

Part I: Stress Management from the “Outside In”



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The following article is Part 1 of a two-part series on prevention of burnout and the management of stress. Part II, Stress Management from the “Inside Out”, will address how an individual’s internal dialogue can create stress.

In my practice as a psychotherapist, clients often come to me feeling overwhelmed and anxious by the amount of stress in their lives. Athletes will report a lack of motivation to train and poor performance. With a bit of questioning, I often discover they are suffering from burnout. Burnout is a condition of physical and mental exhaustion from being exposed to excessive and prolonged stress without allowing adequate recovery time to replenish the expenditure of energy.

Symptoms of burnout include:

1. Chronic fatigue – a sense of being physically run down, decreased motivation
2. Irritability/negativity - low frustration tolerance, feeling put upon and angry by other’s demands
3. Escapist/Acting Out Behavior – partying, shopping binges, overeating, internet addiction
4. Depression
5. Anxiety/panic attacks
6. Isolation
7. Powerlessness/hopelessness
8. Problems seem insurmountable
9. Weight loss/gain
10. Somatic symptoms/Illness– Frequent headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, body aches/pain
11. Sleep disturbances
12. Overuse injuries

There is a growing body of research that speaks to the issue of burnout in young athletes.

I work with teens that come to me complaining of reduced performance, loss of interest/enjoyment in training/competition, and physical/emotional exhaustion. We come to realize that part of what led them to this state was a lack of balance in their lives. For example, one male high school athlete reported that he averaged 15 training hours per

week, 1-2 competitions per month, and was enrolled in Gate classes which required 8-10 hours of weekly homework. His sport and academics entailed a total of 40-45 hours per week. Traveling to competitions out of town added even more additional stress. The athlete felt isolated from his non-sport peers and felt exhausted and annoyed most of the time.

I also find that young athletes and/or their parents are too focused on the outcome, which creates a great deal of pressure to train and win. One female athlete was led to believe that her college education was dependent upon an athletic scholarship. As a result, she developed a sense of entrapment and began to doubt the value of her sport. Some athletes feel guilty for the amount of money and time their parents have invested in them, and continue to participate despite loss of enjoyment.

Many of the dynamics described above can occur among adult athletes as well. With my adult population, I see burnout manifesting in a wavering commitment to training/competition, physical injury/illness, and exhaustion despite the same training regiment, decreased performance, delayed recovery from injury, and an increase in relationship/work issues. The condition of burnout, if left untreated, can lead to dropout from the sport.

I believe that stress does not have to lead to burnout, nor be responsible for 80 to 85 percent of all illnesses and diseases as reported by the American Medical Association. One line of thought in dealing with burnout is working on eliminating exposure to stress, like John Travolta's character in the 1976 movie, 'The Boy in the Plastic Bubble.' The main character, Tod Lubitch, is born with a deficient immune system and must live out his life in an incubator to protect him against unfiltered air which has the power to kill him. In other words, air is stressful and Tod's body lacks sufficient resistance (strength) to fight off illness.

An alternate perspective involves using stress as a means to build emotional, physical and mental resiliency and strength. Weight training is a good example of this notion from a physical perspective. The exercise stresses (breaks down) the muscle tissue fibers for the targeted muscles. The actual building of the muscle occurs during the rest and recovery period. Research shows that exposure to new learning can help prevent age related cognitive decline, in other words keep you strong mentally.

I view burnout, illness, and/or injury as the result of excessive stress without adequate recovery time. Burnout can be prevented in both athletes and non-athletes by balancing stress with appropriate recovery time. The model, based upon James Loerhr's book, 'Toughness Training for Life', involves viewing stress from three perspectives; emotional, mental and physical, and designing adequate recovery methods for each area in order to build toughness. I take a mind/body approach to stress and believe that excessive stress in one area can have a synergistic effect on the other two areas. For example, one athlete I worked with believed her inability to access her full power on the bike was due to overtraining. We took a look at what was going in her life at the time, and discovered she had an overabundance of mental stress with insufficient recovery time. Her physical performance was suffering because she was unable to concentrate during training. She became frustrated with herself which was displaced on her husband during a discussion over where to go for dinner. An argument ensued, thus depleting her emotional stores which then affected her physical training the following day.

Stress management from the 'outside in' entails the implementation of a stress/recovery program where energy is expended and replenished in the mental, emotional, and physical realms. I agree with Dr. Loehr who believes that the first step in recovery is meeting your basic needs for adequate sleep, nutrition and water. You must have these in place before you can perform at an optimal level. The next task is working on identifying activities that serve to replenish each area. For instance, you might balance high mental stress with reading light material, and balance emotional stress by engaging in nurturing activities such as relaxation exercises, guided imagery, or massage. Incorporate recovery time during your workday (i.e. take a lunch break away from the office) rather than only attending to yourself at the day's end. This latter pattern can set you up for overeating and drinking late at night, which are both insufficient ways to replenish your depleted stores.

The stress/recovery model can be applied to young athletes as well. For example, I worked with the male athlete described above on creating a foundation of adequate sleep, hydration and sports nutrition. I found that he was getting 5-6 hours of sleep per night and eating junk food 1-2 hours prior to competition. He rarely hydrated during and following his game. We then looked at incorporating recovery time into his schedule, including time with friends. I also provided parent education about symptoms and prevention of burnout to foster their support.

Stress does not have to be destructive if you create space in your life for adequate recovery. It's up to you to make yourself worth replenishing. As Ernest Hemingway said, "Life breaks everyone, but some people become stronger in the broken places."

1. Loehr, James Ed.D, *Toughness Training For Life*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.