

OVERTRAINING IN EXERCISERS IS MORE COMMON THAN YOU THINK. LEARN HOW TO SPOT THE SIGNS.

Many individuals have trouble with client motivation and getting their clients to train at an effective level to produce the results they crave, but there is an increasingly larger group of exercisers who suffer from overtraining and suffer the negative psychological and behavioural consequences of this.

There is a lot of ambiguity over the definition of overtraining but the U.S. Olympic Committee defined overtraining as “a syndrome that results when excessive, usually physical, overload on an athlete occurs without adequate rest”. The result of prolonged overtraining is often “athlete burnout”, a phrase that is commonly referred to in the media. Burnout has been defined as “ a psychological, emotional, and physical withdrawal from a formerly pursued and enjoyable activity as a result of chronic stress”. So if you have a client who is overtraining the end result is usually psychologically very unpleasant. Overtraining is most common in endurance athletes eg. long distance runners etc.

As a professional in the fitness industry you need to be aware of the potential signs and symptoms of overtraining; it would be unfortunate if you were unable to recognise this until late on when the client is physically and psychologically “breaking down”.

Many symptoms have been proposed to that are associated with overtraining. Fry et al. (1991) divided the symptoms into 4 homogenous categories;

- Psychological
- Physiological
- Biochemical
- Immunological

The rate of physical complaints rises with increased training loads, as do objective clinical problems such as injury and infection. Typical clinical symptoms and findings include:

Underperformance

Decrease in maximum performance

Increased perceptions of perceived exertion

Time to exhaustion during constant load test decreased

Mood and Psychological Parameters

Fatigue

Mood disturbance
Drowsiness/lethargy
Loss of appetite
Palpitations
Sweating
Disturbed sleep patterns

Muscle Findings

Muscle weakness
Muscle stiffness, and stiffness

Cardiovascular Findings

Increased or decreased heart rate during exercise
Decreased heart rate variability

Others

Increased rate of infection
Weight loss
Anorexia
Ammenorhea, decreased sexual function

Kellmann (2002) produced the Recovery-Stress Questionnaire for Athletes (REST-Q) to help monitor an exercisers' ability to cope with overtraining, and the incident of symptoms of the disorder. The test consists of 7 stress scales, and 5 recovery scales. The test should be given to exercisers during periods of their training when the intensity of training has been increased. If the client begins to suffer from overtraining then their stress scores will increase and their recovery scores will decrease as the impact of prolonged intense workloads increases. If you are able to integrate the areas that are identified in the REST-Q then you will be able to notice whether your client is suffering from this.

The scales are:

General stress
Emotional stress
Social stress
Conflict
Fatigue
Lack of energy

Physical complaints
Success
Social recovery
Physical recovery
General well-being
Sleep quality
Disturbed breaks
Burnout/emotional exhaustion
Fitness/injury
Fitness/being in shape
Burnout/personal accomplishment
Self-efficacy
Self-regulation

Though there is not enough space in this email to expand on these if you get in contact I will send you a copy of the test so you can see in more detail the areas that should “red flag” potential warning signs in your clients. I hope this has increased your awareness of a really important issue, though often under-recognised, in the fitness industry.