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Coping without doping: Exploring the relationship between psychological stress and chemical assistance in high performance rugby

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OBJECTIVES: To explore associations between rugby players' stressful experiences, their coping resources, and their use of chemical assistance.

DESIGN: A qualitative research design was adopted. Lazarus' (1999) cognitive-motivational-relational theory was used as the theoretical lens to address the study objectives.

METHODS: Ten male (n=7) and female (n=3) high level rugby league and union players ($M_{age} = 22.6$, $SD = 2.80$) were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. A high level player was defined as an individual currently competing in national league one or above who had been competing at that level for at least five years. All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 25 and 98 minutes ($M_{length} = 52.40$, $SD = 27.54$). Data was analysed using thematic analysis procedures.

RESULTS: All players reported lifetime use of nutritional supplements and that their consumption dovetailed stressful experiences in rugby. Some (n=5) of the participants suggested that they had used, or considered using, banned substances to cope with chronic stressors such as injury, pressure to perform, and pressure to increase muscle mass. Players were most likely to use supplements and or banned substances to cope with stressors when their personal and social coping resources had been depleted.

CONCLUSIONS: This study has shaped our understanding of the associations between psychological stress and chemical assistance in rugby. Researchers and practitioners are encouraged to develop coping interventions that focus on chronic stressors and to educate players about the risks involved with potentially maladaptive coping strategies, such as supplement and banned substance use.

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