Coping by Competitive Athletes With Performance Stress: Gender Differences and Relationships With Affect

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This study evaluated patterns of coping, relationships between coping and negative and positive affect, and gender differences in coping and affect in competitive athletes. A sample of 235 female and male athletes reported recent stressful performance situations and indicated appraisals related to performance goals, coping, and affective responses. Lack of goal attainment (goal incongruence) was used as a measure of stress. Group means for coping indicated that athletes primarily used strategies such as increasing effort, planning, suppressing competing activities, active coping, and self-blame. Females used higher levels of seeking social support for emotional reasons and increasing effort to manage goal frustration. Males experienced higher levels of positive affect. For positive affect, regression analysis found a significant five-variable solution ($R^2 = .31$). For negative affect, there was also a significant five-variable solution ($R^2 = .38$). The gender differences were not congruent with views that males would use higher levels of problem-focused coping.

Participating in competitive sport often places the athlete under intense physical, psychological, and emotional demands. The athlete must develop and use an array of cognitive and behavioral coping skills to manage these demands (Crocker, Alderman, & Smith, 1988; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993; Madden, Summers, & Brown, 1990; Smith, 1986). Sport researchers have begun to identify how athletes cope or believe they would cope under varying sport-related conditions (Crocker, 1992). These researchers have studied elite figure skaters (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993), Olympic level wrestlers (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993), and elite middle-distance runners (Madden, Kirkby, & McDonald, 1989). These studies have reported how athletes cope with not only performance demands, but also the demands of managing time, interpersonal relationships, media, and finances.

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Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). There appears to be an important distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Endler & Parker, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts used to change the problem causing the distress. These strategies may include problem-solving, planning, and increasing effort. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, involves strategies used to regulate emotional arousal and distress. Strategies in this dimension may include behavioral withdrawal, wishful thinking, denial, and venting of emotion.

Researchers quickly realized that the two dimensions, although serving as a conceptual guide, were inadequate to describe and measure the complexity of coping. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) developed the Ways of Coping Checklist (WCC), which was composed of eight functionally different coping scales. The WCC has had a major impact on coping research in sport (Crocker, 1992; Hammermeister & Burton, 1993; Madden et al., 1989; Madden et al., 1990). Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989), citing concerns with the WCC, developed the COPE instrument. The COPE contains 13 conceptually distinct scales based primarily on theoretical and functional considerations (Carver et al., 1989). The COPE instrument contains five scales to measure distinct aspects of problem-focused coping (active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, and seeking instrumental social support), five scales of emotion-focused coping (seeking emotional social support, positive reinterpretation and growth, acceptance, denial, and turning to religion), and three other scales (focus on and venting of emotions, behavioral disengagement, and mental disengagement). Two exploratory scales (humor and drug/alcohol use) had also been developed. Scales from the COPE have been utilized in recent sport research (e.g., Bouffard & Crocker, 1992; Isaak, 1993).

Some coping theorists have suggested that coping and emotional experience are related (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985, 1988; Lazarus, 1991a). When a person experiences a stressful situation, specific coping processes can be associated with changes in ongoing emotions. The relationship between emotion and coping has been described as bidirectional, with each affecting the other (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Initial appraisal (e.g., threat, harm, challenge) generates emotions that in turn influence coping processes. Coping then can modify a troubled person–environment relationship, leading to a different emotional state. Empirical evidence from community populations has found that problem-focused coping is associated with challenge and benefit emotions, whereas threat and harm emotions are linked to emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985, 1988). There is limited empirical evidence in the physical activity field concerning coping and emotion relationships. In a study involving repeated assessments with individuals with physical disabilities, Crocker and Bouffard (1992) found inconsistent relationships among various coping strategies and positive and negative affect. The only consistent finding was that the strategy of venting of emotions was moderately correlated with negative affect.

Another important question concerns whether men and women cope with stress in athletic settings in dissimilar ways. Most quantitative studies on coping in the sport and physical activity domain have not reported gender analyses (e.g.,
Bouffard & Crocker, 1992; Crocker, 1992; Madden et al., 1990). Madden et al. (1989) found some evidence that female cross-country runners use more emotional responses in reaction to injury than do their male counterparts. However, the small number of study participants (9 females) raises questions about the stability and generalizability of their results. Studies from community populations have shown that women are more likely to seek social support and to use emotion-focused strategies than are men (Carver et al., 1989; Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992; Stone & Neale, 1984). These findings are consistent with a socialization model which holds that sex role stereotypes and role expectation predispose men and women to respond differently (Ptacek et al., 1992). Women are socialized to use emotion-focused strategies and to seek social support. Men, on the other hand, are socialized to use more problem-focused coping.

One methodology that has been used to assess coping and stress in physical activity settings is to ask individuals to report the most stressful athletic event from a defined time period (e.g., Bouffard & Crocker, 1992; Crocker, 1992). A potential weakness in these retrospective studies is the assumption that the person has experienced a stressful event. It is possible, however, that the reported event may not have been stressful. Many study participants have expressed this concern in previous coping research by the first author. One possible solution to this dilemma is to assess goal attainment. Paterson and Neufeld (1987) argued that being unable to reach an important goal (goal incongruence) would produce stress. Emotion is also linked to goal attainment (Emmons & Diener, 1986; Lazarus & Smith, 1988; Locke & Latham, 1990), with lack of goal attainment being associated with negative affective states. To address the problem of subjects reporting low stress events, only the data from those subjects reporting moderate to high levels of goal incongruence were analyzed.

This study had several objectives. The primary purpose was to examine how competitive athletes cope with stress. The second purpose was to examine the relationship between coping and affect. It was expected that forms of problem-focused coping would be positively associated with positive affect, whereas forms of emotion-focused coping would be positively associated with negative affect. A third purpose was to investigate gender differences in both coping and affective experience. Based on the socialization hypothesis, women should report higher levels of seeking social support for emotional reasons, lower levels of problem-focused coping, and higher levels of negative affect compared to men.

Method

Participants

Athletes were recruited from regional, provincial, university, junior national, and national competitive teams. A total of 377 competitive athletes (169 women and 208 men) ranging from 15 to 30 years of age ($M = 20.5, SD = 2.5$) volunteered for the study. Athletes competed in the sports of football, volleyball, hockey, basketball, soccer, track and field, and wrestling. The sample included 53 national/junior national, 42 provincial, 270 university, and 12 regional (city) level athletes.

Measures

Coping. Coping responses were assessed by 12 coping scales. Nine of the scales were based on Carver et al.'s (1989) COPE instrument. These scales
were Active Coping, Seeking Social Support for Instrumental Reasons, Planning, Seeking Social Support for Emotional Reasons, Denial, Humor, Behavioral Disengagement, Venting of Emotion, and Suppression of Competing Activities. Three other scales were added based on the research of Crocker (1992) and Madden et al. (1990): Self-Blame, Wishful Thinking, and Increasing Effort. Each of the 12 scales was composed of four items (see Appendix). Each item was scored on a 5-point scale anchored at the ends by used not at all (1) to used very much (5). The coping statements were preceded by the following written instructions: ‘‘For each item, indicate how much you used each strategy during the stressful performance situation.’’

Based on pilot testing, some items were slightly modified to provide greater sport relevance. For example, most items were rewritten to eliminate any reference to a ‘‘problem’’ and replaced with ‘‘performance.’’ This revision was then analyzed by an artificial intelligence program (Rightwriter 2.1) that rated the education level required for understanding. Several items were then slightly reworded until a Grade 5 level of education was required for understanding.

Performance Goal Incongruence. This measure was assessed by three items: (a) ‘‘I was able to perform as well as I wanted’’ (reverse scored), (b) ‘‘I didn’t reach my performance goal,’’ and (c) ‘‘I was unable to reach my performance goal.’’ The items were scored on a 5-point agreement scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (5). The following instructions were provided: ‘‘Answer each item based on the situation you have just described. Read each item carefully. Choose the correct response for you by circling the appropriate number.’’

Positive and Negative Affect. Affective experiences were assessed by the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PANAS contains two scales: Negative Affect (NA) and Positive Affect (PA). The PA scale reflects one’s level of pleasurable engagement with the environment, and the NA scale represents general negative valence associated with subjective distress. Each scale consisted of 10 items, with items scored on a 5-point scale anchored on the ends by not at all (1) and extremely (5). The instructions that preceded the affective scale were the following:

This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and then mark the appropriate answer in the space next to that word. Indicate to what extent you felt this way during the performance situation.

In physical activity settings, the PANAS has shown acceptable psychometric properties, with internal consistency values of $\alpha = .77$ to .89 for PA and $\alpha = .79$ to .92 for NA (Bouffard & Crocker, 1992; Walsh, Crocker, & Bouffard, 1992). Furthermore, perceived challenge was associated with high levels of positive affect and low levels of negative affect (Bouffard & Crocker, 1992). Additional construct validity was provided by Hamid (1990) who reported that trait positive affect was positively associated with higher satisfaction for an exercise program and slower drop-off in continued exercise involvement.

\[\text{Task importance was also assessed by three items. The data, however, were highly skewed producing low interitem correlations and low (.52) internal consistency.}\]
**Procedure**

Each athlete was asked to recall a recent athletic situation from practice or a game in which he or she experienced performance difficulties or felt under pressure to perform. Each athlete was asked to write a description of the performance situation, followed by an assessment of performance goal incongruence. Finally, the athlete indicated what coping strategies were used to manage the situation and what affective states were experienced. The questionnaire containing this information was completed in a group setting, with group size ranging approximately from 10 to 25.

For the performance description section, the athlete received the following written instructions:

Please briefly describe a recent stressful performance situation that you experienced in your sport. The performance situation could be one in which you had problems or one that you felt under a lot of pressure to perform well. Do not worry about spelling or grammar. Write in the language of your choice.

Athletes were given the choice not to complete this section if they felt uncomfortable about revealing the details of the situation.

**Results**

**Scale Descriptives and Reliability**

Items for each coping scale and each affect scale were summed using equal weighting and examined for internal consistency using coefficient alpha. The standardized alpha coefficients for each scale are reported in Table 1, along with

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<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Planning</td>
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<td>Suppression</td>
<td>12.3</td>
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<td>Increasing effort</td>
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<td>Active coping</td>
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<td>Wishful thinking</td>
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<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>34.6</td>
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<td>Negative affect</td>
<td>25.5</td>
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the descriptive statistics. The limited number of items per coping scale (four) can result in underestimates of scale item intercorrelations, which influence coefficient alpha (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Therefore, only those scales that exceeded .60 were retained for further analysis. The Denial coping scale was dropped because its coefficient alpha indicated that estimated error variance was greater than estimated true variance ($\alpha = .42$). This scale was found to have low internal consistency in previous work by Carver et al. (1989) and Isaak (1993).

The correlations among the coping scales are shown in Table 2. As expected, the problem-focused scales of Planning, Increasing Effort, Active Coping, and Suppression of Competing Activities show moderate intercorrelations ($rs = .46$ to .69). The other scales tapping more emotion-related coping (Seeking Support for Emotional Reasons, Venting of Emotion, Disengagement, Self-Blame, and Humor) had much lower intercorrelations ($rs = .00$ to .34). Consistent with earlier work by Carver et al. (1989) and Bouffard and Crocker (1992), both social support scales were strongly related ($r = .68$).

The internal consistency for the appraisal of performance goal incongruence was acceptable ($\alpha = .84$). The items were summed together, and a scale was formed by taking the average of the three items. Scores were used to determine participants for the primary analyses.

**Primary Analyses**

To select only those athletes who experienced stress, we used the scores from the Performance Goal Incongruence scale. Paterson and Neufeld’s (1987) arguments about goal attainment imply that being unable to reach a performance goal would produce stress. There were 269 subjects with performance goal incongruence scores of 3 or greater. Any subject with missing data on the coping and affective measures were also excluded from the analysis. The retained sample consisted of 235 athletes (123 men and 112 women) with a mean age of 20.4 years. The sample included 37 national/junior national, 25 provincial, 162 university, and 10 regional level athletes. Only these athletes were included in the following analysis.

**Coping and Affect Relationships.** The correlations between coping and affect are shown in Table 2. As expected, problem-focused coping variables were positively related to positive affect, whereas the emotion-focused and social support variables were generally associated with negative affect. A stepwise multiple regression was used to predict both positive and negative affect. For Positive Affect, a five-variable solution was significant, $F(5, 229) = 21.3, R^2 = .31$. The standardized equation was $.36$ (Increasing Effort) + $.22$ (Active Coping) + $.12$ (Humor) − $.16$ (Self-Blame) − $.20$ (Wishful Thinking). A five-variable solution was also produced for Negative Affect, $F(5, 229) = 28.8, R^2 = .38$. The standardized equation was $.33$ (Wishful Thinking) + $.26$ (Venting) + $.23$ (Self-Blame) + $.13$ (Seeking Social Support for Instrumental Reasons) − $.11$ (Effort).

**Gender Differences in Coping and Affective Experience.** Differences between males’ and females’ coping and affective responses were analyzed by MANOVA. The multivariate test was significant, Wilks’s lambda = .84, p < .001. Follow-up univariate $F$ tests found that there were gender differences for seeking support for emotional reasons, increasing effort, and positive affect.
Table 2  Zero-Order Correlations Among Coping and Affective Scales for 235 Competitive Athletes

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*p < .01, two-tailed.
Group means and \( F \) ratios are shown in Table 3. Consistent with the socialization hypothesis, females used higher levels of seeking social support for emotional reasons. However, they also used higher levels of increasing effort and were not different from males in the experience of negative affect. Males did, however, experience higher levels of positive affect.

**Discussion**

This study examined how competitive athletes coped and emoted with perceived performance difficulties and performance pressure. The data show that athletes used primarily problem-focused coping strategies such as increasing effort, planning, active coping, and suppression of competing activities (Table 1). Many of these problem-focused coping strategies were employed in combination as the strategies were moderately interrelated (Table 2). Reliance on problem-focused strategies to manage performance challenges is to be expected by competitive athletes. To reach high competitive levels, athletes must use a repertoire of problem-focused coping strategies to actively change or manage a demanding environment in order to achieve success. Most sport psychologists and coaches would agree that disengaging from competitive demands or only engaging in wishful thinking would not be adaptive at high levels of competitive sport.

The data also showed high use of self-blame coping. Rather than being dysfunctional, this strategy may be part of a problem-focused repertoire to accept responsibility for performance problem. Self-blame is associated with attributions of internal locus of causality (Lazarus, 1991a; Weiner, 1985) and the resulting emotions of guilt and shame. The present results found a moderate relationship between self-blame and negative affect. There will always be some situations in sport that the athlete is unable to manage, possibly resulting in the athlete feeling he or she is violating a coveted value or not achieving a desired ego-related goal (e.g., high sport performance). The experience of this negative emotion may motivate the athlete with high self-efficacy to increase motivational behavior in the future (see Bandura & Cervone, 1983).

The clustering of types of coping is similar to that reported by Carver et al. (1989) with nonsport populations. The problem-focused strategies of planning, suppression of competing activities, increasing effort, and active coping were positively correlated (Table 2). Both social support scales were strongly correlated. This may indicate that athletes seek social support not only to obtain information about overcoming performance problems but also to solicit emotional reassurance. The strategies of venting of emotion, disengagement, wishful thinking, self-blame, and humor had low interrelations in most cases. The lack of strong interrelations among these strategies may reflect their distinct functional nature. Although planning, active coping, increasing effort, and suppressing competing activities can often be used in unison, the other strategies are not necessarily compatible in the same situation. Furthermore, strategies such as self-blame and humor can easily be applied in combination with problem-focused strategies.

The findings provided some evidence that females and males cope differently with performance-related stress in sport. Females reported using higher levels of seeking social support for emotional reasons and increasing effort. The use of higher levels of social support is consistent with Astor-Dubin and Hammen
Table 3  Coping Scale and Affective Scale Means and $F$ Ratio Values for 235 Male and Female Athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>$F$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>15.87</td>
<td>16.63</td>
<td>3.81*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>12.88</td>
<td>13.15</td>
<td>0.33</td>
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<td>Active coping</td>
<td>13.95</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>0.81</td>
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<td>Suppression</td>
<td>11.98</td>
<td>12.51</td>
<td>1.32</td>
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<td>Self-blame</td>
<td>14.08</td>
<td>14.98</td>
<td>3.30</td>
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<td>Social support-emotional</td>
<td>8.99</td>
<td>10.96</td>
<td>13.66**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social support-instrumental</td>
<td>9.14</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>0.89</td>
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<tr>
<td>Venting of emotion</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>9.29</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>8.66</td>
<td>7.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>0.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wishful thinking</td>
<td>12.75</td>
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<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>35.75</td>
<td>33.57</td>
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<td>Negative affect</td>
<td>24.96</td>
<td>25.91</td>
<td>0.87</td>
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*Note. Multivariate tests of significance: Hotelling = .1813; Wilks’s lambda = .877, $p < .001$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. 
Crocker and Graham (1984) who found that women are more likely to reach out in response to stress. Although there was a statistically significant difference for the strategy of increasing effort, the size of the effect has little practical significance. Both males and females used high levels of increasing effort. There was no evidence that men used more problem-focused coping than women. One difficulty in drawing strong conclusions from the data concerns the types of stressful situations reported by athletes. It is possible that females and males report different types of performance stressors (Ptacek et al., 1992). Without a common performance stressor, which is not possible in naturalistic settings, it is difficult to find out if gender differences in coping found in any study are due to true gender differences or due to differences in types of reported stressors.

Consistent with other coping and emotion literature (e.g., Folkman & Lazarus, 1985, 1988), we found a relationship between coping and positive and negative affect. Positive affect, which is a reflection of pleasurable engagement (Watson et al., 1989), was positively related to problem-focused coping strategies such as active coping, planning, effort, and suppression of competing activities. Positive affect was also negatively related to wishful thinking and behavioral disengagement. One explanation for these associations is that the positive affective descriptors such as being active, determined, inspired, alert, and enthusiastic are reflective of problem-focused coping. These coping behaviors are reinforced by coaches and are valued by athletes. Even though performance goals are not being attained, the gallant fight to achieve the goals may still produce some positive feelings. Negative affect, a measure of general subjective distress, was positively related to wishful thinking, self-blame, behavioral disengagement, venting of emotions, as well as both instrumental and emotion-focused social support. Interestingly, there was no relationship between problem-focused strategies and negative affect.

Assessing the nature of the relationship among emotional experiences, coping, and appraisal processes in athletic settings is difficult. Lazarus (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) had argued that coping would be a key variable in the generation of emotion. Problem-focused coping changes the person–environment relationship by changing either the person, the situation, or both. Emotion-focused coping can reduce distress by diverting attention away from the situation (i.e., wishful thinking) or by changing the meaning of the situation through cognitive reappraisal. The coping dimension the athlete uses will have its effect through changes in appraisal of the athletic situation. Lazarus (1991b) stated, “Emotion is a reaction to meaning, and if the meaning is changed there will also be a change in the subsequent emotion” (p. 830). However, given the constantly changing nature of stress and emotion, it is difficult to determine the effects of coping on emotion in a particular situation using a retrospective design that asks athletes to recall the affective experiences they experienced and the type of coping strategies they used. The finding that problem-focused strategies are related to positive affect, whereas emotion-focused type strategies are positively associated with negative affect may be intuitively appealing. It is not clear, however, what the nature of the relationship is between the two. Prospective designs may help tease out the complex transactions among cognitive appraisal, coping, and emotion. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to measure these processes during the ongoing stress encounter without qualitatively changing the naturally occurring appraisal-coping-emotion complex.
Coping in athletic settings is very complex and dynamic. This research has assessed only part of the broad spectrum of coping used by competitive athletes. Recently Gould, Jackson, and Finch (1993) used qualitative analysis to examine the sources of stress and coping strategies used by United States national figure skating champions. They reported over 158 unique types of coping strategies that they classified into 20 distinct dimensions. These coping strategies were used to reduce the negative impact of a host of sport-related stressors, ranging from demands on skating resources, to expectations and pressure to perform, to relationship issues. Clearly, the expanding sport-related coping research points out the need to develop various methods and instruments to gain a thorough understanding of the role of coping on performance and emotional processes in athletic settings.

References


Appendix

The 12 Coping Scales and Corresponding Items

Seeking Social Support for Instrumental Reasons
   I asked teammates what they did or would do.
   I talked to my coaches or teammates to find out more about my performance.
   I tried to get help from someone about what to do.
   I talked to someone who could do something about my performance.

Seeking Social Support for Emotional Reasons
   I talked to someone about how I felt.
   I got support and understanding from someone.
   I talked about my feelings with someone.
   I tried to get help from my coach or teammates to deal with my feelings.

Behavioral Disengagement
   I could not deal with my performance and stopped trying.
   I decreased the amount of time and effort I put into my performance.
   I gave up trying to get what I want out of my performance.
   I stopped trying to perform my best.

Self-Blame
   I blamed myself for the situation.
   I criticized or lectured myself.
   I decided I was at fault for my performance.
   I took responsibility for what had happened.

Planning
   I made a plan of action.
   I thought hard about what steps to take to manage this situation.
   I thought about how I could best handle my performance.
   I tried to think about a plan about what to do.

Suppression of Competing Activities
   I dealt only with my performance difficulties, even if I had to forget other things a little.
   I didn’t let myself think about anything except my performance.
   I stopped doing other things in order to concentrate on my performance.
   I tried hard to not let other things get in my way of dealing with my performance.

Venting of Emotions
   I felt a lot of upset feelings, and I showed those feelings a lot.
   I got upset and let my feelings out.
   I lost my cool and got upset.
   I let my negative feelings out.

Humor
   I kidded around about my performance.
   I made fun of my performance.
   I made jokes about my performance.
   I laughed about my performance.
Effort
I tried to increase the quality of my performance.
I put more effort into my play.
I tried to improve my effort.
I worked harder.

Wishful Thinking
I daydreamed about a better performance.
I had fantasies or wishes about how things might turn out.
I wished the situation would go away or somehow be over.
I wished I could change what was happening or had happened.

Active Coping
I tried real hard to do something about my performance.
I did what had to be done, one step at a time.
I took direct action to overcome the performance challenge.
I tried different things to improve.

Denial
I acted as though I was not having performance difficulties.
I didn’t believe I was performing like I was.
I pretended it was not happening or hadn’t really happened.
I told myself, “This performance isn’t real.”

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