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High Performance Living Handout

From the field, to the office and to the home:

Ideas on achieving work-life balance

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This handout is a summary of presentation given by Drs John and Megan Best to corporate groups of varying sizes. Working with elite athletes the parallels between their lifestyle and the busy corporate lifestyle are striking.

Background

Busy professional lives take their toll. In fact, it is unusual to find an individual who functions well at home and work on a consistent basis. Elite athletes who function at high performance levels face similar challenges with demanding work schedules (training and competing), unusual working hours, travel and unexpected challenges along the way. There are highs and lows and seemingly no “middle ground” where you can have a break. This high performance living can feel out of control.

This session covers information, which includes a literature review of data in the areas of overtraining and burnout in sport (particularly Rugby Union), the parallels with professional work loads and a model for considering intervention to improve one's ability to control what seems to be out of control situations.

Aims

- Examine the impact of high performance expectations on the individual
- Consider the impact of high performance culture at work and at home, and
- Offer practice advice for developing the skills needed to function at a high-performance level

High performance, athleticism and work

A ‘high performance’ culture may be defined as an environment where striving for success is achieved through a powerful work ethic, utilising gifts to fulfil their potential, eliminating weaknesses and avoiding the acceptance of mediocrity.

The motivating factors to live in this way are varied and may be dependent on an individual's stage in life. Personal relationships, status, excitement, wealth and possessions are the common motivating factors. Not surprisingly these

same factors influence our core values – what drive us and makes us tick (Loehr and Schwartz 2001).

A situation where the important and motivating factors are not satisfied, combined with a demanding work schedule, may lead to a clinical syndrome identical to what is seen in athletes. Overtraining Syndrome or ‘Burnout’.

Overtraining syndrome (OTS) / burnout

This may be defined as “a reduction in performance not attributed to other medical causes” (Uusitalo 2002).

This should not be confused with the very normal periods of fatigue we feel after having a busy few days/weeks. In the latter we may bounce back after good sleep and simple rest and relaxation (Budgett 2001) .

OTS causes the negative situation of ongoing fatigue; poor sleep quality, irritability, increased susceptibility for infections, demotivation and sense that we are just not doing things well. OTS symptoms will vary and mimic conditions such as depression and chronic fatigue. Indeed it may be a precursor for depression (Hartmann 2001).

Overtraining syndrome / burnout and work

The parallels between high performance living between professional athletes and working professionals are striking. The difference in the understanding of the problem may be due to inadequate data.

Athletes always measure themselves and their schedules are mapped out and carefully planned. They may “periodise” their regime, that is identify periods of time when they have to be 100% (eg Olympics, World Championships) and accept that these are times where overloading and inadequate recovery is dangerous.

We often don’t translate these measures to work.

Positive indices such as profit and new clients may be used, although the more negative indices such as sick leave, stress leave and professional complaints may offer a more significant reflection of performance.

A certain fact is that once OTS is present, the recovery time is long and often complicated. Possibly up to 2 years, with much heartache along the way.

Monitoring and identifying “Red Flags” for OTS / Burnout

The circumstance of a constant heavy work schedule, inadequate periods of restoration and dissatisfaction in the area of core values take their toll over a period of time. This would be months or even years.

A key though is to identify the problems as early as possible, and to institute preventative measures for short, medium and long terms. Having “**red flags**” in place may identify these problems.

This process is known as monitoring. Monitoring is a measuring system and it may be **objective or subjective**. In athletes objective monitoring is often done through fitness testing, blood, saliva or urine testing (Best 2001). **Objective measurements** have the advantage of not being coloured by the current emotional state.

Subjective measurement has been found to be increasingly effective. The individual, at regular intervals, will score himself on parameters such as sleep quality, stress levels, irritability, mood state, fatigue levels, work performance or libido.

To be effective this is done on a regular basis. Although athletes may do the twice per week (some diarise subjective measurements daily) and high performance professional would obtaining good information if it were to be done regularly, for example, each 2-4 weeks. This should be done at the same time See Figure 1.

The recording of negative scores, in comparison to what is normal for you, may be identifying “red flags”. This is a good time to consider intervention in the form of recovery and restoration strategies (eg sleep, vacation, leisure).

Figure 1: Self-rating questionnaire

Parameter	1	2	3	4	5
Sleep Quality	Lousy		Not too bad		Perfect
Perceived Stress	Always Stressed		Normal Level		No problems coping
Mood	Very Flat		Appropriate		Cheerful
Fatigue	Always Tired		Bounce Back Well		Lots of Energy
Work Performance	Struggling Badly		Getting Through		Very Satisfied
Irritability	Regularly Irritated		Usual Level		Not Easily Irritated

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High performance in the home

Even when other areas of your life are going well, if our important relationships are suffering, life will not be enjoyable.

Work stress may place pressure on relationships, but our research has shown that many problems are avoidable (Best 2000).

The presentation explains strategies, which have been effective.

The main points are:

- Spend time with your important relationships, work on communication even if it's just to explain that you're stressed
- The spouse in the non-work-stress situation may experience stresses of a different sort which need to be recognized
- Organise home when you organise work. Parenting is stressful at the best of times. It helps to have a systematic approach
- Keep fit. Coping mechanisms are enhanced through improved health and fitness.

Sleep

The health benefits of sleep are becoming more impressive through quality research and the development of "sleep medicine" as a medical specialty.

To enjoy the restorative phases of sleep requires sleeping for lengthy periods without interruption (the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends 8hrs for males and 10hours for females!).

Sleep deprivation has negative consequences including concentration difficulty, altered mood and reduced immune function.

The presentation will expand on techniques to improve sleep quality including:

- Understanding and improving sleep hygiene – "pre-sleep ritual"
- Creating an environment for good sleep – dark, 21°C, quiet, familiar environment
- Dietary factors – avoiding fatty foods, caffeine, high sugars, large quantities of alcohol. Higher protein evening meals, herbal teas and other measures to enhance relaxation are helpful.
- Exercise – early morning and late afternoon medium intensity is best (see below)

Exercise

The extensive health benefits of exercise are both physical and psychological (Mayo Clinic Foundation 2004). Even in a mentally fatigued state, low to medium intensity exercise (30 mins per day which can be in 1-3 bouts) produces benefits.

The intensity is measured against an individual's maximal heart rate. Although athletes use heart rate monitors, volitional fatigue is accurate. The maximal level for cardiovascular benefit is at 65% of ones maximal heart rate – at that level, one is able to say a sentence (eg 'I am John Best from Sydney.').

This could be achieved with brisk walking (jogging if fitter), cycling, tennis, swimming, paddling, dancing, circuit classes, some forms of yoga and vigorous gardening.

Summary

“High Performance Living” at work and at home places unique stresses on the individual, similar to an elite athlete.

Accepting that certain core values will motivate us and satisfy and acknowledging that we have a limit is realistic position.

The development of an overtraining/burnout syndrome may occur if these factors are ignored.

The following steps may act a regular “check-list”:

- Identify what is important to you
- Do at least one thing for pleasure
- Assess your sleep quality
- Identify your “red flags” - consider self monitoring
- Intervene when your red flags appear