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Talking about stress within teammates: An observational study of teammate conversations and social support

University athletes are tasked with successfully managing demands across athletic, academic, and personal contexts, which can cause significant stress (Brown et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2016; Madrigal & Robbins, 2020). Thus, they must learn to effectively manage their stress to achieve optimal performance and wellbeing, and athletes often rely on social support from their teammates to manage stress (Freeman et al., 2011). Though previous research has revealed that positive outcomes ensue for athletes who perceive higher levels of social support (e.g., DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Tamminen et al., 2019), there is a need to examine social support interactions to advance the knowledge in this area that has focused primarily on athletes' self-reported perceptions of support.

Purpose: This study sought to objectively examine university athlete pairs' social support exchanges, with specific goals of understanding (1) to what degree teammates provide various types of social support (including emotional, esteem, and informational support) and (2) how such social support behaviours relate to athletes' perceptions of stress.

Method: The sample included 46 dyads (92 athletes) from individual and team university varsity sports (e.g., softball, soccer, badminton, basketball, rowing, etc.) in Canada. Athlete teammate pairs were invited to visit a research lab in person. One member of each pair was asked to take on a support "seeker" role, and was asked to list up to five stressful situations/events and rate them in terms of the degree of stress felt on a scale from 0 (no stress at all) to 100 (intolerable stress) (Kowalski & Crocker, 2001). The pairs were then asked to engage in an unstructured conversation regarding the listed stressors, and the conversation was video-recorded for analysis. After the conversation ended, support seekers were asked to provide the stress ratings again, and to report the degree to which they felt they received social support from their teammate during the conversation. Video-recorded conversations were rated by an independent coder in terms of the degree to which the teammates provided social support to the support seekers. Bivariate correlations were used to examine the relationships among observed social support (i.e., coder ratings), support seekers' perceptions of received support, and their stress ratings.

Result: In addition to emotional, esteem, and informational support behaviours, teammates often engaged in co-rumination with the support seekers, defined as persistent and collective discussions of the stressors with a focus on the negative feelings associated with the stressors

(Rose, 2002). Thus, co-rumination was inductively added as a behaviour category that was rated by the coder. The bivariate correlations revealed that though none of the support dimensions were related to stress perceptions, co-rumination had a statistically significant positive relationship with post-conversation stress perceptions ($r = .28$).

Conclusion: The null relationship between social support and stress perceptions may suggest that the match between the type of social support and the type of stressor may be important to consider (e.g., esteem support for a teammate struggling with a lack of confidence). The findings also highlight the important role of co-rumination during social support exchanges between teammates. Specifically, athletes may commonly engage in co-rumination in response to a teammate sharing stressful experiences, which may be associated with negative outcomes. Thus, researchers should explore ways to encourage athletes to engage in more constructive social support exchanges as opposed to focusing excessively on the negative feelings associated with the stressors.

Project status: SSHRC and Sport Canada funding for this research was awarded in 2018. Study 1 is complete (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.102034>). The above abstract describes Study 2, which focuses on social support exchanges between university athlete teammate pairs.