

Managing stressful sport transactions: Adolescents' coping behaviours pre-, during, and post-races throughout a swim season

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This project used Lazarus' (1991, 1999) Stress Theory as a framework to qualitatively investigate the stress management processes used by elite adolescent swimmers. Lazarus' model is dynamic and context-dependent, but most sport studies have provided limited information about coping patterns that occur over time. This study examined the patterns of adolescent swimmers' coping behaviors surrounding four major meets during the 2005/06 season. Participants were eight swimmers (4 females and 4 males) participating in provincial and national meets in the U-14 (n = 4) and U-17 (n = 4) age groups. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted for each swimmer: one preliminary interview and an interview before and after each of four meets. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Results indicated that various coping behaviours used during specific phases (pre-, during, and post-races) of competitions were consistent across the four meets for most participants. The majority of coping took place before the races. During this time, participants tended to move their attention away from their upcoming event. This strategy was followed by the use of specific routines closer to the start of the races. Routines were used to focus attention on the race and included strategies such as talking to the coach, stretching, and listening to music. During competitions, swimmers used a combination of problem and emotion-focused coping strategies. The coping choices were based on the availability of immediate feedback during the race. After the races, swimmers engaged in a routine to regulate their performance-related emotions. This routine was not based on swimmers' preferences but rather reflected a swimming ritual common to most swimmers. This included talking to the coach and warming down. Finally, rationalization was sometimes used to try to justify unsuccessful performances. Overall, this study suggests that adolescent elite swimmers have preferred coping strategies that they use in specific swimming situations.