Sources of stress and coping strategies of Kenyan university athletes: Implications for coaches

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Abstract

The debate on whether participation in college sports is a “buffer” or “stressor” to student-athletes has not yielded conclusive consensus. The purpose of this study was to assess the sources of stress and coping strategies utilized by Kenyan university athletes. It was predicted that the sources of stress and coping strategies will not differ based on the university athletes’ gender, age, and level of study. Data were collected through the use of modified version of COPE inventory from 210 university athletes (males 60.7% and females 38.9%). Data were analyzed through independent t-test and one way ANOVA. Results showed that university athletes’ sources of stress were mainly interpersonal and environmental sources. These sources of stress varied significantly based on age (F₃,201=3.32, p<0.021), gender (t=2.18, df,202,p<0.03) and year of study (F₄,203=4.00, p<0.04). University athletes utilized both approach and avoidance coping strategies in equal measures and with minimal differences of the predictor variables of gender (t=4.05 df=195 p<0.000) and age (F₃,195=3.26, p<0.002). It is concluded that Kenyan university athletes are faced with stress levels and as such coping strategic urgent intervention measures are needed from university coaches, administrators and counselors.

Keywords: Stress, coping, coaches, university athletes.

How to cite this article:

Introduction

The concept of stress and sport participation has received unrestricted attention and focus. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) had defined stress as the negative feeling that occurs when an individual feels unable to cope with the demands placed upon them by their environment. Similarly, Stein and Cutler (2002) define stress as a total response to one’s environmental demands and pressures and theorize that stress is an unavoidable part of life that everyone has to deal with. Therefore, student-athletes by virtue of their roles and positional status in campus may be victims of stress (Martens et al., 2003; Ford, 2007).
Studies on one hand, have acknowledged that participation in sports can serve as a buffer to stress (Kudlacek, 1997; Shirka, 1997; Hudd, et al., 2000; Hsieh, 2001; Kimball & Freysinger, 2003). On the other hand, studies have also reported that college athletes are stressed due to balancing academic and athletic lives and maintaining high levels of performance, social isolation, responding to or anticipating possible exclusion from the team and maintaining multiple relationships with friends, academic and coaches (Pinkerton et al., 1989; Humprey, Yow & Bauden, 2000; Kimball & Freysinger, 2003; Papnikolaou et al., 2003; Martens et al., 2003; Ford, 2007).

Student-athletes are also influenced by stressors such as regimented schedules, time constraints, physical stress and fatigue, commitment to attend practice sessions and games, dual roles as both athlete and student, medical treatment, physical therapy, satisfying coaches, fans and family, expectations from significant others (Carodine et al., 2001, Stigler, Etzel & Lantz, 2001; Papnikolaou et al., 2003; Olivares, 2005; Singh & Surujlal, 2006; Martens et al., 2006; Humprey et al., 2006; Van Syle et al., 2009). Athletes also experience unique stressors related to their athletic status such as extensive time demands, loss of “star status” that many had experienced as high school athletes, injuries, the possibility of being benched/red-shifted’ during their freshman year and conflicts with their coaches (Papnikolaou et al., 2003).

Moreover, Martens et al. (2006) suggest that the unique social and academic challenges that student-athletes face place them at an increased risk for developmental and psychological problems which could result in them experiencing several stressors during their athletic careers (Kausar, 2010). Indeed, student-athletes are characterized by various maladaptive behavior including alcohol problems, depressive symptoms and lack of social support or practices, bad health habits, and untoward psychological experiences (Hudd et al., 2000; Nelson & Wechler, 2001; Papnikolaou et al., 2003; Martens et al., 2003; Martens et al., 2006; Rintaugu, Mwisukha & Amusa, 2012). Researchers have also found university students are among individuals with the highest prevalence of binge drinking due to the increase in stress level from school and academic-related activities (Lorente et al., 2003). Wechler et al. (2002) observed that the dual role as athlete and student may create an environment that increases the likelihood of athletes engaging in behavior risks including sexual activity and alcohol use.

Lack of coping with behavioral risks activities is associated with stress (Wechler et al., 2002). Coping is defined as the behavioral and cognitive efforts to manage the internal and external demands during a specific stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While coping strategies refer to the specific efforts both behavioral and psychological that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The coping styles of
student-athletes are affected by their personal influences of gender, level of competition, skill level and sources of stress (Kausar, 2010; Gan & Anshel, 2006). Coping styles used by student-athletes are dependent on the stressors experienced and the stressful occurrence they encounter (Anshel & Si, 2008; Holt & Hogg, 2002).

Numerous studies report that males and females employ different coping strategies which is based on the dispositional hypothesis derived from role constraint theory that attribute coping to different roles that each gender assumes in society (Tamres, Janieki & Helgesson, 2002; Hoar et al., 2010). Beyond gender differences, older athletes should have a wide coping repertoire from which coping strategies may be selected for use during stressful situations (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). Holt et al. (2005) showed that coping strategies varies based on age i.e. adolescents can use cognitively based strategies more frequently and more effectively than children. They observed that repertoire of coping strategies as well as efficiency increase over age.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded on Lazarus’ transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 2000). Coping processes in this theoretical framework is viewed as responses to an individual’s cognitive appraisals that are assumed to determine the type of coping strategies evoked (Folkman, 1991). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) coping can be characterized as cognitive, affective and behavioral efforts and resources used in order to meet specific external and/or internal demands.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping is a framework for evaluating the processes of coping with stressful events. Stressful experiences are construed as person-environment transactions. These transactions depend on the impact of the external stressor. This is mediated by firstly the person’s appraisal of the stressor and secondly on the social and cultural resources at his or her disposal (Cohen, 1984). When faced with a stressor, a person evaluates the potential threat (primary appraisal). Primary appraisal is a person’s judgment about the significance of an event as stressful, positive, controllable, challenging or irrelevant. Facing a stressor, the second appraisal follows, which is an assessment of people’s coping resources and options (Cohen, 1984). Secondary appraisals address what one can do about the situation. Actual coping efforts aimed at regulation of the problem give rise to outcomes of the coping process.

**Literature review**

Studies in Taiwan (Hsieh, 2001) reported that collegiate student-athletes sources of stress were academic requirements, competition, not being able to compete,
not able to participate in competitions, return to sport and multi-roles. They observed that the biggest challenge for student-athletes was inability to balance between sport and academic requirements and psychological distress of adaptation to university life, academic requirements, training, injury, career plan and drugs and eating disorders. However, Hsieh (2001) also showed that the encouragements from teammates helped student-athletes adjust to demands placed on them.

Etzel et al. (1994) pointed out that collegiate athletes were among the high-risk groups for various health behaviors including alcohol abuse, eating disorder, coping with the stressors of injuries and academic performance, overtraining, lack of sleep and feeling of exhaustion. They opined that due to the above challenges, students are more susceptible than other students to experiencing psychological distress. In a similar study by Kim, Change and Destini (2002) on Korean intercollegiate student athletes found that seven main stressors of interpersonal, relationships, sport injury, worry of competition, training demands, academic performance, expectation from significant others and non-sport problems. Humprey et al. (2000) found that almost half of the male athletes and slightly more than half of the female athletes interviewed experienced stresses associated with sport participation such as pressure to win, excessive anxiety, frustration, conflict, irritation and fear. These aspects significantly affected their mental or emotional health.

While comparing the differences in the types of stress that athletes and non-athletes experience, Wilson and Pritchard (2005) found that student athletes reported more stress compared to non-athletes in a wide variety of variables such as dealing with conflicts with a boyfriend or girlfriend’s family, not getting enough time for sleep and having heavy demand from extracurricular activities. On the other hand, non-athletes reported more stress than their athlete counterparts in areas such as financial burdens, making important decisions about their education, getting ripped off (e.g. paying too much for services), social conflicts over smirking with a roommate or friend, difficulties with transportation, social isolation, being ignored and being dissatisfied with their physical appearance.

Abedalbasit et al. (2010) explored the sources of stress and use of coping styles among Jordan University athletes (n=50). Results indicated that the most common source of stress experienced were injury and illness, pressures of competition, referee, conflict with the coach and spectators. Panahi and Nejad (2011) compared the strategies of coping with stress among elite athletes (n=340) in Iranian national I sports men and women in different age groups. They used COPE revised to measure coping styles used by elite athletes. In this Iranian study the results indicated that athletes used accommodation, approach, self-punishment, self-help and avoidance strategies. Furthermore, it was reported
that older athletes used approach and self-punishment coping strategies and male athletes used emotion focused style more than female athletes.

Kaiseler et al. (2012) investigated gender differences in appraisal and coping among a sample of male and female soccer players. The respondents rated stressors intensity and perceived control and completed the Modified-COPE (MCOPE) in response to 3 different experiment defined stress scenarios. Results showed that there was gender differences in coping after controlling for stress intensity and control were found across the three scenarios. Results suggest that males and females differ in their preference for the use of certain coping strategies and that gender is a moderator in the stress appraisal and coping process. From these studies, a large number of sources of stress have been identified and several appear to be common across sports suggesting that there could be a core group of stressors experienced by all athletes (Mckay et al., 2008).

Selected demographic variables and sport specific factors have been associated with stress and coping strategies. In this regard, Rogowska and Kusnierz (2012) determined the extent to which gender, age, skill level and years of practice serve as predictors of coping styles in Judo. Results from 98 judo competitors (Females =47 and 51 males aged 13-21 years) showed that gender, age and judo practice served as predictors for approach avoidance or behavioral coping styles. Similarly, Hoar et al. (2010) examined gender differences in the types of coping strategies adolescents’ athletes used to manage sport-related interpersonal stress. Adolescent athletes (n=524) completed measures of stress appraisal and coping strategy use in response to a self-selected interpersonal stress sources in sport. Results found that gender differences in selected coping strategies supported partially the situational gender coping hypothesis. From the literature reviewed, it is apparent that student–athletes experience a variety of sources of stress and employ diverse coping strategies. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the sources of stress and coping strategies employed by Kenyan university athletes. The study predicted that the sources of stress and coping will be mediated by the athletes’ age, gender and level of study.

Methodology

Participants

Data were collected from 210 Kenyan university athletes (60.7% males and 38.9% females) between the age of 16 and 24 years. When the athletes were further divided into three age categories; about 44.7% were aged 22–24 years, 45.5% were aged 19-21 years, 5-6% were over 24 years and 3.8% were aged between 16-18 years (Table 1).
A questionnaire which was divided into three sections was used for data collection. Section A of the instrument sought demographic details of the respondents such as gender, age, year of study, sport and length of playing for the university teams. Section B contained items derived from the stress sources survey which had 30 items to measure sources of stress. These items were weighted on a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1(always), to 5 (never). The survey items were derived from previous studies related to sport (Mc Kay et al., 2008; O’Neil & Steyn, 2007). The items represented six sources of stress as interpersonal source, competition/training, academic source and environmental sources. Section C had items on coping styles which were assessed with the Coping Style in Sport Inventory (CSSI). The CSSI has 16 items that measures the two styles of coping of approval and avoidance. The athletes were asked to indicate their reactions to each stressful event they had often experienced in sport in the university on 5 point likert scale ranging from 1 (always) to 5 (never).

Data collection procedures

The study included student-athletes who were in residential training preparing for a national university sport competitions. Permission to conduct the study was sought from the directorate of sports and games to conduct the study. After permission was granted, the student-athletes were informed about the study objectives and were informed that participating in the study was voluntary and they could pool out of the study with no consequences. After this, they were requested to sign consent forms which was treated as a way of accepting to take part in the study. Questionnaires were administered to the student athletes with the assistance of coaches after training sessions. The targeted sample size was 321 student-athletes, but only 210 student-athletes questionnaires were processed implying a return rate of 65.42% which was considered adequate for the study.

Data analysis

Data were coded and analyzed with statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 20) and reported in frequencies, means and percentages. Independent t-test was used to test for differences in the sources of stress and coping strategies between males and females while one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test differences between students defined by age, year of study and type of sport. Any significant differences from ANOVA were subjected to Post hoc tests of Tukey HSD at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

The demographic details of the participants showed that more males participated in the study than females (Table 1). Most of the participants in the study were
aged between 19 to 24 years and this is the age of students enrolled in universities in Kenya. Most of the participants were in third year of study followed by those in fourth year of study. This could be attributed to the fact that most of the degree programmes in Kenyatta University take four years. Secondly, the third (37.6%) and fourth year student-athletes are conversant with the university routine, and may be able to create time to participate in sport. The lower number of first years in the study could be attributed to the fact that a majority of first years unless really talented may take time before they join the university teams. As expected, most of the participants took part in ball games such as soccer, volleyball, handball, rugby, netball, basketball and hockey. According to their distribution into different sport’s participation, 69.15% of the participants participated in Ball games, 8.87% in racket games (Table Tennis, Tennis and Badminton), 6.07% in athletic (track and field), 4.67% in martial arts (Judo and Taekwondo) while 5.6% in Board games (chess and scrabble) and swimming respectively. Ball games are not only popular in the university but in other levels of education (Rintaugu, 2005).

Table 1: Demographic details of the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (yrs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 – 18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 – 21</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 – 24</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of Study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Sport</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ball games</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>69.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racket (TT, Tennis, Badminton)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martial arts (judo, Taekwondo)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board games</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources of Stress

The 30 items which were used to measure the sources of stress were collapsed into five (5) clusters of stress of interpersonal, intrapersonal, competition/training, academic and environmental sources.
Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations on sources of stress of university student athletes. The results showed that the sources of stress among university athletes ranged from interpersonal sources followed by environmental, competition/training, academic and intrapersonal sources. The study sought to establish whether the sources of stress differ based on demographic factors. Findings revealed that sources of stress differed based on age ($F_{3, 201}=3.32$, $p<0.021$) on the source of too much pressure to satisfy sports and class demands with younger athletes (16-18 years) differing from those of 19-24 years. Tukey Post hoc tests revealed that those aged 16–18 years differed from those of 19-24 years. Those students who were aged 16-18 years had higher means on too much pressure to satisfy sports and class demands. On the item of lack of team cohesion, participants who were in first year of study differed from those in years 3 and 4 and also year 2 differed from year 5. The item on lack of progression had year 1 differing from the other years. Those in years one had higher means altogether. Gender returned significant differences on competition for positions cohesion ($t=2.18$, $df=202$, $p<0.030$). In all the above aspects females had higher means than male athletes. The effect of year of study produced two significant f-rations ($F_{4,203}=4.00$, $p < 0.004$) on lack of team cohesion with participants in first year reporting higher means. The same first years differed ($F_{4,197}=4.62$, $p <0.001$) on the lack of progression in team performance.

Coping Strategies

The coping strategies employed by the participants are presented in Table 3. Results show that the five main avoidance coping strategies were “I felt like giving up” “I did not take the situation seriously”, “I used profanity due to frustration than quickly regained my composure”, “I thought about something else and I quickly forgot about it and moved forward”. The most frequently approach coping strategies were “I argued become critical/angry”, “I thought about the unpleasant experiences for sometime”, “I became very self-critical and I become more aggressive” and “I became more psyched-up”. Cumulatively avoidance coping strategies had a mean of 2.59 while approach coping strategies had a mean of 2.35. The study was out to determine whether the coping strategies were mediated by selected demographic factors of gender, age and year of study. The $t$-test results revealed that gender had significant differences on the coping strategy of I did not take the situation seriously (Avoidance) ($t=4.05$, $df=195$, $p=0.000$). In this aspect the females had higher means than male
athletes. The coping strategies differed based on age in the aspect of using profanity (Avoidance) \((F_{3,195}=3.26, p < 0.02)\) while year of study returned significant differences on the turned attention to the next task (Avoidance).

**Table 3:** Coping strategies employed by Kenyan university student-athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Just thought about something else</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I became more psyched – up</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought about the unpleasant experiences for sometime</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I became more enthusiastic to overcome the problem</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tried to learn from the unpleasant experience</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt like giving up</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I became very self-critical (for more than a few seconds)</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I argued/become critical/angry</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I analyzed what went wrong</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I concentrated on what I had to do next</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I analyzed what went wrong</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I concentrated on what I had to do next</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tried to get more information about the problem</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not take the situation seriously</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I become more aggressive</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I used profanity due to frustration than quickly regained my composure</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I quickly forgot about it and moved forward.</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I immediately turned my attention to the next task</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The sources of stress reported in this study are similar to Meichi and Likang (2010) who found that five sources of stress identified by collegiate student-athletes were interpersonal, intrapersonal, academic, training/competition related and environmental sources. Within the cluster of interpersonal sources, highest means were reported on family issues, coach related issues of dressing down players, neglect and poor communication. The least sources of stress within this cluster included competition for positions, desire to make nonathletic friends. In the category of environmental sources athletes reckoned on lack of cohesion/discipline, lack of progression in performance and training attitudes of teammates. These findings are contrary to Stilger et al. (2001) who found that academic concerns were a major source of stress to student-athlete and that their many responsibilities make their lifestyle uniquely demanding. However these results concurred with James and Collins (1997) where they argued that not performing to the required standard was a general source of stress. This may imply that poor performance may lead to more worrying situations for student athletes. Martens et al. (2006) student-athletes experience the need to satisfy the expectation of coaches, fans and family. Donato et al. (1994) found that student athletes feel more pressure to perform at a higher level than their peers both inside and outside the classroom. They also found that athletes encounter
pressures on a daily basis such as isolated living quarters, long hours spent in training and travelling. Surujlal et al. (2013) opined that student-athletes find themselves under tremendous pressure to excel, compete successfully, meet academic and perform their own expectations of others. Humprey et al. (2000) and Papnikolaou et al. (2003) athletes often find relationships with others quite stressful. Adedalbasit et al. (2010) findings have suggested that athletes often report problems such as negative and unsatisfactory relationships with teachers, coaches and fellow athletes. Results indicated that the most common source of stress were injury and illness, pressures of competition, referee, conflict with the coach and spectators and they identified 16 coping strategies used to manage stress. Hsieh (2001) concluded the sources of stress they underwent were academic requirements competition, not being able to compete, not participate in the competition, and return to sport and multi-roles.

Competition and training was the third source of stress among the university athletes. Within the cluster of competition and training, athletes reported mainly not able to improve performance, isolation from teammates after injury, lack of control of performance and inappropriate expectations. The major student athlete time demands includes games, travelling, film/video sessions, weight training, injury/recovery treatment, media responsibilities and alumni/community related duties (Thomas, 2008). Humprey et al. (2000) reported athletes were stressed by factors such as tests and examinations, preparing papers for class, missing classes because of travel and making up missed assignments. It is generally acknowledged that freshman year of college is stressful time of social and academic that they are integrated in campus academic culture to adjustment (Lubker & Etzel, 2007; Martin et al., 1994). It is a time that can be filled with emotional disturbances such as loneliness, home sickness, and grief. This could trigger risk behaviors’ such as subsistence abuse and thereby compromise a student athlete’s college grades. Meichi and Likang (2010), had found that the competitive nature and negative interactions with teammates resulted in stress reaction while team cohesions and positive interaction supported student-athletes.

Findings on gender that males are more stressed than females are contrary to Humprey’s et al. (2000) findings that almost half of the male athletes indicated that stress associated with sport participation such as pressure to win, excessive anxiety, frustration, conflict, irritation and fear significantly affected their mental or emotional health. The authors argued that females tended to be over socialized in comparison to the males who demonstrated having a higher need for approval and greater concern for others needs resulting in higher levels of distress. Rudolph (2002) reported that females experience more stress in associations with parents, peers and intimate relationships whereas males experience more difficulties with achievement related events that involve others.
Results of this study showed that student-athletes utilized avoidance coping strategies more than approach coping strategies. These findings are contrary to Rogowsa and Kuspierz (2012) findings that approach style of coping gained a dominant position whereas avoidance style received the lowest value which presented adaptive ways of coping. Recent reviews suggest that male and female athletes might utilize different coping strategies when dealing with stressful encounters (Kaiseler & Polman, 2010; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Panachi and Nejad (2011) found that male athletes use the avoidance and self-punishment strategies more than females. Also older athletes used the approach and self-punishment strategies more than other age groups. They also found that athletes use the problem-focused strategy more than the emotion focused ones. Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) showed that male athletes use the emotion-focused (avoidance) strategy more than the problem focused (approach). Anshel, Sutarso and Jubenville (2009) reported that female college athletes used approach and avoidance coping styles more often than male counterparts.

Present findings indicate that males and females differ in their preference for the use of certain coping strategies and that gender is a moderator in stress appraisal and coping process. Both the appraisal and selection of coping strategies may be influenced by biological and/or social factors which can explain differences between the genders. Previously obtained gender differences would point to differentiating between males and females when teaching coping skills. In addition, it would be important to first assess clients cognitive appraisal process before developing an athlete’s coping skills. A possible explanation for this finding is that females have a tendency to appraise situations with higher levels of stress (intensity) as compared to men who experience situations more intensely. But it is under whether this is a consequence of biological or leaving differences. Nicholls et al. (2007) indicated that females use more approach strategies for planning, technique-oriented coping and communication than males. Hammersteiter and Burton (2004) females more than often used avoidance coping than their male counterparts. Females seek more social support for emotional, rumination and positive self-talk (Hoar et al., 2010). Hoar et al’s. (2010) study reported that females use more instances of seeking social support and cognitive re-appraisal. Males reported using more instances of aggression compared to females.

According to Martin et al. (2006), athletes older than 30 years use the approach and self-punishment strategies more than the other age groups possibly because of their experience they encounter the problems and stressing factors, check their experience and by accepting the reality, manage and organize their emotions to decrease the stressing factors and their effects. In Folkman et al. (1987) the adult athletes used the emotion focused coping strategy and younger athletes used the problem-focused more often. Kaiseler, Polman and Nicholls (2012) reported that female use more of the problem-focused coping strategy seeking informational
social support and the emotional focused coping strategies seeking emotional support and wishful thinking across the 3 scenarios. Hoar et al. (2010) suggested that the results in their study may be due to age-related differences since adolescents are likely to have a narrower coping repertoire.

Recommendations

Firstly, coaches need to come up with strategies to assist university athletes to navigate major sources of stress such as interpersonal and environmental sources. Strategies such as improving coach-athlete relationships, athlete-athlete relationships may be of great assistance. Additionally, this can be possible by having more social activities, open forums where team cohesion can be enhanced. Secondly, coaches need to appreciate that the athletes are students first and the athletes secondly. Consequently they need to appreciate that student-athletes have to balance the dual requisites of academia and sports participation. This requires coaches and sport administrators to reflect on their communication and leadership styles.

As some selected demographic factors of age, gender and year of study influence sources of stress and coping strategies then first year students need to be guided, encouraged, supported and be insulated from bullying by older athletes. Coaches, sport administrators and university counselors need to be aware on sources of stress and coping strategies that are gender specific such as competition for positions, self-high expectations and lack of cohesion among female athletes. Future predictions can be done on how other selected demographic factors like type of sport, degree programme and university environment may interact with the sources of stress and coping strategies. Given limited information regarding comparison between student-athletes and non-athletes, it therefore necessary for future studies to compare the sources of stress and coping strategies of student–athletes and non-athletes.

Conclusions

Student-athletes are stressed mostly by interpersonal sources (negative interactions, competition for positions, coach related issues) followed by environmental sources i.e. lack of team cohesion, teammate’s attitudes, stagnated performance and competition training (lack of progression, isolation, lack of control of performance). University athletes use avoidance coping strategies of profanity and ignoring stressful situations while approach coping strategies included arguments /anger/criticism /aggression.

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