

BURNOUT SYNDROME IN ATHLETES¹

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Nada Trifković²

College of Sports and Health, Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract: Burnout syndrome is a consequence of accumulated stress, caused by excessive engagement, both in the physical and mental (psychological) domains. It is characteristic of many professions, especially professions that involve direct work with people (healthcare, education, army, etc.), and in sports it is almost inevitable. The two most common reasons that cause burnout syndrome are: setting hard-to-achieve goals or unrealistic deadlines and trying to meet other people's (imposed) expectations. In both cases, endurance limits are pushed, which leads to burnout and has consequences for the entire human body and psychophysical health. We live in a harsh age where it is not enough to be successful, the demand is to be the best. This ultimatum is particularly prominent in sports. Athletes are distinguished from others by discipline, perseverance, persistence, focus on the goal (victory), sacrifice and responsibility. Top fitness and top results are always expected from them. The question arises: Is it even possible to achieve top results and avoid the burnout syndrome? In addition to the analysis of causes, symptoms and consequences, the paper seeks an answer to this question.

Keywords: *affirmation, burnout syndrome, expectations, suppression, stress*

INTRODUCTION

Burnout syndrome has become a relevant issue in the past few decades and people who deal with psychology, sociology, interdisciplinary and medical sciences discuss and write about it, because the problem is interdisciplinary and can be viewed from several angles, in order to answer the question of how this syndrome arises, how to recognize it, treat it and, above all, prevent it.

The term burnout syndrome, which is used in most of the world, including here, was introduced by Freudenberg in 1974. "The name comes from the title of Graham Greene's novel *A Burn-Out Case*, published in 1961, in which a disillusioned architect quits his job and goes to an African jungle" (Dedić, 2005, p. 851).

There are different opinions as to what causes burning out. Erić (2021, p. 132) states: "The concept of suppression as a defence also opened a new perspective on the most important mechanisms of the onset of psychological disorders, observing them through the psychological mechanisms of defence that people use to overcome their life problems, which can be unconstructive and impoverishing and to bring a person into a sick state".

"People suffer (and not only suffer, but also get sick) because of untold stories, because of their own unfulfilled desires, because of (repressed or separated) sense", says Dimitrijević (2005, p. 215).

Adler (2020) believes that it is the feeling of inferiority that triggers all our mechanisms (especially organs) to engage with increased effort.

Baćanac and Radovanović (2005) point out that the cause lies in the desire for affirmation.

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² ✉ nada.trifkovic@vss.edu.rs

Galić (2006) believes that the cause should be sought in the demands of the environment, integration into micro and macro collectives.

Richard H. Cox (2005) analyses the personality of athletes and claims that the response to stress primarily depends on the complex structure of the personality.

Karaleić (2019) believes that inadequately regulated stress in sports leads to burnout syndrome.

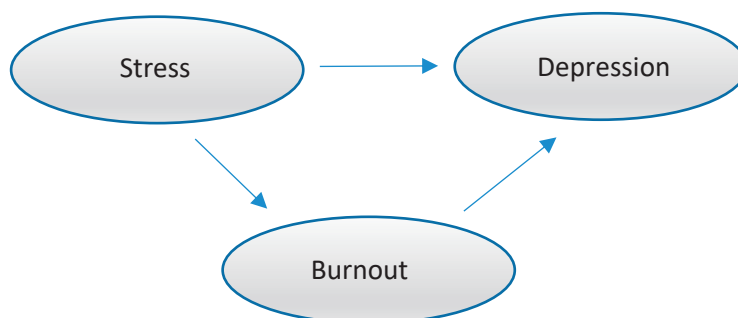
Čabarkapa (2020) points to the complexity of this syndrome and the necessary cooperation of doctors and psychologists in diagnosing it.

Freud (2013) emphasizes that we cannot explain any psychological phenomenon or illness with symptoms, as they only serve to recognize the condition, especially in situations of suppressed stress.

Dedić (2005) believes that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal achievement are the cause of burnout at work.

Cristina De Francisco et al. (2016) conducted a study in 2016 on a sample of 453 athletes from Spain on the topic: *Causes and Consequences of Burnout in Athletes: Perceived Stress and Depression*, and reached the following conclusion: "In short, studies on the origins of burnout in sports enabled the determination of burnout as a consequence of the chronic stress process. Empirically, it was also possible to establish positive relationships between depression and burnout. However, there is no literature in which these constructs are analysed together in order to establish clear relationships between them. Furthermore, there is no evidence of the form and degree of association between these variables. In this study, we hypothesize that: 1) stress has a positive effect on burnout in the context of sports, 2) burnout also has a direct effect on depression in the context of sports, and 3) stress has two types of effects on depression, one direct and the other indirect through burnout. (Figure 1 reflects the structure of the relationship between the three psychological constructs)" (p. 241).

Figure 1. *Hypothetical model*
Source: Cristina De Francisco et al. (2016, p. 241)



The relationship between stress and burnout in athletes will be further discussed in the the paper, with the aim of determining the possible conditioning, the connection between these two states of the organism that would be specific for athletes in seeking answers to what could be the most common cause of burnout and whether it can be alleviated or avoided.

METHOD

The paper used the method of induction, the descriptive method and the method of analytical reasoning.

NEED FOR AFFIRMATION

The desire for affirmation, the need to be acknowledged, accepted, praised, is something that develops from early childhood and manifests itself in different forms and dimensions. It begins with drawing the attention of the environment to us, and ends with imposing one's goals, attitudes, and aspirations.

One of the most common causes of frustration is when we fail to assert ourselves in our field of work. In sports, it is mostly related to results, winning titles, trophies, medals, etc. It often happens that burnout syndrome occurs during the preparation stage, disappointment emerges due to the absence of results, which then causes depression, demotivation and illness; the statements of the athletes, who talked about the reasons for their giving up and retiring at the peak of their careers, lead to the conclusion that stress and pressure are equally present when maintaining the achieved results.

According to Plunkett (2016), Anthony Erwin, an American swimmer, member of the US Olympic team, left the competition at the age of 35 due to burnout and became a swimming instructor. Four years later, when he saw the children he coached in the pool, he declared, "I just wanted to recapture that playfulness of being in the water. Why am I doing this? I enjoy work in itself".

Plunkett goes on to refer to Jax Mariash Koudele, who at age of 36 was on track to become the first woman to finish the gruelling Grand Slam Plus running event. Koudele said she was struggling with motivation amid her quest to win the series, stating at the time: "Someone asked me what was the hardest thing about the Grand Slam Plus Series, and I really think it's one of the hardest challenges - especially when you're trying to win everything - stay at that level of training, mentally and maintain that level of fitness for the whole year."

ENVIRONMENT DEMANDS

Galić (2006) explains the need for personality affirmation, which is closely related to integration into the micro and macro environment: "Everyday life and work of people in micro and macro teams is the only condition for the true affirmation of an integral personality, for the real manifestation of the creative qualities of most people, and full development of each social community as a whole. The very concept of integral personality gets its true meaning only in life as part of a team, where the collective and personal, joint and individual, communal and private face each other. Life in a certain collective is today the only way of life" (p. 216).

All our affirmations, but also frustrations, arise in interaction with others. In the course of one's life, a person strives to find and keep their place in both smaller and wider community. Immature personalities experience surprise and a sense of injustice when others fail to see all those things they think about themselves. Mature personalities strive to be better, to overcome the set limits, to renounce conformity for the sake of achieving results that would realistically make them stand out from others. Athletes certainly belong to the latter. Persistence, self-discipline, sacrifices are a sure path to success, but also a path to burnout.

Athletes are frequently forced to justify their investments, to return the investment by achieving certain results, which represents an additional burden and then sport ceases to be a path to self-realization and becomes a business, it comes down to the economic balance. As a rule, this leads to double burnout - on the one hand, physical effort, on the other hand, mental stress, which leads to a complete replacement of these: sport is no longer a desired activity, but a compulsive one.

DIAGNOSIS, DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS AND THERAPY

It is interesting to emphasize that most doctors and psychotherapists claim that physical activity is crucial for health in general and that it an effective stress-management tool.

So how is physical activity a predictor of burnout syndrome in athletes?

The answer lies in excessiveness, exhaustion, constant pushing of endurance limits, which in a way is expected of athletes, especially prior to a competition. When symptoms of impaired health appear such as: increased anxiety, loss of focus, hormonal imbalance, loss of appetite, loss of sleep, increased blood pressure, palpitations, headache, nausea, depression/aggression, depersonalization, alienation from family and friends, regression of thinking (paraphrenia) etc., it is very difficult to make a precise diagnosis at first, because one or more of these symptoms can be the result of different diseases, and they can also indicate the frequency of stress that leads to burnout.

As pointed out by Čabarkapa (2020): "Given the fact that the burnout problem is characterized by mostly non-specific symptoms, a comprehensive and differentiated approach is necessary when we talk about establishing a diagnosis of burnout syndrome. For the diagnostic process, medical expertise is as important as interdisciplinary

cooperation and communication between all people involved in the diagnostic process (patient, general practitioner, specialist, psychologist, etc.)”.

On the medical side, diagnosing burnout syndrome is very complex, because people with this problem usually see a doctor when any type of pain becomes chronic and cannot be treated with available drugs.

Pain is at the same time a reaction of our organism and an alarm that something is wrong. In case of physical pain, neurotransmitters accurately send feedback about the location of the pain. It is different with psychological pain. The whole organism sends signals that something is wrong and then it is the cause, not the location that needs to be looked into. The well-known proverb "A healthy mind in a healthy body" is often quoted by psychologists with the addition "and vice versa".

Adler (2020, p. 71) explains that "the mental mechanism of striving for compensation, which the mental organ uses to respond to the feeling of inferiority in order to alleviate this painful, tormenting feeling, has an analogy in organic life. It is a proven fact that vital organs, when they show weakness and impotence, if they are viable to any extent, begin to respond by an extraordinary increase in their efforts".

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALITY AND BURNOUT SYNDROME IN ATHLETES

Richard H. Cox studied personality levels in athletes and observed that burnout occurs due to membrane permeability between these levels. "Personality can be divided into three separate but interconnected levels. These are: (1) Mental cores, (2) Typical reactions (3) Role-related behaviors. The mental core of the individual preserves the idea of the personality as it is in reality. It includes self-concept. Mental core is the central part of one's personality, it includes basic attitudes, values, it is the "real self". Typical reactions are the usual way we react to situations in our environment. Role-related behaviours are the aspect of our personality closest to the surface. We engage in role-related behaviour in such a way that we adapt it to the perception of our environment" (Cox, 2005, p. 31).

Cox states that to understand the personality of athletes, we cannot rely on behaviour related to roles, but rather on typical reactions, because we find them more basic. But, reaching mental core is mostly blocked in situations of increased or frequent stress, because our organism defends itself by suppression, which Freud writes about in detail in his works. Suppression, again, accumulates stressful conditions in the deeper layers and deposits them, until the pressure on the permeable membrane, which Cox speaks of, occurs. This is the burning point and it is dangerous because the organism is no longer able to provide an adequate response.

IMPACT OF STRESS ON BURNOUT PROCESS IN SPORT

"Stress that is not adequately regulated in sports can be linked to increased anxiety and the occurrence of burnout syndrome, increased aggressiveness and violent behavior, a decrease in self-esteem and enjoyment in sports," defines Karaleić (2019, p. 122).

It is difficult to specify with certainty whether a mental state of exhaustion leads to a physical one or vice versa, but one thing is certain: a person is a unity of both and one symptom always triggers the other.

Although stress is one of the most common causes of burnout syndrome, there is a difference between stress and burnout syndrome. Stress in itself is not always unnatural, nor necessarily a harmful condition, but it even contributes in some situations to the mobilization of all our defence mechanisms.

Theresa Chyi et al. (2018) conducted a study in 2018 on the topic *Predicting Life Stress on Burnout in Athletes: Dual Role of Perceived Stress*, on a sample of 195 athletes (138 men and 57 women), recruited from two sports colleges and four universities in Taiwan: "This study demonstrated the intertwined relationships of life stressors, perceived stress, and burnout among student athletes. The negative component of perceived stress was a mediator in the relationship between stress and burnout in general and life and sport and life. On the other hand, the positive component of perceived stress played a moderating role between generations of life stress-burnout, but not in the condition of sport-specific life stress".

The authors of this study suggest that in order to promote health and reduce stress, life-management programmes for young athletes should be created and promoted.

DISCUSSION

Analysing various authors who researched the causes, symptoms and consequences of this relatively new (burnout) syndrome, we observe important aspects that indicate the complexity and connection (conditionality) of various factors that lead to burnout syndrome.

Affirmation is always related to integration into a smaller or wider community and environment, so Galić (2006) emphasizes that the very concept of integrality of personality is always related to the demands of the environment, which often lacks understanding for the individual and their needs. Athletes are role models for many, especially young people, so the expectation to maintain the unrealistic image of heroes, successful people, champions creates additional pressure.

According to Bogunović (2022), one of the possible consequences of unfulfilled expectations can further develop in the direction of thought regression (paraphrenia), and even further, such as paranoia and sensory hallucinations. This is the kind of an expression of the mental nature that was observed in unfulfilled athletes, as concluded by interactive psychoanalysts at the Institute for Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies in Novi Sad.

Accumulated, suppressed, delayed phenomena of frustration, dissatisfaction, depression, alienation, that emerge due to the highly demanding concept of discipline, renunciation, strenuous exercise (especially in the period of maturation of young people who have opted for professional rather than recreational sports), frequently lead to burnout.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has only recently included burnout syndrome in its *Disease Classification Manual*, so that from now on, healthcare professionals will be able to diagnose this disorder as a medical/health condition (Zavod za medicinu rada i sporta R. Srpske, 2021).

As Dedić (2004, p. 851) noted: "A condition similar to the phenomenon described in the professional literature was previously known as 'reaction to exhaustion'. In psychiatry, according to the *Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders* (ICD-10), this disorder is included in the diagnosis Adjustment disorders (F 43.2), which are characterized by disorders in social, work-related or academic functioning".

When stress in sports is not regulated properly and on time, Karaleić (2019) claims that, anxiety and burnout inevitably occur; that is why sport is a profession with a shorter lifespan than other professions.

CONCLUSION

Engaging in sports is certainly a way to a healthier life, especially nowadays, when a significant number of professions are increasingly linked to modern technologies that force people to work in a sedentary position in front of a computer, which affects their physical, social and mental state and health.

But sport as a profession is one of the most demanding professions that requires a lot of sacrifice, discipline, endurance, persistence, focusing on the goal, maintaining the achieved results, pushing the limits of success, but also endurance.

Most of the authors mentioned in the text are trying to find an answer to the question: What causes burnout in athletes?

Stress appears to be the most frequently mentioned reason. No matter how individual the responses to stress are, what they have in common is that stress is the "trigger" of many diseases, including burnout syndrome. Indicators of stress in athletes, such as: own ambitions, demands of the environment, self-denial, persistent and hard training, increasing competition, etc., depend on many factors and it is difficult to classify them as a general rule.

Success is the measure and result of all the efforts of an athlete. But success is a matter of the moment, while the path to success consists of renunciation, adaptation, self-discipline, persistence, etc. It should be kept in mind that any achieved result, if the cost is burnout (impairment of health), is not a success but a Pyrrhic victory.

How to act preventively to alleviate or avoid the burnout syndrome?

- Follow the signs of the organism. We notice and focus our attention on the environment and others much more easily and more often than on ourselves. Migraines, insomnia, nausea are symptoms more often caused by an internal disorder than by external factors.
- Raise awareness of suppressed defence mechanisms. For this, we usually need others (a friend, a family member, a coach, a pedagogue, a psychoanalyst).

- Conscious repressed content can also cause intense stress if we dwell on it. It is necessary to rationally analyse one's conditions and reactions, to give them the right name and significance, and to notice (find out) the causes that led to it.
- Work to eliminate the causes, not just the consequences.

In addition to coaches, sports clubs should have to have a psychologist who would monitor the mental state of each athlete and, in cooperation with the coach, adapt the requirements of professional sports to the complex personality structure of each athlete.

This kind of prevention requires the awareness of the individual, but also of the entire environment and society.

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