The BASES Expert Statement on Burnout in Sport

Produced on behalf of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences by Dr Daniel Madigan, Dr Henrik Gustafsson, Prof Alan Smith, Prof Thomas Raedeke and Prof Andrew Hill.

Introduction

Burnout is an extreme and persistent form of sport disillusionment that can afflict both athletes and coaches. It is comprised of three symptoms, namely, a reduced sense of accomplishment, devaluation or cynicism directed at sport, and physical and emotional exhaustion (Maslach *et al.*, 1986; Raedeke & Smith, 2001). These symptoms are significant contributors to diminished physical and psychological well-being. As such, our aim in the present expert statement is to increase awareness of burnout and provide athletes, coaches and sport scientists with recommendations to help prevent its occurrence.

Background and evidence

Researchers have invested substantial time and resources into understanding burnout in sport (Goodger *et al.*, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2019). This research has provided us with considerable insight into its consequences. For athletes, burnout is associated with underperformance, compromised physical and psychological well-being and possible dropout from sport (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2017). For coaches, there is evidence that it reduces work capacity, negatively affects coach-athlete relationships and can result in coaches leaving the profession (Goodger *et al.*, 2007). Although few studies have directly assessed burnout prevalence, estimates suggest that up to 10% of athletes may regularly experience moderate levels of burnout symptoms. In coaches, rates are likely to be comparable to those found in similar professions (e.g. ~15% of teachers; García-Carmona *et al.*, 2019).

Research has also provided us with a great deal of information about burnout development. This research suggests that burnout stems from both stress and motivation-related processes. Consequently, factors that place the individual at risk of stress or motivation difficulties are particularly relevant in understanding burnout development. These factors can relate to the structure of sport (i.e. organisation/environment) and the individual themselves.

For the structure of sport, perceived incongruence of personally desired and organisationally provided resources (e.g. workload, control, reward, community, fairness and value), a lack of social support, and negative social interactions have all been found to positively correlate with burnout (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2017; Pacewicz *et al.*, 2019). For individual factors, a large body of evidence has shown that certain aspects of personality and elements of self-determination are important. For example, perfectionistic concerns (overly critical evaluations of one's behaviour and performance) positively correlate with burnout and predict increases in athlete burnout over time (Hill & Curran, 2016). In addition, thwarting of psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness positively correlates with burnout. This thwarting corresponds with more external motives and less internal motives for sport involvement, which also tie with greater burnout (Li *et al.*, 2013).

The preceding discussion highlights the importance of protecting athletes and coaches from burnout. To provide athletes, coaches and sport scientists with the means to do so, we offer recommendations for how to monitor, intervene and further our understanding of burnout in sport.

Recommendations

Monitoring

Monitoring athletes and coaches for burnout symptoms is an important component of burnout prevention. Burnout is typically measured using self-report questionnaires. The Athlete Burnout Questionnaire is a15-item questionnaire capturing the three symptoms of athlete burnout (Raedeke & Smith, 2001). Similarly, the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Scale (Schaufeli *et al.*, 1996) is a 16-item questionnaire capturing burnout symptoms in coaches. We provide example items and the response format in Table 1. Higher scores indicate more frequent symptoms. Research shows that these questionnaires are useful for ongoing monitoring and detection of burnout in athletes and coaches (Smith *et al.*, 2019).

Intervention

What can athletes and coaches do to address burnout? The aforementioned risk factors are helpful in terms of organising possible interventions. That is, we can target (1) the structure of sport (organisation/environment) and/or (2) the individual:

Table 1. Symptoms, example items and response format for monitoring athlete and coach burnout.

Athletes						
Symptom	Example item	Almost never		Sometimes		Almost always
Reduced sense of accomplishment	"I am not achieving much in sport."	1	2	3	4	5
Sport devaluation	"I don't care about my sport performance as much as I used to."	1	2	3	4	5
Physical and emotional exhaustion	"I am exhausted by the physical and mental demands of sport."	1	2	3	4	5

Coaches								
Symptom	Example item	Never			Sometimes			Always
Reduced professional efficacy	"At my work, I am not confident that I am effective at getting things done."	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Cynicism	"I don't really care if my work is done well or poorly."	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Exhaustion	"Working all day is a real strain for me."	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Items are adapted from the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (Raedeke & Smith, 2001) and Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Scale (Schaufeli *et al.*, 1996). Higher scores reflect more frequently experiencing burnout symptoms.

(1) The structure of sport

- Coaches and support staff can be taught to provide athletes with environments that are less likely to lead to burnout. There is evidence that offering more autonomy support (e.g. acknowledging athlete perspectives, providing athletes with the opportunity to make choices and decisions, and valuing independent problem solving and initiative taking), social support, and positive feedback can buffer the likelihood of burnout (Smith *et al.*, 2019).
- Organisational changes that reduce exposure to stressors (e.g. reduced workload), improve role clarity, and increase congruence between desired and provided resources (e.g. increased reward, organisational support) may help mitigate burnout risk for coaches.

(2) The individual

- Interventions targeting the individual should aim to reduce the potential for chronic stress and equip athletes and coaches with coping resources and strategies. There is evidence that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy-based interventions are particularly effective in these regards and can combat burnout directly (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2017). Psychological skills training (e.g. goal-setting, self-talk, imagery) is also likely to be effective and is often part of routine support provided by sport psychologists to athletes and coaches.

Whereas more studies examining interventions for burnout prevention and treatment in sport are required, evidence outside of sport suggests interventions that simultaneously target the sport structure and the individual will be most effective (West *et al.*, 2016).

Future research

Sport scientists play an important role in advancing our understanding of burnout so as to increase our capacity to assist athletes and coaches. Accordingly, we close this expert statement by providing recommendations for future research.

1. We recommend developing behavioural observation measures of burnout symptoms. This would provide an additional means to monitor athletes and coaches for burnout symptoms (and may act as early warning for these individuals).
2. We highlight the need for research identifying the epidemiological and public health significance of burnout given its potential prevalence and impact on health-related outcomes.
3. We have little understanding of the psychophysiology of burnout, both in terms of aetiology and its markers. Future research should therefore adopt a multidisciplinary approach that aims to identify endocrine (e.g. cortisol) and immunological (e.g. Salivary IgA) markers associated with burnout.
4. We also believe it is important to understand how social dynamics potentially catalyse or mitigate the processes involved in burnout development. This includes how burnout manifests amongst coach-athlete dyads and within organisations (e.g. teams of athletes and support staff).
5. We call for further intervention research that ensures we are able to practice in an evidence-based manner.

Conclusions

Burnout consists of three core symptoms that have a negative impact on athletes and coaches. Burnout is known to stem from both stress and motivation-related processes and can be monitored using self-report questionnaires. Prevention should focus on addressing the sport structure and individual in ways that reduce exposure to stress, promote autonomy support and increase coping resources and strategies. Taken together, we hope that this expert statement will enable athletes, coaches and sport scientists to better recognise burnout and its risk factors so as to help prevent its development and intervene when necessary. ■

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