

Coping Strategies for Dealing with Occupational Stress: A Study of Midwestern Interscholastic Athletic Directors

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Stress management is an important topic for sport organizations given the ever-increasing management pressures stemming from economics, external media, parental pressures, and athletic scrutiny. Whereas stressful environments promote turnover, burnout, ineffectiveness and health issues, proper management of stress at work equates to quality of living and productivity (Burton et. al, 2006). Due to the problem-solving nature of their occupation, interscholastic athletic directors are managers susceptible to high levels of stress (Railey and Tschauner,1993).

Wells (1985) indicated that the first step to defusing stress is deciding how to approach it. This may include eliminating the stressor, resisting or decreasing the stressor, or coping with the stress. Weiten and Lloyd (2003) defined coping as active efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the demands created by stress. Coping resources are important factors in psychological and somatic health outcomes (Lazarus, & Folkman, 1984). It is important for interscholastic athletic directors to understand stress issues and capitalize on coping strengths to properly manage stressors.

Today's workplace demands high performance of its employees, but that does not mean putting work ahead of health. The purpose of this study was to investigate the available coping resources of interscholastic athletic directors in the state of Indiana. Coping resources employed by athletic directors to manage stress were compared with regard to age, the number of years served as athletic director, the number of hours per day assigned to athletic director duties, and the size of the school by student population.

The questionnaire for assessing coping resources reported by interscholastic athletic directors in Indiana was the The Personal Resources Questionnaire (PRQ). The PRQ is part of the Occupational Stress Inventory (OSI-R) developed and revised in 1981 and 1998 by Osipow and Spokane. Several research studies provided strong support for the reliability and validity of this carefully constructed assessment (Osipow & Spokane, 1998). A total of 288 (74%) of the 389 subjects responded to the questionnaire. The University's IRB approved all of the procedures. Analysis of data was presented in terms of means, rank order, and standard deviation.

The statistical analyses included direct multiple regressions assessing coping strategies with relation to age, years of athletic director experience, the numbers of hours per day assigned to athletic director duties, and the size of the school by student population as dependent variables. The level of significance for all statistical analyses was $p < 0.05$. The mean scores for the coping domains, social support systems (SS), rational/cognitive skills (RC), recreational activities (RE), and self-care behavior (SC) were $4.09 + .72$, $3.39 + .61$, $2.48 + .49$, and $2.41 + .64$ respectively. Four direct multiple regressions were used to assess the relationship between the four factors in the PRQ to the dependent variables.

There was no significant relationship between available coping resources employed by Indiana interscholastic athletic directors to manage stress and the number of hours per day assigned to athletic director duties. The partial regression coefficients of the four independent variables of coping resources indicated that self-care behavior is the only variable making a significant contribution to the prediction of the age and the number of years served of the athletic director and cognitive coping skills was the only variable making a significant contribution to the prediction of the size of the school by student population.

The implications of the study were as follows: The data indicated that social support systems were the coping resources most employed by Indiana interscholastic athletic directors in managing stress. This finding is supported by the research of Gilligan (1982) and Goeller (1992). Anderson, Deshaies, & Jobin (1996) have noted the importance of social support for individuals experiencing distress due to the benefits that SS has on buffering emotions of stress. The buffering effect of SS said to be due to the continuum of positive events of support provided by a large social support network to the recipient who helps to stabilize and/or increase the mental well-being of that recipient (Anderson, Deshaies, & Jobin, 1996; Bianco, 2001).

The second highest used resource was RC which is supported by the research of Flett, Russo, & Hewitt (1994), Groder (1989), and Tardy (1977). The subjects indicated that they rely on rational and objective coping resources when faced with challenges. Folkman and Larazus (1988) found that individuals who "engage in rational, plan-full problem-solving ... are less likely to communicate hostility than those who use confrontive coping" (p. 313). RE were the third most important resource used by

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athletic directors. Cunningham (1989) reported, "productive and satisfying use of recreation and leisure time has been identified as a potential coping strategy in reducing stress" (p. 652). The research of Bailey, Fillos, and Kelly (1987), Howard (1975), and Fallon (1981), documented that administrators identified as effective selected more recreational activity coping resources than other types. The increased use of RE as coping strategies by Indiana Interscholastic athletic directors could potentially increase work effectiveness. Athletic directors should be encouraged to cope in this manner. SC ranked fourth overall indicating that the subjects do not completely avail themselves of self-care coping resources. The research of Newman and Behr (1979), Fallon (1981), Carlton and Brown (1981), and Power (1990) indicate that SC coping resources are beneficial.

This study begins several threads for more research in the field; stress management in every sport management position is an essential skill for productivity and quality of life optimization. Much research has been focused on the stress and pathogenic processes as opposed to the human adaptation process of coping and adjustment (Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). Areas for coping-skills improvement like the relationship between stress, coping resources, and overall job satisfaction should be identified and investigated.

Questions still need to be answered examining how long coping resources such as social support and recreation will neutralize stress and if coping efforts prove to be less effective if the level of occupational stress remains at the same level of intensity. As more female administrators enter the field, it would be interesting to investigate the female interscholastic athletic directors stress experience and their subsequent coping and adjustment changes over time. In addition, coping strategies of males versus female sport administrators should be examined. A better understanding of how sport managers of various levels are experiencing stress similarly or differently can lead to better company and self-employed coping strategies. Longitudinal research to investigate the consistency of coping resources used and levels of adjustment over time should also be considered in future studies (Lazarus, 2000). Finally, future research should use larger participant groups and employ experimental designs, thereby enabling the generalization of the results and the establishment of causal relationships between variables.