

# Dealing with stress as a coach

## What is stress?

*“Stress is not what happens to us. It's our response TO what happens. And RESPONSE is something we can choose.”*

The pressure of performing in sports is creating stress amongst athletes and coaches. Stress itself is a physiological, mental, emotional and behavioral response of an individual towards a specific situation (e.g. a game). Stress isn't necessarily something entirely negative, there is also such a thing as positive stress.

## Difference between negative and positive stress

*“Stress is like spice - in the right proportion it enhances the flavor of a dish. Too little produces a bland, dull meal; too much may choke you.”*

Stress can only occur, if an individual perceives a situation as relevant. If the situation is perceived as unimportant, there will be no stress. If a coach perceives a specific situation, e.g. a game, as important and relevant, stress will occur. Whether this stress is perceived as negative or positive depends on the coach's perception of his own coping options. Each challenging situation presents specific demands. If the coach is convinced that he possesses enough personal skills and resources (coping options) to meet these demands, he will perceive positive stress. However, if the coach isn't convinced that his skills/resources are enough to manage the demands of the situation or if he even thinks that he is lacking the necessary skills/resources, then negative stress will be the consequence. Thus the same situation can lead to (negative/positive) stress for one person, but to no stress for another.

So whether you perceive positive or negative stress as a person or a coach, doesn't depend on the situation itself, but on your subjective evaluation of the specific demands of the situation and your coping options. Thus two questions decide, if you feel (negatively or positively) stressed:

1. Is this situation relevant to me?

No → you won't feel stressed

Yes → possibility of negative stress

2. Do I possess enough coping strategies to meet the demands of this situation?

Yes → positive stress

No → negative stress

### **Negative stress aka Distress:**

- Causes anxiety or concern.
- Can be short- or long-term.
- Is perceived as outside of our coping abilities.
- Feels unpleasant.
- Decreases performance.
- Can lead to mental and physical problems.

### **Positive stress aka Eustress:**

- Motivates, focuses energy.
- Is short-term.
- Is perceived as within our coping abilities.
- Feels exciting.
- Improves performance.

## **Different types of coping**

*“The more tranquil a man/woman becomes, the greater is his/her success, his/her influence, his/her power for good. Calmness of mind is one of the beautiful jewels of wisdom.”*

If you are to effectively manage the stressful demands of (competitive) sport as a coach then you must develop, modify, or enhance various coping and emotion regulation skills.

Your coping skills not only regulate your emotions but also your cognitions, behaviour, and the environment during stressful situations. There are numerous coping strategies you can use in a purposeful manner to manage your level of stress. These coping strategies can be divided in different categories: problem-focused, emotion-focused/avoidance coping.

### **Problem-focused coping:**

Problem-focused coping targets the causes of stress in practical ways which tackles the problem or stressful situation that is causing stress, consequently directly reducing the stress. Such strategies are:

- Problem-solving.
- Time-management.
- Obtaining instrumental social support.

In general problem-focused coping is best, as it removes the stressor, so deals with the root cause of the problem, providing a long-term solution. However, it is not always possible to use problem-focused strategies.

Emotion-focused coping:

Emotion-focused coping tries to reduce the negative emotional responses associated with stress; e.g. embarrassment, fear, anxiety, etc. This may be the only realistic option when the source of stress is outside the person's control. Various emotion-focused coping strategies are:

- Distraction, e.g. keeping yourself busy to take your mind off the issue.

- Emotional disclosure. This involves expressing your emotions by talking or writing about it.
- Meditation, e.g. mindfulness.

There are also harmful strategies, such as:

- Eating more, e.g. comfort food.
- Drinking alcohol.
- Using drugs.

Emotion-focused strategies are often less effective than using problem-focused methods in relation to health outcomes. Such strategies are ineffective as they ignore the root cause of the stress. Emotion-focused coping does not provide a long-term solution and may have negative side effects as it delays the person dealing with the problem.

## Coping strategies

*“Set peace of mind as your highest goal, and organize your life around it.”*

### **1. Take Breaks**

In order to prevent burnout, it is important to remember to step away from the game. This can take several forms from a quick 15-minute break or actual vacation time, depending on the situation.

Examples can be:

- Leaving the office to go for a walk around the complex to give the mind a rest.
- Exercising as a way to relieve the stress of the job.
- Taking extended vacations before or after a season with friends or family to make sure the mind is fresh for a new year.

After taking a break, coaches return to the field with a clean slate and a fresh set of eyes. Coaches are not only relaxed, but have the energy to deal with the headaches that come with coaching. This tactic may even allow them to figure out the solution to that one, persistent problem.

### **2. Keep a Realistic Schedule**

Keeping a schedule is important in any industry, especially athletics. It can be easy for people to unintentionally double-book schedule slots or budget too little time for a problem that winds up taking much larger than anticipated. Coaches can get so busy they won't even remember what was on their to-do list without having it written down. To help keep an organized schedule, invest in a planner with plenty of slots for careful scheduling and room in the margins to make notes on certain tasks. Coaches need to stay away from stretching themselves too thin, so remember not to schedule too many obligations. Furthermore, allow ample time to complete each task by blocking off large slots in the schedule for events that take more time to complete.

Following these tips will allow coaches to keep their days well planned and relieve stress by knocking out obligations in an efficient manner.

### **3. Delegate Tasks**

Another way to stay organized and alleviate some of your workload is by delegating tasks to coaching assistants. This is why there is a coaching staff. Remember that assistant coaches or people responsible within your club can handle tasks like making phone calls to other teams, administration, or potential prospects. Allow them to help plan the itinerary for an upcoming road trip or hold meetings with a certain subset of the team. By trusting in the people around them to take items off of their plate, coaches can significantly reduce their stress levels.

### **4. Allow Time for Personal Exercise & Healthy diet**

While coaches spend all day working athletes into physical shape, it can be hard to remember to take the time to stay in shape themselves. Many coaches were once competitive athletes and know what it feels like to stay in shape and eat healthy. There are many benefits to staying in shape which include:

- Improving confidence, self-esteem, and body image.
- Setting a good example for athletes that demonstrates a commitment to athletics and health is lifelong.
- Keeping a healthy weight.
- Releasing endorphins keeps people happy while loosening up the muscles to relieve stress and frustration.

As a coach, it can be tempting to work twelve hour days and forget to schedule time for personal exercise & healthy eating. Remember that exercising and healthy food is one of the easiest and most rewarding ways to relieve stress.

### **5. Give Breathing Techniques a Chance**

When it comes to breathing techniques, it is important to inhale and exhale deeply. Breathing techniques have proven results that have helped everyone, including coaches, manage stress. Breathing in deeply allows for maximal expansion and deflation. This helps to stretch and release muscles that are commonly used to carry stress. As the fibers move across each other, substances such as lactic acid are released from muscles and help people to relax. This releases hormones that create happiness and relieve stress. After a few breaths, it will slow down the heart rate and allow the stress to dissipate.

### **6. Spend Time With Those Close to You**

Almost every sport has games during the weekends and practices during the week. This busy schedule can make it is easy to lose touch with family and friends. Remembering to spend time with these people can actually help relieve stress. In fact, these friends, either in the sports world or outside the industry, are great people to vent frustrations to. They can even bring new perspectives to the coaching profession. Family and friends also make a great counter-balance to a professional career and are an essential element to keeping people grounded.

Make sure to stay in touch with those that matter most. Whether it's a phone call, a meal, or spending daily time with a spouse, do not lose touch with the people that matter most. They are important for managing stress and keeping a stable work-life balance.

## **7. Keep Up With Your Hobbies**

Make sure to preserve life outside of the coaching world. While this might seem to distract from the profession, everyone has interests outside of coaching that are essential for keeping the mind fresh. Ideas for hobbies include:

- Woodworking, blacksmithing, technology, or other home improvement projects.
- Watching the latest TV series to generate another topic of conversation with other coaches, athletes, friends, and family.
- Expanding the travel itinerary both domestically and abroad.

Hobbies are an important way to focus on something other than sports and give the mind a break. Find something to hang on to outside of a coaching career. It's the people without a source of happiness outside of coaching that can struggle the most.

## **8. If Needed, See a Counselor**

While many people believe there is a stigma about asking a counselor or therapist for help, ultimately this can be the necessary step to managing stress. Professionals have fantastic ideas about managing stress. They have spent many years in school studying the latest techniques in stress management and come to sessions armed with the expertise necessary to potentially save careers and relationships.

## **9. Stay Positive**

Thinking positive thoughts is important for stress because people often become worried if they feel they are performing badly. Therefore, it is important to view problems as "challenges" or opportunities for improvement. This sets a great example for players on how to handle any problems that might arise in their own lives. Furthermore, this can translate into positive mindsets for the players and encourage success for the whole team.

## **10. Get To Know Your Team Personally**

It can be tempting to view the team as a singular entity, but remember that it is made up of individual people with individual stories. Getting to know players outside of practices and games can be as easy as organizing team dinners either at restaurants or at someone's house. Setting up a team building activity at an amusement park, ropes course, or some other outdoor adventure center can encourage bonding and allow the team to have fun together. Coaches can even give everyone something to talk about by taking the team to see the most popular movie in theaters.

Finding a way to talk to the players about topics other than a sport will keep the atmosphere loose and the stress level low. Stress management is important for preserving the team atmosphere and personal life outside of work.

Source: Ohio University, USA (<https://onlinemasters.ohio.edu/blog/10-stress-management-techniques-for-sport-coaches/>)

# HOW STRESS AFFECTS YOUR MIND AND BODY

## HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT THE MIND

- IRRITABILITY
- AGITATION
- MEMORY PROBLEMS
- INABILITY TO CONCENTRATE
- INCREASED ANXIETY
- LONLINESS



## STRATEGIES TO REDUCE STRESS



TALK TO SOMEONE



BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS



FIND OUT WHAT IS CAUSING YOUR STRESS



GET ENOUGH SLEEP



EXERCISE REGULARLY



LEARN RELAXATION TECHNIQUES



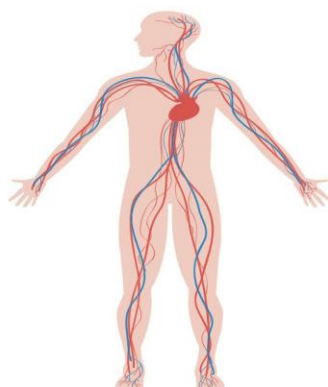
SET ASIDE TIME FOR HOBBIES



BE AWARE OF WHAT YOU EAT



FIND OUT WHAT IS CAUSING YOUR STRESS



## HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT THE BODY

- ACHES AND PAINS
- NAUSEA
- RASH
- INSOMNIA
- HEADACHES
- HYPERTENSION

## Summary

*“Being in control of your life and having realistic expectations about your day-to-day challenges are the keys to stress management, which is perhaps the most important ingredient to living a happy, healthy and rewarding life.”*

In sports we need stress to perform well. However too much stress will be harmful to our overall performance and state of happiness. So it is important that you analyze your stressors and know how to cope with them. This means you have to

- Understand what situations make you feel stressed
- Understand what situations you can and can't control
- Prepare for stressful events in advance, by thinking about the future
- Keep yourself healthy with good nutrition, exercise and regular relaxation
- Try to do happy things every day

If you do these little things you feel certainly feel less stressed and more content as a coach and in general with your life.

## Sources & further literature

- <https://www.simplypsychology.org/stress-management.html>
- <https://onlinemasters.ohio.edu/blog/10-stress-management-techniques-for-sport-coaches/>
- Sport Psychology for Coaches by Damon Burton & Thomas Raedeke

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