. The risk was that not living up to expectations in running competitions may become, in his words, 'an assault on the sole core of myself'.

You will next consider your own identity – this analysis may help you understand why identity and self-esteem are such key concepts within burnout.

3 What is your identity?

You will now explore the multiple roles and identities that you consider make up who you are.

Activity 3 Drafting your own identities mind map

Allow about 15 minutes

Think about the various different spheres of your life – for example, your professional, family, social, sporting or cultural spheres. Then break down the various aspects of each sphere in order to work out just how many different roles you play. One way of doing this would be to draw a mind map to describe your self-concept, an example of which is shown in Figure 3.

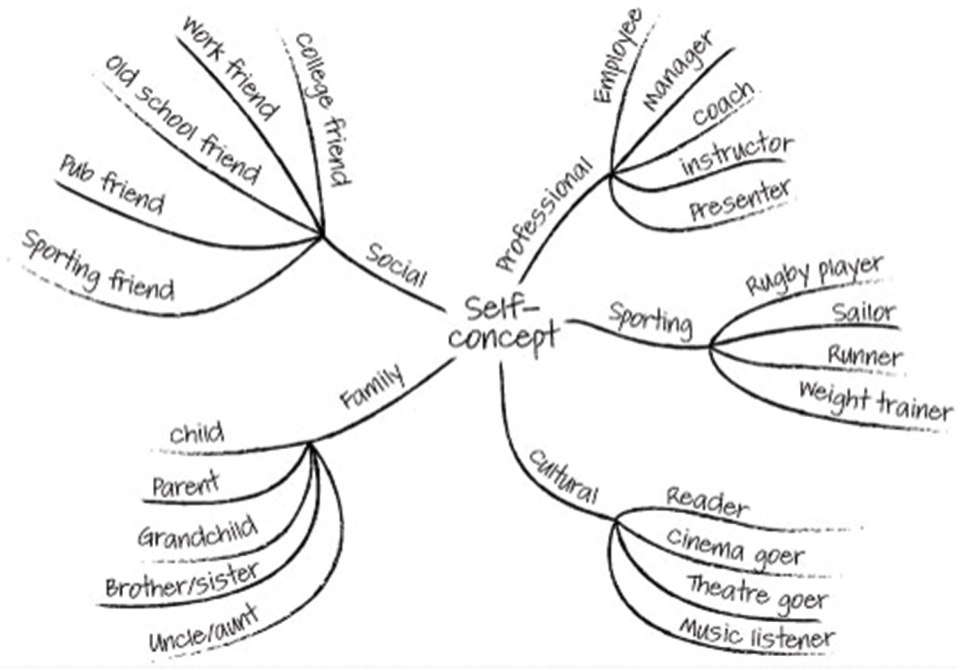


Figure 3 An example of a mind map of a person describing their self-concept and different roles

Discussion

Drawing a mind map gives you a visual display of the level of complexity involved in the roles and potentially multiple identities that exist in your life. Evidence shows that sport performance-based self-esteem is closely associated with burnout (Gustafsson et al., 2018). Therefore, developing multiple parts to your identity gives more spheres in life to see yourself as someone with value and so helps reduce your burnout risk.

Managing those with a unidimensional identity heavily based in their sport is something you will explore in Session 7. You have already seen, however, how a unidimensional identity puts an athlete at risk of feeling trapped, yet drives them to continue to train hard. This can lead to overtraining – you will explore this next.

4 Overtraining and burnout

In Session 1 you read a case study about cricketer Jonathan Trott. To overcome poor form, he refused time off to rest and spent extra time practising. An anti-rest and macho training culture was also described by one of the athletes in Gustafsson et al.'s (2008) interviews: 'To get a day off you had to be more or less in plaster'.

Figure 4 Is this man slumped, asleep, or experiencing a pre-cursor to burnout?

An overtraining perspective (one of the four main perspectives you learned about earlier) views burnout as the result of doing too much training without having adequate recovery periods. Here, it is not just the training but the recovery that comes into focus. Overtraining is often a precursor to burnout and can be thought of as an imbalance between stress and recovery.

A possible visual representation of the idea of an imbalance between stress and recovery is shown in Figure 5.

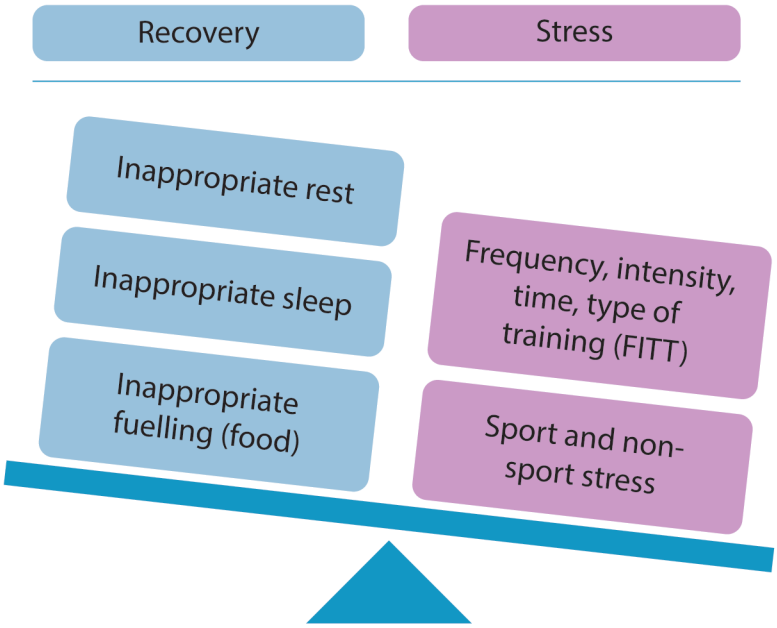


Figure 5 Overtraining: an imbalance between stress and recovery

Activity 4 Your experience of stress–recovery imbalance

Allow about 10 minutes

Overtraining can affect recreational exercisers who may also have a job or family or other commitments. When looking at Figure 5 can you think of any experiences of stress–recovery imbalance in your life, even if it did not lead to burnout?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Figure 5 largely represents Kellmann's (2002) perspective of underrecovery often being a precursor to overtraining and perhaps burnout. In your response you may have identified that stress includes all training and competition, as well as additional non-training stress factors (e.g. social, educational, occupational, economical, nutritional and travel factors). Thinking back to the case of cyclist Elinor Barker, it was the compounded stress from three sources (her World Championships, her A-levels and signing for a professional team) as well as her underrecovery that contributed to early signs of burnout.

Kellmann (2010) describes that, when talking to coaches, it is more useful to describe overtraining as underrecovery:

> It is the coaches' job to train athletes at the optimal level (which is often at the limit) ... Coaches may be much more receptive to working with the concept of

> underrecovery because it acknowledges that underrecovery can also be due to factors which are outside of their control.
>
> (Kellmann, 2010, p. 101)

To train athletes to the optimal level requires a sound understanding of physiology and this is what you will focus on in the next section.

5 The physiology of overtraining

Exercise physiologists are interested in the functions and mechanisms of the human body's response to exercise.

Figure 6 illustrates the concept of supercompensation (the process of the body adapting to the progressive demands of training). The timescales involved are very broad estimates but do indicate that far longer is needed for recovery and adaptation than some people realise. This is why training plans often aim to stress different muscle groups at different times in a training period and why consistently high training volumes and intensities make it more difficult to sufficiently recover between sessions.

Ideally, athletes follow a periodised programme which varies the volume, intensity and training focus: this enables supercompensation and recovery but minimises fatigue.

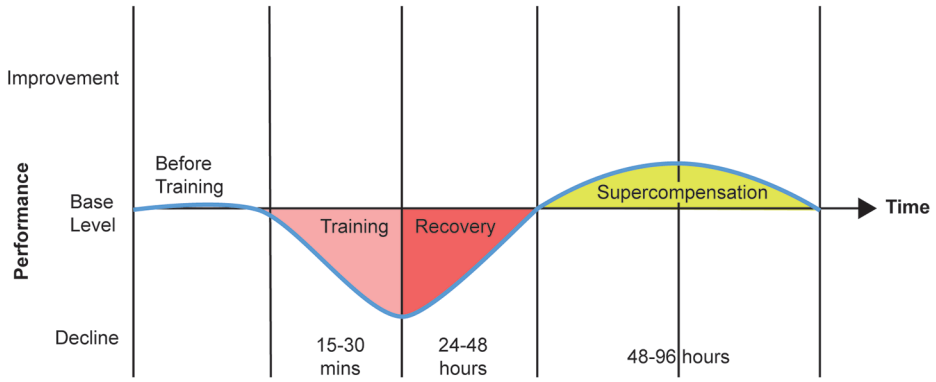


Figure 6 The supercompensation effect and its relation to training and recovery

Leading strength and conditioning coach Vern Gambetta (2007) explains:

> The body is always seeking to maintain a state of homeostasis [equilibrium] so it will constantly adapt to the stress from its environment … the desired adaptive response is called supercompensation. … The first step is the application of a training stress and the body's subsequent reaction to this …: fatigue or tiring. There is a predictable drop-off in performance because of that stress. Step 2 is the recovery phase. … As a result of the recovery period, the energy stores and performance will return to the baseline (state of homeostasis) … Step 3 is the supercompensation phase. This is the adaptive rebound above the [performance] baseline; it is described as a rebound response because the body is essentially rebounding from the low point of greatest fatigue. This supercompensation effect is a physiological, psychological and technical response.
>
> (Gambetta, 2007, p. 71)

The penultimate word 'technical' refers to improvements in skills, techniques and accuracy in a movement. You will now consider what happens when repeated training sessions apply training stress. Here, a new term will be introduced: overreaching.

6 The fine line between overreaching and overtraining

Physiologists suggest that any subsequent training session after an initial training stress is best placed in the supercompensation phase.

By examining Figure 7 you can see that, in the periodisation (i.e. systematic scheduling) of training, recovery and supercompensation phases lead to gradual improvements in performance. However, subsequent training when recovery is incomplete (i.e. underrecovery) leads to 'overreaching'. This is manageable provided a quick recovery is still possible with rest (ranging from days to weeks). Overreaching is often an intentional part of elite training periodisation.

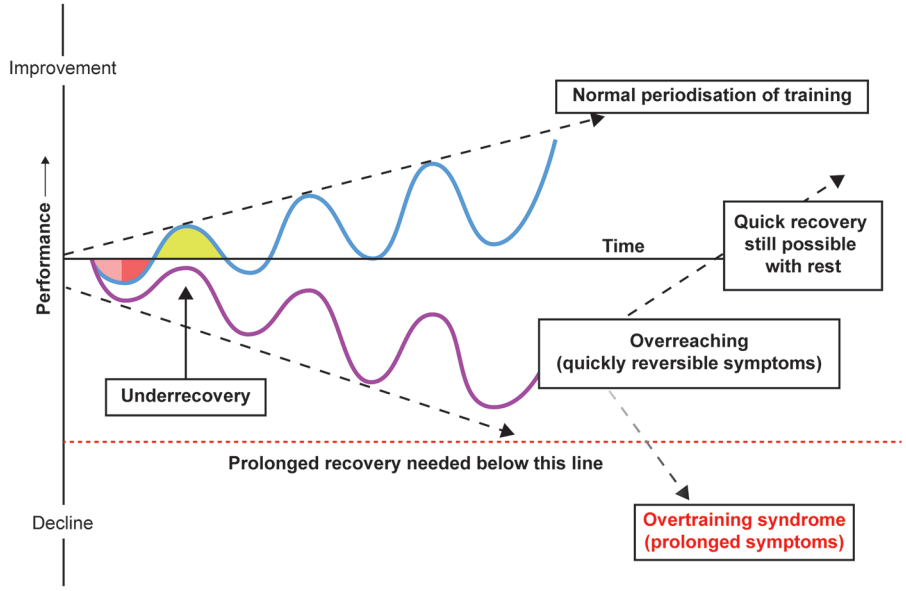


Figure 7 Overtraining and underrecovery leading to the overtraining syndrome

Overreaching becomes overtraining when the red horizontal line at the bottom of Figure 7 (the x-axis) is crossed – that is when prolonged symptoms persist (e.g. fatigue, insomnia, agitation, weight loss, infections/illness (Kreher, 2016)). Recovery will then take weeks to months. If this overtraining condition continues it can lead to burnout.

From the physiological basis of overtraining, you can see there is a fine line between overreaching and overtraining – from preserving your body's ability to repair and rebound, and pushing yourself into a downward spiral. Recovery and rebound (supercompensation) are the key processes that differentiate a tired recreational exerciser or athlete from someone who has gone too far and has crossed the line separating overreaching from overtraining.

7 Learning from the physiology

You need to stress the body and allow recovery for a training effect, yet it may be difficult for an athlete to self-diagnose overtraining symptoms such as fatigue, insomnia, agitation, weight loss, infections and illness. This is especially true for someone with a unidimensional athletic identity who may struggle with inadequate downtime and recovery. In addition, as any failure potentially threatens their identity, this may lead to maladaptive behaviours such as more training, in an effort to preserve their self-esteem (as you saw in the case of Jonathan Trott).

Figure 8 The fine line between overreaching and overtraining is difficult to spot since most athletes rely on self-diagnoses and a 'no pain, no gain ethos'.

Overtraining may also remain undiagnosed in groups which have an anti-rest and macho culture. Cultures such as these often exist in the fitness industry and amongst recreational gym goers and weight trainers.

Effective monitoring might be able to spot the early signs of overtraining. This is something you will learn about in the next session.

8 This session’s quiz

Check what you’ve learned this session by taking the end-of-session quiz.

Session 3 quiz

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you’ve finished.

9 Summary of Session 3

The main learning points from this session are:

- Athletic identity can be defined as ‘the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role’ (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). ‘Unidimensional athletic identity’ is used to reinforce the idea that an identity is narrowly focused and singular.
- Self-esteem refers to the evaluation of one’s worth as a person. A self-esteem that is mainly based on sports performance outcomes is closely associated with risk of burnout (Gustafsson et al., 2018).
- Sport entrapment refers to a feeling of being trapped in sport because one’s identity and self-esteem is closely linked to sport; contemplating being an ex-athlete creates uncertainty and anxiety. Hence athletes often continue to train hard whilst feeling trapped in sport.
- Overtraining is due to an imbalance between stress and recovery. Some of the prolonged symptoms of overtraining are fatigue, insomnia, agitation, weight loss and infections and illness (Kreher, 2016). A focus on underrecovery is useful when discussing overtraining.
- The training–recovery–supercompensation phases describe the adaptive rebound in performance and may have physiological, psychological and technical components (Gambetta, 2007).
- Overreaching is a state of short-term physiological depletion from which it is still possible to recover relatively quickly (in days or weeks).

In the next session you will explore five in-depth insights into overtraining and underrecovery, which may challenge any pre-conceptions you might have on this topic.

You can now go to Session 4.

Session 4: Insights into overtraining

Introduction

> The workouts are on point and focused, no fluff, no nice to do fillers that make you tired and add undue training stress.
>
> (Gambetta, 2015, p. 1)

Leading strength and conditioning coach Gambetta suggests in this quote that being acutely aware of how much training stress you are creating in a session is vital. Moreover, to what extent does a coach appreciate how much training stress you have experienced?

Figure 1 Obtaining clarity and sometimes sudden understanding of a complicated problem or situation

You will find two themes running throughout this session on overtraining: one is recovery, whilst the other is the balance between individual characteristics (e.g. an athlete's personality) and situational influences (e.g. their environment).

In this session you will gain insights into overtraining through stories, examples and recovery research, including discussion of how athlete overtraining might be better understood and how athletes might be monitored. These insights feature a world champion, a range of sports medicine organisations and a novel phone app.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- recognise both individual and situational influences when evaluating overtraining and burnout
- discuss the lessons from five insights into overtraining and underrecovery. These insights will support your learning of the issues surrounding overtraining: prevention, associated disorders, and how assessment and monitoring might successfully be used.

1 Individual vs. situational influences

Increased recognition is being given to athlete and coach welfare in elite sport nowadays, including in relation to overtraining and burnout. For example, the Duty of Care Report to UK Government (Grey-Thompson, 2017) reported that:

> For those on a high performance pathway life is often unbalanced … The rigour of training and being put under the pressure of achieving targets can affect some more than others. Mental resilience is not something that all participants and coaches automatically have and this should be developed with the same consideration that physical resilience is built.
>
> (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 23)

Reports such as this place responsibility on organisations to develop appropriate behaviours and cultures that address welfare, overtraining and burnout. That is, organisations are now being required to create favourable *situational* conditions for sport. But this does not take into account the influence of *individual* characteristics on overtraining.

What does the overtraining and burnout research literature say about both individual and situational influences? Christina Maslach is influential in occupational burnout outside of sport; her research was referred to in the development of the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire you saw earlier (Raedeke and Smith, 2001).

In the activity that follows you will look at Maslach's explanation of internal individual and situational (she calls it 'organisational') influences on burnout. This will help provide some context around these factors before you develop your understanding of this theme further in the rest of this session.

Activity 1 Maslach and the false individual–organisation dichotomy

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch the video below and apply Christina Maslach's job-related ideas to sport overtraining.

To what extent do you agree with her argument for focusing on individuals and organisations?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Maslach's argument is that stressors are created by the environment in which people operate; so you need to look at **both** the individual and the organisation (their situation). For her, a focus on either the situation or the individual is not a useful distinction. Her message is to think more of the 'big picture'. She wants a positive approach towards helping people thrive in their environments. By framing the problem this way, she claims it is more likely to focus on stress-related prevention rather than cure; this approach may have an impact on a larger group of people than a sole focus on individuals with a chronic condition.

The important point is that both individual and situational characteristics need to be taken into account when evaluating overtraining and burnout. This relationship between the individual and the situation is a consistent theme throughout this session.

You will now study the first of the five insights (or lessons) into overtraining using a personal account of the importance of recovery from Chrissie Wellington, four-time Ironman Triathlon World Champion.

2 Insight: recovery is training

Chrissie Wellington trained obsessively hard when she gave up her civil service job to become a full-time athlete. She states that ‘recovery is training … spending the day shopping or gardening doesn’t count as rest. It has to involve sitting down, preferably on a sofa’ (Wellington, 2012, p. 150).

Figure 2 Chrissie Wellington

Activity 2 Is Wellington's view of recovery realistic?

Allow about 5 minutes

Watch this video of Wellington describing how she massively reduced her risk of overtraining once she changed her approach to recovery. Is her idea that it is only possible to get full mental and physical rest by sitting or lying on a sofa realistic for most everyday athletes?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Wellington was at the very top of an extreme physical endurance sport in which legs were important in running, swimming and cycling. Her extreme version of rest is perhaps uncommon and difficult to comply with for those who work and/or have family caring responsibilities. Her comments about resting her active mind are also interesting since for most people going shopping or light gardening would be one easy way of helping to switch off.

The important point is that recovery in itself is training, and overtraining can be prevented by appropriate rest.

But if an athlete doesn't allow for appropriate recovery – what are the potential health risks? You will look at this next.

3 Insight: the health risks of underrecovery

The tendency of those passionate about sport is to train hard. A hard training culture often permeates sport, and proponents of a social perspective of burnout would hold this up as an example of where the sport environment contributes to burned out athletes.

In a hard training culture, athletes may be tempted to avoid recovery sessions. In this section you will see that prolonged underrecovery combined with undereating can have severe health consequences.

Activity 3 Under-fuelled and overtrained

Allow about 15 minutes

British middle-distance runner Bobby Clay had the world at her feet - aged 18, she was hailed as a star of the future for Team GB after taking Gold at the 2015 European Junior Championships. Listen to this interview with Clay who tells a shocking story involving extreme underrecovery. Then respond to these two questions:

1. Why do you think Clay achieved her best ever results whilst at Loughborough University?
2. In Session 2 you categorised burnout characteristics under three headings:
    - individual characteristics (i.e. a person's attributes and resources)
    - prolonged overload (i.e. the stress stimulus and response)
    - situational characteristics (i.e. the environmental and social influences).

    Using these headings as a starting point, what factors most influenced Clay's overtraining?

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. It is likely that a 50% reduction in training volume at Loughborough and a load that was managed through a close athlete–coach relationship was one of the main causes of her lifetime best results (i.e. less is more).
2. What most influenced Clay's overtraining was, in terms of physiology, excessive overtraining and undereating. However, you may also conclude that the overload was not due to the training regime but Clay's personality characteristics as she was obsessional in her drive to train hard through her adolescence. The inability of others to measure her training load before going to university also contributed.

Arguably, though, her individual characteristics of being 'narrow minded' and training 'under the radar' had the greatest impact. Athlete monitoring is clearly an important part of organisations' responsibility for athlete welfare. In 2018, Loughborough University released a press release and you may like to view their

short film about eating disorders amongst athletesin which a healthy Clay features (this is not a compulsory part of this course).

The National Centre for Sport and Exercise Medicine (NCSEM) (2017) suggests that 'eating disorders and disordered eating are common among athletes. Around one in five female athletes and one in twelve male athletes are affected' (p. 2). Their research supports the potential for the negative impacts of undereating as you saw in the case of Clay. Also, remember Gustafsson et al.'s (2008) burnout interviews in Session 3: three out of five women reported eating disorders. Appropriate re-fuelling is a fundamental part of recovery so undereating can have severe health consequences (NCSEM, 2017). Clay's example also points to obsessional behaviour being a risk factor in overtraining and burnout.

Earlier in this course you heard of a macho training culture. Next you will hear an example of a modern coach turning this on its head to see how little training athletes can do to still be effective.

4 Insight: less is more

You saw in the Clay example how a 50% reduction in training load contributed to her lifetime best results. When training loads are appropriate, less (training) really can result in more (improvement and physical progress).

American coach Dan Pfaff who worked with Olympic gold medallists Donovan Bailey, Greg Rutherford and Jonnie Peacock supports the 'less (training) is more (performance)' approach that Clay started to benefit from at Loughborough. This is what he says about training:

> I think there is a tendency for athletes to do more than they should. They think if *two* was good let me do *four*, well *four* was pretty good let me do *six*; well there is a breaking point and more is not better. I'm actually the opposite, every year I write training plans I'm looking what can I get rid of. You know, how few of things can we do.
>
> (Pfaff, 2012)

It is debatable whether athletes who choose to put in more sessions are doing so due to individual ambition, which is reinforced by sport training culture. However, a shift in ethos to 'less is more' and 'recovery is training' would clearly help many athletes to prevent overtraining.

So far in this course you have considered the burnout experience as something that is often very individual to each athlete. What happens when you attempt to introduce medical assessments to overtraining: can it be classified medically? This intriguing question is the focus of the next section.

5 Insight: a medical assessment

Such has been the concern about overtraining that in 2013 the European College of Sport Science (ECSS) and the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) took the unusual step of issuing a position statement on overtraining (Meeusen et al., 2013).

Using this consensus of expert opinion, they developed a diagnoses flowchart for assessing if athletes are overtrained.

Activity 4 Have you ever been overtrained?

Allow about 15 minutes

The following eleven criteria are recommended by ECSS/ACSM to clinicians to help them assess the classification of athletes who are experiencing the overtraining syndrome (Figure 3).

Review the eleven ‘yes’/ ‘no’ criteria. Then think of a time when there was an imbalance in your stress–recovery. The flowchart starts with the key symptoms such as decrease in performance and duration of symptoms; then performance changes are defined and possible supporting evidence identified. A challenge is that there are ‘confounding conditions’ which get in the way of accurately assessing overtraining (e.g. illnesses or infections). Using your example, work downwards through each of the diagnostic questions in turn, following the flowchart options. Are you suffering from overtraining syndrome? Which of these criteria, if any, surprised you?

ECSS/ACSM states that overtraining may involve ‘several confounding factors such as inadequate nutrition (energy and/or carbohydrate intake), illness (most commonly, upper respiratory tract infections), psychosocial stressors (work, team, coach, and family related), and sleep disorders’.

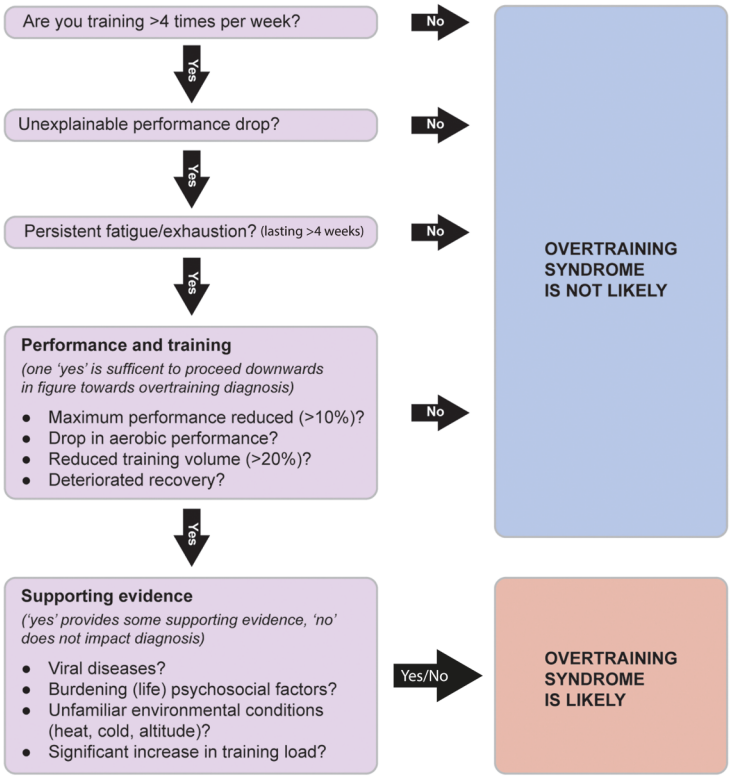


Figure 3 A diagnoses flowchart of overtraining syndrome (Adapted from Meeusen et al., 2013)

Discussion

The criteria suggest that you need to be training at least five times a week and to have been exhausted for at least four weeks. These seem quite rigid criteria. The term 'deteriorated recovery' seems vague and it is not clear to what extent sleep disturbances are included as part of this.

The environmental conditions of heat (hot or cold) and altitude are new criteria not mentioned previously; this suggests that training in such environments may be a trigger factor due to the increased physiological stress this would create. The inclusion of 'burdening [life] psycho social factors' demonstrates that this condition may not solely be triggered by physical factors.

Professional judgement is needed to help make difficult decisions about how to respond to those athletes with some, but not all, of these symptoms. However, prevention is better than cure, and technology can be used to monitor athletes. Next you will look at a monitoring tool used by the English Institute of Sport and consider whether use of this is surveillance or support.

6 Insight: surveillance or support?

The loss of valuable training preparation time through overtraining, injury or worse can be prevented via effective monitoring. In preparation for the 2016 Rio Olympics, the English Institute of Sport developed an app as part of their Personal Data Management System (PDMS).

This app collected an athlete's personal data, thirteen dimensions of which are shown in Figure 4. For example, you can see how training load, health, recovery, sleep, hydration and life stress are all included in one dashboard. Quantitative and qualitative information is collected on an athlete's 'Availability' to train, the 'Effort' they were able to exert and how they feel afterwards during 'Recovery'. This is an attempt to assemble a range of valuable information in one place so coach and other support staff can accurately monitor an athlete's well-being.

Note: RPE = Rate of Perceived Exertion

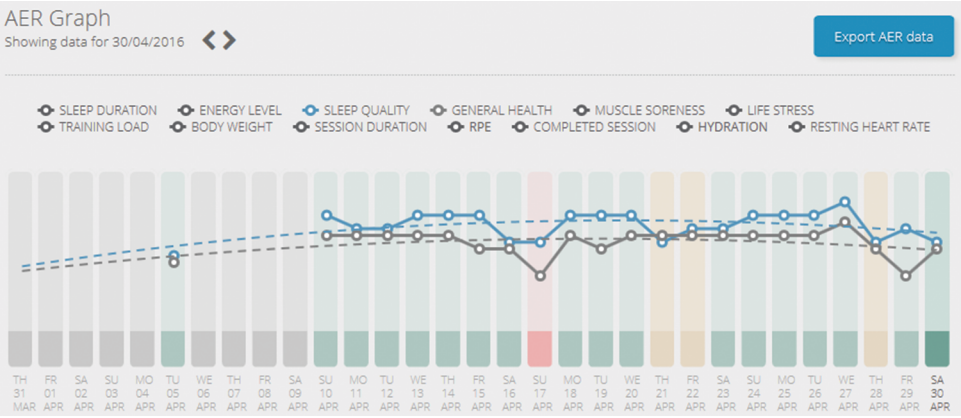


Figure 4 Thirteen dimensions for monitoring individual training load, recovery and welfare

Activity 5 Athlete load and recovery monitoring

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch the video below and answer the following:

1. List three reasons why it is claimed this app may help with prevention of overtraining.
2. How much does this app rely on athletes engaging with its ethos? Or, is it a means of the organisation exerting undue surveillance and pressure?

View at: youtube:trIr84A8d90

Video 3

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. These are the three reasons that you may have identified, although you might express them differently or have identified another. First, the app helps in identifying training patterns over time including indicating possible problems associated with overtraining, before they escalate. Second, it is claimed the information allows training to be adapted to individual needs, including fatigue and mood, each day. Third, it perhaps allows strength and conditioning coaches to work with medical and other support staff more holistically and arguably to be more effective.
2. Certainly, the app will only really work if all athletes are honest and complete it regularly. However, for some it might be regarded as too much intrusion and control into their lives and may be perceived as increased pressure. As a thought experiment, you might consider whether this tool would have prevented the 'going under the radar' behaviour of Clay (athletics) in Activity 3.

The very app that you have seen in action at the EIS recently came under discussion during a BBC radio programme. This is the focus of the following section.

6.1 The reliability of monitoring

In a BBC radio programme, athletes debated to what extent individuals and squads 'buy-in' to the aim of monitoring; some even questioned the extent of their honesty when recording data.

Activity 6 Discussing athlete buy-in

Allow about 10 minutes

Listen to this clip of Sam Quek (hockey) in conversation with Eleanor Oldroyd (BBC presenter) and Steven Finn (cricket).

If you were asking a group of athletes to use a monitoring system such as the one discussed in the clip, what arguments would you put forward to persuade them?

[Note that 'Pep' in the clip is Pep Guardiola, Manager of Manchester City football team at the time of broadcast.]

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 2

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Sam Quek makes the case for using the app on the grounds of achieving high personal standards and helping her avoid missing training unduly through injury. Being able to reduce the occurrence of injury is a huge bonus for any sport even if it is small reductions. The issues of trust and confidentiality would need to be raised and the personalised nature of the 1–10 scale ratings made clear. To make a coherent

argument for such detailed monitoring it would be valuable for any coaches and medical professionals to explain how useful the information is and how, collectively, individuals and the whole team could benefit in terms of how they function, avoid injury and for their own well-being.

Ideally, an individual needs to put faith in the organisation acting in their genuine interests. An organisation hopes that monitoring will mean more athletes are available for selection, there are fewer athlete days off sick or injured, and there is less likelihood of athletes overtraining. However, as you saw at the start of the session, this is also increasingly recognised as an organisation's duty of care.

The five insights you have studied in this session support your learning of the issues surrounding overtraining in terms of prevention, associated disorders, and how medical assessment and monitoring might be implemented.

7 This session's quiz

Now it's time to complete the Session 4 badge quiz. It is similar to previous quizzes, but this time instead of answering five questions there will be fifteen.

Session 4 compulsory badge quiz

Remember, this quiz counts towards your badge. If you're not successful the first time, you can attempt the quiz again in 24 hours.

Open the quiz in a new tab or window then come back here when you've finished.

8 Summary of Session 4

The main learning points from this session are:

- There is a need to consider both the individual and situational characteristics when evaluating overtraining and burnout.
- Organisations have a responsibility to create environmental (or situational) conditions conducive to well-being.
- Lessons from the five insights into overtraining and underrecovery were:
    1. Chrissie Wellington's example reinforced the research into the integral nature of recovery. Her statement 'recovery is training' helps emphasise this.
    2. The Bobby Clay example reinforces the research that prolonged underrecovery and undereating can have severe health consequences (NCSEM, 2017). Her example points to obsessional behaviour being a risk factor in overtraining and burnout.
    3. Dan Pfaff's approach that less (training) is more (effective) is a reminder of the way athletes and sports culture are often inclined to increase training volume and the risk of overtraining.
    4. The ECSS/ACSM position statement (Meeusen et al., 2013) suggests overtraining is of widespread concern and the diagnostic criteria you considered showed the broad range of influences beyond high training loads.
    5. Effective monitoring of athlete training plays a valuable role in helping prevent overtraining and burnout since the information helps training to be adapted to individual needs and helps identify training patterns over time.

In the next session you will discover more about how the intense drive or motivation to train is often one of the key factors in burnout. As you can imagine there are some rich case examples to draw on. This is why the motivational perspective and research into how perfectionism contributes are particularly valuable in helping to understand burnout.

You are now half way through the course. The Open University would really appreciate your feedback and suggestions for future improvement in our optional end-of-course survey, which you will also have an opportunity to complete at the end of Week 8. Participation will be completely confidential and we will not pass on your details to others.

You can now go to Session 5.

Session 5: What role does motivation and perfectionism play?

Introduction

> In order to burnout, one has first to be ‘on fire’.
>
> (Pines, 1993, p. 41)

In this session you will explore how an understanding of motivation, which includes the distinct case of those with perfectionist tendencies, can be helpful in understanding burnout.

Figure 1 How can attention to detail, drive and unrelenting high standards both help and hinder?

Motivation refers to the direction and intensity of one’s effort (Sage, 1977) and it is likely that within sport you have thought about your own motivation, and that of others, before. In this session you will investigate both the positive and negative aspects of what drives people in sport. You will do this by seeing how the Self-determination theory of motivation

(Deci and Ryan, 1985) and ideas about perfectionism apply to a career-threatening episode experienced by a leading Olympic cyclist.

By the end of this session you should be able to:

- explain how Self-determination theory and the perceived satisfaction of the three needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence can be used to help explain burnout
- describe how the motivational climate that coaches create influences motivation and in particular how an ego-involving climate increases the risk of burnout
- discuss how the role of perfectionism and insights from case studies help explain burnout in some athletes.

First, watch this video, in which Kate Goodger introduces the session further.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1

1 Why is a sense of control important in motivation?

In Session 2 you were introduced to fifteen burnout factors. One factor under 'Situational characteristics' suggested that a sense of limited control over circumstances can contribute to burnout. This factor is common to motivational (e.g. Cresswell and Eklund, 2005) and social (Coakley, 1992) burnout perspectives. The next activity explores this further.

Activity 1 What does 'limited control' mean in training?

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch the following video in which former Olympic rower Bo Hanson presents his thoughts on burnout and control.

Do you feel his explanation that limited control is a 'leading cause of burnout' is an oversimplification?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Hanson certainly provides a good example of what control means in a coach–athlete context. He describes a 'controlling and pressuring structure' and lack of genuine two-way communication with a coach. He presents this as the single most important cause of burnout. As you have seen burnout has many contributing factors. Perhaps he fails to connect the feeling of a lack of control to how this can create perceptions of stress. In addition, exhaustion factors are downplayed.

Having some control over your work, sport and life generally is important since, without it, it can be debilitating (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Exerting some control is a feature of a Self-determination theory (SDT) approach to understanding motivation. In SDT literature, the term **autonomy** is used rather than control.

To examine the role of the three SDT needs, you will apply each in the following section using the case of former Olympic cyclist Victoria Pendleton.

2 Case study: Victoria Pendleton

So far, you have seen how control (autonomy) is a feature of Self-determination theory (SDT) – what follows is a quick summary of what this theory suggests about motivation.

According to this theory, three core human needs must be satisfied for an individual's well-being. These are:

- **autonomy** – a sense of being able to make choices and take some control, as described earlier
- **relatedness** – a sense of belonging, connectedness and rapport with others
- **competence** – developing mastery and achievement in what you do.

In contrast, frustration of these needs contributes to ill health (Deci and Ryan, 1985). The theory is called SDT since it suggests that motivation occurs on a continuum from individuals who are more **self-determined** (i.e. freely choose to do an activity due to the pleasure and enjoyment they get from it), to those who are less so (i.e. because they ought to or feel obliged to do something by others). You should note that the *perception* of the satisfaction of these needs is more important than any reality as you will see as you now apply SDT to the case of cyclist Victoria Pendleton.

Activity 2 Victoria Pendleton's early career crisis

Allow about 15 minutes

Former Olympic cyclist and double-gold medallist Victoria Pendleton revealed in her autobiography an early crisis including some symptoms of burnout and depression when, at the age of 22, she acted on British Cycling's suggestion that she try training abroad in Switzerland for eighteen months.

Read about this episode drawn from Oakley's (2014) analysis of autobiographies. Effectively this extract summarises Pendleton's autobiographical account of her experience.

How might autonomy, relatedness and competence needs be used to help explain her struggles at the time?

Figure 2 Pendleton (left) mainly rode in velodrome sprint events (2005–12)

She [Pendleton] relocated to the UCI sprint academy in Aigle, funded by the GB team. It was a cosmopolitan environment with 12–15 top riders from around the world.

It was a tough transition; moving to a new training group, facing higher training standards and adapting to a new coach, Fred Magne, who used a fairly autocratic regimented approach. This included, after lunch everyday, athletes going to a 'Salle de Repose' to take a communal sleep in a large dormitory room with mattresses on the floor. Pendleton put her head down and got on with her new life but found the going tough.

'My body was not accustomed to such intense training … I had never seen such big black eyes under my eyes …

'I was motivated by a need to try and keep up with the other women. Every time [they] went out on the track [their] individual times would be logged in the book, and compared by the whole group the same day … It felt as if they were miles ahead of me.'

Gradually, her times on the track quickened. She kept on working. At the 2003 World Championships she took a huge step forward, finishing fourth. Many were astonished by her sudden leap into the top four in the world.

Pendleton identified the start of her problems as being connected to her relationship with her new coach, Magne, and her own wish for some input into her training.

'It seemed to me that … I lacked core strength. I had studied core stability at University and thought I'd include some additional abdominal exercises in the gym … Fred called me into his office. 'What's the matter with the programme I give you? He asked angrily.'

Feeling increasingly isolated from the group she describes how her relationship with Fred deteriorated. She spent many hours in her room, alone, feeling like an outcast. It got worse. She started self-harming, using a

Swiss army knife to cut her arm. It must have represented a terrible low point, alone, far away and without support. She maintained the facade of normalcy by wearing long-sleeved garments and saying she was 'ok' to those around her, and on the phone to her worried mother.

Pendleton continued competing. Later in April she won her first World Cup in Manchester. Then in May her mood dipped as she finished fourth in the World Championships in Melbourne. Pendleton's fourth was made more negative by a snide comment made by her competitor, fifteen years her senior, who had just beaten her to take bronze, 'You will always be a princess – but you will never be the queen'.

'After 18 months of training under Fred I did not seem to be making the progress I should have done. In my depressed mood I considered fourth place at the Worlds a failure … I felt stuck – and emotionally blocked.'

Eventually, Steve Peters, British Cycling's psychiatrist came to meet her. She broke down in tears the first time they met when he said he was there to help her. The challenge and pressure of relocation, changing coach and a lack of social support probably triggered the expression of underlying difficulties.

(adapted from Oakley, 2014)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The important point is that it is Pendleton's perception of these needs which influences her well-being and motivation. Looking at her autonomy, relatedness and competence needs in turn:

- **Perceived** autonomy – the change to an autocratic coach who did not allow athletes much influence over their training has all the hallmarks of an environment in which Pendleton had limited control over her own circumstances.
- **Perceived** relatedness – the fact that she was isolated with no obvious support group close by and that she had no reported friendships with others or feelings of belonging is evident.
- **Perceived** competence – this one is a conundrum since she was still performing at a high level (fourth at the World Championships). Yet this did not seem to be enough for her high standards despite winning a World Cup event in Manchester. This emphasises the point that it is not the actual performance but the *perception* of performance that influenced her mood; it might also be linked to her focus on outcome goals, as well as the ego-involving goal climate Pendleton found herself in. You will look at this in more detail in the next section.

The issue of self-harm as mentioned in Pendleton's case is obviously a serious matter, but it is inappropriate to discuss it further here. Needless to say, cases involving self-harm should always be referred to a medical practitioner.

2.1 Pendleton's expectations: motivational climates in sport

Sport psychologists describe the structure of the social environment, in the way it influences an individual's motivation, as the 'motivational climate' (e.g. Ntoumanis and Biddle, 1999).

Figure 3 Social aspects of training – dialogue influences expectations and the motivational climate

Two contrasting types of goal setting climates are often identified (Ames, 1992):

- **a task-involving** climate – this has emphasis on, and reward for, effort and cooperation with a focus on learning. Thinking back to the analogy of a craftsperson (Session 3) some athletes are motivated by mastering the knowledge, techniques and skills of their sport. This climate is less associated with burnout.
- **an ego-involving** climate – this encourages comparison, within-group competition and punishment of mistakes. A key element here is that ego-involving climates can be highly stressful (especially for people with low perceived competence) and this may exacerbate burnout. This climate is more associated with burnout (Reinboth and Duda, 2004).

From what you have read, you will have seen that Pendleton encountered more of an ego-involving climate in Switzerland. For example, notice how she described that

'individual times would be logged in the book, and compared by the whole group the same day'. The coach–athlete relationship is a key part of the motivational climate and Pendleton's relationship with her controlling coach Magne did not appear good. Notice how it is hard for an athlete to make changes to their motivational climate – but coaches and an organisation can.

The case of Pendleton begs the following questions: *how* can coaches and parents help create a healthy motivation for athletes that helps protect them from burnout? How might SDT contribute to this understanding?

2.2 Needs supportive coaching

A great deal is written about 'needs supportive coaching' (e.g. Amorose and Anderson-Butcher, 2007) with reference to Self-determination theory. Bo Hanson's coach, who you read about in Activity 1, provides an example of this approach in the way that he encouraged 'relatedness' (one of the three needs identified by Self-determination theory) by showing open communication between himself and his athletes.

However, Anthony (2017) suggests coaches should also:

- give athletes *choice* in the selection of their training and competition (SDT autonomy needs)
- emphasise *social support* between team mates as an important factor in a training environment (SDT relatedness needs)
- provide athletes with *task focused feedback*, in a non-controlling manner (SDT competence needs).

Coaches and parents, therefore, have a potential role to play in helping meet the needs of athletes to avoid overtraining and burnout.

In the next section you will hear first-hand reflections of Pendleton's experience in Switzerland from Pendleton and psychiatrist Steve Peters.

2.3 Pendleton and the psychiatrist: a decade later

An athlete's motivational environment has a huge influence on their well-being, and the coach–athlete relationship is a key factor in developing a positive motivational climate (Reinboth and Duda, 2006).

In 2014, two Olympic gold medals later and now in retirement, Pendleton reflected on her first meeting in Switzerland with Peters, her psychiatrist. A psychiatrist is someone who is trained as a doctor but who has specialised with further training in mental health. Peters took a more unusual route into working in sport than most people, and he and Pendleton enjoyed a fruitful professional relationship.

Listen to their thoughts in the next activity.

Activity 3 Reflecting on Switzerland and the mental side of training

Allow about 10 minutes

Listen to this conversation between Pendleton and Peters, which was part of a BBC broadcast. What surprises you about this conversation and what did you learn from it?

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

It was striking how much rapport there was between them; they obviously know each other very well. It was surprising that the self-harm was not mentioned but perhaps being on public radio influenced this.

In terms of what you may have learned: you may have noticed the confidence, possibly with hindsight bias, with which Peters could identify a 'gritty determination' and 'will to succeed' in Pendleton at the time. He suggests that she probably would have been successful in another field such was her drive. He also commented on Pendleton's 'need to prove herself to herself' and that this internal focus was claimed to be more prevalent in females. Some may dispute this.

Victoria Pendleton, by her own admission, had perfectionistic personality traits. Perfectionists have a much higher risk of experiencing burnout and overtraining. This is why you will turn your attention to understanding perfectionism in more detail in the following section.

3 Perfectionism: a double-edged sword?

In a survey of the general population in 2009, 53% of people claimed they were perfectionistic at work, 36% were perfectionistic in bodily hygiene and 18% were perfectionistic in sport (Stoeber and Stoeber, 2009). Perfectionism is a personality factor that is consistently associated with burnout because of the relentlessly high standards that people apply to themselves. You may even recognise this characteristic in yourself.

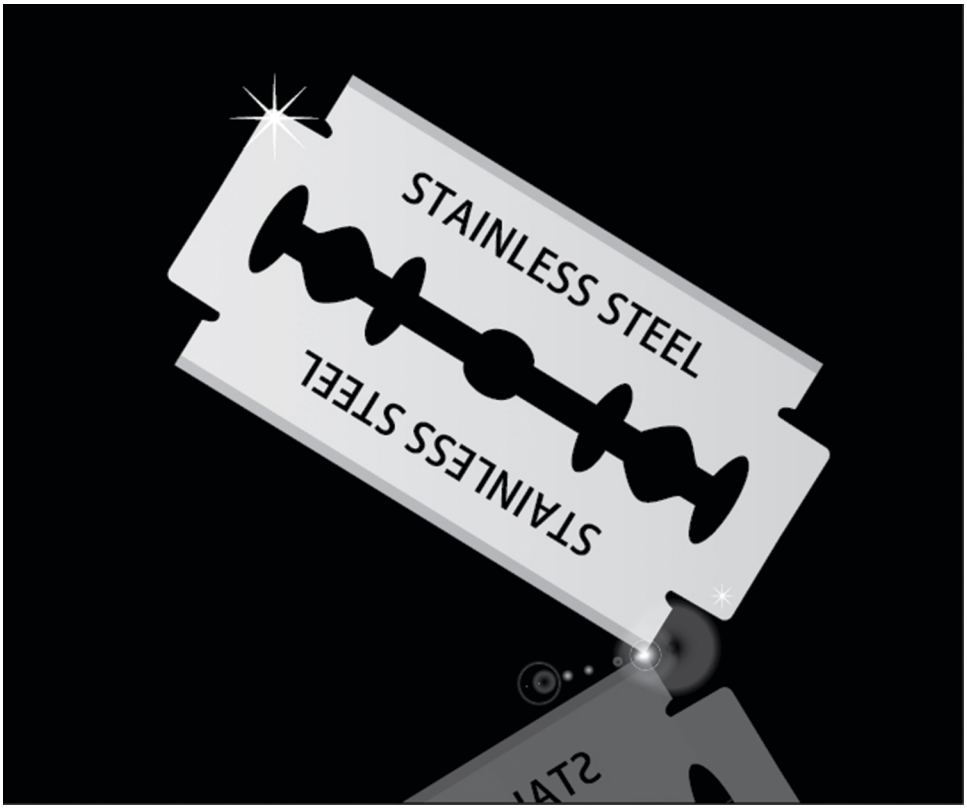


Figure 4 Two sides of perfectionism: it drives excellence but may include self-criticism induced stress

The double-edged sword of perfectionism is illustrated by this quote:

> That's just how you are as a perfectionist, you sacrifice. I sacrificed marriage on it, I sacrificed everything on it … I think [as a performer] I have benefited by being a perfectionist. As a person I probably haven't.
>
> (Ralph in Hill et al., 2015, p. 246)

Perfectionism can be a very positive characteristic helping people excel with high standards, but when accompanied by constant self-critical evaluation it also creates ongoing stress and anxiety. To explain this further look at Figure 5 which demonstrates six characteristic conditions of perfectionism.

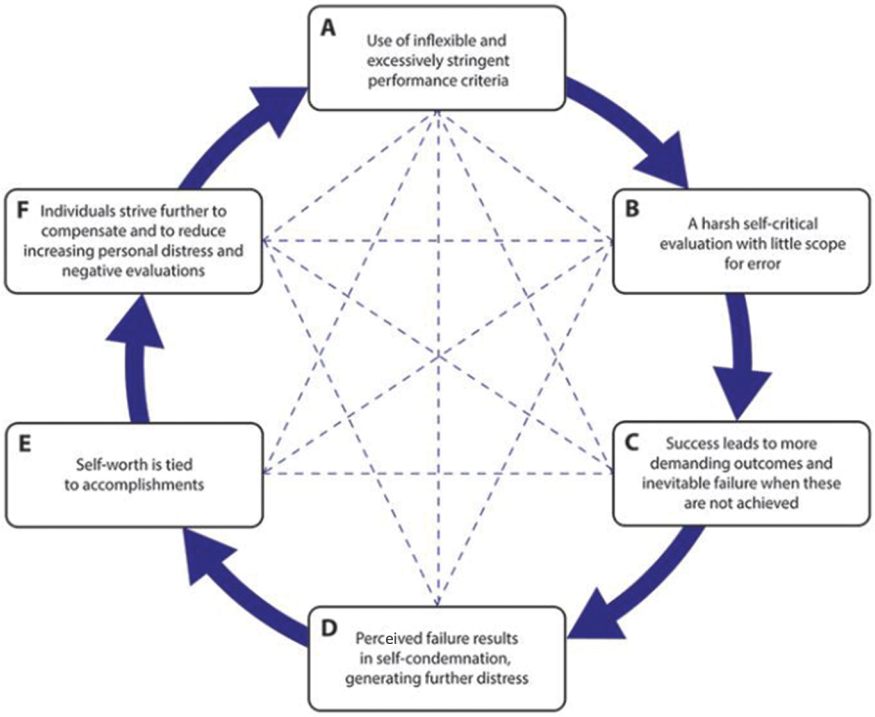


Figure 5 Six characteristic conditions of perfectionism: a vicious cycle?
(adapted from Hall et al., 2014)

By following the lettered boxes around clockwise from A–F you can see the vicious cycle that perfectionists may experience. The words in the boxes which describe thoughts and behaviours are not always followed in a neat progression. In fact, the dashed lines between boxes indicate complex interactions between them all.

Notice how boxes A, B and F are likely to create a potent drive to train, linking to an overtraining or motivation perspective of burnout; in contrast, items C, D and E suggest associated stress and anxiety, connecting to a stress or overtraining perspective of burnout. Those using a social perspective of burnout would argue that the structure and organisation of sport itself, with constant comparisons with others, creates considerable stress and risks for perfectionists.

You have already seen how perfectionism effected Pendleton's training experiences but now in the next section you will see a vivid example of a rugby player talking about it.

4 Case study: Jono Kitto

Rugby Union player Jono Kitto from New Zealand has made a strikingly candid video of his own perfectionism and how it almost ended his career, which you will now watch in Activity 4.

Activity 4 Kitto's way of viewing his world

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch this video in which Kitto explains how he used to view his sporting world in a negative way, creating feelings of shame. How did he change his thinking with regard to mistakes, self-worth and identity?

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 3

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Kitto begins by talking about wanting to be liked or loved, particularly by his father; it was important to be perfect. This is connected to his self-worth and a former harsh self-critical evaluation of his performances in which he would only remember the negative parts from a game. He changed this by realising, perhaps with a psychologist's support, that the very best players including Michael Jordan (basketball) were all remembered for their positive moments in matches rather than the negative. In the second half of the video he mentions identity a few times; it may remind you of the link between a unidimensional athletic identity and burnout that you learned about in Section 3.

It is noticeable that, with reference to Figure 5, Kitto is mainly referring to the negative thoughts associated with items B, C, D and E.

A useful summary statement about athletes with perfectionistic tendencies is this: if they stay in the game without developing strategies to cope with their stress inducing thoughts then they are very much at risk of burnout.

5 Two types of perfectionism: which is a hindrance?

Many researchers suggest there are two types of perfectionism – **perfectionistic striving** and **concerns over mistakes** – that often coexist. You will now look at the difference between these two types using a study by sport psychologist Andrew Hill.

Activity 5 Identifying helpful and hindering perfectionism

Allow about 15 minutes

Andrew Hill, a sport psychologist partly responsible for the ideas in Figure 5, set out to investigate the way perfectionists like Jono Kitto think, but on a far larger scale. He and a colleague looked at perfectionism's relationship to burnout in research results for 9800 people in work, sport and education settings.

From the link below, read the summary of their research from 2015, as reported in the Huffington Post, then answer the following questions:

1. Explain the difference between perfectionistic strivings and concerns over mistakes.
2. Do the results add anything new to your understanding of perfectionism?

Open the summary in a new tab or window by holding down Ctrl (or Cmd on a Mac) when you click on the link.

https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/perfectionism-leads-to-burnout_us_55bfa2-f8e4b0d4f33a0378e1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. **Perfectionistic striving** is the use of high personal goals; actively working towards high standards may, it is argued, ward off burnout by contributing to a sense of personal accomplishment.

   However, **perfectionistic concerns over mistakes** – the constant fear of failing, making even minor errors – and the need for constant self-approval were strongly linked with burnout. 'Concerns' indicates that this perfectionism creates high levels of stress and/or low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. To help alleviate these, an athlete often trains harder and the vicious perfectionist cycle continues (see items C, D, E, F in Figure 5). An example of perfectionistic concerns is 'if I don't achieve a time of below 20 minutes in the 5km I will have failed and everyone will judge me' (Anthony, 2017).
2. The study claimed that the workplace may see higher levels of burnout than sport due to there being less social support at work. The idea of perfectionists overcoming perfectionism by thinking about 'flexible goals and **degrees of success and failure**' is very useful. A degree of success or failure means being

kind to yourself and recognising, for instance, that scoring yourself 6 or 7 out of 10 is entirely acceptable if you know how to improve to 8 out of 10.

In summary, perfectionistic concerns can be a hindrance unless they are managed in a similar way to that which Kitto described. You now have a sound introductory overview of perfectionism and how it might contribute to burnout.

6 This session's quiz

Check what you've learned this session by taking the end-of-session quiz.

Session 5 quiz

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

7 Summary of Session 5

The main learning points from this session are:

- Self-determination theory (SDT), with its emphasis on the perceived satisfaction of the three human needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence, is often used in exploring a motivational perspective of burnout.
- The motivational climate that coaches create influences motivation. In particular, an ego-involving climate increases the risk of burnout and a task-involving climate reduces it.
- Perfectionism is consistently associated with burnout. The two main dimensions of perfectionism are:
    - ‘striving’ – the use of high personal goals, and
    - ‘concerns over mistakes’ – this is strongly associated with burnout.
- Researchers (e.g. Hall et al., 2014) have identified six interlinked thoughts and behaviours which help explain perfectionism.
- The Pendleton (cyclist) case illustrated the application of the three SDT needs, the importance of exploring athlete goals and how perfectionism strongly influences thoughts and behaviours.
- The Kitto (rugby) case illustrated the distress caused by perfectionistic high standards and negative evaluation. In addition, you saw how reframing the way Kitto judged his performances and broadened his identity benefited his well-being.

In the next session you will investigate how coach burnout experiences may be different to those experienced by athletes. In the process you will discover what it is that may make coaches’ day-to-day work with people so draining, and how coaches close to burnout sometimes use an unusual defence mechanism to protect themselves.

You can now go to Session 6.

Session 6: Coaches and burnout

Introduction

You may be surprised to learn that, as well as athletes, coaches can also experience burnout. A coach's burnout experience tends to be similar to that found amongst those working in the caring professions (e.g. nurses and teachers) as they become exhausted handling the relentless strain of dealing with people.

In this session you will explore differences between coach and athlete burnout experiences using three case studies – two of coaches and one relating to the leader of a sports organisation.

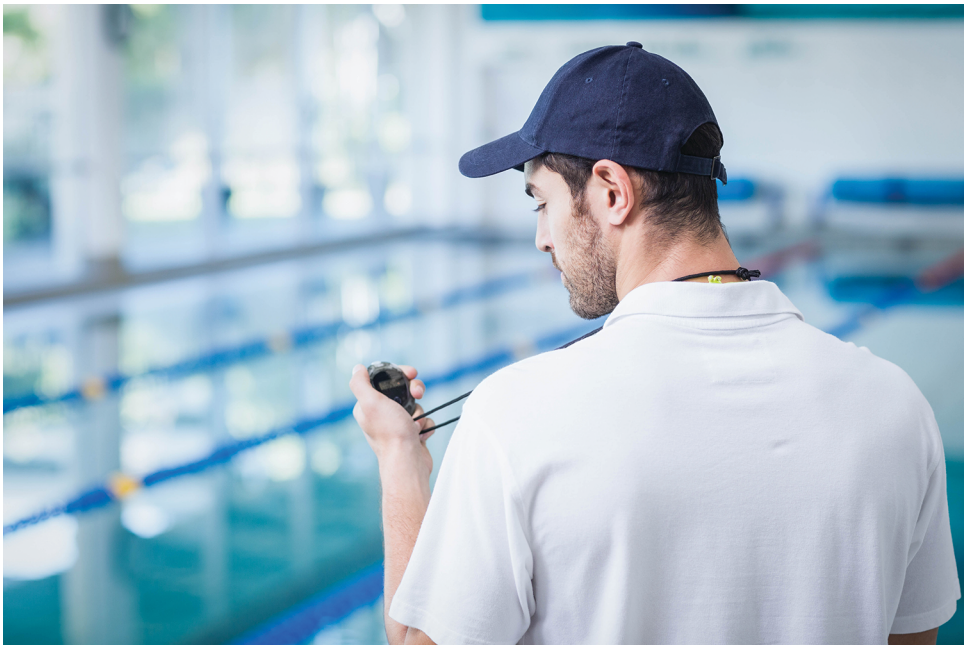


Figure 1 How is the coaching job different to athletes 'work' and how does their burnout differ?

Working with people means that the influence of the surrounding working context has a profound impact on burnout and you will explore this further in the early part of this session. You will then discover two ideas which are attracting increasing interest in the research literature on burnout: 'emotional labour' and 'depersonalisation'. These are the focus of the second half of this session.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- identify the distinctive differences between athlete and coach burnout and explain why they differ
- explain the concept of ‘emotional labour’ and how it particularly affects coaches, whether they are experiencing burnout or not.

1 Case study: Ian Braid

As Chief Executive Officer of the British Athletes Commission (2013–17), Ian Braid’s job was to represent and provide impartial advice to elite athletes, particularly if it were felt their rights had been infringed.

Activity 1 Situational influence on coach burnout

Allow about 15 minutes

Listen to this interview with Braid from 2018 in which he describes a turning point in his career at the time when athlete welfare and accusations of bullying in a number of Olympic sports surfaced.

1. Identify three words or phrases he uses to describe his experience.
2. What explanation does he give for the causes of his stress-related condition? If this is indeed burnout, why might it be different to athlete burnout?

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. You may have identified a number of ways in which he describes his experience and it is likely you found three amongst these:

   ‘pressure’, ‘something wrong with me’, ‘don’t know how to relax anymore’, ‘loss of identity’, ‘loss of self-esteem’, ‘loss of confidence’, ‘anxiety, stress and depression’.
2. His explanation for his condition was that it was ‘all situational’ (i.e. connected to his work context). He reflects that this was ‘to do with the pressure of my job’ and the loneliness of his role. Often leaders or coaches feel very isolated in their job especially if they are not able to confide in others who perhaps understand the challenges they face. The confidential and sensitive nature of his work perhaps made sharing with others particularly problematic.

   It is debatable whether this is a case of burnout: but it is certainly stress and mental health-related. Unlike an athlete who often experiences overtraining or physical stress, Braid experienced mental or emotional stress. This limited physical element (i.e. through training) is a key difference between athlete and coach burnout.

Braid's account is a reminder that situational factors (i.e. the surrounding work context) can play a major role in burnout. Whilst leadership roles such as his may involve considerable interaction with other people, paradoxically coaches can often suffer from a lack of social support. Always being on show and having to control their emotions is a part of coaching and burnout that you will explore in the next section.

2 The role of emotional labour

Consider those occasions when you, as a sports athlete or coach, are in an inappropriate mood. For example, you are meant to be positive, full of energy and smiling but the way you feel does not match this. When this happens one option you have is to fake the appropriate behaviour.

Figure 2 Do you feel you often have to put on a certain persona in your coaching or athlete role?

One psychologist, Hochshild (1983), in a seminal study titled 'The Managed Heart' examined how flight attendants manage their emotions in their work. She found that there are two strategies that people use – 'surface acting' and 'deep acting' – to achieve the appropriate emotional display: a process she called **emotional labour**. These ideas are interesting because emotional labour is closely associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout in sport (Larner et al., 2017). It is also a point of difference between coach and athlete burnout since coaches are always interacting with and managing their emotions: it is a job in which people skills are the focus of their work.

The following activity explores the two emotional labour strategies you might use in your work with other people in sport.

Activity 2 Emotional labour as 'acting'

Allow about 10 minutes

The two strategies of emotional labour are explained in the video that follows. The first strategy is **surface acting**: putting on a faked emotional display, for instance by smiling, appearing enthusiastic or using a calm voice. Second is **deep acting**: altering your felt emotions in order to produce the appropriate authentic emotional display. Of the two, the first – surface acting – has been shown to require more cognitive effort since attention and effort are required to ensure that the true emotions do not leak out (Richards and Gross, 2000).

Watch this video in which the Australian researchers Johnson and Nguyen explain emotional labour and surface/deep acting with reference to the health care sector.

How could you explain ‘deep acting’ to a coach or colleague using the term ‘empathy’ (sharing the feelings of others)?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The best way to illustrate how you could explain ‘deep acting’ to a coach or colleague using the term ‘empathy’ is by looking at some of the sentences you might use. For example, you might say:

‘Deep acting is when you feel **empathy** towards the situation or perspective of a participant or fellow coach and draw on that feeling in what you might display back to them.’

or you might say,

‘Being **empathetic** helps convey a more authentic emotional response as a coach’, or similar.

You now know that it is often surface acting that makes working with people in sport potentially emotionally draining. This is perhaps more likely in coach burnout than in athlete burnout. It is surface acting which draws most heavily on your mental resources and, over a prolonged period, may contribute to fatigue, stress and burnout.

3 Case study: Andy (athletics coach)

Understanding the emotional labour process is one thing. In contrast, recognising deep or surface acting in coaches can be difficult since they are unlikely to disclose what they really think about the athletes they deal with. However, as you will see from the abstract in Box 1, one group of researchers set out to investigate the emotions underlying coaches' experiences of burnout.

Box 1 Understanding the underlying emotions of coach burnout: a narrative approach

Abstract

This … study … investigate[d] coaches' subjective experiences of burnout in order to shed light on the emotional nature of this syndrome. Five full-time paid coaches (two women and three men) experiencing burnout participated in an in-depth individual interview as part of a larger 13-week intervention study. A content analysis of the interview data resulted in the construction of five non-fictional short stories highlighting the emotions underlying the coaches' experiences of burnout. The coaches described a variety of emotions including anxiety, anger, apathy and dejection, which had negative implications upon their well-being and coaching practice. Emotions were linked to the three dimensions of burnout. … Findings support calls for intervention research to help coaches manage their emotions and prevent burnout.

(McNeill et al., 2017)

This next activity challenges you to spot the signs of surface acting in the case study of athletics coach Andy, taken from McNeill et al.'s (2017) in-depth interviews.

Activity 3 Recognising signs of surface acting – athletic coach Andy

Allow about 15 minutes

Read through Andy's account of his burnout and identify which sentence(s) reveal a connection with surface acting.

> My first year I was employed, I was the head coach of Club X. It was a highly successful year for the club, for budgets, athletes, national teams, records, medals. … Administratively though, it crushed me because I took on everything.
>
> It was a feeling of uncontrollable, continuous white noise in the brain. I couldn't turn the brain off, I couldn't detach, and it just turned into a downward cycle of continuing levels of stress. I drank a few more beers every week, I didn't sleep well, I put on almost 20 lb. And when the club told me they wouldn't match the salary I was at, and I knew [I] was done. And for a good year, I didn't know if I was ever going to come back. But coaching ultimately was where I wanted to be. And when I coach, I go 0 to 100, I empty the gas tank. …

> … The large portion of my stress comes down to the number of roles I have. I wear three major hats, sometimes four or five or six, depending on the weekend. … That means there's six different groups of people at a time who need my attention. So it feels a lot like I'm juggling. But I'm pretty good at sheltering [my emotions]. I take the viewpoint of 'they don't need to know'.
>
> My athletes have a job to do and when they show up at the track, I expect them to leave their stress, their lives, … their dates, their jobs, and give me [a few] hours of focus and time that they need to achieve their goals. So I don't want to be a negative part of that and I demand the same from myself. But my girlfriend might say that I can get a bit closed in. I don't see it as much, it's more, 'I don't need to talk about it; I'm good'.
>
> Do I think I can continue this pace forever? Definitely not, but right now I have age and health and a bunch of things on my side. So I'm going to grind it out and do everything I can to be successful for myself and my athletes' careers. … I need to make sacrifices. … If I wanted to be a recreational coach, I'd find a different job and coach 6 hours a week, but this is what I signed up to do.
>
> (Andy in McNeill et al., 2017)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

One of the key signals is when he says 'I'm pretty good at sheltering [my emotions]'. He then goes on to say 'I take the viewpoint of 'they don't need to know'', and 'I don't want to be a negative part of that [focus within sessions] and I demand the same from myself'.

In the study, the researchers concluded:

> This is indicative of Andy's engagement in 'surface acting' with his athletes, where he consciously changed his outward expression to meet the 'display rules' (i.e. the rules that govern when and how overt emotional expressions occur in specific situations) he felt necessary to comply with. As such, it may speak to how Andy felt constrained by … norms for emotional management in coaching ...
>
> (McNeill et al., 2017, p. 192)

Emotional labour is draining, and this is something that coaches rather than athletes experience. You have seen how athletes often stop caring about their sport when experiencing burnout, and the same applies to coaches. Next you will consider: what else do coaches stop caring about when they get burned out?

4 Past caring: depersonalisation

Coaches who are experiencing burnout may stop caring about their sport – but they may also stop caring about people and become cynical about others. But why might this be?

Such **depersonalisation** has been described by leading psychologist Christina Maslach. She wrote about this in a work context but it applies equally to sport. Depersonalisation, which results in **personal detachment,** serves as a defence mechanism, as you will learn in the next activity.

Activity 4 Depersonalisation as self-defence

Allow about 15 minutes

Listen to this account from Maslach about why people start treating others with cynicism. To what extent have you seen this disconnection with people in your own sporting workplace?

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 2

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Maslach's fascinating observation suggests that depersonalisation and personal detachment are mechanisms through which one can avoid confronting complex feelings and emotions. Cynicism towards others is not unusual in workplaces and is also, sadly, common in sport where coaches treat athletes as objects or commodities. Coaches may avoid dealing with complex difficult situations appropriately in order to protect themselves. This is not often talked about openly but, if you witness someone who is under prolonged stress and who is becoming detached from others, then depersonalisation may be part of the issue. Most organisations now have a welfare officer with whom you should discuss the situation.

Depersonalisation is a further distinct difference between coach and athlete burnout. You will next explore figure skating coach Molly's own personal account of her burnout where you can see her detachment played out in a real life setting.

5 Case study: Molly (figure skating)

In Activity 5, you will try to spot the new ideas you have been introduced to – detachment and depersonalisation – in figure skating coach Molly's account of her own burnout, taken from another of McNeill et al.'s (2017) in-depth interviews.

Activity 5 Recognising signs of depersonalisation – figure skating coach Molly

Allow about 15 minutes

Read through Molly's account of her burnout and identify which sentence(s) reveal links with depersonalisation and a cynical attitude to athletes or people.

> The last six months have been hell. … I have been physically exhausted. When I'm burned out, I get apathetic and look at the kid [athlete] and say, 'My god, you're probably not going to ever get to the next level of skating. What's the point, why are you here?' Like 'I'm just an expensive babysitter for you' … And then it starts to creep into the work I do with the kids who really do want to be there. … And that's the worst thing, when I start turning into that ...
>
> And it's harder to see the big picture when I'm angry or overstressed. I fixate on one thing at the expense of a well-rounded training session, or carry over that sense of apathy or detachment, and … a week [goes] by and I've accomplished nothing. Or I feel like no matter what exercise I give the kids, it's the wrong one, and I lose faith in my abilities as a coach. ... And it's extreme, in one week I can touch on all these different places, there's mountains and then crashes. And I hope that the kids don't pick up on it, but they're not stupid. I'm sure they can tell when I'm having a bad day and I'm yelling at them to get their arms up and stretch their legs … sometimes I get too harsh and I get too negative …
>
> I'm always an emotional person … but now it's more 'quick to anger'. I'll snap at my students when I don't want to, I'll snap at my partner which I should never do. Or else I'm very apathetic. I feel nothing or I feel like nothing matters anyway so why bother trying? And I think if I didn't detach myself, then I would feel things negatively even more. So at least if I shut down or say, 'Screw it, it doesn't matter anyway' then I don't have to feel those things.
>
> But then it gets me to a certain point where I snap out of it and think 'I'm not supposed to be this person, I'm supposed to be successful, high-achieving'. So I'll throw myself into work and start the whole cycle again. And it's hard to turn work off; coaching is my daily life in the sense that it's difficult to separate.
>
> (Molly in McNeill et al., 2017)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The researchers interpreted Molly as describing a form of cognitive and emotional distancing akin to depersonalisation. This was shown through a negative, indifferent attitude towards her athletes (i.e. ‘My god, you’re probably not going to ever get to the next level of skating. What’s the point, why are you here?’). This was interpreted as a coping response in the face of growing exhaustion (McNeill et al., 2017).

Most tellingly, Molly describes why she detaches herself, which connects to the self-defence ideas of Maslach: ‘I think if I didn’t detach myself, then I would feel things negatively even more’.

This is a further insight into job burnout amongst coaches and how this experience differs to athlete burnout. The ideas of the emotional labour processes and depersonalisation and detachment apply to most workplaces in which there is close work with, and care of, people.

6 This session's quiz

Check what you've learned this session by taking the end-of-session quiz.

Session 6 quiz

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

7 Summary of Session 6

Some of the main learning points from this session are:

- The Braid (leadership) case illustrates how situational (environmental) influences, including the lack of social support, can create feelings of isolation.
- A distinct difference to athlete burnout is that coach exhaustion is unlikely to have an overtraining or physical element.
- Emotional labour is a process in which workers, including coaches, manage their emotions when responding to others at work using cognitive effort. It is closely associated with exhaustion and burnout in sport (Larner, et al., 2017).
- The two strategies used in emotional labour are surface acting (putting on a faked emotional display) and deep acting (altering your emotions to create an authentic emotional display). Surface acting has been shown to require more cognitive effort (Richards and Gross, 2000).
- Depersonalisation is another point of difference between burned out coaches and athletes. Depersonalisation is a defence mechanism in which a coach may detach or distance themselves from having to confront complex feelings and emotions. It is characterised by cynicism towards others.
- McNeill et al.'s (2017) cases of Andy (athletics) and Molly (figure skating) illustrated how burned out coaches' experiences relate to emotional labour and depersonalisation.

In the next session you will start exploring how you and/or sport psychologists might manage people you identify are on a burnout path. The session takes the approach that preventing burnout is by far the best option, rather than responding after it has taken effect. You will explore ways in which organisations, clubs, coaches and parents can adjust their styles, behaviours and the overall climate in which athletes train and compete to make burnout far less likely.

You can now go to Session 7.

Session 7: Managing those on a burnout path

Introduction

Managing people you think are on a burnout path is not a case of simply working through a mechanistic checklist of symptoms and solutions – instead it is a far more nuanced process. Excellent interpersonal skills are required to establish rapport and trust, and to encourage the person to begin to disclose their experiences.

Figure 1 The path metaphor is often used: preventing people progressing too far towards burnout is your focus here

The next two sessions look at managing burnout. You will consider how burnout might be prevented – how might organisations, coaches and parents improve their ways of working with both adult and child athletes?

In doing so, you will focus on three preventative strategies:

- preventing overtraining
- needs supportive coaching, and
- creating a mastery motivational climate.

Each strategy is illustrated by a video example – sometimes the strategy relates to adults and sometimes to children but the strategies can equally be applied to either.

In the final sections of this session, you will explore strategies specifically designed for parents.

You will start, however, by exploring how each individual case of burnout requires a distinct and tailored response, putting yourself in someone else's shoes to think about how you would respond to burnout.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- explain how a coach can control the training schedule, their coaching style and the motivational climate and therefore use prevention strategies for burnout
- understand how adults' and parents' positive influence on youth sport can make burnout less likely. This can be achieved by both influencing an athlete's identity and how much stress they experience through playing sport.

1 A tailored response to burnout

One of the important things to keep in mind when responding to burnout is that every individual has a different experience. Listen to this clip of a softball coach at an American college. The coach was asked 'what would your reaction be if an athlete said they felt burned out?'. Listen to her response.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1

The softball coach emphasises the individual basis of burnout, a need to know 'the whole of what's going on' and a consideration about their existing relationship with, and knowledge of, the athlete.

You can see that every burnout experience is different, and every response needs to fit the individual circumstances.

Activity 1 How would you help prevent burnout?

Allow about 15 minutes

Imagine you are a coach embarking on a new role with a squad that has experienced high levels of burnout before. You as the coach are interested in how you could act to reduce burnout incidence in the future.

What actions would you recommend the organisation or club takes to prevent burnout in other athletes?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Responsibility should be taken by organisations to **prevent** burnout in the first place. It could be that the environment and its practices are contributing to burnout. Therefore, your focus for actions may be on situational aspects such as the training and/or the competitive environment, and/or educating those supporting athletes. Your actions might include reviewing:

- coaching behaviours (i.e. style and tone)
- the climate created by coaches and parents (e.g. their focus, expectations, goals, rewards for athletes)
- support for life outside sport (i.e. broadening athlete identities), and
- the schedule to allow appropriate recovery combined with monitoring for early warning signs, including managing overtraining

You may have thought of other actions that could also be useful.

It is important to consider the range of factors that may be influencing an individual and then respond holistically to the individual's needs. Often it is a blend of strategies that are used based on the information you have gleaned about the individual's experience. These would be tailored to respond to the circumstances.

You will now explore three preventative strategies in more detail. These are:

- preventing overtraining
- needs supportive coaching, and
- creating a mastery motivational climate.

So, first what can you do to prevent overtraining?

2 Preventing overtraining

In Session 4, you saw that athletes need to train at least five times a week for a medical practitioner to diagnose overtraining via the diagnostic flowchart. An athlete training five times a week represents a committed full-time athlete or recreational exerciser.

Activity 2 A simple stategy for preventing burnout

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch the video at the link below of Harvard University women's ice hockey coach Katey Stone (also the US women's national team coach) in which she describes a simple strategy for preventing burnout amongst committed full-time athletes or exercisers. Notice how seriously university (college) sport is taken in the USA compared to in Europe. Identify three main reasons she gives for her strategy.

You should watch the whole video here.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Stone's determination to allow two full rest and recovery days for her athletes is largely explained as a way for them to get away from sport to be a 'college kid'. From a social perspective of burnout, time off also allows the athletes to build their identity beyond sport which, as you have seen, is also an important preventative strategy. She also explains that she wants to prevent mental fatigue during a long season in which peak performance is needed in March. She reports that injury rates were considerably reduced after this strategy was introduced. You might term her approach a determined '**time-off**' strategy.

If time off is combined with **physiological monitoring** then burnout risk is considerably reduced. Sam Quek (hockey) (Session 4) and Bo Hanson (rowing) (Session 5) both spoke about monitoring their heart rate daily. Research has concluded that short-term (<2 week) overload training results in an increased resting heart rate with a mean increase of +4–5 beats per minute (Bosquet et al., 2008). An elevated resting heart rate is an early indicator of possible overtraining.

You also studied a more holistic approach to monitoring through the use of an EIS app in which a whole range of factors were entered each day that the support staff used to prevent injury and overtraining (e.g. Sam Quek, Session 4).

Activity 3 Preventing overtraining and underrecovery

Allow about 15 minutes

Research into overtraining and underrecovery is continually evolving. Examine this visual summary of tips to prevent overtraining derived from Meeusen and De Pauw (2013).

Looking at both the coach section and the athlete section, are there any aspects that surprise you?

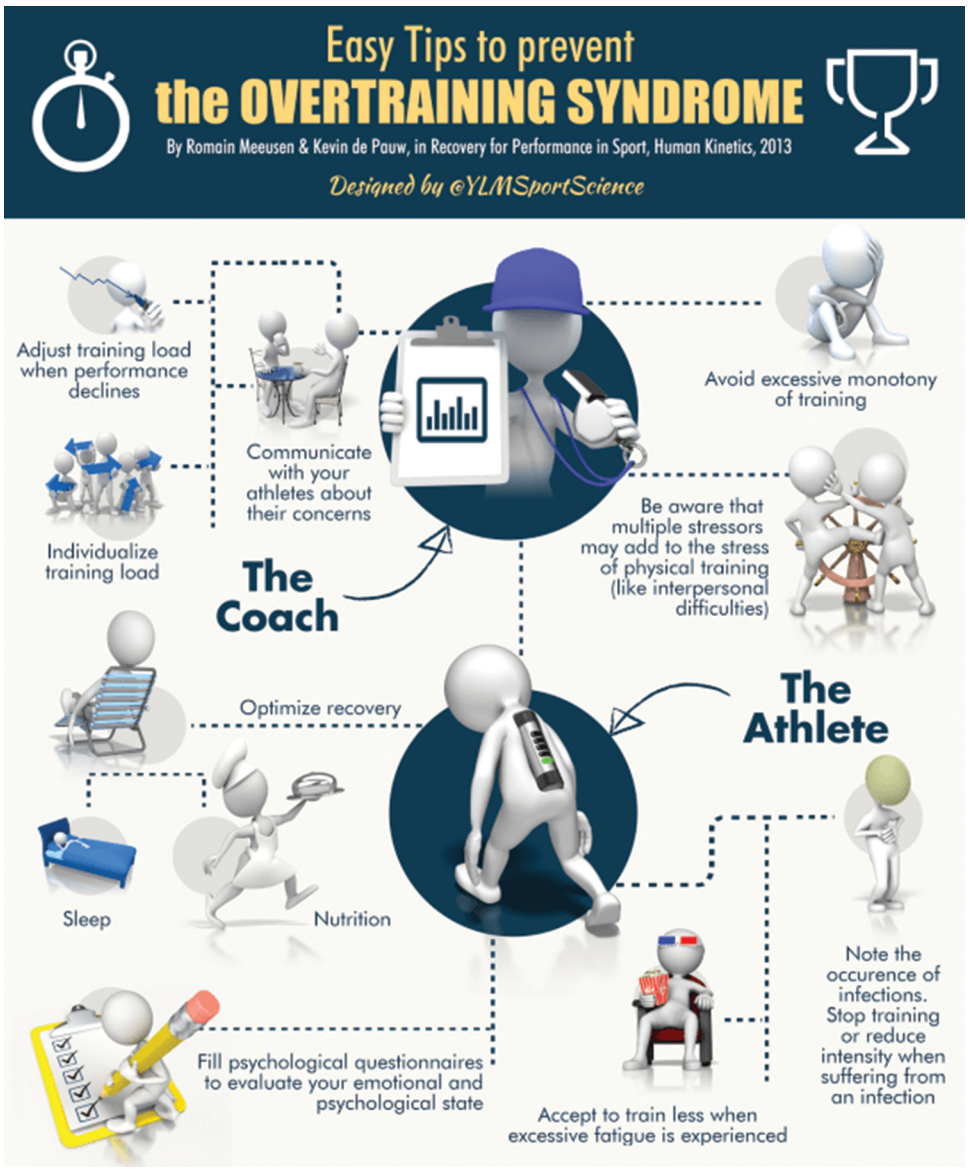


Figure 2 A summary of some of the thinking and research on overtraining

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In the coach section, you may have found the suggestion that training monotony is a recognised contributory factor unusual. It would perhaps seem obvious to any experienced coach but it probably needs to be highlighted: athlete engagement with their training is important for their welfare.

In the athlete section, none of the suggestions were particularly unexpected apart from perhaps the recognition that psychological questionnaires have a recognised role. This supports the points Sam Quek (hockey) made about monitoring and responding honestly to such welfare monitoring questions.

It will be fascinating to see how the monitoring of overtraining and underrecovery develops as wearable devices become more advanced in measuring human physiology.

The preventative strategy you will look at next is about coaching behaviours.

3 Needs supportive coaching

You will now study a preventative strategy that is concerned with coaching behaviours and that is underpinned by a motivation perspective of burnout.

There is considerable research evidence that suggests coaching style has an impact on burnout (e.g. Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2012). This strategy re-educates coaches about the motivational processes that operate in their coaching, in particular how their communication (language, style and tone) and training organisation have an effect. In the research literature these strategies are known as **needs supportive coaching** or **autonomy supportive coaching** (Reinboth et al., 2004).

Activity 4 Applying needs supportive coaching

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch this video which explains a project in which local UK coaches are trained in motivational processes to better appreciate needs supportive coaching (the term 'empowering coaching' is also sometimes used).

Whilst this is aimed at improving the enjoyment of all sport participants, how do you think the principles also influence burnout prevention? It may be useful for you to think back to the Hanson example and the case of Pendleton (cycling), which both featured in Session 5.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Both the Hanson and Pendleton examples suggested that a limited perception of control and relatedness contributed to their burnout. The principle of addressing athletes' autonomy needs is perhaps given most emphasis in the video. The way coaches behave and the extent to which they *involve* athletes (rather than *direct* them) can have an impact on participants' motivation, particularly if there is a long period of exposure to an overly controlling coaching style. It is too simplistic to suggest that coaches (with the wrong approach) cause burnout, but if a controlling style coincides with other factors then the risks of athlete ill-being rise. 'Ill-being' (as opposed to 'well-being') may seem like a strange term. However, it is used in a research study you are about to examine, linking autonomy and burnout.

The strategy of teaching needs supportive coaching is increasingly recognised in the mainstream training of coaches. This closely links to the three principles of supporting athletes' needs that you saw from Self-determination theory, and which you studied in relation to Pendleton's case in Session 5. Take a moment to briefly revisit Pendleton's case study now (you may want to open it in a new tab or window).

Once you have been back to Session 5, examine the visual summary of a research study (Gonzalez et al., 2015) given in Figure 3. Look for information within the 8-points that reinforces your understanding of a needs supportive coaching strategy. As a reminder: needs supportive and autonomy supportive coaching mean the same thing.

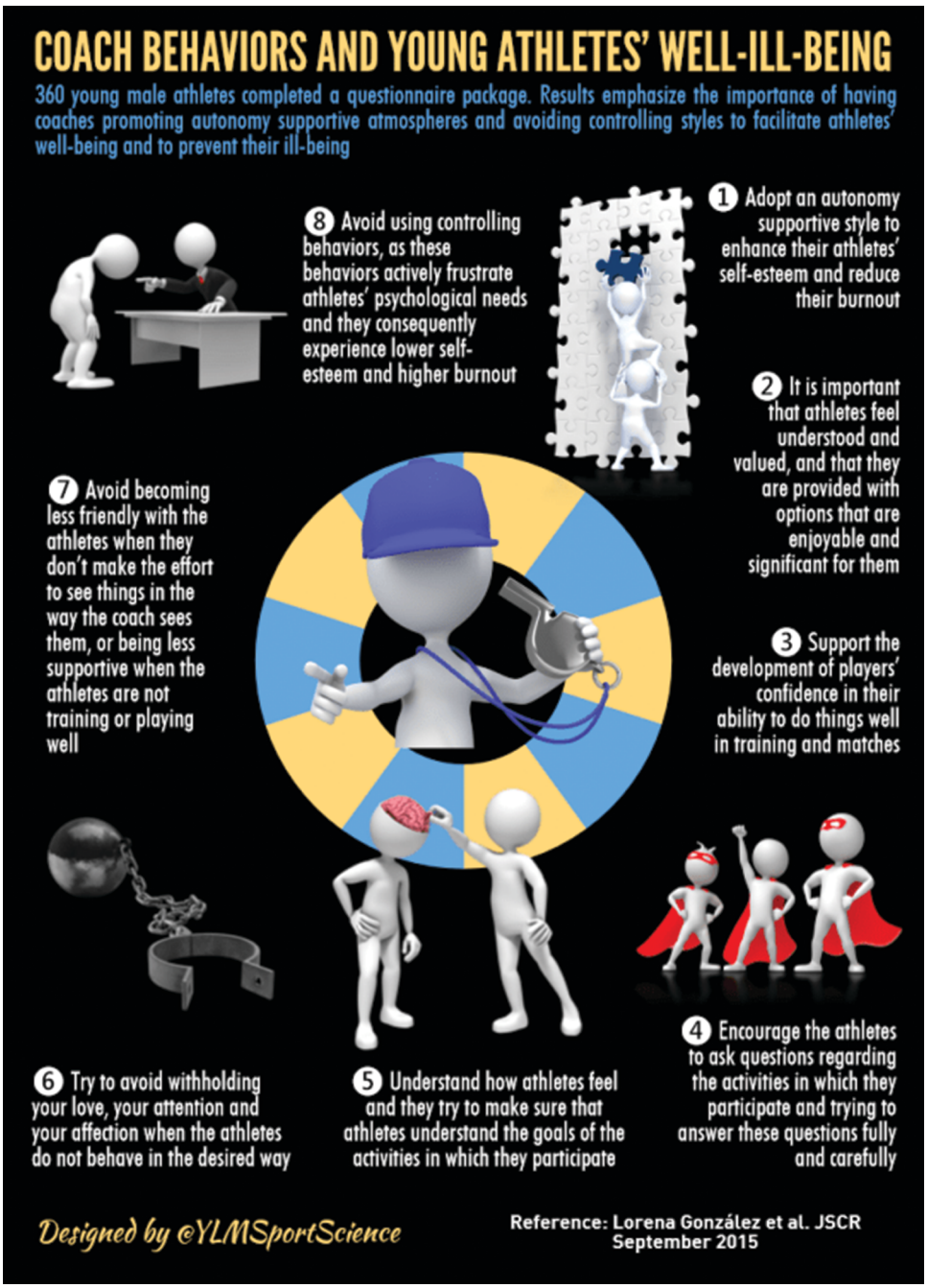


Figure 3 Research summary of Gonzalez et al.'s (2015) research into autonomy (needs) supportive coaching

This strategy focused on coaching behaviour. In the next section you will move on to consider the motivational climate that both parents and coaches can create: this is a prevention strategy aiming to change the way athletes judge themselves.

4 Creating a mastery motivational climate

A burnout prevention strategy attempting to create a **mastery motivational climate** is one that seeks to change the way in which athletes evaluate their competence in their chosen sport.

A mastery motivational climate (either coach-created or parent-created) emphasises and rewards the importance of tasks involving personal development and improvement. This is in contrast to a performance (or ego-involving) motivational climate which emphasises and rewards relative standing in the group and sporting outcomes (results). As you saw earlier in Session 5, ego-involving climates can lead to higher levels of stress and feelings of low autonomy. Thus, building mastery motivational climates may be an effective long-term strategy for preventing burnout. This type of intervention draws on Achievement goal theory (e.g. Ames, 1992) in which three factors interact to determine motivation:

- goals (e.g. outcome or task goals)
- perceived ability and
- behaviour (e.g. persistence, task choice).

Research using this theory revealed the impact of task-involving or ego-involving climates (e.g. Ntoumanis and Biddle, 1999).

Coaches and parents strongly influence the expectations of younger athletes and often need appropriate education so they can appreciate how their actions impact on athlete welfare. Examine Box 1 in which a research summary of the impact of motivational climate is presented – can you identify any link between perfectionism and motivational climate?

Box 1 Profiles of perfectionism, parental climate and burnout among junior athletes

In a study by Gustafsson et al. (2016), 237 junior athletes from Sweden (aged 16–19), from a variety of sports, completed measures of athlete burnout, perfectionism and parent-initiated motivational climate.

Three levels of perfectionism were identified:

- non-perfectionistic athletes
- moderately perfectionistic athletes, and
- highly perfectionistic athletes.

Analysis suggested that junior athletes high in perfectionism were at comparatively greater risk of burnout. It was also found that this may especially be the case when the athletes perceive that their parents emphasise concerns about failure and winning without trying one's best (i.e. elements of an ego-oriented motivational climate).

(Gustafsson et al., 2016)

This research indicates that a strategy aimed at developing a mastery motivational climate helps manage those with perfectionistic tendencies. Lemyre et al. (2008) argue that a mastery motivational climate stimulates:

- a desire for challenge, and intrinsic interest
- motivationally enhancing characteristics for achievement, and
- protection of athletes from burnout.

In contrast, an ego-involving climate:

- promotes an intense focus on validating self-worth
- fosters feelings of incompetence, and
- heightens a sense of personal threat and anxiety,

all of which renders athletes vulnerable to burnout (Lemyre et al., 2008).

You have read a lot on new ideas presented so now it is timely that you recap with a summary of the three preventative strategies.

5 A short recap: the three preventative strategies

Take a moment to pause and reflect on the three preventative strategies for burnout you have covered so far:

1. The first was aimed at preventing overtraining and underrecovery through encouraging time off and monitoring.
2. The second was needs supportive coaching (coaching style, language and behaviours) drawing from Self-determination theory.
3. The third was to create a mastery motivational climate aimed at encouraging expectations and goals related to improvement, effort and collaboration. This strategy draws from Achievement goal theory and is particularly suited to help manage the negative aspects of perfectionism (Lemyre et al., 2008).

These are all useful preventative strategies that can be employed by coaches (in particular) but also parents. The next set of strategies you will encounter focuses more on the steps parents can take to prevent overtraining and burnout in their child athletes. These include the strategies of reducing parental involvement and expectations (including avoiding early sports specialisation), fostering broad identities, and developing children's healthy relationship with sport.

6 Parental involvement and early specialisation

Parents have considerable influence over their child athlete's engagement with sport and would benefit from understanding the principles of both needs supportive coaching and the importance of creating positive motivational climates.

This short video clip from Dr Camilla Knight, Associate Professor at Swansea University, provides a useful introduction to a parent's influence:

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 3

A social perspective (e.g. Coakley, 1992) on preventing burnout argues that burnout often stems from the way sports are organised and that the emphasis adults place on sport is inappropriate. Both the International Olympic Committee (Bergeron et al., 2015) and the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine (AMSSM) (DiFiori et al., 2014) have issued position statements about youth sport in which they warn of burnout. The AMSSM summarised the problem:

> an emphasis on competitive success, often driven by goals of elite-level, travel team selection, collegiate scholarships, Olympic and National team membership, and even professional contracts, has seemingly become widespread.
>
> (DiFiori et al., 2014, p. 1).

Both organisations associate burnout risk with young people who specialise in one sport year-round. It is called **early specialisation**, when focused training is undertaken before puberty.

Attempting to re-orientate the adult view of sport by influencing parents is a major task at a national and international scale. Powerful commercial interests, such as professional sport, also need to change. The following activity shows how worthwhile attempts are being made to change adult views.

Activity 5 The dark side of too much parental involvement

Allow about 15 minutes

Watch this light-hearted video in which a group of recovering Canadian sports parents discuss how their ambitions for their child's participation in sport have been thwarted. What do you think are the three main messages in this video?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 4

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The headline message is that children playing more than one sport benefit from a more holistic development and are less likely to become injured or experience burnout. A second point was made about the dangers of children starting dedicated training and specialisation too early; it was suggested this is often fuelled by unrealistic parental aspirations for elite success. The third point concerned parental identity becoming too closely associated with children's athletic achievements.

Parents should avoid encouraging their children to specialise too early. A strategy for preventing burnout through fostering multiple identities is something parents should also be aware of as you will look at next.

7 Fostering a broad identity

Parents can also help their athlete children by adopting a strategy which aims to foster multiple identities. This helps to overcome the risks associated with a unidimensional athletic identity which was covered in Session 3. In Activity 6 you will examine a short story about Kally Fayhee (swimming) who describes her six-year-old self and then later life as a top university swimmer.

Activity 6 The case of Kally Fayhee (swimming)

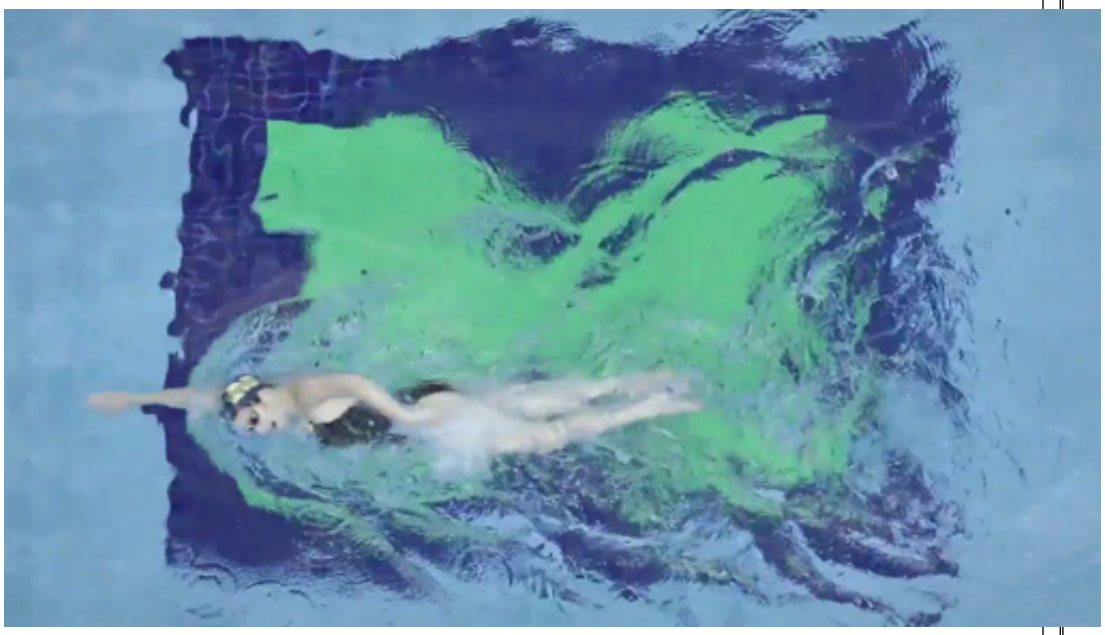
Allow about 10 minutes

Watch this video in which you hear how Kally Fayhee grew up wanting to be an Olympic athlete and how she ended up viewing her swimming training at the University of Michigan.

What were the important aspects of her athletic life? Do they suggest that her identity was narrow or broadly defined?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 5



Provide your answer...

Discussion

Fayhee's description starts with the metaphor of swimming against a (water flume) current in which striving to overcome the current is constant. She talks more about identity when describing her sixteen-year quest to become an Olympian since the age of six. She says she defined herself by numbers (e.g. distances, times, strokes) and a pursuit of the right training formulae. She was aiming to reach her goals and to be

accepted by others. This short clip suggests an athletic identity that is perhaps narrower than that of many other athletes, although this clip is only a snapshot.

Thinking about someone like Fayhee, deeply immersed in their training, what prevention strategies might you put in place in supporting athletes to create more balanced identities to reduce their burnout risk?

DeFreese et al. (2015) make three suggestions:

1. Communicate and demonstrate, perhaps through example, that everyone can strongly identify with multiple roles (e.g. athlete, family member, community member, student, responsible citizen).
2. Encourage athletes to develop other aspects of their lives beyond sport and provide appropriate support for this.
3. Help athletes put sport performance into a holistic life perspective.

This is one area where parents – and to some extent coaches – can have enormous influence. To conclude this session, you will now consider an infographic that underlines the key importance of the third strategy – helping children to develop a healthy relationship with sport.

8 Tips for parenting children in sport

Those supporting children need to understand the range of factors which contribute to burnout. When tips to parents are distilled down to eight key messages (as you will see in the next activity) the emphasis is on parents helping their children to develop a healthy relationship with sport – this is the third of the strategies for parents and one of crucial importance in preventing burnout.

Activity 7 Helping children develop a healthy relationship with sport

Allow about 10 minutes

This activity explores the burnout prevention strategy of parents developing a healthy relationship with sport for their child.

Read this infographic developed from Harwood and Knight's (2009) research. What links can you make from their advice to the burnout insights from this course?

Figure 4 Tips for parenting children involved in sport

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The advice in Figure 4 (based on Harwood and Knight's (2009) research) centres on understanding the child's perspective and needs. In particular, there is recognition of the child's autonomy (Tips 1, 2 and 3). In addition, by limiting discussion about parental

expectations or outcomes (results) (Tip 4), parents are more likely to foster a mastery motivational climate.

The following tips also connect to burnout in different ways:

- Tip 5 speaks to reducing stress by not placing the child in the middle of parent–coach disagreements
- Tip 6 speaks to relatedness and social support needs, and
- Tip 7 speaks to the potential stress of parents of being involved in their child's sport.

Many of these tips are about reasonable and measured adult behaviour in children's sports environments (i.e. balancing support with a hands-off approach). To summarise, positive parental support in competitive sport environments is likely to make them less stressful for children and to reduce the likelihood of burnout.

As you have seen, the influence of parents on whether their children are likely to suffer burnout or not is considerable. In the last three sections, you have covered the following strategies that may help:

- reducing parental involvement and expectations, including avoiding early sports specialisation
- fostering broader identities (this is something that coaches can also do)
- encouraging parents to develop their child's healthy relationship with sport. Parental tips focus on the themes of reducing stress, an awareness of needs supportive environments, and task mastery.

9 This session's quiz

Check what you've learned this session by taking the end-of-session quiz.

Session 7 quiz

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

10 Summary of Session 7

Some of the main learning points from this session are:

- Experiences of burnout differ and require individual responses in which a holistic view of the athlete's experience is needed.
- Burnout prevention strategies include:
  - Promoting time off and monitoring to help prevent overtraining and under-recovery. This was supplemented with Meeusen and De Pauw's (2013) advice to coaches and athletes.
  - Encouraging needs supportive coaching which relates to Self-determination theory. This describes a coaching style, language and behaviours which allow athletes to contribute their ideas to the coach and where controlling behaviours are avoided.
  - Creating a mastery motivational climate drawing from Achievement goal theory. This involves encouraging expectations and goals that are related to improvement, effort and collaboration. This strategy is particularly suited to help manage the negative aspects of perfectionism (Lemyre et al., 2008).
  - Fostering a broader identity beyond sport, drawing on social perspectives of burnout.
  - Encouraging appropriate parental support, which is likely to make sport less stressful for children (based on research by Harwood and Knight (2009)); this includes aspects of needs supportive coaching and mastery motivational climates and overcoming false myths about early specialisation in sport.

In the final session you will investigate how different psychological skills can be used to help reduce burnout. These include some perhaps familiar ideas (like goal setting), some that you may be less familiar with (like social support) and some relatively new skills that are having an impact (like self-compassion).

You can now go to Session 8.

Session 8: Reducing burnout using psychological strategies

Introduction

> The state of [burnout] exhaustion and its associated symptoms are not relieved by routine recovery (i.e. rest), and it does not simply get better but takes time and appropriate management.
>
> (Goodger, 2012, p. 569)

Figure 1 Reducing burnout can appear simple like this image but underneath a range of factors need addressing

It sounds as if it should be quite straightforward to reduce the incidence of burnout but, in reality and as the quote suggests, to do so it is necessary to address the underlying

contributing factors and this requires a tailored approach. In this final session of the course you will start by taking an overview of the range of possible *psychological* strategies you can use in preventing burnout. You will then focus on the three intervention strategies of self-compassion, goal setting and social support.

Different reduction strategies aim to address a combination of stress management, motivational needs, feeling trapped and/or perfectionistic tendencies. You should realise that reduction strategies can often also be used as prevention strategies. The long-term effective use of these strategies to *reduce* burnout, for example goal setting, is also often useful to *prevent* burnout.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- appreciate the range of strategies that can be applied to managing burnout and to know where to find further information on each
- explain the three strategies of self-compassion, goal setting and social support, including the purpose of each strategy in order that you may be able to draw on them in your own interactions with athletes.

1 The range of strategies

Each reference source you consult is likely to recommend slightly different burnout reduction strategies. Each source may use different names to describe them (e.g. visualisation or imagery – largely the same thing) or different techniques (e.g. progressive muscular relaxation or relaxation breathing – again, the same idea).

In order to appreciate the range of psychological tools available to prevent burnout, examine Figure 2 (adapted from University of Michigan, 2018). Click on ‘View interactive version’ at the bottom of the figure and hover over the eight skills and strategies to read an overview of each. It gives an overview of eight skills and strategies. You will be guided towards further information on each skill or strategy later.

Interactive content is not available in this format.
Figure 2 A range of eight psychological tools to prevent burnout

Relaxation skills and strategies	Cognitive reframing skills (or restructuring)	Self-talk skills	Self-compassion* (or mindful self-compassion)
Imagery skills (or visualisation)	Cost–benefit analysis	Goal setting skills*	Social support* (as a strategy)

Much information about these strategies is available online but there is no guarantee that the resources are reliable. The University of Michigan (shown in Figure 3) is a reliable source because it is an organisation that highly values sport but also has research, academic and medical departments relating to sport and psychology.

Figure 3 University of Michigan Stadium (107,600 capacity)

In the activity below you will have the opportunity to find out more about these sport psychology strategies. Note, however, that the information from this activity will not be quizzed.

Activity 1 Find out more about sport psychology strategies

Allow about 25 minutes

Session 8 focuses on three of the strategies from Figure 2 – self-compassion, goal setting and social support. Each of these has a recognisable evidence-based impact on burnout. This activity is an opportunity to learn more about the other five strategies, plus some additional approaches to supporting mental well-being in sport, from the University of Michigan.

If you want to find out more about:

- cognitive reframing skills (or restructuring)
- self-talk skills
- imagery skills (or visualisation)
- cost–benefit analysis
- breathing and muscular relaxation skills

visit the Athletes Connected Skills and Strategies page at the University of Michigan.

Discussion

In this exploratory task, you can see that these five strategies can all also contribute in some way to reducing burnout.

You will now look in more detail at the first of the three intervention strategies that are the focus of this session – the relatively new strategy of self-compassion.

2 Managing setbacks: the self-compassion strategy

Thinking back to Session 2, you explored fifteen burnout factors summarised in a colour coded figure. The 'Individual characteristics' category (yellow) that identified which attributes and resources can influence whether a person experiences burnout included the following factors:

1. tendency for anxiety
2. unidimensional athletic identity
3. high levels of self-criticism (e.g. perfectionism), and
4. limited coping skills or resources (e.g. appropriate goal setting, relaxation).

Self-compassion has been recognised for about two decades as a strategy which helps to counter anxiety (factor 1), self-criticism (factor 3) and limited coping skills (factor 4). It deals with setbacks by helping athletes treat themselves kindly rather than being harsh and self-critical; it helps balance their thoughts and emotions and lets them appreciate that other athletes experience similar hardships. It may be particularly useful for people with high perfectionism (Mosewich et al., 2013).

Activity 2 Swimmer Kally Fayhee describes her approach to self-compassion

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch this video in which Kally Fayhee (who you met earlier in Session 7) describes her approach as an athlete who used self-compassion in difficult times. Answer these two questions:

1. What does Fayhee reveal about the result of identifying her negative thoughts and feelings?
2. What was a helpful self-compassion mindset in managing these thoughts?

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. She describes initially feeling odd paying attention to the thoughts racing through her mind. Gradually she realised these negative thoughts had a pattern; they were not based on fact and they occurred at distinct times in her training and competition schedule. This made managing them more achievable. In effect, she enhanced her self-awareness by paying attention to what she was thinking.
2. She put herself in a friend's shoes – as self-compassion advises (e.g. Neff, 2019) – to consider what she would say to them in similar situations. With this approach she reflected how she would view the friend and questioned if she would apply the same harsh self-criticism to them as she applied to herself.

   For Fayhee, self-compassion helped her to reframe her thoughts to be more encouraging to herself.

Thinking and writing exercises have been developed to encourage self-compassion. Many of these practices teach people to increase self-awareness and change their inner dialogues by reframing a self-critical voice in a way that is more positive.

But what does the research evidence identify as self-compassion's particular strength?

3 Case study: John Bergland

Evidence suggests (e.g. Mosewich et al., 2013) that self-compassion is a useful intervention to reduce burnout, counterbalancing excessive feelings of guilt at not pushing yourself hard and making you more positive about your achievements.

Figure 4 Some athletes who are particularly self-critical experience guilt about not training or pushing themselves hard

Research evidence on self-compassion is gradually emerging to show that it can be a valuable tool for some, particularly for managing athletes with perfectionistic tendencies. You will explore this in the next activity, in the case of John Bergland, an ultra-distance athlete.

Activity 3 Self-compassion: Bergland's 'secret sauce' for perfectionism

Allow about 15 minutes

Read this extract from a *Psychology Today* article in which Bergland (2018), prompted by his research into perfectionism and self-compassion, describes how a key moment, as well as self-care, changed his life.

Once you have read the article, revisit the case of Jono Kitto (rugby) from Session 5. How similar were Kitto's strategies towards change, to Bergland's use of self-compassion?

> As a professional athlete, I learned about … perfectionism the hard way. … Being a triathlete, I had zero tolerance for imperfection. Unfortunately, in the late 1990s, when I started getting bored [I] decided to [do] more extreme ultra-endurance events.
>
> I was determined to stick to a robotically-rigid training regimen, I ignored the warning signs of overtraining. This led to a colossal meltdown … injuries and burnout … and ultimately, a major depressive episode.
>
> Fortuitously, during this time period, Alanis Morissette released a song, 'That I Would Be Good,' about embracing oneself despite appearing 'less than' [perfect]. …, this song was an epiphany for me.
>
> Once the meaning of this song sunk in, I began practicing more self-compassion and let go of my … perfectionism. Notably, this is also the precise moment when my athletic career really began to take off. Once I silenced my inner critic and stopped constantly beating myself up for being less than perfect, joie de vivre and exuberance took over. … I actually

> started having fun during races. Self-compassion can be a real game-changer. …
>
> Self-acceptance and a carefree spirit were my secret sauce as an ultra-endurance athlete. More specifically, mastering the art of talking to myself … allowed me to compete in absurdly gruelling ultra-distance races.
>
> As an athlete, learning to practice more self-compassion improved both my mental health and sports performance by reducing maladaptive perfectionism. This anecdotal evidence … corroborates the latest empirical evidence by Ferrari et al. (2018) …
>
> (Bergland, 2018)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Both Bergland and Kitto remember inspirational people or moments which helped change their mindset in managing their perfectionism-related burnout. For Kitto, it was the Michael Jordan quote which demonstrated Jordan had made plenty of mistakes in his career but not been defined by them. This is the quote he spoke about:

> I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.
>
> (Jordan, n.d.)

Kitto mentions in his interview about accepting mistakes, that 'there is a sense of grace in that' and that he now recognises 'the good that we [as players] are adding to the field'. It certainly sounds like there were very strong similarities between the strategies he used and those of self-compassion. Bergland's full engagement with the strategy of self-compassion and his enthusiastic description of it as his 'secret sauce' certainly adds anecdotal evidence to its value.

If you wish to explore the self-compassion strategy further,
The agony of defeat: How Olympians can deal with failure (Kowalksi and Ferguson, 2018) is a useful article, with numerous onward web links to research. (The information in this article will not be quizzed.)

Part of the challenge for perfectionists and others with burnout is the type of goals they set themselves. You will look at this next.

4 Goal setting for reducing burnout

Appropriate goals are good for you. Striving for goals that align with your values and interests has a beneficial impact on work rate, performance and well-being (Smith et al., 2007). Evidence demonstrates (e.g. Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2013) that Achievement goal theory (i.e. creating a positive motivational climate) that you explored in Sessions 5 and 7 is a valuable perspective for managing burnout.

As for self-compassion, it seems there is also a relationship between perfectionism and personal goal setting (Stoeber et al., 2009). It is for these reasons that goal setting is particularly important to explore in helping manage burnout in sport.

Figure 5 Imagine learning to hurdle and setting the hurdles too high or setting unrealistic targets

Goal setting is a psychological technique that most people involved in sport and exercise are well versed in. Athletes are used to working towards targets and so targets are often a useful tool in any recovery from burnout. There is a wide variety of goals that might be set for reducing burnout and some of these are summarised in Figure 6. Setting goals can help focus the individual's attention, keep them motivated and increase their adherence to burnout reduction plans.

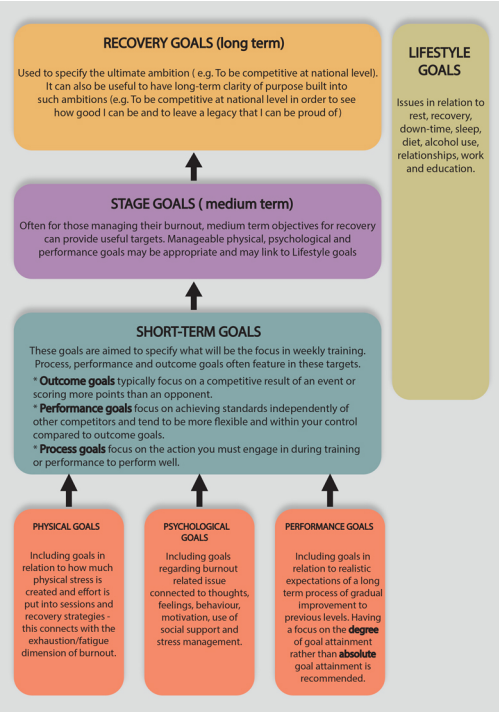


Figure 6 Types of goal for sport rehabilitation (adapted from Arvinen-Barrow and Hemmings, 2013)

You will now build on your existing knowledge of goals to look at what constitutes meaningful goal setting for those experiencing burnout.

5 Goal setting for athletes experiencing burnout

For those experiencing burnout, unrealistic goals may have a negative impact on progress. For example, think about the way Bergland (ultra-distance athlete) was constantly striving to a rigid training regimen before he found a more sustainable approach.

Activity 4 Applying goal setting principles to burnout

Allow about 15 minutes

Watch the video below which takes a general look at goal setting in sport and then answer the questions that follow.

View at: youtube:MeChdwU-53E

Video 2

1. Look at the following examples of goals set by an imaginary athlete 'Kyle' who is trying to reduce burnout. Decide whether each goal (a, b and c) is a process, performance or outcome goal. Which types of goal are more likely to reduce stress?
   a. *to achieve a top 20 national result by September*
   b. *to return to within 5 kg of my pre-burnout personal best on the bench press*
   c. *to explore psychological strategies to help reduce my worry about fitting into the group.*
2. What is SMARTER? Using SMARTER, try to improve the wording of another of Kyle's goals:
   d. to improve my engagement and focus with training.
3. Why do you think it is important to set both short-term and long-term goals?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. a = an outcome goal
   b = a performance goal
   c = a process goal.
   Of these, the use of performance and process goals is more likely to reduce stress.
2. SMARTER is an acronym which reminds us of key goal setting principles (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely, evaluated and rewarded). You may already be familiar with it or the shorter SMART version.
   Kyle's goal (d) doesn't adhere to the SMARTER principles. For example, it is not very specific – what aspect of training? The goal would be improved by adding a

more specific component such as endurance training, skills work or squad meetings. You could get even more specific by stating which types of session. To make the goal measurable, you and Kyle could add engagement or focus targets such as effort (heart rate), touches of the ball, contribution of ideas or positive body language with others. The target heart rate, number of touches or contributions would need to be realistic (attainable) and relevant to the individual.

The goal could also be enhanced by setting a realistic time period for its achievement (timely). The goal should be evaluated so that progress can be seen and a reward for achievement may motivate the individual. An adjusted goal might read something like:

d. to improve visible physical commitment to defence skills sessions and make daily constructive verbal contributions to the group over the next month.

3. Ultimately, a key goal for many athletes experiencing burnout is a return to more satisfying experiences of their sport. However, for some athletes this ultimate goal can seem too distant. A long-term goal to re-engage with sport needs to be supported by a series of short-term goals that lead toward this. These can be thought of as stepping stones towards the ultimate goal, each of which gives the athlete something to focus on that is tangible. These shorter-term goals can be broken down into smaller sub-goals perhaps linked to daily lifestyle choices.

Burnout reduction can be complex and unpredictable – this can sometimes make goal setting a difficult task and at times goals won't be achieved. In these situations, it is recommended you focus on **the degree of goal attainment** rather than absolute attainment. For example, if an individual hasn't fully achieved a goal you might emphasise the improvement made towards it e.g. focusing on the progress from the starting point.

Goals that are process and performance related are more likely to be valuable for those recovering from burnout. A further aspect of any longer-term goal is to establish the deep-seated purpose of an athlete's involvement in sport. An athlete with more clarity about purpose is more likely to understand how their own satisfaction and engagement is derived. For example, a craftsperson takes the stress out of focusing on the outcome of their work (i.e. the finished item) by concentrating on their journey and the skills required to make an item. Athletes who are encouraged to develop craftsperson-like goals such as improving their skills are more likely to thrive. Such longer-term questions would often benefit from discussion and support with others.

Next you will study the third of the psychological strategies: social support. Perceptions of social support can be important in helping to manage burnout in athletes.

6 The social support strategy

Social support may not seem like a psychological technique, but evidence shows its potential impact in preventing and reducing burnout amongst athletes is extremely powerful (e.g. Cresswell, 2009).

Figure 7 Do you feel you have people around you who you can depend on if needed?

Social support can mediate some of the stresses that contribute to burnout. Researchers have investigated whether the perception of support in itself can help manage burnout – you will explore this in the following activity.

Activity 5 The power of perception: do you feel supported?

Allow about 10 minutes

Read through and respond on a scale of 1–4 to these statements drawn from the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona and Russell, 1987). Think about to what extent each statement describes your current relationships with sport and exercise colleagues, where 4 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

1. There are colleagues I can depend on to help me if I really need it.
2. There is no one I can turn to for guidance in times of stress.
3. I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being.
4. There is a trustworthy person I could turn to for advice if I were having problems.
5. There are colleagues who I can count on in an emergency.

Why might perceptions of social support, as partly explored in the above statements, help manage burnout?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Social support can be provided by many different people around an athlete experiencing burnout (e.g. coach, teammates, medical/science support team, friends or family). Being able to talk to someone about how burnout is making them feel may make them feel less isolated. Perhaps knowing that there is someone to talk to and to listen to them can contribute to an athlete feeling more positive.

Notice how in the list of statements above, item 2 would be scored in reverse compared to the others, i.e. if you 'strongly disagree' with item 2 you would respond with '1'. But when it comes to assigning scores to each of the other questions, you would score them as '4'.

An average score across all questions is then used to determine your perception of support. An average of between 3 and 4 would indicate strong feelings of support.

DeFreese and Smith (2013) measured perceived social support and burnout with a questionnaire (as above but with a greater number of items) across 63 teams with athletes aged 18–25 years. Their main findings suggested that the perception of available support, regardless of how much support was actually received, was an important correlate of burnout (as measured by the ABQ). It appears then, that an important focus in managing burnout is to **help people feel that they are supported**; in the next section you will explore how this might partly be achieved.

DeFreese and Smith (2013) explain their interesting findings with reference to Self-determination theory (SDT) (Session 5). The process of athletes partly satisfying their SDT needs (relatedness, autonomy and competence) through social support is thought to be important for athletes in helping to manage burnout and their overall well-being.

7 Categories of social support

Social support is considered a multidimensional construct with subtly different categories of support possible. In the next activity you will work to identify the different categories of social support within your own social, domestic or sporting circles.

Activity 6 Identifying your own social support networks

Allow about 10 minutes

Examine Figure 8 below in which five main types of social support are summarised. Think about your own experiences of providing or receiving social support. To what extent do these categories of social support exist amongst your own social, domestic or sporting circles?

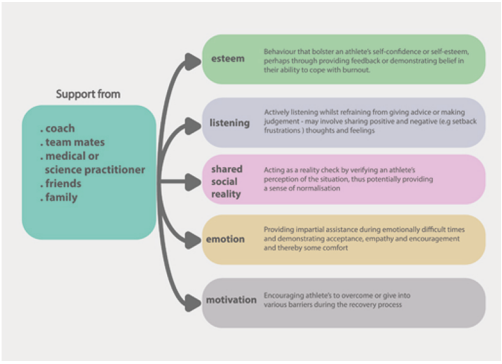


Figure 8 Categories of social support (adapted from Arvinen-Barrow and Pack, 2013)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Perhaps the two most familiar categories of social support are the first two: those related to esteem and listening. However, this figure shows how social support might provide further different categories of support that verify perceptions (shared social reality), provide emotional acceptance and encouragement as well as motivational encouragement through difficult times.

DeFreese et al. (2015) make practical suggestions about strategies to bolster the social support networks amongst athlete groups:

- provide pre- and during-season opportunities in groups that support positive social interactions
- consider team building activities within the practice structure, and
- encourage social activities of teams beyond sport training time.

The powerful effect of social support and helping athletes feel they are supported is not fully appreciated. There is arguably a need to educate coaches and athletes of the value

of support networks and the positive effects these can have in preventing and reducing burnout.

However, your own behaviour towards others can also have a marked impact on other people's willingness to ask for support, as the next section illustrates.

8 Helping athletes feel supported

You may have heard the terms ‘a person-centred approach’ or ‘an athlete-centred approach’ – these terms were developed by humanist psychologist Carl Rogers in 1957 and they often feature in discussions about athlete support. In sport, the **person-centred approach** suggests that a climate conducive to support is valuable using the concepts of **congruence, unconditional positive regard** and **empathy** (Nelson et al., 2014).

You will now explore and apply these concepts to see how you can help athletes feel emotionally supported.

Activity 7 Person-centred support and burnout

Allow about 20 minutes

This activity has two tasks.

1. Look at Figure 9 and explore your understanding of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy by clicking on each heading in turn. Take time to carefully read through the descriptions given.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Figure 9 Three principles of a person-centred humanist approach to support

2. Now consider how you would react in the following situation, applying one or two aspects of the person-centred approach:

Imagine you are a colleague of Kyle, who has always been shy. He reveals that he has begun to induce vomiting the day before athletes are weighed as part of the monitoring of the squad. You are understandably shocked by this.

How would you react to such information in your own sport or fitness environment if an athlete made such a revelation? What might be an appropriate response?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

A person-centred non-judgemental response to Kyle may be, ‘OK, so when during the day do you do this?’ or ‘I can only imagine how painful it must be to talk about that, would it be helpful to chat further?’. The second example is non-judgemental but also shows empathy. In contrast, a judgemental response may be, ‘Really, why do you do that?’, accompanied by a shocked facial expression.

To respond to Kyle in a non-judgemental manner is likely to build trust and encourage him to feel that he is supported and able to seek further help. For a strategy of social support to be effective, those listening may need to show empathy in trying to understand and reflect back what is being said in order to make the other person feel understood.

Some of the negative social consequences of burnout can be isolation from team mates and coaches. Therefore, your increased awareness of the different categories of social support and the evidence showing the importance of athletes feeling supported should help you respond appropriately.

9 Bringing it all together: how can you help manage burnout?

As you reach the end of this course, this section provides an opportunity to reflect on what you have learned about the experience of burnout and what you can do to help manage burnout in your environment.

Figure 10 Social support, goal setting and self-comparison have a common theme of individual care

Activity 8 Reflection

Allow about 15 minutes

Using the following questions as prompts, reflect on how what you have learned on this course will affect your future practice.

- Will your interactions with any athletes or coaches experiencing burnout change as a result of studying this course? If so, in what way?
- What actions might you now take to help prevent burnout?
- What actions might you take to help individuals recovering from burnout?
- What are the key lessons that you have learned about burnout experiences and the risk of burnout?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Reflecting like this is a useful way to consider how what you have learned in this course can be applied to your everyday life. Hopefully, the course has led you to better

understand burnout experiences as being beyond just physical exhaustion. You may have reflected on how you can integrate more sport psychology into your practice in your professional role (as a coach or instructor) or as a parent, or you may have thought about the need to include a sport psychologist in your professional network.

10 This session's quiz

Congratulations on almost reaching the end of the course.

Now it's time to complete the Session 8 badge quiz. It is similar to the quiz that you took at the end of Session 4, with 15 questions in total.

Session 8 compulsory badge quiz

Remember, this quiz counts towards your badge. If you're not successful the first time, you can attempt the quiz again in 24 hours.

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you're finished.

11 Summary of Session 8

The main learning points from this session are:

- Eight psychological strategies for managing and reducing burnout were identified along with a source for additional information. These strategies can often also be used to help *prevent* burnout.
- Three burnout reduction strategies were outlined in detail:
  - self-compassion – used to help counter anxiety, self-criticism and perfectionism, and which can enhance athlete coping skills. Self-compassion helps athletes treat themselves kindly rather than being harsh and self-critical.
  - goal setting – this was applied to burnout and emphasised distinctions between:– outcome, performance and process goals

    – SMARTER principles of effective goal setting, and

    – short-term and long-term goals.
  - social support – the perception of support was highlighted as important. DeFreese and Smith (2013) link its effectiveness to Self-determination theory. Social support can partly be achieved by using:– the person-centred concepts of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy, and

    – knowledge of different types of social support, and the positive encouragement of social networks, interactions and activities amongst squads and groups.

Where next?

If you've enjoyed this course you can find more free resources and courses on OpenLearn . You might be specifically interested in two other badged courses, *Exploring sport coaching and psychology* and *Communication and working relationships in sport and fitness*. There is also a page of sport and fitness courses on OpenLearn.

New to University study? You may be interested in our courses on Health and Wellbeing. You might be particularly interested in our BSc (hons) Sport, fitness and coaching.

Making the decision to study can be a big step and The Open University has over 40 years of experience supporting its students through their chosen learning paths. You can find out more about studying with us by visiting our online prospectus.

Tell us what you think

Now you've come to the end of the course, we would appreciate a few minutes of your time to complete this short end-of-course survey (you may have already completed this survey at the end of Week 4). We'd like to find out a bit about your experience of studying the course and what you plan to do next. We will use this information to provide better online experiences for all our learners and to share our findings with others. Participation will be completely confidential and we will not pass on your details to others.

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Acknowledgements

Intro

Images

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Session 1

Text

Activity 2: Burnout in professional sport Jonathan Trott: Burnout Sky Sports 1; reviewed by Darren Britton

Activity 6: Gould, D., Udry, E., Tuffey, S., & Loehr, J. (1997). Burnout in competitive junior tennis players: III. Individual differences in the burnout experience. The sport psychologist, 11(3), 257-276.

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Audio/Video

Video 1: The British Psychological Society; Professor D R Gould

Session 2

Text

Activity 4: adapted from Gustafsson et.al. (2017); Eklund and Defreese (2017)

Images

Figure 1: Positiffy: Shutterstock

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Audio/Video

Audio 1: BBC Radio 5 Live; Elinor Barker joins Eleanor Oldroyd; 05 January 2018

Session 3

Text

Activity 1: Gustafsson, H., Hassmén, P., Kenttä, G., & Johansson, M. (2008). A qualitative analysis of burnout in elite Swedish athletes. Psychology of sport and exercise, 9(6), 800-816.

Images

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Audio/Video

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Session 4

Images

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Audio/Video

Video 1: Christina Maslach, PhD, discusses “Burnout: An Overview”; www3.mdanderson.org

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Audio 1: BBC World Service: Sportshour

Audio 2: BBC Radio 5 Live Sports Special

Session 5

Images

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Audio/Video

Audio 1: BBC Radio 5 Live: Victoria Pendleton - Mind of a Cyclist

Video 2: courtesy of Athlete Assessments; www.athleteassessments.com

Video 3: courtesy of Rugby Players Association; part of the Rugby Players Association's 'Lift the Weight' mental health campaign

Session 6

Text

Activity 3: McNeill, K., Durand-Bush, N., & Lemyre, P. N. (2017). Understanding coach burnout and underlying emotions: a narrative approach. Sports Coaching Review, 6(2), 179-196.

Activity 5: McNeill, K., Durand-Bush, N., & Lemyre, P. N. (2017). Understanding coach burnout and underlying emotions: a narrative approach. Sports Coaching Review, 6(2), 179-196.

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Session 7

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Session 8

Text

Activity 3: Psychology Today; Self-Compassion Counterbalances Maladaptive Perfectionism; Christopher Bergland

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