

Exploring the Differences in Stress Mindset between Former and Current College Student-Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Stress is a universal experience, often believed to be negative, that has been linked with negative consequences. However, recent studies have shown that stress can lead to positive outcomes as well, including an increase in health and performance in a variety of domains. Research has also found one's beliefs about the nature of stress (e.g., stress mindset) play a large role in the extent to which one experiences these beneficial outcomes of stress. Although two athletes may encounter the same stressor, their beliefs on stress impact whether they experience detrimental or enhancing outcomes resulting from the stressor. Given some athletes view pressures associated with sport participation as negative or harmful, sometimes resulting in the athlete terminating their sport participation, research is needed examining the stress mindset in current athletes and former athletes who retired or terminated their sport participation early. **PURPOSE:** To explore the differences, if any, in stress mindset and perceived amount of stress between current and former student-athletes. **METHODS:** A total of 113 students ($n = 87$ current athletes; $n = 26$ former athletes) participated in this study. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and the Stress Mindset Measure (SMM) administered via an online survey tool. The SMM is a self-report assessment of participants' beliefs about stress. Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to assess differences in stress mindset and perceived amount of stress between former and current college athletes. **RESULTS:** There was no significant difference observed between former and current student-athletes stress mindset scores ($U = 1231.5, p = .494, \eta^2 = .004$). Likewise, there was no significant difference observed between current and former athletes on perceived amount of current stress ($U = 884, p = .171, \eta^2 = .025$). **CONCLUSION:** No statistically significant differences between groups in stress mindset scores or perceived stress were observed, but both current and former athletes were found to have a stress-is-debilitating mindset (i.e., they held negative beliefs about the nature of stress). Current student-athletes did report a slightly lower SMM score ($M = 1.65$) than former athletes ($M = 1.8$) and given that stress mindset reflects one's view of the process of stress itself and not simply an appraisal of any given stressor, there may be a difference in the way student-athletes appraise their sport or stress stemming from their sport participation. As burnout was not measured in the present study, it is possible the current student-athletes in this study may be experiencing burnout but have not terminated their sport participation yet. Future studies should examine burnout in athletes alongside the stress mindset and should continue to explore this construct with a larger sample of former athletes.