

# "I'M EXHAUSTED, AM I SHOWING SIGNS OF BURNOUT?"

BURNOUT IS WHEN A SWIMMER EXPERIENCES OVERWHELMING EXHAUSTION FROM TRAINING AND COMPETITION

Over-training, poor performance and loss of interest in swimming? You might be suffering from burnout, says **Helen Davis**

**F**or many of us our training and competition swimming programme works us hard and is tiring, but we manage and cope with the demands it presents. However, for some swimmers, intense physical and psychological demands of swimming participation come with a high cost – burnout.

## WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Sport psychologists define burnout as physical and emotional exhaustion, sport devaluation and reduced athletic accomplishment. Simply put, burnout is when a swimmer experiences overwhelming exhaustion from training and competition, resents or completely loses interest in swimming and experiences lower achievement than previously demonstrated. Burnout is a response to chronic stress of continued demands from swimming without the opportunity for physical and mental rest and recovery.

## WHY?

Burnout in swimming can occur due to various factors. A good way of looking at these is to consider internal and external factors. Internal factors might consist of perfectionism, high expectations or a loss of love for the

sport. External factors might include physical exhaustion, excessive time commitments and even injury.

Swimmers who experience internal factors might self-induce their burnout with personal motivation for success. This type of swimmer applies more personal demands on their physical conditioning and technique sessions or is fully consumed by swimming as a way to fulfil their identity as an athlete.

Swimmers who experience external factors might feel stale or overwhelmed by their circumstances. These swimmers might be encouraged by coaches, teammates or even social media to push through the symptoms of overtraining and potential burnout to continue with a demanding schedule or in order to feel part of a team or club.

## CHECK IN WITH MOTIVATION

Research with swimmers tells us that checking in with the quality of your motivation is important when it comes to burnout. Swimmers are motivated for various different reasons. Some are more intrinsically motivated, that is they participate and compete in swimming due to internal rewards. Here, swimmers engage due to a naturally occurring satisfaction from

within themselves as swimming makes them feel good, is good for them and is part of who they are. Some swimmers are more extrinsically motivated. This is where you are motivated by an external factor pushing you to do something in the hope of earning a reward, such as a medal, T-shirt, praise or by avoiding a less-than-positive outcome. Here swimmers swim because they want people to think they are good swimmers, to avoid feeling guilty about not doing it or for a prize.

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Not all swimmers will demonstrate symptoms in the same way, but look and listen for warning signs:

- Constant fatigue, lack of enthusiasm or enjoyment from training or competition
- Having a plateau in performance – strength and stamina have been lost
- Difficulty in concentrating or being forgetful, energy has decreased
- Illnesses as a result of a suppressed immune system and injury – excuses are made for poor performances
- Low self-esteem, increased anxiety and depression as a result of falling short of swimming demands.

**If someone is telling you they are concerned about how much swimming you are doing, then it's important to listen and reflect rationally on what they are saying.**

Swimmers who are at higher risk of burnout tend to be more extrinsically motivated, they have a sense that they 'have to' swim for extrinsic reasons.

## INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COPING RESOURCES

If you have warning signs of burnout, or someone has expressed their concern for you, take some time to work on internal and external coping resources. Internal resources to help swimmers deal with stress include consistent sleep patterns, manageable exercise, eating well and good time management skills. Downloading

an app for relaxation as a breathing tool can be invaluable. Strong social support is an external resource, this might consist of the presence of others whom you can rely on, who value and care for you. Take time to keep connected to others for support.

## WHAT WE KNOW

Research on burnout and swimmers tells us that swimmers with both relatively low coping behaviours and social support are more likely to experience higher burnout levels in response to stress. Swimmers report higher stress when they feel more

exhausted, value swimming less and feel like they are accomplishing less in swimming compared to those who have lower stress 🧘

Helen Davis is a swimmer and sport psychology consultant who works with individuals, teams and coaches on their sporting performance. Each month, Helen will suggest psychological techniques to help overcome difficult open water swimming scenarios. [www.thinkbelieveperform.co.uk](http://www.thinkbelieveperform.co.uk) @helenDav2245

