

# FISU World Conference 2025

## Balancing Work and Life: The Anatomy of a High Achiever

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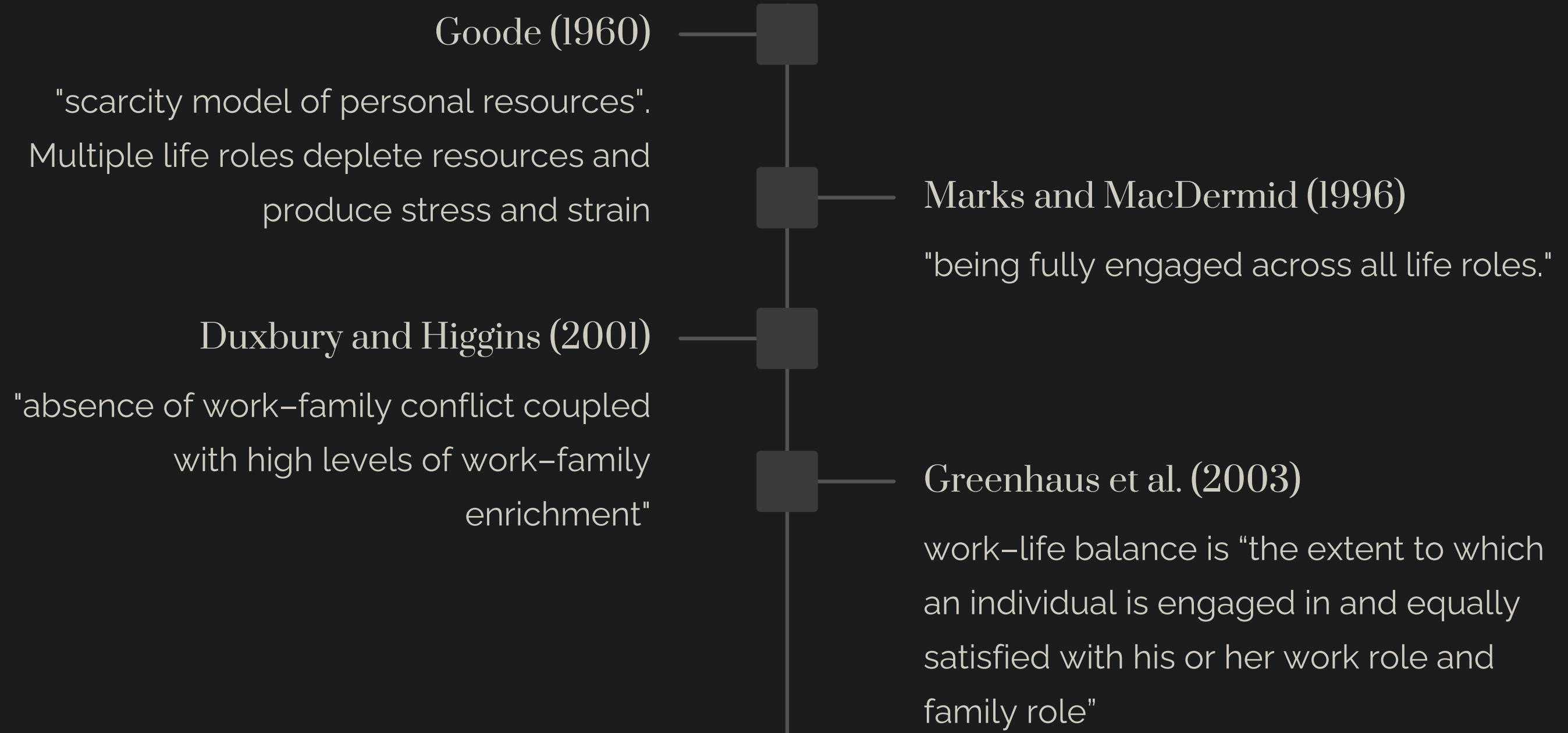
July 2025

# Work-Life Balance:

## Academic Perspectives



# Evolution of Work - Life balance definitions



# Defining Work-Life Balance: Beyond Simple Dichotomies

## Challenging Traditional Terminology

"[Work-life balance] implies that work is not part of life, ignores the distinction between paid and unpaid work and... implies that work and the rest of life are in some way antithetical or mutually exclusive."

— Lewis, Rapoport, & Gambles (2003, p. 829)

Lewis et al. prefer the term **work-personal life integration**, acknowledging that work constitutes an integral part of our lives rather than standing in opposition to it.

### Time Balance

Allocating time across domains in alignment with individual values and priorities

### Involvement Balance

Psychological engagement and commitment distributed across work and personal roles

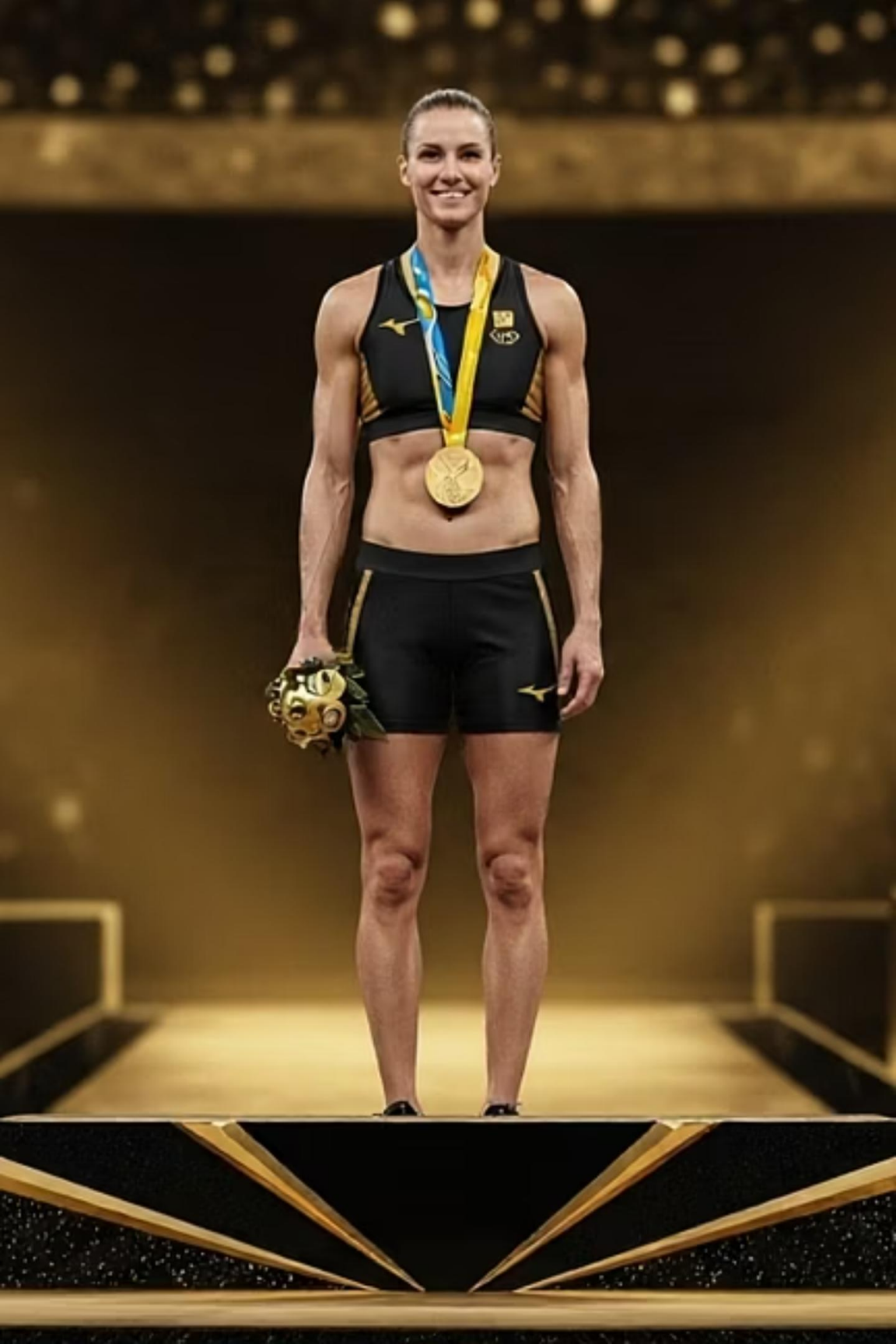
### Satisfaction Balance

Level of fulfillment experienced across multiple life domains

Greenhaus & Allen's three essential components (2011)

⚠ Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) noted that "Whether such imbalance in favor of one role is healthy or not is, in our opinion, the empirical question" (p. 513) — suggesting that optimal balance may be highly individualized rather than universally defined.





# Defining the High Achiever:



## Officials & Administrative Team

Managing logistics, regulations, and the overall sporting environment.



## Medical & Psychological Support

Ensuring physical recovery, mental well-being, and resilience.



## Coaches & Technical Staff

Guiding performance, strategy, and skill development behind the scenes.

# Core Characteristics of High Achievers



## Achievement Focus

Concentrates on achieving goals rather than avoiding failure. Full ownership of outcomes. (Walden University, 2022)



## Grit & Persistence

Pursues long-term goals with passion and perseverance, sustained over time.(Duckworth, 2013)



## Intrinsic Motivation

Driven by deep professional purpose, higher productivity and sustained engagement. (HBR, 2023)



## Continuous Learning

Values ongoing practice and improvement, constantly seeking to refine skills and knowledge. (Beuke, Psychology Today)



## Achievement Enjoyment

Finds great pleasure in reaching goals and striving for excellence, which fuels continued motivation. (HBR, 2023)

### References:

- Duckworth, A. L. (2013). Grit research cited in American Psychological Association Monitor.
- Walden University Psychology Research (2022). The Psychology of High Achievers.
- H. Beuke, How Do High Achievers Really Think?, Psychology Today.
- Harvard Business Review (2023). Research on high achiever productivity and characteristics.

# Behind the Sidelines

"Behind every gold medal, there's a coach sacrificing sleep, family, and mental health."

The unseen mental health struggles of coaches, referees and support staff power the sporting achievements we celebrate—yet their wellbeing remains largely overlooked.



# The Invisible Grind

## Constant Travel

Navigating multiple time zones and recovering from jet lag whilst maintaining peak performance and decision-making abilities.

## Job Instability

Living with contract-based employment where continued work depends on athlete performance factors often beyond their control.

## 24/7 Availability

Expected to be perpetually available to athletes, with boundaries between personal and professional life consistently blurred.

## Emotional Labour

Managing athletes' emotional states, disappointments and failures whilst suppressing their own reactions and concerns.



# Life in Transit

The sporting calendar forces support personnel into nomadic lifestyles, with profound consequences:

- Spending 150-200 days per year away from home and family
- Living out of suitcases with inconsistent accommodation quality
- Missing critical family milestones and everyday moments
- Struggling to maintain meaningful personal relationships
- Facing disrupted sleep patterns and irregular meal times



# 24/7 Mental Load

## Perpetually On Call

Expected to respond immediately to athlete crises regardless of time, personal circumstances or location.

## No Psychological Boundaries

Unable to mentally disengage from work responsibilities even during nominal "time off" periods.

## Crisis Management

Regularly dealing with high-pressure situations requiring immediate decision-making that impacts athlete careers.



# Emotional Labour

## be a.... Mentor

Providing guidance beyond sport technique into life skills and personal development.

## be a...Psychologist

Offering emotional support and mental health first aid without formal training.

## be a...Conflict Manager

Resolving tensions between athletes, officials, and stakeholders under intense scrutiny.

## be a....Performance Analyst

Providing technical feedback whilst maintaining positive relationships.

This constant role-shifting leads to emotional depletion and identity confusion





# Real Life Struggles and Stressors

## The Weight of Expectation

"You feel the pressure of having to succeed. It looks like a lot less sleep. Your mind is constantly thinking about the worst-case scenario.. This thing goes wrong, it's on you."

— Dawn Staley, Head Coach, U.S.A Women's Olympic Basketball Team

## Sacrifice and Unrelenting Pressure

"The pressure is unrelenting. You sacrifice birthdays, family time, and even your health. But that's the job – and the cost of success."

— Sir Alex Ferguson, Legendary Scottish Former Professional Football Manager

## Gender-Based Challenges

"Nobody shouts: 'Go wash up!' to a male referee. But they do to us."

— Alexandra García, Referee

## Never-Ending Demands

"You're literally 24/7. It's just that kind of occupation and the reality is it's very difficult to switch off."

— Ange Postecoglou, Football Manager

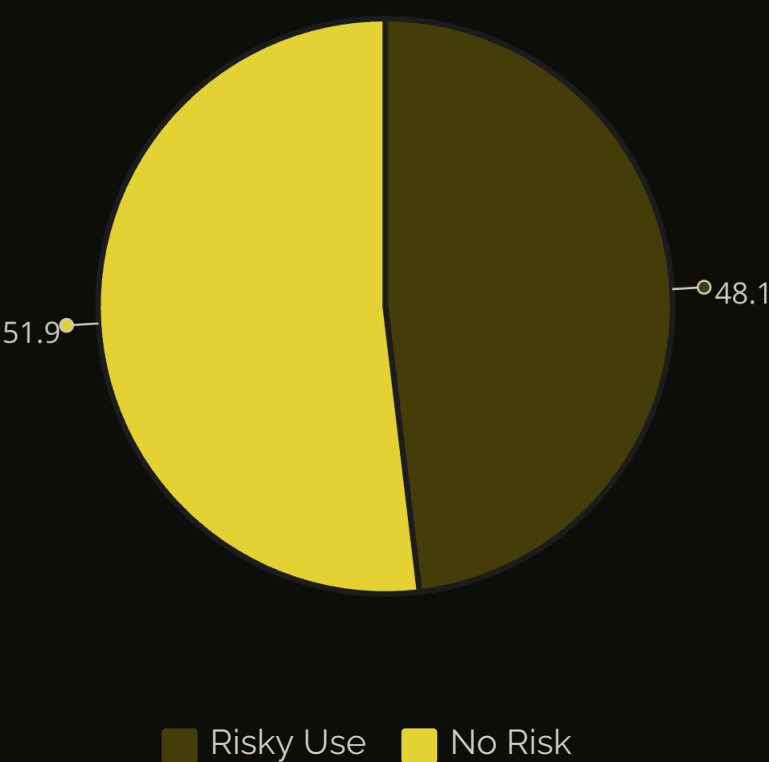
## The Unspoken Toll

"The true extent of overwork, stress, anxiety and depression would not be known amongst the coach population, because it is generally accepted that it goes with the job and they will just cope."

— Leigh Nugent, former head coach of Swimming Australia



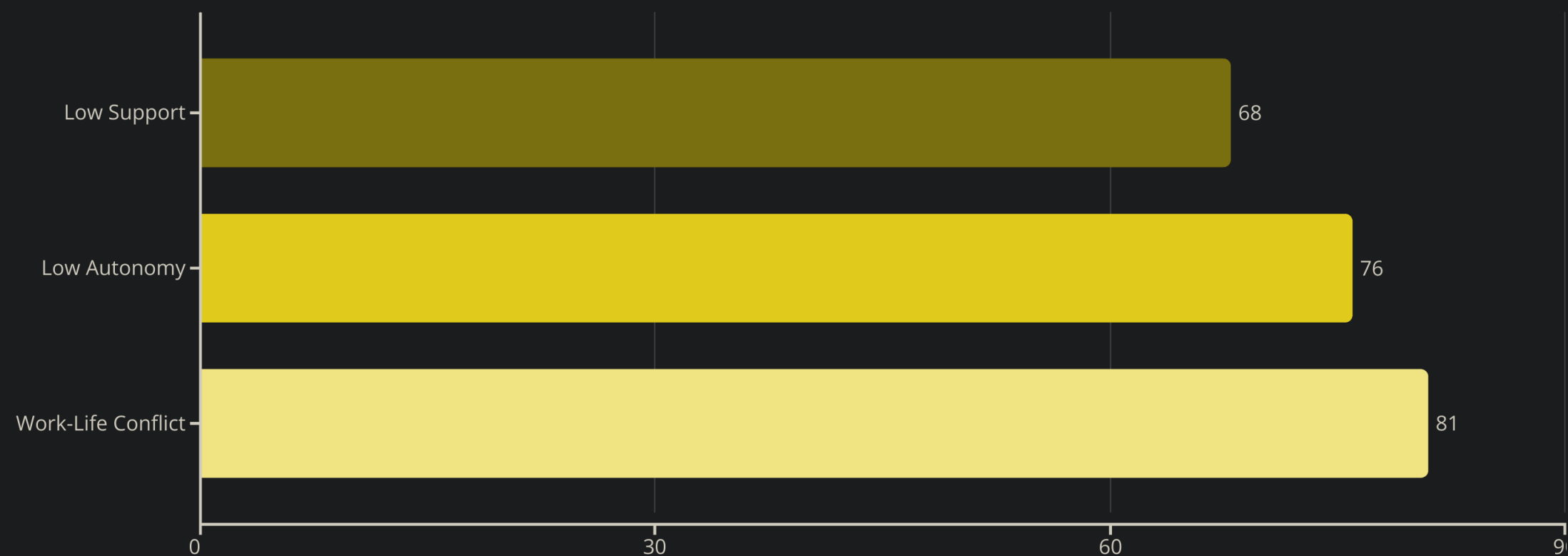
# Substance Abuse in Elite Coaching



⚠ Coaches are at significantly higher risk for alcohol misuse than the general population, with 48.1% showing potentially problematic drinking behaviors.

**References:** Carter, Tori B., et al. (2021)., Gouttebarga, V., et al. (2022), Gomes, A. Rui, et al. (2021).

# Personal Relationship Impact



## Turnover Intentions

- 3.2× more likely to report strong intentions to leave their position
- Low perceived autonomy increased turnover intention by 76%

## Relationship Strain

- Irregular hours and travel requirements (averaging 60+ hours weekly)
- Income instability
- Emotional depletion

**References:** Kilo, Rachel A and Peter Hassmén (2016), Gomes, A. Rui, et al. (2021).

# Abuse in Referees and Officials

94%

Experience Verbal Abuse

Percentage of GAA referees reporting verbal abuse during games

23%

Face Physical Threats

Percentage of officials reporting physical intimidation or abuse

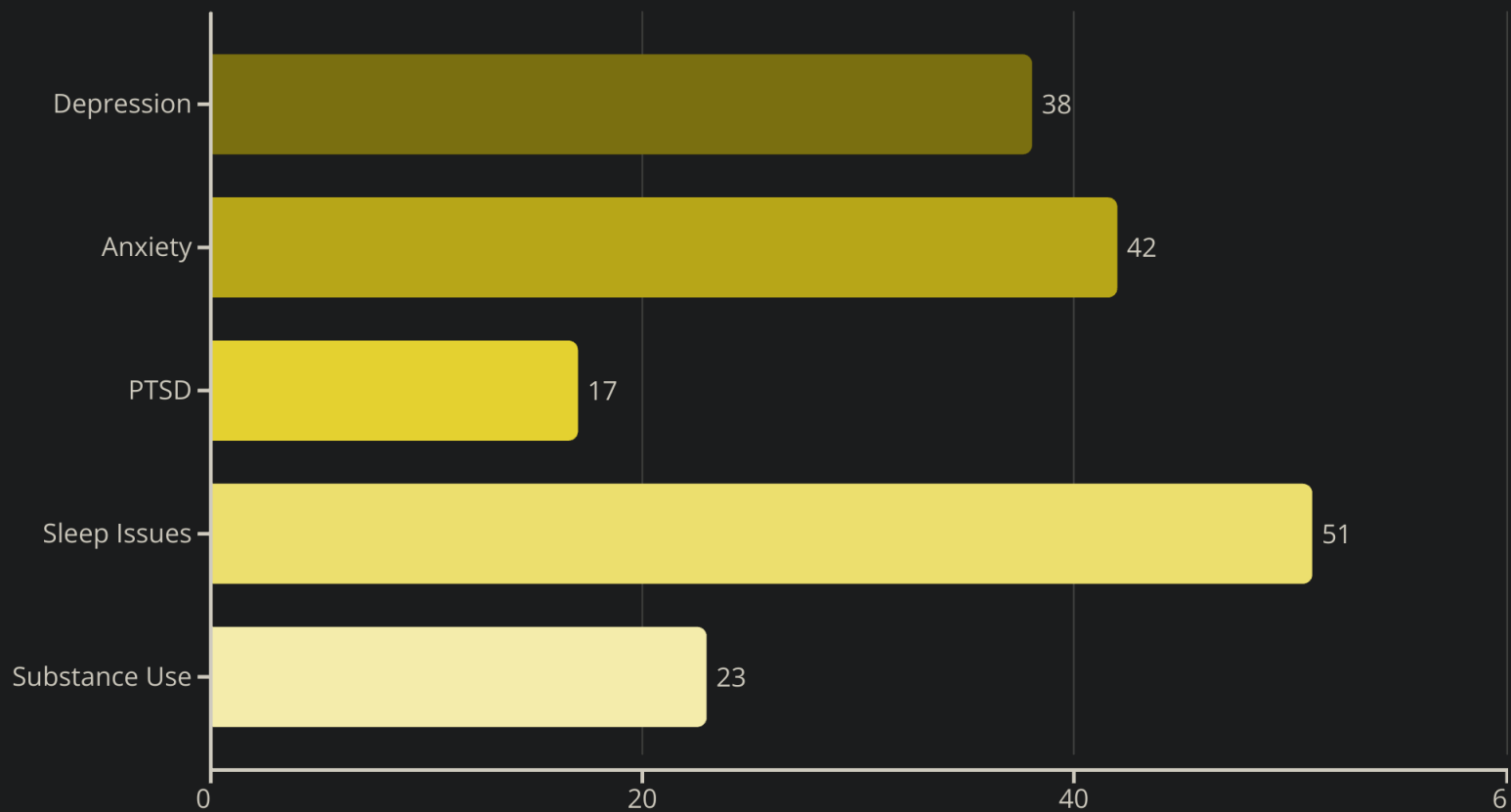
21%

Annual Dropout

Percentage of football referees in England who left in 2020

**References:** "Match Official Welfare Study." Sky Sports Research Institute (2022). "Verbal Abuse and Official Retention." Gaelic Athletic Association Research (2021). "Referee Crisis in English Football." Football Association Report (2021).

# Comprehensive Mental Health Impact



## Clinical Disorders

Elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and stress among referees:

- Younger officials (under 30)
- Those with limited social support
- Lower-level referees

## Secondary Effects

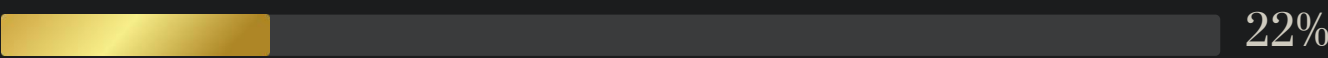
Officials face heightened risk for:

- PTSD following abusive incidents
- Sleep disorders (insomnia, poor quality)
- Substance use as coping mechanism



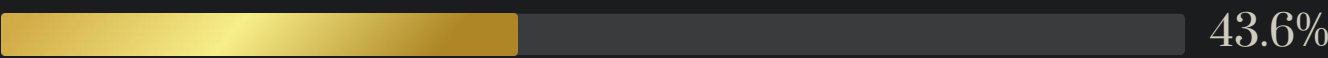
# Burnout: Prevalence & Drivers

## Coaches



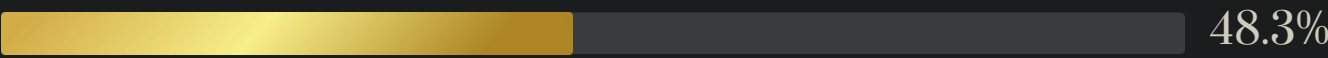
Mild to Severe Burnout

In Finnish high-performance coaches (n=499)



Depression & Anxiety

In Australian elite level coaches (n=78)

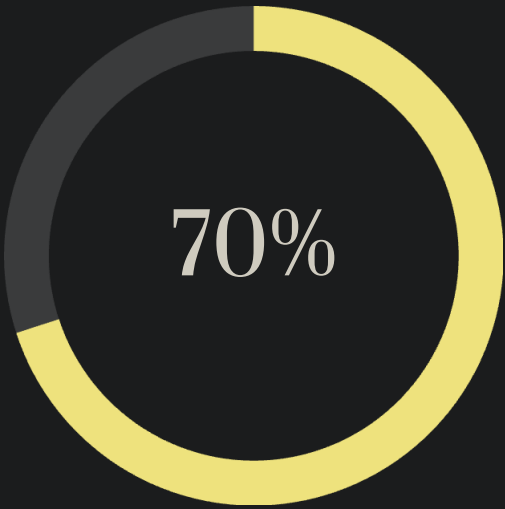


Risky Alcohol Use

Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Tool (AUDIT-C)

**Key drivers:** unstable schedules, high athlete expectations, poor organizational support

## Referees



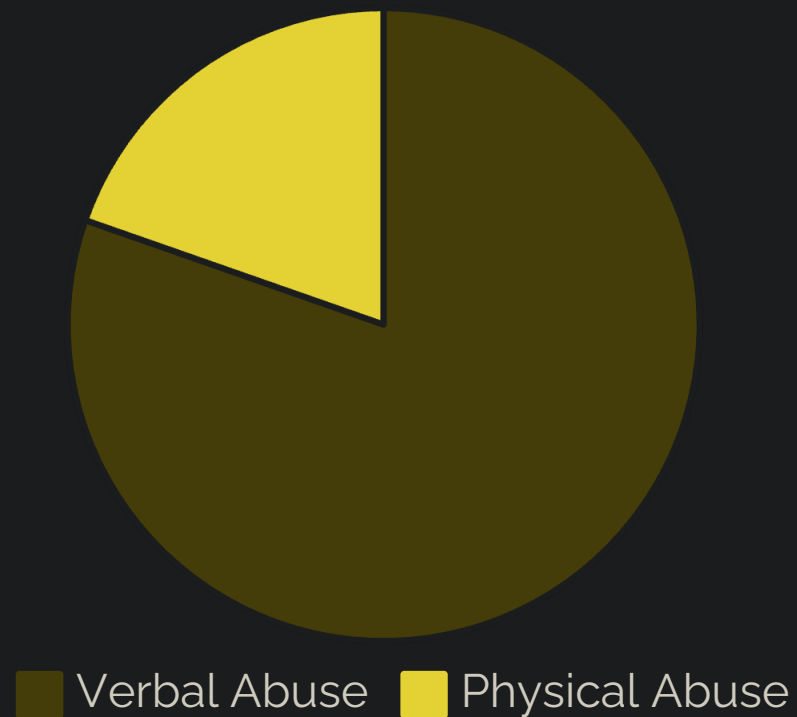
Moderate-High Burnout

Among sports officials (n=120) across multiple sports

Less experienced officials show greater vulnerability to burnout symptoms

References: Carter, Tori B., et al. (2024), Frost et al. (2024), Kegelaers et al. (2021), Kaski, Satu S., and Ulla Kinnunen (2021)

# Officials Abuse & Burnout

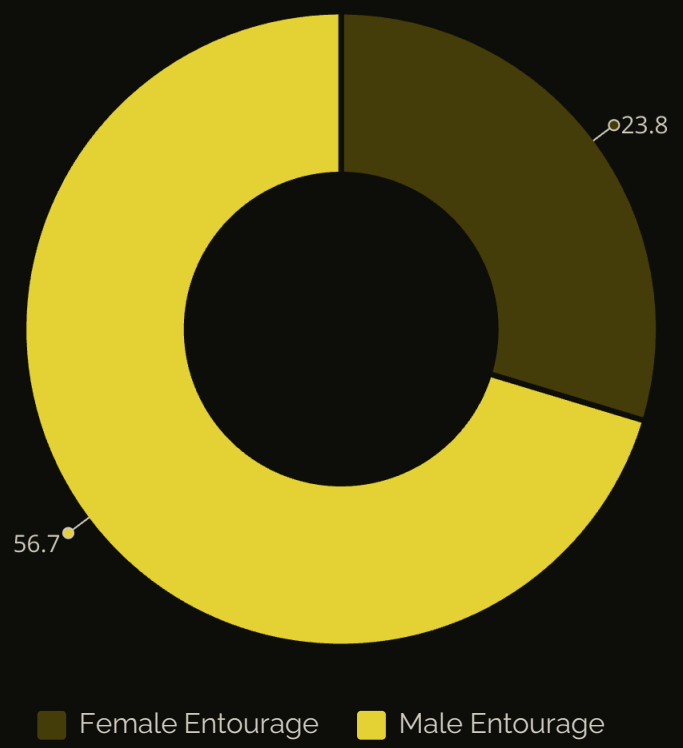


Sports officials face an alarming "crisis" of abuse:

- Over 70% experience moderate to high burnout levels
- 94.29% have faced verbal abuse during their career
- 23.06% have experienced physical abuse
- Most common frequency: "a couple times per season" (43.83%)

References: Glandorf, Hanna L., et al. (2025), Ackeret, Nadja, et al. (2022)

# Gender Disparities & Family Impact



**Family Impact**

Burnout causes "tremendous physical and psychological problems" affecting both work performance and family relationships

**Gender Challenges**

Women in sports leadership face greater stress-related issues, especially in high-pressure environments

**Sidelined**

Women remain significantly underrepresented in elite coaching positions (23.8%) while facing higher rates of stress-related mental health challenges that can impact both career and family life.

**References:** Baumann, Laura, et al. (2024)

# Core Stressors & Contributing Factors

- Time Pressure

Irregular schedules and insufficient recovery time between competitions

- Interpersonal Conflict

Managing athlete, parent, and administrative expectations and criticism

- Performance Anxiety

Fear of making incorrect calls or decisions under high-stakes conditions

- Sleep Disturbance

23-25% report moderate-to-severe sleep issues directly linked to burnout

- Lack of Recognition

High visibility when errors occur but minimal credit for successful performance

References: Rainey & Hardy (1999); Carter et al. (2024)



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a black business suit over a white shirt, is seated in a black leather tufted office chair. She is holding her hands to her temples, looking down with a distressed expression. Her desk is cluttered with papers, a pen, a coffee cup, and a small bottle. A brass desk lamp is visible in the background.

# Dropout & Intention to Withdraw

## Strong Correlation

Research shows a direct relationship between burnout levels and officials' intention to terminate their careers

## Predictive Factors

Time pressure, interpersonal conflict, performance anxiety, and negative feedback significantly predict both burnout and likelihood of quitting

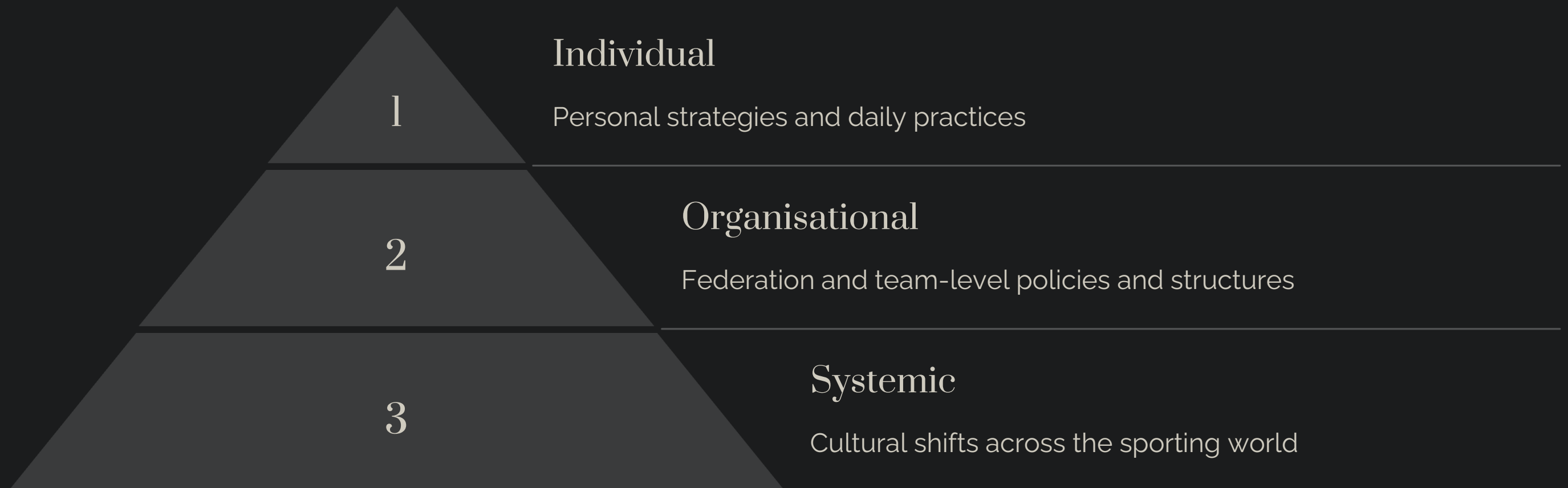
Reference: Rainey & Hardy (1999)



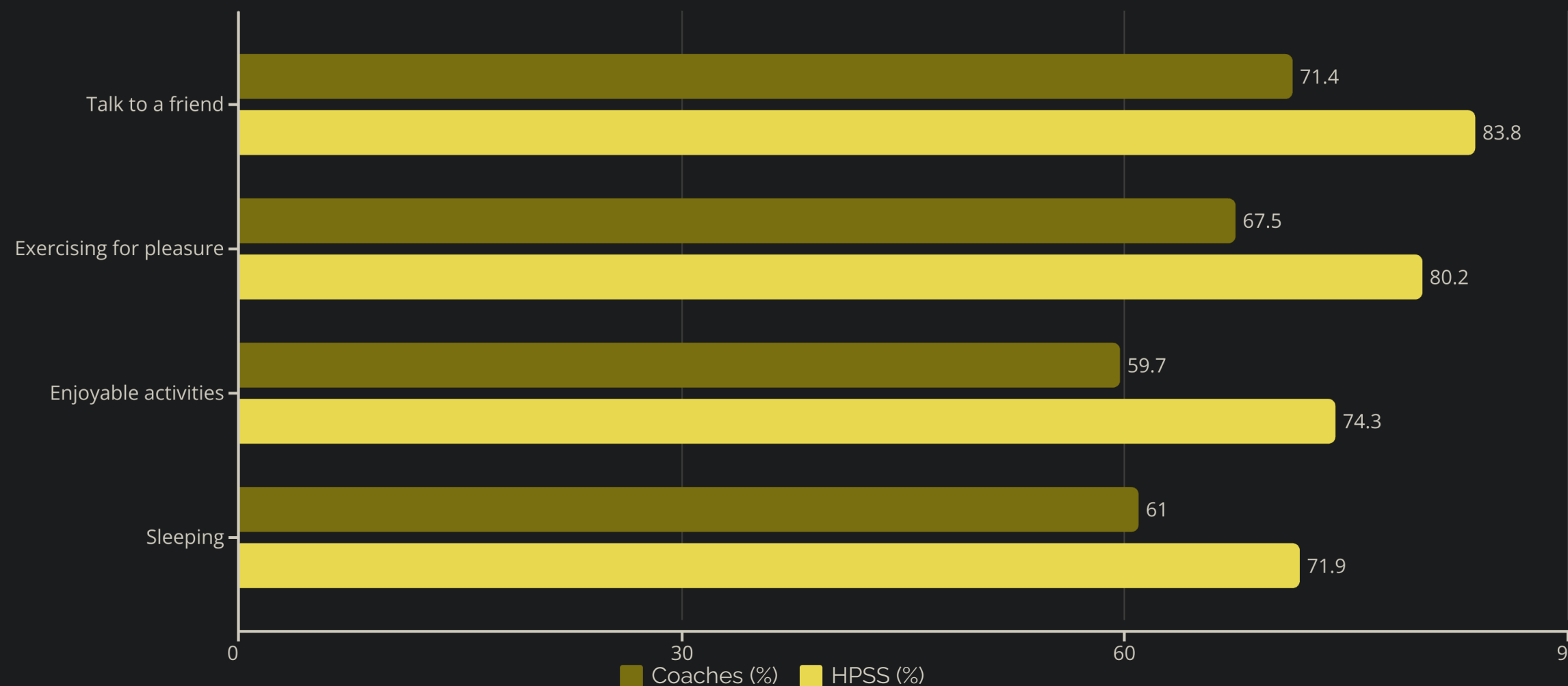
# Mastering the Balance: Work-Life Harmony for High Achievers

Evidence-Based Strategies for Sustainable Excellence

# A Multi-Level Approach to Sustainable Performance



# Individual - Level Strategies for Managing Stress



A small number reported doing nothing to manage their stress or mental well-being (6.5% coaches; 3.6% HPSS).

Reference: Pilkington, Vita, et al. (2022)



# Key Pillars to Master



## Boundary Management

Creating clear delineation between professional and personal domains



## Stress Management

Developing proactive approaches to mental health and stress resilience



## Physical Health

Prioritizing sleep, nutrition, exercise and recovery as foundations



## Psychological Resilience

Building mental toughness techniques for sustained coaching excellence



## Relationship Management

Nurturing effective communication with athletes, colleagues and family



## Time Management

Implementing strategic prioritization and integration of responsibilities



## Professional Development

Engaging in continuous growth for career sustainability and satisfaction

# Creating Clear Lines

## Professional Boundaries

- Define explicit coaching hours with buffer zones
- Establish communication protocols with athletes
- Practice effective delegation to support staff
- Create separate physical and digital workspaces

## Personal Boundaries

- Implement technology management (notification settings, device-free times)
- Protect dedicated family time as non-negotiable
- Cultivate identity-affirming hobbies outside of sport
- Communicate boundary needs to stakeholders proactively



# The Foundation of Resilience

 "Lack of sleep increases stress and directly links to low work-life balance scores among elite coaches, with cascading effects on decision-making quality." — International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching

## Sleep Hygiene

- Consistent sleep-wake schedule across time zones
- Pre-sleep routines that signal wind-down
- Technology curfews to protect sleep quality

## Nutrition Management

- Hydration tracking during high-stress periods
- Anti-inflammatory eating patterns
- Strategic caffeine management for energy

## Exercise Routine

- Scheduled movement sessions (non-negotiable)
- Strength training for resilience and energy
- Activity that differs from coaching sport

## Recovery Protocols

- Active recovery techniques between sessions
- Travel adaptation strategies for jet lag
- Physiological monitoring during intense periods

# Mental Toughness



## Cognitive Strategies

- **Perspective-taking:** Viewing challenges through multiple lenses
- **Goal flexibility:** Adapting objectives to changing circumstances
- **Self-compassion:** Treating oneself with the same kindness offered to athletes
- **Meaning-making:** Finding purpose in difficulties

## Emotional Regulation

- Emotion labeling techniques
- Strategic use of mental simulation
- Implementation of pre-planned coping responses
- Acceptance-based approaches to uncertainty



# Effective Communication and Teamwork

1

## With Athletes

- Establish clear expectations and boundaries from day one
- Implement regular structured check-ins beyond performance
- Develop two-way feedback systems that invite dialogue
- Practice conflict resolution methods that preserve relationships

2

## With Support Staff

- Define role clarity and decision-making protocols
- Create collaborative planning processes
- Establish information sharing systems
- Foster psychological safety within the team

3

## With Family

- Develop communication planning for high-intensity periods
- Create meaningful inclusion strategies for family in coaching life
- Build reciprocal support system expectations
- Implement rituals that reconnect after separations



# Effective Prioritization

"Workplace integration and effective prioritization are most operational for achieving work-life balance in high-performance coaching environments." — Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports

<b>Urgent &amp; Important</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Crisis Management</li><li>• Deadline-Driven Projects</li></ul>	<b>Important, Not Urgent</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strategic Planning</li><li>• Relationship Building</li></ul>
<b>Urgent, Not Important</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some Emails</li><li>• Interruptions</li><li>• Interruptions</li></ul>	<b>Not Urgent &amp; Not Important</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Time Wasters</li><li>• Some Meetings</li></ul>



## Priority Matrix

Categorize tasks by importance and urgency to identify what truly requires attention versus what can be delegated or eliminated

## Time Blocking

Allocate specific time periods for different coaching responsibilities, including dedicated blocks for personal recovery

## Batch Processing

Group similar administrative tasks to maximize efficiency and reduce context-switching mental fatigue

## Energy Management

Schedule high-cognitive tasks during personal peak energy periods and implement seasonal periodization for workload



# Overcoming Typical Obstacles



## Perfectionism

**Challenge:** "I need to optimize everything to be successful"

**Solution:** Implement "good enough" standards for non-critical areas and practice selective excellence



## Identity Fusion

**Challenge:** "I am my coaching role - taking time away means I'm not committed"

**Solution:** Reframe self-care as performance enhancement and develop multiple identity anchors



## Organizational Pressure

**Challenge:** "My organization expects 24/7 availability"

**Solution:** Educate stakeholders on performance benefits of balance and establish clear protocols



## Travel Demands

**Challenge:** "Constant travel disrupts any routine I try to establish"

**Solution:** Develop portable wellness routines and location-adaptive habits

# Organisational & Federation-Level Actions



## Policy Adjustments

- Mandatory recovery days after competitions
- Maximum workload guidelines and "no-contact" hours
- Clear role definitions to prevent overextension



## Mental Health Support

- Embedded mental health professionals
- Confidential coaching and counselling hours
- Regular wellbeing assessments



## Support for Parents & Women

- Flexible scheduling for training and travel
- On-site childcare during events
- Leadership pathways for women in male-dominated roles

Australian Institute of Sport

"Gold Medal Standard for  
Wellbeing"

2,859

Athletes & Entourage Supported

The MHRN has expanded from supporting 1,000 athletes to now supporting 2,859 athletes, coaches and support staff.

"41.2% of coaches and staff reported anxiety and depression symptoms"



"In 2020, more than 183 high performance athletes and coaches from 19 separate sports participated in these community engagement activities".

# Education and Proactive Support



## Mental Health Education

Since March 2020, the AIS has delivered 34 group mental health education sessions on coping with COVID-19 and Olympics postponement, reaching over 900 attendees.



## Expanded Services

The Mental Health Referral Network has expanded to include retired athletes, coaches, support staff, and even impacted family and friends during the bushfires and COVID-19 pandemic.



## Performance Benefits

Regular surveys of athletes, high performance directors, coaches and support staff help the AIS stay informed of mental health needs and improve performance outcomes.



# GAA 'Healthy Clubs Project' in Ireland

The **GAA Healthy Club Programme (HCP)** represents a groundbreaking partnership between the Gaelic Athletic Association and key Irish health organizations to transform the nation's 2,200+ GAA clubs into comprehensive wellbeing hubs.

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## Official Partners

- Healthy Ireland (Government framework)
- Health Service Executive (HSE)
- National Office for Suicide Prevention
- Irish Life (Corporate partner)

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## Comprehensive Focus

- Physical wellbeing programs
- Mental health initiatives
- Social connection opportunities
- Gambling and Substance Use awareness



# Same Principles, Different Application

## Olympic Champion Principles

### 1 Consistent Preparation

Champions don't improvise recovery—they schedule it with the same rigor as training

### 2 Strategic Recovery

Elite athletes prioritize recovery as a performance enhancer, not a luxury

### 3 Mental Toughness

Champions apply the same discipline to personal boundaries as technical excellence

### 4 Support Systems

No athlete succeeds alone—coaches need their own support team too

**Key message:** "Work more sustainably, not less. Apply the champion's mindset to your own wellbeing."



"Behind every athlete's success stands a resilient, yet overlooked, team of coaches, referees, and support staff...

Their well-being is not optional.

It's essential.

Let's Connect

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