



Stressors, coping, and well-being among sports coaches: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Sports coaching can be an inherently stressful occupation because coaches must fulfill multiple roles and cope with various expectations. Further, stress and well-being have implications for coach performance. The objective of this study was, therefore, to conduct a systematic review of literature on stressors, coping, and well-being among sports coaches.

Design: A systematic review using PRIMSA guidelines.

Method: Thorough and systematic literature searches of PsycINFO, SPORTDiscus, and Web of Science were conducted. To be eligible for inclusion, papers had to be published in the English language between January 1994 and March 2016 and as full papers in peer-reviewed journals.

Results: The final sample consisted of 38 studies that were conducted with 4188 sports coaches. This sample consisted of 19 qualitative, 17 quantitative, and two mixed methods studies. The findings demonstrate that coaches experience a variety of stressors relating to their performance and that of the athletes they work with in addition to organizational, contextual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal stressors. The findings also highlight that coaches use a variety of coping strategies (e.g., problem solving, social support, escaping the stressful environment) to reduce the negative outcomes of stress. Five studies that were included in this review focused on coaches' well-being and found that basic psychological needs satisfaction, lack of basic psychological needs thwarting, and self-determined motivation are needed for coaches to be psychologically well.

Conclusion: Future research should address gaps in extant literature by using longitudinal study designs to explore coaches' appraisals of stressors, coping effectiveness, social support, and well-being among the unique sports coaching population.

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Psychological stress has been explored in various professional contexts, including law enforcement (Kaiseler, Queirós, Passos, & Sousa, 2014), nursing (Woodhead, Northrop, & Edelstein, 2016), public services (Liu, Yang, & Yu, 2015), and teaching (McCarthy, Lambert, Lineback, Fitchett, & Baddouh, 2015). Collectively, the findings of this research suggest that high levels of perceived stress can reduce performance and contribute to negative health implications. In a sport context, a considerable amount of research has examined the stress experiences of athletes (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2014; Kaiseler, Polman, & Nicholls, 2013; Thelwell, Wagstaff, Rayner, Chapman, & Barker, 2016). The research in this area has highlighted that the coach can be a pertinent stressor for athletes, that athletes are influenced by coaches' stress experiences (e.g., Thelwell et al., 2016), and that coaches' stress experiences are influenced by athletes (Nicholls & Perry, 2016). The growing realization of the influence that a coach can have on the athlete has stimulated research that focuses on sports coaches as performers in their own right. Nonetheless, this unique population has received limited research attention when compared to that directed at athletes (Olusoga, Butt, Hays, & Maynard, 2009). Given that there are approximately 2.4 million coaches working in the United Kingdom alone (UK Coaching, 2016) who may face a variety of stressors, it is important that we better understand coaches' experiences to facilitate positive sport environments that may optimize coach and athlete performance.

Sport psychology researchers have frequently adopted a transactional conceptualization of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The transactional perspective proposes stress as an umbrella term that encompasses stressors, appraisals, coping, and emotions as central parts of stress transactions. From this perspective, stress is defined as "an ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with their environments, making appraisals of the situations they find themselves in, and endeavoring to cope with any issues that may arise" (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2008, p. 329). Stressors can be defined as "environmental demands (i.e., stimuli) encountered by an individual" (cf. Lazarus, 1999, p. 329) and, according to transactional stress theory, individuals evaluate (i.e., appraise) these stressors on an ongoing basis to assess their significance. The appraisal process is made up of primary appraising where an individual evaluates whether or not the situation is relevant and secondary appraising, which involves an evaluation of available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). During primary appraising, an individual may evaluate the situation as stressful and, if he or she does, one or more of three transactional alternatives (harm/loss, threat, challenge) can be experienced (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). A stressful appraisal is thought to activate coping (Lazarus, 1999), which can be defined as "constantly changing behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Coping strategies can be categorized as high-order coping dimensions, such as emotion-regulation (regulation of emotional states) or problem-focused (managing person-stressor transaction; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). More recent sport psychology research has suggested three further categorizations of coping: avoidance- (e.g., cognitive or behavioral efforts to avoid the situation), approach- (e.g., increasing effort),

and appraisal-focused coping (e.g., re-evaluation; see Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Whilst the five aforementioned categories are the most widely used among sport psychology researchers, there remains debate about how coping should be categorized (see Didymus & Fletcher, 2014; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003) and other researchers (e.g., Gaudreau & Blondin, 2002) have suggested three dimensions relating to task (e.g., imagery), distraction (e.g., distancing), and disengagement (e.g., venting) coping. Didymus (2016), however, recommended categorization of coping into families (e.g., dyadic coping, escape, information seeking, negotiation, problem solving, self-reliance, support seeking) that each represent a different function in adaptation. Thus, the question of how best to categorize coping remains unanswered.

How an individual copes with a stressor is a complex phenomenon that will influence their well-being (Malik & Noreen, 2015). Defining well-being is a challenge because published definitions often focus on dimensions of well-being (e.g., positive feelings or positive functions; Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012), rather than capturing the essence of what well-being is. The question of how well-being should be defined remains largely unresolved, which has resulted in multiple, broad definitions being reported in the literature (Gasper, 2010). In this study, well-being was viewed from a positive psychology standpoint as "a broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction" (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999, p. 277). This definition was adopted because it complements the basic premises of transactional stress theory (i.e., that judgments, or appraisals, and emotions are central to stress transactions) that have dominated the sport psychology literature on psychological stress. Previous research (e.g., Stenling, Lindwall, & Hassmén, 2015) has shown that decreases in athletes' well-being are mirrored by decreases in overall performance. This review will explore the research on coaches' well-being to assess, among other things, whether similar patterns are evident for this population.

While Fletcher and Scott (2010) previously published a narrative review of psychological stress in sports coaches and focused on definitional and theoretical issues, no published systematic review has comprehensively identified, evaluated, and summarized the research on stress and well-being among coaches. This is surprising given the influence that stress and well-being can have on coaches' performance (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003) and the need to better understand coaches' experiences if we are to offer evidence based recommendations for stress management and, ultimately, performance enhancement (Didymus, 2016). Further, coaches' experiences of stress can influence their performance and that of the athletes with whom they work (Thelwell et al., 2016). With this in mind, the aim of this study was to conduct a systematic review of the research that has explored the stressors that sports coaches' experience, the coping strategies that they use, and their well-being. A review of this nature will provide coaches, sports psychology practitioners, organizations, and researchers with directions for future research and practice, and will offer insight to coaches' experiences that may be used to enhance coach and athlete performance.

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