After burning, the phoenix will be reborn from the ashes: possible measures for burnout prevention in Sports and Exercise Medicine academics

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The Phoenix is a mythical bird that sets itself on fire at the end of a life cycle. After intensively burning, the Phoenix can regenerate itself from the ashes and start a new life.

In the editorial from Verhagen et al 1,2 ‘Shining on others, I burn myself: time to disagree with Hippocrates’, the awareness is directed towards occupational constraints and burnout in the academic Sports and Exercise Medicine (SEM) community. In this sequel to this movement, we want to share our (ongoing) journey towards burnout prevention in SEM academics. We are both sports medicine professors who normally have to juggle several roles, including clinical work with patients in clinic or within federations, responsibilities of clinical organisation, research, supervising students, academic self-administration, teaching and our personal lives as well as being active and doing sports ourselves. We are devoting our time to taking care of athletes and their entourage. We want to guide young SEM academics to achieve their maximum potential and motivate them for an academic career. However, time is insufficient to fulfill all tasks to our satisfaction, which bears the potential for burnout. 3

We are fortunate because we are doing something we are passionate about, and we want to share our strategies to stay fully satisfied and motivated and possibly prevent burnout.

After reading the editorial from Verhagen et al,3 I completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory.3 Although I felt enthusiastic, positive, happy, proactive and efficient (far from burnout), the result was a strong argument to myself to increase/accelerate changes. Thus, I discussed with colleagues (including many relevant discussions with Karsten Hollander), listened to podcasts on productivity and personal development, read books, and tried to take the time to reflect. I progressively implemented things early in 2023. And after almost 1 year, I can say that this has worked (of course, nothing is stable, and improvements should continue!). I am happy to share here the top 3 actions that have helped me to improve my satisfaction (and probably improve my efficacy) (figure 1):

► Determine my goal(s)/objective(s) at different terms (eg, life, career, year(s)) and domains (eg, professional, social, personal, etc.). This is not an easy task. We should take the time needed to know what is important for us, what makes us vibrate and what we want to have accomplished. They are not rigid; they can change. These goal(s)/objective(s) serve like the compass that points the way to follow. They help me to make choices and decisions to say no.

► Make a choice! For more than 10 years, I used the Eisenhower matrix (figure 1). But, one thing was missing: clear goal(s)/objective(s). Choices are still difficult, but knowing personal goals and the Eisenhower matrix helped me greatly. This also includes saying ‘no’, which was not in my vocabulary. I am a ‘Yes man’ (such as Jim Carrey in the movie ‘Yes Man’4). I think it was a perfect attitude in my career, but now it is probably dangerous for my long-term health.

► Time-blocking. This method allows you to organise your time by blocking work slots

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I am passionate about what I do! I am really happy about my job and activities! But for a long time, I am not fully satisfied with not doing all that I want to do. And thus, regularly, I tried to improve my organisation.
devoted to a task. In practice, it consists of (1) creating the to-do list, (2) prioritising the tasks and defining deadlines, (3) evaluating time per task/subtask and (4) blocking slots (as accurately as possible) in planning. My use of time-blocking is not perfect, but this is an organisational approach that helped me the most to increase my satisfaction!

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For me, a parental leave in the summer of 2022 initiated my process of changing my approaches to workload management. Before the birth, I felt continuously ‘busy’. My email inbox and to-do-lists were always full and refilling. I tried to manage by working 12+ hours almost every night to get inbox zero and all the work off the table, papers submitted, and everything settled before starting the leave. However, academic work is infinite…

When starting the parental leave, I put an absence note, informed the most important collaborators and colleagues, and urged myself not to open the computer during the whole period. At times, I struggled and felt like having withdrawal symptoms: Is this peer review already in? What happened to the funding application? Am I maybe missing the chance for an interesting collaboration? Am I the lame duck in a project, and colleagues must wait for me? It took about 3 weeks for the symptoms to subside. I had been in the ‘academic game’ for 10 years by then, and it felt kind of like an addiction. This was truly bothering and alerting me at the same time. Another eye-opener was after returning from the leave that I only missed three real urgent problems out of the 3k+ emails (half phishing). When I reached out to my colleagues and said that I was back and could work on the ‘very urgent’ problems, they were already solved. This was a real game changer, and after reading ‘A World Without Emails’ by Cal Newport, I changed my attitude toward emails. Furthermore, I read several additional books on the topic, and Deep Work and Four Thousand Weeks especially resonated with me.

From reading these books, I put a couple of measures in place to help me better organise the simultaneous academic and clinical work (figure 1). However, this is maybe one of the most important part, not to get more work done—academic work is infinite—but to be more efficient in the focused time, reduce shallow work and have more time to reflect as well as for family, sports, and friends. With these (partly) relatively simple measures (figure 1), I got an even higher output of quality research, recognition and confirmation from my students and patients and very low points on the Maslach Burnout Inventory scales.

Our main research interest is prevention, and still, it took us several key moments, the mutual discussions about the topic (and not tabooring it), and the editorial by Verhagen et al to condense the diffuse feeling of work overload and the associated risk of burnout. There is a need to act and continue openly discussing this within the SEM community.

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Figure 1 Possible measures for efficient work organisation and possible burnout prevention in academic work.
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