

SPORTS MANAGERS' COPING STRATEGIES AND OVERALL LIFE SATISFACTION

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Abstract: The sport manager is a key figure in sports structures, organizing, leading and planning activities for the smooth running of the organization. The purpose of the study was to examine the level of overall life satisfaction and the coping strategies used by future and, also, experienced sports managers. Thirty-six participants took part in the study, 15 experienced sports managers ($M_{age} = 51$), and 21 future specialists in the sport management field ($M_{age} = 27$). The Brief COPE Questionnaire which measures 14 strategies to cope with stress, and The Cantril Ladder for overall life satisfaction were used. Using the independent samples t-test significant differences were highlighted for social emotional support and for acceptance (as coping strategies), experienced sports managers needing less emotional support and compassion in a stressful situation, compared to future managers. Also, experienced managers accept more easily situations they cannot change and control. To explore the gender-related differences in sports managers the non-parametric U test was used. Even if the p-values were insignificant, it is worth mentioning that experienced male managers are using more planning and acceptance, and less self-distraction and self-blame, compared to future male managers. With respect to experienced female managers it was found that they used a little more humor and acceptance in difficult situations (compared to future female sports managers), while social emotional support ($p < 0.05$) and behavioral disengagement were less used. Considering the overall life satisfaction, experienced female managers obtained significantly lower scores than future female sports managers, possible explanations being discussed.

Keywords: coping strategies, sports managers, life satisfaction.

Introduction

The sports phenomenon has evolved significantly in recent decades, and it has transformed into a vast industry capable of mobilizing substantial financial, material, and human resources. This evolution has had a direct impact on economic and social life. Each resource is vital and plays an essential role in managing sports organizations (Vasilescu & Țifrea, 2020).

Over time, the term „manager“ has been confused with the term „leader“, but in reality there are distinct elements, so that the two terms cannot be perceived in the same way (Riggio, 2017) – the roles of manager and leader are complementary, the same person can take on the role of manager or leader, depending on the situation. Management is a process through which goals are achieved. Management positions are expected to grow in the present (The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). In sport, being a growing industry, with a huge number of people involved in all aspects of sport management and administration, there are differences in leadership compared to any other field. On the one hand, there is a very

well developed voluntary sector and marketing strategies that can be a real success, and on the other hand there are numerous funds and sponsorship that those in the world of sport can call upon (Watt, 2004). Sport management is a multidisciplinary field that integrates two major components, management and sport. Management includes planning, organizing and leading using the internal factors that the organization has at its disposal. The functions of management refer to forecasting, organizing, coordinating, coaching and controlling (Lussier & Kimball, 2023). The manager needs to know what each person in the organization is doing for the smooth running of the organization. Also, each member must be clear about his or her area of action, personal responsibilities and duties. The manager determines the tasks, duties and responsibilities of each employee, sets performance standards and determines how to motivate. The coordination of activities can take two forms: bilateral (manager and employee) or multilateral (manager and several employees) (Anghel et al., 2013). The

manager will need to know as many motivation techniques as possible, which suit each person involved in the development of the organization. It is preferable that the motivation is positive (and not negative - e.g., the manager penalizes employees, offers something unpleasant) because this increases the satisfaction of team members (Certo & Certo, 2019).

The role that a sports manager plays in an organization is crucial, therefore it is a necessity for any leader to possess a set of skills that will enable them to perform at the highest level in sports organizations. The sport manager will need to be able to respond quickly to the demands of the organization, adapt easily and be a flexible person, succeeding with these qualities to carry out the planning made in order to achieve performance (Duclos-Bastías et al., 2021). Sports managers negotiate contracts, seek sponsorships, analyze data, plan the budget, buy the necessary equipment and plan travel. At the same time, they must have relationships with administrators, players, volunteers, and fans (Masteralexis, 2023). Among the skills needed for sports managers can be listed: communication (the ability to communicate both verbally, nonverbally, and in writing effectively); the ability to step into a leadership role, leading team members and helping them to achieve their goals as quickly as possible; the ability to plan events, attract sponsors and maintain standards of excellence; the ability to manage the money at hand correctly for the benefit of the organization; the ability to manage sales and make a profit; the ability to interact with the public (Koenigstorfer, 2023). Strategic planning in a sport organization has become an indispensable tool to reach the desired results, thus decision making is done with focus on the ultimate goals of the organization, the sport manager being responsible for these decisions (Horch & Schütte, 2003).

Investigating psychological features in male and female sport managers from Romania, Macra et al. (2010) emphasized that female managers reported higher levels of neuroticism, anxiety, muscle tension, and lower values for monotony avoidance (sensation seeking). In contrast, male managers had a higher preference for novel experiences and sensation seeking. It seems that experienced managers (EM) working in sports organizations manifest a very high level of emotional intelligence. EM registered higher values for recognition of one's emotions, inner motivation and productive use of emotions, and for the control/ intelligent manipulation of emotions, compared to future sports managers (Predoiu et al., 2021). Also, the same authors discussed about the extraverted sensing (sensation) temperament type – EM are more sociable, open, and „*rely significantly more in the interpretation of information on direct and concrete experiences, on the five senses (relating more strongly to external stimuli), and less on intuition*“. In the last years, brain dominance of sports managers was explored. Researchers reported that Romanian experienced sports managers use more the lower right quadrant of the brain (being empathetic, sensitive to others, socially oriented persons), and a significant difference was observed when using the upper left quadrant of the brain (cortical system), with EM being better at performing analytical, logical, mathematical activities, compared to future specialists (Predoiu et al., 2023a). Also, experienced sports managers „pay more attention to support and motivate employees, showing a reduced social distance from the subordinates“ (EM obtained a higher value in the case of the relationship-oriented leadership style, compared to future sports managers – see Predoiu et al., 2023b).

Not least, Macra-Oșorhean et al. (2011) underlined that Romanian sports managers have a reduced level of verbal aggression and irritability, and a higher score for social desirability, guilt and inhibition of aggression (when compared to male sports managers from other European Union countries).

Stress is a major problem in everyday life and in the workplace, and it can be the source of many health problems. Strategies to cope with stress are essential in overcoming the harmful effects of negative stress (distress) and *unhealthy stress* – „work stress that leads to hardship, distress or strain, resulting in diminishing individual's work well-being“ (Piotrowski et al., 2021). But how do experienced and successful managers deal with

distress and with all the activities for which they are responsible? Coping strategies become very important in this context. Coping refers to the elimination of the source of stress or a change in perspective and perception of it. Each person has his/her own way of coping with difficulties, and there are several options that can be chosen to manage negative stress. Some people may turn to anxiolytic drugs, planning, humor approach to problems, or others may turn to denial, self-blame or positive/ optimistic approach (Tüdös & Mitache, 2011). A person will react to events according to the interpretations he/she makes, considering the circumstances in which he/she is involved, and the available external and inner resources of which he/she is aware (Lane, 2008). Various strategies to deal with stress were highlighted in the literature (Predoiu et al., 2022):

- Problem-focused strategies – the active approach, for example, which aims to remove the source of stress, or the suppression of activities so that the person can concentrate on solving the problem, avoiding distractions.
- Emotion-focused strategies – refer to positive interpretation so that the person finds a positive side to even the most difficult situations, or acceptance (the person is aware that the situation cannot be improved and accepts the threatening factor).
- Coping strategies focused on social support – refer, for example, to the use of instrumental social support (the person asks for information and advice to improve his/her situation).
- Avoidance coping strategies – include denial, mental passivity (avoiding confronting the problem), or behavioral disengagement (the person gives up trying to remove the stressor); all these are dysfunctional coping strategies (they don't really help the person to solve the problem, being useful only in the short term, reducing the experienced stress).

Substance use, humor and religion represent, also, coping strategies (see, for example, Predoiu, 2016). Also, Hann (2000) discusses (in sports field) about visualization, confidence enhancement, relaxation and negative thought-stopping, as coping mechanisms.

Coping mechanisms help to avoid the burnout syndrome, which is increasingly common among people who work very hard, to the point of exhaustion. The persons/ group with which an employee surrounds himself can be an important

resource for quality of life and perceived life satisfaction (Maresca et al., 2022).

The concept of life satisfaction can be considered an universal indicator for one's well-being, so Veenhoven, in 1996, defines subjective well-being as the extent to which the person judges favorably the overall quality of his/ her life (Bălătescu, 2003). The degree of satisfaction of the person with his or her own existence is given by a number of subjective and objective factors. People tend to compare the life they have with the life they would like to have, or with the lives of other people, close or not (Veenhoven, 1996). Among the factors directly responsible for people's satisfaction with their lives can be specified (Diener & Suh, 1997):

- Personal factors – include health status (both physical and mental), psychological characteristics such as optimism, self-esteem, confidence and life experiences which can be positive and/ or negative, so that perceptions of life may be different.
- Social factors – interpersonal relationships, with family, friends or partners are an important aspect. The better the quality of these relationships, the more the perception of personal life can improve. Socio-economic status, also, falls into this sphere, and the job a person has, the education he/ she received and the income level will influence overall life satisfaction.
- Cultural and contextual factors – cultural norms, geographical context and standard of living.

Studies have shown that people with high levels of life satisfaction have better physical and mental health, close relationships with those around them, increased longevity, better job performance and greater social involvement (Cummins, 2000).

Materials and method

Purpose

The aim of the study is to investigate the level of life satisfaction (generally), and the coping strategies used by future and, also, experienced sports managers.

Research questions

- 1) What are the differences between future managers and successful sports managers in terms of the coping strategies used in everyday activities?
- 2) What is the difference between experienced (and successful) managers and future sports managers in terms of overall life satisfaction?
- 3) What are the gender-related coping strategies of experienced sports managers?

4) How does overall life satisfaction vary, in the case of sport managers, according to gender?

Participants

The current study included 36 participants aged between 24 and 69 years, distributed as follows:

- 15 experienced sports managers (8 males and 7 females, aged between 34-69, $M_{age} = 51$) –hold leading positions in sports federations, school sports clubs or private sports clubs;
- 21 future sports managers (12 males and 9 females, aged between 24-31, $M_{age} = 27$), Master students in Bucharest (at the National University of Physical Education and Sports), in the Master's program: Management and Marketing in Sports Structures, Activities and Events.

Measures and Procedure

The study was conducted between January-April 2024. The questionnaires in this research were administered online via *google forms*. Ethical principles considering written informed consent, data confidentiality and anonymity of participants were ensured.

1) Brief COPE Questionnaire (Carver, 1997)

The instrument is a shortened form of the COPE questionnaire, with 28 items. Ways of answering: 4 = "I've been doing this a lot"; 1 = "I haven't been doing this at all"; 2 = "I've been doing this a little"; 3 = "I've been doing this a medium amount".

Instructions to the participants: "The phrases refer to how you cope with stress in your life during everyday activities. To what extent did you do what the item says?"

Brief COPE measures 14 coping strategies (two items are noted for each strategy to deal with stress). Examples of items are given below:

- „I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things" (Self-distraction);

- „I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape" (Venting);

- "I've been getting emotional support from others" (Use of emotional support);

- „I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it" (Substance use).

The other ten coping strategies assessed by Brief Cope are: Active coping, Denial, Use of instrumental support, Behavioral disengagement, Positive reframing, Humor, Religion, Acceptance, Planning and Self-blame.

2) The Cantril Ladder (Cantril, 1965)

The Cantril Scale assesses a person's overall life satisfaction and inner well-being, a multifaceted concept (Diener et al., 2009). The Cantril scale is a simple visual scale. Instruction: "Please look at the scale below. Number 0 means the lowest possible level of satisfaction and number 10 means the highest possible level of satisfaction. Mark your level for Overall Satisfaction with life now". The results inevitably depend on the person's state of health, living conditions, income, the quality of social relationships and the conditions in which professional and personal learning/development takes place.

Results

We present the analysis and statistical interpretation of the answers given by the participants to the instruments used in the current research, aiming to respond to the four questions that were the basis of this study.

1) What are the differences between future managers and successful sports managers in terms of the coping strategies used in day-to-day activities?

The independent samples t-test was used (Table 1). Skewness coefficient was less than 1 (in absolute value), the normality of distributions being assured, for each coping strategy (Morgan et al., 2004). Considering the Levene test, only in the case of Active coping and Substance use strategies $p < 0.05$ (the homogeneity condition not being met).

Table 1. Independent t-test – strategies to cope with stress

Items		Statistic	df	p		Effect Size
Self-distraction	Student's t	-0.7798	34.0	0.441	Cohen's d	-0.2636
Active coping	Student's t	-0.9875	34.0	0.330	Cohen's d	-0.3338
Denial	Student's t	0.0737	34.0	0.942	Cohen's d	0.0249
Substance use	Student's t	1.7214	34.0	0.094	Cohen's d	0.5819
Use of emotional support	Student's t	-2.4507	34.0	0.020	Cohen's d	-0.8285
Use of instrumental support	Student's t	-0.3046	34.0	0.763	Cohen's d	-0.1030
Behavioral disengagement	Student's t	-1.1132	34.0	0.273	Cohen's d	-0.3763
Venting	Student's t	0.9580	34.0	0.345	Cohen's d	0.3239
Positive reframing	Student's t	-1.5745	34.0	0.125	Cohen's d	-0.5323
Planning	Student's t	0.4456	34.0	0.659	Cohen's d	0.1506
Humor	Student's t	1.4407	34.0	0.159	Cohen's d	0.4870

Acceptance	Student's t	2.4190	34.0	0.021	Cohen's d	0.8178
Religion	Student's t	-0.7385	34.0	0.465	Cohen's d	-0.2497
Self-blame	Student's t	-0.8416	34.0	0.406	Cohen's d	-0.2845

There are significant differences between experienced managers (EM) and future managers (FM) in their use of the social emotional support coping strategy. Future managers need significantly more emotional support and compassion from those around them ($p = 0.020$, $M_{\text{future managers}} = 6.24$, $SD = 1.26$, and $M_{\text{experienced managers}} = 5.27$, $SD = 1.03$). Also, EM more easily accept certain situations, which FM fail to do ($p = 0.021$) – $M_{\text{future managers}} = 4.38$, $SD = 0.92$, respectively $M_{\text{experienced managers}} = 5.29$, $SD = 1.28$. Effect size $d = 0.82$, with a strong difference between the results (Predoiu, 2020).

2) What is the difference between experienced (and successful) managers and future sports managers in terms of overall life satisfaction?

Table 2. Inferential statistics - overall life satisfaction

		Levene		Statistic	df	p
Overall life satisfaction	Student's t	F = 1.53	p = 0.225	0.767	34.0	0.448

In Table 2 the alpha significance threshold is greater than 0.05 ($p = 0.448$), therefore there are no significant differences between EM and FM in terms of perceived life satisfaction. However, the balance tips towards experienced sports managers, who are slightly more satisfied with life, in general ($M_{\text{experienced managers}} = 8.13$, $SD = 0.64$, and $M_{\text{future sport managers}} = 7.81$, $SD = 1.54$).

3) What are the gender-related coping strategies of experienced sports managers?

To examine the gender-related differences in sports managers the non-parametric U test was used.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test – coping strategies (male sports managers)

Items		Statistic	p
Self-distraction	Mann-Whitney U	33.0	0.247
Active coping	Mann-Whitney U	44.0	0.780
Denial	Mann-Whitney U	43.0	0.716
Substance use	Mann-Whitney U	36.5	0.262
Use of emotional support	Mann-Whitney U	42.5	0.686
Use of instrumental support	Mann-Whitney U	45.0	0.840
Behavioral disengagement	Mann-Whitney U	47.0	0.968
Venting	Mann-Whitney U	33.5	0.261
Positive reframing	Mann-Whitney U	38.5	0.457
Planning	Mann-Whitney U	40.0	0.551
Humor	Mann-Whitney U	45.0	0.840
Acceptance	Mann-Whitney U	27.0	0.089
Religion	Mann-Whitney U	40.5	0.577
Self-blame	Mann-Whitney U	39.0	0.481

In Table 3 we observe that $p > 0.05$ (for each coping strategy). We conclude that there is an insignificant difference in terms of the coping strategies used by experienced male managers compared to future male sports managers.

Figure 1 emphasize that experienced male managers (blue) are using more planning, venting, substance use and acceptance (as coping strategies), and less self-distraction and self-blame, compared to future sports managers (however, substance use strategy was the least used strategy by managers in a stressful situation).

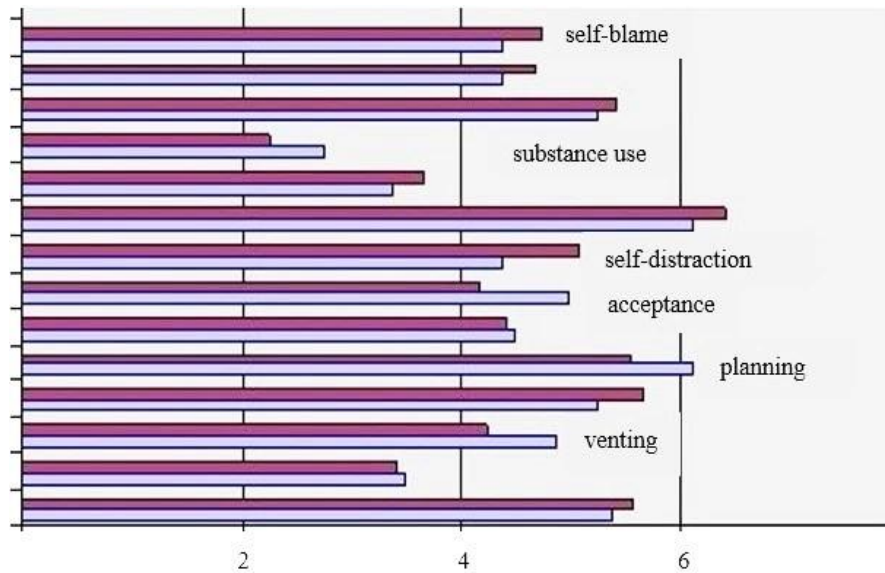


Figure 1. EM (blue) and FM (purple) – 14 coping strategies (males)

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U test – coping strategies (female sports managers)

Items		Statistic	p
Self-distraction	Mann-Whitney U	29.50	0.870
Active coping	Mann-Whitney U	27.00	0.665
Denial	Mann-Whitney U	26.00	0.586
Substance use	Mann-Whitney U	25.50	0.392
Use of emotional support	Mann-Whitney U	4.00	0.003
Use of instrumental support	Mann-Whitney U	30.00	0.905
Behavioral disengagement	Mann-Whitney U	14.50	0.071
Venting	Mann-Whitney U	31.50	1.000
Positive reframing	Mann-Whitney U	15.50	0.090
Planning	Mann-Whitney U	26.00	0.584
Humor	Mann-Whitney U	14.50	0.070
Acceptance	Mann-Whitney U	20.50	0.249
Religion	Mann-Whitney U	28.00	0.739
Self-blame	Mann-Whitney U	29.00	0.822

In Table 4 we observe a significance threshold of less than 0.05 for social emotional support ($p = 0.003$) – $M_{\text{experienced female managers}} = 5.29$, $SD = 1.11$, and $M_{\text{future sports managers}} = 7.33$, $SD = 0.70$). The effect size is $r = 0.71$ ($z = 2.85$), hence a very strong difference between the two groups of female sports managers can be reported. Figure 2 underline, also, that experienced female managers (blue) are using more humor and acceptance (as coping strategies), and less behavioral disengagement and positive reframing, compared to future sports managers.

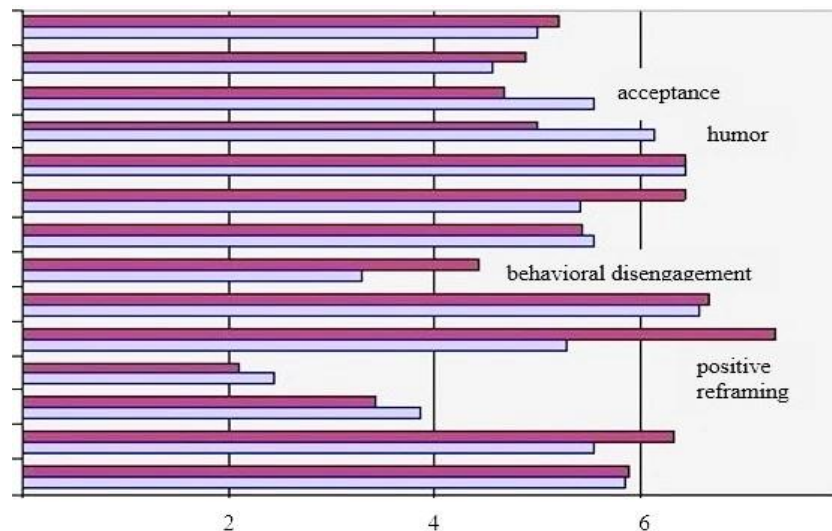


Figure 2. EM (blue) and FM (purple) – 14 coping strategies (females)

4) How does overall life satisfaction vary, in the case of sport managers, according to gender?

Table 5. Mann-Whitney U test – life satisfaction (sports managers)

		Statistic	p
Overall life satisfaction	Mann-Whitney U - males	41.0	0.534
	Mann-Whitney U - females	9.00	0.015

Experienced and successful female managers scored significantly lower than future female sports managers in the case of overall life satisfaction ($p = 0.015$) – $M_{\text{experienced female managers}} = 5.00$, $SD = 1.29$, and $M_{\text{future sports managers}} = 7.33$, $SD = 2.44$. In male sports managers no significant differences were found in terms of perceived life satisfaction between the two groups (EM vs. FM).

Discussion

Under the guidance of a sports manager an organization will be able to increase its value and will also have the benefit that both athletes and staff will be guided in a right way, towards the achievement of the organizational goals. People who run important sports clubs have understood the need for highly management and marketing (Harvey et al., 1993). Experience in sports management is based on high-level education and studies, followed by long practice (Andreff et al., 2009). The present study aims to support future specialists who want a successful career in sports management.

After analyzing the results significant differences were found between experienced managers and future sports managers, in terms of social emotional support and acceptance (as coping strategies). In other words, future managers need significantly more emotional support, compassion and help from those around them when facing a stressful situation. Also, experienced managers accept more easily certain situations which they cannot change and/or control. We recommend

future sports managers a higher degree of acceptance of situations beyond their control.

In terms of overall life satisfaction, there were no significant differences between the two groups of managers (EM and FM) – without participants' gender being investigated separately.

Another significant difference was found between the group of experienced female managers and future female sport managers in terms of social emotional support. Early career female managers need more emotional support and compassion when in a difficult situation. Also, considering the results registered by experienced female managers (the differences between groups were not, however, statistically significant), we recommend women who want to become successful sports managers to have a higher degree of acceptance (in the face of situations they cannot control), and lower behavioral disengagement, as well as to use a little more humor (as a coping strategy) in stressful circumstances. In the case of future male managers, we recommend to use more planning and acceptance, and less self-distraction and self-

blame in a stressful condition, knowing that self-blame is related with experienced stress, while „tendencies to reappraise negatives experiences boosts resilience“ (Mineva, 2023).

Data analysis showed, also, that experienced and successful female managers scored significantly lower than future female sports managers in the case of overall life satisfaction. These results could be explained by the impact of family on women's lives. With age, a woman's responsibilities increase and it becomes more difficult to combine personal and professional life. Most women over 35 are already mothers (in the current study 85.7% of the experienced female managers had at least one child at the time of testing), so things can be even harder to manage. Raising and bringing up children, while a very enjoyable process, can also bring frustrations for mothers, leading to lack of time and neglect of other activities and things they have to do. It takes a very well thought-out plan and complete discipline for a woman to be a successful manager, wife and mother, and to be satisfied and fulfilled with the life she has. The results can be related to other findings in the literature, emphasizing that female successful sports managers showed higher daytime sleepiness, poorer sleep quality and higher level of exhaustion, compared to male successful sports managers (Predoiu et al., 2024). We recommend future female sports managers to be aware of the position they will find themselves in years to come, in order to ensure that life satisfaction is still at a high level, knowing, also, that women represent a more vulnerable subsample in terms of psychological stress (Tubić et al., 2022). In this context, an essential aspect is the development of stress tolerance at workplace, being linked to a higher self-efficacy (Volgemute et al., 2023). Not least, especially female sports managers need to be aware that “the first symptoms of maladaptive behaviors may be hidden in presumably usual activities and attitudes” (Kawalec et al., 2023).

The present study is not without limits, the most important being the relatively reduced number of participants in each group of sports managers. Different findings could be obtained if the same psychological phenomena would be investigated in other countries, or if variables such as number of children and their age, or social status (married or unmarried), which can influence managers' coping strategies and reported life satisfaction, would be considered.

Conclusions

Experienced sports managers need significantly less emotional support and compassion from people around them when facing difficult circumstances, compared to future managers, and accept more easily certain situations that they cannot control.

Even if the differences were not significant, it is worth mentioning that experienced male managers are using more planning and less self-distraction and self-blame (in a stressful condition), compared to future male sports managers, while experienced female managers are using more humor and acceptance (as coping strategies) and less behavioral disengagement, compared to future female managers.

In terms of perceived life satisfaction, experienced female managers scored significantly lower than future female sports managers, possible explanations of these findings being discussed.

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Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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