



## Hope and athlete burnout: Stress and affect as mediators



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** In this study we examined the relationship between trait hope and burnout in elite junior soccer players and whether stress and positive and negative affect mediated this relationship.

**Methods:** Participants were 238 Swedish soccer players (166 males, 71 females; one did not indicate gender) aged 15–19 years who completed questionnaires measuring trait hope, perceived stress, positive and negative affect, and athlete burnout (i.e., emotional/physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation).

**Results:** Bivariate correlations were consistent with hope theory contentions indicating significant negative relationships between hope and all three burnout dimensions. The relationship between hope and emotional/physical exhaustion was fully mediated by stress and positive affect. For sport devaluation and reduced sense of accomplishment, stress and positive affect partially mediated the relationship with hope. In contrast, negative affect did not mediate the relationship between hope and any of the burnout dimensions.

**Conclusion:** The results support earlier findings that hope is negatively related to athlete burnout. Support was also found for the hypothesis that high hope individuals would experience less stress and therefore less burnout. Promoting hope may be relevant in reducing the likelihood of this detrimental syndrome.

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Sport participation may be a highly rewarding and enriching experience for many athletes. It is also apparent that a range of negative phenomena may occur in the sport context. Among the negative occurrences which have received increasing academic interest in recent years is athlete burnout (Gustafsson, Kenttä, & Hassmén, 2011). Athletes striving for maximal performance at the elite level may be especially prone to developing burnout given the pressures and chronic stressors associated with high performance sport (Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007; Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008). Examining the correlates of athlete burnout is therefore an important task for researchers aiming to better understand burnout and its occurrence. Initial evidence suggests that helping athletes remain hopeful may be one way of reducing the likelihood of burnout and enhancing health, well-being, and performance outcomes (Gustafsson, Hassmén, & Podlog, 2010; Snyder, 2002).

### Athlete burnout

Although the prevalence is based on statistical estimations, the number of athletes suffering from athlete burnout is suggested to range from 1 to 9% (Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007). Athlete burnout is defined as a psychophysiological syndrome comprised of three dimensions; emotional/physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation (Gustafsson, Kenttä, et al., 2011; Raedeke, 1997). This conceptualization of athlete burnout is consistent with the majority of research in occupational settings (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Qualitative research in which burned-out athletes from different sports have been interviewed, support these suggested dimensions as the main components of athlete burnout (Goodger, Wolfenden, & Lavalle, 2007; Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä, & Johansson, 2008). Emotional/physical exhaustion is the stress related dimension and is considered the core dimension of athlete burnout (Gustafsson, Kenttä, et al., 2011). Without the other two dimensions however, a full understanding of the syndrome is not

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possible (Maslach et al., 2001). A reduced sense of accomplishment relates to perceptions of lower ability in executing sport skills and performance. Sport devaluation relates to perceptions of diminished interest in and a cynical attitude towards a once loved sport. Importantly, athletes must experience all three symptoms for a period of epidemiologic significance in order to be considered burned-out (Gustafsson, Kenttä, et al., 2011; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003).

From a conceptual standpoint, it is important to note that although stress may be salient in the development of burnout, the latter is a more exhaustive psychophysiological syndrome (Gustafsson, Kenttä, et al., 2011; Smith, 1986). Stress has been defined as any “environmental event which taxes or exceeds the adaptive capacity of an organism, resulting in psychological and biological changes that may place the person at risk for disease” (Cohen, Kessler, & Underwood-Gordon, 1997, p. 3). If stress accumulates and becomes chronic in nature, the individual is at risk of developing burnout (Gustafsson, Kenttä, et al., 2011). However, reducing burnout to mere stress reaction would be a simplification; burnout is more than a stress reaction, as not everyone who perceives stress burns out (Raedeke, 1997). It has been suggested that one of the key differences between stress and burnout is that stress fails to capture the relationship a person has with their job (Maslach et al., 2001), or in the case of athletes, with their sport.

Given the relevance of stress in the burnout process, it is not surprising that Smith's (1986) Cognitive-Affective Stress model has been one of the most influential in understanding the burnout phenomenon (Gustafsson, Kenttä, et al., 2011). In this model, burnout is described by a four-stage process, where stress and burnout are presented in parallel and burnout is the manifestation or consequence of stress. In stage one, demands are placed on the athlete, such as a high training load or parental pressure. The second stage involves a cognitive appraisal of the situation, whereby the athlete interprets the situation as exceeding his or her personal resources or not – that is as stressful or not. In the third stage, if the demand is interpreted as threatening or overwhelming, a physiological and affective response will occur. Finally, the physiological response will lead to behavioral consequences or coping such as decreased performance, avoidant behavior, or withdrawal from the activity. All four stages are also influenced by personality and motivational factors. There is strong support for a relationship between stress and athlete burnout (Gustafsson & Skoog, 2012; Raedeke & Smith, 2001, 2004).

Despite the evident relevance of stress to burnout occurrence, few studies have investigated stress as a mechanism in athlete burnout. Understanding the antecedent and mediating factors associated with burnout is important given past research highlighting the negative consequences of burnout. In particular, burnout has been associated with diminished motivation, reduced well-being, lowered self-esteem, and in some cases withdrawal from sport (Gustafsson et al., 2008; Lemyre, Treasure, & Roberts, 2006; Lonsdale & Hodge, 2011). In one of the few studies examining burnout mechanisms, Raedeke and Smith (2004) found stress to mediate the relationship between coping behaviors and burnout in age group swimmers. Furthermore, in support of Smith's model, research shows that negative affect was associated with higher burnout perceptions among athletes (Gustafsson, Hassmén, & Hassmén, 2011; Lemyre, Treasure & Roberts, 2006). These theoretical assumptions from Smith's model and the aforementioned research indicate that stress and negative affect are important components in the development of athlete burnout and that appraisal of the situational demands are most likely influenced by dispositions such as hope.

In line with Smith's model, motivational factors have been salient in earlier burnout research. Self-determination theory (SDT:

Ryan & Deci, 2000) and achievement goal theory (AGT: Nicholls, 1989) have guided much of the research. SDT researchers have found that burnout is associated with a motivation, that is, when one displays a lack of motivation towards a particular endeavor (e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2005). Furthermore, in SDT it is postulated that satisfaction of the three core psychological needs of relatedness, autonomy and competence is associated with well-being, whereas frustration of these needs will lead to ill-health (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the theory, competence is characterized by a sense of proficiency or effectiveness in the pursuits one engages in. Autonomy is characterized by an internal locus of causality and the perception that behaviors are self-authored or personally endorsed (Ryan & La Guardia, 2000). The construct of relatedness refers to a sense of connectedness or belonging in the social world (Wilson & Rodgers, 2007). Satisfaction of these needs has been found to be associated with lower levels of athlete burnout (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Ng, 2008; Perreault, Gaudreau, Lapointe, & Lacroix, 2007).

In AGT it is suggested that the type of goal orientation athletes' endorse will have important implications for their affect, cognitions and sport-related behaviors (Roberts, Treasure, & Conroy, 2007). In this conceptualization athletes can have two types of goal orientations – ego or task. Athletes with an ego-orientation use normative comparisons to judge their ability whereas those with a task-orientation judge their competence based on self-referenced standards or in relation to earlier performances. Furthermore, it has been asserted that the perception of the motivational environment or the motivational climate is important for achievement goals and behavior (Ames, 1992). Researchers have divided the motivational climate into two dimensions: a mastery climate where effort, learning and personal improvement is emphasized and a performance climate where the evaluation criteria are based on comparisons with others and mistakes are punished (Roberts et al., 2007). Using AGT, Lemyre et al. (2008) found that athletes with a high ego-orientation, perfectionism, low perceived ability, and a performance climate, reported significantly higher perceptions of burnout than athletes who experienced a mastery climate, were task oriented, and low in perfectionism.

### Hope theory and research

As the above discussion suggests, motivational issues surrounding burnout have been the focus of much research. An important motivational issue that has received scant attention in the burnout literature is hope. Snyder and colleagues defined hope as “a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful agency thinking (i.e., goal directed energy), and goal pathways (i.e., planning to meet goals)” (Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991, p. 287).

A fundamental tenet of hope theory is that human behavior is goal directed. In attempting to reach desired goals, agency thinking represents the motivational component of hope, that is, one's perceived ability to reach sought after goals. Pathways can be described as the perceived ability to generate viable routes to attain future goals. Hope is therefore the product of two components, namely, a person's belief that he or she has the requisite motivation and power to achieve particular goals (i.e., agency), and the ability to envisage clear pathways to attain such goals (i.e., goal pathways). In this conceptualization, the relationship between the components of hope is considered iterative, such that agency and pathway thinking enhance one another in the goal pursuit sequence; high agency will lead to more pathway thinking and vice versa (Snyder, Harris, et al., 1991). Agency has similarities with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), but there are also differences. While self efficacy is considered to be situation specific, agency can be both enduring

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