

Effects of various Stress Coping styles on the Performance of Athletes

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Abstract

Aim: This review helps to assess the effects of various coping styles on stress that affect the performance of athletes. Gender differences in choosing a coping strategy are also studied.

Method: A systematic search of ResearchGate, SPORT discuss, Journal of sports and exercise, ScienceDirect, and Journal of exercise rehabilitation for articles on stress, coping and its effect on sports performance was done. Also, gender differences in coping strategies used were reviewed. 64 articles were found to be relevant at the initial stage of screening out of which 22 articles were related to stress and coping of athletes.

Purpose: It is understood that different coping skills need to be used based on the time and context of the situation and no particular strategy stands to be the best. Based on the studies, there is also a contradiction in the usage of various strategies of coping such as avoidant or approach and emotion-based as well as problem-focused coping strategies based on gender. There is a need for more gender-based studies so that interventions can be more specific. The contextual study is also required for an effective study plan which would further help in performance enhancement by improving the suitable coping strategies used by the athletes.

Keywords: Stress, Coping, coping styles, Performance enhancement, Avoidant approach coping, Problem emotion-focused coping.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological stress occurs when an athlete perceives the environmental demands exceed their ability or capacity for performance (Cohen, 2007). Stress can be looked upon in two ways the way it would affect the athlete's performance. One-way athletes can be affected is the positive way where athletes are motivated to practice more for the upcoming competition and stay more focused on having the goal in mind. This is possible only if stress is in the right amount for the athletes. If the stress experienced by the athletes is too high then it would lead to poor performance as it would affect their health and they would not be relaxed and confident to perform well. So optimal performance is possible with the athlete being able to cope with the stress. Coping is managing demands that exceed the limits of the person by putting in cognitive and behavioural efforts (Anshel, 2008). The inability of coping with stress is known to be one of the most important factors for low or failure in optimal performance (Lazarus R. S., 2000a).

There are various sources of stress for the athletes such as the nature of the sport itself, where the athletes and their coaches would encounter similar stressful situations (Nicholls, 2016a), fear of failure, pain, fear of injury, anticipating a win or lose and team pressure etc. So, the inability to cope with such stressors may lead to poor performance (Lazarus R. S., 2000a). Performance can be analyzed or anticipated before by knowing how an athlete would respond psychophysiological to the stressful situation. Athletes who perceive a situation as difficult had difficulty breathing and higher cardiac pressure, and are alert in processing, so they tend to cope and perform better than an athlete who perceives a situation as a threat, who experience increased breathing pattern, and no or minute changes in the cardiac output (Seery, 2011).

A study was done by Germina Cosma et al to check how performance got impacted when trained on coping strategies where athletes had a good level of coping skills without which they can't reach the optimal level of performance as coping skills are dynamic and need to keep changing with the change in various stressors that the athlete experiences. The same strategy of coping cannot be used for all stressors and wrongly used methods may even harm the athlete leading to health and psychological problem such as lack of confidence and difficulty in coping with new challenges (Nicolotti, 2003).

According to the coping model proposed by Richard S. Lazarus, the first step of coping itself starts with the recognition of threat as many athletes would be unable to differentiate well using their perception filter. The next step would be to assess the level of threat and think of all the possible ways to cope with it by checking if the resources available for them are sufficient or not. Once a particular coping style is used the athlete would know if it was effective in reducing the threat

or not after which they could either continue coping or choose a different style if the previous method wasn't effective in overcoming the threat or stress level (Abdul Rafeeqe, 2016).

Various athletes coping styles used in stressful situations:

A problem-focused coping style mainly focuses on eliminating the stressor itself by analyzing the information that has a positive effect which would help in overcoming the stressor (Lazarus R. S., 1984).

Whereas emotion-focused coping acts on the emotions themselves by regulating the unwanted emotions during a stressful situation where the athlete would be disengaged emotions towards the situation helping them control the way they emotionally respond to the situation (Roth, S., and Cohen, L. J,1986). It also involves positive reappraisal and seeking emotional support.

Developing a plan to solve or reduce the intensity of stress in a situation by confronting the stressor and coping with it by eliminating stress with direct cognitive and behavioural action is an approach coping style (Roth, S., and Cohen, L. J,1986) (Anshel M. H., 1999). For instance, an athlete would want to know the reason for his penalty or fault or even argue with the referee for a clear explanation for his decision.

Contrary to the approach coping style, avoidance coping is when an athlete consciously avoids a stressful situation by disengaging from it using psychological or behavioural attempts (Krohne, 1993). It involves escaping, neglecting, and perceiving the situation differently to avoid stress (Stowell, 2001). Athletes might be defensive and refuse to agree with the situation directing their actions away from the stressor (Weinstein, 2009) (Yoo, J. 2001). In this when an athlete is told something stressful by the referee they would psychologically withdraw or desensitize away from the comment or any stressor.

METHOD

Search Methods: ResearchGate, SPORT discus, Journal of sports and exercise, and Journal of exercise rehabilitation, were searched for articles on stress and coping and its effect on sports performance. Keywords such as coping strategies, the stress in athletes, athletes coping styles, and gender differences in coping were used. The collected data from these journals were implied and added in this article.

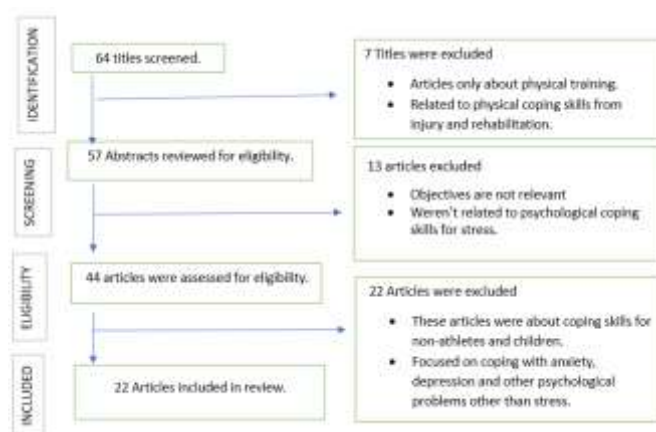
Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

This article consists of studies which are: a) Research, review and viewpoint articles, b) article that provides data for research done on athletes and their coping strategies for stress, c) Studies that have included both male and female and their gender differences, d) Participants of all the studies were of age 12 to 38, e) Both quantitative, qualitative and mixed analysis articles were included.

Studies weren't considered in this review if a) non-athletes and children below 10 years were part of the sample, b) Coping strategies were used for psychological issues other than stress such as anxiety and injury.

RESULTS

Study Selection



Stress is caused by various sources at different levels for different athletes. According to a study conducted on 56 (38 males, 18 females), Jordanian university athletes of age 18-24 years for causes of stress and how they coped with it, Using the Coping Style in Sport Inventory (CSSI) found that stress caused due to health conditions and injury was the highest stressor followed by the pressure of competition and then conflict with coach. This study also showed that in a competition where a quick decision had to be made, athletes who used avoidant coping strategies more than approach coping were successful (Abedalhafiz, 2010). A study was done to assess the coping profiles of (332 M, 200 F) 532 advanced and novice athletes from different sports using a Culturally-Specific Coping Scale for Korean Athletes. It was found that athletes who were a part of individual sports used avoidance coping more than athletes of team sports. There was also a gender difference in the coping style as problem-focused coping was used by men and emotion-focused coping was used

by women athletes (Yoo, J. 2001). A study was conducted by Nicholls, A. R et al which aimed to understand the effectiveness of stress and coping on the type of sport along with the athlete's gender which consisted of a sample size of 749 undergraduate athletes (294 females,455 males) with the age of 18 to 38 years. (Nicholls A. R., 2007) It revealed that female athletes used problem-focused coping more than males which is contrary to previous studies (Abedalhafiz, 2010), (Gaudreau, 2002a), (Elliot, 1997). (Askari, 2014)conducted a study on 114 athletes in Fars territory to know the relationship between coping style and sports stress, which showed that using an avoidant coping style as competitiveness increased further enhanced their performance also showing that this coping style was used more by men than women. 62 male golfers aged from 13 to 20 years were assessed with M COPE inventory where avoidance coping was used more during the competition and if athletes didn't perform well this was reduced (Gaudreau, 2002a). Thus, approach coping was positively connected to the goal accomplishment level of athletes whereas the avoidant approach had a negative relationship (Amiot, 2004). Elliot's hierarchal model (Elliot, 1997) seems to help predict which coping style would be used by an athlete during the competition. After a study on 902 Malaysian athletes was carried out to test the correlation between coping strategies that deal with stress and anxiety it was known that peak performance can be achieved by athletes with the help of somatic and cognitive coping strategies. And male athletes indulged more in drinking, drugs and smoking which were ways of negative coping strategies. Effective coping has a great impact on improving athletes' performance during a competition (Parnabas, 2009)

DISCUSSION

Coping is an integral part of stress management for athletes as they are under constant pressure to practice and perform well in the competition. Fear of injury, expectations of the athlete, coach and audience, difficult opponent etc. are some of the stressors that need the athlete to have a good coping strategy. The level of stress and need for coping for the athlete mainly depends on what is at stake for the athlete. It is understood that athletes cannot use the same coping strategy for all their stressors and it has to be changed accordingly as an athlete's social environment is important since stress and coping are not isolated from it. So, the perception of the athlete about the controllability of stress has an impact on how well they can cope and what strategy they would use. Based on the studies done, problem-focused coping is widely used by athletes. At times both the coping styles such as problem-focused and emotion-based coping are also applied based on the stressor, for example, if an athlete loses a point, they would first want to know information on why they lost that point (problem-focused coping) and then they might indulge in venting out all their negative feelings (emotion coping) that affect them to their teammate or anyone they feel comfortable with.

There are many studies done on gender disparity in coping styles which show that women utilized an emotion-based approach and male athletes used more problem-focused and avoidant coping strategies in the competition and training as well and the nature of the stressor is very important in determining the strategy. But the majority of the studies didn't collect data on coping styles for the same stressors for both genders. There is a paucity in the literature that points out a proper gender difference in coping whereas most of the studies have given data with no gender difference in the coping style of athletes. This lack of proper differentiation may be due to the innate training as to how a male and females need to approach their problems.

Athletes need to have a wide range of coping skills to manage different stressors in suitable ways as different sports have different kinds of stressors. The same coping strategy cannot be used for all the stressors as what might work for one would not work for a different stressor hence there is no clear distinction on what coping strategy is the best to use. In situations where athletes need to make a quick decision during training or competition, they may choose an avoidant strategy for a short time until they can find a suitable solution. Yet, in some other cases, avoidant strategy can't be used if it's a problem with the coach or lost a point, for example, then they can't be avoided and approach strategy would be best applicable as information on what went wrong is needed to improve the performance. In designing a training program or intervention it is important to consider factors such as the athlete's goal, situations that are stressors, and the context in which coping is needed, so intervention can be well designed to be effective across various situations.

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