# Sports Stress in 21ˢᵗ Century: A Management Model in the Nigerian Situation

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## Abstract

Stress affects athletes' life and performance, therefore understanding its many facets is crucial in sports. Nigerian athletes face a complex problem of sports stress in the 21st century. Athletes' physical, mental, and performance are deeply affected by sports stress. This research examines sports stress in Nigeria and proposes a complete management plan. We suggest an integrated strategy to reduce sports-related stress based on Bronfenbrenner ecological system theory and many academic contributions. The Nigerian athlete-specific approach emphasizes cultural awareness and community support. It respects athletes' varying cultural and linguistic origins and emphasizes the significance of knowing how stress is viewed and experienced differently. To equip athletes to manage stress holistically, the concept offers psychoeducation, family-centered techniques, and religious and cultural traditions. The approach also stresses the need of collaboration between athletes, coaches, support personnel, and the community to build social cohesion and resilience. It recognizes that athletes must be enabled to build personalized stress-reduction tactics that match their particular experiences. In Nigeria, sports stress management must be comprehensive and culturally appropriate. The suggested model acknowledges the intricate interaction of cultural, economic, and communal influences on athletes' stress reactions by including Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. It was concluded that Nigerian athletes need a comprehensive approach to physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being that addresses their particular demands and backgrounds. Hence, Coaches and support personnel require frequent cultural sensitivity training to better understand and meet Nigerian athletes' unique demands.

**Keywords:** Sport stress, Stress management, Stress management model

## Introduction

Nigerian athletes face regular and environmental pressures. Climate change, political, social, and economic turmoil have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, players feel in danger, anxious, and unsure about their sporting future. They also worry about injuries and performance slumps while trying to get greater chances and recognition in sports. This circumstance reflects increased interpersonal tension, animosity, and intolerance (Berdzenadze, 2022). Thus, athletes' mental and physical health is greatly affected by stress. To comprehend sports stress, describe its nature.

Sports stress is a psychological and physiological response to stimuli and associated oscillations. It describes a mental condition when an athlete struggles to handle athletic activities and tournaments. Sports stress comes from situations that threaten an athlete's performance and well-being and varies in severity. It's vital to remember that athletes' subjective interpretations of external events also affect their stress (Schweickle et al., 2021). Sports stress is influenced by competition, fear of underperformance, and pressure to match social and personal standards. Sports stress in Nigeria may also be caused by family and personal troubles including injury, death, and relationship problems.

Sports stress has both good and harmful elements. Eustress, or positive stress, may motivate athletes to succeed. However, negative stress, or distress, may endure and harm

athletes' physical and mental health. This negative stress occurs when athletes' expectations exceed their coping strategies and resources. Like general stress studies, sports stress has beneficial and bad aspects. Eustress, or positive stress, benefits athletes and is transient (Bhadauriya & Tripathi, 2018). It inspires athletes to overcome obstacles, improving their mental state, motivation, and performance. Negative stress, or distress, lasts longer and is unpleasant. When athletes' internal expectations surpass their coping capabilities, it may cause emotional, mental, and physical health concerns.

Sports stress is classified by its cause (physiological vs. psychological), its effect on the athlete (eustress vs. distress), and its duration (acute vs. chronic) in the literature. Sports stress has been researched from response-, stimulus-, and cognitive-transactional-based process perspectives. These viewpoints assist explain how athletes handle stress, intensity, and sports demands.

**Understanding Stress**

The word "sports stress" has several meanings and manifestations. Schweickle et al. (2021) define sports stress as athletes' physical and mental strain from training and competition. The pressure to perform and win, fear of injury, team chemistry, expectations from coaches, fans, family, or self-imposed standards may cause this sort of stress (Bhadauriya & Tripathi, 2018). Sports stress may cause anxiety, poor performance, burnout, exhaustion, and immunological dysfunction. Its intricacy comes from its versatility, touching on many real-world sports topics. When faced with physical and mental challenges, athletes naturally feel intimidated, apprehensive, dysphoric, or otherwise disturbed. The American Psychiatric Association (2014) lists overload, anxiety, performance pressure, weariness, and lethargy as symptoms. Sports stress may harm athletes of any age, gender, color, or socioeconomic level.

Sports stress is the body's reaction to any external event that upsets homeostasis, according to Shahsavarani et al. (2013). This term highlights athletes' need to react, control, and adapt on physical, psychological, and emotional levels. Silverman et al. (2010) said that sports stress is caused by situations, events, ideas, or emotions that cause annoyance, rage, apprehension, and worry. Sports stress is the body's and mind's response to the perception that an athlete's resources and coping processes are inadequate to handle a difficult, frightening, or demanding circumstance.

Sports stress literature classifies stressors by origin (physiological vs. psychological), effect on the athlete (eustress vs. distress), and duration (acute vs. chronic). Researchers and sports professionals may better understand and manage sports stress using these categories. Stults-Kolehmainen and Sinha (2014), Fletcher and Sarkar (2012), and Gustafsson et al. (2011) examined physiological vs. psychological, eustress vs. distress, and acute vs. chronic sports stress. They show that physiological and psychological stresses affect athlete performance differently, with eustress encouraging and distress inhibiting. Acute stress may enhance attention and energy, but prolonged stress can harm health, showing the complex dynamics of sports stress.

Sports stress is assessed three ways. Hans Selye's response-based theory sees stress as a failure to adjust to demands, defined by the General Adaptation Syndrome's alarm, resistance, and tiredness. Holmes and Rahe's stimulus-based perspective evaluates stress by effort to overcome stresses but ignores athlete differences. Last, the cognitive-transactional process theory, promoted by several writers, defines stress as an athlete's perception of excessive, damaging expectations and emphasizes the dynamic interaction between athletes and their settings. Context and transactional processes make sports stress customized, according to this view.

**Effects of Stress**

In the realm of athletics, chronic stress stands as a formidable adversary, posing significant risks to both physical and mental health (Schweickle et al., 2021). Our discussion here delves into the multifaceted consequences of prolonged stress on athletes, exploring its detrimental impact on cardiovascular health, immune response, digestive function, sleep patterns, pain perception, and body composition. Concurrently, it highlights the profound mental health challenges arising from persistent stress, including anxiety disorders, depression, cognitive impairments, emotional instability, potential substance abuse, and in severe cases, suicidal ideation. Understanding these varied implications is crucial for devising effective strategies to safeguard the holistic well-being of athletes in high-pressure environments.

**Physical Health Consequences**

Chronic stress in athletes, as described by Chapman (2016), triggers a "fight or flight" response, releasing stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. This prolonged hormonal exposure can detrimentally affect athletes' physical health, increasing cardiac workload and hypertension risk, which can lead to arterial damage and heightened cardiovascular disease and stroke risks. Furthermore, chronic stress weakens the immune system, prolonging recovery from illnesses and affecting training schedules. Athletes also face digestive issues, including symptoms like diarrhea and constipation, as noted by Segal, Smith, Robinson, and Segal (2016). Stress can worsen conditions like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and lead to emotional eating, contributing to obesity. Additionally, stress disrupts sleep patterns, causing difficulties in falling and staying asleep (Balaji and Gopal, 2021). This disrupts the sleep-stress cycle, impacting athletes' well-being and performance. Chronic stress also lowers pain tolerance, exacerbating headaches, migraines, back pain, and fibromyalgia, and causes muscle tightness. These findings underscore the importance of managing chronic stress in athletes for their overall health and performance.

**Mental Health Consequences**

Prolonged stress in athletes can lead to anxiety disorders, such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder, and Social Anxiety Disorder, as they face persistent worry and pressure from their sporting careers. This stress impacts serotonin levels, contributing to depression symptoms like sorrow and hopelessness, as Kihara and Mugambi (2018) note. Cognitive impairments, including weakened memory and decision-making, are also consequences of chronic stress, as highlighted by Makubu (2020). Additionally, emotional instability, mood swings, and relationship strains can result. Manjunatha and Renukamurthy (2017) suggest that some athletes may turn to substances like medications or alcohol, risking substance abuse and worsening mental health issues. In severe cases, chronic stress and depression may lead to suicidal thoughts or self-harm, necessitating immediate professional intervention. Acknowledging the gravity of long-term stress and its impact on athletes' mental and emotional well-being is vital for providing appropriate support and resources.

**The Nigerian Situation**

In Nigeria, athletes face stressors stemming from a complex mix of historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors. As identified by Yakubu (2020), the lower life expectancy in Nigeria is partly due to pervasive stress. Political instability (Orji, 2017), widespread corruption, and cultural and religious diversity leading to inter-group tensions exacerbate stress. Security threats like terrorism and banditry (Abonyo, 2020), economic disparity, high youth unemployment, and healthcare challenges further contribute to the stress landscape. Additionally, the education system's shortcomings (Udoh and Ajala, 2015) and gender-based discrimination add to the societal stressors.

Environmental challenges like deforestation and pollution (Oludeyi, 2015), migration issues (Bamba, 2016), and the clash between traditional gender roles and modern societal demands create additional stress. The tension between religious principles and modern life further complicates the situation. Mental health stigma, as noted by Adim et al. (2018), prevents many from seeking needed support, exacerbating stress among athletes and the broader Nigerian population.

**Conventional Stress Management approaches**

Keeping your mind and body healthy in today's fast-paced world requires adept stress management. There is a wide variety of methods available to people for managing stress. The following methods for dealing with stress are suggested in Table 1.

**Table 1: Stress Management Techniques**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Mindfulness and Meditation** | Meditation and other forms of mindfulness practice assist practitioners bring their attention back to the here and now. Anxiety levels can be lowered and stress alleviated with the use of these methods (Bowin & Harvey, 2019). |
| 2 | **Physical Activity** | Intense stress relief can be attained by regular exercise. It's a great stress reliever and natural mood booster since it triggers the release of endorphins. Jogging, yoga, and dancing are all fantastic choices. |
| 3 | **Healthy Diet** | Consuming foods rich in vitamins and minerals, as well as remaining hydrated, helps general health and the body's ability to deal with stress (Petreanu, Lordache, & Seracin, 2020). |
| 4 | **Sleep Hygiene** | Getting enough sleep is an important stress management strategy. Better sleep can be achieved with the help of excellent sleep habits like sticking to a regular sleep schedule and engaging in a relaxing bedtime routine. |
| 5 | **Time Management** | Tasks might be less overwhelming if they are organised and prioritised. Effective time management can be achieved by the use of tools such as the Pomodoro Technique and the making of to-do lists (Balaji & Gopal, 2021). |
| 6 | **Social Support** | The emotional support and new perspective you gain from talking to a friend, family member, or therapist are invaluable. Having and keeping solid friendships is a great way to reduce the effects of stress. |
| 7 | **Relaxation Techniques** | Individuals can decompress and lower their stress levels by partaking in activities like reading, taking warm baths, or engaging in hobbies. |
| 8 | **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** | According to Lumley and Provenzano (2003), CBT is a method of therapy that aids patients in recognising and altering stressful ways of thinking and behaving. It teaches people how to handle stressful situations better. |
| 9 | **Stress Reduction Workshops** | A person's ability to cope with stress can be greatly improved |

| | | by attending a stress reduction programme or class. Awareness of stress and methods for dealing with it are common topics of these seminars. |
|---|---|---|
| 10 | **Self-Care** | Preventing burnout and increasing resistance to stress can be achieved through prioritizing self-care activities such as taking breaks, establishing boundaries, and practicing self-compassion. (Adim, et al., 2018) |
| 11 | **Nature and Outdoor Activities** | Outdoor activities and time spent in nature have been shown to have a relaxing effect on the mind and body, making them ideal stress relievers. |
| 12 | **Mind-Body Practices** | Techniques like tai chi and qigong use breathing exercises and attentive movement. These have the potential to serve as stress-dissolver and induce calm. |
| 13 | **Seeking Professional Help** | Seeking expert support from a mental health professional is crucial when stress gets unbearable or causes mental health disorders like anxiety or depression. Professionals in the field, such as therapists, counsellors, and psychiatrists, can offer personalized support and care. |

An individual's particular stressors will dictate the combination of methods they should employ, so it is important for them to experiment to see what works best for them.

**A Proposed Management Model: A holistic Approach**

The stress management model must be adapted to Nigerian sports stress management, taking into consideration cultural, socioeconomic, and community factors that affect players' stresses and coping techniques. This tailored methodology stresses cultural and community-based stress management for Nigerian sports. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, people are interrelated with their local and wider surroundings. This strategy addresses Nigerian athletes' stress management requirements based on their culture, community, and social setting.
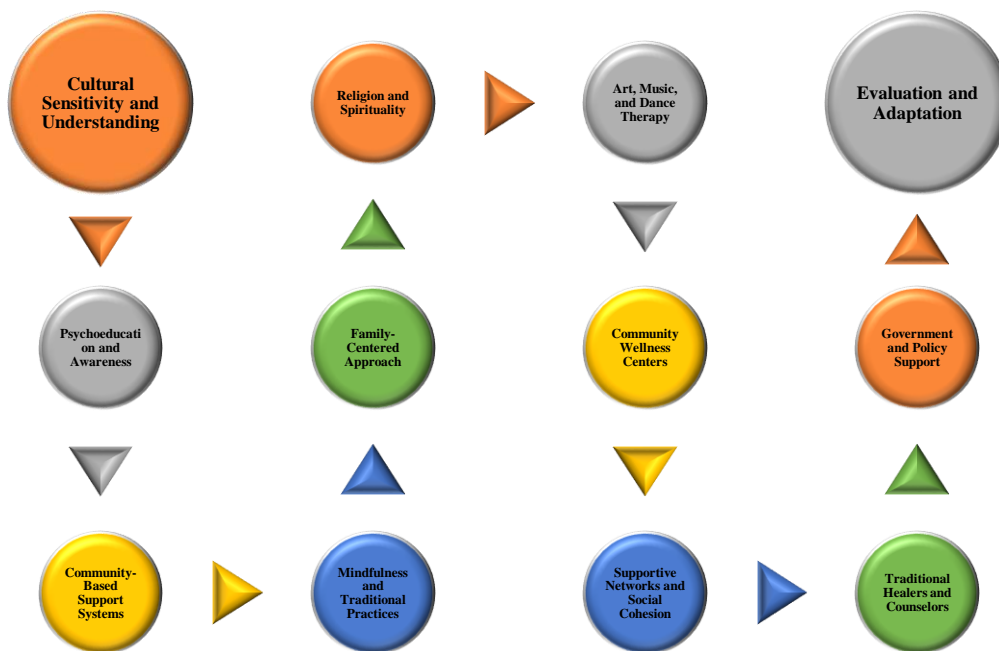


**Figure 1: A holistic Model to Sports stress management in contemporary Nigeria**

**Cultural Sensitivity and Understanding:** Nigerian athletes come from diverse cultural backgrounds and speak multiple languages. To effectively manage sports stress, it's essential to recognize that stress can be interpreted and experienced differently based on one's cultural background. Coaches, support staff, and fellow athletes should be culturally sensitive and understanding.

**Psychoeducation and Awareness:** Athletes should be educated about the physiological and psychological effects of stress on their performance and overall well-being. Public awareness programs, tailored to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the athletes, can encourage them to seek professional help when needed.

**Community-Based Support Systems:** Building on the traditional community support systems in Nigeria, such as close-knit families and community events, these should be enhanced to provide a strong support network for athletes. Community-wide dialogues can be organized to openly discuss stressors and coping strategies within the sports community.

**Mindfulness and Traditional Practices:** Athletes can benefit from stress-relieving activities like yoga, Tai Chi, and meditation, enhanced with mindfulness techniques. Traditional herbal treatments, known for their calming effects, can be considered under the supervision of experts.

**Family-Centered Approach:** Recognizing the significance of family dynamics in Nigerian society, involve families in stress management programs. Encourage family members to engage in open discussions about their stress experiences and ways to cope with them.

**Religion and Spirituality:** Nigeria's strong religious and spiritual traditions can be integrated into stress management programs. Athletes can be encouraged to find solace and strength in their faith, utilizing religious practices as coping mechanisms.

**Art, Music, and Dance Therapy:** Traditional art forms like music and dance can be used as therapeutic tools to relieve stress among athletes. Art, in various forms, can be harnessed for its potential to bring about social change and serve as an outlet for stress.

**Community Wellness Centers:** Establish community wellness centers where athletes can access expert counseling, stress management classes, and more. These centers should prioritize cultural competence and linguistic accessibility to cater to the diverse athlete population.

Supportive Networks and Social Cohesion: Foster opportunities for athletes to come together through community celebrations and support networks. Neighbors and fellow athletes can be encouraged to watch out for one another and provide support when needed.

**Traditional Healers and Counselors:** Collaborate with respected local healers and counselors who are familiar with local customs and values. These professionals should be trained to recognize signs of stress and provide culturally sensitive support to athletes.

**Government and Policy Support:** Advocate for policies that allocate funding for mental health care in underserved communities, including those in the sports sector. Investment in research on stress and mental health in Nigerian sports is essential to guide evidence-based interventions.

**Evaluation and Adaptation:** Continuously evaluate the sports stress management model based on scientific data and feedback from athletes and support staff. Adaptations should be made in response to changes in society and culture to ensure the model remains effective.

Incorporating this adapted stress management model into the Nigerian sports landscape acknowledges the complexity and interconnectedness of factors influencing athletes' stress experiences. It takes inspiration from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, highlighting the importance of considering the athlete within the broader context of their culture, community, and society. This holistic approach aims to provide athletes with the necessary tools and support to effectively manage sports-related stress while respecting their unique cultural and societal background. It is possible to handle stressors in a way that resonates with Nigeria's diverse population and promotes mental and emotional well-being by designing and implementing a stress management model adapted to the Nigerian environment, with a focus on cultural and community-based solutions. The goal of this strategy is to equip individuals with the resources they need to deal with stress in a healthy, culturally appropriate way.

**Importance of a Holistic Approach to Stress Management**

In the context of sports stress management, taking a holistic and integrated approach is vital due to the profound impact of stress on athletes' physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. This comprehensive strategy addresses not only the surface symptoms of stress but also its underlying causes, incorporating various aspects of athletes' lives, including their lifestyle, relationships, athletic commitments, and personal beliefs (Kraaijenbrink, Spender, & Groen, 2010).

**Physical Well-Being:** The holistic approach in sports stress management emphasizes the importance of physical well-being. Athletes can effectively cope with stress and reduce its physiological effects by focusing on areas such as exercise, nutrition, and sleep. A healthy body is better equipped to handle the physical demands of sports, reducing the negative impact of stress.

**Mental Fortitude:** Athletes often face stress-related mental health challenges, including anxiety, sadness, and cognitive impairments (Ashfag and Mohammed, 2013). Holistic approaches such as mindfulness, counseling, and relaxation techniques strengthen athletes' mental resilience and help them manage destructive thoughts, allowing them to perform at their best under pressure.

**Emotional Regulation:** Emotional state is a significant contributor to stress. Cultivating self-awareness and emotional regulation is essential for athletes. A holistic approach empowers athletes to control their emotional responses to stressors, promoting emotional well-being and performance.

**Social Support:** Strengthening social relationships and seeking support from teammates, coaches, and sports communities is a crucial component of holistic sports stress management. These connections provide both mental and physical relief from stress, enabling athletes to share their experiences and find support.

**Self-Care:** Athletes need to practice self-care to avoid burnout, enhance overall health, and maintain happiness. Taking time for oneself, pursuing personal interests, and showing self-compassion are essential for managing sports-related stress effectively.

**Balancing Professional and Personal Life:** Achieving a harmonious balance between one's sports commitments and personal life is essential in holistic sports stress management. This approach acknowledges the significance of boundaries, effective time management, and maintaining a fulfilling life beyond sports.

**Individualized Approaches:** Recognizing that every athlete deals with stress uniquely, a one-size-fits-all solution may not be suitable. Holistic sports stress management encourages athletes to develop personalized stress-reduction strategies that align with their individual challenges and strengths.

**Long-Term Coping Skills:** Holistic approaches in sports stress management go beyond providing temporary relief and focus on teaching athletes healthy coping mechanisms that they can use over the long term. This equips athletes with resilience and the ability to proactively address stress.

**Enhanced Quality of Life:** Ultimately, a holistic strategy for sports stress management aims to improve an athlete's overall quality of life. By addressing physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects, athletes can experience greater life satisfaction, enjoyment, and fulfillment both in their athletic pursuits and their personal lives (Palmer, Cooper, & Thomas, 2004).

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Managing sports stress in Nigeria demands a multifaceted and culturally sensitive approach. By integrating Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the proposed model recognizes the complex interplay of cultural, socioeconomic, and community factors in shaping athletes' stress responses. Effective management requires a holistic strategy that encompasses physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being, tailored to the unique needs and backgrounds of Nigerian athletes.

Three recommendations for implementing this model are:

**Enhance Cultural Competence:** Training for coaches and support staff in cultural sensitivity to better understand and address the diverse needs of Nigerian athletes.

**Strengthen Community Support:** Leverage traditional community structures and support networks to provide a robust foundation for athletes' stress management.

**Promote Public Awareness and Education:** Implement widespread education programs focusing on the importance of mental health in sports, destigmatizing mental health issues, and encouraging athletes to seek professional help when needed.

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