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Self-handicapping tendencies, coping, and anxiety responses among athletes

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Abstract

Objectives: Four studies examined relationships between self-handicapping tendencies and reactions to two different yet potentially stressful sport situations (i.e., dealing with a performance slump and emotional reaction prior to competition).

Design: Retrospective and prospective cross-sectional survey.

Methods: For studies 1 and 2, participants were 65 male athletes (mean age=20.45) and 141 male and female athletes (mean age=21.5), respectively. Participants in study 1 completed the Self-handicapping Scale (SHS) and slump-related coping was assessed using the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS). Participants in study 2 completed the SHS and slump-related coping was assessed using the modified Ways of Coping in Sport Scale (WCSS). For studies 3 and 4, participants were 220 male athletes (mean age=22.60) and 120 male and female athletes (mean age=34.75), respectively. Participants from both studies completed the SHS and emotions prior to competition were assessed using the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory (CSAI-2).

Results: Data from study 1 showed that self-handicapping tendencies were related to emotive-oriented coping. CISS emotion scale scores accounted for 25% of the variance in SHS scores. Data from study 2 showed that self-handicapping tendencies were related to denial/avoidance and wishful thinking subscale scores of the WCSS. Together these two variables accounted for 11% of the variance in SHS scores. Data from studies 3 and 4 showed positive relations between self-handicapping tendencies and cognitive state-anxiety. Cognitive state-anxiety accounted for 8% of the variance in SHS scores in study 3 and 12% of the variance in SHS scores in study 4.

Conclusions: Results from studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that self-handicapping tendencies are related to general and specific emotion coping strategies when dealing with a slump. Results from studies 3 and 4 show that self-handicapping tendencies are related to precompetitive cognitive state-anxiety.

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Jones and Berglas (1978) used the term self-handicapping to describe the process of proactively protecting self-esteem in the face of potential danger. In short, “self-handicapping involves any action or choice of performance setting that enhances the opportunity to externalise (or excuse) failure and to internalise (reasonably accept credit for) success” (Jones & Berglas, 1978, p. 406). Self-handicapping behaviours include a variety of actions such as altering the amount or quality of practice (Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984; Harris & Snyder, 1986; Tice & Baumeister, 1990), creating or exaggerating physical problems such as illness or injury (Smith, Snyder, & Perkins, 1983), and focusing on real or imagined character flaws (Snyder, Smith, Augelli, & Ingram, 1985; Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982). Most researchers agree that the adoption of self-handicapping strategies serves both self-protection and self-enhancement motives (Arkin, 1981; Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Tice, 1991).

Rhodewalt (1990) suggested that self-handicapping tendencies vary across individuals and that these tendencies can be assessed with the Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS; Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982). Two components of self-handicapping are assessed by the SHS. The first component is the proclivity for excuse-making and reflects the individual’s tendency to proactively focus on impediments to successful performance. The second component of self-handicapping, diminished effort, reflects the individual’s tendency to alter the level of personal effort or motivation prior to performance.

Self (1990) has argued that the tendency to self-handicap must be viewed in a social context because self-handicapping strategies are only used when there are potential threats to self-esteem. Thus, situations that characteristically promote self-handicapping tendencies are those that are high in evaluative potential, contain uncertainty about success and consequently, present a threat to self-esteem if failure occurs. Moreover, the task must be perceived as important, performance must be public and evaluation standards must depend on the performance of another. When these conditions prevail, the individual’s self-concept is under test.

Sport is characterised by a number of these conditions and presents an ideal forum in which to examine the correlates of self-handicapping tendencies. Sport-related correlates of dispositional self-handicapping that have been studied to date include: changes in practice effort prior to important events (Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984); perceptions of team cohesion (Hausenblas & Carron, 1996; Carron, Prapavessis, & Grove, 1994), the role of self-esteem in mediating relations between self-handicapping tendencies and the use of potential self-handicaps (Prapavessis & Grove, 1998); task and ego goal orientation (Ryska, Yin, & Boyd, 1999) and precompetitive mood state responses (Prapavessis & Grove, 1994). Given these findings, further investigation of the sport-related correlates of self-handicapping is warranted. Indeed, competitive sport provides an ideal setting to examine such relationships because athletic ability is an important self-concept dimension to many sport performers, and constant evaluation of performance is inherent in sport. One would expect needs for self-enhancement and/or self-protection to be exaggerated in this high stress environment, especially when failure is salient.

Reactions to performance slumps are likely to be influenced by self-handicapping tendencies,

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