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Coach Well-Being

Every time coaches step on the field of play, whether to encourage an athlete, run a training activity or provide guidance in competition, coaches are in the spotlight. Quality coaches invest in developing the habits and learning the self-management skill of well-being to be their most effective and authentic self to best serve their athletes.

One of the saddest ironies in sport is that although coaches strive to provide an enjoyable and healthy experience for their athletes to develop and



perform optimally, too often they approach their job in a manner that has the opposite effect on their own well-being. High tension, poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, family conflict and social alienation are common in coaching. Such self-destructive behaviors are neither desirable nor sustainable, and they must be discouraged.

Serving others, as coaches do their athletes, can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Few coaches make it through a competitive season or cycle without experiencing fatigue and anxiety. Left unchecked, these feelings can drain coaches' passion and motivation. In severe cases, these problems can lead to mental health issues and dropout.

The coach is not the only one who is negatively affected when his or her well-being is compromised. The athletes' development and performance suffer, as do relationships with family and friends, sometimes irreparably.^{1,2} Yet, inexplicably, coach well-being has largely been neglected by most sport organizations.³

In making coach well-being a foundational component of its *Quality Coaching Framework 2020*, the USOPC rightly brings this factor to the forefront. The USOPC seeks to promote an environment in which coach well-being is readily identified and properly addressed. Rather than passively letting coaches succumb to the negative consequences, the USOPC is encouraging a set of proactive measures that will prevent coaches from incurring such a fate through positively influencing well-being. After all, quality coaches are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy coaches.

Stress Protection

Coaching can bring moments of great joy and fulfillment. It can also spawn serious stress, more than most coaches can handle. The first step in combatting coach stress is to identify its five primary sources (see table 6.1).

The second step in managing stress is to design strategies that help coaches effectively cope with it. The most successful approach is for coaches and leaders within the organization to develop strategies (see table 6.2) and then commit to a comprehensive stress-reduction plan. Although this plan should be tailored to the specific coaching environment, all plans should have two key aspects: (1) providing coaches guidance on how to self-manage stress and (2) having the organization focus on the infrastructure, systems and support personnel (e.g., coach developers) needed to help coaches deal with stress positively.

Support Networks

Coaches tend to prefer to work independently and address personal and professional issues without assistance from others. But just as athletes

TABLE 6.1 Five Major Sources of Coach Stress

| Stressor | Description |
|---|---|
| 1. Communication and conflict | Mismatch between coach and administrator philosophies, interference from parents, miscommunication and lack of trust among coaching staff, communication with officials |
| 2. Pressure and expectations | Pressure from self and others to meet unrealistic performance targets, being evaluated as a coach based solely on athlete results, lack of job security |
| 3. Athlete discipline and team dynamics | Lack of commitment, focus, effort and character by athletes; team cohesion issues related to role acceptance and playing time; recruiting, selecting or dropping athletes from the team |
| 4. Program support and isolation | Inadequate support for the program (recognition, funding, facilities, equipment) or personal development as a coach (no formal opportunities to learn with and from other coaches) |
| 5. Sacrificing personal time | Conflicting demands with family, strain on relationships, keeping pace with multiple roles and workload, health issues due to lack of sleep or regular physical activity |

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TABLE 6.2 Stress-Reducing and Coping Strategies

| Stressor | Coach-level strategy | Organization-level strategy |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Communication and conflict | Steps and methods for parents, athletes or other program stakeholders to share concerns | Clearly described expectations and job responsibilities shared with coaches |
| Pressure and expectations | Setting realistic athlete development and performance goals that are regularly adjusted as needed | Agreed-upon metrics for measuring coach and program success that are periodically reviewed and updated |
| Athlete discipline and team dynamics | Clear explanation of team values and athlete behavior standards; consequences for behaviors that do not align with values and standards | Efficient and quick response protocols for reporting and resolving coaching concerns with administrators |
| Program support and isolation | Regular interactions with coach mentors | Creation of coach learning and support networks—real and virtual |
| Sacrificing personal time | Daily physical activity built in to work schedule (e.g., walking or active meetings, joining athletes during physical training sessions) | Regular and frequent checks with coaches to ensure they have the tools needed to perform their best |

require a support team to excel and sustain, so do coaches. Indeed, a strong coaching network can be a great source for emotional and social support.

The best coaching networks are filled with “energy givers.” These are action-oriented peers who are positive and enthusiastic and will boost the spirits and reduce the tension of those around them. Coaches, therefore, should fill their network with colleagues who have most of the qualities listed in figure 6.1.^{4,5}

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- Exude positive energy and enthusiasm
 - Display uncommon drive
 - Work with a clear sense of purpose
 - Are service- and other-oriented
 - Hold others accountable
 - Are trustworthy
 - Known for their relationship skills
 - Offer frequent and genuine praise
 - Show humility and gratitude
 - Are good listeners
 - Open to learning from others
 - Show positive body language
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FIGURE 6.1 Checklist for identifying candidates for a coach support network.

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Although a network of energy givers providing emotional and social support can help to lower stress and heighten spirits, peers who stimulate a coach intellectually can serve to enhance coaching skill and nourish personal wellness.^{6,7} Coach developers and sport organizations can facilitate the creation and implementation of effective learning communities by

- scheduling time for regular ongoing discussions about coaching (in-person meetings at competitions, creating virtual meeting spaces, coordinating conference calls);
- assigning a coach to serve as a peer facilitator (responsible for keeping the group focused and engaged in the network) and then training that person for the role; and

- sharing the results of coach learning group discussions via social media updates, coach storytelling and reports of best principles in action in coaching newsletters and magazines.

Self-Care

Support—on organization, group and individual levels—is vital to long-term coach wellness. But no factor is more critical to coach well-being than the coach’s own commitment to self-care. Coach well-being would be much higher if the coaching community subscribed to the notion that those who are helped most are those who help themselves.

Unfortunately, too few coaches take that approach. Instead, they neglect their own needs and place personal well-being at the bottom of their list of priorities, while they work intently and tirelessly to develop their athletes and programs. They deplete their energy tanks without pausing regularly to fill them.

Coaches must be convinced of the need to monitor their personal energy gauge as they do their vehicle’s gas gauge—and to replenish it before it runs low. An incentive system that rewards coaches for conducting regular wellness checkups may be a good start. One tool that coaches can use to periodically check their health status is provided in figure 6.2.

Armed with a better awareness of the specific areas of coach wellness that need to be recalibrated, coaches—perhaps with some initial assistance from those who support them—can then focus on designing self-care strategies that address each coach’s unique wellness needs.

Work–Life Balance

Coaches are notorious for neglecting their own physical activity and sleep.⁸ The surest way to improve coach wellness is to build physical activity and good sleep habits into daily routines.

Due to their experience as athletes, coaches often equate physical activity with intense physical training. For coach wellness, though, physical activity should be thought of much more broadly. Walking the dog, yard-work and playing catch with family or friends are all examples of physical activity that help a coach stay fresh—physically and mentally.

Whether coaching young athletes in a volunteer capacity or leading a national team in an elite position, a coach never seems to have enough time for sleep. This is particularly challenging when coaches travel with their athletes for competitions, sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings and adjusting to different time zones or environments. Coaches can follow some simple tips for improving the quality of their sleep:^{9,10}

Instructions: Circle the answer that best represents how you feel right now about coaching. The higher the score, the greater the risk that a coach will succumb to stress and burnout.

| Question | Not at all how I feel | Somewhat how I feel | Exactly how I feel |
|---|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. I don't look forward to coaching as much as I used to. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. I feel physically and emotionally worn out from coaching. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. I don't feel that I can cope very well with the demands of coaching. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. I don't feel like I'm accomplishing many worthwhile things as a coach. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. Athletes and others I work with don't show the same level of commitment that I do. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6. I don't feel supported in my coaching. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. There is a lack of communication and trust where I coach. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 8. I don't feel secure in my current coaching position. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 9. I question if the amount of time and energy I spend on coaching is worth it. | 1 | 2 | 3 |

FIGURE 6.2 Coach wellness checkup.

Reprinted, by permission, from W. Gilbert, 2017, *Coaching better every season: A year-round system for athlete development and program success* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 342.

- Aim for seven to nine hours of sleep each night.
- Sleep, and wake, at approximately the same time each day.
- Develop, and adhere to, a presleep routine (how you prepare for bed each night).
- Avoid screen time in the hour before bedtime. At a minimum, use a blue light filter on electronic devices.
- Ensure that the bedroom is cool and as dark as possible. Wear an eye mask if needed.
- When possible, take a brief nap during the afternoon (no more than 30 minutes and not after 3 P.M.).
- When traveling, bring your own pillow.

The long workday of a coach often causes great strain on personal relationships. Sadly, coaches often realize too late that they have neglected to spend sufficient time with family and friends while pursuing their coaching goals. Quality coaching requires intentional efforts to prioritize family and life.⁸

Obligations beyond regular coaching duties, such as coaching clinics and camps, can mean even more time away from family and friends. This can add tension to already-strained relationships. When possible, coaches should consider some way of fitting family time around such events. This can work if, prior to the coaching event, the coach clearly communicates the responsibilities and commitments he or she will have during the event.

A simple and time-tested self-care strategy for coaches is to set aside time at the start of each day to do something for themselves.¹² Time management experts often refer to this as “starting the day on offense.” Coaches spend most of each day playing “defense”: responding to other people’s needs and problems. This can become exhausting, and it can also lead to frustration and feelings of resentment if coaches feel like they are never making progress toward their own goals.

Other proven strategies for improving coaches’ work–life balance include making priority lists and delegating some responsibilities to others. Successful coaches put first things first. The various things that we need to do and want to do—both in work and in personal life—are not equal in importance and urgency. Leadership guru Steven Covey has created a simple framework to organize tasks into one of four categories:¹³

1. **Critical and urgent:** things that are very important and that we must do now
2. **Critical but not urgent:** things that are important but can be done later without jeopardizing our ability to complete the task effectively

3. **Not critical but urgent:** things that are not that important but do need to be done soon (these are the types of things that coaches should try to delegate when possible)
4. **Not critical and not urgent:** things that we often do, or think we are expected to do, that add little or no value to our work or life (these are things we should try to eliminate or discontinue as much as possible)

Delegating some less urgent, or less critical, coaching responsibilities is a valuable way for coaches to improve their work–life balance. This makes it even more important for coaches to surround themselves with trusted assistants and supportive colleagues and friends.

Finally, the best way to increase the likelihood that coaches will embrace and achieve a healthy work–life balance is for the organizations and programs that employ them to truly support them in that effort. That means not only explicitly stipulating the need for such balance in coaches' job descriptions and expectations, but also monitoring that coaches are taking care of themselves.

CHAPTER 6 | Takeaway

Athlete development suffers when coach health and wellness are neglected. Quality coaching requires mental, emotional and physical conditioning. Coach wellness starts with an awareness of common sources of coaching stress. Armed with this knowledge, coaches can take regular steps to refresh and reload so they can be at their best more often. To stay fresh, coaches should make time each day to fill their own tanks, and they should surround themselves with others who are energy givers. With well-being included as a quality coaching principle, coaches can consistently perform at their peak while sustaining physical, mental and emotional health.