

It pays to know the signs of hockey burnout



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

Shaunna Taylor

“I feel like I want to quit.” “I just don’t love hockey anymore. In fact, I can’t stand it.” “I have no desire to go to practice or

games.” “The only reason I’m still playing is because my parents say I have to.”

If any of these statements sound familiar a member of your family may be undergoing sport burnout.

Sport burnout can occur in hard-working and driven individuals who become mentally, emotionally or physically exhausted. There are many different reasons why it happens and many different ways burnout is seen in their thoughts and behaviour.

Some common sources among hockey players are:

- They’ve been under intense and constant pressure for a long period of time, beyond what they are personally able to cope with.
- They have trouble saying ‘no’ to excessive demands or additional responsibilities beyond what they can handle in a healthy way.
- They have little to no balance in their life because almost all activity, thought, social life revolves around a central activity such as hockey.
- They have been playing without adequate support or healthy communication channels for a long time (they don’t talk to anyone about their true feelings and thoughts and are now ready to explode).
- They have been subjected to long-term verbal or emotional abuse (in extreme cases) and fed a steady diet of criticism and disapproval.

There is also a more specific type of physical burnout that results primarily from physical sources of overtraining, inadequate rest and malnutrition. An athlete will not burn out suddenly and one day wake up and think: “I just can’t take this anymore.” It occurs gradually.

For players, parents and coaches, here are some of the common warning signs to look for in the case of physical burnout:

- more frequent viral infections;
- intense and persistent fatigue;
- immune system breakdown;
- frequent or chronic pain and injury;

If mental burnout is a concern, look for these symptoms:

- increasing feelings of failure and negativity;
- detachment from relationships in and out of sport;
- very low or complete lack of motivation or drive;
- loss of a sense of purpose and mental energy;

- feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to handle commitments.

If you fear that you or someone you care about is in danger of experiencing hockey burnout, you are not alone. Hockey is like a religion in Canada, it is woven into the fabric of many families and communities across the country.

For this reason and many others, athletes may feel guilty or unable to talk to others about their negative feelings. Hockey is supposed to be fun, and playing is supposed to be challenging and rewarding. But when this ceases to be true a player can feel overwhelmed and not sure whom to turn to.

More coaches and parents need to start waking up and applying these safeguards. I see too many young players in my office who once had promising futures, but were pushed too hard and too soon and can no longer stand the game they once loved.

There are many ways to avoid this situation.

Re-evaluate the player’s goals and if necessary, re-prioritize them because families often lose sight of what a child wants: does Dad want his son to play summer hockey, but does son want to golf, play lacrosse or go fishing with dad this summer? Expose them to other sports and hobbies for a mental and physical break from the monotony and danger of over-training in one sport.

Make sure they have the opportunities and outlets to discuss other things that are important to them; find a way to balance education – if that means extra enrichment, tutoring, cutting back on training in order to catch up on homework or to raise grades, make a commitment to get creative and do it!

The odds are not in the player’s favour that hockey will pay their bills one day. Odds are 100 per cent that a good education will.

Learn to say “no” when commitments become overwhelming and there is little or no free time in a young person’s life. Parents today often over-schedule their kids, and this means no time to recharge batteries, to use their imaginations, to learn new skills or discover other gifts!

Remember the well-balanced approach to health – adequate rest, moderation in training and exercise, proper nutrition, and positive relationships with others. Do you or your family need to re-balance in one or all of these areas?

Hockey is a wonderful sport with a rich history and potential for teaching great life skills but overdoing it and obsession can lead to burnout and a loss of love for the game. Keep your eyes and ears open, and speak up if you need help or support from others to get you through.

Shaunna Taylor is the sport psychology consultant at the Ottawa High Performance Centre (www.ohpc.ca)

Reprinted with permission from the February, 2007 issue of *Centre Ice*.