

THE ROLE OF PEERS IN MANAGING INTERPERSONAL STRESS IN ELITE YOUTH SPORT

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The purpose of this study was to examine how peers provide support to elite adolescent athletes in stressful peer interactions in sport. This project used Lazarus' (1991, 1999) cognitive-motivational-relational theory as a framework to qualitatively explore how adolescent athletes appraised and coped with stressful situations surrounding their relationships with their peers in sport, and their perceptions of the role of their friends and teammates in providing support. Participants were 30 provincial-level athletes (16 females and 14 males) between the ages of 14 and 18 years representing both individual (swimming, canoeing, kayaking) and team (soccer, field hockey, synchronized swimming) sports. Semi-structured interviews (30-60 minutes) included a discussion of a recent stressful interaction with their friends or teammates in sport, and the role of their close sport friends, other teammates, and non-sport friends in the situation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using content analysis procedures. Results indicated that many adolescent athletes felt that their close sport friends, and sometimes teammates, provided emotional support and reality confirmation. Only a few perceived that their sport friends and teammates provided instrumental support, as many felt that their peers were powerless to help resolve the stressful situation. In some cases, particularly among males, peer support was viewed as neither helpful nor desirable in the situation. Non-sport friends played a unique role in some cases by providing an "outsider" view, support that is not influenced by the social dynamics of the team. Non-sport friends, however, were not often sought for support. Since they were not part of the athlete's sport life, it was perceived that they wouldn't understand. Results are congruent with previous research suggesting that there are gender differences in social support processes among adolescent athletes. Social support seeking and the support provided also vary depending on the perceived power of particular peers to effectively help, and group norms in the context of the stressful transaction. These findings have implications for understanding the role of peers in adolescent athletes' emotional experiences in sport.