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# Stressors and Coping Among Voluntary Sports Coaches



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## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

- Sports coaching can be a naturally stressful occupation. Coaches must be able to competently and effectively manage stress that is inherent in their role to perform under pressure. Yet, limited research exists that explores coaches' experiences of psychological stress. The research that does exist has mainly focused on full-time elite coaches who represent a marginal percentage of the coaching workforce in the United Kingdom (U.K.). Indeed, 72% of the 1.5 million individuals who engage in coaching in the U.K. every year operate on a voluntary basis (North, 2009).
- We viewed stressors from a transactional perspective as "environmental demands (i.e., stimuli) encountered by an individual" (Fletcher et al. 2006, p. 329) and coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural 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).
- Despite the substantial contribution that voluntary coaches make to the coaching workforce, there has been no research to date which explores their experiences of stressors and coping.
- The purpose of this study was, therefore, to explore the stressors that voluntary coaches experience and the coping strategies that they use.

## METHODOLOGY

- Our approach to research sits within an interpretive paradigm whereby we believe that reality exists based on an individual's subjective experience of the world.
- We adopt a constructionist epistemology and relativist ontology, which explains that knowledge is constructed through social interaction as opposed to being created (Sparkes & Smith, 2008).
- The findings presented are the authors' interpretations of the coaches' experiences, which represent one possible interpretation of the data collected. Readers are encouraged to interpret the findings in ways that are meaningful for them and to draw their own conclusions from the insight that is offered.

## METHODS AND ANALYSES

- Institutional ethical approval was granted.
- Participants were recruited using snowballing sampling.
- Participants were three males and one female, with an average age of 38.5 years ( $SD=11.68$ ) and between six and 28 years of coaching experience.
- The sports represented were football ( $n=1$ ), disability tennis ( $n=1$ ), and athletics ( $n=2$ ).
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis to construct in-depth and insightful knowledge.
- Coaches were first asked to recall stressors from their memorable past. This recall phase was followed by in-depth explorations of each stressor and the coping strategies that the coaches employed.
- Interviews were analysed using an abductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

- The voluntary coaches reported a range of stressors that relate to their athletes, themselves, and the organisation.
- The coaches discussed using a range of coping strategies to reduce or eliminate the impact of stressors, which vary from planning to distraction strategies.
- Future research should explore the impact of stressors on the well-being of our coaching workforce.

## RESULTS

- **Stressors** were categorized as either athlete-related (12), coach-related (3), or organisational (17).
- **Coping strategies** were categorized as either planning (6), experience and learning (7), avoidance (7), approach (7), psychological skills (4), distraction (5), confrontation (1), and social support (9).

Stressor dimensions	Themes	Example quotes
Athlete-related stressors	Managing athlete disappointment	"Managing their disappointment and it's not really something I look forward to. It's having to manage some difficult conversations about exploring why they didn't perform."
	Paralympic cycles	"The player's about to go to Rio for the Paralympics, so it's apprehensive to make sure he performs when he's out there."
Coach-related stressors	Time	"Time is a big factor that adds stress, trying to find the time to fit everything in as well as coaching."
	Balancing multiple roles	"So I do my full time job and then at the weekends do consultancy and the voluntary coaching, which is six to 16 hours a week, so it becomes a jigsaw to put things in."
Organizational stressors	Admin duties	"Even with voluntary coaching you still have to do all the registration forms and making sure every child is registered to the club."
	NGBs	"National governing bodies are stressful because they have four year Olympic cycles of funding that they work with."

Coping dimensions	Themes	Example quotes
Planning	Plan for the season	"I like to sit down at the start of the season and make a plan, this is what I'm going to do, we're going to play these games and train like this, and what I want to achieve over the year."
Experience and learning	Coach education	"I've done some coach personal development and coach education stuff to help me cope."
Avoidance	Hid away	"I just sat outside Buckingham Palace on the circuit, I just hid away until it had all finished and the spectators had left, and then I got myself back to the start finish area."
Approach	Switched off phone	"My phone instantly started going off, but I just turned my phone off. I didn't want to speak to anyone so I just turned it off."
Psychological skills	Meditation	"I have at least five to 10 minutes a day where I'm completely silent and I'm doing some form of meditating to help me relax after a stressful day."
Distraction	Go walking	"If I get the opportunity then I go for a walk to de-stress. In the summer if it's nice, light nights, I'll go out and get some fresh air."
Confrontation	Vent	"I come home and I vent and have a nagging 30 minutes or so about my day, and then that's it, I'm not allowed to talk about it anymore."
Social support	Mentor	"I speak to my mentor, I can ring him up at any time and say can you help me with this, what should I do, what are your thoughts, and he's always there to help."

"Coaches are performers, educators, administrators, leaders, planners, motivators, negotiators, managers, and listeners, but they are also people."  
 (Giges, Petitpas, & Vernacchia, 2004, p. 431)