Is it all bad news? A transactional model of coping with stressors in elite performers

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The present paper explores current theories and research on the transactional model of stress and coping and how this can affect our ability to perform at all levels, particularly within elite performers. In post-pandemic COVID-19, this paper presents an important topic for discussion and has significant practical implications on elite performers’ overall well-being and mental health. The aim is to present an alternative understanding of how we respond to stressors and reflections from a practitioner perspective working with elite performers. Firstly, sport and exercise psychology literature presents an overview of what constitutes a stressor and how this can affect an individual. It looks at drawing parallels with sports performance psychology and how different sources of stress and anxiety can lead to the adoption of different coping styles. Secondly, a model of coping styles is illustrated to shed light on how different perceptions of stressors and anxiety are managed individually and in groups. To conclude, some practical implications and reflections for clinical practice are presented, highlighting the significance and value of creatively teaching and fostering opportunities for individual learning coping and tolerance skills. Furthermore, it explores how exposure to stressors can provide unique opportunities to foster the implementation of effective transformational coping, greater inner strength, and personal growth through self-reflection and self-management.

Keywords: avoidance coping; coping styles; emotion-focus coping; problem-focus coping; transactional model
Before defining stress in the context of this paper, a reminder of the World Health Organization definition of health and well-being is here well placed. It highlights health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (WHO, 1948). It is often thought that to experience well-being, an individual has to be free from illnesses and diseases, which in part becomes counterintuitive from what the literature in neuroscience, sport and performance psychology suggests, where a level of stress and pressure is often experienced and necessary for our resilient systems to grow and flourish. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The definition emphasises the role of prevention and health determinants. It also emphasises how health is shaped by the cultural constructs within which it is situated and how it can be promoted at both an individual and a society level (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Individual and social perspectives are included within this definition, emphasising that health and well-being are complex systems interacting and influencing each other. Social perspectives through theoretical paradigms aim to explain how society influences individuals and how individuals shape and influence society as agents in a canvas rather than in a vacuum. Complex systems require complex answers and solutions. Therefore, inhibitors and barriers to our health and well-being can be defined as demands placed on our systems, both within individual and collective perspectives, which outweighs the coping resources available at any given moment. Stressors have been defined as ‘environmental demands encountered by an individual’ and categorised within some sports literature into three main groups: competitive, organisational, and personal (Fletcher et al., 2006). In this article, I aim to present some reflections which my professional experience has shaped as a practitioner sport and exercise psychologist in supporting elite performers in the performing arts and draw on theoretical psychological understanding on how formulations and transformational growth has occurred (or not), reflecting and challenging how stressors are understood and managed throughout this process.

**Demands from competitive stressors**

Competitive stressors are defined as ‘an ongoing transaction between an individual and the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with competitive performance’ (Fletcher et al., 2006). Therefore, only stressors that are related to competitive performance are named competitive stressors. For example, opponents in a competition or team game will be perceived as threats to the acquisition of winnings and rewards (Hanton & Fletcher, 2005). Other examples can include preparation for competition, environmental issues related to selection, finances, accommodations when travelling, training environment, and competitive environment. Team issues have been identified as the team atmosphere, the available support network, role-definition, and communication (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). The unpredictability of the opponent's preparation, the eventuality of injuries, and technique issues have also been identified as further sources of competitive stressors (Thelwell et al., 2007). In Thelwell et al. (2007) study of professional cricket batters and through a combination of inductive and deductive content analysis, they suggested that despite the overlap between stress and coping interventions, the specific demands of a sport (or performing art discipline), the specific techniques issues and barriers need to be understood by practitioners for the interventions to be successful. In a study by Neil et al. (2011), appraisal, emotion-reactions, further appraisals, and athletes’ behavioural responses were examined to the exposure of performance and organisational stressors within a competitive environment. The transaction between the individual perceived stressors and the competitive environmental stressors gave rise to negative emotions and appraisals (Relojo et al., 2015). However, through a further appraisal, thoughts and feelings were interpreted as facilitative through increased effort and focus. It is arguable that the demands placed on elite performers in an art/performing environment is or can be highly competitive, even with the absence of individual opponents, teams or competing for winning medals. It can cause perceived stressors and anxiety that, if exceeding the performer coping resources available, within and outside the working environment, can impact their individual and collective performance quality (Ogwuche et al., 2020).

Performance anxiety can also be a consequence of other individual anxiety levels caused by different factors which can stem from the environment, both at the group and systemic levels. It is not because there are no medals or rewards at the end of a performance that stressors and anxiety are experienced less frequently or intensely. Fear of failure, low self-esteem and self-efficacy, low sense of locus of control, concerns with deselection, peer pressure can all be contributing factors in experiencing a high level of competitive stress.

**Demands from systemic stressors**

The organisational stressors are defined as ‘the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with the organisation in which s/he is operating’ (Fletcher et al., 2012). Research in sports literature has proposed a framework of five key organisational themes (Fletcher et al., 2006). Factors intrinsic to sport such as training environment, travel, accommodation: roles in sport organisations such as role conflict and ambiguity; organisational structure and climate such as cultural issues; sports relationships and interpersonal demands
such as either absence or inadequate access to social support; and finally athletic career and performance development issues such as position insecurity, opportunities for career progression and promotions.

Understanding organisingational stressors within a sporting and performance environment are thought to be significant due to its disruptive nature towards overall performance. And these themes can well translate into arts-based performing environments with similar observable challenges. Contemporary evidence proposes that organisational stressors have the strongest influence on athletic performance (Fletcher et al., 2012). These key organisingational themes highlight the significance of contributing factors that might not necessarily be causally related to the individual experience of stress and performance. In other words, it emphasises the importance and impact that supporting the whole person within their context – and not as a performer in isolation – ought to guide reflections and interventions which are connected and beyond the biological/physical component of stress management. The way an individual perceives their level of autonomy, competence and belonging – key psychological human needs – being met (or not) also play a significant role in managing stressors and anxiety (Ryan & Deci, 2007).

Demands from individual stressors

Personal stressors are defined as ‘an ongoing transaction between an individual and the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with personal life events’. Examples can include lifestyle issues and financial issues (Thelwell et al., 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a fertile landscape in the last 18 months, where artists and performers have been either laid-off or made temporarily or permanently redundant. At least 7,442 theatre and live events workers have been made redundant due to the COVID-19 pandemic, new figures from entertainment union BECTU have revealed (Masso, 2020). In specific artistic endeavours, the unemployment rates for pre-Covid hover at around 90%, with only about 2% of actors able to make a living from their career (Williams et al., 2019).

Psychological stress is a particular relationship between a person and the environment that the individual appraises as taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). From a theoretical perspective, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) suggested a transactional model of stress and coping, helping to understand the stress appraisal (and re-appraisal) and coping relationship as a process that is fluid and changeable (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
The Adopted Transactional Model of Stress, Adapted from Folkman & Lazarus (1988).

Folkman et al. (1987) suggested two central processes that determine the outcome of a stressful experience in each situation: a cognitive process and a coping process. The first includes three basic forms of appraisal: a primary appraisal where the individual assesses the significance of the situation and gauges whether the situation is positive, stressful or irrelevant and through this appraisal makes a judgement on whether the level
of ‘threat’ is negatively affecting their homeostasis or optimal arousal level for individual optimal performance. A secondary appraisal is an assessment of coping resources and options available depending on the situation appraised, such as a threat, a challenge, an opportunity, or a loss. The third is the notion of re-appraisal, which is a state of being ‘on guard’ as processes are in constant motion due to possible changes in the environment and the individual’s developing coping skills. Emotional responses and emotional self-regulation need to be mastered, and this is when cognitive appraisals leave the stage for different coping processes (Boltivets & Reloj, 2019).

The model asserts that individuals’ cognitive appraisals of potentially stressful situations will be influenced by an interaction between the person (e.g., personality, goals) and the situation (e.g., social interactions, the environment). The transactional model provides a conceptual framework that addresses that stressors, rather than a quantifiable entity out there (or at times perceived as internal and unique to the individual), needs to be seen as a fluid and transactional process which encompasses the overall journey, including: (a) stressors – the source of the problem issue; (b) appraisals – the way people perceive the issue, strain and; (c) coping – the way individuals resolve or try to resolve rather than to explain it as a single phenomenon (Hanton et al. 2005). The physical symptoms of stress are generally categorised into three areas: (a) physiological – increased heart rate, sweaty hands, and muscle tension; (b) cognitive – perceptual changes and narrowing, decision-making, memory, and response selection; (c) emotional – aggression, frustration, confusion, and withdrawal from the situation.

Physiologically, hormones such as serotonin, dopamine, adrenaline, oxytocin, and cortisol play a fundamental role in coping. Hormones carry messages from where they are produced to different parts of the body. They help switch on or switch off cellular processes that control our appetite, growth, stress, blood sugar, sleep cycles, sex drive, and sexual function (Aaron et al., 2019). Dysregulation in serotonin production can affect our moods and our ability to implement effective passive or active coping mechanisms (Carhart-Harris & Nutt, 2017). Automatic responses, also known as the ‘fight-or-flight’ response, activates the sympathetic nervous system in the form of increased focus levels, adrenaline, and epinephrine. These responses are activated for survival in the face of threats and have played a crucial role throughout our evolution. These responses are experienced by all of us throughout our lives, with different levels of intensity, frequency, duration, and range, and I would argue that these challenges have an important function to play in our psychological resilience and growth. Normalising these experiences and supporting them in understanding their role and usefulness has been beneficial in promoting more effective and efficient stress management techniques in elite performers. Differences are also accounted for by the individual perception of the stressors in question and availability and access to their resources, their ability to do so effectively, and their ability to recognise those coping resources to autonomously and competitively reach out and source them in the first place.

**Coping: problem-focus and emotion-focus coping styles**

In this context, coping refers to the individual’s response to a psychological stressor which the individual has experienced – long and intensely enough – to provoke a reaction, as stressors are often related to the adverse event(s) or perceptions of negative situations that causes an individual’s anxiety. However, as illustrated above, stressors can be classified into different areas which do not necessarily amount only to adverse events: the ability to sit uncomfortably with an unpredictable situation that causes anxiety and an ability to cope with it till the relevant resources for managing effectively are available and sourced by the individual, become an essential part of this process of growth and transformational coping (Dryden, 2019).

Though Lazarus & Folkman (1984) have identified two broad categories, individuals may adopt a range of coping styles: problem-focus coping styles and emotion-focus coping styles. Individuals that adopt problem-focus coping styles aim to deal with the source of the problem, often tackling the situation and effortlessly committing to making changes: finding out information on the problem or issue experienced and committing to learning new skills to manage them. Problem-focus coping is aimed at changing or eliminating the source of the stress, Folkman and Lazarus (1988) have also identified three types within this category: (a) taking control; (b) information seeking, and (c) evaluating negatives and positives of a given situation. Taking control of what is controllable is a modality often adopted with elite performers and the ability to recognize what is out of their control so that these elements – out of their control – can either be parked for a later time when resources to positively manage the situation become available or let go of them in such a way that it becomes a conscious and effortful individual’s decision. Elements from acceptance and commitment therapeutic models (ACT) can help support this process (Hooper & Larsson, 2015). Information seeking can keep the individual’s sense of meaning-making and opportunities to challenge pre-conceptions or belief systems that are unhelpful to cope with the situation effectively. The evaluative process can be promoted in challenging assumptions that again are either maladaptive or unhelpful to the individual, seeking instead and empowering a self-discovery and solution-focus approach to the issue.
Emotion-focused coping styles instead aim to manage the emotional responses to the perception of a stressful event/situation. Emotion-focus coping styles aim to reduce, alleviate, contain and minimise the unpleasant, stressful feeling associated with the stressor. The focus of this coping style is to guide away, accept and manage or contain the emotional responses to an unpredictable and uncontrollable situation. It is also important to distinguish between an avoidance coping mechanism related to the emotional response and coping style and a positive re-appraisal. The latter is preferable as a long-term emotion-focused coping style mechanism instead of distancing or avoiding a situation that can become detrimental to the individual over an extended period. Labelling emotions can be a good process where individuals are empowered and guided to identify and label what they are experiencing and feeling. Often not quite knowing what an individual is experiencing can be very debilitating and limiting, where recognising and labelling and compassionately noticing which emotions are permeating can be extremely helpful (Hooper & Larsson, 2015).

**Appraisal-focus coping style**

A third classification proposed by Carver et al. (2010) is identified as the appraisal-focus coping style, which aims at challenging the assumption of an individual’s perception of a specific stressor through a change of cognitive re-evaluation and ultimately a process of re-framing. People tend to use various coping styles according to the stressor and situation they are facing and managing. However, what seems to be happening in situations when the issue and source of stress continue to affect the performer negatively, is often their inability to adopt the appropriate coping style for a specific situation or lacking the ability to implement cognitive restructuring and a positive re-evaluation for their perceived stressor. Individuals tend to adopt problem-focused coping styles for uncontrollable situations whereas they would benefit from adopting an emotion-focused coping style as the situation cannot be changed at the time of their appraisal. Conversely, they tend to adopt emotion-focused coping styles to address the situation by acquiring new skills such as further information or implementing an alternative evaluation through solution-focused styles.

The investment of elite performers who are often extremely focused on their ultimate endeavour can present a barrier to potential transformational change as their rigidity of thinking prevents them from seeing the alternative(s). Their commitment to reaching positive results is characterised by a strong determination and motivation, which hinder the necessary flexibility to embrace a different perspective or see the value of safely containing a situation before specific drivers can be effectively implemented. Often, they may not necessarily have the ability or skills to perform this mechanism of re-appraisal without external support and guidance.

Understanding these mechanisms – behind the source of stressors – remains key if we want to ensure that the most appropriate level of psychological and educational support is provided. In the next section, I aim to illustrate through some practical examples how this process of understanding that stress and low levels of performance anxiety can lead to proactive and transformational resolutions when appropriate appraisals and coping styles are adopted within a wider context.

**How to cope with competitive stressors**

Coping with competitive stressors in elite performers is often related to the individual drive for perfection. It is not the scope of this article to delve into perfectionism, but in my professional practice, it is strictly related to the self-management of stressors and how these are perceived and conceptualised by the individual (Pickard, 2020; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Positive education and transformational growth can occur by promoting self-awareness of their limitations and, more importantly, recognising and effectively adopting their characters’ strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

This is the process that would be followed for an elite athlete to achieve optimal results in competition. The transaction between the individual and their environmental demands related to their performance should be considered a starting point, rather than considering the environment as a static vessel where the individual has to perform with only medals and winnings as the focus of their efforts. Reducing, mitigating and safely containing or re-framing stressors means being able to be tuned in with what the individual wants to achieve and how they are going to get there. Through clear process goal-oriented tasks and, more significantly, process-orientated activities, this can be achieved by using pathways appropriate to each individual in terms of skills acquisition, mastery and eventually integrating generalisation and transferability to different competitive contexts.

**How to cope with organisational stressors**

The process of coping with organisational stressors is undoubtedly challenging when financial and aesthetic pressures compound the organisation. This remains the most significant step to be adopted for any stress
management reduction intervention. In the context of organisational stressors, this will ensure that as far as possible and within the constraints and pressures of any performing organisation, the elite performer has a voice and can make supported and structured choices within the performing environment. Each individual will be adapting and adopting individualised coping mechanisms to make sense of the situation they are managing and reduce any potential conflicts of values. Reaching a 'good fit' between the individual belief system and the organisational values become an important and essential factor.

**How to cope with individual stressors**

When coping with personal stressors, knowing the individual's case history, educational background, previous overcome challenges, and lesson learnt from those experiences, the current personal situation outside the organisation – their social support environment, their emotional environment – can help in the understanding of what other contributing factors amount to sources of experienced stress. This can be achieved by building a trusting working relationship that places the performer at the centre and a collaborative, co-produced plan that promotes development (Keegan, 2016; Tod & Anderson, 2012). Supporting individual performers in cultivating and nurturing self-reflection and knowledge of the self has been essential when empowering individual performers in acquiring the necessary and effective tools for self-management. Promoting well-being and wellness when mental health issues are more and more talked about will be key if we want to ensure that professional performers live long and healthy professional lives (Pilao et al., 2017). Reducing the effect of prolonged exposure to poorly managed stressors that can lead to serious mental health conditions such as eating disorders, depression, and suicidal ideation ought to be an ongoing priority. Equipping performers with the necessary tools that not only enhance their performances; however these are measured, but support them to nurture a sense of agency, a sense of competence and effective ways of coping in the face of adversities ought to be all of the allied health professionals and practitioners' priorities.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper aimed to understand better the stress appraisal process and subsequent coping styles and responses to different situations/events in elite performers within arts-based environments. By drawing from knowledge in the sport and exercise psychology literature, but also other modalities of therapeutic approaches, the paper illustrated how stressors and stress management and containment is conceptualised and aimed at clarifying the notion of a process that is fluid and changeable rather than a static event/situation in time. As 'performers' in our societies, we can all be experiencing stress differently and frequently. Accepting and committing to this notion that stress and stressors are part of our lives might be transformational. Understanding coping mechanisms and styles behind stress management can help us reach better outcomes in prevention, management, health promotion, and treatment - when treatment becomes necessary. The realisation that stress is more common than what we normally assume or think of may also help us embrace the opportunities for growth that come with it.

By exploring current coping styles and by reflecting on new ways in which levels of stress and anxiety can be addressed through acknowledgement, acceptance, awareness, and observation, noticing what is going on rather than providing an immediate reactive response to the symptoms (both observable and non-observable) will better equip the elite performer in self-managing their stressors.

This article looked at the perception of stress and stressors from a growth and developmental perspective, where obstacles and barriers to learning become an essential part of our growth. Through uncomfortable situations and events, we test ourselves, and it is through risk taking we learn, adapt, and adopt new skills to be able to cope with the occurring situation positively. Teaching ways on how to understand and address the relationship between our thoughts and feelings and subsequently our responses/actions to it – our behaviours – can ultimately support individuals to better be attuned to the self and in some ways attuned to others, so that the transformational growth does not happen in isolation, in a meaningless vacuum, but as part of a wider social and cultural context where all individuals healthily, dynamically and creatively function, develop and contribute.

**REFERENCES**


