

Burnout in Sport Coaches: A Review of Correlates, Measurement and Intervention

Burnout bei Trainern:

Ein Review zu Einflussfaktoren, Diagnostik und Interventionen

Summary

- › **This review article** summarizes the current state of burnout research, factors contributing to burnout, diagnostic instruments, and approaches for interventions. Coaches have to deal with emotional and physical stress that can influence their well-being and in turn, potentially impact athlete performance. Stressors include conflicts, pressure and expectations, managing the competition environments, athlete concerns, coaching responsibilities to the athletes, consequences of sport status, competition preparations, organizational management, sacrificing personal time, and isolation.
- › **A uniform definition** of burnout does not exist. Research in the field of sport and especially coaches has mainly focused on the widely accepted concept of burnout by Maslach and Jackson. They identified key symptoms, which included emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.
- › **Studies on factors** influencing burnout show contradictory results. Overall, demographic variables (e.g., age and gender) seem to have minor effects on burnout, whereas coaches' perception and appraisal of social and management support might play an important role. Furthermore, personality (e.g., perfectionism), motivation and the behavior of a coach influences the individual assessments of stressful situations.
- › **Especially within the last years**, burnout research outside of the sport context has produced numerous findings regarding contributing factors and intervention strategies. These findings should be transferred to the coaching environment.

KEY WORDS:

Burnout, Coaches, Stressors, Emotional Exhaustion

Zusammenfassung

- › **Dieser Übersichtsartikel** fasst den aktuellen Forschungsstand zum Thema Burnout bei Trainern zusammen. Neben der Definition von Burnout werden moderierende Variablen, Messinstrumente und Ansätze für Interventionen dargestellt. Der Beruf des Trainers ist mit einer Vielzahl an Drucksituationen und Stressoren verbunden. Trainer müssen sich mit Konflikten, Drucksituationen, Erwartungen und Sorgen von Athleten, Planung von Training und Wettkampf sowie dem Fitnesszustand der Athleten auseinandersetzen und dadurch Einbußen in der eigenen Freizeit in Kauf nehmen. Daraus resultieren hohe emotionale und physische Belastungen, die das Wohlbefinden des Trainers beeinflussen und sich in der Folge auch negativ auf die Leistung der Athleten auswirken können. Die subjektive Überforderung in Kombination mit mangelnder Erholung kann im zeitlichen Verlauf zu einem Gefühl des „Ausgebranntseins“ führen.
- › **Eine einheitliche Definition** zu Burnout existiert nicht. Weit verbreitet ist hingegen die Unterscheidung der drei Dimensionen emotionale Erschöpfung, Depersonalisierung und verminderte persönliche Leistungszufriedenheit.
- › **Untersuchungen zu Einflussfaktoren** bei der Entstehung von Burnout zeigen zum Teil widersprüchliche Ergebnisse. Insgesamt scheinen demographische Variablen (z. B. Alter, Geschlecht) wenig Einfluss auf die Ausprägung von Burnout bei Trainern zu haben. Vielmehr scheinen die eigene Persönlichkeit (z. B. Hang zum Perfektionismus), das Trainerverhalten und die Wahrnehmung und Bewertung der eigenen Situation eine wichtige Rolle für das Wohlbefinden von Trainern zu spielen.
- › **Außerhalb des Sportkontextes** hat die Burnout-Forschung vor allem innerhalb der letzten Jahre zahlreiche Erkenntnisse zu Einflussfaktoren und Interventionsstrategien hervorgebracht, die es auf Trainer und deren Umfeld zu übertragen gilt.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER:

Burnout, Trainer, Stressoren, emotionale Erschöpfung

Introduction

Preservation of mental health is an important issue in various disciplines of sport science. Hence, burnout in sports has fascinated and inspired researchers for the past 30 years. The reviews of Dale and Weinberg (10) and Goodger et al. (14) reveal that the number of burnout studies has risen during this period. Most of the studies regarding burnout in sports focus on the athletes' perspective (31). However, coaches have to deal

with a number of emotional and physical stress too, that can influence their well-being and, in turn, potentially impact on athletes' performance (41). The first investigation of burnout in coaches was done by Caccese and Mayerberg (8). Since then, most of the studies have been conducted on US College coaches (1). Generalizing these findings to European and especially German sport structures might be problematic >

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because of the different sport systems (1, 14, 17). At present, there are only four published studies focused on burnout in German coaches (2, 4, 5, 48) and further six studies focused in the European context (13, 17, 22, 32, 34, 39) over the last fifteen years.

Coaches have to deal with several stressors. Olusoga and colleagues proclaimed conflicts, pressure and expectations, managing the competition environments, athlete concerns, coaching responsibilities to the athletes, consequences of sport status, competition preparations, organizational managements, sacrificing personal time, and isolation as the main stressors of a professional coach (38). In addition, coaches have long, irregular working hours and undertake extensive travel (5, 32). This review aims to provide an overview of the current state of burnout research in coaches, factors contributing to burnout, diagnostic instruments, and approaches for interventions.

Definition of Burnout

Research on sports and especially on coaches has been mostly based on the widely accepted concept of burnout by Maslach and Jackson (4, 5, 8, 18, 35, 41). Key identified symptoms include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (35). Emotional exhaustion is the central quality of burnout and the most obvious manifestation of this complex syndrome (36). Moreover, it is the most widely reported and the most thoroughly analyzed aspect. Emotional exhaustion relates to the stress part of burnout and describes the exhaustion as a consequence of prolonged work-life stress. A second symptom, depersonalization, focuses on how the individual puts distance between oneself and others and produces a personal disconnection (36). It can be viewed as an avoidance strategy to make demands more manageable (33). A reduced personal accomplishment is accompanied by inefficacy. In work situations with very high demands resulting in exhaustion or cynicism (depersonalization) impedes a sense of accomplishment (36).

In recent years, there have been further advances of conceptual thinking towards burnout in coaches including a meta-model by Fletcher and Fletcher (11) and a bio-psychological perspective of stress and recovery by Kellmann (26). The meta-model of Fletcher and Fletcher (11) is based on the assumption of an individual appraisal to external stressors. The external stressors lead to positive or negative reactions depending on process of perception, evaluation and coping (1). Furthermore, this specific process is influenced by situational and personal variables. The recovery-stress model of Kellmann (26) suggest that burnout is the eventual result of chronic exposure to stress and insufficient recovery. Consequently, in this case burnout is defined as a state of maximum need of recovery, whereas a balance of stress and recovery characterize an optimum state (20).

Correlates of Burnout

In this section individual and situational factors contributing to burnout will be discussed. In the authors' view, individual factors include demographics, personality, and cognitive appraisal variables, whereas situational factors describe organizational and environmental variables.

Individual Factors

Age

Several studies have investigated the impact of coaches' age and job-experience on burnout. Older and more experienced coaches

coped more efficiently with stress and had advantages in terms of self-regulation compared to their younger colleagues (13, 40, 41). It seems that older coaches might be buffered by their experiences and developed coping strategies. However, these results warrant some caution. Kallus and colleagues (21) suggested that older coaches might have given up their job due to increased emotional exhaustion and accordingly did not participate in the investigations. In addition, coaches who are experiencing burnout might not agree to participate in research for personal reasons.

Job Experience

Furthermore, a study with Lithuanian coaches examined the influence of job experience on burnout (34). They compared two cohorts of coaches: Those with more and those with less than ten years of coaching experience. The results indicated higher values in the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; (35)) for coaches who worked more than ten years in their jobs. The authors trace the increased exhaustion scores back to duration and intensity of coaching. An additional factor could be an increased failure during the season (13).

Gender

Caccese and Mayerberg were one of the first researchers investigating the impact of sex differences on burnout (8). In their study with 231 college coaches, they found that female coaches had higher scores in emotional exhaustion compared to their male colleagues. In the authors' explanation it was proposed that female coaches were more under pressure to compete with male coaches for employment and had to deal with more financial insecurity. These results are supported by other studies with college coaches (24, 25, 40, 51). In contrast, no gender differences for coaches in relation to burnout have been found in European studies (4, 13, 34). Therefore, female coaches in the North American college system might be faced with greater challenges compared to their European colleagues. Further studies are necessary to examine potential contextual differences.

In a study with Swedish elite soccer coaches, Hjälm and colleagues investigated the influence of coaching male and female teams (17). They revealed that coaches of female teams reported higher scores of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. The authors explained these findings by a lower level of institutional support and funding for female teams.

Motivation

Several researchers have investigated the influence of varying forms of motivation on burnout. A research with elite swimmers investigated the influence of variability in motivation on athletes' burnout susceptibility (30). The results showed that athletes with less intrinsic motivation suffered from higher burnout scores. This finding was supported by Ryska who found that coaches emphasizing the pursuit of prestige (e.g., winning, rewards) showed higher burnout scores in contrast to coaches having the goal to develop athletic skill (personal improvement) (46). So extrinsic motivated coaches with pressure to succeed may risk athletes' physical health (e.g., injury), potentially resulting in team conflict and stress (1). Furthermore, Bentzen, Lemyré, and Kenttä utilize the self-determination theory to better understand the motivational process leading to burnout (7). One of the conclusions is that long lasting amotivation lead to burnout.

Coaching Behavior and Personality

In a study with female college softball and basketball teams the relationship of burnout, coaches behavior, and the effect on

athletes were investigated (50). Coaches with increased burnout values, (a) praised less in training and competition and (b) showed less empathy towards their athletes. Furthermore, the authors found a correlation between burnout and the leadership of a coach. Hence, coaches with increased burnout scores tend to use an autocratic style of leadership. Whereas a study with soccer coaches of high school teams revealed that the coaches with increased burnout scores tended to make decisions within the team (41). Both studies revealed an interaction between burnout and coach behavior; whereas, Harris and Ostrow could not find any connection between leadership and burnout (15). These equivocal results suggest that further research is warranted to deepen and to clarify our understanding.

Another contributing factor in the development of burnout might be the personal trait profile of a coach. Tashman, Tenenbaum, and Eklund revealed a positive correlation between, maladaptive perfectionism and burnout (49). However, the measure has been questioned. Altfeld and Kellmann criticize an insufficient item structure of the Perfectionism Inventory and advocate a specific measurement instrument for research with coaches (1, 16).

Success, Dissatisfaction, Entrapment, and Loss of Meaning

Fletcher and Fletcher consider that the perception and appraisal of the current situation might influence the coaches' well-being and stress experience (11). This assumption was supported by a study of Altfeld and Kellmann with German coaches (4). Their findings suggest that "the individual perception of the current coaching job might have more influence in coaches' emotional exhaustion than context-related variables" (p. 649). Furthermore, a perceived feeling of success was associated with a sense of well-being (5); whereas, feelings of dissatisfaction and entrapment were identified as risk factors of burnout (42, 43, 51). Maslach and Jackson (35) found a relationship between the loss of meaning for people in the current job and the burnout dimension of reduced personal accomplishment. However, the finding was not supported by research on German coaches where no relationship was found (5).

Social Support, Fairness, and Commitment

Numerous studies highlight the buffering qualities of social support by family, friends, and colleagues to protect against burnout (19, 23, 25). Coaches falling back on a supportive social network cope better with stress and perceive stressful situations as less demanding (1). In contrast, conflicts in the family environment can have a negative impact on burnout (37). In addition to the social environment, the support of the club's management can have a positive impact on the level of burnout (13, 51). It was shown that coaches who are intrinsically motivated and who are highly committed to coaching, reported lower emotional exhaustion (42, 43). Outside of the sport context it was found that employees who perceived their supervisors as being fair and supportive are less susceptible to burnout (28).

Situational Factors

Sport

In interaction with individual factors, situation circumstances such as organizational or environmental challenges play a role, too. Therefore, the differences in the type of sport and level of burnout was investigated in a study with Greek coaches (22). It became apparent that in comparison to volleyball and track and field coaches, basketball coaches had increased levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. The differences were explained by a higher social standing and the popularity of

basketball compared to other sports. This assessment was supported by an earlier study in US college sports, where coaches of popular team sports (e.g., football, basketball) had higher burnout scores, compared to coaches in less popular individual sports (18). In contrast, in a current study on German coaches the authors reported no differences in the burnout characteristics of coaches in track and field, soccer, handball, basketball, and tennis (4).

Form of Employment

Another potential variable is the effect of employment status (part or full-time) on coaches' burnout. Several studies revealed higher emotional exhaustion in full-time compared to half-time coaches (4, 21, 43). According to Kallus and colleagues, half-time coaches possess better coping strategies and have to deal with less pressure (21). Furthermore, job insecurity, the pressure to win, missing alternative job opportunities, and perceived external pressures might be critical stressors, which distinguish full-time from part-time coaches (32, 38). Moreover, the results of Altfeld and Kellmann indicate higher values in emotional exhaustion and lower sense of well-being for coaches without job alternatives (4).

Performance Level

If full-time coaches have to deal with higher stress and burnout symptoms compared to half-time coaches, then coaches in higher leagues might also be vulnerable to higher stress and burnout compared with their colleagues in lower performance level leagues (21, 43). The thesis was refuted by studies with college tennis coaches (24) and German coaches of different sports (4), that found no differences in the level of performance.

Measurement

The assessment of burnout is usually realized by self-report questionnaires (1). The overwhelming majority of the reviewed studies used the MBI (35). The MBI is used in about 90% of clinical studies and is considered as the 'gold standard' for measuring burnout (47). The original questionnaire includes 22 items divided into the three scales emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Pursuant to the MBI, high values in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and low values in personal accomplishment indicate a high risk of burnout (35). However, several authors criticize the item structure of the MBI relating to coaches (9, 20, 29). Consequently, coach specific versions of the MBI have been developed (3, 9, 17).

In a Greek study the Coach Burnout Questionnaire (15), as an adaptation of the Athletic Burnout Questionnaire (45) was used (34). The CBQ depends on the same three dimensions of burnout as the MBI (45). However, up to now the CBQ is rarely used.

In a study with 123 German coaches, Altfeld and Kellmann compared the MBI and the CBQ with regard to their suitability to detect burnout (3). They favored the MBI because of superior indices of construct validity and more frequent use in international research. In a comparable study among 604 Swedish coaches, the same questionnaires were explored, in which the authors reached a different conclusion (33). They promoted the use of CBQ since it covers important aspects of burnout in a sporting context that the MBI does not cover (33).

A further approach in the measurement of burnout arises from the recovery-stress model by Kellmann (26). By using the Recovery-Stress Questionnaire for Coaches, the level of >

stress and recovery over the last week is assessed (27). The relationship of stress and recovery permits conclusions regarding risk factors contributing to burnout (21).

Implications for Intervention

Research on burnout often focused on finding effective interventions. Awa, Plaumann, and Walter compared 25 primary intervention studies in their review of intervention programs in a workplace environment (6). The comparison covered person-directed interventions, organization-directed interventions, and combinations of both intervention types. They concluded that the combination intervention induced the most positive and long lasting effects.

Unfortunately, intervention programs as they are known from the workplace research do not exist with regard to coaches, but recommendations for coaches lead in a similar direction. Individual-oriented approaches might deal with strategies which improve coaches' stress resistance and help them tolerate strains during the season. These strategies should include time management skills, relaxation, conflict management, social skills, and coping strategies (5). The use of these strategies has resulted in a reduction of emotional exhaustion in workplace contexts (36). Organization-oriented approaches might focus on improving the management-coach relationship (44). To support coaches and to create a positive and trustful environment (e.g., clarification of role expectations and goal setting) club management should be skilled in leadership and communication (5).

Concluding Remarks

The main goal of the present review was to summarize factors contributing to burnout in coaches. Demographic variables (e.g., age and gender) seem to have minor effects on burnout, whereas coaches' perception of social and management support might play an important role. Furthermore, personality, motivation, and the behavior of a coach influence the individual assessments of stressful situations. In addition to the relevant factors that are examined in the current review, there may be more factors that influence and contribute to burnout among sport coaches (e.g., autonomy support, fairness). For this reason, findings from other research areas (e.g., areas of worklife) should be transferred to the sport context (36). Frank, Nixdorf, and Beckmann call for more theory driven hypotheses, to gain scientific evidence about these topics (12). In this case, a diathesis-stress-model could help to explain why some coaches are more vulnerable to burnout than others.

Most of the reviewed studies used cross-sectional analysis. However, as burnout is described as a slow and gradual process, which can take several months or even years, longitudinal examinations might provide greater insights into the development of burnout during the season.

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