

An Integral Approach to Overtraining

Essentially the study of overtraining has been partialized and fragmented due to different schools of thought attempting to describe and study it from their own lenses. This has given a “broken” picture of the phenomenon and left researchers and scientists less capable of finding efficient strategies to deal with it. I will attempt to briefly exemplify the consequences that a fragmented approach can have.

Let's suppose that a young athlete is suffering from a great deal of pressure coming from his father. This can be expressed from continuous negative comments regarding his performance and efforts in training and competition, which create high levels of anxiety that have by now become chronic. As such, each time he goes into competition he complains of feeling his body so tense that it feels like he has no energy to perform. More, he also fears his opponents greatly, which contribute to his high discomfort and lack of enjoyment for his sport. The most objective and observable result of these dynamics is that this athlete's performance is impaired, i.e. he has had a significant decrement in performance for the last 6 months and even though he is training he does not manage to perform well. He complains of being very tired frequently and not recovering quickly, and the coach has seen that he often has infections like colds, tonsillitis and a sore throat.

The common approach sports science (specifically sports physiology) takes is to collect a series of bodily measures like resting heart rates, immune and hormonal parameters, cardiovascular function, performance, training load and more. This perspective, even though valuable only tells us what is happening in the athlete's body and performance, and cannot provide any insight into what the athlete is experiencing emotionally, how he perceives his sport and competition, what is happening in the parental-child dynamics, including how he feels supported and how his father communicates with him.

This is what is meant with a perspective that even though valuable is partial since it considers an isolated aspect of reality, i.e. the exterior of an individual. Sports physiologists have however held to this perspective

as the “holy grail” of sports science and the solution to any sport-related problem.

Sports psychologists would likely look into the athlete's level of anxiety and rightfully verify that they are very high. This would lead them to use certain psychological training skills (i.e. imagery, goal setting, relaxation techniques, cognitive re-structuring and more) and aim to decrease the anxiety levels the athlete is under and his stress/competition coping mechanisms. Once more, this perspective even though very important is partial since it now gives us an insight into the athlete's interiors from which we understand that he suffers from anxiety. It however tells us nothing about his immune system and metabolism as a response to training and competition, or how much the athlete is training.

Both perspectives are important since they are irreducible aspects of the same phenomenon with the difference that one deals with exterior, objective aspects of reality of the athlete and the other with interior, subjective aspects of the same individual. When considering either perspectives individually or even together they still miss out crucial aspects of reality that are related with a collective phenomenon, in this case the family dynamics that seem to be an essential problem that needs dealing with urgently, i.e. the interior not of an individual but its collective. Sports sociology is able to give us insight into these dynamics, which is positive and can lead to a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

Now, so will this perspective be ineffective if the previous two are “forgotten” and left aside. If one, can bring these 3 main perspectives together, the picture that can be described of this athlete who is suffering from overtraining is suddenly a much clearer one.

Finally, the last perspective to be taken into account relates to the exterior aspects of the collective, which in this case mean anything that relates to the systemic aspects of reality that influence the athlete's life and relationship to overtraining. For example, this athlete has to travel every day for 40 minutes on the car to get to his training venue and then back home. The facilities in which he trains lack a good conditions, with drafts in corridors, cold water of the swimming pool and no hot water showers available for after the training sessions.

This creates an added fatigue, discomfort and stress on the swimmer that does not come directly from training and also impacts the time he arrives home in the evening and all the activities he still needs to undergo, e.g. eat dinner, study for school and sleep. Further, in the case the athlete's family struggles with finances the amount of expenses that go into car fuel are a motive of stress for the father, which leaves him even more angry when his son doesn't perform well: "I am spending all this money for you and you can't even perform well!".

An integral approach to overtraining will therefore attempt to consider these 4 main perspectives together and investigate the possible sources of stress for the athlete. Hopefully the reader can now understand that dealing with this situation by measuring body parameters, advising rest and decreasing training load (classical approach to recovering athletes from overtraining in sports science) for as necessary as it may be, it is not going to improve the athlete's chronic anxiety levels or how the parents communicate with the child and therefore, the problem will essentially remain. The athlete will still be scared of not performing well since he is desperate to please his parents and make them feel proud of him.

[An integral recovery into overtraining](#)

In my view the best approach to help an athlete recovery from overtraining is by addressing the 4 main perspectives that were spoken above. Like this, all important areas that together contribute to the development of overtraining can be tackled. It may be that this athlete does require a decrement in the amount of training he is doing and the amount of competition he enters, as he is clearly very physically tired as demonstrated by his depressed immune function, disturbed sleep, lack of recovery, chronic fatigue levels, elevated resting heart rate, etc.

It is also likely that he needs emotional support coming from his coach but importantly, his parents. Further, it seems crucial to improve the way the father communicates with his son and help him see that he is actually trying to feel good and successful with himself through his son's own success and that this is resulting in a huge amount of pressures to the son.

Issues that relate to the family's financial problems, lack of proper facilities in the swimming pool can also be dealt with by working



together with coach and parents to try and alleviate these problems, although this is a lot more complex to solve.

Nuno Matos, PhD, Master Integral Coach™