

Managing Stress in Sport

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The world of competitive sport is exciting, intense and increasingly fast-paced. Athletes and coaches alike often find themselves working overtime to identify ways to sharpen individual skills, maximize team talent, and develop mental toughness, all to stay one step ahead of the competition and achieve performance excellence. In truth, working hard and striving to be the best are hallmark goals of many competitors. However, if not properly balanced with necessary rest and down time, this quest to “be the best” can result in athletes and coaches experiencing increased feelings of pressure or stress that instead of propelling them toward their goal, can in fact be detrimental to performance. Knowing the signs and symptoms as well as effective stress management strategies can help people better manage their own stress. This can help coaches in providing more assistance and support to their athletes and staff and to create an overall healthier sport environment.

Stress Defined & Potential Causes

The National Institute of Mental Health, defines stress as the way in which the brain and body respond to any demand. Considering this definition, it’s reasonable to conclude that everyone experiences stress from time to time. Certainly, within sport environments where practice and performance demands are ever-present, feelings of stress can ebb and flow throughout the course of a season. Experiencing stress is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. Both positive and negative events can result in feelings of stress and in many cases, people can moderate these feelings. However, when one experiences extended periods of stress or chronic stress, feels that the demands of the situation or task outweigh their ability to respond, and/or have limited coping skills to effectively manage these feelings, the stress is more likely to be experienced as distress and consequently interfere with various aspects of functioning including sport performance (Benson, 1975; Sapolsky, 1998).

Sport and non-sport factors that can cause stress for coaches and athletes (Kroshus, 2014). In my experience, some of the common non-sport factors include family concerns, relationship issues, and academic or work related pressure. As for the sport environment, difficult relationships with teammates or coaches, unrealistic or unclear performance expectations, time demands, lack of clarity regarding role definition within the team, consistent critical feedback coupled with little to no communication of support or encouragement, intolerance for mistakes or mistakes being exclusively met with punishment (rather than being treated as learning opportunities), expectations of perfection, fear of failure, and limited definitions of success can all contribute to a stressful sport climate.

So, how can you tell if your athletes or coaches are stressed out or feeling excessive pressure? What signs should you look for and what can be done to manage stress and create a less stressful environment?

Signs & Symptoms

Everyone responds differently to stress but in thinking about the common signs and symptoms, they can generally be classified into one of four broad categories: cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioral. Cognitive signs of stress include: difficulty concentrating and making decisions, worrying, negative thoughts, and difficulty remembering and recalling information (e.g., forgetting plays). Anger or

irritability, anxiety, sadness or depression, decreased motivation and low self-esteem or self-criticism are some of the emotional signs of stress. Some of the physical manifestations of stress may include muscle tension, exhaustion and fatigue, headaches, and gastrointestinal issues. Another potential impact of stress is having an increased susceptibility to general illness or injury. The behavioral signs of stress are most often noticed by others. This includes performance declines in sport and possibly other areas (e.g., academics), social withdrawal or increased conflicts with others, direct statements about feeling overwhelmed or burned out, changes in sleep and appetite, or engagement in unhealthy coping behaviors. With all the ways a person could be impacted by stress, it becomes clearer to understand why minimizing negative stress within a sport environment is a key component of maximizing individual and team talent and creating a healthy & successful culture.

Managing Stress

Many different techniques and strategies are available to help with managing stress. However, the goal of any effective stress management plan is to identify strategies that one will consistently use and that decrease one's perceived feelings of stress. It's important for athletes and coaches to know what their stress looks like, first and foremost so that they know when they need to pause and make an adjustment to avoid becoming chronically stressed. This knowledge is also important because it can guide them toward stress management techniques to specifically address their needs. In addition to managing stress on a personal level, creating sport environments characterized by hard work balanced with support and encouragement, clear expectations, good communication, and fun can help to minimize perceptions of stress.

If a coach is concerned about one of their athletes or assistant coaches, it's important to let the person know that she is concerned. Beyond seeing the person as simply an athlete or a coach, expressing concerns about them as a person can go a long way in making them feel supported and subsequently decrease stress. Ask to speak with them privately, express concerns in a non-judgmental way, and if necessary, share the observed behaviors that are concerning (e.g., I've noticed you isolating from your teammates and forgetting plays in practice) and avoid making general negative statements about the person (e.g., You're messing up). Work together to identify what might be helpful for them and offer support in their process of dealing with the stress.

Sport can be stressful but stress can be managed. Knowing the signs and symptoms and employing stress management skills can help coaches in managing their own stress, providing support to athletes and assistant coaches and creating a healthy sport culture.

References

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