

Psychological well-being in performance coaches: a theoretical perspective

JAMIE L TAIT¹, PETER KREMER², FRASER CARSON³, JULIA WALSH⁴, LUANA C MAIN⁵

^{1,2} Deakin University, Centre for Sport Research, School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Geelong, Victoria, AUSTRALIA

³ LUNEX International University of Health, Exercise and Sports, Differdange, LUXEMBOURG

⁴ La Trobe Sport and Exercise Medicine Research Centre, School of Allied Health, Human Services and Sport, La Trobe University, Melbourne, AUSTRALIA

⁵ Deakin University, Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Geelong, Victoria, AUSTRALIA

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Abstract:

Problem Statement: Sports coaches work in uncontrollable, complex, and ever-changing environments that exert numerous demands, which together can affect psychological well-being. The stressors faced by sport coaches at varying competitive levels, and the coping methods they employ to mitigate these stressors have received considerable attention in the literature. However, factors contributing to psychological well-being, scaffolded by theoretical models, have not been fully elucidated. **Purpose:** The purpose of this narrative review was to outline and discuss the main theoretical models that have been used to assess psychological well-being in sport coaches. **Approach:** Included studies were original research using theoretical models to assess psychological well-being in sport coaches of mixed competitive backgrounds. A major focus of this review was studies involving 'self-determination theory', published to July 2020. **Results:** Reviewed studies revealed that basic psychological needs satisfaction, lack of basic psychological needs thwarting and self-determined motivation, contribute to higher levels of psychological well-being in sport coaches. Working conditions, workload and social agents within the coaching environment also play pivotal roles in influencing a coach's psychological well-being. **Conclusions:** Supporting the psychological needs of coaches and instilling feelings of personal accomplishment is therefore a priority in maintaining high levels of psychological well-being and decreasing susceptibility to burnout, while ultimately preserving coach performance and retention. To better understand coach well-being, a clearer distinction of well-being at distinct levels of competition and experience is required, along with further investigation of well-being in female sport coaches, and the development of broader conceptual theory.

Key Words: Coaching, self-determination theory, basic psychological needs, stressors, motivation

Introduction

Sports coaches work in complex, uncontrollable, and ever-changing environments that exert numerous pressures and demands. They are tasked with optimising the performance and participation of their athletes, whilst also providing positive experiences that lead to athlete development (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Regardless of competition level, coaches experience context-specific challenges that impact their performance, job satisfaction, and mental and physical well-being (Norris, Didymus, & Kaiseler, 2017). In higher levels of coaching, job pressures are increased in the pursuit for a competitive edge, as coaches are required to invest significant time and resources (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). These demands can be compounded by the need to satisfy multiple roles that are burdened by expectations from the public and media. However, lower level coaches (e.g., community, recreational) also face challenges, typically related to meeting the psychosocial needs of athletes and maintaining their sport participation (Kelly, Thelwell, Barker, & Harwood, 2018).

Definitions of psychological and/or subjective well-being are inconsistent in the literature, focusing on dimensions of well-being (e.g., positive feelings or positive functions), and regarding aspects of well-being as extreme end points on a singular continuum (e.g., positive and negative affect) (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012). Subjective well-being has been defined as an optimal psychological state of human flourishing, comprised of emotional (e.g., feeling satisfied), psychological (e.g., feeling competent and autonomous) and social well-being [e.g., feeling connected to others (Keyes, 2002)]. A proposed model of psychological well-being includes dimensions such as self-acceptance, positive relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). The maintenance of optimal psychological well-being has important implications for sport coaches, with poorer levels associated with diminished job performance and

decreased ability to handle challenges over the course of a career (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Frey, 2007). Moreover, a coach's psychological well-being can affect the well-being, performance and participation of their athletes (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Thelwell, Wagstaff, Rayner, Chapman, & Barker, 2017). Despite this research, a more in-depth overview of the job-related and personal elements contributing to psychological well-being in sport coaches is necessary, in order to better understand coaches' experiences, which may inform the prescription of evidence-based recommendations for stress management, and ultimately enhance coach and athlete performance (Didymus, 2017).

There has arguably been more research interest in the stressors faced by sport coaches at varying competitive levels, and the coping methods they employ to mitigate these stressors, when compared to investigations into the factors contributing to psychological well-being (Fletcher & Scott, 2010; McNeill, Durand-Bush, & Lemyre, 2019; Norris et al., 2017). The factors contributing to psychological well-being have also been incompletely described. In state and national level coaches, psychological well-being has been shown to be poorer in both younger, and male coaches (Carson, Malakellis, Walsh, Main, & Kremer, 2019), which may relate to adaptive coping strategies and positive self-regulation of emotions in female coaches (Carson et al., 2019; Kentta, Bentzen, Dieffenbach, & Olusoga, 2020). Further, coaches who successfully manage their workload and have greater control over workplace decisions, have reported higher levels of psychological well-being (Carson et al., 2019). Levels of psychological well-being may not differ between coaches from different performance levels (McNeill, Durand-Bush, & Lemyre, 2017). A review by Norris and colleagues (Norris et al., 2017) focused on well-being and stressors in coaches, but did not explicitly outline the key theoretical models, or the factors within these models. This information is important for identifying the positive and negative elements inherent within sport coaching that affect coach psychological well-being, their job performance, and their interpersonal relationships with athletes. The 'self-determination theory' [SDT; (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000)] is a social-cognitive theory that aims to highlight the factors that motivate certain behaviours. According to SDT, when individuals engage in activities for autonomous reasons, there is greater probability that they will experience enhanced well-being. This model has received considerable interest in the sport coaching literature, for its ability to highlight associations between motivating factors related to the role of sport coaching (e.g., autonomy, perceived support, team environment) and their psychological well-being. However, the collective factors that underpin greater psychological well-being in sport coaching are yet to be identified or reviewed. Therefore, the purpose of this narrative review is to outline and discuss the factors within theoretical models that contribute to psychological well-being in sport coaches of all competitive levels, with a major focus on original research involving 'self-determination theory' (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000). This review includes studies published between April 2011 - July 2020. An exhaustive outline of the occupational stressors experienced by coaches and the subsequent coping mechanisms will not be a focus, but given their importance in moderating psychological well-being, an up-to-date overview of the stressors experienced by coaches will be briefly presented. Last, this review will consider practical implications and areas for further research.

Factors that affect coach psychological well-being

A brief overview of the stressors that influence psychological well-being within the coaching role is valuable for a broader understanding of the factors that have been assessed within theoretical models. In the workplace, a stressful response is contended to emerge when an individual is presented with excessive work demands and pressures that are not matched by their knowledge and abilities and are appraised as a challenge or threat (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). These environmental demands and the emotional responses of an individual to these demands, need to be balanced by appropriate coping strategies and personal resources (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006), for sustained psychological well-being and/or job performance (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). The stress experienced by sport coaches has most commonly been examined via theoretical models including the meta-model of stress, emotions, and performance (Fletcher & Fletcher, 2005; Fletcher, Hanton, Mellalieu, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2008), transactional stress theory (Lazarus, 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), the cognitive-affective model of stress and burnout (Smith, 1986), and a model of coach stress and burnout (Kelley, 1994). In sport coaches, an inability to cope appropriately with occupational stressors can result in maladaptive behavioural responses such as decreased motivation and isolation, vulnerability, anxiety, anger and frustration (Taylor, 1992), all of which have the potential to contribute to lower ratings of psychological well-being. If left untreated, chronic levels of perceived or actual psychological stress may lead to a phenomenon known as 'burnout' in coaches (Olusoga, Bentzen, & Kenttä, 2019), resulting in depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee, & Harwood, 2007; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Potential sources of stress for sport coaches include the performance of themselves and their athletes, organisational factors that include a complex network of other people (e.g., athletes, parents, other coaches), and personal factors (e.g., coaching level and experience) that influence life at work and at home (Norris et al., 2017). It is acknowledged that coaches across all levels of competition experience stress (Pearson, Baghurst, & Mwavita, 2020). Similarly, challenges encountered by coaches may be consistent between males and females,

with some gender specific concerns (e.g., stereotypical male culture associated with sport) (Kentta et al., 2020; Olusoga et al., 2019). Competition performance and outcome, along with meeting external expectations to succeed, have been cited as the main occupational stressors for a high-performance sport coach (Frey, 2007), however organisational factors are also commonly cited as sources of stress (e.g., administration, organisational environment, leadership and communication) (Knight, Reade, Selzler, & Rodgers, 2013; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Levy, Nicholls, Marchant, & Polman, 2009; Olusoga, Butt, Hays, & Maynard, 2009). In addition, job insecurity and unrealistic performance expectations are also major stressors affecting the psychological well-being of coaches (Bentzen, Kenttä, & Lemyre, 2020). Across all competitive levels, a lack of social support, increased numbers of, and conflicting responsibilities, salary, job insecurity and poor work life balance, are consistently linked to elevated levels of perceived stress that can affect well-being (Frey, 2007; Kellmann & Kallus, 1994; Knight et al., 2013; Levy et al., 2009; Pearson et al., 2020; Robbins, Gilbert, & Clifton, 2015; Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). Conversely, supportive organisational environments that provide tangible support and value the coach's performance may buffer the stressors coaches encounter (Chroni, Abrahamsen, Skille, & Hemmestad, 2019), while higher levels of 'grit', perseverance of long-term goals (Moen & Olsen, 2020), and the provision of social support networks (Norris, Didymus, & Kaiseler, 2020), are protective for coach well-being. Together, this complex of individual and occupational stressors highlights the importance of considering coaches' experiences as part of broader social structures that interact with the potential to affect performance and psychological well-being.

Intrapersonal theoretical models used to investigate coach well-being

In the context of SDT, psychological well-being is often conceptualised as pleasurable experiences and happiness (e.g., satisfaction with life), along with a state of internal energy (e.g., vitality), which represent hedonic and eudemonic well-being respectively (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Basic psychology needs theory (BPNT) is a subtheory of the wider SDT framework (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and postulates that the development and maintenance of psychological well-being and optimal functioning is predicated on the fulfilment of three psychological needs: particularly *autonomy* (choice or ownership over behaviour), *competence* (ability to interact effectively with one's environment or mastery), and *relatedness* (a sense of belonging or social connectedness). In contrast, *psychological need thwarting* diminishes effective functioning and entails negative psychological outcomes. In this regard, psychological ill-being is not merely reflected in the absence of positive affect or vitality, but in the presence of negative affect and psychological malfunction such as exhaustion. Thus, akin to psychological well-being and ill-being representing different concepts, a lack of BPN satisfaction is not equivalent to need thwarting (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011).

Within the SDT framework, a coach's interpersonal style and motivating factors can either influence, or be a by-product of their psychological well-being, in a bidirectional manner. Underlying SDT is the concept that motivations exist along a continuum of self-determination, which extends from intrinsic motivation to amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although recent research has disputed a continuum structure being used for motivational types (Chemolli & Gagné, 2014), the use of such a continuum has received consistent support (Howard, Gagné, & Bureau, 2017). Intrinsic motivation and other related behavioural regulations (e.g., integrated regulation or identified regulation) are regarded as autonomous or self-determined motivations, whereby an individual decides to engage in or initiate an activity for reasons generated from one's self, such as an activity being interesting and satisfying. According to SDT, autonomous motivation and subsequent engagement in activities is more likely to produce greater well-being, while BPN fulfilment leads to a greater internalization of motivation (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Vallerand, 2001). In contrast, controlled motivation produces a participation in activities that is driven by external demands or rewards (e.g., media attention and public recognition) (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Related to these coaching motivations, SDT also delineates autonomy supportive and controlling styles of coaching and interpersonal environments. Autonomy supportive environments are created when coaches offer their athletes opportunities for input and decision making, and acknowledge their feelings and perspectives (Stebbing, Taylor, & Spray, 2015). This coaching style can offer numerous benefits for athletes, such as enhanced psychological well-being and performance, and autonomous motivation (Amorose & Horn, 2000; Hollembeak & Amorose, 2005; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Conversely, a controlling interpersonal style (e.g., punishment and criticism, seeking compliance) decreases well-being and motivation in athletes, and increases the likelihood of an athlete leaving the sport (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In summary, SDT appears to be useful in investigating a coach's well-being, as it accounts for their motivations, interpersonal style, and needs fulfilment.

Intrapersonal consequences to coach well-being

To date, the majority of research involving coach well-being has adopted a SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) perspective. SDT is a useful framework to examine the constructs contributing to coach well-being, particularly as monitoring variation in the key variables of autonomy, working conditions and motivation appears to inform evaluations of well-being. In one of the first studies to investigate the factors influencing coach well-being,

Stebbing and colleagues (2011) utilised SDT to demonstrate that greater psychological well-being, measured as positive affect and subjective vitality, was predicted by BPN satisfaction for competence and autonomy, in 443 coaches of mixed experience and competition levels. In turn, greater perceptions of well-being predicted autonomy supportive behaviours, while lower perceptions predicted controlling interpersonal behaviours toward athletes. The relationship between BPN fulfilment and well-being was extended in a more recent cross-sectional study among a sample of 302 development coaches (Alcaraz, Torregrosa, & Viladrich, 2015), where a positive association between the psychological need for relatedness and psychological well-being, was mediated by greater levels of self-determined motivation. Self-determined motivation also mediated the relationship between BPN thwarting and lower psychological well-being. In addition, BPN thwarting directly predicted negative affect and perceived stress, while higher levels of competence and relatedness were associated with less perceived stress. This follows other work that has shown associations between higher levels of self-determined motivation, and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, perceptions of well-being and personal accomplishment in coaches of various levels, while non-self-determined (e.g., controlled motivation) has been linked to poor well-being and burnout (McLean, Mallett, & Newcombe, 2012). Collectively, these findings (Alcaraz et al., 2015; McLean et al., 2012; Stebbings et al., 2011) indicate that higher levels of psychological well-being in coaches of various competitive levels are associated with the presence of at least three conditions; basic psychological needs satisfaction, lack of basic psychological needs thwarting, and self-determined motivation.

An individual's style of sport coaching has also been explored for its capacity to improve coach well-being, within a person-centred approach. Solstad and colleagues (2018) combined SDT with Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) (Duda & Hall, 2001) to determine whether the motivational climate created by a coach could improve their well-being. Higher levels of well-being at the end of a season were reported by coaches who delivered high levels of empowering and low levels of disempowering instruction to their athletes at the start of their competitive season. Specifically, higher levels of task-involved sports coaching in association with an autonomy-supportive style and the provision of social support was positively associated with a coaches' BPN satisfaction and positive affective state. This indicates that an emphasis on improvement and learning, based on task-involving principles within a coaching style, may influence coach well-being, as it contributes to intrinsic satisfaction and a sense of personal competence and control. Furthermore, this autonomous style may have additional benefits for athletes, with the provision of choice during training sessions previously associated with autonomous motivation (Smith et al., 2016), goal striving and goal motives in athletes (Smith, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2010).

Perceptions of the work environment can challenge or improve the well-being of employees (Parker et al., 2003; Wilson, Dejoy, Vandenberg, Richardson, & Mcgrath, 2004). Few studies have attempted to determine how different perceptions of the work environment and its associated factors, can affect the sequence of BPN satisfaction, motivational performance and well-being in the context of sport coaching (Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2016; Stebbings, Taylor, Spray, & Ntoumanis, 2012). In a recent study exploring these issues, Bentzen and colleagues (2016) assessed whether SDT could be used to understand burnout and well-being in high performance coaches over a competitive season. These authors reported that changes in perceptions of the environment led to alterations in psychological need satisfaction, which subsequently contributed to changes in autonomous motivation, and in turn, affected well-being and burnout across the season. In particular, perceived autonomy support from external leaders positively predicted changes in well-being in coaches, measured through vitality and an adapted version of the satisfaction with life scale, whereas increased workload decreased these ratings. This indicates that an autonomy supportive environment, characterised by leaders who provide support and understanding while minimising a coaches' job pressures, can lead to BPN satisfaction and greater psychological well-being, vital over the course of a competitive, taxing season. This data adds to previous findings whereby autonomy support offered by leaders in sport is key to vitality and work satisfaction in high-performance coaches (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Relatedly, a review using the 'Areas of Work Life Model' as a theoretical model attempted to outline the factors contributing to enhanced health and well-being in high performance sport coaches (Carson, Walsh, Main, & Kremer, 2018). Perceptions of greater workload, low levels of autonomy within multiple roles, insufficient reward, low social support, and a discrepancy between individual and organisational values, were suggested to lead to poorer psychological well-being in sport coaches (Carson et al., 2018). In addition, coaches who managed their workload to a greater extent, and had more decisional control in the workplace, reported higher levels of well-being (Carson et al., 2019). This evidence indicates that perceptions of the work environment, including actual and perceived organisational support, have the capacity to influence coach well-being.

Interpersonal consequences of coach well-being

A question that currently remains unanswered in the literature concerns which intrinsic (e.g., motivation) and external antecedents (e.g., job conditions, organisational climate) are most important for coach well-being, and how these factors can predict or influence the interpersonal style of a coach, particularly over a competitive season. To date, SDT has been a key model used to explore these issues (Norris et al., 2017). In

Stebbing and colleagues (2011) study of coaches from various levels, greater perceptions of well-being predicted autonomy supportive behaviours, while lower perceptions predicted controlling interpersonal behaviours toward athletes. In a later cross-sectional study involving 418 coaches with mixed experience and competition levels demonstrated that greater job security, opportunities for professional development, and lower work-life conflict, correlated with psychological need satisfaction. Psychological need satisfaction was subsequently associated with a higher index of psychological well-being (including hedonic and eudemonic indicators such as vitality and positive affect) and autonomy supportive behaviours toward athletes (Stebbing et al., 2012). In contrast, a coach's perceptions of higher work-life conflict and fewer opportunities for development were positively associated with thwarted psychological needs, psychological ill-being (e.g., emotional and physical exhaustion), and controlling interpersonal behaviour (Stebbing et al., 2012). Importantly, this research implies that lower well-being in coaches may lead to a more directive style that is delivered through a more critical lens. In one of the few longitudinal studies in the area, Stebbing and colleagues (2015) explored whether psychological well-being predicted perceptions of autonomy supportive and controlling interpersonal styles. Results showed that happier coaches with high levels of positive affect, and coaches who considered their coaching role to be integrated into their sense of self (i.e., eudemonia, or "I am a coach"), were more likely to provide greater opportunities and support for athletes, compared to coaches with lower levels of these attributes. Conversely, coaches who were prone to negative emotional responses (e.g., anger, irritability) had a higher tendency to criticise and intimidate their athletes, while role devaluation by a coach was aligned with a reduction in effort, lack of engagement, and a distant and jaded interpersonal style (Stebbing et al., 2015). Overall, the collective findings indicate that a supportive environment for coaches can lead to them experiencing positive affect and integration, and can limit their experience of negative affect, which in turn facilitates their creation of an adaptive interpersonal environment that allows their athletes to flourish.

Considerations for future research investigating coach well-being

Research has highlighted that a more precise definition of coach well-being is required, including what this represents to coaches, before more theoretically informed programs of research are embarked upon (Norris et al., 2017). Moreover, most research in this review used cross-sectional study designs and focused on quantitative methods, however longitudinal designs could be useful in unpacking whether the most critical determinants of coach well-being fluctuate over a season and in tournament coaching as typically occurs for world championships/Olympics (Bentzen et al., 2016; Solstad et al., 2018; Stebbing et al., 2015). These designs would also allow causative/predictive relationships to be determined, as well as more comprehensive, theory-based, modelling of causal pathways. Sports coaching presents unique stressors not observed in most other professions. Future intervention studies should assess the benefit of coach-specific education programs that 1) increase awareness of real and potential stressors, 2) improve a coach's understanding of these stressors, and 3) assist in utilising the most appropriate coping strategies. Obtaining further knowledge of the determinants of coach well-being and their internal and external needs, and embedding these concepts within coach-specific well-being programs, may increase employee receptivity and promote coach buy-in.

Of further importance is the heterogeneity of study populations in studies of coach well-being, in terms of their experience, competitive level of coaching, and gender. Differences in job expectations and demands, resources and organisational stresses found across different levels of coaching, may exert diverse influences on coach well-being. While several studies have specifically included high performance coaches (including at a national level) (Bentzen et al., 2020; Bentzen et al., 2016; Carson et al., 2019; Carson et al., 2018; Chroni et al., 2019; Kentta et al., 2020), most studies include coaches of mixed experience and competition levels meaning that it is difficult to distinguish whether coaches at different competitive levels experience psychological well-being at similar levels, or if the intra- and interpersonal factors that contribute to well-being differ by performance levels. Therefore, determining how competitive standards moderate perceptions of attendant stressors and subsequent well-being would be beneficial. In addition, a greater understanding of female coaches' well-being is needed, given they only occupy ~20% of the sampled coaches, in both well-being and stress research (Norris et al., 2017). This information is needed as perceptions of well-being, stress experiences and coping methods may be subject to gender differences, (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Durand-Bush, Collins, & McNeill, 2012), and it will ultimately create a more inclusive coaching workforce.

Overall, broader conceptual theory needs to be developed to understand coach well-being and to guide research. At present the literature is too reliant on intrapersonal conceptualisations such as SDT/BPNT, reflected by the research in this review. However, the effects of interpersonal elements (e.g., greater social support, positive relationships, organisational imposition and pressure, role ambiguity and expectations) or intrapersonal traits (e.g., grit, hardiness, resilience, anxiety, purpose) on well-being, have been underexplored in the literature. For instance, further research is required into the effect(s) of social support on coach well-being because of its role in buffering stress-induced psychological disturbance (e.g., depression and anxiety) (Frese, 1999; LaRocco, House, & French Jr, 1980; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), and its significance in sustaining psychological well-being in the workplace (Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel, & Schulz-Hardt, 2010), and in a sport

and exercise context (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Norris et al., 2020). Furthermore, the potential impact of work-life balance (Sirgy & Lee, 2016) which has been commonly cited as a concern for coach well-being, warrants further investigation. The importance of such inter- and intra-personal factors within theoretical models used in organisational psychology and occupational health and well-being (e.g., organisational health framework, bioecological model, biopsychosocial theory, socio-ecological theory), provides further evidence that a more holistic approach including biological, psychological, sociocultural and physical/environmental factors, may be considered in understanding and appraising coach well-being (Bone, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Cotton & Hart, 2003; Danna & Griffin, 1999; Wilson et al., 2004). Thus, additional sociocultural and/or employee-specific characteristics of personality may be integrated within SDT, or, used in the construction of more specific theoretical models, to better understand coach well-being.

Conclusions

In summary, this review has identified several important trends which indicate that basic psychological needs satisfaction, self-determined motivation, and a lack of BPN thwarting, are required to engender higher levels of psychological well-being in sport coaches. Furthermore, the working conditions (e.g., workload) and social agents (e.g., performance directors) within the coaching environment can play a pivotal role in providing coaches with a sense of autonomy, through opportunities for decision making (e.g., training structures, athlete management) and development, which subsequently increases well-being. This implies that a manageable workload and tempered expectations, endorsed by organisation leaders and management, are essential for a sport coach's long-term well-being and performance. Perceptions of autonomy and a coach's well-being can contribute to the provision of positive (i.e., autonomy supportive) or detrimental (i.e., controlling) environments for athletes. Therefore, while deviations in a coach's affective state may influence athlete interactions, decisions made and opportunities (or lack thereof) created by organisational powers can also indirectly affect the athlete experience. Supporting a coach's psychological needs, sustaining their interest in their work and instilling feelings of personal accomplishment is therefore a priority, to decrease their susceptibility to burnout while also improving both athlete and coach relationships, performances and retention.

Conflicts of interest: the authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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