



“STRESS OF HIGH-LEVEL COMPETITION”

Prepared By Christopher Nickson, Ph.D.

High performance athletes encounter athlete-specific (sport-related injury and concussion, performance failure, sport type, and overtraining) and general risk factors (major negative life events, low social support, and impaired sleep) to mental health challenges that can vary across career phases with support systems and expectations shifting with developmental progression. There are more than over 640 stressors associated with mental health symptoms and disorders for elite athletes during and after transitioning out of sport. One of the most significant factors contributing to mental health challenges is the pressure athletes place on themselves. Stress is common in elite sport contexts where high performance underpins innovation, success, and competitive advantage and where athletes experience dynamic interactions within multiple aspects of their lives and the sporting environment. These can include personal (e.g., work-life interface, family issues), competition (e.g., inadequate or disrupted preparation; risk of injury; expectations of media, sponsors, coaches) and the organizational contexts (e.g., selection processes, cultural and team issues). Organizational stressors can occur as leadership and personnel

issues (e.g., the coach's behaviors and interactions, external expectations), cultural and team issues (e.g., communication, team atmosphere, and support), logistical and environmental issues (e.g., facilities and equipment, selection), and performance and personal issues (e.g., injuries, career transitions). Socially marginalized athletes (Black race, LGBTQ orientation, etc.) may experience extensive pressures and challenges regarding encounters that fuse a combination of a person's social identities to create unique modes of discrimination and marginalization factors. Stress can affect both physical and mental health with the potential to lead to the development of dysfunctional thought patterns, anxiety and depression, poor concentration and memory issues, social withdrawal and isolation, gambling or other risky behaviors, sleep disturbances, disordered eating, and poor relationships, and academic problems.

An additional concern in consideration to stressors is stigmatization of mental health treatment services throughout athlete culture. High-performance athletes may encounter self-stigma (one's stigmatized attitudes from internalized versions of public stigma) and public/social stigma (stigma endorsed by societal figures or the public). Concerns about others' (peers, coaches, and sport administration) perceptions can impact an athletes' desire to recognize the problem or seek help. Thus, the optimal response to stressors is a cultural one.

High-performance athletes are individuals who perform on a stage to fulfill their goals, ambitions, and drives. High-performance athletes also represent a large portion of the financial economy which indicates their value to our society. Therefore, it is important that the athlete is treated as

the person above their commodity status. When we can culturally address each athlete as a person and truly be invested in their life-long developmental progress, stressors related to high-performance athlete experiences will reduce as supportive measures and developmental strategies increase.

Helpful Resources:

Article: Teens and Stress: Practical Coping Skills | Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-race-good-health/201501/teens-and-stress-practical-coping-skills#:~:text=Research%20reports%20that%20stress%20may%20lead%20to%20sleeplessness%2C,shot%2C%20are%20less%20effective%20for%20them%20%28NIMH%2C%202015%29.>

Article: NIMH » I'm So Stressed Out! Fact Sheet (nih.gov)

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/so-stressed-out-fact-sheet>

Article: Stress, health, and high performance. The ultimate guide for a high performing corporate executive. (sagaperformance.com)

<https://sagaperformance.com/high-performance-articles/2020/10/19/stress-health-and-high-performance-a-guide-for-the-corporate-high-performer>