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How can social support make coaching less stressful?

A longitudinal inquiry with sports coaches

Over the last decade, increased research attention has been dedicated to understanding sports coaches' experiences of stressors (1), coping (2), and well-being (3). To elaborate on the literature that has focused on stressors, coaching has been reported as a particularly stressful occupation (4) where coaches encounter a variety of stressors that influence performance and psychological well-being (PWB; 5). Sport psychology researchers have frequently adopted a transactional conceptualization of stress and defined stressors as "environmental demands (i.e., stimuli) encountered by an individual" (6, p. 329). On a day-to-day basis, coaches are regularly expected to develop engaging and winning training programs; recruit and release athletes; cope with competitive (e.g., athlete performances) and organizational (e.g., arranging travel to events) stressors; and manage relationships with different stakeholders such as athletes, administrators, officials, media, and parents (7, 8). Fulfilling these roles and responsibilities can lead coaches to work long, unsociable hours (9) and can facilitate feelings of isolation (10; 11). The aforementioned factors make coaches a unique population (12) that is susceptible to burnout (13, 14). The majority of literature on stressors and coping with coaches to date has recruited elite samples from the United States of America (U.S.A., e.g., 10, 15). Understanding coach stressors in more varied contexts and how coaches cope with those stressors is important to facilitate retention within the profession and to help coaches to succeed in a demanding occupation.

From a transactional perspective, coping is defined 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" (16, p. 141). Social support is an important option for coping with stressors, and one that can enhance PWB during stressful episodes (17). Social support has often been defined as a multidimensional construct that

1 encompasses the structure of an individual's social network and the explicit resources that
2 one's interpersonal relationships may provide (18). The social support literature has cited
3 four types of resources (see Table 1 for detailed definitions and examples). Despite social
4 support being conceptualized as multidimensional and durational, the extant literature in sport
5 is predominantly and historically quantitative and cross-sectional in nature (e.g., 13, 19, and
6 20). One of the first qualitative studies to explore social support when coping with stressors
7 highlighted it as a way of controlling emotions among men and women head coaches from
8 the U.S.A. (15). Having friends who were not coaches allowed these individuals to switch off
9 from coaching and be themselves. Coaches also found that spending time with friends who
10 could relate to coaching specific stressors (e.g., athlete misbehavior) enhanced coaching
11 effectiveness and PWB (15). A recent qualitative cross-sectional study by Norris, Didymus,
12 and Kaiseler (21) focused on social support with coaches in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and
13 provided novel insight to their social networks using social network analysis (22). The study
14 highlighted important roles of social support by demonstrating that coaches turn to peers (i.e.,
15 coaches and colleagues), family (e.g., mother and or father), friends (e.g., housemates), and
16 miscellaneous (e.g., the internet) for social support resources. This is, to the best of our
17 knowledge, the only study in this area that specifically focuses on coaches' experiences of
18 social support. It is clear, therefore, that little is known about social support resources among
19 sport coaches or how these resources are used to mitigate the negative effects of stressors.
20 The current study will extend previous research in two main ways: 1) by providing new
21 insight to sport coaches' social support resources and 2) by using a qualitative longitudinal
22 design to understand the multidimensional construct of social support resources and how it
23 changes over a period of time.

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Table 1. Definitions and Examples of Social Support Resources (18).

Social Support Resources	Definition
Emotional support	Expressions of empathy, love, trust, and or caring (e.g., venting frustrations).
Esteem support	Information that is useful for self-evaluation to bolster a person’s sense of competence or self-esteem (e.g., affirmation).
Informational support	Support relating to advice, suggestions, and information (e.g., gaining ideas).
Tangible support	Physical aid (e.g., someone covering a coaching session).

Two models of stressors and social support have been proposed in mainstream social support and psychology literature (23). The main-effect model suggests that social support has a direct beneficial effect on PWB (through positive affects), irrespective of whether the individual is experiencing stressors (24). Alternatively, the stress-buffering model suggests that aid from social relationships *buffers* the potentially harmful influence of stressors (23). These models have been frequently used in psychology literature to explore the relationship between social support and stressors in different contexts (e.g., 25, 26) but have seldom been used in sport settings. The limited evidence that does exist shows support for both the main- and stress-buffering effects of social support resources on PWB and performance in sport (19, 26). Freeman and Rees (27), for example, investigated main and stress-buffering effects on self-confidence in athletes and found that the availability of emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support exerted both stress-buffering and main-effects on outcomes that, in turn, positively predicted self-confidence. This scenario *could* be similar with coaches but no research has directly explored social support among coaches, and it is currently unclear if and how these models are relevant to explain social support among this population. This void in knowledge is noteworthy because understanding social support resources and the effects on stressors may help coaches to prosper in an inherently stressful occupation whilst maintaining personal and professional relationships. Sustaining such relationships may, in turn, reduce the

1 potentially harmful effects of stressors to maintain and perhaps enhance PWB.

2 The inability to cope effectively with stressors can have negative implications for
3 coaches' engagement and PWB (e.g., 5, 11, 28). One potentially powerful option for coping
4 is via social support yet no research exists that has explored stressors and social support
5 resources, including main- and stress-buffering effects, with sports coaches. Research of this
6 nature could be used to inform interventions that aim to enhance social support resources for
7 coaches and, in doing so, increase coach effectiveness, maintain PWB, and retain individuals
8 within the coaching profession. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to explore sports
9 coaches' social support resources and to understand how such resources may alleviate the
10 negative outcomes of stressors. Considering that social support is a durational phenomenon,
11 and that the majority of previous related literature has been quantitative and or cross-sectional
12 in nature, this study aimed to further understanding by adopting a novel qualitative
13 longitudinal approach. This is important for advancing knowledge on the multidimensional
14 characteristics of social support, which we achieve in the current work by studying the target
15 concepts over a six-week period of time.

16 **Methodology and Methods**

17 **Philosophical Assumptions**

18 My (the first named author's) ontological stance is best described as relativist and my
19 epistemological approach is underpinned by constructionism. Therefore, I recognize that my
20 values and experiences influence my understanding of coaches' experiences and that the
21 researcher and the researched are interdependent in such a way that findings are co-
22 constructed (29). These form my paradigmatic assumption of social constructionism (30). In
23 line with this assumption, I believe that knowledge is constructed via interactions between
24 people during the course of life. I have over 10 years of coaching experience in soccer across
25 a variety of performance levels. The second and third named authors align primarily with

1 constructionist orientations and also see knowledge as constructed, rather than created, via
2 social interaction. They have relativist views of reality and assume that their values and
3 experiences influence what they understand.

4 **Interviewees**

5 Purposeful (31) and snowball sampling (32) were used to recruit 15 coaches.
6 Interviewees were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. Ten coaches
7 (women=6, men=4; $M_{age}=35.2$, $SD=13.0$ years, $M_{experience}=13.5$, $SD=9.7$ years) subsequently
8 volunteered to take part (see Table 2). Each interviewee was coaching part-time at the start of
9 data collection as either a head (n=8) or assistant coach (n=2). During the data collection
10 period, one coach moved to coach an older age group within their club and changed from a
11 head coach to an assistant coach. Interviewees represented either a team (n=2, soccer, Gaelic
12 football) or individual sport (n=5, disability tennis, RealTennis, tennis, squash, and triathlon)
13 in a youth (n=4) or adult (n=6) context. Interviewees were involved in grassroots (e.g.,
14 amateur; n=1), university (n=2), academy (n=3), and professional (e.g., performing at elite
15 level; n=4) performance contexts. The qualification level of coaches ranged from level one to
16 five (U.K. coaching qualifications) in their respective sports ($M_{level}=3.0$, $SD=1.1$). Five of the
17 coaches were working closely with another coach at the time of data collection.

18 **Study Design**

19 Whilst consensus on what constitutes longitudinal qualitative research is yet to be
20 reached, it is generally accepted that research designs which are attentive to temporal
21 processes and or durational phenomena can be termed longitudinal (see e.g., 33, 34). A
22 longitudinal study design was considered appropriate for the current work because the aim
23 was to explore whether coaches' experiences of social support resources, which is a
24 durational concept, changed over time. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with
25 each coach, and each interview took place three weeks after the previous interview (i.e.,

1 interviews occurred at weeks zero, three, and six during a six-week data collection period
 2 with each coach). The six-week data collection period was appropriate for this study because
 3 it was long enough to represent phases of training and competition for coaches and allowed
 4 sufficient time for changes and or trends to occur within the multidimensional characteristics
 5 of social support (35, 36). Previous longitudinal sport psychology research has also used a
 6 six-week period of data collection to explore durational concepts (e.g., 37, 38).

7

8 Table 2. Interviewee Characteristics.

Interviewee Pseudonym	Age (years)	Sport	Context	Performance level	Experience (years)	Qualification Level
Andy	52	Soccer	Youth	Academy	12	4
Chloe	26	RealTennis	Adult	Professional	8	1
Ellen	24	Soccer	Youth	Grassroots	8	2
Ethan	26	Gaelic Football	Adult	Professional	10	2
John	18	Soccer	Youth	Academy	4	3
Kim	32	Squash	Adolescents	University	15	3
Lily	43	Disability Tennis	Adult	Professional	22	4
Natalie	50	Triathlon	Adult	Professional	7	3
Rosy	25	Soccer	Youth	Academy	10	3
Scott	56	Tennis	Adolescents	University	39	5

9

10 **Data Collection**

11 ***Interview Guide***

12 A semi-structured interview guide was developed specifically for this study using
 13 previous literature on social support with coaches (8, 21) and athletes (19). The questions for
 14 the first and second rounds of interviews were divided into two sections. The first section
 15 consisted of open introductory questions (e.g., “How did you get into coaching?” and “How
 16 has your coaching been going?”) that were designed to understand the coach’s background,
 17 build rapport with the interviewee, and, in the case of the second interview, explore any
 18 differences in coaching experiences since the first interview. Section two entailed open

1 questions about coaches' experiences of social support resources (e.g., "What are your
2 experiences of social support as a coach?" and "Has your social support changed? If so, how
3 has it changed?") with additional probes (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that?") to expand
4 on or elicit further understanding of perceived changes in social support experiences.

5 The interview guide for the third round of interviews consisted of three sections. The
6 first two sections were the same as the previous interview guides: they began with
7 introductory questions and then focused on coaches' experiences of social support. The third
8 round of interviews included a third section that focused explicitly on the links between
9 stressors and social support. In line with our philosophical assumptions, we realized during
10 the interviews and our analyses that our data from interviews one and two did speak to the
11 ways in which social support resources reduced the effects of stressors but that this
12 information was not as clear or as explicit as was needed to address our research aim.
13 Therefore, a third section of the interview guide was created to encourage more specific
14 discussions about how social support resources may alleviate the negative outcomes of
15 stressors (e.g., "How has social support helped when you were experiencing stress?").

16 All the interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first named author. The
17 interviews lasted between 33 and 110 minutes (Overall $M_{length}=58.81$, $SD=14.44$ minutes;
18 time point one $M_{length}=54.13$, $SD=18.22$ minutes; time point two $M_{length}=57.88$, $SD=11.86$
19 minutes; time point three $M_{length}=63.30$, $SD=11.22$ minutes).

20 **Data Analysis**

21 We transcribed each interview audio file verbatim and analyzed the transcripts using
22 an abductive approach to latent thematic analysis (39). Specifically, we used the six steps of
23 thematic analysis that are described by Clarke and Braun (39), recursively via NVivo (40).
24 The inductive phase of our analyses was applied at the beginning of the analysis process to
25 create original themes that identified strongly with the interview data (41). These inductive

1 themes were then reviewed alongside existing theory, which constituted the deductive
2 element of our analysis. For example, when analyzing inductive themes relating to how social
3 support resources may alleviate stressors, it was clear that what the interviewees were
4 describing could be categorized as having main- or stress-buffering effects without changing
5 the meaning. Once our inductive and deductive analyses were complete, codes and themes
6 were reviewed by each author and were separated according to the time point that they were
7 collected from. This final part of the analyses facilitated comparison of data across different
8 periods of time, which is an important element of longitudinal research (35).

9 **Trustworthiness**

10 Researchers have debated the need for quality assessment criteria in qualitative
11 research (e.g., 42). These debates have led to the development of the *letting go* approach
12 (e.g., 44, 44) whereby different criteria for judging the trustworthiness of quality research can
13 be selected based on their appropriateness for any given project. This aligns with the
14 paradigmatic assumptions that underpin our research by positing validity as socially
15 constructed and, therefore, differing in meaning according to the form of inquiry. In line with
16 social constructionism, the first author used reflexivity to maximize trustworthiness
17 throughout this study (45). Reflexivity increases transparency in the researcher's subjective
18 role when conducting research and analyzing data (45). Close collaborations with the
19 interviewees enhanced the quality of data (46) by involving the coaches as co-creators of
20 knowledge and by allowing their experiences to come to the fore (30) using thick, descriptive
21 quotes in our results (47). The trustworthiness of this study was also evaluated according to
22 the worthiness or significance of the research question. Specifically, we asked whether the
23 phenomenon of interest was important to advancing knowledge and whether the research
24 question addressed a significant gap in the literature (48). This study answered these
25 questions by researching a phenomenon that has ramifications for PWB (i.e., social support).

Results

The results are divided into two sections: 1) coaches' social support resources and 2) how social support resources alleviated stressors. The results include quotes from the coaches that allow their experiences to be at the fore. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the coaches' identities and maintain confidentiality. The longitudinal elements of the findings are portrayed by presenting and contrasting interviewees' quotes from each of the three interviews (e.g., "in interview one, [interviewee] discussed...whereas in interview two..."). Frequency counts are included to align with the authors' constructionist philosophical assumptions: including detail relating to the volume of data and providing context, offers insight to the construction of understanding from the interviewees and authors across the three data collection points (30).

Coaches' Social Support Resources

This section focuses on the types of social support resources that coaches used over the six-week data collection period. We constructed 642 raw data codes over the three time points (time point one=263, time point two=176, time point three=203; see Table 3). Using our abductive approach, we organized the data codes into four lower-order themes that each represented a different type of social support resource: emotional (e.g., venting), esteem (e.g., encouragement), informational (e.g., advice), and tangible (e.g., sharing tasks).

Informational Support

This section included data from each of the three interviews with each coach. Informational support was used recurrently by the coaches as highlighted when they described receiving support for advice (e.g., signing players), ideas (e.g., training drills), and feedback (e.g., improve coaching courses) in each round of interviews. For example, prior to the first interview, Andy, a head coach in youth football, had recently accepted a new managerial position at a professional soccer club coaching adults in a different country to that

1 which he was used to working in and needed some advice:

2 This manager's job, I've never been a manager of a professional football club before.
3 I have at semi-professional. So now I'm calling in favors from people to, you know,
4 "What do you understand by it?" "What do you think we need to do?" "What's the
5 first 60 days look like?"

6 John persisted to seek advice for the impending managerial position during his second
7 interview. He was continuing to gain understanding of managing at a professional level from
8 other people with experience at that level:

9 So, what is success? So, you're asking people who've got experience in management.
10 Um, so for instance, I rang [coach] this morning. I ring [coach] every morning as he
11 rings me. And we -- I seem to be his sort of mentor, confidant. And he's mine.

12 During the third interview, Andy's support needs had progressed, and he was now
13 looking for players to join the new club but required additional advice to do so:

14 I'm always, always looking for advice . . . They will say you're always learning, but
15 one of the biggest things about always learning is the advice that you take. Um, I'm
16 going out to [country], a completely different structure . . . So, when you approach a
17 player, it's completely different. So, you have to find out how, so how you would
18 approach a player, how you sign a player. The contractual system is completely
19 different in this country. So, yeah, I've had lots and lots of advice. I've asked for it.
20 Um, uh, you know, I said, "What's the score in [country]?" And- So, yeah, I've had
21 loads of information advice on the system in [country].

Table 3. Coaches' Experiences of Social Support Across the Three Interviews.

Raw Data Themes						Lower-Order Themes	Higher-Order Theme
Interview 1	Coaches who Discussed Each Theme	Interview 2	Coaches who Discussed Each Theme	Interview 3	Coaches who Discussed Each Theme		
Advice	An, Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Na, Ro, Sc	Advice	An, Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Na, Ro, Sc	Advice	An, Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Ro, Sc	Informational	Coaches' experiences of social support
Feedback	Et, Jo, Ki, Ro, Sc	Feedback	Ch, El, Et, Li, Sc	Feedback	Ch, El, Jo, Ki, Li, Na, Ro		
Ideas	An, Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Na, Ro	Ideas	An, Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Na	Ideas	Ch, El, Jo, Ki, Na, Ro, Sc		
Acceptance	An, Na, Sc	Acceptance	An, Ki, Sc	Affirmation	Ch, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Na, Ro, Sc		
Affirmation	Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Na, Ro, Sc	Affirmation	An, Ch, El, Et, Ki, Ro, Sc				
Confidence	Et, Ki	Confidence	Ki	Confidence	El, Ki, Li, Ro	Esteem	
Encouragement	An, Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Na	Encouragement	An, Ch, Ro	Encouragement	El, Li		
Perspective	El, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Na	Perspective	Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Na, Ro, Sc	Perspective	El, Jo, Ki		
Reflection	El, Et, Jo, Li	Reflection	Et, Li	Soundboard	Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Na, Ro, Sc		
Soundboard	Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Na, Ro	Soundboard	Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Ro				
Venting	El, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Ro	Vent	Et, Ki, Li, Na	Vent	An, Ch, Et, Jo, Ki, Li, Na, Ro	Emotional	

Financial	An, Ch	Distraction	Ch, Et, Jo, Ki	Distraction	Ch, Ki, Li, Na	
Home	Et, Ki, Na	Home	Ch, Na, Sc	Home	An, Ch, El, Jo, Ki, Li, Na, Ro, Sc	
Opportunities	Jo, Ki, Na, Ro	Opportunities	Ch, El, Jo, Na	Opportunities	Ch	Tangible
Physical activity	Et, Li, Ro			Physical activity	Et, Li	
Sharing tasks	An, Jo, Na, Ro	Sharing tasks	Ki, Sc	Sharing tasks	Et, Jo, Ki, Ro	
Travel	Ch	Travel	Ch			

Note. Initials correlate to the interviewee pseudonym (Andy = An; Chloe = Ch; Ellen = El; Ethan = Et; John = Jo; Kim = Ki; Lily = Li; Natalie = Na; Rosy = Ro; and Scott = Sc). The same approach to data representation has been applied in Tables 4 and 5.

1 At each data collection point, the coaches also cited informational support as
2 important for gaining ideas for training. In interview one, Ellen, a head coach in youth girl's
3 football, discussed how she shared ideas with other coaches to help develop her knowledge:

4 So, it's nice when you like - so I've got a guy that I do coach with who is really, really
5 good . . . kind of giving each other ideas . . . there are a few more [coaches] there [at
6 the club] that are the same.

7 As can be seen from the preceding quote, sharing ideas was important for Ellen at the
8 start of data collection. Her coaching knowledge evolved during the data collection, and, by
9 the third interview, discussed wanting this continually important support in the form of more
10 detailed ideas:

11 She's [coach] been doing it [observing] and recording it [me coaching] and sending it
12 [recording] over so I can have a look through it [the video] . . . Um, but yeah, that was really
13 helpful to just have someone like that there that I could walk up to and go "Oh, this isn't
14 working, what do you think if I do this?"

15 *Esteem Support*

16 In addition to informational support, coaches discussed esteem social support
17 resources during each of the three rounds of interviews. This included support relating to
18 affirmation (e.g., that they are doing the right thing), perspective (e.g., different mindset),
19 confidence (e.g., improving confidence), and encouragement (e.g., to progress). Two other
20 themes that were discussed during interviews one and two were acceptance (of coaching
21 hours) and reflection (on coaching practices). This highlights that esteem support was
22 discussed frequently during the first two rounds of interviews but less so in final round of
23 data collection (see Table 3).

24 A prominent theme across all three rounds of interviews was affirmation. During the
25 first interview, John, an assistant soccer coach, discussed how comments from his coaching

1 partner with the U12s team provided affirmation and encouragement after a perceived poor
2 coaching session:

3 I was just like, "This [training session] has gone awful," but then like after the session,
4 [coach] started texting me saying "Don't be so harsh on yourself, you know, it was a
5 really good session... maybe we could change it a bit next time and just, keep going."

6 That started motivating me and she supported me a bit emotionally there, and a bit
7 psychologically . . .it's just that sort of, just go again the next time.

8 Affirmation was not mentioned in John's second interview but in the third interview,
9 he discussed a similar narrative. The same coaching partner from the first interview affirmed
10 to John that recent training had gone well and that this continued to make him feel supported:

11 Um, [coach], she usually texts me um sometimes you know, "Good session tonight!"
12 or "Really happy with the session." So yeah, like, "well done." She sometimes gives
13 me that feedback, usually over text. Um, yeah, it's nice to hear, because she's
14 obviously supporting me...

15 A theme that varied across the three time-points was being offered a different
16 perspective. This was highlighted more by coaches in the first two interviews and less so in
17 the third. Head triathlon coach Natalie did not mention perspective in her third interview but
18 discussed it in the previous two. She stated how talking to other coaches on the course
19 provided her with different perspectives to consider when coaching:

20 That's why I enrolled to do the masters... It's been really good because you get
21 perspectives from other coaches, from other sports and I've come across stuff that, for
22 some reason, doesn't really seem to feature in the British triathlon coaching
23 qualifications, um, that's been really enlightening. (Interview one).

24

25

1 Um, but they [the other coaches in her support network] all come from slightly
2 different backgrounds, coaching people at different levels, coaching different types of
3 people, kids, all the people, high-performance, and on every day or whatever. Um,
4 and so you get all those different perspectives and so you get much richer
5 conversations around the topic and you can take on board different ideas and apply
6 them to your own context. (Interview 2).

7 *Emotional Support*

8 Coaches discussed emotional support over the six-week data collection period.
9 Someone being a soundboard (e.g., listening to ideas) and venting (e.g., frustration at player
10 behavior) were highlighted as themes during each of the three time points. With regard to
11 having someone to act as a sounding board, John described in his first interview how talking
12 to his romantic partner and parents about coaching was helpful because he perceived that they
13 knew him best:

14 Um, my girlfriend I think. Just someone to just to talk to about coaching. She
15 [girlfriend] would understand because she knows me the best. So, I suppose my
16 parents as well. They started nudging me on but they don't really know about football
17 but they know about me and what I want to do and where I want to go.

18 Then during the second interview, John discussed how he would also frequently speak
19 to a more experienced coach about experiences when coaching and dealing with players: "I
20 think the um [coach is] quite positive about both the reflecting and using each other as a bit of
21 a sounding board, a bit of a, you know, 'what do you think, what do you think?'" Another
22 example is Kim who, in between interviews one and two, reluctantly applied for a promotion
23 from coaching 18-21 year-olds because she did not feel appreciated in her current role. She
24 described her need for emotional support in the form of soundboards and venting to air some
25 of her frustrations:

1 Yes, so I just had to, you know, just to like . . . I spoke to you about, I need to get it
2 [frustration] out in the open. I need to get it off of my chest. Otherwise it just bubbles
3 over. But it's just made me a little bit flat and a little bit demotivated and stuff.

4 Prior to the third interview, Kim needed further emotional support, in addition to
5 financial support, from her network when applying to attend a coaching course:

6 I had emotional support with getting on to the level five [coaching course]. I'm not
7 allowed to do it. I don't know why. Then . . . the dates changed actually for the level five;
8 they put it back. There weren't enough people to . . . [be]cause it's only once every two years
9 . . . I went back to the head of sports with a proposal again and just said "I just want some
10 time, and then you know, time to do it. And I've got the funds" . . . And they [support
11 network] were like "Put in a bid, write a bid, write something, and write a proposal." Um,
12 financially I was gonna get support from . . . the support network were gonna chip in cause
13 [the course] was gonna be like two-three grand.

14 Emotional support was discussed less in the first two rounds of interviews but was
15 more commonly referred to at the third time-point (see Table 3). This is highlighted by Lily
16 who discussed in her third interview that she required more emotional support:

17 I probably got more of emotional support at the minute. It's kind of boring and I tend
18 to just vent at the moment. I'm gonna get myself and sing for a moment and it's purely
19 to off load and get that [stressor] out of my head and then move on . . . I've probably
20 vented a little bit to coaches . . . Um... probably my partner, I've been to [them] a lot.

21 ***Tangible Support***

22 To a lesser extent than the other social support resources, coaches experienced
23 tangible support. In each of the three interview rounds, tangible support included sharing
24 tasks (e.g., administration), support from home (e.g., food shopping), and creating
25 opportunities (e.g., to observe). Exercise (e.g., going to the gym), distraction (e.g., eating

1 out), and travel (borrowing a car) were cited across two time-points, and financial support
2 (e.g., funding for coaching qualifications) was mentioned in the first round of interviews. In
3 his first interview, Andy talked about the helpfulness he experienced from a colleague who
4 recognized when he needed support, due to him having numerous commitments, and took on
5 some of his coaching tasks:

6 ...they [social network] can recognize the fact that I'm at my wits end here and
7 actually say, "Leave it with me, I'll sort it for ya." [Colleague] is brilliant at that by
8 the way. If you ever say, "[Colleague], the world is getting on my shoulders." She
9 will just say "Take it off, leave it, I'll sort it."

10 Andy did not mention tangible support in the second interview but during the third
11 interview discussing that, in the preceding three weeks, he had been relying on his family to
12 complete tasks at home because he was particularly busy with coaching:

13 ...certainly, over the last two or three weeks, I haven't needed much support apart
14 from family support, you know. Please get me ironing done, me washing done, me
15 cooking done. You know, when I get home [from coaching] I'm gonna have a shower
16 so you know, don't expect me to go and take the dog for a walk...

17 The tangible support resources that coaches received from people at home came
18 through as important at each of the three data collection points. Without that support, some of
19 the coaches may not have been able to continue coaching. For example, during her first
20 interview, Chloe talked about the support that family provided by looking after her child
21 when she was coaching:

22 ...when you're playing, or coaching, or marking, or, you know, whatever it may be.
23 Someone else is having to, um, pick up the kid from school or, um, you know,
24 tomorrow, mom has [child] when I coach, 16:00 to 18:00.

25 In her third interview, Chloe still required tangible support from home to look after

1 her child when she was coaching or at work:

2 It would have to be like my family or [partner] looking after this one [child]. Yeah,
3 that, you know, kind of sticks out to me as one of our rough times, when you're
4 playing, or watching, or marking, or, you know, whatever it may be. Someone else is
5 having to, um, pick up the kid from school or-or, um, you know – tomorrow, my mum
6 has her while I coach, 4:00 to 6:00 – and then I finish at 6:00 and come home. But I
7 wouldn't be able to do that [coach] otherwise.

8 **Social Support and Alleviation of Stressors**

9 This section presents data on the ways in which social support resources alleviated
10 stressors for coaches (see Tables 4 and 5). This higher-order theme contains a total of 118
11 raw data codes, seven raw data themes, and two lower-order themes: main-effects and stress-
12 buffering-effects.

13 ***Main-Effects of Social Support***

14 Nine coaches discussed the main-effects of social support resources on stressors (see
15 Table 4). Coaches commonly turned to emotional support to reduce the negative effects of
16 stressors. For instance, Chloe talked about how venting when she was experiencing stressors
17 provided a direct effect on her well-being:

18 God, just even having a rant to someone, de-stress you know, really helps de-stress.
19 Um, whether it's about my match, whether it's about, uh, you know, could be a
20 coaching session or potentially, like planning for a coaching session, which can
21 sometimes be stressful, um, definitely having like even just someone as your
22 soundboard, just to go back to.

23 Tangible support also had a direct influence, as highlighted by John. He mentioned
24 that, if his coaching partner saw that he was stressed, she often took up more tasks to reduce
25 his workload and, hence, the volume of perceived stressors:

1 Um, has it [social support] supported me when I'm stressed? Yeah, yeah, yeah, it has.
 2 They've [social network] sort of taken a bit astray, so [coach] might have taken some
 3 of the responsibilities off me. She might have coached rather than me and I just sort of
 4 sit back and watch a little bit.

5 In another example of how informational support could be used, Kim discussed how
 6 she needed adequate information (e.g., about locations and fixtures) prior to and when at an
 7 event or competition. Receiving this information had beneficial effects, irrespective of
 8 whether the stressor had yet to occur:

9 Um, informational support. I think it, getting it, receiving information for me really
 10 does . . . I think it's when I'm in the dark that I get stressed. So anytime with
 11 feedback, as long as I can get [information and feedback] then it helps...

12

13 Table 4. Coaches' Perceived Main-Effects of Social Support on Stressors.

Raw Data Themes	Coaches who Discussed Each Theme	Lower-Order Themes	Higher-Order Theme
Talking Venting	An, Ch, El, Et, Jo, Ki, Na An, Ch, Jo, Ki, Li, Ro	Emotional support	
Advice Ideas Receiving information at an event	An, Ch, El, Et, Ki El An	Informational support	Main-effect
Borrowing a car Hiring a cleaner Making dinner Sharing tasks	Ro Ki Jo An, Jo, Ki, Li	Tangible support	

14

1 ***Stress-Buffering-Effect***

2 In total, nine coaches discussed the perceived buffering effects of social support
3 resources on stressors (see Table 5). Coaches perceived emotional support, for example, to
4 have stress-buffering-effects. Interviewees highlighted that they felt more relaxed being able
5 to talk about a potential stressor prior to it occurring. Chloe provided an example of this: “I’d
6 say it doesn’t even need to be stressing you out for having spoken about it [potential stressor].
7 It’s subconscious; you’ll be less stressed in the future [if you talk to someone] ...” Rosy
8 discussed getting informational support (e.g., advice prior to an event) as helpful for deterring
9 stressors:

10 It’s [social support] like a preventative measure rather than a cure if that makes sense,
11 so yeah. Um...talking to [coach] about the match days and stuff, I didn’t even start to
12 worry about that cause we already have a plan...

13 Finally, some of the coaches, such as Chloe, briefly discussed how tangible support
14 can help to buffer stressors before they have occurred:

15 It [tangible support] probably makes things less stressful . . . before you can get it and
16 go, “Oh my God what am I going to do?” You know, tomorrow night we’ll be in a
17 final but my mum’s got the little one so I can still work in the home. If she was away
18 and I was thinking about it, then that would be a real stress to me...

1 Table 5. Coaches' Perceived Buffering-Effects of Social Support on Stressors.

Raw Data Themes	Coaches who Discussed Each Theme	Lower-Order Themes	Higher-Order Theme
Affirmation	An, Ro, Sc		
Encouragement	El		
Perspective	Ch	Esteem support	
Reassurance	El		
Talking	Ch, Et, Li		
Venting	Ki	Emotional support	
Advice prior to an event	An, Ch, Ki, Ro		Stress-buffering-effect
Feedback	Ch, Ki	Informational support	
Receiving information prior to an event	Ro		
Parents looking after the children	Ch	Tangible support	

2

3

Discussion

4

The purpose of this study was to explore sport coaches' social support resources over a six-week period and to understand how social support resources may alleviate stressors.

5

6

The innovative findings highlight that, over a six-week period of training and competition,

7

coaches used all four types of social support resources (emotional, esteem, informational, and

8

tangible). Informational support for advice, ideas, and feedback on training sessions, new job

9

roles, and player development was used most regularly across the different time points.

10

Coaches also reported how their social network and all four types of support resources could

11

help to directly and pre-emptively protect against some of the negative effects of stressors.

12

More specifically, coaches perceived that social support resources may alleviate stressors

13

through stress-buffering (i.e., receiving information prior to an event to reduce uncertainty)

14

and main-effects (i.e., coaching partner taking some of the workload.) The results highlight

15

that some social support resources (e.g., esteem) might be more important for buffering the

1 effects of stressors and others (e.g., emotional) may be more important for main-effects.

2 With reference to coaches' experiences of social support resources, our novel findings
3 develop previous research that has explored social networks with other populations (e.g., 18,
4 20) by highlighting that coaches experienced all four types of resources over the six-week
5 data collection period. The original contributions of this study illuminate that coaches
6 frequently use informational support throughout a six-week training and competition period.
7 For example, sharing training drill ideas was important for development of coaches' technical
8 and tactical knowledge. Informational support also appeared imperative for younger coaches
9 who wanted to develop and progress within the profession. It seems, therefore, that a
10 community of practice approach (development through social interactions) to coaching
11 practice may be useful to offer individuals regular opportunities to learn from others (49).
12 Research (20, 50) with athletes has reported that informational support from coaches helps to
13 decrease negative consequences of stressors (e.g., loss of self-confidence). The current work
14 suggests that coaches may experience similar benefits of social support and points to the
15 importance of significant others for coaches' personal and professional development.

16 The findings of the current study provide new longitudinal insights to social support
17 among coaches and suggests that these professionals amend their social support depending on
18 the situation (e.g., tangible support being used more frequently in the third round of
19 interviews). In addition, the findings highlight that coaches use more than one type of social
20 support resource to cope with the same stressor. For example, when applying for a coaching
21 qualification, both informational and tangible support were reported. The use of different
22 types of supportive resources to cope with the same stressor can augment the effectiveness of
23 coping (19, 51). Therefore, practitioners who are working to improve coaches' social support
24 resources should help individuals to develop a wide social support network that provides all
25 types of social support resources.

1 Turning to theoretical implications of our findings, coaches perceived that social
2 support resources may alleviate stressors through both stress-buffering and main-effects. For
3 example, coaches reported that tangible support (e.g., a colleague taking some of their
4 workload) alleviated the possible effects of stressors by providing stress-buffering and main-
5 effects. Other resources, such as esteem support, seem to be more important for buffering the
6 effects of stressors whilst others relate more strongly to main-effects (e.g., emotional
7 support). Interpretating social support resources and their possible effects on health can be
8 linked to perceived (an individual's perceptions concerning the availability, access, and
9 satisfaction of their social network) and received (the specific supportive behaviors or
10 exchanges of social support resources that are provided to the recipient by their social
11 network) social support functions (52). Functions of social support can have positive effects
12 on one's health and PWB by helping the individual to perceive a stressor as less of a threat
13 (53, 54), potentially providing main-effects. Therefore, there should be increased focus from
14 researchers and practitioners on how social support can alter coaches' perceptions of potential
15 stressors and, in doing so, alleviate the prospective negative influence of that stressor.

16 The findings of the current study should be considered in light of the strengths and
17 limitations of our methods. One strength lies in our research design. Previous research on
18 social support among coaches has been predominantly cross-sectional (e.g., 8, 21) and has
19 neglected the dynamic nature of social support. This study offers original insights to augment
20 understanding of the multidimensional nature of social support in relation to different
21 stressors and at various points in time. The applied implications of this are that practitioners
22 should tailor support to coaches depending on the context and the stressors that they are
23 experiencing. For example, a coach who is experiencing frustration with their athletes may be
24 encouraged to vent to significant others whilst a coach who is considering applying for a
25 promotion may benefit from sounding their ideas and aspirations with another coach. Another

1 strength lies in our sample, which included men and women coaches who were purposefully
2 selected from a range of team and individual sports and coaching levels. This is important
3 because research with coaches is dominated by samples of men coaching at high levels,
4 which creates a gender biased picture of coaches' experiences. With the increasing foci on
5 diversity and inclusion in coaching policies and practices, more research attention should be
6 dedicated to minority groups (e.g., women, LGBT+, minority ethnic groups) to better
7 understand their experiences and provide a more supportive environment that can retain a
8 diverse group of individuals in the coaching profession. Finally, the reporting of frequency
9 data helps to illustrate the number of elements and duplicates within each subcategory of our
10 data (55). This interpretation has important theoretical and practical implications for the use
11 of social support. Applied practitioners should prioritize the significance and impact of social
12 support resources when educating coaches about coping with stressors. Our data relating to
13 duplicate information (i.e., that which was evident at more than one point in time during data
14 collection) highlights the number of replica elements (e.g., advice, feedback) that have been
15 raised by interviewees across the various time points. This is important to demonstrate how
16 social support can change or remain constant. Therefore, we can better understand how to
17 more effectively support coaches depending on the time of season and situation.

18 Despite sampling both men and women coaches, this study did not separately explore
19 experiences among men and women. Previous research has suggested that men and women
20 athletes may experience and cope with stressors differently (56) and may engage in different
21 opportunities for social support (e.g., women are more likely to provide and receive
22 emotional support; 57). Therefore, it may be useful to explore men and women coaches'
23 experiences separately to develop in-depth understanding of their social support preferences.
24 This would aid practitioners when tailoring support for specific coaching groups.
25 Furthermore, whilst the current study offers a range of insight from coaches who were

1 working at different performance levels, on varied employment bases, and in various sporting
2 contexts, it does not offer in-depth understanding of a particular sport or context. Future
3 research could narrow the focus by qualitatively exploring coaches' experiences within
4 specific sports or in different performance contexts (e.g., elite, non-elite).

5 **Conclusion**

6 This study provides novel longitudinal insight to coaches' use of social support
7 resources, and develops understanding of how social support resources may alleviate
8 stressors. The use of longitudinal methods over a six-week period allowed data to be
9 collected on the use of social support resources over periods of training and competition. The
10 findings suggest that coaches used emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support
11 resources throughout the six-week period. Information support was the main resource
12 exploited by coaches when experiencing or anticipating stressors. The longitudinal study
13 design highlighted that coaches may use different types of support resources to cope with the
14 same stressor. Further, some social support resources (e.g., esteem), might be more important
15 for buffering the effects of stressors and others (e.g., emotional) for main-effects.

16 Based on the findings of this study, we recommend that applied interventions should
17 include education on ways to develop a social support network that provides all types of
18 social support resources Moreover, interventions should aim to alter coaches' perceptions of
19 potential stressors as less of a threat and more of a challenge (e.g., via cognitive restructuring;
20 11) to alleviate the prospective negative influences of stressors. This is important for
21 individuals working in the inherently stressful occupation of coaching.

22

23 Word count: 7268

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