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Lived Experiences of Stress and the Coping Mechanisms of Assistant Coaches in the National Basketball Association (NBA)

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2   **National Basketball Association (NBA)**

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Abstract

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25   This study investigated the stress, stressors, coping strategies, and support interventions

26   experienced by NBA assistant coaches. Twenty male NBA assistant coaches participated in

27   semi-structured interviews regarding stress and burnout. Data analysis revealed three core

28   themes: Experienced Stressors and Burnout, Personal Coping Strategies, and Organizational

29   Support. Participants reported high stress levels, sometimes moderated by family, organizational

30   support systems, and religious faith. Unanticipated findings included stressors related to being a

31   minority coach and the fear of failure. The findings indicate a need for enhanced stress reduction,

32   coping strategy training, and systematic organizational support to help assistant coaches manage

33   stress and avoid burnout.

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35   *Key Words: Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, Stressors, Coping Strategies, Burnout,*

36   *Coach, Coaching*

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47   **Lived Experiences of Stress and the Coping Mechanisms of Assistant Coaches in the**

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50   Expectations placed upon coaches, particularly at the elite level, create stressors. Stress

51   exists when an individual perceives that the demands of a job or situation exceed their perceived

52   capabilities and resources necessary to be successful (Hjälm et al., 2007). It is the consequence

53   of a physical, chemical, or emotional challenge (a stressor) that requires the organism to adapt or

54   suffer physical or mental strain or tension. Burnout may occur when an individual cannot

55   mitigate or reduce repeated stressors or experience an extreme stress event (Kelley & Baghurst,

56   2019; Pearson & Baghurst, 2020a). Olusoga and colleagues (2019) comprehensively review the

57   literature on stress and burnout in coaching, noting that while a variety of theoretical models and

58   methodological designs have been used in the literature, stress and burnout are prevalent across

59   many coaching levels, coach demographics, and sports.

60   Stress in any vocation leads to many adverse outcomes (Baghurst, 2023; Frey, 2007;

61   Olusoga et al., 2009; Mazerolle et al., 2020; Tekano et al., 2011). In general, these can be

62   grouped into those associated with psychological (e.g., emotional exhaustion, frustration,

63   anxiety), physical (e.g., substance abuse, heart-related conditions, ulcers, weight gain),

64   societal/personal (e.g., time management, difficulty with personal relationships, work-life

65   balance), and work-related (e.g., pressure to perform, travel, staff turnover, funding). With such

66   adverse outcomes, it is important that coaches are self-aware of the stressors in their lives and

67   engage in stress-reducing processes.

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70 **Mechanisms for Coping with Stress**

71   Coping is the process by which an individual manages the demands of the person-

72 environment relationship that is appraised as stressful, as well as the emotions they generate.

73 Coping refers to "cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal

74 and/or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction" (Folkman, 1984, p. 843).

75 For example, if a coach is losing an important game, it may be perceived as stressful.

76 Consequently, negative thoughts and emotions may arise, such as feelings of anxiety and fear of

77 what might happen in the future. Coping is the process necessary to address and resolve these

78 thoughts and feelings, and it can be accomplished through learned coping mechanisms.

79   Coping mechanisms can be developed and implemented by both the individual and

80 employer/organization. Sports organizations may be interested in assisting a stressed coach, as

81 their replacement can be costly and time-consuming (Dohrmann, 2011). Examples might include

82 formal mentoring programs, which have been reported to help with personal and professional

83 success, breaking through barriers, and aiding in developing leadership skills (Christie Jr. &

84 Baghurst, 2017). Organizations should also create opportunities for the coach to spend time with

85 family to improve their work-life balance, which has been reported as one of the most significant

86 stressors for collegiate coaches (Joncheray et al., 2019; Pearson et al., 2020a). Continuing

87 education and professional development also mitigate stress; the more competent an individual

88 feels about their job, the less stress they will experience (Aldrup et al., 2017).

89   Pearson and Baghurst (2020a, 2020b) provided a variety of personal methods that can be

90 used to cope with stress, particularly for coaches. These include working with a mentor;

91 incorporating family/friends into the work environment; exercising, meditating, and getting

92 enough sleep; continuing to learn and engaging in professional development; prioritizing, setting

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93   limits, and saying "no" to opportunities; engaging in a hobby; and developing personalized

94   coping strategies (e.g., crocheting, watching a comedy, visiting a favorite place).

95   Judge et al. (2015) explored the sources of occupational stress for NCAA Division I and

96   Division III track and field coaches during their championship seasons. They reported that

97   coaches with more social support and positive experiences could better deal with occupational

98   stress. Furthermore, Altfeld and Kellmann's (2015) study on stress associated with German

99   coaches from various sports and levels found that those with lower anxiety attributes and

100   exhaustion had a superior support system compared to coaches without these support structures.

101   Time management, proper sleep, diet and conditioning, the absence of alcohol, regulated

102   downtime, and family support have all been reported to help reduce stress (Denton, 2018;

103   Woike, 2019).

104   **Stress in Elite Coaching**

105   Coaches within high-visibility professional sports are noticeable members of the larger

106   community and face job performance demands that differ from most professions (Overton, 2005;

107   Schroeder, 2010). Combined with the many roles and responsibilities associated with being a

108   coach, coaches must work within a framework emphasizing winning, which is often a critical

109   evaluation method of a coach's performance (Van Mullem, 2015). Coaches are similar to

110   athletes in that they are required to coach in a pressurized environment, make critical coaching

111   decisions, adjust to adversity, and are held to high expectations both by the executive levels of

112   the organization, the media, and the fans (Hodgson et al., 2017; Pereira, 2015; Zillgitt, 2018).

113   Unfortunately, perhaps due to accessibility, evaluation of stress and the coping strategies

114   coaches use at the highest echelons of sport are poorly understood (Thatcher & Day, 2008).

115   Nevertheless, these coaches may be the most scrutinized and evaluated in the profession, as their

116   job performance (i.e., winning or losing) faces a very public evaluation (Altfeld et al., 2015; Coy

117   & Masterson, 2007; Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Van Mullem, 2015). An emphasis on winning

118   combined with the varied but many roles and responsibilities of an elite-level coach can be

119   stress-inducing (Rundle-Thiele & Auld, 2009). Too much stress leads to burnout, and the coach

120   is replaced by being fired or quitting (Pearson & Baghurst, 2020c).

121   Studies on stress and well-being among sports coaches have gained momentum in the

122   past decade. However, this research is generally dominated by a quantitative research

123   methodology, which can be more convenient and time-efficient when evaluating high-level

124   coaches. For example, such studies have investigated strategies for maintaining confidence under

125   pressure among South African soccer coaches (Surujlal & Nguyen, 2011), stress and burnout in

126   Greek track and field coaches (Georgios & Nikolaos, 2012), burnout and perceived stress among

127   Lithuania university coaches (Malinauskas et al., 2010), and stressors of elite cricket captains in

128   England (Smith et al., 2017). Thatcher and Day's (2008) qualitative research investigated the

129   properties of 16 national-level trampolinists' stressful appraisals. Their work is underpinned by

130   Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. They confirmed the

131   necessary underlying properties in the model but also reported two additional properties: "Self

132   and Other Comparison," in which there was a comparison to another individual through a

133   physiological, psychological, or social aspect of performance, and "Inadequate Preparation"

134   whereby the individual felt unprepared for competition (p.332).

135   **Assistant Coaches and the National Basketball Association (NBA)**

136   In many ways, coaching in the NBA is unique. With just 30 teams, only a limited number

137   of assistant coaching jobs are available; those named assistant coaches are immediately pressured

138   to retain their positions. The weight of coaching responsibilities includes establishing and

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139   maintaining a positive team culture, reviewing and assessing metrics associated with each game

140   plan, allocating time for media events, participating in front-office executive meetings, juggling

141   demands from players as to playing time and positions, and negotiating with a player's agent

142   (Young, 2020).

143   Basketball coaching typically encompasses improving individual and team offensive and

144   defensive skills and overall physical conditioning. Coaches are also responsible for improving

145   their teams through player development, strategy, and in-game management. However, there is a

146   clear dissemination between a head and assistant coach. The assistant coach must be given

147   meaningful responsibilities that develop their coaching skills, motivate them, and positively

148   impact their sense of fulfillment. However, during highly competitive events, the power dynamic

149   between the head coach and the assistant coaches creates a perceived sense of feeling thwarted,

150   incompetent, and having less autonomy (Zakrajsek et al., 2019). Therefore, while an assistant

151   coach in the NBA may enjoy the rewards such a position offers, many stressors remain

152   associated with the role. These stressors and how assistant coaches in professional sports cope

153   with such stressors are largely unknown.

154   **Transactional Model of Stress and Coping**

155   This research study was conducted within Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional

156   Model of Stress and Coping. This model established that stress is characterized as an imbalance

157   between demands and resources experienced as an appraisal or evaluation of the circumstances

158   in which an individual finds themselves. According to this model, individuals continuously

159   evaluate (i.e., appraise) these stressors to assess their significance. Cognitive appraisal is an

160   evaluative process determining why and to what extent a particular transaction or series of

161   transactions between the person and the environment is stressful.

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162   The core of this model is the concept of appraisal, whereby emotions occur from the

163   evaluation of what is happening to the person (primary appraisal) and what might be done about

164   the stressful person-environment situation (secondary appraisal). These appraisals are vital for

165   how the person will cope with the situation (Chroni et al., 2019; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984;

166   Norris et al., 2017). For example, suppose an assistant basketball coach in the NBA perceives

167   that one of the players they are responsible for is underperforming. In that case, they appraise the

168   situation as a possible threat (placing their job at risk), a challenge (an opportunity to rally the

169   player), or benign (part of the long-term development of the player). After identifying the

170   stressor, the coach conducts a secondary appraisal by evaluating their resources and options.

171   They judge whether anything can be changed, such as speaking with the player or making a

172   strategic change. From this, coping strategies can be employed.

173   An individual's primary appraisal evaluates whether an event or situation is either

174   insignificant, an encouraged encounter, or a threat. A secondary appraisal results from an

175   individual's assessment of whether the environmental situation is harmful. If it is, a decision

176   must be made on how to remedy or cope with the challenging situation or threat through coping

177   strategies. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping asserts that an individual either adopts

178   a problem-focused or an emotion-focused coping style to change individual thoughts and

179   emotions to reduce these stressors.

180   **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

181   Coaches, particularly those at the elite level, are placed in environments with extreme

182   pressure that create repeated and sometimes extreme stressors. Underperformance and burnout

183   are likely to occur without coping skills and support mechanisms. Given the limited qualitative

184   research on stress and burnout within elite-level coaching, this study aimed to examine the

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185   stressors that National Basketball Association (NBA) assistant coaches experience and their

186   coping strategies. Three research questions were proposed:

187   R1: What stressors do NBA assistant coaches experience?

188   R2: What personal strategies do NBA assistant coaches employ to cope with stressors?

189   R3: What organizational support systems do NBA assistant coaches view as mechanisms to

190   manage short-term and long-term stressors?

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192   **Method**

193   **Participants**

194   Participants were selected by purposeful sampling from the assistant coaches currently

195   under contract in the NBA for at least one entire season at the time of data collection (October

196   2021 – April 2022). Participants were selected through personal contacts; the primary researcher

197   had been affiliated with the NBA since 1999 as a player and coach. Thus, participants were

198   recruited directly or through their agents. In total, 21 out of approximately 90 assistant coaches

199   in the NBA were contacted, and all but one agreed to participate.

200   Participants represented 10 of the 30 teams in the NBA. The geographical areas

201   represented included the Midwest, South, North, East, and West Coasts. Participants were, on

202   average, 43.85 years of age, with an average of 8.6 years of experience coaching professionally.

203   All participants were male and identified themselves as African-American ($n = 11$; 55%),

204   Caucasian ($n = 8$; 40%), or Hispanic ($n = 1$; 5%). Concerning education, 11 coaches had

205   completed a bachelor's degree, 8 had a master's degree, and 1 was a high school graduate.

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208   **Instruments**

209   The one-on-one semi-structured interviews used open-ended questions to gather detailed

210   replies reflecting participants' unique experiences and perceptions (Charmaz, 2014). These

211   questions were developed using previous literature on stress, response to stressors, coping, and

212   interventions. A series of questions were developed and administered as a pilot study with one

213   former assistant NBA coach. Aside from grammatical wording, no questions were altered.

214   In total, 14 open-ended questions focused on specific situations or events across four

215   broad research categories: perceived effects of stress, responses to stressors, coping strategies,

216   and interventions. These were developed from the exigent literature, and examples included the

217   following: "What kind of stresses have you experienced as a coach? Have they affected any part

218   of your professional or personal life? If so, how?" "You have mentioned that _____ is a source

219   of stress for you. How do you cope or deal with this stress? Has anyone or anything specifically

220   helped you develop the coping skill?" "Does the organization you work for provide any specific

221   methods for helping you deal with stressors that occur as part of your job?"

222   The primary researcher made every effort to maintain a non-judgmental and active

223   listening voice throughout the interactive dialog with participants, which is critical, given that the

224   interviewer had a personal connection to several of the study participants and had personal

225   experiences as an assistant coach. The overall intent of questioning was not to lead but to ask

226   probing or follow-up questions that added to the participant's responses to the pre-determined

227   questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler & Charles, 2011; Plano et al., 2015). Probing

228   questions were used to gain clarity or to follow a new thought. (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell &

229   Poth, 2017).

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Procedure

Following institutional review board approval, a pilot study was conducted to test the

efficacy of interview questions, after which 21 eligible participants or their agents were

contacted via email or phone requesting participation. Participants were informed of the study's

purpose, the benefits and risks of participation, and how data would be stored and presented

anonymously. Only one emailed participant failed to respond and agree. An informed consent

form was completed before any data collection.

Once consent had been provided, the primary researcher electronically sent the list of

questions to be asked before the interview and arranged a convenient time for the interview.

Because data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the NBA had strict

isolation protocols, each interview was conducted virtually and audio-recorded to allow for

professional transcription. Participants were allowed to decline to record their interviews, but all

gave permission.

Interviews ranged between 45 minutes ($n = 6$) to 120 minutes ($n = 14$) in duration, and

data collection took approximately five months. When all interviews were conducted, audio files

were transcribed by a professional transcription service before analysis.

Data Analysis

Positionality is based upon the interpretive/constructivist approach, as the researcher

ascribes to the notion that subjective perspectives describe and interpret what is understood

through multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, it was appropriate to explore

participants' perspectives to understand how stressors, coping strategies, and support systems

among NBA assistant coaches are perceived and acknowledged through their experiential lens

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

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254   Sound qualitative research results from a research design, data collection, and a data

255   analysis approach that relies on methods that ensure transparency and trustworthiness (Merriam

256   & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness, as acknowledged by Glesne (2016), stems from the

257   researcher's attention to the quality and rigor of the study and the variety of criteria employed to

258   determine how well the research was completed. With lengthy interview sessions of up to 120

259   minutes, this prolonged interaction provided a framework of familiarity between the researcher

260   and the coaches. Since the researcher was an insider to the NBA coaching life, it permitted a

261   unique opportunity to have a shared identity with the study sample and provide a level of

262   legitimacy and trust in conducting the research.

263   Member checking was done by contacting each participant and offering them the

264   opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracy and verification. All participants

265   declined a review, presumably because of the personal dynamic of trust between the NBA

266   assistant coaches and the primary researcher. Peer debriefing was also conducted, in which three

267   additional qualified peer researchers reviewed and assessed the transcripts, from which emerging

268   themes were discussed and agreed upon.

269   Reflexivity is another tool for critical reflection not only on behalf of the researcher but

270   also on how the participants, the setting, and the research process interact and influence each

271   other. Reflexivity reminds the researcher to consider and be aware of their influence on what is

272   being studied and how the research process affects them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the

273   current study, the primary researcher considered and was acutely aware of how the research

274   process affected him, especially regarding his position and biases as a current assistant coach.

275   Data analysis was conducted inductively using Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) four-step

276   approach: data preparation, open coding, axial coding, and theme development/refinement. Once

277   a professional service had transcribed data, transcripts were read several times by the lead

278   researcher to promote familiarization with the data. Second, the data were analyzed in

279   chronological order, and open coding was done first, where descriptive labels were assigned to

280   salient extracts of the data. Next, axial coding was performed. This was an important phase in the

281   data analysis as it facilitated the researcher in making connections between the open codes. Upon

282   completion of the axial coding, categorization was performed, which resulted in emergent

283   themes. The analysis's final phase consisted of peer debriefing, whereby themes were developed

284   and refined through critical and reflexive conversations between the research team.

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286   **Results**

287   We identified three themes from the data: Experienced Stressors and Burnout, Personal

288   Coping Strategies, and Organizational Support. Names and locations are altered for anonymity.

289   **Theme 1: Experienced Stressors and Burnout**

290   This first-order theme represents the findings on how stressors in professional sports

291   coaching were illustrated using three subthemes: direct stressors, contextual factors, and

292   interpersonal dynamics. These subthemes encompass other small categories, which will be

293   discussed next. The data presented in this fashion provides a valuable framework to group

294   themes according to their shared characteristics.

295   *Subtheme 1: Direct Stressors*

296   **Family.** The inherent pressures of coaching in the NBA and its effect on families were

297   significant factors noted in the findings. "You're away from your family. You're traveling. Sure,

298   you get lots of money, but does that really matter? Or sure, we get lots of fame, or you're on TV,

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299   but does that really matter?" said Coach S. "The family is probably the hardest one for me to

300   deal with because it's the most important one to me," stated (Coach A)

301   For those married, assistant coaches described their spouses' fear of the unknown, what

302   the future held for the family, and what sacrifices would have to be made. "Being on the road 10,

303   11, 12 days at a time; the responsibility of a wife, especially with young kids, increased the stress

304   since she tires of being the superwoman," said Coach P. Interaction with one's spouse was often

305   limited, which became stressful. According to Coach T:

306   You do your best to try to maximize the level of investment, time, interaction, and

307   presence, but it never seems to suffice, so I think that's where the stress commences. It's the

308   frustration of working as hard as you can to close that gap but knowing it's a gap that will never

309   fully be closed.

310   **Physical Health.** High workloads created physical stressors associated with sleep

311   deprivation, fatigue, and poor nutrition. For example, Coach M stated, "It's not only a lack of

312   sleep and feeling tired or sore because your back hurts from the plane ride. Or there's something

313   going on in your family. You just have to learn how to manage the physical downside the best

314   that you can." Coach P reported that "the physical stress affected my stomach and digestion,"

315   and Coach G, "I think the number one physical thing for me is fatigue. Like, on a road trip, going

316   to bed at 2-3 AM every day in different time zones. More than anything, the lack of sleep leads

317   to fatigue."

318   **Finances and Job Security.** Thoughts on financial realities and job security were mixed.

319   It became more stressful for those assistant coaches nearing the end of their contract year or early

320   in their careers. For example, Coach B stated, "If it were just me by myself, I'd probably be able

321   to handle it pretty well. But being the sole provider of our household, the financial part became

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322 stressful." An overarching sentiment was that during the beginning of their career, participants

323 were in a survival mode. One coach equated how his future was never as secure as it was for his

324 friends who were teachers, bankers, or lawyers. "The next change is always coming in the NBA,

325 so you're always wondering how that change is going to impact you in your family." (Coach Q)

326   The reality of job security was a clearly identified stressor. "I think I'm really thankful

327 that I've had a unique career and that I've been with one organization my entire coaching career.

328 But I know that that doesn't mean anything in the NBA, and that could change in a snap of the

329 fingers," said Coach R. The real impact of job security was expressed by one interviewee who

330 was terminated:

331   Getting fired clearly shows that there are no friends in the NBA. They did it with no kind

332   of hesitation or anything. They called me one day and said, "You're fired." Human

333   Resources sent me an email and said that my phone was going to be cut off at the end of

334   the day and that benefits were over on Monday. That was it. I never heard from them

335   again. You pour your heart and soul into a team, and you give them everything you've

336   got, and then one day, they say your email is going to be shut off, your phone is going to

337   be gone, and we expect the computer. And if we don't get the computer back, we're

338   going to sue you. You're done, no remorse, no nothing. It's very eye-opening to learn

339   what the league and the NBA are all about. (Coach E)

340   **Pressure to Win.** Participants reported the constant evaluation and expectation to win as

341 a stressor. "You have to be on your game from a preparation standpoint, from a mental

342 standpoint, from a physical standpoint, seven days a week for seven straight months where you

343 are continually being judged on the performance of the players," said Coach B. Coach H

344 reinforced this: "Obviously, the stress of winning and losing is probably the biggest one; the

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345 pressure to win and that one is pretty ongoing and comes with the territory of working in

346 professional sports." Coach J felt the pressure from fans and management: "Nobody ever wants

347 to be wrong, especially when you have your bosses watching, you're on TV, you got fans in the

348 stands."

349   **Burnout.** This theme is more aligned with the consequences of stressors; however, it is

350 an important feature of the data and a consequence of the stressors. Most participants did not

351 report having experienced burnout, but Coach F admitted to having experienced it without

352 knowing it at the time:

353   My first burnout was when I was coaching in the "X" league. I didn't know. I had anxiety

354   because it affected my sleep, and I had no coping mechanism because I didn't even know

355   what it was. I think burnout is a mental health issue. Yeah. I feel like I've experienced

356   burnout three different times; now, this third time, with the "Y" team.

357 Although burnout may not have been experienced by the participants in this study who were still

358 coaching, thoughts of quitting were prevalent. Coach S rationalized how he continued from

359 season to season:

360   There were times during the season when there were thoughts of quitting, but then you

361   step back and say that perhaps I can wait until the end of the year. But summer comes,

362   and you rationalize that maybe one more year is the goal. This is a continual mindset for

363   me.

364 *Subtheme 2: Wider Environmental Factors*

365   **Coaching as a Minority.** The majority (60%) of participants described themselves as a

366 minority, and there was consensus that coaching as a minority created additional stress through

367 inequity of the hiring process for both assistant and head coach. For example,

368   … when you see the disparity in the profession across all sports, of how few coaches of

369   color are in a position of leadership. If I'm in a league that's 70% black, I think that

370   figure should be somehow approached in terms of coaches, head coaches, whatever.

371   Now, that's never going to happen because you don't have black ownership." (Coach N)

372   A perception was shared that all assistant coaches, regardless of race, were held to the

373   same standard as their colleagues. However, this did not hold true regarding organizational

374   decision-making, such as advancement. "They [non-minorities] have an unfair advantage in the

375   color of their skin a lot of times. And what a head coach perceptively looks like." (Coach G)

376   Coach O supported this:

377   Absolutely. That's no secret in this league. Black coaches get treated differently, and

378   that's more of a life stressor. It's just that it may be a little more amplified within the

379   NBA just because of the sheer numbers, but that's definitely a stressor. I mean, you see it

380   every day: guys who should be head coaches in this league and don't get a sniff. (Coach

381   P)

382   Coach M took on a more candid position on opportunities for advancement.

383   So, you know it's interesting. We've always had to understand how white men, how to operate in

384   their space, and a black college-educated graduate, even with a master's degree or a doctorate,

385   will always need to know and understand how to navigate in a white man's space. I mean, we're

386   trying to get those positions and get those opportunities as well. And it gets tougher and tougher.

387   **Advancement and Promotion Opportunities.** Participants recognized that advancement

388   and promotion were inevitably part of the stress of being in a competitive professional sport.

389   However, stress was highlighted when assistant coaches were not advancing or even felt they

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390   were moving backward. "It's a stressor. Because if you're not advancing, it's a problem in our

391   profession. You're probably replaceable," said Coach F.

392   Another concern by Coach H was the worry of being pigeonholed into a specific assistant

393   coach role.

394   If you are the video coordinator, you don't want to be labeled as a video guy. If your role

395   is that of a player development coach, colleagues then view you as just the workout guy.

396   No, I'm more than just a workout guy. I'm an assistant coach.

397   Coach O stated the stressor succinctly:

398   I think the stress is knowing that there are only 30 NBA teams and there are only so many

399   assistant coaches on every team. It's very competitive, especially for those who are

400   unwilling to do some of the maybe not immoral but unethical things to move. There's

401   certainly some disappointment in not getting different opportunities.

402   *Subtheme 3: Interpersonal Dynamics*

403   **Head Coach Expectations.** The stressor of meeting the head coach's expectations was

404   mentioned throughout the interviews. Participants described working with a head coach as a

405   considerable pressure point. "Stress comes from the head coach, the person that I am responsible

406   for answering to. You feel the pressure that they want instant results from a player." (Coach I)

407   Coaches F and K also shared this view:

408   Dealing with a head coach definitely adds stress 100 times over. I'd say it's

409   maybe at the top of the list because I want to do well for him. I hate team

410   meetings. Although I know the coach is talking about the players, I feel like he's

411   talking to me because when he says so and so… well, I take it as I'm not doing

412   my job right. (Coach F)

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413   I think, at times, our coaches feel that we are not valued. Because one misstep or

414   miscue can set you back, and you may never ever get that opportunity again. You

415   get undervalued as a coach on a losing team. (Coach K)

416   **Other Assistant Coaches.** Working with other assistant coaches was described as a

417   stressor. "I've had some stress working with colleagues and other coaches, especially since not

418   every person that you work with shares the same values, morals, or ethics that you may believe

419   in." (Coach P) Coach R described how difficult it can be working with coaches who are all

420   protective of their roles and players:

421   One day, an assistant coach pulled me aside and got red in the face. He was so

422   angry. He thought I was trying to make them [his players] look bad in front of the

423   head coach. He was kind of ripping into me… I sat on that for a bit before

424   figuring out the best way to apologize and to mend the relationship. But I always

425   felt you never really fully go back from when someone is screaming and red-in-

426   the-face angry, and you realize you kind of messed up. So, that would be the most

427   stressful part I've had with other coaches.

428   **Coach-Player Communication**. Some participants reported being comfortable

429   developing and sustaining positive player relationships, while others expressed that player

430   communication was an uncomfortable stressor. For example, Coach A reported, "There are

431   moments when the pressure mounts when a player that you're working with isn't performing to

432   the best of their ability over a number of games. You begin to put yourself under the microscope

433   and ask why you can't get through to him."

434   Conflict arises when the head coach expects a certain level of performance that the player

435   does not affirm; the assistant coach must then intervene between the head coach and the player.

19

436 Coach E found that differences in opinion between the player and head coach could be stressful

437 because the player could not understand that "What a player thinks is beneficial to him may not

438 be beneficial to the team." This was supported by Coach H, who stated that "… dealing,

439 especially with a lot of young players, guys don't always want to hear or see what they aren't

440 doing well."

441   I have to deal with players who view themselves as their own man, and it's my

442   responsibility to point out their weaknesses and help them develop their skill sets. Young

443   players don't always want to hear my instructions, and that results in stress for me.

444   (Coach Q)

445 **Theme 2: Personal Coping Strategies**

446   Coaches reported using a variety of coping and support systems to enable them to

447 moderate and reduce experienced stressors. These are presented in subthemes of Proactive

448 Strategies, Relational Support, and Personal Beliefs.

449 *Subtheme 1: Proactive Strategies*

450   **Organization and Preparation.** An emphasis on being organized and prepared was

451 based upon a coach's time management for processing game floor defenses/offenses and

452 analytics. "I tried to be organized, thorough, and detailed, so that helps me eliminate stress,"

453 stated Coach B. For others, it was a matter of coming to terms with what an assistant coach could

454 control. Coach H elaborated, "I try to cope with my preparedness. I always want to feel like I'm

455 prepared going in so that I won't regret anything coming out. The losses suck, but you try to

456 celebrate the wins to help maintain your balance."

457   **Physical and Mental Health.** Taking care of oneself was an important stress-coping

458 strategy. Coach T's coping strategy was journaling because it "took the stress away" and "helped

20

459   me tremendously." Coach P used multiple methods, "I use exercise and breathing techniques to

460   reduce the stressors around me. The more you can put yourself in the state of "Let me relax," I

461   can reduce the physical stress that I feel through competition." Coach F used a variety of

462   methods, from medication to meditation, noting the dangers of alcohol as a negative form of

463   coping with stress:

464   I use prescription medication that is working for me now. I also meditate for 30 or 40

465   minutes a day because it's very important to me. Once you learn how to do it, it washes

466   all the negative thoughts, the anxiety, the self-doubt and makes you calm. It makes you

467   think more clearly. I turned to alcohol to cope with some of my stress. It was a form of

468   self-medicating that resulted from my anxiety. Exercise also was an important way for

469   me to cope with my anxiety. Drugs and alcohol put me in so many dangerous situations. I

470   meditate every day, and the meditation absolutely helps me, but it's a lot more work.

471   (Coach F)

472   Of note, the interview process made some aware of the need to incorporate physical and

473   mental coping mechanisms into their daily life. Coaches J and H elaborated:

474   I really don't cope well, to be honest with you. When we get on the plane, I eat a lot, and

475   I think that's a bad one. I don't have an answer for you, to be honest. I don't have a

476   release that I know of. I know that eating is probably a release. My diet is right on point,

477   and when I'm working, it's great. I think probably after doing this interview, what I'm

478   realizing is that I don't have one, and I think that's a problem. It's something that I'm

479   realizing now more and more as we're talking.

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21

482 ***Subtheme 2: Relational Support***

483 **Family Dynamics.** The time and energy commitment to coaching in the NBA and its

484 inherent pressures upon families was a clear factor noted in the findings. However, the sample

485 acknowledged that finding the appropriate coping strategies to work through family dynamics

486 depended upon the connection between themselves and their spouses via communication,

487 whether in person, by telephone, or electronically.

488 In terms of coping, I think it's communication. That's what I'm learning. I think I need to

489 be really honest with my wife in terms of what the expectations are of work, and she

490 appears to be becoming better at just saying, "Okay, well, that is what you have to do for

491 work." She says that I'm very present when I'm home with my kids, and that makes a big

492 difference as a coping mechanism. (Coach I)

493

494 It's my wife and family; in regard to our relationships and the challenges around my wife,

495 I am wondering if this is a good occupation for me. This job is not conducive to marriage

496 or being a father. It just isn't. My coping mechanism is a continual focus on family needs

497 and expectations that I can fulfill. (Coach E)

498 The most frequent source of support was a coach's spouse and family. The commentary

499 affirmed that their spouses were the people who best knew their struggles, pressure, and

500 stressors. "But I will say, first and foremost, my wife and my family. Because even though they

501 may not have the complete understanding of who it is I'm around every day, they are the ones

502 that know me the best," said Coach A. "Certainly, my wife is the primary source of support, and

503 my son is a great source of support also. I also think my extended family, who I really enjoy

504 spending time with but seldom get to," stated Coach T.

22

505   **Head Coach and Colleagues.** Having the head coach's support was a key finding.

506   Participants reported them as crucial in being someone they could confide in, trust in, and

507   receive candid, constructive feedback. These relationships between the head coach and assistant

508   coach were built upon the commonality of the game's pressures, how to adjust to these pressures,

509   and how to cope with the emotions of winning and losing. "I think having a head coach that

510   believes in you, to me, was my biggest support," said Coach R. "Well, I've been blessed to have

511   the most influential men in my life being head coaches. I try to talk to them as much as possible

512   and just try to be as transparent as I can with them," stated Coach L.

513   Although head coaches could be perceived as a stressor, participants also

514   recognized that the right coach could be a supporting mechanism.

515   I've leaned on with any questions I had or how to handle this situation, that situation. So,

516   I've been very fortunate to be able to reach out to him and share a special relationship

517   with him. I would say basketball-wise, him. I would say he is the number one go-to guy if

518   I have some questions. (Coach Q)

519   Participants also relied upon their fellow assistant coaching mentors and colleagues in the

520   league. It resulted from the advice and counsel of these mentors who are or have previously

521   coped with the pressures of the competition in the NBA. "A few veteran coaches like yourself

522   [primary researcher] who have been in the industry for a long time and will provide good advice

523   in all things. Guys with wisdom and guys that have been through it before." (Coach S) Coach M

524   also emphasized the importance of talking to other veteran coaches:

525   I have a few people that really helped me, I guess, with a lot of it [stress]. One is actually

526   another coach with whom we share different stories, and we talk about different things.

527   We laugh and joke about all types of stuff, but there's a level of understanding to begin

23

528   with. So, a lot of things don't have to be explained, and it probably makes it a little bit

529   easier to communicate freely because it's not foreign. You talk to somebody else who has

530   to deal with the same exact thing.

531   **Relationships with Other Minority Assistant Coaches.** Among the findings gleaned

532 from the interviews with the minority assistant coaches was how communication with other

533 minority colleagues who have experienced similar issues served as a coping mechanism. For

534 example, Coach G stated that:

535   If you'd reach out and talk to some other people. So that's definitely a help for me in

536   terms of a coping mechanism. And I think our industry is interesting because there's so

537   many black athletes and it's so predominantly black in terms of the athletes that I think

538   there's actually some strength in that too and some comfort in that as well, for me

539   anyway.

540

541 Some participants were cognizant of being mentors to younger coaches and players of color.

542 Coach O explained:

543   Although it may not be favorable in terms of how we're treated, you try to help the next

544   brother. I try to cope with it in that way; paying it forward, I think, is the first way. The

545   second way, like I started with, you've just got to try to be better.

546 *Subtheme 3: Personal Beliefs*

547   **Spiritual and Faith-Based.** An unexpected set of findings regarding coping strategies

548 stated by almost half of the assistant coaches was their spiritual faith. This finding did not

549 emerge from a specific interview question focusing on a coping strategy aligned with religion or

550 faith but arose serendipitously. "For me, one thing is trying to lean more on your spiritual side. I

551   know that's not the same for everyone, but I try to lean more on spiritual values and upbringing.

552   It provides some relief during difficult games," said Coach T. This was reiterated by Coach E,

553   "Faith. Just believing... I mean, it's not blind optimism. It really is faith. So, I think my faith is

554   my first coping mechanism." In Coach J's words:

555   I'll start with my faith. Whenever I feel the stresses of work, I always try to reflect on my

556   faith and say, "Well, what could the alternative be?" Then, I tend to appreciate the

557   blessings that I have. It's a blessing to be under pressure, to be relied upon, to have

558   responsibilities. So, I think my faith is my first coping mechanism.

559   **Theme 3: Organizational Support Systems**

560   No clear set of results identified the team's executive organization as a stressor or source

561   of coping. Winning or losing was primarily placed upon the shoulders of the head coach by the

562   executive organization and not necessarily the assistant coach. Although the team's executives

563   were the final arbiters in drafting players, it became primarily an assistant coach's responsibility

564   for their development. Participants questioned whether or not the team executive's expectations

565   were realistic with this player. There was an underlying belief that because top management had

566   drafted this player, and he did not perform to their level of expectation, the blame fell mainly on

567   the assistant coach for their failure to develop.

568   *Subtheme 1: Team Executive's Expectations of Assistant Coaches*

569   Team executives decide on an assistant coach's job security, which can be stressful. One

570   seasoned assistant coach (Coach A) expressed that his long-standing relationship with team

571   executives was never a stressful experience for him. "I remember when Coach X got fired. That

572   was the first time during my time that a head coach was terminated. But the front office was

573   great in communicating to me about my future."

25

574   Others found that front office personnel could be stressful. For example, Coach O had

575 worked with seven different NBA teams, commented that:

576   When the front office is not aligned with the coaching staff, there certainly is stress

577   because you don't feel like everybody's pulling in the same direction. So, I've been

578   fortunate to be in a situation here in city "X" where I feel like everybody's pulling in the

579   same direction, and that's definitely a positive. But, when everybody's not, there's

580   definitely some stress with that because you feel like people don't have your back.

581   Assistant coaches emphasized the importance of communication and transparency

582 between themselves and the team executives.

583   I just try to open up the lines of communication as much as possible with management.

584   And sometimes, if the head coach and management are really butting heads, it's difficult

585   because if the head coach sees you talking to management, sometimes they get paranoid

586   and things like that, too. There's always a fine line, but I think communication is the best.

587   (Coach B)

Subtheme 2: Team Psychologists

589   The data collected from this discussion on team organizational support varied across the

590 interviews. However, the role of a team psychologist or sports psychologist was one that many

591 participants had mixed feelings about. Coach A recognized the support in his organization, but it

592 was not always accessible.

593   I think they [organization] have psychologists onboard that we can talk to. I know they

594   have seminars every week that we get the invites for, that usually we're traveling, that

595   we're not able to make necessarily. But they do provide those types of outlets. They have

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596   a bunch of round table discussions and different things on various topics that are going

597   on. So, I think they do a really good job of having that stuff accessible to us.

598   Others were ambivalent about the resource or did not view the organization as supportive

599 of coaches' mental well-being. According to Coach G, "I don't think the organization is very

600 effective in helping me deal with stressors, to be honest with you." Coach S reinforced the desire

601 to have regular access to mental health support services:

602   One thing that I really think our organization needs, which I've even talked about with

603   people, is someone who is onsite every day. That can be a mental health and mental

604   wellness coach. We have a person in that role, but they don't travel and are basically

605   remote. They pop up once every two months, which I feel is just backward, especially in

606   today's time and given COVID-19 and all the stresses that can happen with social

607   injustices at this point. But I really think that needs to be a standard across the league and

608   mandatory, as someone in that role travels with every team.

609 ***Subtheme 3: Team Psychologists as a Minority Coach***

610   Many minority coaches expressed a distrust of organizational psychologists. This was

611 framed from their perspective of the organization's mental health experts not understanding the

612 unique stressors that minority coaches experienced. The data collected from this discussion

613 varied significantly across the interviews, but the dominant finding centered upon a team

614 psychologist's availability or lack thereof. Consider the following excerpts from minority

615 coaches:

616   I don't think that they are aware of the stressors that we go through. There are people

617   there, in theory. But I'm not sure they necessarily fit the mold of people who could bring

618   that relief to us. Especially when they can't relate to what we're going through. Well, for

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619   the simple fact that, first of all, their background. They might have the education; they

620   might have the answers in theory. But I don't know that they have the pulse of what it

621   feels like to be a, I will just be candid, a black coach whose role is basically, at times, to

622   be the watchman or watchdog for black players and having to stay within those lines and

623   don't venture out too far. When you are ambitious and have big dreams, you feel like, at

624   times, you are just suffocating, and you're not quite sure that a white team psychologist

625   would understand what you go through or what your fight is. And it's not their fault.

626   (Coach D)

627

628   I think this may be off-subject, but I think that question alludes to another topic: there are

629   more people of color in positions where they can provide that support. Because I think

630   that those who are unable to relate it's not their fault. They just don't know how to

631   provide support for that. And having people in place who have a better understanding of

632   that could be beneficial. (Coach R)

633

634   **Discussion**

635   This study sought to describe and better understand the experienced factors of stress,

636 stressors, coping strategies, and support interventions of elite assistant coaches in the National

637 Basketball Association (NBA). The original three research questions guide this discussion:

638   R1: What stressors do NBA assistant coaches experience?

639   R2: What personal strategies do NBA assistant coaches employ to cope with stressors?

640   R3: What organizational support systems do NBA assistant coaches view as mechanisms

641   to manage short-term and long-term stressors?

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642

643   First, stressors, specifically in sports, can be categorized into competitive and

organizational stressors, including "conflicts, pressure, and expectations, managing the

competition environments, organizational management, sacrificing personal time, and isolation"

(Schaffran et al., 2016, p.121). The NBA assistant coaches in this study reported experiencing

high levels of stress that were sometimes moderated by utilizing personal and organizational

support systems. Findings support much of the exigent literature, specifically elite-level coaches'

experience of significant stress (Olusoga et al., 2019). Various coping strategies mitigate that

stress, but the organization was found to be either a stress contributor or a reducer. Given the

scope of our results, we discuss the findings using the four features of the model (Lazarus &

Folkman, 1984) that are new to the stress and burnout literature and provide recommendations

for coaches and sports organizations.

654   In terms of stressors, participants reported that the demands of their jobs negatively

affected their physical health and well-being. A lack of sleep, exercise, and poor eating habits

were all reported as a stress response to the job. While the finding is not necessarily surprising,

little research shows that coaches eat and sleep well or exercise regularly. Stokanoski et al.

(2019) noted that even a single night of sleep deprivation may result in poor decision-making,

impacting vigilance and motor skills. Lastella and colleagues (2017) measured a coach's sleep

quantity and quality compared to his athletes, finding that the coach obtained less sleep with

poorer quality than his athletes, markedly so before significant games.

662   In the stress and coping literature, strategies are typically viewed as either problem- or

emotion-focused (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Problem-focused coping strategies are designed to

change the situation itself. In contrast, emotion-focused coping strategies are intended to try and

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665   address the emotional distress that is associated with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

666   Coaches in the present study reported employing emotion-focused coping strategies to counter

667   these health challenges through various methods, such as exercising, meditation, and relaxation

668   techniques. These strategies were intentional and intended to alleviate the inherent stress of being

669   an assistant NBA coach. Interestingly, some participants recognized the need for better self-care

670   by participating in the study. This suggests that coaches may need to be prompted or educated on

671   the importance of maintaining proper physical and mental well-being. This suggests that some

672   coaches will enviably have more robust emotion-focused strategies. Therefore, for some coaches,

673   undertaking more training provisions (e.g., mental health and self-care) may improve the overall

674   impact of the effectiveness of their emotion-focused strategies. Equally importantly,

675   organizations could provide opportunities for professional development or support personnel to

676   aid in these areas. For example, while professional athletes may have access to mental health

677   professionals, coaches could also be provided with such services.

678   The pressure to perform well was a continual stressor for all coaches. Although

679   participants enjoyed the financial benefits of being an assistant coach in a professional sport, the

680   shadow of potentially being fired at any point and the fear of never making the step to head

681   coach was stressful. The financial compensation for coaches can be viewed as a positive

682   opportunity that, to some degree, offsets the stress of the job. However, the uncertainty of job

683   security combined with club owners' or executive management's expectations clearly threatens

684   their position (i.e., a primary appraisal). One assistant coach who worked with seven different

685   NBA teams commented that when the front office is not aligned with the outcomes of the

686   coaching staff, stress is significant and is personalized to the feeling that team executives did not

687   back them. The misalignment between coaches and front offices can be viewed as a primary

688   appraisal and potential threat for coaches as the power of who is hired and fired often sits with

689   management.

690   It is unlikely that any strategy (problem or emotion-focused) will completely alleviate the

691   fear of losing a job or never getting that promotion. However, head coaches and organizations

692   could instill processes to help. For example, regular performance reviews would provide

693   feedback to the assistant coach on job performance. Organizations may offer educational

694   opportunities, such as coaching retreats, monthly training, or formal mentorship programs, that

695   not only improve the assistant coach in their current situation but train and prepare them for the

696   next step in their career.

697   Second, several coaches mentioned that their spiritual faith served as a personal means of

698   coping with the rigors of their job (i.e., an emotion-focused coping strategy). This was

699   unanticipated, as it was not a pre-determined question and arose organically in the discussion.

700   There is plenty of literature to support coaches' inclusion of their faith within their coaching

701   practices (e.g., Duncan, 2012). For example, Carver et al. (1989) included religion in a survey

702   under the heading of emotion-focused coping; in practical terms, organizations and head coaches

703   should consider how they can support their assistant coaches' spiritual needs, from setting time

704   apart to providing a quiet location. This could be viewed as a problem-focused coping strategy

705   implemented by an organization rather than an individual. For example, while sometimes

706   marginalized in professional sports (Whitmore, 2021), sports chaplaincy programs may serve

707   this role.

708   Perhaps the most illuminating finding within this study was the reported stress and

709   coping mechanisms derived from being a minority assistant coach. Minority participants

710   comprised 60% of the sample, and the general agreement was that being hired and promoted was

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711   more difficult and unlikely. Participants referenced the inequity between a professional sport that

712   is predominantly black, where the leadership of the league and head coaches are primarily white.

713   Grenardo (2022) suggested that people typically hire people like them; a white owner is most

714   likely to hire a white coach. Schroffel and Magee (2012) reported that NBA players who were

715   the same race as the coach played more minutes per game. Thus, there is research that suggests

716   bias within professional sports.

717   There was also a reservation among minority participants about sharing or working with

718   team psychologists. This was an unexpected finding; participants suggested that there was a

719   disconnect between their experiences as minorities and professional coaches and the experiences

720   of organizational psychologists. Previous research indicates that self-identified minorities are

721   generally less willing to engage with mental health professionals compared to non-minority

722   groups. Several factors contribute to this, including stigma, lack of culturally competent care,

723   and systemic barriers. For example, a systematic review found that stigma plays a significant role

724   in hindering minorities from seeking mental health services. This includes both public stigma

725   and internalized stigma, where individuals perceive mental health care negatively within their

726   community or internalize negative stereotypes about mental illness (Corrigan, 2004).

727   Additionally, cultural norms and preferences, such as seeking help from family or friends instead

728   of professionals, are common in collectivistic cultures, further decreasing engagement with

729   mental health services (Bruns et al., 2015). This finding is significant because by being less

730   willing to engage with team psychologists, some minority coaches are, in essence, reducing their

731   available emotion-focused strategies.

732   Third, and from a broader organizational standpoint, as it pertains to professional

733   basketball, the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Basketball Coaches

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734   Association (NBCA) should consider the development of minority-based support organizations

735   or mentorship programs that aid in addressing the concerns expressed by this sample of coaches.

736   This would be a valuable organizational supportive system that could help coaches to manage

737   stressors. In particular, Black or women coaches might benefit from formal programs. Although

738   some efforts have been made in this area, such as the Coaches Equality Initiative between the

739   NBA and NBCA (NBA, n.d.), clearly, there is more work to be done.

740   **Limitations & Future Research**

741   Findings should be considered in light of the study's limitations, which provide

742   opportunities for future research. First, although every attempt was made to conduct this study

743   without personal or knowledge biases, the primary researcher was an assistant coach in the NBA

744   at the time of data collection. This provided opportunities for unique access to participants but

745   may have influenced responses somehow. For example, a participant may have been reticent to

746   share something personal, knowing that a colleague at the same professional level would have

747   this knowledge. Second, participants were assistant coaches in the NBA. Findings may not

748   translate to assistant coaches in other sports or levels. Third, interviews were collected through

749   video technology. Although this was necessary during COVID-19 restrictions, face-to-face or

750   even focus group data collection may have yielded richer responses.

751

752   **Summary**

753   This study sought to describe and better understand the factors of stress, stressors, coping

754   strategies, and support interventions experienced by elite assistant coaches in the NBA. This

755   unique group of professional coaches highlighted the very real stressors of their position that

756   were sometimes buffered by coping strategies that they, not the organization, developed.

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757   Findings indicate a clear need for greater stress reduction and coping training for coaches at the

758   professional level. Head coaches and organizations need to intentionally build support systems,

759   whether formal or informal, that better support the assistant coaches within their program. This is

760   particularly salient for minority assistant coaches. Failure to do so will likely result in continued

761   data such as presented here: assistant coaches experiencing significant stressors, struggling to

762   mitigate them, and fearing burnout. Future research should consider measuring the effects of

763   support systems for assistant coaches and comparing the experiences of stress and burnout of

764   assistant coaches to head coaches.

765

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