Imagining three certified athletic trainers talking at their conference basketball tournament. Conversation logically turns to how the season is going. They compare notes on injuries, coaches, students, and... levels of burnout. This scenario is played out hundreds of times around the country each year. It seems that whenever athletic trainers gather, the topic of burnout comes up. Everyone has experienced burnout, knows a colleague who has it, or even knows someone who has left the profession because of it. When the topic of burnout arises, most athletic trainers have an opinion about it or an experience with it, yet most cannot provide a cogent definition of it. The purpose of this article is to review burnout as it relates to the profession of athletic training.

Burnout has been described and studied since the mid-1970s. Early research on burnout focused on mental-health-care providers and individuals who were employed in “helping professions” such as teaching and social work. Current research on burnout spans nearly every profession, from medicine to coaching to business. The picture of burnout that arises from the research is that of a multidimensional syndrome characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Burnout usually has a slow onset and is typically a reaction to job-related stress. Individuals who are burned out describe loss of motivation and a sense of emotional depletion. Burnout is a three-stage process: It begins with high and sustained levels of job stress; progresses to emotional exhaustion, irritability, and a defensive reaction of detachment, cynicism, and apathy; and culminates in a decreased sense of personal accomplishment.

### Sources of Job Stress

Job stress for athletic trainers might have a cyclical nature. For athletic trainers in the traditional setting, the weeks when there is overlap of the end of one season and the beginning of the next can be very hectic and stressful. Other sources of job stress for athletic trainers include difficult workloads with multiple job demands including health care, teaching, and administration; long work hours; limited personnel and financial resources to provide appropriate care; emotional demands of patients and other stakeholders (coaches, families); and conflict with colleagues and administration. Finally, job stress and burnout can be exacerbated if athletic trainers do not feel that their work efforts are recognized, appreciated, and appropriately rewarded.

As job stress mounts, what began as important, challenging, and meaningful work becomes unfulfilling drudgery.
Perception of job stress is unique to each individual and each organization. Stress occurs when the demands of a situation are greater than the individual's ability to cope with and adapt to them. More experienced athletic trainers might describe less job stress as a result of having coped with similar situations in the past. Individuals who have greater emotional involvement in work are more likely to experience increased job stress and burnout. Furthermore, the social support available in an organization can affect job stress and burnout. If there is little sense of community in the organization or the athletic training staff is isolated from the rest of the group, athletic trainers will experience greater stress. Job stress will increase if the athletic trainers feel that their values are at odds with the values of the group; for instance, they feel it is in a patient's best interest to limit activity while the coach is pushing for the patient to return to play. When athletic trainers have positive relationships with administrators and colleagues and are able to have some level of control over their work hours and the allocation of resources, job stress and burnout diminish.

**Burnout Signs and Symptoms**

When job stress becomes overwhelming, athletic trainers might succumb to the next stage of burnout. This stage includes emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Emotional exhaustion is described as feeling emotionally overextended and depleted of emotional resources. Athletic trainers who are emotionally exhausted are likely to feel fatigued and be irritable. Detachment and cynicism are strategies used to cope with stress and emotional exhaustion. These strategies cause athletic trainers to depersonalize or even dehumanize the patients for whom they care. In this stage, athletic trainers often treat patients strictly “by the book” rather than individualizing treatment protocols, which is not an optimal approach to patient care.

As burnout progresses, athletic trainers experience a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. They might feel inadequate or incompetent, worry excessively, and withdraw. Productivity and pride in work decrease. If the burnout process is not reversed and the sources of stress alleviated, the results are dismal. Burnout can result in one remaining in the position but being ineffective or not functioning well, seeking another position, or leaving the profession.

Although burnout is related to job stress, there are some physical and behavioral signs that should be noted that can lead to confusion regarding the condition that is afflicting the athletic trainer. The sidebar below lists the signs and symptoms presented frequently in those suffering from burnout. Burnout can also cause individuals to act in a negative or hostile fashion in most interpersonal interactions. Although burnout is not considered life threatening, some research has linked it to heart attack.

When athletic trainers discuss their feelings of emotional exhaustion and cynicism with friends and family, it is often assumed that they suffer from chronic fatigue syndrome or even posttraumatic stress disorder. More frequently, however, depression is believed to be the cause of their symptoms. Research has clearly demonstrated that burnout and depression, although related, are unique. Burnout has specific work-related causes and symptoms unlike the multifaceted physiological and biological symptoms associated with depression. The layperson does not understand the complexities of burnout in this health-care profession. Furthermore, when athletic trainers experience burnout, they might conclude that they are not satisfied with their particular job or that they no longer enjoy the profession. If the sources of job stress can be reduced, enjoyment of the job usually returns.

The picture that arises of burned-out athletic trainers is one of professionals who have worked long hours with large patient loads. They feel that there are insufficient staff and financial support to provide proper care for their patients. They might have conflicts with other people in the organization, and they feel that

### Signs and Symptoms of Burnout

- Chronic fatigue
- Insomnia
- Increased absenteeism
- Musculoskeletal aches and pains
- Migraines
- Digestive problems
- Recurrent bouts with colds and flu
- Loss of compassion and empathy toward patients, family members, coworkers, and friends
- Frequently bored
their values are in opposition to those of powerful individuals within the organization. They usually feel that they have little control over their schedules and the allocation of resources and that they are poorly compensated for their work. Patient care provided by burned-out athletic trainers is perfunctory. They perform necessary tasks but do not look for additional avenues of treatment or rehabilitation. They spend as little time as possible with each patient and might even refer to a patient as, for example, “the ankle injury.” They often begin to make minor mistakes or forget appointments, have difficulty unwinding at the end of the day, and might even look to alcohol or drugs for escape from stress. Burned-out athletic trainers are often cynical or sarcastic during conversation and often avoid social gatherings like staff lunches in the workplace. They usually feel that the work they are doing is not worthy of recognition.

Strategies for Preventing Burnout

Although this description of burned-out athletic trainers is disheartening, there are strategies that can address burnout. It is critical to note that burnout is not the result of flawed character, behavior, or drive. It is the result of job stress and a flawed work environment. In order to reduce burnout, the work setting must be analyzed. Athletic trainers must be willing to discuss burnout with their supervisors and make suggestions about ways to improve the situation. First, they should take care of their own health by eating properly, getting sufficient sleep, and participating in routine exercise. Second, they should spend more time with patients and less time on paperwork—delegate paperwork to clerical staff, because most athletic trainers regain a sense of personal accomplishment from working with patients. Next, find some time each day to laugh and have fun. Finally, learn to say no. Committees and noncritical projects add to workload and job stress unnecessarily.

Conclusion

Burnout is a serious problem in today’s work world. The increasing demands placed on athletic trainers by employers, as well as increasing emphasis on higher professional standards, cause heightened levels of job stress. Recognizing the causes of burnout and knowing a few things about how to remedy those causes can help athletic trainers maintain a positive attitude and continue to love the work that they do.

References