School of Allied Health/ Department of Athletic Training

Perceived Stress and Coping Skills in Professional Master's Level Athletic Training Students

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INTRODUCTION

Stress can occur in anyone, manifesting in many different forms.[1] If improperly managed, it can lead to, but is not limited to: burnout, anxiety, depression, personal and professional difficulties, and suicidal ideations.[2] As athletic training education continues to expand, it is important to consider the amount of stress students experience and what coping skills they use to mitigate it. Although there is considerable research on athletic training students and perceived stress (PS), there are few studies related to students enrolled in professional master's programs (MAT) regarding stress and how the student deals with it.

OBJECTIVES

Determine perceived stress levels and coping skills in professional master's level athletic training students. We are interested in determining if MAT students use more emotion or problem-focused coping skills to mitigate perceived stress.

METHODS

Design: Cross-sectional quantitative design
Population: Current students in Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) accredited MAT programs (males=42, females=99, age=23.42 ± 2.91 years).
Recruitment: Program directors emailed and asked to forward a link to students in their respective MAT programs.
Instrumentation: Survey via Qualtrics. Includes: demographics section (age, gender, year in school, learning model). Two surveys were included: The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to measure perceived stress (PS), and the Coping Orientation to Problem Experience (COPE) inventory to measure coping skills (CS).
Analysis: Means and standard deviations were calculated for the PSS and 15 subscales of the COPE. One-way ANOVA's were calculated for PSS utilizing demographic variables. Pearson correlation analysis was used to calculate most significant CS, and the impact of them.

RESULTS

Perceived Stress

PSS scores of 0-13 indicate lower stress, 14-26 moderate, and 27-40 as high perceived stress. MAT students demonstrated a mean value of 24.84 ± 7.267, revealing a moderate level of perceived stress; displayed in figure 1. Additionally, females demonstrated higher levels of PS as compared to males ($F_{(1,139)}$ =4.93, p=0.03). No other demographics showed significant values relating to perceived stress.

Coping Correlations

A Pearson correlation analysis established multiple significant coping skills. Age revealed positive correlations with positive reinforcement, active coping, and acceptance. It revealed negative correlation with perceived stress. Females demonstrated significant correlations with venting, social support, and emotional support. Year two of schooling demonstrated a significant correlation with mental disengagement. Demographics and coping correlation dispersion are displayed in figure 2. Finally, perceived stress demonstrated significant correlations with positive reinforcement, mental disengagement, venting, active coping, denial, behavioral disengagement, substance use, and planning. Dispersion of perceived stress and coping skills are observed in Figure 3.

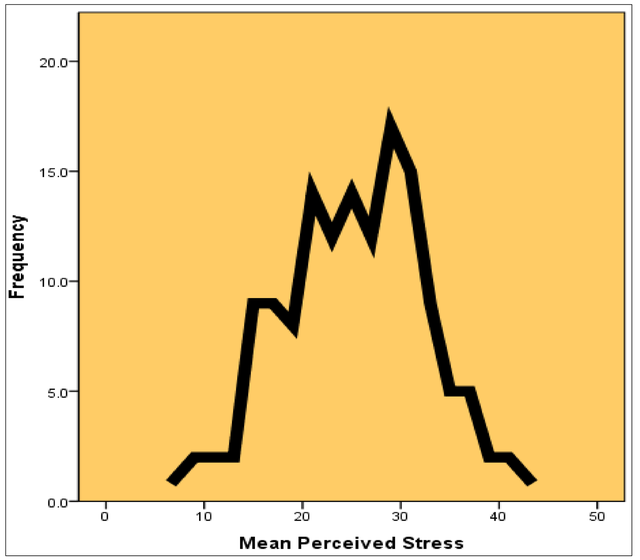

Figure 1. Mean perceived stress scores of MAT students

		PR	MD	Venting	SS	Active	Denial	Religiou	Humor	BD	Restrai	ES	SU	Accepta	Supp	Planning
Age	Corr.	0.168*	-0.010	-0.005	-0.032	0.252**	-0.112	0.016	0.129	-0.008	0.105	-0.103	-0.024	0.250**	-0.029	0.115
	Sig.	0.049	0.906	0.956	0.713	0.003	0.191	0.855	0.132	0.928	0.221	0.228	0.783	0.003	0.732	0.179
Gender	Corr.	-0.066	-0.135	-0.191	-0.218	-0.005	-0.022	-0.070	0.017	0.061	0.049	-0.2	0.079	0.058	-0.133	-0.109
	Sig.	0.435	0.110	0.024	0.009	0.954	0.800	0.407	0.837	0.474	0.565	0.016	0.354	0.496	0.115	0.196
Yr in School	Corr.	0.037	0.250**	0.042	-0.136	-0.015	-0.099	0.077	-0.124	0.105	0.052	-0.126	0.030	0.060	-0.023	-0.039
	Sig.	0.662	0.003	0.621	0.107	0.856	0.244	0.366	0.142	0.213	0.544	0.136	0.720	0.481	0.787	0.650

Figure 2. Pearson correlation dispersion of demographics and coping skills.

		PR	MD	Venting	SS	Active	Denial	Religio	Humor	BD	Restra	ES	SU	Accept	Supp	Plannin
Stress	Corr.	-0.247	0.188*	0.359**	-0.081	-0.265	0.247**	-0.163	0.124	0.397**	-0.163	0.007	0.253**	-0.149	-0.048	-0.297
	Sig.	0.003	0.026	0.000	0.339	0.001	0.003	0.053	0.143	0.000	0.054	0.939	0.002	0.077	0.576	0.000

Figure 3. Pearson correlation dispersion of perceived stress and coping skills.

EMOTION Vs. PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING

Problem-focused coping is a way of acting upon the stressor with intentions to alter, mitigate, gain information, and/or increase awareness of the situation.[3] Problem-focused coping skills include active coping, planning, suppression, restraint, and a variation of social support (in the form of seeking assistance). Emotion-focused coping entails enduring the stressor, without altering the event or causing an emotional disruption.[4] Variations include ventilating of emotions, behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement, positive reinterpretation and growth, denial, acceptance, religious coping, substance use, humor, and a variation of social support (such as seeking sympathy). Previous research has demonstrated greater increases in stress associated with the use of more emotion-focused coping skills.[5] Furthermore, mental and behavioral disengagement, substance use, and venting are all expressed as avoidant coping skills, and considered negative.[6] This has exhibited positive associations with depression.[7] Additionally, previous research has exhibited significantly reduced rates of stress with problem-focused coping.[5]

CONCLUSIONS

Our data suggests that female MAT students experience more PS than males. As age increases, the use of positive coping skills increases. However, overall, MAT students use mostly emotion-focused coping skills, which can be more detrimental to stress. These results can assist students and professors in recognizing and using healthier alternatives to cope with stress.
Future Research should investigate intervention strategies to increase the use of more problem-focused, constructive, coping strategies in order to decrease PS observed in MAT students.

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