

Risk and Protective Factors Influencing Elite Coaches' Mental Health: A Qualitative Socioecological Study of Australian High-Performance Sport

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ABSTRACT:

Elite coaches operate in very high pressure, uncertain environments that can have a detrimental impact on mental well-being. In this qualitative study, an ecological systems approach was adopted to gain insight into elite Australian coaches' perceptions of factors that impact their psychological well-being. Fourteen coaches (12 male and 2 female) participated in semi-structured interviews from a range of sports. Five key themes emerged from reflexive thematic analysis: (1) facing multiple demands, (2) use of psychological skills to cope, (3) support among personal networks, (4) receipt of organizational expectations and assistance, and (5) stigma to prevent help-seeking. In an ecological context, coaches reported organizational stressors such as job insecurity and work-life imbalance. They faced these challenges and surmounted them by means of inner strengths (e.g., self-compassion), robust social networks and supportive workplace cultures. Low levels of organization and coaches who lacked effective coping skills were more likely to feel vulnerable to mental health problems. The results indicate that sport organizations should facilitate psychological skills development among coaches, provide time for support networks and foster psychologically safe environments which are conducive to good health. Further research needs to be conducted to identify which factors have the greatest impact on elite coaches' mental health, to inform and direct resource allocation and provision of support in a timely manner.

Keywords: Mental Health, Socioecological.

Introduction

In recent years, there have been a number of studies that highlight the higher prevalence of mental ill health among elite coaches, and this prevalence is comparable to, or can even exceed, that of elite athletes and the general population (Frost et al., 2024; Pilkington et al., 2022). Some research has focused on factors that impact on the mental health of elite athletes (Kuettel & Larsen, 2020) but

relatively little is known about factors that either help or harm the mental health of elite coaches. Coaches at the top level may commonly experience various types of pressures (e.g. poor results from athletes, injuries, loss of jobs, etc.) as well as various types of organisational pressures (e.g. excessive workloads, job instability, etc.) and personal pressures (e.g. relationship problems, social isolation, etc.). These stressors may interact and

push them towards higher levels of stress, lower levels of wellbeing and mental ill-health (Baldock et al., 2021; Kegelaers et al., 2021). The job of the elite coach is very different to that of the athlete, so coaches' mental health is a key factor to consider when creating support systems.

Two continuum models of mental health have gained traction in mental health research within elite sport for conceptualising and contextualising mental health (Lundqvist & Andersson, 2021). Dual continuum model was first proposed by Keyes (2005, 2002) and implies that mental health consists of two continuum variables, one on mental well-being (emotional, psychological and social functioning) and another on mental ill being (mental illnesses). This shifts the focus from deficit-based conceptions of mental health, which only consider it when someone is not suffering from an illness or when their well-being is not low. The dual-continuum model however uses the concepts of positive psychology and human flourishing to describe what is 'complete mental health'.

Besides the dual-continuum approach, socioecological models have been created to grasp the various layers of influences on mental health and well-being and mental ill-health in the sporting context of athletes and coaches (Lundqvist & Andersson, 2021). They point to the importance of elite sport in relation to mental health outcomes, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory, and refer to individual factors, interpersonal factors (microsystem), organizational factors (exosystem) and the macro-system (society). This perspective emphasizes the need to take overall social, cultural factors into account—the context in which a person lives and works—a context where the symptoms he or she experiences might exist.

A recent scoping review using a socioecological lens revealed a number of risk and protective factors that affect elite coaches' mental health (Frost et al., 2024). Individual level protective factors include positive coping strategies (e.g. reach out to others for support) and good psychological functioning (e.g. resilience) (Baldock et al., 2021). High stressors and a high emotional exhaustion on the other hand are significant risks. Social isolation or lack of social support is a risk factor for burnout (Olusoga &

Kenttä, 2017) and strong social support networks is a protective factor interpersonally (Pilkington et al., 2022). Based on the organizational level, a manageable workload and adequate supports (e.g., resources, autonomy) are linked to good mental health, while heavy workload and chronic job insecurity are linked to poor mental health outcomes (Bentzen et al., 2020; Bentzen, Kenttä, Richter, & Lemyre, 2020). Finally, stigma toward accessing health services, and media coverage, at the societal level, are acknowledged to be risk factors (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

The review found a number of factors that may be considered risks or protective factors for elite coaches' mental health; however, less than 25% of the studies included in the review were qualitative. To illuminate individual experiences, nuanced perspectives and personal interpretations elite coaches give to their mental health, qualitative methods are necessary (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Previous qualitative research has tended to be on coaches' experiences of mental wellbeing (Potts et al., 2023). Baldock et al. (2021) for example found that professional soccer coaches, overall, viewed stressors as threatening and harmful and coping as leading to well-being outcomes, depending on effectiveness. Qualitative studies also have found that coaches who leave their positions voluntarily or are fired experience decreased well-being, including negative emotions and low self-efficacy (Bentzen, Kenttä, Richter, & Lemyre, 2020; Kenttä et al., 2016).

Importantly, recent research has sought to gain a greater understanding of elite coaches' perceptions of mental wellbeing, what it means and what are the key characteristics. Distinguishing between the values coaches might hold and the cultural values of coaches, Simova et al. (2024) suggested that mental wellbeing could be a result of this interaction. In addition, Didymus and Potts (2025) identified that although the definition of psychological well-being will differ from coach to coach, the following qualities can help build and maintain psychological well-being; curiosity, genuine passion for coaching, psychological detachment and good boundary management.

While qualitative studies provide some understanding of elite coaches' mental health, their perceptions and experiences of mental ill-health have not been much explored. An exception to this is Roberts et al. (2019) that presented a case study of an elite coach with depression and alcohol dependency, and employed a new non-fiction narrative approach. What is particularly interesting from their findings, is the fact that the stigma of mental health issues in elite coaching was still apparent, with the head coach opting to keep his own mental health issues secret to support his job security. Finally, although capturing perceptions of mental health is important, perceptions of mental ill-health and mental health may be able to provide a more comprehensive picture of a coach's overall mental health.

The aim of the present study is to fill the gaps in the literature in two important aspects. First, none of the current qualitative studies which explored coaches' perceptions of risk and protective factors has done so from a socioecological perspective, so our study set out to learn about their mental health experiences but also listen to their perceptions about influences at various levels. The Australian context of high performance sport includes Olympic and Paralympic sports which are supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) (Gowthorp et al., 2017) as well as those which are considered 'professional' such as Australian Rules Football (AFL). There are other cultures, different ways of doing things and a different organization within these systems that can affect mental health outcomes. Various professional sports organisations, such as the AFL, and the ASC have dedicated mental health programs and policies, and mental health is a topic that regularly features in public forums in Australia, as well as in sport, including in various media. This study sought to examine the multi-level factors specific to sports coaches within Australia's sporting system.

Second, rather than confining the analysis of this qualitative study to only one mental health continuum (e.g., well-being) or mental health condition (e.g., depression), Keyes' dual continuum of mental health was utilized. The way these coaches

were able to express their own perceptions and experiences of mental health, not being limited to a continuum or condition. To this end, we aim to answer the research question: In a socioecological perspective, *This study aimed to answer the following research question: From a socioecological perspective, what factors do elite Australian coaches perceive as affecting their mental health?*

2 Methods

2.1. Epistemological framework and researcher positionality

In the present study the view of a constructivist philosophy was used to gain insights into the factors influencing the mental health of elite Australian coaches; recognising their individual and context specific experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Stopping at a relativist ontology, the research stance is centred on an intersubjective and subjective experience of the world of the coaches in Australia (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). The above brings us to a subjectivist and transactional epistemology that view knowledge being co-constructed in interdependent relationships set up between the researchers and participants. This view takes into consideration the position of the researcher in relation to the results of the research, which is based on the interpretation and life of the subject of the research.

The research team comprised a PhD student (JF), two clinical psychologists with expertise in psychological research in the elite sports environment (RP, SR) and a senior researcher with a similar background in research and applied experience as a sport psychologist (CW). JF carried out the interviews and analysed the data with the supervision of other authors. The lead author is a white male lacking personal experience of, yet aware of, elite coaches' mental health experiences.

2.2. Procedure and participants

The study was approved by the Human Ethics Research Committee, University of Melbourne (#25538). To overcome the difficulties of capturing this small and hard to reach population convenience sampling was used to recruit elite coaches based in Australia. To ensure that informed, focused and

nuanced insights are offered that are relevant to the particular concerns and structures around sports in Australia, all current and former coaches aged 18 years or older with Australian residency were invited to participate. Elite-level coach was defined as an individual engaging in the regular (at least once a month) management and/or leadership of athletes/teams at the Olympic, Paralympic, international (global events) or national (domestic events) or professional (paid work) level as per Frost et al (2024). This definition included head coaches (overall leadership and decision making), assistant coaches (to assist the head coach), and development coaches (to create and develop the younger athletes). It did not however cover coaches whose primary responsibility is a particular physical, scientific or medical support, e.g. strength and conditioning coaches.

Sporting organisations and coaching associations within authors' professional networks in Australia and social media requests directed to LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter) facilitated the study. Coaches who have expressed interest and written consent in the form of an online survey from October 16, 2023 to March 25, 2024, completed by 16 head and assistant and development coaches, formed the basis of the data. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were held online in which the average time was 40.4 minutes, and in which 12 of the participants were male and 2 were female. Of the 16 coaches who provided consent, two did not respond to interview invitations. Because Zoom offers a rich set of built-in security features including encryption end to end, and built in

recording tools (Archibald et al., 2019), this tool was selected for video conferencing.

Sample size was decided based on Information Power and in respect to feasibility (Malterud et al., 2016). The reason for lack of information power was because the research question was broad and the lead author was initially not knowledgeable in doing qualitative research. This was built up on by restricting the sample to coaches living in Australia, to bring a more similar experience in the Australian sporting system, along with the use of a socioecological theory as a guide to structure the coach consultations and the experience of the interviewer in working in the field of mental health coaching, which helped build rapport with the coaches and ensured the quality of the dialogue. As a result of review and reflection the 14 interviews were decided to have sufficient power to answer the research question.

The interview dynamics focused on demands, risk factors, protective factors (socioecological perspective), mental health and effectiveness of coaching (see Supplementary File 1). The research team was not interested in providing a formal definition of mental health to the participants either prior to or during the interview and invited them to discuss mental health as they saw appropriate. A random allocation list was maintained to allocate equal number of students from each college to different groups and every participant got AUD\$100 for participation. The 14 coaches who participated had the following characteristics as shown in Table 1. Throughout, pseudonyms have been used to guarantee the anonymity of the subjects.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics and Coaching Profiles of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Sport and Gender	Coach Type	Nature of Work	Years in Elite Sport
Graham	Man	35–44	ARF; Men	Development	Full-time	>10 years
Michael	Man	35–44	ARF; Men	Development	Full-time	4–9 years

Ethan	Man	35–44	Volleyball; Men	Head	Full-time	>10 years
Noah	Man	35–44	ARF; Men	Development	Full-time	4–9 years
Laura	Woman	45–54	Rowing; Both	Head	Part-time	4–9 years
Jacob	Man	45–54	ARF; Men	Assistant	Full-time	>10 years
Lucas	Man	25–34	Ice Hockey; Women	Head	Volunteer	4–9 years
Jake	Man	45–54	ARF; Men	Assistant	Full-time	>10 years
Harrison	Man	35–44	ARF; Men	Assistant	Full-time	>10 years
Xavier	Man	25–34	Rugby Union; Women	Assistant	Contract	1–3 years
Theo	Man	35–44	ARF; Men	Development	Full-time	>10 years
Antonio	Man	55+	ARF; Men	Development	Former	>10 years
Dianna	Woman	25–34	Rowing; Women	Development	Full-time	4–9 years
Simon	Man	25–34	ARF; Women	Assistant	Full-time	1–3 years

^aARF = Australian Rules Football.

2.3. Data analysis

A paid external transcription service was used to transcribe the interviews verbatim. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was chosen as the analytical approach for this study, as it is a flexible and adaptable method, which enables the researcher to identify the possibilities for meaning or pattern at the level of analysis, as well as recognise and value the position of the researcher in the process of knowledge production. This approach is rooted on the researcher's interpretation of the themes, based on the researchers' skills, resources and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). RTA process was guided and executed using Braun and Clarke 6 phase process (2022).

To do this, JF first got immersed in the data and got to know it well. These were printed out and reviewed multiple times and handwritten notes taken with the research question in mind. All the codes and themes were documented during the analysis process using NVivo (version 14) and each iteration (iteration 1, iteration 2 etc.) was noted (Byrne, 2022). Knowing that RTA would be an iterative process, it was important for the codes and themes to be revisited and reconceptualised with each iteration to best reflect the socially constructed perceptions of the participants. To start with all the transcripts were entered into NVivo and coded inductively with a semantic and latent coding in iterations 1 – 3.

Iterations 4-6 involved clusters of codes being deductively grouped into categories with the goal of offering a beginning from which to guide the development of the themes from the socioecological perspective. At the socioecological levels, codes also were differentiated as risk and protective factors. The themes at levels of the socioecological framework were infrequently identified individually; during iterations 7-10, a process of combination and building upon the themes was implemented that more accurately captured the data in the interest of capturing risk and protective factors. An iterative process of theme development was completed 10 times (see Supplementary File 2 for an example of the iterative process); RTA cannot be "final", so the themes and encapsulated codes that appeared in the data were developed through this process.

2.4. Methodological Rigour

Some interview questions were semi-structured, which is best practice in research, as it allows for the methodological rigor and limits the use of leading language and technical jargon, while allowing for more rapport with the respondents (Melissa & Lisa, 2019). A semi-structured interview was chosen as it allows participants to speak about a complex topic of their importance and personal topic emotion sensitive for mental health issues (Kallio et al., 2016). Prior to the initiation of the interviews, the interview script was checked for theoretical consistency and appropriateness with the participant sample by RP, CW and SR.

Throughout the entire interview process, JF maintained a reflexive journal (Ely, 1991) full with comments about the delivery of the interview, participants' experiences, and first impressions of the data. This journal was analyzed at the data analysis stage and the lead author was able to think about any individual biases and subjectivities that were captured during data collection. Prior to analysing the data, participants were asked to review their own transcript, masking/rejecting any information they deemed as "sensitive" and explaining any issues they felt needed clarification. Of the three participants, three wanted to change their transcript.

A series of themed focused meetings and analysis focused meetings were then led by a critical friend (CW) to identify the themes and develop them. These conversations did not aim to achieve inter rater reliability (Smith and McGannon 2018) but instead explore and understanding of evolving and interpretation of the themes.

3. Results and discussion

Five main themes emerged, reflecting the socioecological factors that coaches consider to impact their mental health in the Australian high performance sporting environment.

The theme represents the range of potential influence on coaches mental health in Australia. From a socioecological perspective, pressures most commonly reported by participants were of an organizational nature followed by some of a more general societal nature. Graham explained that there is not just one sole cause, rather a number of factors that can add up and have a coach be more susceptible to mental health problems:

"I think when it comes to mental health, it's a combination of all of those things; it's not just about one thing in my opinion; the stress of what everybody's going through, your workload is too busy, you're overwhelmed with how busy you are, your home life is too busy and then you have a loss, if you're already at the breaking point then that's when I think mental health starts to buckle."

Consequently, three particular sub-themes associated with demands were identified – (1) coping with the job intensive lifestyle, (2) coping with job insecurity and long-term sustainability and (3) coping in the public glare.

3.1.1. Navigating a work-intensive lifestyle

The overall perception of most respondents was that the profession of being an elite coach can be intensive at times and often requires a very busy lifestyle with numerous trips, high workloads and busy schedules, especially during the competitive season. By virtue of this position, some of the participants mentioned how tough it is to have a well-balanced life, given the organizational stresses and associated mental health risks. As Noah says:

"I would certainly say I have had moments of not being a hundred per cent mentally stable, just because of the job, the

role, and being in a high-performance environment, I couldn't have maintained my life as balanced as I wanted."

Past research has shown coaches have a poor work-life balance (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017) and that some of the best strategies for preventing burnout revolve around work-life balance (qualitative studies). This balance could be tricky because of the nature of the coaching job, but several coaches imposed additional pressure on themselves "to stay ahead of the [performance] curve." These participants spoke of their dedication to make every effort to ensure that participants are doing "what is good" in terms of athlete development and continuous improvement. The research findings regarding workload and mental health are inconsistent (Bentzen et al., 2016; Frost et al., 2025), however Harrison said that the effect could begin to impact an elite coach's mental health when the workload starts to take its toll and results start to drop:

"When you're working extremely hard and things aren't playing out the way you want, it can be a slippery slope: "The grind, tiredness, disappointment, frustration, blame – all those things can come in.... You can find yourself in some dark places if you're not ready for it."

3.1.2. Managing job insecurity and unsustainability

Many had reported mental health issues due to the ongoing need to acquire elite coaching positions and similar uncertainties. Participants reported that the job itself, which involves performance based on how well the team does, and "knowing that you're basically one ... poor season away" from being fired, is a major stressor in the organization, particularly for those who have full-time jobs. Being an employee with low job security was a great source of stress, and contributed to Michael's anxiety about his future and his responsibility to provide for dependents:

"Listen, I had bills to pay and a family to feed, there's a reputation to uphold - there's no getting fired in this game." Is it possible to even enter again due to that? Otherwise, what's to be done to help my family? So I guess I am a little bit nervous about what lies in the future."

There is some available evidence that job security is a critical risk factor for elite coaches, with studies

showing a correlation between job insecurity and low mental wellbeing, anxiety symptoms and depression symptoms (Bentzen, Kenttä, Richter, & Lemyre, (2020); Frost, Walton, Donaldson, et al., (2025)). Elite coaches also expressed concerns with the future of coaching as a career due to a "cut-throat" competitive environment within coaching, short-term contracts (less than 6 months) offered to coaches and the lack of work-life balance. The high levels of challenge and intensity in coaching prompted the question around the "shelf-life of a coach. Michael said that he sought other skills and avenues to pursue a career to alleviate the sense of being "trapped" and not knowing what "to do after" he was "completely burnt out.

3.1.3. Operating in the public eye

Coaches from sports with more of a public face and profile, such as hockey and athletics, commented on how challenging, for the organisation and society, it was to operate in a public forum. Elite coaching is unique in that the nature of the beast is it's so public and most people have an opinion," says Jacob. They can be opened up to easy criticism by both traditional media and social media, which the participants felt has a negative one on their self-esteem and self confidence. Drawing on resilience and actively seeking to minimise the media attention are important ways of coping that Jacob stressed, saying this would eventually protect his mental health.

"You need to be in a position to defend against that [the media] and have a thick skin because the media is always there, it just gets to you and if you are self-demanding at least you can talk to yourself and start telling yourself that you're not good enough."

There are coaches who for some reason have to have public exposure and attention, due to the nature of the sport that they coach. However, studies indicate that media attention is only a general stressor for coaches and it is likely that the onset and occurrence of negative media attention is the most common trigger and inducer of stress in elite coaches (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

3.2. Using individual resources to moderate the demands of coaching

This theme refers to coach's individual-level responses to meeting the demands and pressures imposed on coaches at an elite level. Two general sub-themes were identified: psychological and behavioural coping strategies.

3.2.1. Leveraging psychological strategies

100% of the coaches reported that they used psychological skills to ensure their well-being and mental safety. Things such as being organized, managing emotions and showing passion and appreciation for the job. Laura said the benefits of being organised was that it made her psychologically feel like she had a sense of structure and control to deal with her mental state:

"I would think that the thing was to keep yourself organized at all times – all the time – if you're organized, everything will boomerang – if you're not, that's when it goes wrong – 'cause I stay very organized to keep myself very well."

However, some participants commented that late in the competitive season, it is often difficult to keep focused and disciplined and that being world class is labour intensive. Outcomes of performance can be removed from the centre of an elite coach's emotions and identity by refocusing their attention on the factors and processes that they can influence. Dianna noted that the ability to see – and embrace – flaws and failures can help curtail rumination and allow elite coaches to learn from those experiences and face challenges more effectively.

"It's not always going to be as good as you would like it to be, but as long as I feel like I've learned from it, and am a little better prepared to deal with this kind of situation next time, that's what counts."

Previous studies have found a number of psychological skills that elite coaches practice to maintain their mental health such as self-talk, imagery, relaxation and goal setting (Thelwell et al., 2008). Such competencies can contribute to vital qualities such as hardiness and resilience, which have been demonstrated to shield exercise educators from psychological ill-being, exhaustion and stress (Georgios & Nikolaos, 2012; Kegelaers et al., 2021).

In relation to this a small number of coaches reported that thinking about what they were thankful for made "these pressures and demands seem in perspective. Xavier said that he had experienced something through a privileged lens – that of an elite coach – which allowed him to see what stressors were affecting him:

"Understand that it is not "all sunshine & roses" and that there is going to be a lot of need and being in a place where a lot of people would would like to be in."

A small group of participants also explained how connecting to their "love" and passion for coaching was beneficial in sustaining demands and pressures of coaching. True sports enthusiasts – the coaches that indicated they were very passionate about coaching – may not be as affected by the sacrifices that must be made to maintain a healthy work life balance. Simon explained:

"I don't think that if I was not in a job that I loved and was passionate about, would I say it's not sustainable, because I'm not sure that it's a well-balanced amount of time, that I spend or don't spend."

Previous studies suggest that coaches who are more autonomously motivated (intrinsic and identified regulations) are less susceptible to burnout than coaches who are more controlled motivated (introjected and external regulations) (Bentzen et al., 2016). In this regard, the motivation for coaching can be a factor in cultivating passion and feelings of gratitude, and ultimately impact mental health outcomes (Abrahamsen & Chroni, 2021).

3.2.2. Employing behavioural coping strategies

Most coaches saw behavioral coping strategies as a good way of safeguarding mental health. This individual level intervention consisted of taking time off from coaching (with family or time alone), promoting physical health (exercising, sleep) and hobbies or other activities. Coaches had the opportunity to experiment with a new approach that did not involve coaching and to take advantage of an opportunity to engage with other activities outside of work. As elite level coaches *"vest so much of their self-worth and their identity on their sport and their performance"* and dominant coaching identities have been associated with a greater risk of burnout

(Lundkvist et al., 2012), time off from coaching could be an important factor in protecting a coach's mental health. For Jake: there was a plan; a time away from coaching, to ensure that he didn't live it all of the time.

"I don't really meditate, but I'm very conscious of what I'm doing when I'm in the ocean, or when I'm in the gym or when I'm running, "Ok, during this time I'm trying to get away mentally from work."

Multiple coaches discussed positive outcomes of exercise as a way to "get away" from coaching as well as for their own physical and emotional well-being. Coaches learn to by what seems to be impossible, Noah said, noting that the time limits that go with coaching really influence the emphasis coaches can place on exercises.

One thing I do for myself is I can exercise and obviously I know in the research that exercise helps mental health; it may be the first thing that I'll put on the back burner when time becomes an issue."

Although the research above does report positive impact on the quality of elite coaches using exercise for mental well-being and with coaches being aware of the protective role of exercise, overall the obligatory requirements of coaching (e.g., workload, scheduling) may impact a coaches participation.

3.3. The protective value of interpersonal networks

This theme is an examination of interpersonal level influences in the socioecological model. It provides an overview of how coaches discussed the significance of their support networks to their mental health and wellbeing. This aligns with earlier research which associated more positive satisfaction with social support with mental ill health for elite coaches (Pilkington et al., 2022). However, in a few situations, coaches identified that the nature of their work prevented them from maintaining social relationships and being as socially connected as they could be, thus putting them at a higher risk of becoming socially isolated. Regarding the support systems, there were two main sub-themes: (1) Coaches receiving psychosocial support from co-workers and (2) Coaches living the coach lifestyle with family & friends.

3.3.1. Colleagues offer psychosocial support

The assumption was that different actors within the sports environment (athletes, mentors, support staff and other coaches) play a role in supporting coach mental health. There was a shared common experience of engaging with these individuals to discuss expectations of coaching, as well as to receive feedback, confide in these individuals, and mental health check-ins. Most participants reported great value in coaches who had high importance of peers/mentors, and there was some correlation with experience; the more participants coached, the more they were able to understand, connect and share. Lucas explained:

"I was very fortunate in having a great support network mentors, friends I had very strong relationships with, that have a lot of experience in the roles that I have been in."

While the benefits of having support networks within elite sport environments has been reported previously as having a positive impact on coaches' well-being and stress management, such as receiving advice (Hill et al., 2021; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016), a few participants said it was the strength of the relationships with specific individuals, rather than their position or formal role (e.g., senior coach), that determined whether they felt comfortable discussing issues, with a few participants referencing particular mental health issues specifically. A high level of trust with a coach or mentor helped with participants feeling comfortable being vulnerable and sharing issues related to mental health.

Coach workload, time pressures (of other coaches – mainly head/lead coaches), was however described by participants as being the obstacle to having meaningful conversations. Michael said the head coach is "under more stress than anyone in the organisation, so their capacity to be able to support [and] reinforce those messages [about mental health] is difficult. As a result, organisational stressors can hinder other coaches from being able to support each other's mental health.

3.3.2. Family and friends support the coaching lifestyle

Most coaches emphasised the role friends and family play for them in counselling. Partners, parents, friends and other relatives were perceived by the participants as supporting their mental health by supporting their perceived coaching needs (e.g. supervising children), helping them to disconnect from coaching (e.g. socialise), and giving them an opportunity to debrief about their work. Coaches recognized the value of support networks for mental health issues to allow sharing. He "never sought professional help" when it came to his mental well-being, and he could tell family about an issue he has faced at work," said Xavier.

"So I'm happy that I'm not necessarily looking to get professional mental health care, although if I were, I don't know that that's an area that I would really seek out, being that I have a pretty solid support network at home."

Informal social networks have been well documented as a vital way for elite coaches to receive support to help them cope with issues around their work hours and flexible work arrangements and discuss role pressures (Didymus, 2017; Hill et al., 2021; Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016). Mental health support was the most important supports for Michael, including from his partner, parents and siblings who helped to "lighten the load" and "redirect ... [his] attention towards more positive processes" during his coaching. Interestingly, informal social support plays a vital role in supporting coaches throughout their coaching career, however also research shows that family and friends can be a source of support for the coach during transitions (e.g. coaching burnout; post contract; Kenttä et al., 2016, Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017).

As well as having family and friends, certain of the participants discussed how the organisational demands of the job were an impediment to access to informal support networks. A frequent travelling schedule and limited flexibility in travel schedules were seen as having a negative impact on the relationship between the coach and family and close friends during competition periods. Some described feelings of loneliness and guilt of being away from

family and how that impacted them as a coach; "lonely job". As a home-less coach: Jake said:

"But what I'm in is not unique to me, I don't have anybody I can talk to, I don't have anybody I can socialize with; that's really difficult to be honest."

However, a few of those involved noted the necessity to get involved socially outside of the realm of top flight sport. Laura spoke about the importance of socializing to get other people's ideas about what to do and what the challenges are and to keep up an identity other than coaching:

"It is, it's very important. If I wouldn't have them, not a line of rowing coaches then I think it would get a bit difficult, I just have to get a different Facebook perspective to my friends."

So, coaches keeping in touch with their friends is still an important part of their support system for them to disconnect and detach from coaching. Norris et al (2020) research further highlighted the importance of friendships for support – also a distance from the profession – identified by coaches of varying levels of competition.

3.4. The influence of organisational expectations and support

Sports organisations helped to either lessen or increase the demands and pressures of coaching. That is, the cultural and emotional setup that is orchestrated by organizations can "make a bad situation better or worse," said Harrison. Two sub-themes that came out at the organizational level were: (1) Organizational leaders' influence on the culture and expectations, and (2) Organizations can support and care for coaches.

3.4.1. Organisational leaders shape culture and expectations

Most coaches spoke about the standards setting and expectations of those who are in leadership in the organization in relation to mental health in the organization. The participants underlined that persons in management positions set expectations in respect to the job (workload, working time, job flexibility, workload autonomy), job structure (autonomy, flexibility) and job objectives (performance expectations) of a job. Jake said that there are some organizations that have an "it will get

done" attitude and do not consider how it can affect the mental health of a coach.

"I think there's just an assumption that it will just get done [the work], and what the knock-on effect is for that coach or even that staff member is not often considered ... It's very much a 'just get on with it' kind of industry, if you don't get on with it someone else will."

Some coaches found themselves unable to seek assistance and adjust their workloads given pressure to accept and manage workloads imposed by the organisation, for fear they would lose their job. For some of these expectations were based upon workloads and helped to create higher performing cultures where workloads were more important than health. Some of the members noted that it's possible that some organizational leaders are not looking at the psychological recovery factor and are constantly searching for ways to get the most out of staff. Graham has acknowledged that the sporting body can have a huge influence over the workload/recovery balance and if a manager wants to get every drop of you, he can if he wants to. I told Michael that this was, *"I think there is a very big culture as far as I'm concerned in my workplace of not taking a day off or not missing a thing."*

"One time I remember being off at one club I used to go to and the Head Coach saying to me 'Well, did you have a sniffle, did you?' And it is just an undertone of like, 'We are pretty tough here'."

Therefore, by creating high-performance cultures with expectations that focus on the coaching role and responsibilities instead of the mental health outcomes and self-care practices, coaches may be at a greater risk of overworking and not recovering sufficiently (Lundkvist et al., 2016). Some studies have suggested that increased workloads and reduced recovery time can increase the risk for burnout (Bentzen et al., 2016); however pressures and instability experienced in high-performance environments, such as overcommitting or overworking due to the industry's volatility, and pressure from leaders to deliver podium performances are the biggest barriers to elite coaches seeking mental health support (Frost, Walton, Donaldson, et al., 2025).

On the other hand, when coaches were given space to be flexible and autonomous in their coaching, participants reported it was possible to achieve a healthier work-life balance and mistakes were not liable to repercussions. Jacob indicated:

"It is about giving your time back to your family when you are not needed at the club. As I have said, I am starting a bit later, finishing early when I need to. Making sure you have autonomy in what you do ... and the ability to do your role and make mistakes is really important."

While the feeling of autonomy was found to be connected to higher levels of mental wellbeing and less burnout for elite coaches (Bentzen et al., 2016; Hassmén et al., 2019), a few participants felt that caring for and prioritising one's mental health could be contingent upon winning. Theo mentioned that his success as a development coach depended a lot on the results;

My specific organization at times is very flexible if you have to travel somewhere to see your family, sometimes it is a good thing, sometimes it's not, depending on how you are performing. Are you winning or are you losing? When he's on a winning streak, he's willing to ask for anything; when he's on a losing streak, he feels like he can't ask for anything.

Previous research has found that the pressure and expectations placed by organisations to achieve performance targets (e.g. governing bodies) can be a 'chronic stressor' for elite coaches, particularly when linked to sources of funding (Didymus, 2017; Olusoga et al., 2009). Therefore, organisations need to be mindful of the standards and expectations they have for elite coaches, based on the resources and workload that they have.

3.4.2. Organisations play a role in supporting and caring for their coaches

Most respondents said that receiving support from their organization had a positive impact on their mental health. This support manifested in a number of ways, including affordances to balance work and family, pay and recognition, high-performance environments where athletes could flourish and a focus on mental health supports for athletes. Participants who were directly involved in elite coaching reported that they felt more supported by sport organisations when the organisations

promoted the idea of living outside of coaching. Graham found that his sport organisation was important to him in enabling a healthy balance of work and life:

"While the workload was heavy, it was never to the point of being weighed down and having no time to do anything else, I think around work-life balance is the one thing the industry or a club can do."

A few coaches also believed that being appropriately compensated and receiving acknowledgment and encouragement for their efforts positively influenced their mental health, as well as their willingness to invest additional time into their role. Xavier described:

"Being recognised and having the club support and backing it is fantastic for your mental health, in terms of you being willing to do whatever you can to ensure you're delivering first class programmes and training sessions."

In a similar way, some of the participants noted that mental health improved when organisations created an environment that promoted coaches' success. Participants said conditions that helped coaches to thrive in their careers were those that enabled them to be confident, relaxed, and less concerned about the pressure to perform. Coaches' psychological protection also was identified as a critical factor. The participants also recommended that coaches are not necessarily always at risk of being more vulnerable and making a mistake in an environment that does not bring more psychological strain. A few of the respondents spoke of psychological safety, and how it enables great coaches to flourish. Graham explained:

"When you are in the middle of it, when you are presenting and running meetings, you are very clear, your mind is free. You feel like it doesn't matter what you say, you're prepared for it. You're in a supportive environment. You know there's nothing wrong with what you say."

These comments underscore the need for organisations to be aware of and value the stress and mental health of coaches. Unfulfilled coaches or coaches lacking support from the organization (for instance, conflict situation or lack of guidance and resources) might be more prone to burnout (Bentzen et al., 2014; Gencay & Gencay, 2011).

Coaches, however, said they knew of organisations that could help, but of those who responded, some said that athlete mental health was more of a priority than coach mental health. Coaches said they felt their obligation is to serve athletes, and that they felt as if their mental health was ignored or a secondary concern. Simon highlighted:

"There's been so much discussion of the well-being of the player to the nth degree, is there anything that's hurting them? In what ways could this decision impact them? How can we make this one player, or group of players, more 'vibe-y'? Every day players perform Wellness checks. Each and every item is marked and acted upon. But it is always that the players are the focus—it is never spoken about when it comes to coaches."

This approach to the athlete resulted in the sense of being undervalued and being significantly unsupported and minimised through coach athletes' organisations. Participants suggested that coaches may have professional development opportunities, but Harrison said that the mental health resources are geared toward the athletes, perhaps because coaches' roles are not fully appreciated.

"We are fairly well supported as coaches but I think when it comes to mental health resources I feel like we are just playing catch up with the players in that regard, it comes back to the players, obviously they are the main attraction and I think, in the past, that we haven't been respected or that our job as a profession hasn't been seen as, or taken as seriously."

While the vast majority of mental health support for athletes comes from sporting organisations as they are in the centre of the performance, it is crucial that sporting organisations recognise the need for mental health services and support to their coaches. This is especially relevant as coaches spend time in the same elite sporting environments as athletes, and arguably have a more important role in the performance outcomes of those athletes (Frost et al., 2024). Organizations can actively raise awareness of mental health support and encourage help seeking for athletes and coaches, it is recognised that coaches seeking help find it difficult, and it is highly achievable for organisations to do this, as often mental health support is only available for athletes (Frost, Walton, Donaldson, et al., 2025).

3.5. Stigma impedes mental health and help-seeking

Most of the participants shared their views on individual and collective perceptions of mental health that impacted the results and help-seeking behaviour of coaches. These attitudes and outcomes were identified as being shaped by both organizational and societal level factors and resulted in a sense of public stigma and self-stigma, as described by coaches. The following responses were given by participants: 'Struggling mentally' or 'putting a hand up for help' might be seen as a weakness. The findings are also congruent with prior research on the stigma in elite coaching, in which both perceived vulnerability and perceived weakness can intensify the experience of self-stigma, and cultural beliefs about sport and coaching, in which seeking help can be seen as a form of stigma, can drive towards public stigma (Frost, Walton, Donaldson et al., 2025). Lucas explained:

"I think there's a lot of coaches I think they'll find to be hard to admit that they're struggling because, um, the traditional way I guess, of weakness, if you will. For me, I think I'd be hard pressed talking about mental health struggles."

Three sub-themes emerged from this: (1) mental health problems are hidden in order to avoid them having negative consequences, (2) masculine norms reinforce the stigma of mental health problems, and (3) attitudes towards mental health are becoming more positive over time.

3.5.1. Mental health struggles are masked to avoid repercussions

Some people reported that there was reluctance to discuss mental health issues because they did not want to risk their job or career. It might be more about keeping a job and securing employment, than looking for mental health care in stigmatising environments when this is not necessarily a long-term, stable career like is for the elite coaches. As Xavier articulated:

"Stigma I do think would influence me if I was suffering from Mental Health problems, and it became a hindrance to me getting a job and/or considered to coach."

Factors have been reported that contribute to mental health stigma in coaching such as remarkable

organisational stressors like job insecurity (Roberts et al., 2019) which may be experienced in the coaching environment of elite coaching. Such links between job insecurity and mental health stigma may also extend to help-seeking, with the fear of losing their job keeping elite coaches away from seeking mental health support (Frost, Walton, Donaldson, et al., 2025).

Some participants were concerned that mental health problems with athletes or asking for help would be seen as a lack of being a role model for the athlete and would therefore not be discussed. Some indicated soliciting to cover up or to hide their own mental health issues to maintain their 'coaching image'. Worryingly, it was felt that the stigma surrounding having mental health issues – and making this public – would impede optimal communication or lead an athlete to focus on their coach's issue instead of their own. In Laura's words:

"I don't think as a coach, you can show any emotion at all, you can't; you allow the players to, and during that process you help them get through, I would never talk to athletes about mental health at all. I do believe that as a coach, you have to have a standard for yourself – you can't, that is a sign of weakness, I believe, in the way that I deliver my coaching."

As stated by elite coaches in studies conducted previously they wanted to keep mental health issues hidden and to be 'Superman' so other people in the coach's interpersonal network, in this case both inside and outside of the sport environment, didn't have to deal with mental health issues (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). The expectation to be a coach and the desire for coaches to be stoic may also add to the stigma of seeking mental health services, as those who feel that seeking help is a sign of being weak, ineffective, or "soft" are less likely to openly seek out mental health help (Frost, Walton, Donaldson, et al., 2025).

3.5.2. Masculine norms contribute to stigma

Multiple coaches touched upon the preceding issue but also put into perspective how this was related to gender – linking mental health stigma with masculine norms. These respondents suggested displaying vulnerability may conflict with values and identity of organisation and society of being an elite coach. An open discussion about mental health

could be prevented by 'macho' cultures in high-performance sport which promote a 'unhealthy' form of mental toughness, said a development coach. This can make it harder for individuals who may have mental health problems to express themselves freely to associates or to seek support from a mental health professional. In Theo's experience:

Even in a sport that's traditionally male-dominated, where people don't feel comfortable saying 'I'm having really tricky time,' I'm sure there's stuff that you're not seeing that you're having really tough time."

Hypermasculine cultures have been found to be a risk factor in society (Frost et al., 2024) and previously associated with low levels of wellbeing amongst elite coaches. Coupled with masculine norms and expectations of toughness, stoicism and self-reliance, this can result in a mindset that considers vulnerability as a sign of weakness, which can prevent elite athletes from seeking support for mental health concerns (Ojio et al., 2025). This could be especially true for women coaches as coaching is a gendered pathway. At the elite level, women coaches have been demonstrated to get fewer opportunities, lower upward mobility (also known as the glass ceiling), less organizational support such as less formal training and development opportunities for women, and lower financial compensation (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). This can cause additional requirements for women coaches to appear competent in male-dominated environments and women may be hesitant to show vulnerability to perceived competent (Kenttä et al., 2020).

3.5.3. Attitudes towards mental health have improved over time

Lastly, coaches reported that over time stigma associated with mental health has decreased. Some of the participants reported that this shift was because of the shift in the society, for instance, parity in the physical health and mental health. In his sport I think it's getting better every year, talking about mental health, talking about it with players,

showing vulnerability, Graham said. Participants also described how this openness of elite coaches to reveal their vulnerabilities and mental health issues in the public eye have aided in the destigmatisation of mental health and perceptions of seeking help. However, there were also comments about how the attitudes towards mental health are very positive now and that attitudes to mental health are seen as a tool for improving performance. Graham later noted:

"That practice (of being open) seems to carry over to better performances. The more that you are open in environments, the more you show that you're open, the more you show that you want to be open; the better you're connecting as a group, the better the relationships are."

Antonio told us that mental health supports and clear pathways are needed to be easily available for elite coaches, and this could result in better mental health and performance outcomes:

"When I started playing elite sport, it was almost taboo to bring anything like that up, it was like, 'Gee whizz, there's something wrong with you.' It's almost become promoted now as an aid for that extra 1 per cent."

The stigma associated with mental health in elite coaching is still an important current issue, but recent research has found that the stigma is not as great as it is now (Frost et al., 2026). Changing social attitudes and increasing mental health literacy among elite coaches could be important for continuing to reduce stigma towards mental health problems and seeking help (Breslin et al., 2022).

4. Summary and applied implications

This paper describes factors perceived as impacting elite coaches' mental health at individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal levels. A socioecological lens for analysing factors that affect elite coaches' mental health can be helpful to enhance coach wellbeing. As these are not necessarily independent in a socioecological level, the perceived location of each sub-theme on the ecological spectrum is included in Figure 1.

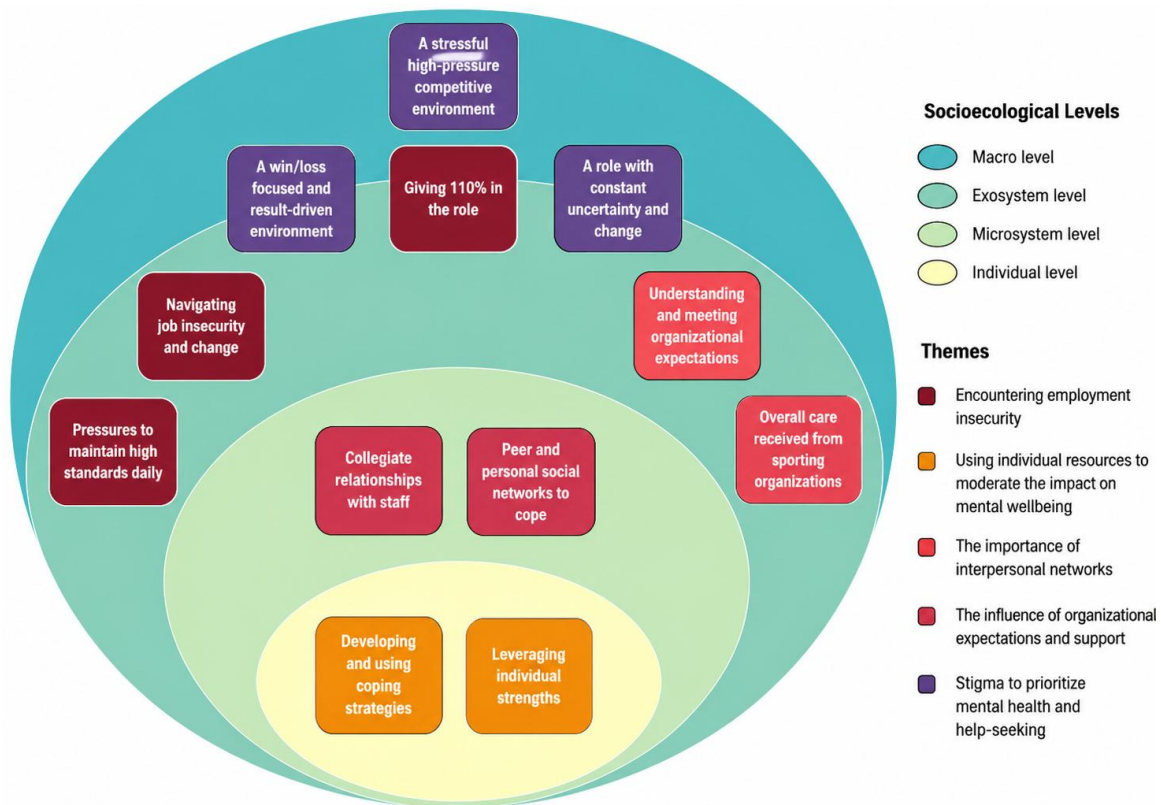


Fig. 1. Socioecological systems map illustrating the identified themes and sub-themes related to elite coaches' mental health.

Various organisational and societal stressors were discussed, such as job insecurity and media coverage, however, we argued that organisational stressors present a higher risk for elite coaches' mental health in that they are systemic and structural (Kegelaers et al., 2021). Based on these findings and the existing literature, sports organization's need to find ways to minimise the impact of organizational stressors, as this may be seen as a potential violation of the duty of care towards mental health of coaches. For instance, giving coaches more assistance when they are under pressure from the media, by analysing how press conferences are scheduled, as well as helping coaches to know how to interact with the media (Faustin et al., 2022). Organisations need to be mindful of their own expectations and standards when it comes to coaches, and their resources and capacity for taking on coaches. This may be achieved by establishing a healthy work/life balance, and fostering flexibility and autonomy of work for elite coaches. Moreover, opportunities need to be provided for coaches to take structured respite to enable them to physically and psychologically

recharge and recover from the burdens of organisation. It is important that such supports be provided to coaches independent of performance results since conditioning supports to success as a coach could lead to excessive workloads, which in turn could lead to burnout and job sustainability.

On the personal level, the participants took different psychological and behavioral measures for the purpose of maintaining their mental health. As in previous studies, coaches during the current study used a number of problem-focused coping strategies (e.g., organized, disengaged from coaching) as well as emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g., regulating emotions, cultivating gratitude) (Didymus, 2017; Olusoga et al., 2010). Coaches may find that carrying out problem focused strategies (e.g. regular activity) in these in-competition scenarios is harder to do due to workloads and travel so it is important to have efficient emotion focused strategies to employ. Organizations may consider using evidence-based strategies to address stress and emotions, such as

mindfulness and self-compassion practices, which could help coaches to manage stress in a more effective way, beyond what is directly in their control (e.g., due to organizational structure) (Hägglund et al., 2025; Longshore & Sachs, 2015). Additionally, with a range of coaches reporting using their interpersonal networks a lot for accessing mental health support, organizations must ensure that they have and utilize interpersonal networks, especially when coaches' stress levels are higher or when there is a lot of traveling.

The findings indicate a need to focus on structural and cultural issues impacting the mental health of coaches, as well as actively creating conditions that promote coaches' flourishing and sustainable, high-performance. Elite sport areas of psychological safety are those where athletes can take interpersonal risks without experiencing repercussions (Jowett et al., 2023); areas of psychological safety can also help to dismantle the stigma of mental ill-health, foster help-seeking and drive flourishing (Walton et al., 2024). Coaches may also be limited in expanding their skill level and attaining their peak performance if they are not allowed to make mistakes. Organisations can play a role to create a container for coaches to share information relating to mental ill-health without concern for job security. To further reduce mental health stigma, and encourage 'mental fitness', there is room to deliver mental health literacy interventions specifically geared towards the demands put on elite coaches via coach education programmes. Mental health pathways for athletes needs to be broadened for coaches to utilise for prevention, early intervention and performance purposes and be promoted through targeted messaging to raise awareness (Frost et al., 2023).

5. Limitations and future directions

In recruiting the sample there was an attempt to achieve diversity but the sample consisted predominantly male (86%) and primarily Australian Rules Football (64%). We were disappointed to see the low number of females that participated in our sample as previous research has shown that females are more likely than males to experience adverse events in sport (Walton et al., 2021) and indicated poorer mental health outcomes than males (Walton,

Gwyther, et al., 2024). In an ideal world there would have been more representation of women coaches in our sample as this would mirror Australia's overall representation of women coaches (15%) (Taylor et al., 2023), but it did not. This reflects the popularity of Australian Rules Football in the sample, being the largest professional sport in Australia and the results are likely to be similar to other professional team sports, such as association football, in other countries. In addition, data collection was conducted at a time when there were a lot of Olympic/Paralympic activities and we noticed that coaches in Olympic or Paralympic activities were less available to be part of our work. Lastly, we have acknowledged that this may reflect a male dominated sport in a high profile team environment and is potential not suitable to women coaches or coaches in Olympic or Paralympic sports.

Coaches from various levels (head coaches, assistant coaches, development coaches, full-time coaches, part-time coaches, contractual coaches, volunteer coaches) were recruited for the study, allowing a wide range of the different roles, responsibilities and pressures associated with coaches and their specific position to affect perceptions and experiences of mental health. Given the variety of coaching professions, it is important to consider the type of coach in the context of the findings and future research could focus on the various risk and protective factors for each type of coach (for example, head versus development coach) and employment status (full-time versus volunteer) which may have different demands, challenges, and experiences for different groups. The interviews were conducted at a single time point and this might not reflect the actual experience and recollection of the participant over time. Interviews at several timepoints may be helpful to gain understanding of organizations' risk and protective factors at different stages of the competitive season (off-season, during season, and post-season) and direct their attention and resources to the factors that are salient at different times of the season. Lastly, a self-selection bias could be found. However, even when there was a recognition of possible blind spots in analyses (such as documentation in the reflexive journal) perhaps participants were more interested in

discussing their mental health experiences than non-participants were?

Conclusion

A range of stressors were identified by high level coaches in Australia, the majority of which they viewed as being organisational by nature and resulted in perceived pressure that negatively affected their mental health. Coaches spoke of using individual resources, interpersonal relationship and organizational supports to deal with these stressors.

Coaches with ineffective coping mechanisms, social isolation and/or operating in stigmatizing settings that don't provide much organizational support may be at risk for poor mental health. As a result, organisations should continue to be conscious of the stresses they may cause to coaches, enhance the 'culture' of the organisations, provide contextually specific skills training for coaches, and provide information about mental health and referral services to help coaches manage the stressors in their role.

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