



Examining the relationship between hardiness and perceived stress-related growth in a sport injury context



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between hardiness, coping and perceived stress-related growth (SRG) in a sport injury context. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a cross-sectional design was employed, whereby 206 previously injured athletes (148 male, 58 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.23$ years) who had recently returned to sport completed three questionnaires: Dispositional Resilience Scale, Stress-Related Growth Scale, and Brief COPE. Pearson product–moment correlations and Preacher's and Hayes's (2008) bootstrapping procedure were used to analyze the data. Findings revealed a significant positive relationship between hardiness and perceived SRG. Two coping strategies were found to mediate this relationship: emotional support and positive reframing. This would suggest that those higher in hardiness may have fostered SRG by mobilising their social support for emotional reasons (e.g., moral support, sympathy or understanding) and having the ability to construe their injury in positive terms; however, more rigorous methodologies are needed to confirm or refute these observations. These findings support some of the central tenets of Joseph and Linley's (2005) organismic valuing theory and provide implications for professional practice. Future researchers should embrace qualitative inquiry to enhance the interpretability and meaningfulness of these findings (e.g., interpretative phenomenological analysis, narrative analysis), and use prospective, longitudinal pre-to-post sport injury designs to further substantiate them.

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There has been a shift in the psychology of sport injury literature, from the dominant focus on the negative consequences following injury, to a more inclusive approach that accounts for positively valenced subjective experiences, individual traits, and resources in the environment (e.g., Crawford, Gayman, & Tracey, 2014; Podlog & Eklund, 2006; Wadey, Clark, Podlog, & McCullough, 2013). This shift is encouraging in that Wadey, Evans, Evans, and Mitchell (2011) suggested that to provide a more balanced, complete understanding of the sport injury experience, not only do both positively and negatively toned consequences need to be explored, but also how they interact with one another. Indeed, although previous research has provided important insights into the stressors (e.g., incapacitation and rehabilitation setbacks), negatively-toned responses (e.g., grief and

depression), and suboptimal outcomes (e.g., not returning to one's pre-injury level of functioning) experienced by injured athletes, more recently researchers have conducted studies that complement this body of literature by exploring desirable concepts such as personal growth, dispositional optimism, and self-determination (e.g., Podlog, Dimmock, & Miller, 2011; Tracey, 2011; Wadey, Evans, Hanton, & Neil, 2012a). For example, Podlog et al. (2011) used the self-determination theory to guide interventions for injured athletes returning to competitive sport that aim to promote an environment that satisfies the three human psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy in order to minimize negative responses and maximize positive outcomes. We feel this more inclusive approach has the potential to provide valuable insights for practitioners who aim to buffer injured athletes' against negative consequences, as well as fostering desirable responses and recovery outcomes.

One positively valenced subjective experience that is gaining increased research attention in sport and exercise psychology generally, and the psychology of sport injury specifically, is one's perceptions of growth following a stressful or traumatic

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experience. By growth, we mean perceived positive changes that propel the individual to a higher level of functioning than that which existed prior to the stressor (cf. Carver, 1998). Taken together, the research that has been conducted thus far across the discipline of sport and exercise psychology can be considered at a macro-, meso- and micro-level. A macro-level perspective considers the effect demanding stimuli have over an individual's career (e.g., Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008; Day, 2013; Galli & Reel, 2012). A meso-level perspective is concerned with a more finite time period; for example, Burke and Sabiston's (2012) investigation of breast cancer survivors' perceived growth after scaling Mt. Kilimanjaro. Finally, a micro-level perspective explores a specific 'snap-shot' of an individual's experiences at any one given moment in time, which has been the approach typically taken to explore positive changes experienced by injured athletes once they have returned to sport (e.g., Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997; Wadey et al., 2012a). However, although the application of perceived growth is gaining research attention following various conditions and across different contexts, one issue surrounding this concept is that researchers continue to refer to this concept with a variety of terms (e.g., post-traumatic growth, stress-related growth, perceived benefits, thriving), which perpetuates conceptual ambiguity. Considering the choice of terminology is not trivial, Wadey et al. (2012b) recently recommended that researchers should justify the terms they employ. For this study, we use the term perceived stress-related growth (SRG) for two reasons: (a) we are interested in perceptions of growth rather than veridical growth; and (b) we are examining a 'stressful' event (e.g., sport injury) rather than a 'traumatic' experience (i.e., severe events or conditions involving threat to life).

One of the first studies that aimed to observe perceived SRG following sport injury was by Eileen Udry and her colleagues who conducted a program of research with injured U.S. elite skiers who had suffered season-ending injuries. Using a semi-structured interview guide, Udry et al. (1997) found the participants to report three dimensions of perceived SRG: (a) personal growth, (b) psychologically based performance enhancements, and (c) physical/technical development. Personal growth included gaining perspective (e.g., clarified priorities), personality development (e.g., enhanced empathy), developing aspects related to non-skiing life (e.g., developed different sides of self), and learned better time management (e.g., learned to meet deadlines). Psychologically based performance enhancements referred to increased efficacy/toughness (e.g., mentally tougher), enhanced motivation (e.g., learned whole new work ethic), and realistic expectations (e.g., learned what can/cannot do). Finally, physical/technical developments constituted skiing technically better (e.g., learnt to ski smarter) and physical health improvements (e.g., got stronger than ever before). Altogether, 81 raw data themes were identified. Considering that many of these positive changes have been reported in other fields of research to be associated with heightened sporting performance, improved subjective well-being, and reduced risk of (re)injury occurrence (cf. Connaughton et al., 2008; Williams & Andersen, 1998), it is clear that this concept may have important practical implications in terms of enabling injured athletes to successfully return to sport.

Since Udry et al.'s (1997) study, a number of subsequent studies have gone to on directly examine perceived growth following injury (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Tracey, 2011; Wadey et al., 2013, 2011) or reported it as a serendipitous finding (e.g., Bianco, Malo, & Orlick, 1999; Ford & Gordon, 1999; Hurley, Moran, & Guerin, 2007; Podlog & Eklund, 2006, 2009; Podlog et al., 2013; San Jose, 2003). Collectively, the aforementioned body of research has shown that male and female athletes, from team and individual sports, across various levels of competition, and with different types of injuries

have transformed their injury from a potentially debilitating experience into an opportunity for growth and development. However, one interesting finding to emerge from previous research is that while some injured athletes' perceive growth, others do not. Indeed, Udry et al. (1997) reported, "One skier was unable to identify any benefits associated with being injured" (p. 244). Consequently, they recommended that future researchers should identify the personal and situational factors that can affect growth and explain the mechanisms through which they operate. This recommendation aligns with the Integrated Model of Psychological Response to Sport Injury and Rehabilitation, which was first published by Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, and LaMott (1995) and later revised in 1998 (Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998). The integrated model posits that both pre- and post-injury variables affect how an athlete will respond to and rehabilitate from injury. Pre-injury factors comprise of personality (e.g., hardiness), history of stressors (e.g., daily hassles), coping resources (e.g., psychological skills), and interventions (e.g., stress management). After an athlete has incurred an injury, personal factors (e.g., personality) and situational factors (e.g., type of sport) are suggested to moderate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to injury, which in turn affect recovery outcomes, such as returning to a higher level of functioning (e.g., perceived SRG). Although this model does not explain how these pre- and post-injury factors might affect perceived SRG, it does have the potential to provide a comprehensive understanding of when and for whom an injury will lead to perceived SRG.

One personal disposition that has been conceptualized to transform stress into an opportunity for growth and development is the personality trait of hardiness. Kobasa (1979) observed that those individuals who experienced adversity and were able to cope effectively possessed three resilient attitudes that conceptualize hardiness: commitment, control, and challenge (i.e., the 3Cs). Specifically, commitment is a, "tendency to involve oneself in (rather than experience alienation from) whatever one is doing or encounters" (Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982, p. 169); control is a, "tendency to feel and act as if one is influential (rather than helpless) in the face of the varied contingencies of life" (Kobasa et al., 1982, p. 169); and challenge is the, "belief that change rather than stability is normal in life and that the anticipation of changes are interesting incentives to growth rather than threats to security" (Kobasa et al., 1982, p. 169–170). Maddi (2002) suggested that these attitudes provide the courage and motivation to use the hardiness actions that transform stressful situations from potential disasters into health and performance advantages. These actions cluster around three behaviors and cognitions: (a) social support, (b) positive health practices, and (c) transformational coping. In terms of transformational coping, for example, an individual high in hardiness is suggested to take a number of progressive steps to address not only the stressful event but also the strain it arouses (i.e., integration of problem- and emotion-focused coping). These steps involve broadening one's perspective to lower strain responses, increasing one's understanding of the stressful event and its aftermath to devise a plan-of-action, and implementing the plan-of-action to resolve and learn from the experience rather than avoiding it (Maddi, 2002).

The few researchers who have explored the effect of hardiness in the context of sport injury have revealed that it can facilitate athletes' recovery. In 1990, Grove, Stewart, and Gordon found that hardiness was negatively related to mood disturbance following injury, and Ford, Eklund, and Gordon (2000) observed a negative association with time-loss from injury (i.e., those higher in hardiness returned to sport sooner than their counterparts). Despite these preliminary isolated studies, only recently has hardiness been explored systematically. Wadey et al. (2012a, 2012b) examined

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