ABSTRACT

Participants in sports can help with personal aspects like developing interpersonal skills but playing sports may be a primary cause of stress for student-athletes. In this study, I examined the differences in stress and coping strategies between athletes and non-athletes. Students at a Division III NCAA college were asked if they participate in a NCAA-sport on campus. Participants then completed the subscales from the College Student Athletes’ Life Stress Scale that pertain to non-sport related stress. They also completed the Academic Coping Strategies Scale which measures coping strategies in an academic scenario. Athletes were expected to report more stress from academic performance than non-athletes, and non-athletes were expected to report using more positive coping strategies. In contrast to the hypotheses, athletes reported lower stress on three of the four non-sport related stress subscales. Gender differences were found on two of the three coping strategies subscales.

INTRODUCTION

Children and teenagers are notorious for playing sports whether for fun or for competition. Playing a sport has physical benefits (e.g., staying in shape) as well as developmental benefits (e.g., working with others). Student-athletes being more developed in social skills, more outgoing, and better leaders than non-athletes reported (Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004). Participating in a sport can also be a cause of stress, depression, and anxiety (Denaire, 2016). Parents and coaches, as well as the athletes themselves, often have high expectations for an athlete, which can result in high levels of stress. Stress can have several sources including academic demands, training adaptation, interpersonal pressures, family relationships, and academic requirements (Lu, Hsu, Chan, Chen, & Kao, 2012). The College Student Athlete’s Life Stress Scale (CSALSS) contains eight stress-related subscales: sports injury, performance demand, coach relationships, training adaptation, interpersonal relationships, family relationships, and academic requirements (Lu, Hsu, Chen, & Kao, 2012). The Academic Coping Strategies Scale (ACSS) assesses three coping strategies: approach, avoidance, and social support strategies (Sulliva, 2000). Athletes reported being more developed in family relationships, training adaptation, interpersonal (than athletes do.

HYPOTHESIS

I hypothesized that athletes would report more stress from academic performance than non-athletes, presumably because of the added pressures athletes experience due to athletic demands. I hypothesized that non-athletes would report using positive coping strategies more than athletes when they are given a stressful academic situation.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 335 undergraduate students (114 men and 221 women) at a small liberal arts college in western PA. 86 self-reported as athlete and 249 self-reported as non-athlete. 304 identified as White, 16 as Black or African American, 2 as American Indian or Alaska Native, 2 as Asian, 3 as other, and 8 as multiracial.

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RESULTS

For the CSALSS (Stress), there was a significant main effect of sport participation, F(1, 331) = 17.23, p < .001, η² = .05. The romantic relationships subscale: (non-athletes = 7.12, SD = 2.96; athletes = 6.03, SD = 2.87) was significantly different between athletes and non-athletes (M = 8.89, SD = 3.06), η² = .05. There was no significant main effect of gender, F(1, 331) = 3.51, p .06, η² = .01.

For the ACSS (Coping), there was no significant main effect of sport participation, F(1, 330) = .01, p .73, η² < .01 (athletes M = 177.74, SD = 15.31; non-athletes M = 178.05, SD = 17.23).

DISCUSSION

One reason why athletes and non-athletes did not differ on academic stress could be that Division III schools tend to focus on academics more than more on athletics, whereas Division I and II schools tend to focus more on athletics than academics. Participating in a Division III sport potentially reduces stress by providing additional social support from teammates and providing a physical outlet for relieving day-to-day stress.

Sport participation among Division III athletes may provide a buffer against other sources of stress, which is consistent with the finding that athletes reported lower levels of stress from family, romantic, and interpersonal relationships, relative to non-athletes.

A possible explanation for gender differences in coping strategies could be that men may tend to cope with academic stresses by handling them directly and alone (approach strategy). Women may seek help from others (social support strategy) for academic problems rather than dealing with the problem alone.

Athletes reported being more developed in family relationships, training adaptation, interpersonal (than athletes do.

This study could help raise awareness of stress and coping strategies. In contrast to the hypotheses, athletes reported lower stress on three of the four non-sport related stress subscales. Gender differences were found on two of the three coping strategies subscales.

REFERENCES


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