

COPING SKILLS IN HIGH RISK SEEKING ATHLETES

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INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on coping with stress during rock climbing. It is obvious that athletes frequently are required to cope with high levels of anxiety during very stressful situations. For some athletes the stress is sought and for others it is not. However, for those individuals who choose to participate in more high-risk sports like rock climbing, kayaking, ice climbing, etc., it is clear that their stress is sought (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997). It is unclear if these individuals seek stress because of a physiological disposition, or a psychological desire. However, one could conclude that they are at least somewhat comfortable and/or possibly proficient with coping with stress during physical activity. Smith (1993) indicated that it is likely that high sensation seekers are more capable of tolerating stress. In this study we wanted to see what could be learned about the coping skills of these individuals.

Relatively little research is available on individuals who participate in rock climbing with the notable exceptions being Robinson (1985) and Davis (1972). Ewert (1988) conducted a study that focused on the identification and modification of situational fears associated with outdoor recreation. Ewert's (1988) study focused on the perception of fear of participants in an Outward Bound Program towards specific tasks or situations. He did find that women reported levels of fear significantly higher than the male participants. The researcher concluded that the difference in self reported fear was because women are more likely to report their fear than men. This study will allow us to replicated Ewert's (1988) finding of gender differences in self-reported fear as related to the specific activity of rock climbing. In addition, this study will help determine how the sensation seeking individuals copes with anxiety.

METHOD & PROCEDURE

Subjects were required to be above 18 years of age. There were 12 females and 8 males which have complete data. Participants were individuals who sign-up to participate in The Metropolitan State College of Denver's Outdoor Adventure beginner rock climbing class and rock climbing experience outings. The beginner rock climbing class focuses on teaching first time climbers general climbing and safety techniques. The rock climbing experience provides less time on pedagogy and merely allows individuals to try their hand at the sport. Both programs were conducted at Table Mountain in Colorado. Prior to climbing participants must hike up about 200 yards and then typically begin their instruction or experience by climbing a vertical rock face (rating 5.7 or 5.8).

All subjects volunteered to complete the pre and post questionnaires and were given an informed consent form. The two authors of this study designed the pre and post questionnaires. Both questionnaires employed a 10 point likard scale on which subjects were required to place a slash mark at any point on the continuum from 0-10. The pre-climbing questionnaire asked the participants their age and gender. The first survey asked two questions about the subject's anticipatory level of anxiety and four questions about the specific focus of their anxiety. The post questionnaire asked two questions about the level of anxiety they felt while climbing and seven questions regarding the use of specific techniques to reduce their anxiety. The second survey also provided a free response box asking participants to write in stress reduction techniques that were not included on the questionnaire. Subjects were given the pre and post climbing surveys at the climbing site.

RESULTS

Because this was an exploratory study correlation was used as the primary method of data analysis. A correlation matrix of all variables was produced. An alpha level of .05 was used to determine significance. A significant correlation was found between the anxiety a participant was feeling prior to climbing and the amount of anxiety they anticipated when climbing ($r = .53$). There were also a significant positive correlations between the anxiety a participant was feeling prior to climbing and the thoughts of being hurt ($r = .44$), climbing would be too demanding ($r = .62$), they would let themselves down ($r = .47$), and they would not have enough ability ($r = .67$). Finally, there was significant positive correlation between the anxiety a participant felt before climbing and the use of encouragement from the ground as a coping technique while climbing ($r = .49$).

A significant positive correlation was found between the anxiety a subject anticipated feeling while climbing and the anxiety that they did feel while climbing ($r = .63$). This finding suggested that individuals were accurate at predicting their own level of anxiety. The significant positive correlation was found between feelings of not having enough ability and the use of encouragement from the ground as an anxiety reduction coping technique ($r = .47$).

The significant negative correlation was found between the anxiety a participant actually felt while climbing and the use of breathing as a coping mechanism ($r = -.52$). In addition, a significant positive correlation between the anxiety a participant actually felt while climbing and using encouragement from the ground as a coping mechanism ($r = .44$). A significant negative correlation was found between the differing scores on anxiety felt on the first and last climb for the use of imagery as the coping mechanism ($r = -.51$).

CONCLUSION

One finding of this study could be deduced primarily by using logic. Those individuals who are concerned about their physical well being and lack of ability were also more anxious about the

act of climbing. The data also indicated that those individuals who lacked confidence in their general athletic ability also lacked confidence in their ability to rock climb.

The results of this study indicated that individuals were able to anticipate their level of anxiety while climbing. Therefore, the subjects are probably not controlling their anxiety by using the psychological process of denial. It could also be true that subjects who anticipate low anxiety even when faced with high anxiety cope with it by telling themselves it does not exist.

It was also interesting to note that three factors were significantly correlated with using encouragement from the ground as a coping mechanism. The three factors were; the anxiety felt prior to climbing, the perception of not have the ability to climb and having higher anxiety while climbing. These results indicate that those subjects who generally were less confident and more anxious required more external encouragement and reinforcement. If this hypothesis is true it would logically follow that those individuals who were more confident and better able to control their anxiety used more internal coping strategies. The data in this study supports the idea that those who were more confident used internal coping strategies. Results indicated an association between lower anxiety while climbing and increased focus on breathing. In addition, the use of imagery was associated with decreased anxiety from the first to the last climbing attempt.

These preliminary findings indicate that there may be a relationship between more effective coping during risk taking situations and greater use of internal coping strategies. One hypothesis which can be derived from this study is that individuals who are highly anxious can be trained in internal coping skills as a method of decrease their level of anxiety in high-risk activities like rock climbing. An alternative hypothesis is that for individuals who are highly anxious external encouragement may be the most effective way of reducing their anxiety. There appear to be many questions to be answered in this area of research. Future researchers have much to learn from evaluating the coping strategies in high risk sports.

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