

Burnout in Youth Sports

Burnout is a multifactorial, multidimensional, biopsychosocial construct originating from studies on job-stress and service-related domains. While burnout in sports is difficult to pinpoint, the current working model describes three dimensions: physical and emotional exhaustion; a sense of dissatisfaction in the athlete's own achievements/skill development; and sport devaluation (Gustafsson, Davis, Skoog, Kenttä, Haberl, 2015; Vitali, Bortoli, Bertinato, Robazza, & Schena, 2015). Schaufeli and Bunk (as cited in Goodger Lavalley, Gorely & Harwood, 2010, p. 495) formed a five category classification system for the consequences of burnout: affective, cognitive, physical, behavioral, and motivational.

Youth sports today as compared to 20 years ago is much more competitive, demanding (of multiple types of resources), and reward-driven (e.g. emphasis on career, scholarships, etc.). Harris and Watson II (2014) noted that reasons given by youth athletes regarding burnout included: lack of fun/enjoyment; feelings of lacking competence; over-involved parents or parental pressures; early specialization; and lack of autonomy.

Harris and Watson II (2014) conducted a cross-sectional survey of 181 male and female swimmers (n=45 for age group 7-10 years old or younger children; n=87 for age group 11-14 years old or older children; n=45 for age group 15-17 years old or high school swimmers) from mid Atlantic competitive swim clubs. In addition to demographic data, Harris and Watson II (2014) utilized the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ), the Sport Motivation Scale (SMS), the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), the Self-Perception Profile for Children and Adolescents, a four-item designed Likert scale for measuring enjoyment, and another customized Likert-style scale for measuring social constraints.

Harris and Watson's II (2014) study found that high school swimmers reported greater burnout (particularly in exhaustion and reduced satisfaction of accomplishments) as compared to older and younger children; and older children reported greater burnout (in the same areas) as compared to younger children. Enjoyment was also a large influence in burnout among older and high school swimmers, but less so among young swimmers (Harris & Watson II, 2014). Older children seemed to be more prone to burnout; it is important because generally older children would have acquired more expertise than younger children. It is important to understand youth burnout to create a more "healthy atmosphere" in order to prevent children with years of practice and advanced skills leaving/abandoning their sport.

Vitali et al. (2015) surveyed 87 (46 girls, 41 boys) youth who played basketball or volleyball from 6 clubs in Italy in a study of burnout factors. Vitali et al. (2015) used the Perceived Motivational Climate in Sport Questionnaire (PMCSQ), a 10-item resilience scale, a perceived competence scale, and the ABQ. Vitali et al. (2015) found that a performance-oriented (ego) climate promoted burnout whereas a mastery/task-oriented climate create by coaches created a more burnout-protective environment; resilience and perceived competence also helped to ward off burnout. Vitali et al. (2015) concluded that coaches could be influential in creating a healthy, balanced, mastery-task-oriented climate and helping guide young athletes toward appreciating intrinsic-rewards and becoming more intrinsically motivated. Coaches may also need to help overbearing parents/guardians towards a more balanced perspective.

Gustafsson et al. (2015) examined the relationship between mindfulness, perceived stress, affect and burnout in 233 (123 males, 107 females, age 15-19 years old) junior elite athletes from various sports (cross country skiing, track and field, biathlon, ski-orienteeing, and alpine skiing) using the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), ABQ, Perceived Stress Scale, and Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). The results of Gustafsson's et al. (2015) survey indicated that mindfulness was negatively related to all aspects of burnout (mindfulness was burnout-protective); mindful athletes experienced less perceived stress and negative affect; mindful athletes experienced more positive affect as compared to less mindful athletes.

Burnout is a complex entity. However, factors that seem to have a "protective" effect include mindfulness, a mastery-task-oriented climate, and an emphasis on intrinsic reward (develop intrinsic motivation).

I have experienced burnout along with my friends. Our symptoms were: the physical/mental/emotional drain/exhaustion; wanting to abandon whatever activity we were involved in; demotivation; and dissatisfaction. However in our (mine and my friends') experiences, the older one gets with more time/resources invested in an "activity" or career choice (what ever the "pursuit"), it is not always possible to just abandon the pursuit--there are consequences involved that affect others beyond ourselves. Very often, I turn inward for soul-searching and clarity realizing that I am accountable and responsible to others beyond myself. Many times, I just start listing ways in which a situation could be worse, and at the same time list why I am grateful that the situation is not worse. I also try to be honest with myself and acknowledge the full range of emotions and challenges.

References

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