



**LA TROBE**  
UNIVERSITY

CENTRE FOR  
SPORT AND  
SOCIAL IMPACT

**A review of factors  
that contribute to stress,  
burnout and mental wellbeing  
in high-performance coaches**

high  
performance  
centre



November 2020

# Background

The complex changing sporting environment presents several occupational challenges. Not only are coaches required to demonstrate expertise in the area of tactical skills, but they are increasingly assumed into other roles and responsibilities. Conflicts, pressures, expectations, managing the competition environment, and athlete concerns, are some of the factors that have been identified as the main stressors in sport. As a result, coaches may be at risk of increased emotional and physical stress, which can lead to job-burnout. In the sporting environment, some sports coaches may flourish in their profession, while others may have a less positive experience.

A critical review was undertaken by the Centre for Sport and Social Impact from La Trobe University, to identify factors that influence the wellbeing of high-performance coaches. The literature review consisted of a four-phase systematic process, which was undertaken to evaluate the literature. Articles were identified that related to elite and high-performance coaches and the topics of burnout, stress and wellbeing. Articles were then screened for relevance, evaluated against an eligibility criteria and analysed in depth. In total, 107 research articles met the criteria and were analysed as part of the review.



# Burnout

Burnout has been described as “a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected rewards”. Recently, a more widely accepted definition has emerged that describes a three-dimensional syndrome involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment which afflicts individuals with careers. For example:

- People who have roles which involve strong relational aspects, such as high-performance coaches, are more likely to experience burnout.
- Research has found that high-performance coach burnout can be attributed to prolonged stress, particularly when adequate recovery is not facilitated.
- Coaches often mask stress and signs of burnout due to the elite sport’s culture, where vulnerability and seeking help is seen as a weakness.
- Sustained stress on its own does not always lead to coach burnout.
- High-performance coaches who exhibited an obsessive passion through their use of ruminative thoughts are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion.
- High-performance coaches who have lower levels of need satisfaction and autonomous motivation make them more prone to burnout.

## External contributors to burnout

The external causes of burnout can be associated with two themed profiles:

1. **the performance environment profile** – stressors created by the coaching role itself.
2. **the life situation profile** – demographics / stressors outside of coaching such as family or financial issues.

## Internal contributors to burnout

The internal armour and mechanisms developed to combat external stressors contribute to a high-performance coach’s resilience and subsequent sensitivity to burnout:

- Stress is a uniquely individual experience and each coach’s perception of stress is a critical component of burnout.
- It has been suggested that the perception of stress could in fact be more significant than the content of the stressor.
- It is essential to understand how a high-performance coach’s perception of stress is influenced.





## Intervention frameworks

Interventions to build capacity of high-performance coaches, to prevent and manage stress, mental wellbeing and burnout can be structured around three frameworks:

### Primary intervention frameworks

Preventative initiatives designed to reduce the overall demand placed upon coaches by reducing the quantity, frequency and intensity of stressors faced (e.g. workload, work patterns, work environment / policies and procedures).

### Secondary intervention frameworks

Strategies focussed on assisting coaches address and cope with the stressors they face by increasing their awareness, coping mechanisms and resilience.

### Tertiary intervention frameworks

Approaches to empower and support coaches to cope with or recover from the damaging consequences of stress.

## Strategies and interventions

The following are strategies and interventions that show promise for supporting and empowering coaches to develop resilience and protective factors:

- Progressive approaches to coaching (e.g. openness to learning, conscientiousness, optimism & productivity)
- An effective coaching support network
- Manageable work/life balance
- Sustained and durable motivation
- Effective decision making.



## Organisational strategies



	<p><b>Negotiate a manageable workload for coaches with opportunities to exercise professional autonomy and have control over decisions.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define and communicate role expectations</li> <li>• Establish structures and processes that allow coaches to participate in organisational decision making</li> <li>• Establish structures and processes that enhance open communication with organisational management</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Develop an organisational culture and policy environment that:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognises the importance of recovery time away from work to enable coaches to refresh mentally and physically</li> <li>• Demonstrates a commitment to “family-friendly” working arrangements that ensure that coaches spend enough time with their families, prioritise their work schedules and engage in leisure activities.</li> <li>• Encourages coaches to proactively manage their work hours</li> <li>• Establishes specific policies stipulating the hours available for coaches to complete non-sport specific activities (i.e. team sponsor meetings).</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Actively encourage and promote help-seeking behaviour to recognise changes in responses to the stressors inherent in high-performance coaching.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counselling</li> <li>• Psychological skills training</li> <li>• Team building</li> <li>• Mental preparation</li> <li>• Stress control</li> <li>• Substance abuse prevention</li> <li>• Sleep and energy regulation</li> <li>• Crisis intervention</li> <li>• Mental disorder treatment</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Create accessible formal (e.g. accredited) and informal (e.g. mentoring) professional development opportunities for coaches that:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve coaches’ autonomy-supportive behaviour</li> <li>• Build coaches capacity to manage workloads</li> <li>• Enhance coach hardiness</li> <li>• Encourage and support coaches to manage challenges</li> <li>• Improve coaches’ capacity to focus on controlling the controllable.</li> <li>• Develop coach communication skills (e.g. assertiveness training, active listening)</li> </ul>

## Individual strategies



### Coaches to take personal responsibility for their own mental well-being.

- Becoming more self-aware of their responses to stress and building their organisation and time management skills.



### Develop self-regulation as an effective way to manage stress.

- Controlling their thinking, emotions and reactions.
- Build strong social support networks
- Coaches with stronger social support networks are better equipped to handle the stressors they encounter and respond more positively.
- Invest in developing sources of social and emotional support including upper-level management, fellow coaching staff (e.g. assistant coaches, sports psychologist, coaching colleagues), and family and friends.

**‘Stress is a uniquely individual experience and each coach’s perception of stress is a critical component of burnout.’**





# References

- Altfield S, & Kellmann M. (2015). Are German coaches highly exhausted? A study of differences in personal and environmental factors. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 10(4):637–654.
- Bruening J, E, & Dixon MA. (2007). Work-family conflict in coaching II: Managing role conflict. *Journal of Sport Management*, 21(4):471–496.
- Carson F, Malakellis M, Walsh J, Main LC, & Kremer P. (2019). Examining the mental well-being of Australian sport coaches. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(23):4601.
- Freudenberger H, J. (1980). *Burnout*. New York: Doubleday.
- Frey, M. (2007). College coaches' experiences with stress—"Problem solvers" have problems, too. *Sport Psychologist*, 21(1):38–57.
- Gould D, Guinan D, Greenleaf C, & Chung Y. (2002). A survey of U.S. Olympic coaches: Variables perceived to have influenced athlete performances and coach effectiveness. *Sport Psychologist*, 16(3):229–250
- Hassmén P, Kenttä G, Hjälm S, Lundkvist E, & Gustafsson H. (2019). Burnout symptoms and recovery processes in eight elite soccer coaches over 10 years. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 14(4):431–443.
- Knights S, & Ruddock-Hudson M. (2016). Experiences of occupational stress and social support in Australian Football League senior coaches. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 11(2):162–171.
- Lundkvist E, Gustafsson H, Hjälm S, & Hassmén P. (2012). An interpretative phenomenological analysis of burnout and recovery in elite soccer coaches. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 4(3):400–419.
- Maslach C, & Jackson S, E. (1986). *MBI: Maslach Burnout Inventory; Manual research edition*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- McDuff D, R, & Garvin M. (2016). Working with sports organizations and teams. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 28(6):595–605.
- 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.
- Olusoga P, Bentzen M, & Kenttä G. (2019). Coach burnout: A scoping review. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 6(1):42–62.
- Olusoga P, Butt J, Hays K, & Maynard I. (2009). Stress in elite sports coaching: Identifying stressors. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 21(4):442–459.
- Olusoga P, & Kenttä G. (2017). Desperate to quit: A narrative analysis of burnout and recovery in sports coaching. *The Sport Psychologist*, 31(3):237–248.
- Ong N, C, H, & Zhao J, H. (2019). A qualitative investigation into the experience of burnout in Singaporean coaches. *Qualitative Research in Sport Exercise and Health*, 11(5):740–756.
- Raedeke T, D. (1997). Is athlete burnout more than just stress? A sport commitment perspective. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 19(4):396–417.
- Ryska T, A. (2002). Leadership styles and occupational stress among college athletic directors: The moderating effect of program goals. *Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, 136(2):195–213.
- Schaffran P, Altfield S, & Kellmann M. (2016). Burnout in sport coaches: A review of correlates, measurement and intervention. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Sportmedizin*. 67(5):121–125.
- Stebbing J, Taylor I, Spray C, & Ntoumanis N. (2012). Antecedents of perceived coach interpersonal behaviors: The coaching environment and coach psychological well- and ill-being. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 34(4):481–502.



**LA TROBE**  
UNIVERSITY

CENTRE FOR  
SPORT AND  
SOCIAL IMPACT

[www.latrobe.edu.au/CSSI](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/CSSI)

Copyright La Trobe University | All rights reserved | November 2020