



## Development of exhaustion for high-performance coaches in association with workload and motivation: A person-centered approach



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The aim of the current study was twofold. First, to explore whether there were different trajectories of exhaustion among high-performance coaches over the course of a competitive season. Then, to investigate whether workload-related variables and motivational regulations were associated with exhaustion class membership.

**Methods and design:** 299 high-performance coaches responded to an online survey at the start, middle, and end of a competitive season, assessing exhaustion, workload, work home interference (WHI), recovery, and motivational regulations. Latent class growth analyses were used to identify different trajectories of perceived exhaustion. Further, multinomial logistic regression examined class associations for workload-related variables and motivational regulations at the start and at the end of competitive season.

**Results:** Four different trajectories of perceived exhaustion among coaches were identified, termed respectively “High” (10%), “Increase” (15%), “Decrease” (4%) and “Low” (71%). Higher levels of workload and WHI were associated to classes with higher levels of exhaustion. Higher levels of recovery, and intrinsic and identified regulations were associated to classes with lower levels of exhaustion. Adaptive and maladaptive profiles were identified.

**Conclusions:** Different trajectories of exhaustion among high-performance coaches over the course of a competitive season were found. A maladaptive profile was associated with higher perceived workload and WHI, as well as lower levels of recovery, intrinsic and identified regulations, when compared to the adaptive profile.

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Exhaustion is the core component of burnout, and reflects the feeling of being overextended and depleted of resources in relation to one's work (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In the context of sports, coaches are the providers in a provider/-receiver relationship, a key characteristic in helping professions, and a characteristic that makes them vulnerable to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Coaches have a key role within the coach-athlete-performance relationship (Lyle, 2002). Excellent high-performance coaches are expected to have the competencies to efficiently train sport-specific skills, motivate athletes, help athletes maximize effort and

recovery, and prepare athletes for numerous competitions (Côté, Young, North, & Duffy, 2007, p. 14). When sport organizations care for the motivation and well-being of high-performance coaches, then this increases the probability of coaches staying longer in their jobs, adding important experiences and skills on their way to excellence in their work (Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2015a), and provide them with necessary energy to be excellent coaches (Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2015b). Despite the importance to prevent burnout in coaches, most studies on burnout in sports have focused on athletes. Only about 40 studies have been conducted with coaches and those reached no consensus on the prevalence of burnout (Raedeke & Kenttä, 2013). Findings range from a low to a high prevalence, but most studies report low levels of coach burnout (Raedeke & Kenttä, 2013). In keeping with the “healthy worker effect,” it is a challenge to research the onset and

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the development of a maladaptive syndrome such as burnout in mostly symptom-free populations (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Therefore, longitudinal studies that better target subpopulations at risk are essential to enhanced understanding of the burnout process, and such focus is particularly sought after by high-performance coaches (Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee, & Harwood, 2007; Maslach et al., 2001).

Working as a high-performance coach is highly demanding, as it is associated with a wide range of performance and organizational stressors (Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). High-performance coaches typically have long and irregular work hours, many travel-days, and relatively short contracts (Altfeld & Kellmann, 2013; Lundkvist, Gustafsson, Hjälm, & Hassmen, 2012). At the same time, working as a high-performance coach is often perceived as fun, highly satisfying, and interesting. Individuals working within the coaching profession are often thought to be highly motivated (McLean, Mallett, & Newcombe, 2012), passionate (Donahue et al., 2012), and committed (Raedeke, 2004). These characteristics of high-performance coaches and their relationship to their work has influenced the two dominant perspectives within burnout research in the last 35 years—the resource-demand perspective and the motivational perspective (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). The resource-demand perspective describes how a persistent imbalance of demands over resources typically creates a lack of energy, which initiates a negative process that leads to burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Eventually and especially if opportunities and skills to recover are weak, depletion of energy may lead to burnout (Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010). The second perspective concerns motives rather than energy (Schaufeli et al., 2009). It has been argued that all employees can experience high degrees of stress due to high demands, though only those employees entering the job with high goals, and high levels of expectation and motivation are at-risk for burnout (Pines, 1993). Both perspectives are reflected within the high-performance coach occupation and it is important to investigate them together to thoroughly grasp the intricacies of burnout propensity in high-performance coaches.

In the resources-demand perspective, perceived workload (Leiter & Maslach, 2004) and work home interference (WHI; Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005) are two frequently studied variables in the work environment, which have a positive relationship with burnout. Perceived workload is one's personal assessment of available time and resources to do the expected work and whether what is expected of them are exceeding what is perceived as legitimate (Leiter & Stright, 2009). In case of a large discrepancy between perceived workload and resources, individuals' level of burnout is likely to increase over time (Maslach et al., 2001). Workload in particular has been found to be related to the dimension of exhaustion (Leiter & Stright, 2009). Two recent studies among high-performance coaches have found that perceived workload was an important contributor to the development of exhaustion (Bentzen et al., 2015b; Lundkvist et al., 2012). Further, many high-performances coaches experience high workload in combination with inconvenient work hours and high travel demand, which could create additional risk factors associated with burnout (Thelwell et al., 2008). A high workload combined with inconvenient work hours also presents a work-life balance challenge. WHI is likely to develop when attempts to balance work and other life activities and responsibilities fail and when problems arise as a consequence (Bakker, ten Brummelhuis, Prins, & van der Heijden, 2011). A qualitative study among coaches revealed that WHI likely contributes to the development of burnout in coaches, as WHI is an important stressor (Lundkvist et al., 2012).

Recovery skills and behaviors are key factors predicting individuals' health, well-being, and work performance, as well as in

preventing negative work outcomes such as burnout (Siltaloppi, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2009; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). A recent study followed six professional soccer coaches with the aim to explore the relationship between stress and recovery over a competitive season (Kellmann, Altfeld, & Mallett, 2015). Findings indicated that coaches' stress levels remained stable over the season, but their recovery behavior decreased. Kellman et al. (2015) suggest that in periods of season where the workload is of necessity consistently high it is of extra importance to focus on quality of recovery. There are two important aspects of recovery, namely psychological detachment and relaxation (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Psychological detachment refers to the ability to refrain from work-related activities and thoughts during non-work time, implying mentally disengaging from one's job whilst away from work (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2014). A review revealed that workload had a negative relationship with psychological detachment, and that it forms both a mediator and a moderator within the relationship between job demands and burnout (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2014). Relaxation is a process associated with leisure activities and down time, where the individual deliberately chooses activities to reduce activation and increase positive affect (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). The ability to relax has been positively associated with positive affective states at the beginning of a work-week (Fritz, Sonnentag, Spector, & McInroe, 2010), and has been shown to prevent exhaustion (Siltaloppi et al., 2009). So far, no known studies have focused on recovery for sport coaches in the primary prevention of burnout (Raedeke & Kenttä, 2013).

Using a self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) framework, research investigating burnout has identified the erosion of motivation as an important antecedent to burnout (Fernet, Guay, Senecal, & Austin, 2012; Lemyre, Treasure, & Roberts, 2006; Sullivan, Lonsdale, & Taylor, 2014). More explicitly, the quality of motivation seems crucial when exploring this relationship (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The quality of motivation is described by different motivational regulations based on how self-determined, or integrated within the self, the activity is for the individual (Chemolli & Gagne, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Intrinsic regulation refers to initiating an activity for its own sake and because it is interesting and satisfying in itself as opposed to doing an activity for an external goal. Identified regulation describes behavior that is done because the person values the activity and when it feels personally important. Introjected regulation refers to behavior that is regulated to avoid guilt and shame or to attain ego enhancements, such as pride. External regulation refers to behavior that is performed to satisfy external demands or to reward contingency (Deci & Ryan, 2000). More self-determined motivational regulations, intrinsic and identified, leads to interest, excitement, and greater psychological health, while less self-determined regulations, introjected and external, are more likely to lead to the draining of energy and ill-being (Chemolli & Gagne, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Two previous studies examining the relationship between quality of motivation and burnout at work have used an aggregated motivational index, collapsing motivational regulations in a single score (Fernet et al., 2012; Sullivan et al., 2014). Findings suggested that high levels of self-determined motivation are negatively related to burnout. This approach has been criticized by Chemolli and Gagne (2014), arguing that each motivational regulation is a continuum on its own, thus the quality of motivation should be measured with separate regulation scores rather than as a sum score for all regulations. Two studies have investigated the relationship between four motivational regulations and exhaustion among coaches (McLean et al., 2012), doctors, and nurses (van Beek, Hu, Schaufeli, Taris, & Schreurs, 2012). Both reported similar patterns of findings as previous research, while adding important nuances. As expected, intrinsic and identified regulations were

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