

Article Title

Stress Impact of COVID-19 Sports Restrictions on Disabled Athletes

Article Citation

Fiorilli, G., Buonsenso, A., Davola, N., Di Martino, G., Baralla, F., Boutious, S., Centorbi, M., Calcagno, G., & di Cagno, A. (2021). Stress Impact of COVID-19 Sports Restrictions on Disabled Athletes. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(22), 12040. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182212040>

Adaptive Sport/Recreation Categories

- Adapted sports
- COVID-19
- Athletes with disabilities

Study Type: Cross-sectional study

Summary

The physical, mental, and social wellbeing benefits of adapted sports and physical activity for individuals with disabilities are well-known and have been well documented in literature. The declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions have presented many difficulties for athletes with disabilities: lack of opportunities and programs for training and competitions, and inaccessible information. The aim of the study was to provide evidence about the stress perception and emotional reactions related to sports activities' suspension during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and to determine whether the interruption of physical activity and sport could represent a potentially traumatic event for athletes with disabilities. A total of 146 participants were recruited through 'snowball' sampling (asking participants to identify/recommend other potential participants). 73 athletes with disabilities (aged 42.11 ± 13.70) and 73 athletes (aged 40.23 ± 13.73) who served as the control group, completed the self-report Impact of Event Scale—Revised (IES-R) questionnaire. The IES-R assessed the level of psychological distress and emotive reactions such as intrusion (INT), avoidance (AV) and hyperarousal (HYP) following the suspension of training and competitions. 8.22% of the disabled participants vs. 30.14% of athletes were affected by subjective distress. Multivariate analysis of variance showed significant differences in IES-R subjective distress for age, where the emerging adults (18-36 years old) had a higher level of distress than adults (37 years old and older) ($p = 0.031$). The individual sports group showed higher scores for distress than the team sports group ($p = 0.049$). Significant differences were observed where athletes had higher scores on the total score for IES-R and all the subscales compared to athletes with disabilities ($p < 0.001$). The resilience of athletes with disabilities to adverse events was suggested in this study. Engagement in sports, inducing a sense of self-efficacy, self-acceptance, and personal growth; and the experience of athletes with disabilities living with impairment and overcoming the social marginalization and structural barriers of society, could act as a buffer effect against stress due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Article Strengths

- Pertinent study during the current COVID-19 pandemic providing insight into the experience of individuals and athletes with disabilities and their participation in adapted sports with the given restrictions
- Highlights the strong resilience of individuals and athletes with disabilities
- Highlights the potential positive attributes of adapted sports for individuals with disabilities

Article Weaknesses

- No mention of potential study bias
- No mention of weaknesses and/or limitations
- ‘Snowball’ sampling may not be generalizable
- Participants were limited to those from a single country; this may limit generalizability
- Athletes with mental disabilities were excluded
- Sample involved a disproportionate number of males compared to females.
- Self-selected volunteers as participants may introduce sampling bias
- IES-R may be one measurement tool to assess stress impact but may not wholly capture the construct
- Cannot distinguish if reported outcomes on the IES-R are from the interruption of sports or from the fears of the pandemic itself.

Take Home Messages

- Athletes with disabilities expressed lower distress levels to the COVID-19 pandemic than athletes without
- Athletes involved in team sports expressed lower distress levels than athletes in individual sports
- The benefits of sports participation and lived-experience of athletes with disabilities could be contributors to their resilience to the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic

Impacts on Clinical Practice

- Participating in adapted sports provides many benefits that can build resilience to adverse events like the COVID-19 pandemic
- The lived-experience of individuals with disabilities can be a source of knowledge and strategies that can also build resilience
- Deeper interactions, communication, engagement in team sports can provide social support to cope with restrictions to participation and to alleviate distress
- Clinicians should be aware of the magnified health and socioeconomic disparities that vulnerable groups like individuals and athletes with disabilities face during times of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic