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**Organisational Stress and Coping in Professional  
Rugby Union Athletes of New Zealand**

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

***Masters of Applied Psychology (Organisational)***

at

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by

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## **Abstract**

Professional rugby union athletes of New Zealand are currently being faced with complex pressures and demands that go beyond the stress they encounter on the field. While these competitive stressors have been an area that has been well researched in the past, organisational stressors that exist between the player and the organisation in which they operate in, have been neglected. This exploratory study was aimed at identifying organisational stressors experienced by professional rugby union athletes of New Zealand, and the subsequent coping methods that they employ to combat such stress.

Eleven professional rugby union athletes from the Waikato rugby team of New Zealand participated in this study. The athletes completed this through a face to face interview. Thematic analysis identified a wide range of organisational issues, including environmental, personal, leadership and team issues with selection and injuries being the most commonly identified sources of stress. Furthermore, major coping strategies identified were problem focussed coping, emotion focussed coping and maladaptive coping, with problem focussed coping methods being the most popular of use.

Understanding the unique organisational stressors and the subsequent coping strategies that the athletes of this study are employing to combat them fills a void on missing literature on the topic. A key implication is the awareness created for rugby union organisations. Findings challenge organisations to be aware of such issues players may be experiencing and encourage them to implement added support initiatives for those individuals. Directions for future research are discussed in the final chapter.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Organisational Context**

This was an exploratory study that aimed to discover the sources of organisational stress professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand and the coping methods employed by athletes. This chapter begins with a brief background introduction into the topic. Definitions and background on stress are then explored. Literature on stress in professional sporting athletes, which may be relevant to professional rugby union athletes is reviewed. Coping strategies definitions and theories are then covered, again with a specific focus on their relevance to professional rugby union athletes. Overall this chapter explores literature surrounding organisational stress and coping, with a specific focus on how such literature can be relevant in a professional rugby union setting.

### **Background**

Rugby union has a great importance upon the landscape of not only New Zealand's sporting culture, but its culture and identity as a nation overall. Not only this but the national rugby union side of New Zealand, the All Blacks, have become an internationally recognised brand worldwide. Their successes, particularly in recent times has become a benchmark for teams of all sporting codes internationally to replicate.

Research has previously not identified that professional rugby union athletes are also fulfilling a workplace role. Though they are playing a sport and/or leisure role, the truth is that they are also contractually employed by their organisations to fulfil workplace duties (i.e. playing rugby). Thus, the overall purpose of this study is used to understand the study of organisational stress in professional athletes, specifically in a rugby player sample.

### **Stress**

Stress has, for a number of years, been a well-studied area of research. Furthermore, the role of stress and its impact upon health in general has been studied for quite some time (Braun, Foreyt, & Johnston,

2016). Much of this has stemmed from a desire for researchers to understand the behavioural, psychological and health effects that stress can cause upon individuals. Additionally, stress in regards to one's occupation or organisation is becoming a far more widely researched area for researchers to focus attention, due to a number of negative consequences individuals can experience from such an issue. Recent studies in New Zealand have indicated that workplace stress has been on the rise in recent years (BusinessNZ, 2017). While research looking at stress in sports is becoming more widespread, especially in looking at organisational stressors that athletes are faced with, professional athletes are actually under-represented in the stress in sport literature and specifically in New Zealand and rugby union (Noblet, Rodwell & McWilliams, 2003). As there is little to none research that has been previously done to show organisational stress in professional rugby union athletes, the purpose of this study is to bridge the gap between organisational stress in sport and rugby union in New Zealand.

The term 'stress' itself is one that is surrounded with inconsistencies and a certain looseness that is used in referring to stress as a label, rather than a concept in itself (Dewe, O'Driscoll & Cooper, 2010). Furthermore, there are concerns that the term 'Stress', now holds a plethora of meanings (Dewe, O'Driscoll & Cooper, 2010). Thus producing a wide and uncertain variety in what the term means from one person, or even research, to the next.

A widely referred to and popularly used understanding of 'stress' has come from Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who believed that stress develops when environmental demands or challenges are perceived by the individual to exceed their resources or capabilities. It is widely agreed upon that when referring to the term 'stress' or 'stressor' that it is thought of and accepted as a transactional process, where the appraisal process provides a causal pathway between the individual and the environment (Dewe, O'Driscoll & Cooper, 2010). Stress itself refers to an issue where if sustained there is a risk of illness or disease and the level and duration of which will depend on the expectancy of the outcome (Ursin & Eriksen,

2007). The issue with this approach is that it does not examine the individuals own appraisal of the situation and their encounter with the environmental demands that is exceeding their capabilities, like the Lazarus and Folkman definition. This is of particular importance for a study that is investigating stress that rugby players are encountering, as stress is only placed upon the individual should they deem the encounter to be exceeding their resources or capabilities to deal with such an issue.

Other sources of stress can provide a number of wide-ranging impacts and emotions to the person. First and foremost, negative impacts or emotional responses have shown to include fear, anger and guilt (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). However, not all stress leads to negative impacts upon a person. Much research has actually proven that stress can lead to positive impacts upon the person involved, with such emotions such as joy, happiness and pride most evident (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

For this research, the approach of the transactional theory of stress has been chosen as the point of view of choice, as it details how a person's reaction from a stimulus leads them to feelings of stress. The transactional theory of stress is widely used across the research world (and is often favoured), for its depiction of stress as being a interactional process, which specifically looks at the interaction of stress between a person and their environment. The applicability of the use of this model in this particular research is that it allows the players to identify what may be stressful to them, as rugby union athletes, and also allows individual differences in the processes of coping in which they employ to combat such stress. In a workplace environment, such as being employed as a professional rugby union athlete, undoubtedly there are particular situations that one player may find stressful in terms of dealing with organisational pressures, while another player may not find the same particular situation stressful. Additionally, as detailed in Arnold and Fletcher's (2012), review in organisational stress in sport paper, they suggest that researchers adopt the transactional conceptualisation of stress as sporting athletes experience continual interplay between the

individual and their surrounding environment. The theory itself is unique, in that it does not pay a specific focus upon either the stimulus or the response to stress itself, rather it describes it as a process that collectively involves stimulus, responses and other individual characteristics (Kalliath et., al, 2014). Essentially there are three parts to the theory. Kalliath et., al, 2014, break down the theory in a simple yet effective demonstration where, firstly the perception of the stressor, and how that differs from one person to the next as some individuals might find an event or situation stressful while others do not. The second part of the theory is cognitive appraisal, which refers to our evaluation of the potential stressor as threatening, challenging or perhaps even exciting. Then finally the third part details our coping response, simply, how an individual attempts to manage that stress. (p.229).

Organisational stress rather than occupational/job stress is the preferred term and approach identified and chosen for this type of research. While from the understanding we have of 'stress' itself applies to environmental demands or challenges that are perceived by the individual to exceed their resources or capabilities, organisational stress to this context refers to the environmental demands experienced by an individual associated with an organisation (Fletcher, Hanton & Mellalieu, 2006). Occupational stress, for a number of years has lacked the understanding of the transactional approach of stress, and has focussed, rather, upon occupational stress as being experienced by one through the person-environment fit, rather than the transaction between one's job and stress that stems from the interaction of the organisations demands placed on them.(Dewe, 1989). Occupational stress also offers a far more blinkered approach to the overall interaction between a person and their employer and experiences in their job. An identified definition of the term job stress offered by Heery and Noon, 2008, details that job stress is a situation where an aspect of one's work causes them physical or mental problems for an employee. To this definition, occupational/job stress is much more focussed upon an individual's work roles that cause stress, and doesn't look widely at the overall interaction that lies between the

wider role that is played out between an organisation and the individual. Simply, the role of an organisation often goes much further. It involves much more than the employment of an individual for them to complete a work task. For example, a professional rugby union athlete's principal work task is to attend trainings, play games and sometimes fulfil media and community tasks. However, what isn't accounted for is particular tasks such as being approached in the street for photos or autographs because of their popularity. While not a set out task for them to complete, if a player was to react adversely to such a situation, the organisation would be involved in disciplining the player to react differently in that given situation. For this reason, such a piece of research which investigates a topic that has not been well examined, it is important to use a term that focuses not only on the more specific aspects of these athletes jobs, and rather a term that encompasses the wide ranging and complexities of the role that they are employed to do. This is particularly important in a sport such as rugby union and nation like New Zealand, where the sport is the most popular sport nationwide in terms of viewership and support. Because of the wide ranging support and popularity of these players, it means that professional athletes in this sport are hugely marketable, which creates complex roles that they must fulfil as part of their job as contracted athletes.

### **Stress in the sporting context**

Organisational stress in sport involves the interaction that exists between the individual and the sporting organisation within which the individual is operating (Woodman & Hardy, 2001). This means that the issues that are not normally directly related to the organisation the athlete is operating within (e.g., relationships outside of the organisation), is not viewed as a source of organisational stress (Woodman & Hardy, 2001). However, should that issue such as a family issue be directly related to the sporting organisation because of their involvement in the issue in one way or another, then it is considered to be a potential source of organisational stress.

Sporting environments create an environment where an athlete is faced with both competitive stressors, as well as organisational stressors

(Nicholls & Pollman, 2007). Kristiansen, Havalri & Roberts' (2011) research on organisational and media stress in professional football players highlighted that not only has sport become a business with a focus on making money, but also the organisations are now increasingly exposing their athletes to more organisational pressures to enable the sports to become successful business. Despite research focussing on competitive stressors, organisational stressors are less so (Fletcher, Hanton & Mellalieu, 2006). Despite research focussing on competitive stressors, research has identified that organisational stressors are creating a greater impact on athlete performances than that of competitive stressors (Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005).

Present literature such as Fletcher, Hanton & Wagstaff (2012), found that the organisational environment can impose a number of negative demands on professional athletes. More specifically the relationship between the athlete and the organisational environment can often create a number of negative emotions such as, anger, anxiety, disappointment, distress, reproach and resentment. In a research of organisational stress and coping in 47 participants (professional sportsmen, coaches, sport science support and administrative staff), Rumbold, Fletcher and Daniels (2018), reported that organisational stress led to feelings of Anger, reduced confidence, demotivation and reduced concentration. While it could also lead to negative issues such as a lack of sleep or making mistakes in performances.

Organisational stressors however, also has the potential to be not only associated with negative consequences, but also positive consequences for athletes (Arnold, Fletcher & Daniels, 2017). The same study discovered that particular dimensions of organisational stress, namely goals and development and team and culture, had a positive effect on negative affect (Arnold et al., 2017). While another study previously mentioned reported that organisational stress could lead to feelings of excitement (Rumbold et al., 2018).

Previous stress research in professional rugby has primarily focussed on competitive related stressors (Nicholls et al., 2006; Nicholls et

al., 2009; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). While little has been completed in New Zealand. With professional rugby players in New Zealand earning more lucrative occupational contracts than in the past, the last NZRU (2016) annual report noted that income over the past year had increased 21 percent to \$161.7 million, leading to an increased \$26 million of investment in players, high performance programs and competitions. Such a large increase in contracting, coupled with stronger competition for the already scarce number of spots, it is about time a piece of research specifically looked at the organisational stress issues felt by these players, and the coping mechanisms they employ to deal with them. Many people would not understand the modern complexities that come with dealing with professional rugby players that runs deeper than just seeing them play at their local stadium or on television. Players are increasingly having to deal with external demands from their organisation that includes, dealing with contracts, managing their nutrition and health in the off seasons and maintaining a healthy working relationship with their fellow teammates, staff and coaches. To most bystanders, these issues aren't thought about and aren't often publicly spoken of, which increases pressure on the players to keep these matters private and not allow it to spill into their playing abilities.

Due to the lack of research in organisational stress experienced by professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand, the research sought influence from other research in the sporting arena previously conducted to help investigate and formulate the research. Woodman and Hardy's (2001) paper on organisational stress in sport, proved ideal for this piece of research on rugby players. The breakdown into themes of organisational stress, personal issues, leadership issues, environmental issues and team issues provides a great basis and inspiration as to where to lead the research for professional rugby union athletes.

## **Coping**

Coping with stress is something that differs from person to person. The actual strategy that people employ to cope with stress is nothing but a way in which they deal with such stress (Suresh, 2008). While it has been

noted that some stress is needed to perform at one's optimum efficiency, it is also understood that too much stress and the ability to cope with such stress can be destructive to an individual (Suresh, 2008). Furthermore, research has shown that ineffective coping strategies from work related stress can lead to burnout, a highly affective syndrome that creates feelings of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficiency (Montero-Marin, Prado-Abril, Demarzo, Gascon & Garcia-Campayo, 2014).

However, once again, we cannot speak of coping and its negative or positive effects on individuals without a greater understanding of its constructs.

Coping specifies the efforts used to manage demands, disregarding the overall success of such efforts. (Folkman, 1984).

The transactional theory of stress that is offered by Lazarus (1984), includes a consideration of coping strategies. As detailed earlier, there are three specific processes involved with the transactional theory of stress. In this research of coping, the last two steps are critical in understanding coping itself. Stress, as outlined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), details that strain on an individual occurs when environmental demands and/or constraints exceeds their capabilities. That process involves cognitive appraisal of the situation, to deem whether the demand or constraint is indeed, exceeding their capabilities. This cognitive appraisal is also the critical component in the process for coping. There are three forms of cognitive appraisal. These being primary appraisal, secondary appraisal and reappraisal (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 2002). Primary appraisal is best understood as an appraisal of an encounter that poses some immediate harm or loss. Secondary appraisal relates to coping behaviours and involves an evaluative component which focuses primarily on the availability of specific coping responses, and how the person may employ them (Carver, Scheier, Kumari Weintraub & Sarason, 1989; Miller & Mccool, 2003). After these two evaluations of the stress are made, the process of coping takes place. Finally, reappraisal involves the process of evaluation and whether or not the attempts of coping have worked successfully or not (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 2002). When understanding the

approach of this research and coping itself, the important part to note is the appraisal component of the theory. That is, that a specified encounter is only as stressful as the person considers it to be. Coping can also be defined, as Lazarus, 1993, p.237, defined it as “ongoing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person”. Also, one player to the next will likely employ a different method of dealing with such a stress, hence why using this particular model is important, to allow for variances in pressures and coping methods to be explored in a manner which allows those varied responses to be discovered.

Lazarus and Folkman, not only identified and caused the transactional theory of stress to become more known in the psychology world, but they also helped to identify and distinguish between two types of coping behaviours, which they named problem focused coping and emotion focused coping. Additionally, there is now considered to be a third category of coping advocated for, avoidance coping (Kowalski & Crocker, 2001).

The first method of coping, problem focused coping, is an altered version of the person-environment relationship (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Problem focused coping is generally aimed at problem solving, in other words, taking some form of action to alter the source of, and/or alleviate the stress (Carver et al., 1989). While the two coping methods are put under two blanket terms of problem focussed coping and emotion focussed coping, there are a number of distinct activities that can be taken by a person that come under these terms. For instance, with problem focussed coping, activities or approaches that are used can involve planning, taking direct action, seeking assistance, screening out other activities and potentially even forcing a person's self to wait before acting (Carver et al., 1989). Planning is an approach that can be used that involves thinking about how to cope with a stressor. Furthermore, planning includes pre-empting the problem and then coming up with action strategies that will focus on what steps to take and how best to handle the problem (Carver et al., 1989). In terms of how planning could be an

effective coping method for professional rugby union athletes, planning can be used as a method of coping for a number of issues, such as injury. If a player is dealing with an injury, planning how they might approach their rehab and slowly allow themselves to gain full strength to get back into contention to play in the games again, could be an effective way in which they can deal with the injury. Suppression of competing activities, may also be another problem focussed coping method that professional rugby union athletes may find effective in coping with organisational stress. Suppression of competing activities is a unique approach that involves the individual putting other projects or tasks aside to ultimately attempt to avoid the distraction of other commitments so that they can tackle the stressor head on (Carver et al., 1989). For a rugby player in the professional scene, they may try and avoid a number of other activities so that they can cope with the stressor head on. Restraint coping is the next form of problem focussed coping. Restraint coping involves waiting until the opportune moment to act on the stressor, essentially not acting prematurely to cope with the stressor. For rugby union athletes, restraining themselves from acting upon the stressor immediately, may be an employed tactic used to deal with stress. Another form of problem-focused coping that can be detailed is seeking social support. If the individual seeks social support for instrumental reasons, such as seeking advice, assistance or information then this can be considered to be problem-focussed coping (Carver et al., 1989). This form of coping could indeed be prevalent in professional rugby, as because the players are constantly surrounded by management and more importantly team mates that are or have been in similar situations dealing with similar stress, it is likely they seek out advice or assistance from those teammates, especially more senior members of the team, so that they can effectively deal with the stress.

The second style of coping response offered from Lazarus and Folkman (1984), is emotion focused coping. Emotion focused coping is aimed at the reduction or the overall management of emotional distress that is associated with the stressor (Carver et al., 1989). It also involves a

wide range of responses such as denial, positive reinterpretation of events and like problem focussed coping, the seeking out of social support. As mentioned before, while seeking out advice from others can be an example of problem-focussed coping, it can also be an example of emotion-focussed coping when seeking moral support, sympathy and understanding. The act of seeking social support can also include focussing on and venting emotions, where there is a tendency to focus on whatever distress or upset one is experiencing and to ventilate those feelings. This point also raises the issue of how this style of coping can also be maladaptive, as the individual may be constantly focussing on these emotions which impedes adjustment (Carver et al., 1989).

Acceptance is an emotion-focussed coping method that may be employed by professional rugby union athletes. Acceptance involves an individual accepting the reality of a stressful situation, thus allowing them to deal with the stressful situation (Carver et al., 1989). In the professional rugby union environment, what may become evident is that the players accept the stress put on them, for example from not being selected by coaches to play in the team, so that they can then move on from the situation and not feel the effects of the stress, allowing them to go back and perform to allow for selection once again.

The third style of coping that has been more recently advocated for and used in research is avoidance coping, sometimes referred to as withdrawal coping. Avoidance holds distinct differences to problem and emotion focussed coping. Namely that the person experiencing the stressful situation actual removes themselves from such a situation, while the problem and emotion focussed method involves the person to remain in the situation while using methods to manage it (Kowalski & Crocker, 2001). Avoidance coping itself can be classed in two styles, behavioural or psychological. Behavioural avoidance coping involves an individual's situations such as walking away from a stressful situation, while psychological avoidance coping involves efforts to attempt to disengage from a stressful situation, such as blocking (Nicholls et al., 2006).

While there are three types of coping that are investigated in this research. It is an important time to note that coping does not always lead to an outcome that is considered positive for the individual. These strategies that the individual may use to cope, can be both dysfunctional in use and unsuccessful in outcome and is commonly known as maladaptive coping. Maladaptive techniques are dysfunctional as, while the coping technique may help in reducing the symptoms of the stress, the use of the avoidance strategy itself increases the effects of stress on the strain (Dijkstra et al., 2009). One such example of maladaptive coping is behavioural disengagement. Behavioural disengagement involves an individual reducing their effort to deal with the stressor, sometimes even going as far as to give up the attempt to attain certain goals with which the stressor is interfering with (Carver et al., 1989). Behavioural disengagement can be closely identified in responses through terms such as helplessness. Helplessness and indeed behavioural disengagement could be a potential response to a stressor that professional rugby union athletes display. Through injury, an athlete may lose interest in trying to reach smaller goals to help deal with the injury as they have feelings of helplessness and uncertainty around their playing futures. Another form of maladaptive coping is mental disengagement. Mental disengagement is like behavioural disengagement, however its differences lie in that it occurs when conditions prevent behavioural disengagement. More specifically, mental disengagement occurs through different activities that serve the purpose of trying to distract or take one's mind off the stressor such as watching TV (Carver et al., 1989). Rugby union athletes might avoid the stress of issues with coaches and management by watching TV, or playing a video game. The use of alcohol could be another maladaptive coping method used by professional rugby union athletes. The athletes may use alcohol as a means to distract them from the stress of not being selected to play in the team for game day.

Research has identified that coping in sporting settings is an extremely crucial factor in athlete's performances and even their satisfaction (Nicholls & Pollman, 2007). Furthermore, it has also shown

that athletes from a wide range of sports do use all three coping methods to deal with organisational stress (Arnold, Fletcher & Daniels, 2017; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2005). Arnold, Fletcher & Daniels (2017) identified that problem focused coping was positively related to positive affect, while emotion focused coping was positively related to negative affect and avoidance coping had significant main negative effect on positive affect in 414 various sporting performers.

The research of coping in professional rugby union athletes has been widely undervalued. Nicholls et al. (2006) completed research on stress and coping in eight first class professional rugby union athletes. They found that the rugby union athletes used a variety of coping methods, which fell under the problem focused, emotion focused and avoidance coping umbrella. Problem focussed coping methods were the most cited as being used, followed by emotion coping and finishing with avoidance coping. In particular the most effective coping method by the players used was increased concentration on task, while interestingly the second most frequently used coping tactic was blocking (avoidance coping method). This suggests that rugby players, while not only using a wide range of coping behaviours, also may be partial to using too often relying on using maladaptive coping methods to deal with stress. While the results of this research are related to a broader concept of stress, it is still an interesting point to note in terms of the coping methods that professional rugby players may employ for organisational stress in New Zealand.

Overall, studies have indicated that largely the coping methods professional athletes employ are from the three main themes of problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and avoidance coping (Arnold, Fletcher & Daniels, 2017; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2005). While professional rugby union athletes are found to engage in predominantly problem focused coping, with a high use of the maladaptive coping behaviour of blocking out the stress (Nicholls et al., 2006).

## Research aims

There may be limited research on competitive stress in rugby union athletes. No research has delved into the organisational stress that professional rugby union athlete's face.

Research to investigate the organisational stressors that New Zealand's professional rugby union athletes are dealing with, and their subsequent coping methods are vital in keeping the athletes minds on the task on the field, instead of worrying about issues outside of it. As previously detailed, the negative effects that can come from stress and ineffective coping methods is of great importance to researchers. Furthermore, the research is necessary in helping players to deal with any kind of stress they are dealing with so they can be open and honest with their management as to issues that they are having to deal with outside of the game. Because the occupation of a professional rugby union athlete is such a unique one, the research that has previously been conducted or conducted in different industries, may hold little relevance or applicability to the players and the complexities they face.

The aim of this study came in two parts. Firstly, to investigate the sources of organisational stress being experienced by the professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand. Then secondly, to identify and explore the coping strategies that these athletes are engaged in to try and remedy the effects of stress due to their occupation. The overall goal of this research is to serve as a starting point into the types of organisational stress professional rugby union athletes deal with and to identify proactive ways in which players can use particular coping methods to help deal with this stress.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Method**

#### **Procedure**

The University of Waikato's research and ethics committee for the School of Social Sciences granted ethical approval for the research to take place. To begin with, participants were told at a team meeting of the research by their personal development manager and team manager, and were asked to volunteer for the study. The players were then given a sheet to look over explaining the purpose for the study and reasoning's as to why it was being researched. The Basic Information sheet, appendix A, and the Participant Information Sheet, presented in Appendix B, were given to the participants approximately one week before the interview was to take place. This approach was taken to not only give them time to carefully consider their involvement in the research, but to also give them time to think of experiences to be discussed during the interview. The interview times were discussed and confirmed with the players, and interviews were then setup to take place, either at the offices in the Waikato Stadium (base for the team), or another location. All players chose to use the Waikato Stadium. The interview began with an introduction to the participants to build a strong rapport and to allow them to feel relaxed in the interview. The participant information sheet was then discussed with the participant, as a means to allow the participant to go over any questions they had regarding the research. This was followed by a demographic sheet and consent form, which was used to better understand the participants' age, years of professional play and while not used for research purposes, their ethnicity was asked to allow for cultural consideration. The interview itself then began. From the participants' permission, the interview was voice recorded. The participant also gave

permission for the interview to be transcribed for research analysis. The interview was completed by following the interview protocol, presented in Appendix C. The interview began asking the participant about experiences of disruptions or pressures that the participant had felt during their time as a professional rugby union athlete. Once the disruption or pressure example was identified, probing questions were used to look more in-depth at the coping behaviours and the strategies the participants employed to cope with such feelings.

The information from the interview was then analysed. The data from the interview was analysed using thematic analysis and the Nvivo computer program. This approach was specifically taken so that it would identify the organisational stress that players were faced with, highlight the coping behaviours then the players used to cope and also not to identify the players in anyway. The analysis was completed following the steps and phases that were outlined in Braun and Clarke's (2006), guide to thematic analysis. The steps that were taken were as follows:

To begin with, data was transcribed and involved removing possible identifying characteristics in order to maintain the participants' anonymity. After a number of readings, themes were noted.

Next, initial codes were created across the full data set. Codes were developed from the responses that were offered by the participants. Only responses that identified an interaction that was negative for the individual between them and their organisation were coded for organisational stressors. Additionally, only responses that were identified by New Zealand professional rugby union athletes as behaviours they engaged in to eliminate stress were coded for the coping strategies. Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis computer program, was the program used to collate the data, as codes appeared. They would be confirmed by being 'noded'.

Next, the data was themed. All the data that was grouped together by codes which are similar by nature. Once all the data was collected for

the themes, they were then given names that summarised the codes within them.

The fourth step involved reviewing the themes. This was conducted to check if they reflected the data. The reviewing of themes was completed through repeating the second and third steps.

Finally, each theme remained open to refine each of them into the finished state. By completing this, each theme was distinctively refined and names for each of those themes were developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was developed from the critical incidents technique and re-created by O'Driscoll and Cooper (1994). The critical incidents technique involves a set of procedures that are used to collect direct observations of human behaviour that have critical significance, while also meeting a methodically defined criteria. The use of such a technique can also be adapted for a number of situations and observations of human behaviours. In this instance the tool is designed to analyse the interrelationships that exist between stressors, coping behaviours and consequences. This type of process was well suited in not only basing an interview structure that identified the stressors experienced by professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand, but also in helping to identify and understand just how the players were coping with such issues and why such methods were employed. The critical incident analysis of this method involves three parts to it, firstly the identification of the stressful transaction they experienced, secondly the description of the specific behaviour they exhibited when confronted with the stressor and finally the outcome or consequences of their behaviours during the stressful event. The interview protocol is available in Appendix C.

The participants were firstly asked about experiences of disruptions or pressures that they had felt in their time as a professional rugby union athlete. The participants were initially handed, prior to the interview, a

sheet that gave examples of organisational stress experienced by sporting professionals found by Woodman and Hardy (2001).

## **Participants**

In total, 11 professional rugby union athletes took part in this study. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 33 years old, with a mean age of 24.7. The criterion of inclusion in this study was that the athletes were professionally contracted to the WRU, years of experience playing professional rugby ranged from 1 to 15 years, with the median score being 4 years of experience. The participants were interviewed after volunteering to take part in the study after being approached by their personal development manager. The personal development manager approached the team to explain the research, its aims and why it was being done. The Waikato Rugby Union side was chosen as team of choice for this research as it was the regional team of the Waikato University and due to its close proximity of location to the researcher.

## **Measures**

The data was collected through face-to-face qualitative interviews. To begin the interview, the participants were: reintroduced to the nature of the study, well informed of their rights to take part and, should they choose to do so, leave the research at any point; informed of their anonymity rights and protection of data and then asked to fill out a brief demographic form and form to show they have given written consent. Once these were completed the semi-structured interview took place. The interview protocol was developed and based upon the critical incident analysis of stressors (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1994) . The use of the interview and qualitative method with thematic analysis was chosen because of the lack of any research being completed in this area. The organisational stressor themes of Woodman & Hardy (2004) and the coping strategies of problem

focused, emotion focused and avoidance coping were highlighted as appropriate theming for this research.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Organisational Stress**

This chapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis of the interviews and the responses offered from the participants. The analysis is split into two-parts.

Firstly the thematic analysis on Organisational Stress is offered, presented in four broad themes under the umbrella of organisational stress. Four broad themes emerged from the data, environmental issues, personal issues, leadership issues and team issues. Each of these themes consisted of several sub-themes, which are explored in detail with supporting quotes. Following this are examples from the identified themes.

### **Organisational Stress Results**

#### **Environmental Issues**

The illustration of the environmental issues is illustrated in Figure 1. The three environmental issues that were discovered were, Selection, Financial and Expectation.

*Selection.* Selection was the leading issue spoken of from the rugby union athletes in regards to organisational stress. Selection involves being selected to be a part of the game-day team. This is in-line with other research conducted on organisational stress in sport, which also found that the leading cause of stress players' perception of was unfair selection criteria (Fletcher et al., 2012). The same piece of research also identified that typical responses to selection issues are generally negative, with dissatisfied temperaments being the most common reactions to selection issues (Fletcher et al., 2012).

As is quite evident, it seems that selection is a particularly sensitive source of stress that is experienced by these athletes. In total, there were 8 different types of selection issues that the athletes experienced, with the main ones mentioned being perception that the player should have been

selected then isn't, unfairly being dropped (players perception) and non-selection due to injury. An interesting finding from this thematic analysis, was that the players often spoke of struggling to understand the reason as to why they were not being selected at the time, and the flow on effect from that affecting their mentality. This quote from one of the athletes details just how difficult and frustrating the players can find non-selection.

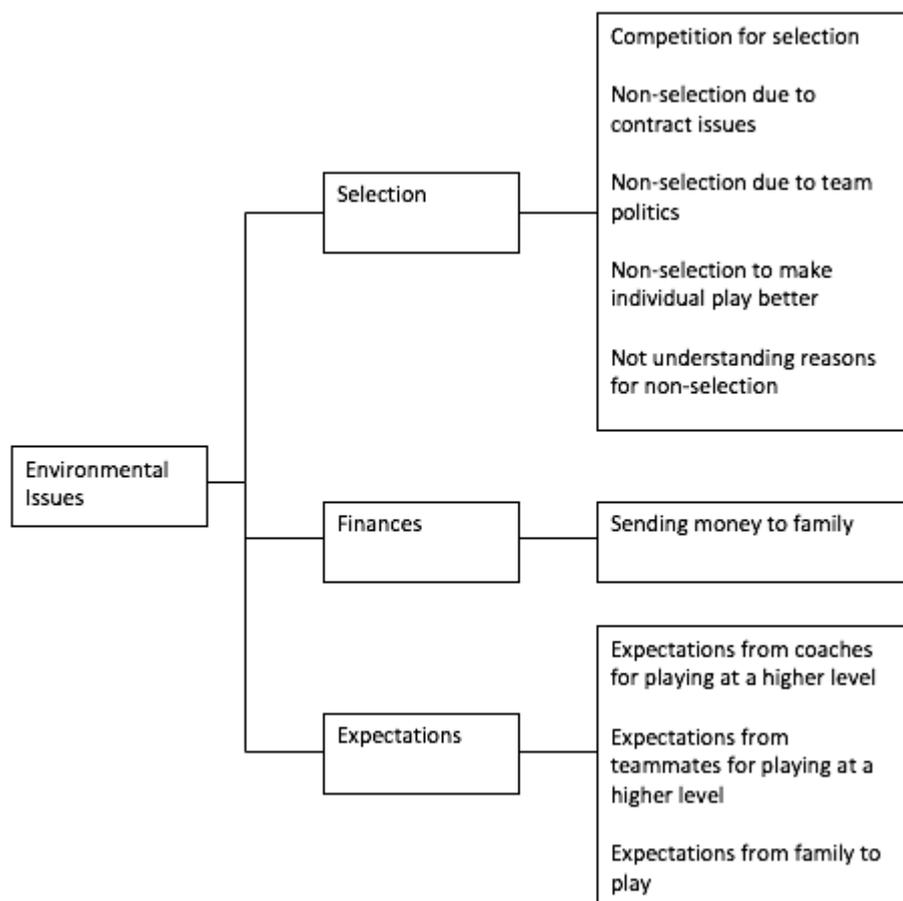
*So with selection, it can get to your head a bit when you're not getting picked, and you thought you did everything in your power to be available for selection and it can make you disappointed but yeah nothing seems, when you're working hard for something and you aren't selected to perform to put the jersey on and play in the game, and it puts a bit of pressure on you for like next weekend.*

Such a selection issue as the quote demonstrates, exemplifies the manifestation of negative thoughts that can come from not being selected when a player feels as if they have done enough to be chosen. This particular example of organisational stress also demonstrates the transactional nature of the stress experienced by the athlete. The athlete describes that when not being selected, the incident then leads to it getting into their head, or what can be better termed as cognitive appraisal, where the athlete interprets that such situation of not being selected as being stressful. Following this appraisal the athlete then discusses the reaction to the stress, this being the feeling of disappointment and subsequent pressure the player places on himself for the next game.

The pressure of not being selected when an athlete feels they should be not only affects their own mental state and increases the feelings that they need to perform when they next play, but also can affect the relationship that they have within the environment and organisation itself. One athlete details:

*I wasn't getting selected to start and that was affecting me a lot in terms of being in the environment it got me into, not a bad place, but I was getting a bit frustrated and it was a bit negative in and*

*around the environment because I felt like sometimes I should have been starting but I wasn't*



*Figure 1: Organisational Stress: Environmental Issues*

The frustration and negative feelings associated with not being selected can lead to disapproving emotions that the players feel with regards to their organisation. When such feelings develop, it can affect the way in which the player reacts or functions in the team environment. It is necessary for the athletes and management to have open communication in such instances, so the player does not find it difficult to remain in the environment because they feel as if their efforts are not being recognised.

While the pressure and disruption of not being selected leads to a stress in relation to an athlete's environment. Athletes also often struggle with what they perceive as being unfairly dropped, as it can often lead to a pressure they previously hadn't experienced with as a player, especially

when they perceive that their performances are going well. One player said:

*So uh yeah that actually got to my head because I thought I was going good, I thought I was doing everything right and then uh, I got the word from the coaches that I had to go back and play under 19 and then yeah they won't pick me for the season and I was quite heartbroken and it put pressure on me as a player.*

Non-selection can also cause problems away from the rugby field for players who may not have seen it coming. Often when players are going well they plan ahead on the premise that they are going to be selected for certain squads, allowing them to plan for the future. Not only this but they also put their bodies on the line and often do not disclose the certain nature of injuries so they don't lose out on often more lucrative contracts. When the surprise of not being selected comes, it can often throw plans in disarray, leaving the athletes to pick up the pieces and make other plans for their future. One player explains how his life changed all from not being selected when he told he would be. He said:

*Anyway came to the announcement of the squads and I had missed out, and the coach called me, at the time and I was out for dinner with my family at that time and f\*\*k it sucked because he said, "I'm really sorry but we can't sign you anymore". So I was like "what's going on?" And he was like "we just weren't really happy with your performances on the field this year" and I was like "oh, yeah, but f\*\*k you know my (name of injury) will be alright". He said "what's wrong with your (name of injury)?" Turns out I had got a scan at the end of the season and I had a crack on my (body part) on my actual (body part), so, "he was like f\*\*\* when did that happen?" So I said, "Over preseason but I just wanted to keep*

*playing to earn the full contract” and he just said “nah sorry mate we just can’t sign you”. That was probably one of my worst moments because I was thinking here’s my next two years sorted. So I was planning around that.*

Selection issues can provide a wide range of negative emotions and stress for professional rugby union athletes. This particular issue is an example of an organisational stressor as it relates to the interaction between the individual and the sporting organisation through which the individual is operating in.

*Financial Issues.* Financial issues were not a common problem experienced by this group of professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand. Although an uncommon issue, the problem is identified as significant to some players as they struggle with the demands of performing on the field, mixed with negative pressures stemming from financial areas. The main issue stemming from this was that because the athletes are perceived as professional rugby players from family, they believe that they are earning lucrative contracts and cultural issues lead to the player feeling obligated to giving money to family, restricting what they can do with their money to benefit their own career. One player details an uncomfortable situation he found himself in. He said:

*Oh just sending money back home to my parents... just for us as a culture, we will do that to help support the parents and that leaves us with not much... sometimes it doesn’t last all month... it was difficult to buy food and pay rent... I couldn’t get stuff to help benefit me and my career.*

Finances are an example of an organisational stress because of the relationship that exists between the organisations employing the individual. This player highlighted the stress that was exerted on himself

when trying to organise finances for himself and his family. This particular kind of issue is important for organisations to be aware of, as it is a key component of the professional rugby scene. These players are earning their livelihoods off such contracts, so helping their players to be more financially savvy is an important way to keep such stress low. Finances are an organisational stressor that is experienced by professional rugby union athletes.

*Expectations Issue.* The athletes interviewed in this research experienced three types of expectations issues. These being expectations from coaches for playing at a higher level, expectations from teammates for playing at a higher level and expectations from family to play. Rugby union in New Zealand has a unique number of levels and intricate pathways that lead to professional rugby. While a provincial team such as the Waikato team, represents a team of talented professional rugby players, those who may go up to experience the higher level of super rugby, then come back down, can often feel a weight of expectation from their peers from club to provincial level. The demands that are placed on these players can be difficult to deal with as they may feel that they need to play at a higher level than normal since experiencing such team environments. The experience from one such athlete describes the internal battle they face when they have played at a higher level and just how it can affect them mentally, as well as through their performances on the field:

*And for me that put like pressure on me and took me away from my processes a bit, and in my first game back I had a bit of a nightmare... during that week, I came to training and nailed everything, then came to game day and you just get that feeling of expectation from all your teammates and all the coaches so for me it just got to my head a bit and I just was trying to do too much and not focussing on my roles, and so it just went into a disaster after that.*

Expectations from within the organisation (through teammates and coaching staff), is an example of organisational stress that leads to negative performances on the field. The participant felt a weight of expectation to perform at a higher level because he had played at a higher level, leading to a stressful interaction between himself and his organisation which ultimately led to a poor performance on the field. This particular situation reinforces Lazarus & Folkman's (1987), findings that sources of stress can have a number of negative impacts or emotional responses upon an individual.

The role of family plays a big part in professional athlete's lives and rugby players are no different. Often the family is the first those who have successes in the game thank, as they make great sacrifices for them to play professionally the game they love. With many athletes now chasing a greater chance at lucrative contracts overseas, they often leave family members at home and receive great expectations from themselves and their family around them. The quote below details the difficulties and stress felt when letting his family know he was not being selected for a particular team, and the expectation they held for him being in that position:

*It probably didn't help that I was talking to my family and stuff back home and they would be like, are you playing this week? And it was like nah. Oh what again? What do they pay you all that money for. So it was like that internal, I suppose input of others was changing my mind set of others, I would get to grip with it, understand it and then I would talk to someone and they would be like, what what's going on. Yeah then you start the cycle again, like yeah it is shit, I should just go home, at least I get to play rugby at home.*

Expectations from those around the players (i.e. family) proved to be a cause of organisational stress, as when not being selected the

athlete was fielding a number of negative questions surrounding why, with the expectation that he would be selected. This is a cause of organisational stress as the player is involved in a negative interaction with the organisation, which then spills into the life of family members and the expectations they field from them. This particular example of organisational stress exists as it details an interaction between the individual and the organisation the individual is a part of. Expectations is an example of an organisational stressor that professional rugby union players are experiencing.

### **Personal Issues**

There proved to be a number of personal issues that were an experience of organisational stress the professional rugby union athletes conveyed in this research. In total there were three mentioned from the participants, these being injury, goals and expectations and home or family issues. The example of which are shown in Figure 2.

*Injury Issue.* Injury proved to be the second most mentioned source of organisational stress experienced by the athletes. Research has previously shown that the risk of injury is higher in rugby union than other codes of sport (Chalmers, Samaranayaka, Gulliver & McNoe, 2012). In such a high contact sport, it is little wonder that there would be so much mention of this particular form of organisational stress. Furthermore, injuries can create a great number of responses from the athletes that are facing them, such as identity loss, separation and loneliness and loss of confidence (Udry, Gould, Bridges & Beck, 1997). Overall the injury issue resulted in eleven different causes of organisational stress that these athletes have dealt with in their time as professional rugby union athletes. The most frequently mentioned of these were, feeling increased pressure because of injury, trying to rush rehab for fear of being dropped, fears the injury could end one's career and a lack of support while injured. Many of the responses from the athletes suggest that players often hide the true extent of their injuries, so as to not compromise their own position in the

team, as well as for the purpose of achieving higher honours in the game, as this quote suggests:

*Obviously, I've injured myself and my (description of injury) and obviously the work behind the scenes where you feel like you're trying to rush things to try and get back, because you know if you're not playing then you won't be getting recognised, obviously if you're fighting and trying to get a spot in higher honours beyond ITM, that could be a factor.*

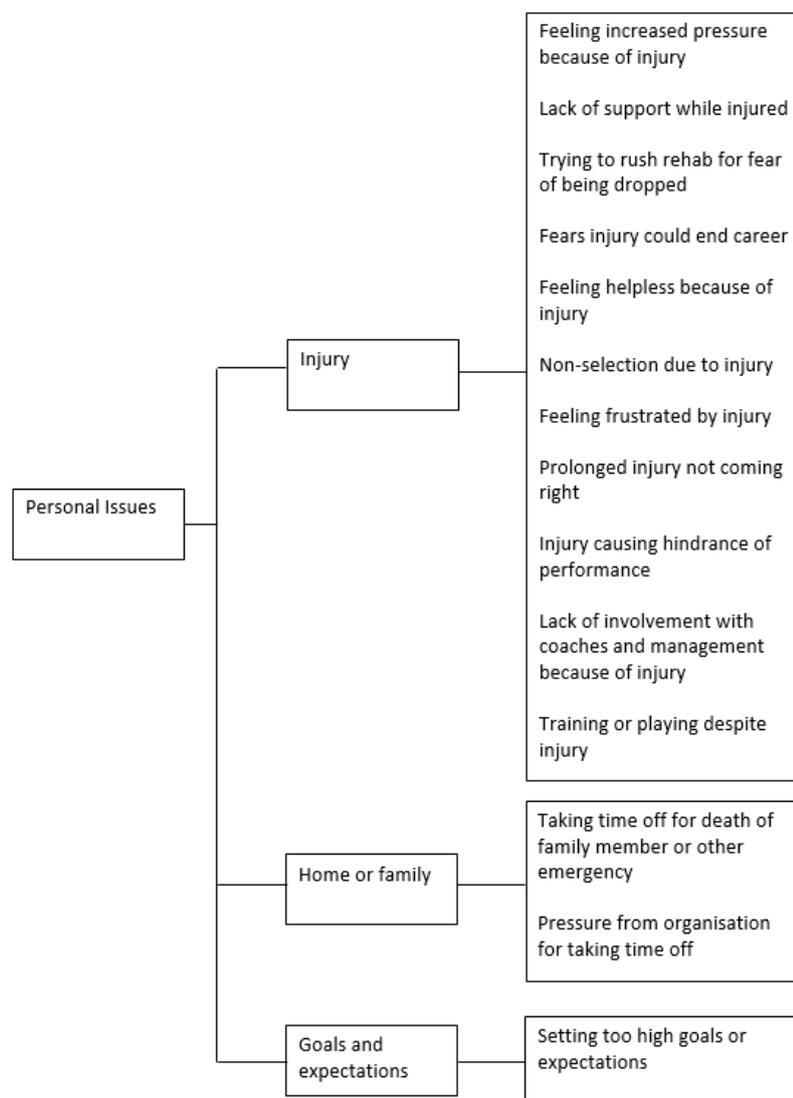


Figure 2: Organisational Stress. Personal Issues.

During the duration of one's injury, negative feelings about oneself and the position they are in are a common response. Pearson and James (1992), reported that injured sportsman often dealt with feelings of frustration and depression, as well as displaying as particularly more tense, hostile, unsure and confused as opposed to their uninjured peers. The athletes in this research were no different, and a common form of stress that they felt came from the feeling of helplessness of being unable to play or contribute for the team due to such an injury. It is not uncommon for athletes to also feel that if they were not injured and in their position, then they could have an influence on the game where the result may be more favourable for them and their team. In this excerpt from one interview, the player details his feelings surrounding missing an important game of the season, how that affected his mental state and his feeling of guilt through not being able to put his own influence on the game to get a win. He said:

*Um, probably this year playing for (name of team), so we played, in the first round we played (name of opponent) for the (name of competition) and we won that one. I hurt my shoulder, shoulder and back and we went into the next week and we focused real hard and then (name of opponent) were coming to play us again at home for the (name of competition) so, yeah that's one of the downfalls this year, I, I just feel helpless. I couldn't help my team mates and we lost that game, we lost the (name of competition) so yeah I feel really down and got really emotional talking about it because if I was playing I still think we could have the (name of competition) or have a better chance, because we have our full team.*

Another player in the next quote, details his feelings of frustration and helplessness that he experienced when watching his team play, and knowing he was unable to contribute due to the injury.

*I suppose for me... it makes it really difficult to not contribute on the field. And even that game, it was really frustrating cus I played a game since and it was the same thing knowing what my body can do and what I can see and what I can see in the game, the roles I can play in the game plan, was real frustrating because I wasn't at my full potential, so I could things happening and couldn't do things about it, physically. So that was pretty frustrating, and especially when we've had a pretty rough bit of the season since I got injured, we were tracking really good and then went off on a different tangent and we weren't performing and not being able to be on the field and contribute from a leadership point of view.*

While support from the team itself is a complex issue as the management have to focus on the healthy players who can contribute for that week as well as rehabbing the injured players through physio and doctors. An issue that arose from the interviews was that at times there was a lack of support for the players during their time of the injury. In particular, many of them spoke of feeling like they needed more help mentally to help them through their negative feelings through the time of injury. One player said:

*Just like the stress it has and effect it has on trying to rehab and you know it's a pretty dark place for us as rugby players, the support, we have lots of support when we are playing. But it's the hard times you know when you're injured when you're on your own and you have to try and get yourself out of this dark place to then start training again with your team.*

Injury is an organisational stressor that professional rugby union athletes are dealing with in New Zealand. Injuries in this instance involved

issues such as feeling helpless to contribute for the team, frustration of the injury and the lack of support received during the duration of the injury, among others. These can have a number of negative consequences for players such as feelings of guilt, frustration and even mention of being in a dark place. Injuries are considered an organisational stressor as the organisation is interacting with the individual throughout the process of the injury and the injury that is experienced most often occurs in the organisations environment. Injuries are a widely experienced organisational stress by professional rugby union athletes of New Zealand.

*Goals and Expectations Issue.* Goals and expectations in relation to personal issues rather than environmental expectations, was another source of organisational stress for these athletes, albeit not a frequent example. The main issue that arose from this particular research was setting goals that were potentially unattainable. While the setting of goals has been proven to improve performance in sport and exercise (Kyllo & Landers, 1995). Roose and Williams (2018), found that if one's goal is seen as so difficult that the goal is in many ways unobtainable, then the performance of such an individual may stop improving or even decline. The experience of one player in the research is testament to this theory. As you will see from his excerpt, the player was thinking too far ahead with his goals instead of looking at smaller more attainable goals in front of him. The result was a frustrating experience and a realisation to set not look too far ahead of himself. He said:

*So last year, there was a spot open at the (team name) for my particular position... With not getting selected as well, so I wasn't really actually getting the game time as well to put myself in front of the coaches and therefore then put my foot forward for the position. So that was, and that was quite stressful for because, there was this big opportunity, and it was a huge goal of mine, to be able to push forward and I was kind of getting held back a bit and I felt like I guess I was almost sort of looked too far ahead before not really*

*first off nailing the starting spot at Waikato and I was looking at the (team name) like f\*\*\*, I was kind of tripping over before I even got there.*

Goals and expectations are an organisational stress as it directly involves the individual's expectations or goals that they may set or have set for them in direct relation to the organisation that they are interacting with. Goals and expectations can create negative feelings for an individual if the goals or expectations that they or someone else may have for them is unrealistic or out of their reach. These goals and expectations are an organisational stress that New Zealand professional rugby players are currently faced with.

*Home or family issue.* Generally issues of home or family would not be considered as an organisational stress. However, in particular instances where there is an issue in relation to one's home or family, where the organisation must be or is involved, then this is considered to be an organisational stress. The main issue that came from this source of organisational stress was pressure from organisation for taking time off. One player detailed an event that he had to take time away for, and the pressure that was put on him to return to the environment.

*Well, you know, we talk about disruptions and with my family I (specified event) last year and the disruption of that was that I took some time off and obviously taking that time off puts pressure on the coaches and the environment obviously to learn the moves and sometimes like I say if they're supportive in that way they should like, they have the support, but obviously the disruption is rushing me back and getting me back to scratch in terms of catching up with the game plan and the game fitness as well.*

Due to the pressure the player felt about having to get back quickly to the environment, this is considered to be an organisational stress. The

player is experiencing a negative pressure and/or demand from the organisation that he is operating under. More specifically the individual involved has identified that they feel a negative interaction with the situation, which has led to an appraisal through the individuals decisions that the situation is stressful enough that it needs intervention. Home and/or family issues are an example of organisational stress that professional rugby union athletes are experiencing.

### **Leadership Issues.**

Two examples of leadership issues causing organisational stress were experienced by the professional rugby union athletes interviewed. These two being, captain issue and coaching issue. The examples of which are shown in Figure 3.

*Captain Issue.* Rugby union involves a team of 15 players of the same team on the field at once, with 8 match day reserves on the bench. Generally speaking there is one captain that is chosen to lead the team over the season, on rare occasions duties are shared between two players. Considering that there are so many individuals in the team led by one, there is little surprise that there can be feelings of animosity towards a captain, especially when things aren't going the team's way. This research found three different types of organisational stress that originated from the captain and player bond. The main two that will be highlighted are, belief that the captain acts differently in front of coaches to teammates and the captain saying one thing but doing another. The first quote demonstrates his feelings around how his relationship with his captain made him feel. He said:

*I didn't really get on with the captain, and for myself my values and the values that I try and hold and share with other people is the total opposite to what he had. Rugby obviously, we all know is a team game and there are a couple of individuals out there in rugby that*

*think they're bigger than the team you know. Like when the coaches are around they do what the coaches want to see or say what the coaches want to hear and then behind that it's just nothing you know. Yeah that sort of barred me up and I didn't really enjoy his company.*

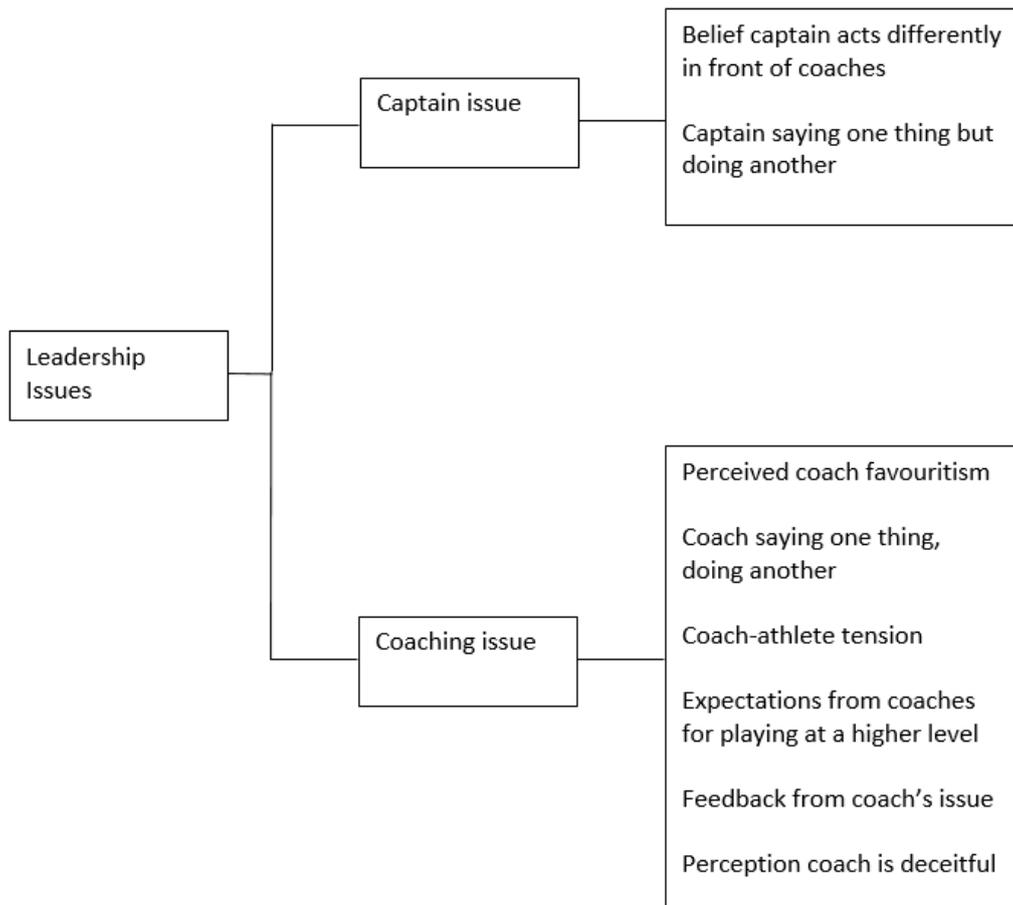


Figure 3: Organisational Stress. Leadership Issues.

Trust between a player and his captain is crucial in any team sports as a breakdown in communication or distrust that may exist between and player and another that is leading the team can have many negative consequences on a team's culture. Captain issues are an example of organisational stress because the stress is a product of the environment that the organisation is providing. The organisation has the ultimate choice on who will become the captain, and the captain has a great responsibility in the team and dealing with management within the organisation.

Therefore, the interaction extends from just a personal one, to one between the individual and the organisation. This type of organisational stress is another example of stress that is being experienced by New Zealand professional rugby union athletes.

*Coaching Issues.* Coaches play an integral role in any organisation. While not only tasked with creating a team environment and culture that fosters and develops players' abilities to create success. They also play a key role in the management processes of a team, and their effects on the team are widespread. Past research has identified coaching issues as a leading cause of organisational stress in sporting athletes (Woodman & Hardy, 2001; Hanton et al., 2005).

Individuals in this research mentioned coaching issues as a source of organisational stress in their time playing as a professional rugby union athlete. The coaching issue resulted in six causes of organisational stress in professional rugby union athletes, with the main issues being around coach-athlete tension, coach favouritism and coach saying one thing then doing another. Coach-athlete tension is a particular source of organisational stress that the professional rugby union athletes identified, such as has been identified in previous organisational stress in sport research. The relationship that exists between the coach and the performer or individual is a critical element in any sporting arena, as the coach is tasked with getting the best performance out of their players or performers (Hanton et al., 2005). The following excerpt highlights just what sort of negative feeling is associated when there is tension between a player and their particular coach. Also just how any decision that is made by the coach is then questioned for authenticity by that player that they are clashing with. The next quote details just how the tension between himself and the coach and the coaches subsequent selections for the side, left the player feeling and why he felt so negatively about the interaction.

*Then that year they ended up signing another two [position], [name of player] who had played professionally... and I thought, still good*

*to have someone like that as a mentor for me and then they signed another one [name of player] who was new to the environment, and they didn't sort of communicate that with me as well, and I was pretty pissed off when I found that out, that two players had been signed without me knowing, which I didn't mind the competition, it was just the connection with the coach and he didn't really talk to me about that.*

This quote indicates just how the connection between a coach and player can affect the individual negatively. If they are suffering in their relationship with their coach and have a bit of built up tension between them, then the player often begins to interpret more situations as stressful and the transactional nature of the exchange leads to negative responses from the individual that may not have arisen if the tension did not exist.

This feeling of tension is not the only source of stress that coaches can impact upon the players. A perceived favouritism from other coaches can also negatively impact a player's performance on the field, leading to not only organisational stress but also competitive stress. One athlete details just how his perceived unfavourable relationship with the coach and not being selected was impacting the free-flowing nature of his game. He said:

*Whereas when you feel like the coach is backing you a bit, you've got a little bit more leeway, like when I made a mistake and I had my opportunities starting and if I made a mistake I would be thinking about that right throughout the game like what its gonna look in the review and stuff.*

The player in this situation perceived that he was out of favour with the coach and that the coach had favouritism others in front of himself. The effect of this was that the opportunities that he was then getting was

impacting his performances on the field negatively and proved to be detrimental to not only his confidence, but also his playing abilities.

The impact of coaches and their relationship with the players is so fundamental in professional rugby that negative interactions can even lead to a player deciding to leave a particular team. This was the case in the situation of one player, who found the coach to not be honest in his appraisal of how much game time the player would be receiving. The player outlines the experience in the following excerpt, he said.

*Well yeah after the [team name] thing, I was still involved with the [team name]...And I found myself at [team name], I had a similar scenario with the coach coming in and saying we are going to start you this week and then I ended up on the bench and s\*\*t like that, and that was one of the main reasons I moved down here as soon as I came off contract with them, cus I moved down here and signed for two years*

The player details in this particular example how the coach saying one thing and then doing another, can lead to such a negative experience and feeling for the player, that they then decide to leave the team.

Coaching issues, as proved evident from the previous examples, create a wide range of emotions and negative outcomes of organisational stress for professional rugby union athletes. This particular issue is an example of organisational stress as it identifies the interaction between the individual and the sporting organisation that the individual operates in.

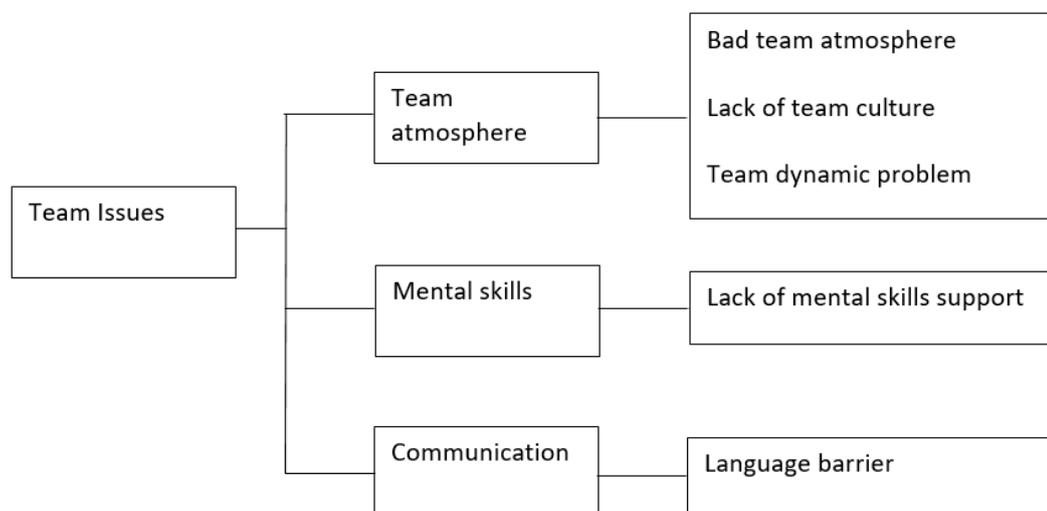
### **Team Issues**

The examples of Team issues is illustrated in figure 4. Three themes were identified from analysis these being, team atmosphere, mental skills and communication issues.

*Team Atmosphere Issue.* Players identified the overall theme of team atmosphere being a source of organisational stress in their

professional rugby union careers. Team atmosphere has been shown in previous research to be a cause of organisational stress in sports (Woodman & Hardy, 2001). The most highlighted team atmosphere issue was the atmosphere itself. As rugby union teams involve 23 match day players, plus additional squad members, the makeup of the team is vastly diverse, with a number of player coming from a number of different cultures and ethnicities. As with any situation, there is always the issue of clashing personalities between team members and even staff. One player details the struggles that are experienced when a number of players with different perspectives and values are put together in a team and the atmosphere that is created by the clashing of these values. He said:

*A lot of guys struggle with it, but they're often selfish and want more game time for a bigger profile and they don't put the needs of the team first, with some players, not all.*



*Figure 4: Organisational Stress. Team Issues*

In the players' experience, he details the struggle that is faced by players wanting more game time for selfish reasons and the effect that this can have upon the team atmosphere. Team atmosphere is an organisational stressor as it involves the wider interaction an individual experiences from being in an environment such as a professional rugby

team. Team atmosphere is an organisational stressor that is being identified and felt by professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand.

*Mental Skills Issue.* Issues that players encountered with mental skills, was an organisational stressor identified in this research. Past research in organisational stress has not identified mental skills as a particular organisational stress, as this is usually placed under the competitive stress umbrella. However, in the particular example that one individual experienced in this study, his example fell under the umbrella of organisational stress as it involved an interaction with his organisation that he was experiencing the stress from. He said:

*Probably like um, the mental skill side of it, cus they helped with the rehab and get me back to playing side, but I thought I didn't have as much support for the mental side. Just trying to be tougher and just trying to flush things out so I can get back on the field and not worry about what my team was doing yeah... Yeah maybe just with the injury guys, then you can have like a one on one session with all the mental skills. So you can just get support and advice on about what you need to do, not just focussing on how your team is going but how yourself and trying to get back to the field as quick as you can.*

In this particular example, the player details the negative interaction he encountered when injured, and how he interpreted it as being stressful because he felt he didn't receive the necessary mental skills help that the organisation can offer. Mental skills are increasingly being coached and used in the competitive side of the game, but its use in organisational stress could be more widely applied to help those suffering.

Mental skills (or lack of in this instance), is a form of organisational stress that is being encountered by professional rugby union athletes of New Zealand.

*Communication issues.* Communication is an important component for effective team building (Yukelson, 1997). Woodman & Hardy (2001, p. 228) noted that communication is important throughout the organisation so all of the members strive towards a common goal. Only one player identified communication as being an issue, from an experience playing overseas with a foreign team where members were using different languages. His experience, as detailed below, shows the frustrations that languages can have upon a team culture, and how the communication of messages was not done easily. He said:

*Um, that was pretty hard because of the language barrier, so obviously I was in a foreign country that spoke [language]...*

Communication is obviously an important component to any team. Without communication, a team cannot easily relay their ideas towards a common goal, and makes the striving for such a goal that much more difficult. This is obviously an issue that can affect the whole team (Woodman & Hardy, 2001). This is a particular example of organisational stress that is being experienced by professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand. It is an example of organisational stress as the issue of communication is a product of the environment that the individual is operating within.

There were four broad themes of organisational stress that were derived from the interviews conducted in this study. The first theme was environmental issues, which contained selection, financial and expectations issues. The second major theme was personal issues, which contained injury, home or family and goals and expectations issues. Leadership issues was the next broad theme, containing captain and coaching issues. Finally the last broad theme of organisational stress experienced by the New Zealand professional rugby union athletes was team issues, which contained issues of team atmosphere, mental skills and communication.

## Chapter Four

### Coping

This part of the chapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis on coping in the professional rugby union athletes. The analysis is presented in three different sections. Each section represents a major coping function that was identified in the thematic analysis. Under each coping function are major themes which are subsequently followed by second-order themes (otherwise identified as examples). The major coping functions that were identified were problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and maladaptive coping.

### Coping Strategy Results

#### Coping Function 1: Problem focused coping

Problem focused coping was a major function of coping that was found through the qualitative analysis in this study of professional rugby union athletes. This particular coping function was the most widely used, and also contained the most number of themes within, with a total number of 6. This coping function involved problem solving or action initiating methods that the players directly employed to alter the source of organisational stress in which they experienced.

#### *Active Coping*

Active coping is one of the problem focused methods that the professional rugby union athletes reported in using to cope with organisational stress. Active coping involves a number of active steps that are used to circumvent the stress or to alleviate the stress it causes.

Table 1. Problem Focused Coping Examples

<b>Coping Theme</b>	<b>Coping Examples</b>
Active Coping	Doing something else to help the problem Facing the problem Getting rid of the stress
Behavioural Coping	Increased effort Played with no-fear
Communication	Communication with coaches the issue Increased communication Open communication with management
Planning	Coping with the issue day-by-day Creating a plan of action Setting a goal or target Working on feedback from coaches
Seeking social support for instrumental reasons	Getting advice from fellow professional players Getting advice from friends or family Seeking advice from coaches Talking to an expert about one's feelings

Furthermore the coping method involves initiating direct action, the increasing of an individual's efforts and also the attempt to execute coping in a step by step plan. (Carvel et al., 1989, p. 268). Active coping is a particular method of problem focused coping that has been not been widely acknowledged in the sporting setting. There were four different

examples of coping that were identified in the active coping theme, the most frequently mentioned and important ones identified were taking direct action concerning the problem and doing something to help the problem. A number of participants reported that they used some form of coping method in their bid to combat organisational stress that they experienced from being a professional rugby union athlete. In this study, active coping refers to any type of strategy a player may use to directly deal with the stressor, in a bid to minimise or even eliminate such a stress. As mentioned previously, the respondents used a number of different tactics to cope with such organisational stress.

Active coping is a particular form of coping strategy that professional rugby union players can actively adopt into their own coping methods, as it effectively involves a direct engagement between behaviours which have a direct effect on the strain that is causing the stress. The use of such a method is exemplary as it allows the individual to deal with the strain or the stress head on. By directly targeting the cause of the stress, the subsequent result for professional rugby union players in New Zealand is likely to help reduce the negative stressful effects.

Taking direct action concerning the problem was the most commonly referred to method of coping strategy that was identified in the active coping theme. This form of stress relieving strategy involves actively sourcing the stress and then taking direct action towards such stress, in a way that will reduce or eliminate the organisational stress. Often the action involves working upon some sort of feedback that has been identified as an issue in one's life. Through listening to what a coach may say as to the reason why they are not being selected to play, then going away and working on it, the players often identify that they come back and perform at a better level, leading to more consistent selection in the team and the reduction of the organisational stress. One such player explains a situation in which he identified the stress of not being selected and the steps he took to rectify the situation when he received particular feedback. He said:

*I really I really wanted to be in a position where I was starting week in and week out so I thought I've got this pretty clear feedback so I'm going to go away and work on it, because I don't want to be in this position where it happens this year... I went away and worked on it through the [Competition season] and through the off season, and it probably reflected on my performances this year and to where I am right now, in terms of, I'm regularly starting.*

The issue of selection is something that was regularly identified from participants as a cause of organisational stress, the extent to which it affected their feeling within the team culture. Many individuals identified a loss of confidence or feeling of helplessness when they found themselves in such a position. By using the coping technique of actually taking direct action concerning the problem, in this example by working on specific feedback by coaches, and using proactive and beneficial methods to combat the problem, New Zealand rugby players can actually alleviate the stress that they feel surrounding such an issue.

Doing something else to help the problem is a method that was mentioned from the participants which involved them taking on a new role within the team when they couldn't fulfil their usual workplace role. This form of coping served as a benefit not only to themselves in alleviating stress but also the team. One participant describes the uncertainty that is felt when injury hits, and the feeling of not being useful to the team if he isn't a player. The participant then goes on to describe the importance of finding another role within the team, not only for the benefit of alleviating his own stress, but also in helping the team to perform better. He said:

*But I think with me personally too, it was really good as well. Because if I hadn't been involved then, I would have got pretty, would have started feeling pretty sorry for myself. Would have felt less of a contributor than I am now, like at the moment, physically I*

*can't contribute, but elsewhere and the mental side of the game I'm actually doing something to support the team as well.*

This sort of coping behaviour is a beneficial way in which professional rugby union athletes can cope with certain organisational stress.

### *Behavioural Coping*

Behavioural coping is another form of problem focused coping that these professional rugby union athletes reported in using to cope with organisational stress they have experienced in their professional playing careers. This form of coping has been cited in previous sporting research (Nicholls et al., 2005; Nicholls et al., 2006). Behavioural coping involves an individual specifically changing their behaviour in a manner which deals with the organisational stress they suffer from. Behavioural coping is placed under the problem focused coping strategy as it involves a direct step or decision in how to approach the stress/problem.

While only 2 participants in this study reported using this form of coping strategy to cope with their stress, with the spread out nature and number of differing coping strategies used by professional rugby union athletes, it still holds importance to the research and provides a unique viewpoint in coping strategies. The behavioural coping method involved two themes, increased effort and playing with no fear.

Behavioural coping is an important coping strategy that can be used by professional rugby union athletes as it helps to eliminate the weight of pressure that players may feel concerning their stress.

Playing with no fear is a coping strategy that is useful for professional rugby union athletes of New Zealand as it allows them to use cognitive appraisal to manipulate their own behavioural approach and thus coping with the organisational stress. Playing with no fear is an important coping strategy for professional rugby players to engage in, as it can be difficult to perform to the best of your ability when feeling effects of

organisational stress, such as selection. As Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan (2005) found, organisational stressors are being shown to create a greater impact on athlete performances than that of competitive stressors.

Therefore, the ability to use a method such as playing with no fear when a player is experiencing organisational stress such as feelings of unfair selection, then they can help their case in being selected in the future, rather than let the weight of expectation and pressure affect their on-field performances. One player believes that taking the mind set of playing with no fear is essential in feeling confident in his own abilities. The athlete details:

*Yeah it did, cus I just had that mentality from then on, f\*\*k if you get on play your own game. Cus s\*\*t I don't care anymore because the coaches don't care anymore, so f\*\*k I'll just play like I don't give a s\*\*t. Like if I make mistakes or whatever. Then that game he whispered in my ear you're going on at halftime and I thought f\*\*k, this is me I'm getting stuck into this... Then he put me on at halftime and I went pretty good, yeah and that was a massive confidence booster for me, because I still have the mind-set that now I don't care what he thinks and it's just totally about me now.*

Playing with the no fear attitude is a necessary coping mechanism for any rugby player as it allows them to put negative organisational stress issues behind them. The use of such a coping strategy is important as it can help the player to distance themselves from the feelings of the stress and perform to the level and ability that is their best, rather than allow the stress to impact their performances negatively.

#### *Communication*

Communication is another type of problem focused coping that was reported as being used by professional rugby union athletes in this study to cope with their organisational stress. Communication is a problem-focused coping technique that has previously been identified in coping

methods used by rugby union athletes (Nicholls et al., 2006).

Communication is a problem-focused method as it targets the stressor being experienced by the individual, through using a problem focused solution. By communicating the issue to someone else that is involved, the individual is taking active steps to influence organisational related stressors.

Communication was reported by participants in this study. The main communication issues involved communicating with coaches the issue, increasing communication and communicating with management the issue.

Communicating with coaches is a particular communication method used by the participants in this research. This involves the players openly conversing with their coaches about a particular organisational issue which they find stressful. One of the athletes interviewed in this study feels that going and seeking open communication with the coaches is important for him to understand where he stands in the team, to deal with the stress of being signed for the future. He details:

*Yeah, it was a big learning curve for me to just go and get honest feedback from the coaches and let me know where I stand. I would rather know, where I sit on the pecking order and know that i've either done really well or not and know where I stand from that. I would rather know, like that you're the fourth [particular position] we are going to sign and this is what you need to work on, and that's the approach that I have done with [team] as well before I came down here, like I asked [name of person] what he wanted me to do to be signed, so, it could of been two ways, like I could have spit the dummy and been like, nah f\*\*k this I don't want to play rugby anymore, but nah that's just not me eh*

Communicating with coaches is a particular method of coping that is useful for rugby union players to alleviate stressful organisational

pressures. Players can use this method to get a greater understanding surrounding particular organisational issues. Rugby union players engage in communication with coaches to reduce or eliminate organisational stress.

### *Planning*

Another form of problem focused coping found to be used by participants in this study is planning. Planning or coping planning, helps overcome obstacles and aids in coping with difficulties through anticipating personal risk situations and creates planned coping responses in detail (Sniehotta, Schwarzer, Scholz & Schüz, 2005). This coping theme encompasses a number of adaptive behaviours that participants engaged in to deal with the stressors they faced. Namely, creating plans of action, goal or target setting, working on feedback and coping with the issue day by day. Planning is a problem-focused coping technique as it involves the individual modifying their thoughts and behaviours to create a solution to overcome rugby related organisational challenges.

Participants from this study reported using some type of planning strategy to cope with organisational stress they feel from rugby union. Planning involves specifying and engaging in behaviours that will mitigate the effects of stress experienced by an individual.

Planning is a coping strategy that is useful for professional rugby union athletes as it helps the individuals to minimise the negative effects of stress in the cognitive appraisal stage of coping. What this signifies is that when the individual makes a readjustment in their assessment of the stressor and the use of resources to deal with such stress, it allows that individual to rethink the impact that the stressor is actually having on their interaction with their organisation and work related roles. Planning makes use of cognitive appraisal to achieve its desired outcome. The individual focus' their cognition on creating an alternative plan of action in a bid to decrease the impact of that stressor, through an action such as reframing.

Goals and targets are a type of behaviour that participants used in this research. Goals or target setting are both a type of problem focused

coping technique as it involves taking active steps to change one's behaviour to change the negative interaction of the stressor. The use of goals is a particularly positive and useful way in dealing with stress as it allows individuals to focus upon a desired outcome and creates an incentive to push themselves both physically and mentally. Goals or targets can be either long or short term, and is unique to the individual. One such participant details using a goal or target to help them deal with the stressors of injury and being unable to play. By setting goals, he says it helps to stay focused on the overall outcome, which is to come back and play. He said:

*Ah, obviously like i said, it's just a matter of doing the rehab and keeping staying focused knowing you've got a sort of target or perhaps a goal you have to go for towards, and obviously that is to get back onto the paddock*

Setting a goal or target is a useful problem focused behaviour as it focuses the rugby players minds on particular achievements they seek to achieve. This can come any many different forms, such as focusing on the time frame of injury, or perhaps goals of trying to get into a team with higher honours. Professional rugby union athletes engage in this type of coping behaviour to reduce organisational stress.

#### *Seeking social support for instrumental reasons*

Seeking social support for instrumental reasons is a form of problem focused coping that was widely used by participants in this research. Though generally considered to be an emotion focused coping strategy, it can also be a problem focused coping strategy when the individual is not seeking to uplift their feelings, rather come up with a solution to deal with coping to the stressor. Seeking social support for instrumental reasons involves advice seeking, assistance or information

(Carver et al., 1989). Seeking such support is functional in many ways and is completed by the individual making a cognitive appraisal that something is particularly stressful and requires an intervention and support from another individual to formulate a problem solving outcome. This theme comprised four sources of social support these being, advice from fellow professional players, advice from friends or family, advice from coaches or advice from an expert.

10 of 11 participants in this study reported using seeking social support for instrumental reasons to help cope with organisational stress they were suffering from. This form of coping strategy is a useful approach as it helps the individual to minimise the effects of the stressor by openly communicating their feelings and using sources of help that they know may be able to guide them in creating plans that will specifically help them to deal with the stress. By openly conversing with a number of experts or support persons in their lives, the individual is able to re-evaluate their own cognitive appraisal and change their emotions towards the stressor. Thus helping them to feel less negative effects from the stressor.

Advice from an expert was mentioned by four individuals in this study. This kind of seeking of social support involved a player seeking advice from a particular expert (usually a mental skills coach), to formulate a plan to deal with the organisational stress they were experiencing. Through seeking such advice from someone who is particularly adept or an expert in the field, the players were able to feel less demands or pressures from the stressful interaction they were having with the organisational stressor. It also allowed the individual to purposefully re-evaluate their own cognitive appraisal and use such appraisal to feel less stress. One player in the research identified feeling a negative interaction with the way he played and seeking social support from a mental skills coach to formulate a plan to deal with it. He said:

*I rang up the mental skills coach, so I just went out for a coffee with him and just told him I'm feeling this and feeling the courses of it.*

*So he gave me some formula for it, like flush it, so take it, it's like pretty similar to my injury just taking it day by day but then actually taking it play by play. So if I'm taking a lineout then just focussing on that and after that lineout focussing on my next job then next job and not just playing it from the whole game, from the first minute to the last minute. But focussing on every minute, so anything you do it has to be on the money and don't think about anything else, just focussing on one job at a time.*

Seeking social support for instrumental reasons is a problem focused behaviour as it involves the individual seeking ways in which they can actively deal with the stress. Such a coping method is an important way for professional rugby union players to deal with stress, as it uses positive ways to actively deal with the problem and helps the individual to feel less demands from the stressor because they are sharing with someone else their thoughts and feelings. Athletes in professional rugby union engage in this type of coping behaviour to reduce organisational stress.

## **Coping Function 2: Emotion focused coping**

Emotion focused coping was the second major function of coping that was found through the qualitative analysis in this study of professional rugby union athletes. This particular coping function contained 3 different themes. Emotion focused coping is a form of coping that involves reducing the negative emotional responses associated with stress.

Table 2. Emotion Focused Coping Examples

Coping Theme	Coping Example
Acceptance	Being honest with oneself Coming back, changing negative mind set and giving another go Learning to deal with the issue Taking it on the chin
Positive Interpretation	Taking a new positive perspective Thinking it's going to be alright
Social Support for Emotional Reasons	Getting emotional support from coaches Getting emotional support from family Getting emotional support from friends Getting emotional support from teammates

Acceptance. Acceptance is an emotion focused coping method that the professional rugby union athletes reported in using to cope with organisational stress. Acceptance involves an individual accepting the reality of a stressful situation, more specifically the process itself involves the willingness to experience psychological events such as thoughts, feelings and sensations, without avoiding or actively changing otherwise unchangeable events (Kishita & Shimada, 2011). As is evident from the definition of acceptance coping, the individual involved is actively using cognitive appraisal to make judgements and to choose their choice of method to cope with the stress. More specifically the use of specific use of secondary appraisal, which involves an individual evaluating coping behaviours and responses and also as to how they can employ them to deal with the stress (Carver, Scheier, Kumari Weintraub & Sarason, 1989; Miller & Mccool, 2003). This theme involved four separate sources of

coping methods, these being honesty, changing of mind and having another go, learning to deal with situation and taking it on the chin.

Acceptance was a method that was used by a few of the players in this study. The use of this method is a useful coping strategy, as it enables the player to identify that they are unable to change past behaviours or situations and lets them appraise that dwelling on such a behaviour or situation will not help them cope with the stress productively. Through using a method such as taking the situation on the chin, they are then able to focus on the future and not dwell on the impact that the organisational stress had on them and the negative effects that they felt from it.

Learning to deal with the organisational stressor was a particular source of acceptance coping that two of the players mentioned using to cope with organisational stress. One particular player used such a method to cope with the organisational stress they felt from not being selected when they felt they should be. They found that through the period of experiencing the stressor, he had to get to a point where he re-evaluated (cognitive appraisal) and accepted the position he was in to help him move on and feel less pressure or demands from the overall situation. He said:

*It's a hard one because like I know even like I'm not in a position in another guys position this year where like someone is starting like in their eyes the better player, you can't really, you just have to be brutally honest. I suppose it's the environment, I understand it's the environment we are in and that we work in where someone is where they see performing, and if you aren't performing or they think that someone is performing better than you then I suppose you just got to suck it up and deal with it eh.*

Acceptance is an emotion-focused coping method as it involves using behaviours (acceptance), to reduce the negative emotional responses associated with the stress. The use of acceptance as a coping

method for professional rugby union athletes is a positive technique that can be used as the players, through accepting behaviours and situations that have caused them stress, are able to put the negative feelings of stress behind them. Professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand engage in this particular coping behaviour to reduce their experiences of organisational stress.

*Positive Interpretation.* Positive interpretation is an emotion focused coping method that the participants of this research reported in using to cope with organisational stress. Positive interpretation, otherwise known as positive reappraisal, is a type of emotion focused coping that is aimed at managing the distress in regards to emotion, rather than dealing with the stressor itself (Carver et al., 1989). This coping theme involves two particular emotion focused behaviours that the players engaged in to cope with the organisational stressor they encountered. Namely, using a new perspective to seem more positive and thinking it's going to be alright.

Participants from this study reported in using some type of positive interpretation strategy to cope with the organisational stress they feel from rugby union. The use of positive interpretation is potentially only an effective coping method in the short term. This is because while it helps the individual to manage the emotional distress they feel from the organisational stressor, it does not actively deal with the stressor itself.

Using a new perspective to make the situation seem more positive was the most used method of positive interpretation used by the professional rugby union athletes in this research. This example of positive reinterpretation involved situations where the player felt themselves experiencing organisational stress and negative emotions from such an interaction. One player detailed his experience of positive interpretation, and using it to cope with the organisational stress experienced of not reaching a particular goal to play for a team of higher honours. Through taking time away and focusing on the privileged position that he saw himself in as playing his passion professionally, it helped him to appreciate where he was in his life. He said:

*Yeah I guess it did in a way. It took me away from the environment and let me enjoy my rugby in a way again. When you are doing something all the time it can feel like a job, whereas this shouldn't, you know you are in a pretty privileged environment so it did make me appreciate it more, because I was working on [name of type of work] 7:30am till 5 and then you come back to rugby and you enjoy it more, so it was pretty easy and it gets you excited I guess. It gives you some good perspective and um yeah it makes you appreciate what you've got sort of thing.*

Positive interpretation is an emotion focused behavioural approach, because it involves the individual reinterpreting their emotions to feel less pressure and demands from the stressor they are faced with. While this method may be effective in the short term, it is perhaps not as effective in the long term as the stressor itself is not being dealt with. Athletes in professional rugby union in New Zealand engage in this type of coping behaviour to reduce organisational stress.

*Social support for emotional reasons.* Seeking social support for emotional reasons is a form of emotion focused coping that was widely used by the individuals involved in this research. Seeking social support for emotional reasons differs from seeking social support for instrumental reasons as using social support to vent emotions or to seek sympathy for their stress does not focus on the function of the problem that seeking social support for instrumental reasons does (Carver et al., 1989). It also represents a focus on changing one's emotions over the problem solving nature of instrumental social support. While the use of such social support seeking may help to reduce some of the negative emotional effects of stress, it is generally considered to be less of a functional coping method compared to social support for instrumental reasons. This is because while speaking to someone to help cope with and vent their emotions to feel better about their situation, it isn't very constructive due to not

focussing on what can be done to improve their situation or actively deal with the stressor they are feeling pressured by. This strategy comprised of four sources. This being, emotional support from coaches, emotional support from family, emotional support from friends and emotional support from teammates.

Players commonly sought social support for emotional reasons in this study. Getting social support from family was a particular coping method that was identified from the players in the research. This kind of social support involved players venting their emotions to family members, in a bid to reduce the negative effects felt from the organisational stress. Using this sort of emotional support was aimed at trying to feel less negative pressure and demands from the stressor. Interestingly, while research has generally shown that the use of social support for emotional reasons is less effective as it does not solve the key problem (Carver et al., 1989). From the experiences from the professional rugby union athletes in this research, it proved to be quite effective. One particular player discussed the role that his family played when he went to them to vent his emotions of anger and distress at not being picked in the side for a number of weeks. Through the venting of such emotions, this player's brother highlighted what would happen if he played well and how that could make the coach feel having not selected him earlier. He described:

*But my brother said, f\*\*k its good you have said something because if he does put you on, he'll f\*\*k rip out every single thing that you did wrong, or if you play well he's gonna have to look at the good and say you played well, and now I've started the last few games and for the rest of the season... Yeah I'm pretty lucky in that I have pretty good family support and stuff, like with my brother. But f\*\*k if I didn't have that...*

Seeking social support for emotional reasons is an emotion focused behaviour as it involves the individual using the venting process to a

particular person as a way to feel less distress or negative pressure and demands from the stressor. Such a coping method is not advised as it does not actively deal with the stressor itself, and rather only helps the individual to feel better about the situation. However the experiences of these professional rugby union athletes tend to be particularly positive in helping to feel less pressure or demands from the stressor. Athletes in professional rugby union show that they engage in this type of coping behaviour in a way to reduce organisational stress.

### **Coping function 3: Maladaptive coping**

Maladaptive coping was the third major coping function that was reported in use by professional rugby union athletes for organisational stress.

Maladaptive coping is a coping behaviour which essentially does not allow the individual experiencing the stressor to do anything to adapt.

Maladaptive coping proved to be particularly popular as a way to cope with the organisational stressors. The particular themes identified in the study were alcohol disengagement, mental disengagement, behavioural disengagement and avoidance coping.

*Alcohol disengagement.* Alcohol disengagement is a maladaptive coping method that the professional rugby union athletes reported in using to cope with organisational stress. Alcohol disengagement involves the individual using alcohol as a mediating effect to remove themselves from the feelings that the stressor may put on them. The participants of this study used alcohol as a solution to forget the stress that they were feeling from their organisation. One participant used alcohol and partying as a method of coping with not being selected for a particular team. He highlights that while it can help you forget the negative feelings of stress for a short while, it is not effective in the long term as it doesn't deal with the stress. He said:

Table 3. Maladaptive Coping Examples

Coping Theme	Coping Example
Alcohol Disengagement	Using alcohol to not think about the issue
Avoidance Coping	Blocking Taking time away from rugby Walking away from the situation
Behavioural Disengagement	Bad thoughts Frustration Feeling of giving up Helplessness Retirement
Mental Disengagement	Holiday Play video games

*I was pretty pissed off and then that weekend I think I had a pretty massive bender, I didn't give a s\*\*t about, got even s\*\*t about going back to school... Like you know when you go and get on the piss with some of your mates you aren't thinking about it and you aren't seeming like it's an issue, but later on down the track you just think what was the point of that you know.*

The use of alcohol is a maladaptive coping method as it does not do anything to actively cope with the stress itself. However, the use of alcohol can allow the individual to forget about their stress for a short period of time. Alcohol disengagement is a coping strategy that professional rugby union athletes engage in.

*Mental disengagement.* Mental disengagement is another form of maladaptive coping that the professional rugby union athletes reported in

using to cope with organisational stress. Mental disengagement occurs through a variety of activities that serve to distract that individual from the stress they are encountering (Carver et al., 1989). Particular mental disengagement strategies that were identified in this study were going on holiday and playing video games.

One participant used video games as a means of disengaging from the stress they were feeling from an injury and subsequent non-selection. He identified that the purpose of purchasing and using a PlayStation was not to deal with the problem, rather to just forget or escape the stress and pressure that they were feeling at the time. He described:

*That's when I was sort of like let's go buy a PlayStation. Because they were going overseas and for however long and I was like f\*\*k it, let's just get a PlayStation... Oh I guess we weren't really trying to help ourselves or myself, we were just trying to forget about it in a way. And you know, you're just playing a game and you get into it, or you just watch some Netflix, cus you can do a lot on PlayStation these days. So it was more just to escape from rugby I guess, in the injuries I have had I've just tried to get away from it so that you know don't worry about it and then when you need to turn up, you turn up.*

Playing PlayStation is a coping strategy that professional rugby union athletes of New Zealand engage in. This particular example of a coping strategy is maladaptive as it also only temporarily helps to relieve the feelings that come with the stress.

*Behavioural disengagement.* Maladaptive coping can occur in a number of different forms and behavioural disengagement is another example of such a coping behaviour. Behavioural disengagement involves the reducing of one's effort to try and deal with the stressor, at times this can even lead to giving up in the cause. Particular behaviours associated

with behavioural disengagement includes helplessness (Carver et al., 1989).

Behavioural disengagement was the most popular maladaptive coping method that was used by the athletes in this study. Particular examples identified from the rugby union athletes included bad thoughts, frustration, giving-up, helplessness and retirement.

One player detailed the feeling of helplessness and loss of control that he experienced when he was not being selected in the team. His experience was obviously very negative, mentioning that though he had worked so hard to get where he was and feeling as if he deserved more chances, it left him in a position where he was helpless. Being unable to actively deal with the situation and use an appropriate coping method. He said:

*Oh, just you feel left out and I you just get really f\*\*\*\*d off, sorry. You get real pissed off and feel like you deserve something that you've worked hard for and then it's not in your control. So yeah you feel like, I suppose I like to feel in control, and like if you do such and such then you don't get a certain reward then yeah you feel like you're not in control*

This particular quote demonstrates the wide array of emotional feelings that professional rugby union players deal with when coping with organisational stress. The quote also demonstrates a form of maladaptive coping, as the individual using a coping strategy that does not allow for any coping ability. Helplessness is a coping strategy that professional rugby union players engage in.

*Avoidance Coping.* Avoidance coping is a particular identified coping strategy in this research, that has also been found in much extant literature (Kowalski & Crocker, 2001, Dijkstra et al., 2009, Nicholls et al., 2006). While avoidance coping could be deemed as its own form of coping

strategy, the techniques that are used in it are also examples of maladaptive coping techniques, as the avoidance strategy does not allow the individual to actually deal with the stress. Avoidance coping involves two approaches, these being behavioural avoidance which involves removing oneself from the situation, and psychological avoidance which involves cognitive approaches to disengage from a stressful situation (Krohne, 1993).

The examples of avoidance coping that was identified in this study were blocking (psychological avoidance), taking time away from the game (behavioural avoidance) and walking away from the situation (behavioural avoidance). Avoidance coping proved to be the most popular form of maladaptive coping in the research, with 9 players using some form of avoidance coping to organisational stress, as well as 14 separate identified times they used such a strategy.

Walking away from the situation, a form of behavioural avoidance, was a popular avoidance technique that the rugby players used to cope with particular situations. This avoidance technique involved the players actively avoiding the stress through actively removing themselves from the stressful situation. Thus not allowing them to actually face the stressor head on, and also not allow them to create a plan to reduce the pressure felt from the stressor. One player's experience of walking away from the situation involved a negative interaction that they had encountered with a particular staffing group. They used the coping method as they felt an overwhelming feeling of anger and disappointment at a certain situation that had arisen with the coach, and felt the only way of coping to the pressure was to walk away. He described:

*So I was like, f\*\*k this. I just kind of, well I didn't give up, but I didn't want to be there for a while, I just sort of slammed the door and walked out... I was sort of sitting there, literally said, cheers, real sarcastically and just slammed the door on the way out.*

An interesting point to note is that with many of these encounters and the rugby union players using avoidance techniques, the individuals themselves more often than not, are identifying that they know their techniques of maladaptive coping to be not the best way of coping with organisational stress. The player before explained later that if he experienced a similar situation then he would've confronted them and used a more problem focused method to deal with the situation, rather than walk away from it. He said:

*Yeah, well I guess hindsight is a good thing and being, again being older now and more comfortable in my own skin I would've been, yeah I would've probably told them to get fucked. And say no, that's not happening...Cus if you are not playing, you're not going to pick a contract up and a job, so in hindsight I definitely would've challenged the thing, his point of view and his, what they were trying to do, more than I did.*

Walking away from the situation is a coping method that professional rugby union players use in their methods to cope with stress. Walking away from the situation is a maladaptive coping method as it does not do anything to deal with the stress itself, however it may relieve the athletes feeling of pressure or demands for a short time.

Three coping strategies were identified from the interviews as to the coping strategies that were being employed by the athletes to combat the stressors they are encountering. The first major theme identified was problem focused coping, the second major theme was emotion focused problem, followed by avoidance coping. The most commonly used coping strategies employed by professional rugby union athletes was problem focused coping, followed by avoidance coping and emotion focused coping

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusions/limitations/implications**

The purpose of this research was to identify the organisational stressors and subsequent coping methods that are employed by professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand. Organisational stress has been an area of research that has been neglected for a number of years in the sporting context. This is despite findings that organisational stress can affect an athlete's performance more than competitive stress does. Uncovering the coping strategies that are employed by current professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand may help to identify the most effective coping strategies for rugby union players to use in dealing with organisational stress. The identification of the organisational stressors experienced by these players may also help rugby organisations in helping to reduce these issues experienced by their players.

This section will be split into 5 sections. The first section will give a complete review of strengths and limitations. The second section will investigate limitations of the research, while the third section will look at implications of the research. Fourthly, future research directions will be discussed and finally conclusions of research will be examined.

#### **Strengths of the research**

As research has not appeared to be conducted in New Zealand about the sources of organisational stress and subsequent coping methods employed by its professional rugby union athletes. The greatest strength of the research is that it bridges a gap between stress that is experienced in competition and stress that is experienced by an individual who is involved with their organisation. Worldwide there is an increasing desire for research to be focused upon organisational stress, rather than just competitive stress, as extant literature has shown it to hold a great impact on athlete's performances (Hanton, Fletcher & Coughlan, 2005). This research has identified causes of organisational stress that fall in line with

previous organisational stress research in sport previously conducted. Woodman & Hardy (2001), created four themes of organisational stress experienced by sporting athletes, and this research on professional rugby union athletes fell under its tutelage of broad themes. While the smaller themes and examples of experiences were different, it helps to show that there is some consistency of sporting research on organisational stressors existing.

The coping strategies that were employed by the athletes in this study were similar to coping methods in previous research identified by rugby union athletes. In the study of Nichols et al. (2006), the results identified that the players used problem focused, emotion focused and avoidance (maladaptive coping), to cope with stressors they encountered in their professional life. While the research identified that the stress those players were dealing with were more competitive than organisational, the fact that the players are using the same coping strategies shows consistency in their responses. This research is important as it creates literature previously not done on professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand and their organisational stressors they suffer from, as well as giving added insight into coping strategies that they use to combat such stress.

Another strength of this study was the use of the qualitative method. The qualitative method of research is an advantage in the exploratory nature of this research, as it allows individuals to highlight the complexity and interacting forces central to their experiences that they would likely not be able to illustrate with a quantitative based approach (Ponterotto, 2002). This study was able to not only find sources of organisational stress and subsequent coping methods that the players were dealing with, but also go deeper into the experiences of the behaviours they were exuding at such time.

## **Limitations of the research**

The first limitation of this study was that the sample was only taken from one team. The limitation of this was that it is hard to get an overall gauge of responses that are coming from New Zealand professional rugby union athletes, when only using responses that come from the one team. Responses from other teams could potentially be different to what are experienced by the professional rugby union athletes of this particular team.

Participants may also have felt pressure to present their feelings in a manner that makes them more socially desirable in the coping methods. As they may have felt negatively about presenting their coping methods that are more maladaptive because of fear of how they may appear using such techniques compared to problem focused coping methods.

As identified in Woodman & Hardy's study (2001), the nature of organisational stress is very negative in content. Therefore, the study sought out what was perceived to be negative and this does not accurately give an accurate or balanced view of the organisation as a whole.

## **Implications**

This research and its results have theoretical implications. Firstly it adds to organisational stress and coping methods research in sport overall. While also adding to literature that has previously been conducted with professional rugby union athletes on coping methods that they use. The research also supports Lazarus' (1993) theory and definition of the transactional model of stress, as it conformed into the problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and the cognitive appraisal used by individuals to assess a situation as stressful.

More importantly, this research had a number of practical implications. The overall purpose of this study was to identify organisational stress that was being experienced by professional rugby union athletes and the subsequent coping methods that they were

employing to deal with such stress. This research provides insight into firstly a number of organisational stressors these players are suffering from, and secondly the coping methods that they are using to deal with such sources of stress.

One important finding from this study was the identification of organisational stressors that are being experienced by professional rugby union athletes. The importance of this finding is that it now creates an awareness for the teams and organisations that are employing these players, and will allow them to focus on making adjustments in their approach to dealing with players and providing added support for such issues. A practical recommendation that could be implemented is for sporting organisations to speak with their individuals about the examples and subsequent risks of feeling organisational stress as an athlete. Organisations would be able to simply make the players aware of certain examples to look out for, and offer those help and advice on how to appropriately deal with such issues.

Another important finding from this study was the use of problem focused coping methods from participants. The importance of this is that it can be used to show other professional rugby union athletes successful and positive coping methods that they can employ to deal with organisational stress. This is especially important for those players who may struggle with their own strategies of coping. The use of these coping methods are constructive as they allow the players to actively minimise the stress that they are feeling, through using any one of the problem focused coping methods. For example, a player who may be struggling with the negative organisational stress of an injury, may find the process of goal setting a productive way in which to deal with such a stress.

Thirdly, another important finding was the use of emotion focused coping methods. This is important as it allows the players who may use such a coping method, to identify that the use of such coping methods is only a short term solution to the stress they are feeling. Emotion focused coping, while it can make an individual feel better, does not directly influence or reduce the stressor itself, and so is often only effective in a

short term period of time. This finding could therefore, help improve the mental health of professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand, as those who may have in the past used such a technique become aware of why the negative effects of stress they feel still linger for a prolonged time. Finally the last important finding of this research is the use of maladaptive coping methods that are being used by participants to cope with stress. Maladaptive coping methods such as the use of alcohol to combat the negative feelings of stress, as well as behavioural and mental disengagement were all identified in this study. The importance of this finding is that it highlights the ineffectiveness that this strategy has upon coping with organisational stress experienced by the professional rugby union athletes. The findings show that, using a maladaptive technique such as alcohol, or walking away from the situation is ineffective in dealing with the stress that they are under. By highlighting and showing these results, players are able to identify that their own use of these particular techniques are largely ineffective in coping with organisational stress they may be suffering from. The knowledge of all these coping strategies are hopefully going to help professional rugby union athletes to learn how to better cope with organisational stress when they encounter it, and shows the positive use of productive problem focused coping methods.

### **Future Research**

This research serves as a starting point into research of organisational stress and coping methods in professional rugby union athletes in New Zealand. Future research should look into whether the results found from this research as confirmed in a wider study that takes participants from a number of different professional teams. The exploratory and thematic analysis nature of the study also leaves the door open for a larger study that uses empirical evidence to confirm the results from this study.

Another point to highlight is that this study often only highlights negative views on the results. The results often only look at negative organisational stress that the players are experiencing, as well as the

overall picture of coping methods employed. What the study does not highlight is the players own interpretation as to how effective they believe the coping strategies to be. Future research could investigate, firstly the organisational stressors and secondly the players own opinions on how effective particular strategies are, potentially even delving into the organisations responses to such issues and how they may be helping their players.

## **Conclusion**

Most research in stress in sports has looked at competitive stress rather than organisational stress experienced by athletes. The same can also be said for coping methods that the athletes employ. Currently there is a real gap of literature on professional rugby union players of New Zealand and the examples of organisational stress and coping methods that they are employing for the stress. The aim of this study was to explore the sources of organisational stress professional rugby union players are suffering from, and identify the coping strategies they are using to deal with such stress. The current study found that professional rugby union athletes are suffering from a number of organisational stressors, more specifically environmental stress, personal stress, leadership stress and team stress. The consequent coping methods they are employing to deal with such stress is problem focused coping, emotion focused coping and maladaptive coping methods. The identification of such issues is important as it will help professional rugby union athletes to use more productive coping methods in the future to deal with organisational stress.

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## Appendix A

### Basic Information Sheet

Thank you for taking the time to be a part of this research, in sharing your experiences of disruptions/pressures you face as a professional rugby union athlete. I hope to discover positive ways in which other players can cope with such issues in the future.

Though your interview will take place in a week's time, you might like to start thinking of events or moments in your time as a professional rugby union athlete where you may have felt a disruption or pressure stemming from your organisation of employment (e.g. Waikato Rugby Union).

Though no research has been conducted specifically looking at rugby union athletes experiencing issues with their organisation which have caused feelings of stress, research in other sporting fields has suggested some areas you might want to think about:

- issues in your work environment (e.g. selection, finances, training environment & accommodation),
- personal issues (e.g. nutrition, injury & goals/expectations),
- leadership issues (e.g. coaches & coaching styles),
- team issues (e.g. team atmosphere, support network, roles & communication).

Rugby Union will obviously have its own unique work-related stressors, so you may also have some other experiences of disruptions/pressure's to talk about too.

In the coming days, if you could think of instances like these, we can speak about them more in-depth at the interview.

Please note that the findings of the research will be used both for a University of Waikato Master's thesis, and presented in a report to the WRU. Only general themes and trends of your responses will be included in any report, meaning no particular response or event shared in the interview will be shared to protect your anonymity.

Thanks for your time and consideration, I look forward to speaking with you next week.

Nick Starck

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Waikato under HREC(Health)#2017-37. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be addressed to the Secretary of the Committee, email [humanethics@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@waikato.ac.nz), postal address, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240

## Appendix B

### Participant Information Sheet

My name is Nick Starck, as a part of my postgraduate studies in Master of Applied Psychology at the University of Waikato I am undertaking a research project that will explore the disruptions/pressures that professional rugby union athletes face in relation to their job/organisation, and subsequent ways in which they cope with such issues.

While disruptions/pressures on the field (in sport) is a universally well studied area, disruptions/pressures in relation to being a professional athlete as a job is an area which is understudied, particularly in the realm of rugby union. The research I complete will go a long way in helping to identify professional players' attitudes and feelings of stress and coping and may be able to better help those cope with such issues in the future. My goal is to help those who deal with such issues to better learn how to deal and cope with such feelings of disruptions/pressures in a professional athlete environment.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour on-site in the personal development office. Should you wish to undertake the interview elsewhere for any reason we can make other arrangements of location. The interview will be voice recorded and then transcribed at a later date for further analysis of responses. At the interview I will get you to fill out a basic demographic form and a consent form, then we will start with the interview. Once the interview is finished I will transcribe and analyse the data to complete my research, your name will not be recorded or used anywhere in the research. Should you wish to obtain a copy of the transcribed text to make any amendments to any of your answers, please mark this in the consent form that will be completed at the time of the interview. Please note that this study is exploratory based, meaning that I have no preconceived ideas surrounding what I would like to discover. Rather I would like you to share with me your experiences and feelings, so

I can better understand how to help players like yourself to better cope with such identified issues in the future. This research will be used for my thesis in Organisational Psychology at the University of Waikato, as well as in a report produced for the Waikato Rugby Union. It will be publicly accessible on the University Research Commons site once completed.

Thank you for taking the time to be a part of my research.

If you find this experience stressful in anyway and feel that you may need help please do not hesitate in contacting an external service such as 'Helpline' 0800 543 354.

If you have any further questions at all before or after the research is completed then please contact myself (Nick Starck) on 0278698798 or [nickstarck3@outlook.com](mailto:nickstarck3@outlook.com)

Alternatively you can contact one of my supervisor's Maree Roche ([maree.roche@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:maree.roche@waikato.ac.nz)) & Anna Sutton ([anna.sutton@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:anna.sutton@waikato.ac.nz))

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Waikato under HREC#2017-05. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be addressed to the Secretary of the Committee, email

[humanethics@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@waikato.ac.nz), postal address, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

## Appendix C

### Consent Form

A completed form should be kept by both the researcher and the participant

Please complete the following checklist. Tick (✓) the appropriate box for each point.	Yes	No
I have read the Participant Information Sheet (or it has been read to me) and I understand it.		
I have been given sufficient time to consider whether or not to participate in this study		
I am satisfied with the answers I have been given regarding the study and I have a copy of this consent form and information sheet		
I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time (for any reason) without penalty		
I have the right to decline to participate in any part of the research activity		
I know who to contact if I have any questions about the study in general.		

I understand that this interview will be voice recorded and transcribed after the interview has been completed		
I understand that my participation in this study is confidential and that no material, which could identify me personally, will be used in any reports on this study.		
I wish to receive a copy of the findings		
I wish to view the summary report of my interview		

Declaration by participant:

I agree to participate in this research project and I understand that I may withdraw at any time. If I have any concerns about this project, I may contact the Human Research Ethics Committee (Telephone: +64 7 837 9336 Email:humanethics@waikato.ac.nz).

Participants name (Please Print):

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Signature:

Date:

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Declaration by member of the research team:

I have given a verbal explanation of the research project to the participant, and answered the participant's questions about it while also giving adequate time for their response. I believe that the participant understands the study and has given informed consent to participate.

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Researchers name (Please print):

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Signature:

Date:

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## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol

Good Morning/Afternoon. Thank you for making yourself available to be a part of my research, especially during such a busy time of your season. I look forward to hearing about your experiences as a professional rugby union athlete.

So as you know, I gave you a sheet one week ago to get you thinking about your experiences of disruptions/pressures relating to your organisation/occupation that comes with being a professional rugby union athlete.

To get us started could you please identify for an example of a cause of disruption/pressure that you have felt in your time as a professional rugby union athlete in relation to your job and in respects to your organisation?

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Are there any other examples that you can think of which cause you disruptions/pressure in relation to your organisation and work as a professional rugby union athlete?

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#### Questions for interview

- So you identified that you felt a negative interaction with the organisation from \_\_\_\_\_ issue. Could you please think about a time when \_\_\_\_\_ issue caused you to feel pressure/demands in the last year?

- What happened/caused the stress?
  - Can you describe more about the incident?
  - How long did this event last for?
  - How did you feel during the incident?
  - Can you remember what you were thinking during the incident?
- 
- So you outlined that you felt pressure from \_\_\_\_\_. What actions did you take during the incident?
    - Did you maybe; walk away from the incident, decide a new plan of action to approach the incident, ignore the problem?
    - So because of \_\_\_\_\_ issue, you \_\_\_\_\_. What was your reason for taking that approach to the incident? Was it based upon past behaviour? Was it because of a conversation you had with team mates/colleagues? Did you think that doing that would help the situation?
- 
- What happened as a result of what you did/actions you took?
    - Was the approach you took to \_\_\_\_\_ helpful in feeling less pressure/demands from \_\_\_\_\_?
    - Why do you think that doing \_\_\_\_\_, helped you to feel less strain/better about the situation?
- 
- What was the outcome of the incident?
    - How would you change (if at all) your behaviour in the future?
    - Why would you change your behaviour? (If at all).

*Repeat with each cause of stress identified by the participant.*

Thank you for being a part of and so responsive in this interview. Please remember that if you have any queries about the research you have just undertaken then you can contact me on the details I have provided.