

Five ways to deal with burnout using lessons from elite sport

July 27 2017, by Peter Olusoga



Job burnout: how to spot it and take action. Credit: shutterstock

It is estimated that burnout costs the global economy [£255 billion a year](#). Burnout tends to happen as a result of long-term stress in a situation or job that, for whatever reason, you're highly committed to. So the more you care about your work, the more likely you are to experience burnout.

Burnout has three major characteristics: emotional and physical

exhaustion, a cynical attitude towards people and relationships at [work](#), and a feeling that you are no longer accomplishing anything worthwhile.

While these feelings might be all too familiar to some readers, there are things you can do to deal more effectively with stress, pressure, and burnout. And in fact, a lot of valuable lessons can be learnt from the world of elite sport – where athletes are expected to perform to the best of their ability under immense pressure. But it's not just elite athletes that can teach us a thing or two about how to manage stressful situations.

Those behind the scenes in the sporting world – the coaches – often have to [deal with their own stress](#), while managing the pressures facing the athletes they work with. This can make their jobs doubly stressful as they are effectively managing and thinking about two jobs at a time.

[My research](#) focuses on the experiences of elite sports coaches who burned out to the point of wanting to quit their jobs. Here's what I discovered:

1. Know thyself

To stop burnout from happening in the first place, it's really important to understand how you normally respond to stress. Write down the things that cause negative feelings in your life, along with how you normally react to those things, and what you do to cope. If you start to notice a change in the way you're reacting to or dealing with stress – at work or at home – this might be an early warning sign of burnout.

The coaches in [our study](#) explained that it was only after they had burned out completely that they could look back and see that it wasn't the amount of stress that had changed, it was how they were dealing with it that led to burnout.

2. Don't be a hero

Our research shows that developing a "superman complex" – also known as trying to do it all – can be a major contributing factor to burnout. This can often see people trying to take on multiple roles, under great pressure, and then not asking for help.

But our research also revealed that daring to let someone in and talk about how you feel can often be the first step to recovery. Asking for help and showing a little vulnerability can be difficult, but it is actually a sign of immense strength, rather than weakness.

3. Watch your expectations

Think carefully about what you expect from yourself in all areas of your life, and make sure those expectations are realistic. The coaches in our study described having unrealistic expectations of what they should be able to handle – clearly linked to the need to be superman all the time.

Previous research also shows that a discrepancy between your "actual self" and your "ideal self" can have a [negative impact on self-esteem](#).

4. Take a little control

There are things in life, in work and at home, that we can control. There are also things we can't control. If you were to write lists for both, I'd bet that most of the [stress](#) and worry in your life comes from the list of things you can't control. So why not take a little of that energy and put it into taking back a little control?

Pick something small (drink more water, eat more fruit, walk more) and make a concerted effort to take control of that aspect of your life. Even after reaching the point of quitting, our coaches explained that taking a

little control over how they left the job was a huge step in their recovery from burnout.

5. Take breaks and be present

Booking a two week holiday in the Bahamas every time we feel stressed would certainly be nice, but it's not realistic. But we can take "breaks" simply by taking the decision to be fully immersed in our lives away from work. Admittedly, it's easier said than done, but take time at home to be fully present.

Eat dinner with your family and make a conscious decision to be fully engaged in that activity – even if you have to check your emails afterwards. According to our [research](#), building and maintaining a supportive network, and connecting with family and friends is vital to avoid [burnout](#) – so those small breaks can make a huge difference.

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