

# Practical ways for coaches to reduce their stress and avoid burnout

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## ABSTRACT

Stress and the potential for burnout are a very real and present concern for coaches at all levels of competition. However, while stress is ever-present, many coaches have never received education or training on how to effectively cope with experienced stress. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present practical ways for coaches to reduce stress and avoid burnout. A brief review of stress, burnout, and the stressors coaches often face are presented. This is followed by methods to help mitigate stress and avoid burnout including best practices for physical activity, meditation, connecting with mentors, connecting with family, renewal, setting limits, saying no, continuing education, and some unexpected methods to reduce stress. All coaches will experience stress, and its recognition, combined with the skills and tools needed to moderate its effects aid in longer and more successful coaching careers.

## KEYWORDS

coaching; coach; stress management; sleep; meditation; exercise

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Wake up, coach, plan training, teach, complete other assigned duties and tasks, sleep a few hours, and repeat. This, or a similar pattern, may be familiar to coaches; the grind of a daily routine without balance repeatedly exposes them to stressors that, unless moderated in some way, can lead to burnout (Pearson et al., 2020). Research in the past decade has determined burnout is more than an emotional state; it is an employee's response to job stressors. These stressors, especially through long-term exposure, result in decreased productivity, feelings of role ambiguity and conflict, job overload, and emotional exhaustion (Purvanova & Muros, 2010; Sisley, 1987; Vladut & Kallay, 2010). Therefore, if a coach is experiencing levels of stress that cannot be balanced or moderated, burnout is likely to occur.

Coaches are highly visible members of the community and often face job performance demands not found in other professions (Schroeder, 2010; Van Mullem, 2015). Winning or losing is a very visible performance indicator of success, and when com-

bined with balancing the vast array of job requirements associated with the coaching profession, creates a stressful work environment (Rundle-Thiele & Auld, 2009). Among other duties coaches may serve as a substitute parent, disciplinarian, academic tutor, tactician, mentor, and friend (Davis, 2005). Coaches can be challenged to aid transitioning young adults into a new athletic and academic environment, and perhaps even a new culture or language when working with international athletes (Baghurst et al., 2018). Coaches are also charged with creating group cohesion, a sense of purpose, and developing the life skills of their athletes (Saavedra, 2013). These are just a few of the many behaviors, skills, and characteristics expected of those in the coaching profession that must be balanced with winning.

Employment as a coach is tenuous at best, and the job expectations of the profession may lead to stress and eventually burnout (Kelley & Baghurst, 2009; Tashman et al., 2010). Stress occurs when the demands of the job or a given situation exceed perceived capabilities and resources for an individual to be successful (Hjälms et al., 2007). Extreme stress, or repeated exposure to stressors, can lead to psychological, physical, and sociological concerns that in turn lead toward burnout. For example, psychological consequences include emotional exhaustion, frustration, reduced personal accomplishment or disillusionment, and negative feelings and beliefs (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach & Jackson, 1982; Sonnentag & Jelden, 2009; Stickle & Scott, 2016). Physical ramifications such as fatigue, heart attacks, strokes, ulcers, substance abuse, and increased morbidity may also occur (Frey, 2007; Mazerolle et al., 2008). Socially, the coach may experience negative consequences such as interference with daily living, lack of a positive work-life balance, and difficulty with interpersonal relationships (Olusoga et al., 2009; Tekano et al., 2011).

Stress and burnout in coaches is well-documented throughout a variety of sports (Olusoga et al., 2019). With repeated stress, or extreme bouts of stress, and without the appropriate resources to cope with the stress, a coach may leave the profession (Anderson, 2010; Bradford & Keshock, 2009; Coy & Masterson, 2007; Kelley & Baghurst, 2009). Therefore, to battle stress, a coach must make a concerted effort to schedule time toward stress reduction and control (Stickle & Scott, 2016). The nature of the coaching profession is fluid and requires coaches to confront issues as they arise. This means taking time from a current task to battle a new crisis, whether an athlete walks into the office with a personal problem, or a contest needs to be rescheduled because of weather. Therefore, coaches must consider the time necessary to combat stress as sacred and not to be interrupted, or stress may continue to build.

Given that stress is ever-present within the coaching profession, and coaches across all demographics and experience levels report experiencing stress of different kinds (Pearson et al., 2020), it is important to consider what and how stress coping mechanisms could be adopted by coaches to help mitigate these stressors. Therefore, based on previous research and application, and presented in no specific order, we offer a variety of guidelines and suggestions that coaches can utilize to establish a personal tool kit of stress reduction techniques.

## **Exercise**

Exercise can be a valuable moderator of stress in coaching (Frey, 2007). It is interesting that very few empirical articles report coaches using exercise or physical activity

as a buffer of stress, yet exercise has been found to be very valuable in alleviating stress (Lawrence, 2005). Although age and injury may affect how much or how hard a coach exercises (Baghurst & Diehl, 2016), regular physical exercise even in the form of walking or the use of an elliptical provides physiological and psychological benefits (Michaelis, 2013).

Many sports are conducted indoors, and coaches likely spend considerable time in indoor offices. Therefore, coaches may be susceptible to a vitamin D deficiency, which has also been linked to stress levels (Lansdowne & Provost, 1998). Therefore, outdoor activity might be even more beneficial at reducing stress (Olafsdottir et al., 2017). Coaches should consider walks away from the training/competition facility, or consider engaging in low-impact outdoor activities such as yoga or tai chi.

### **Meditation**

Coaches must take time away from everyone and everything. Meditation, or the use of relaxation techniques, can be used to reduce stress. Long-term mediation has been found to improve cognitive function and improve the body's physiological relaxation as measured by heart rate and galvanic skin response (Singh et al., 2012).

If new to mediation, find a place that is comfortable and calming. An office could suffice if there are no interruptions. Listening to a guided meditation tape, soothing music, or a guided app can be helpful. Headspace is a popular app that provides a variety of relaxation exercises.

To meditate, focus on posture, being comfortable, and breathing. Losing "focus" is normal, but efforts should be made to return to the task at hand, which is to take a break from daily living and working. Mediation can help avoid "future fret" (Small & Vorgan, 2019). Meditation helps with decision making and reduces worry about an unknown future (Stahl & Goldstein, 2019).

### **Connect with a mentor**

Whether formal or informal, a mentor can help. Although not a daily activity, conversing with a mentor can help serve as a motivator and an impartial advisor (Sciarappa, 2010). In their study, Christie Jr. and Baghurst (2017) reported mentors provided assistance with personal and professional success, breaking through barriers, and assisted in developing leadership skills. Further, a strong correlation exists between those involved in a mentorship experience and a heightened sense of well-being (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). Kutsyuruba and colleagues also reported that those who did not connect with a mentor revealed a significantly lower sense of well-being.

Time is a precious commodity in the workplace (Davies, 2014). Past research specific to those employed in the field of education found striking a balance between personal and professional duties is a difficult task (Lester, 2015). However, if a mentor strongly supports a mentee's healthy work-life balance, the less likely they are to experience associated stress (Nielson et al., 2001).

It is important to recognize that mentors may also be busy and experiencing stress themselves. Therefore, be cognizant of how often and when conversations take place. Recognize that within a scale that values time, a mentor's time is more valuable than that of the mentee's. Therefore, find ways to show appreciation for the mentor giving

up that time. Sending a handwritten note of thanks or a small gift goes a long way to ensure that the value is appreciated.

One coach, cited by Baghurst (2020), summarized why finding a mentor and networking was important.

Make an honest effort in getting to know other coaches, especially those that are veterans and have been around awhile. Most coaches will be open to you and give advice and ideas. It will also help you to network and be more involved in your profession. Some of the best tips, advice, scouting reports, and practice procedures came from veteran coaches. Do not be scared or embarrassed to ask for some help (p. 544).

### **Connect with family**

The conflict between work and family directly or indirectly affects a large portion of the global population (Kossek & Lee, 2017). Even those who are single will experience stress associated with family life, as they may be sons or daughters or are part of a group of friends that functions as a family (Kossek & Lee, 2017).

Coaches are no exception to this work/family conflict. Time management is one of the most difficult challenges of a coach, and sometimes time is given to work over other commitments, which leads to stress and burnout (Pearson et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to make committed efforts to connect with family on a regular basis. Similar to connecting with a mentor, connecting with family can bring immediate improvement to mood states (Karakas et al., 2004). It may be one of the greatest joys in life and helps to build connections among and between generations toward a more shared future (Murakami & Jacobs, 2017).

Connecting deeply with a spouse, partner, family member, or friend helps to relieve stress in many ways, including sharing the challenges and burdens that might be being experienced. The feeling of profound connectedness with someone is calming (Eliuk & Chorney, 2017). So, whether face-to-face, on the phone, the computer, or by any other means, coaches should make efforts to connect regularly with family members, especially if they are those who can aid in reducing experienced stress.

### **Prioritize and set limits**

It can be easy for coaches to take on too many responsibilities (Lyst, 2019). However, it is important coaches set realistic limits of what you can accomplish (Valcour, 2016). Stress is created by expectations, whether personal or those placed on an individual by others, and is a key element in coaching stress (Radke, 2012).

Coaches should consider using day planners or task lists to get through the day. Calendar software or apps can also help to establish schedules and routines, including times for breaks (e.g., relaxation/meditation). Prioritizing tasks also assist in achieving work goals efficiently. Baghurst (2019) presented the suggestion of using the Eisenhower Box to make decisions. Decisions are assigned as *Urgent/Important* (e.g., meeting a project guideline), *Important/Not Urgent* (e.g., family time), *Not Important/Urgent* (e.g., booking a hotel), and *Not Important/Not Urgent* (e.g., using social media). Developing a plan and prioritizing accordingly will assist in time management, efficiency, and ultimately lower levels of stress.

## **Say no**

If tasks have been prioritized and limits set, saying no to extra tasks or assignments is important, especially if not part of the job description. Saying yes can come at a cost of time and additional stress. A coach may feel pressured into saying yes too frequently, especially if the coach is new to the position or is experiencing job insecurity. In addition, saying no might create feelings of worry as it pertains to a relationship with a superior, colleague, or even recruit. However, saying no is an important word to accept and use (Ury, 2007).

Practicing saying no may be of benefit. “I just can’t commit to that right now”, “I would love to help, but I have other priorities”, or “Could you ask me again in a week’s time? I am right in the middle of another project” are all example responses that could be offered. Regardless of the phrase used, learning to say no should be required of all coaches, and may be one of the most effective ways for leaders to shape their program or organization (Jamison & Neubauer, 2019).

## **Renewal**

Coaches should take time to rest and renew (Valcour, 2016). Vacation time should be used, not excused. For many coaches, this may prove difficult, especially if coaching multiple sports in a school or club setting or recruiting in the off-season. However, delegation of duties to others such as an assistant on occasion creates a time window and also provides the assistant with opportunity for growth.

Sleep is also an important component of renewal. Even a single night of sleep deprivation may result in poor decision-making and impact vigilance and motor skills (Stojanoski et al., 2019). Lastella and colleagues (2017) measured the sleep quantity and quality of a coach compared to his athletes and reported that the coach obtained less sleep with poorer quality than his athletes, markedly so before significant games. Rest and renewal serve to reduce exposure to stressors and help avoid burnout (Sonnentag & Jelden, 2009).

Spending some time on a favorite hobby can also reduce stress (Sabo, 2011). Examples of such hobbies include, but are certainly not limited to reading, listening to music, knitting, painting or other art projects, playing cards, board games or computer games, or watching a movie. Caution should be given to electronic forms of relaxation such as TV shows, movies, or computer games, as they can be addictive. For example, Carlston et al. (2006) reported online gaming as addictive as gambling; therefore, if selecting a form of relaxation that could be addictive, set boundaries and limits. Whatever activity chosen, it should bring pleasure and reduce stress.

## **Continuing education**

The more competent an individual feels about the task at hand, the lower the level of stress experienced (Aldrup et al., 2017). Therefore, coaches should seek opportunities to improve their skillset. Attending clinics, enrolling in academic programs, or even reading or watching educational content aids in developing new knowledge and ideas. Some universities offer courses online without fees, or others offer them for a more formal certificate. For example, the FSU COACH Center (n.d.) at Florida State University offers coaching certifications as well as free online educational content via YouTube ([www.youtube.com/fsucoach](http://www.youtube.com/fsucoach)). Of course, coaches must ensure that

there is sufficient time to achieve long-term educational commitments. Completing an academic credential can be stressful in and of itself (Hirsh et al., 2020); therefore, support systems should be built-in to aid in ensuring that stress levels do not exceed the resources in place to manage them.

### **Unexpected ways to alleviate stress**

A literature search of stress reduction methods for coaches revealed some unexpected methods that may or may not be beneficial based on the individual preferences of the coach. For example, research suggests that chewing gum has been found to lower stress, anxiety, and reduce fatigue (Smith et al., 2012). However, long-term chewing or chomping gum may result in jaw discomfort (Farella et al., 2001). Laughter and humor have been found to reduce stress (Yoshikawa et al., 2018), and viewing a video of a stand-up routine or reading the comics section of the newspaper will aid in relaxation and mood improvement. A final unexpected method to reduce stress is to watch fish swim in an aquarium (Cracknell et al., 2015). Viewing the animals swim, especially if the population of fish is larger, was found to increase a sense of well-being. Ultimately, there are a variety of ways to reduce stress, but each individual should find ways that work for them.

## **CONCLUSION**

The consequences of stress in the coaching profession can be severe. Stress exacts a psychological and physical toll on the body that includes a variety of personal, physical, and psychological effects (Bryant, 1992; Ferraro & Nuriddin, 2006; Khan, 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Olusoga et al., 2009; Tekano et al., 2011). Stress also adversely affects decision-making skills and quality of life (Ferraro & Nuriddin, 2006).

When, not if, a coach experiences stress, it may negatively affect work demeanor, attitude, and performance. Knowing stress exists in the coaching profession is the first step to confronting the dangers. Presented were a variety of methods to reduce levels of stress, but it should be noted that what works for each coach will differ. However, coaches should understand that all coaches will experience stress, even if the type that each might experience differs (Pearson et al., 2020). Therefore, coaches must develop stress reduction strategies that mitigate stress, or burnout will almost certainly occur.

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