

# Mental Fatigue in Sports: Causes, Effects, and Coping Strategies – A Review Study

Congyuxin, Yukaihao, Shamsularffin Samsudin

Faculty of Educational Studies Universiti Putra Malaysia 43400 Upm Serdang Selangor

Email: gs66515@student.upm.edu.my, shamariffin@upm.edu.my

Corresponding Author Email: gs59370@student.upm.edu.my

Faizal Bin Abd Manaf

National Defence University of Malaysia

Email: faizalmanaf@upnm.edu.my

Mohd Aswad Ramlan

Faculty of Forestry and Environment Universiti Putra Malaysia 43400 UPM Serdang Selangor

Email: m.aswad@upm.edu.my

Noor Hamzani Farizan

National Defence University of Malaysia

Email: noorhamzani@upnm.edu.my

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## Abstract

This review study systematically analyzes the causes, effects, and coping strategies of psychological fatigue in sports, utilizing literature research and other methodologies. Psychological fatigue, characterized by a decline in mental function, often arises when individuals confront internal and external pressures, manifesting changes in emotions, cognition, motivation, and physiological dimensions. Through an in-depth exploration of psychological fatigue, this paper identifies its close associations with athletes' motivation, stress responses, proprioception, and attention. To effectively address psychological fatigue, various recovery methods are proposed, including cognitive-behavioral techniques, relaxation training, and psychological interventions. These findings hold significant theoretical and practical implications for enhancing sports training, improving athletes' competitive performance, and promoting overall physical and mental well-being.

**Keyword:** Psychological Fatigue, Factors Influencing, Recovery Methods, Sports Domain

## Concept and Introduction of Psychological Fatigue

Mental fatigue is a psychological phenomenon prevalent in contemporary society, stemming from chronic mental stress and emotional burden, with far-reaching effects on an individual's

physical and mental health and quality of life (Smith et al., 2018). This paper explores the concept of psychological fatigue, its underlying causes, influencing factors, coping strategies, and how to effectively manage it to improve an individual's mental health and quality of life. Firstly, psychological fatigue refers to exhaustion and discomfort due to prolonged mental stress and emotional strain (Hobfoll, 1989). In today's competitive and fast-paced social environment, individuals often face various sources of stress, such as work pressure, academic demands, family responsibilities, and interpersonal problems, which accumulate over time and lead to psychological fatigue. Psychological fatigue usually manifests itself in various ways, including emotional, cognitive, motivational, and physiological, adversely affecting an individual's physical and mental health (Lee et al., 2020).

Secondly, the occurrence of psychological fatigue is closely related to a variety of factors. Work pressure, academic demands, relationship problems, and family responsibilities are the leading causes of psychological fatigue. In addition, individual characteristics, lifestyle factors, and coping abilities also affect an individual's ability to cope with and withstand psychological stress, which in turn affects the occurrence and severity of psychological fatigue (Bianchi et al., 2015).

Effective management of psychological fatigue is critical to an individual's mental health and quality of life. Individuals should take appropriate measures according to their situation to maintain psychological balance and health, enhance stress resilience, and prevent psychological fatigue from negatively affecting their physical and mental health. At the same time, society should strengthen its attention to and support mental health, promote the development of mental health education and services, and provide individuals with more psychological support and assistance to jointly promote society's mental health and development (Bianchi et al., 2017).

In conclusion, mental fatigue is a prevalent psychological phenomenon in contemporary society, with significant implications for individuals and society. Mental fatigue is also essential in sports, as it may adversely affect athletes' performance, training outcomes, and physical and mental health. Effective management of psychological fatigue and enhancement of individual mental health is an essential task in current mental health work and an important guarantee for the harmonious and stable development of society (Smith et al., 2020).

## **Causes of Mental Fatigue**

### **Training and Competition Stress**

Training pressure is a significant factor contributing to psychological fatigue in sports, as athletes often experience various forms of pressure during training. In addition to training volume and intensity, training goals and expectations, as well as time pressure, competition pressure also plays a crucial role (Raglin, 2001). In team sports, athletes may face competition pressure from coaches or teammates, leading to nervousness and anxiety. Furthermore, learning new techniques and tactics may also increase training pressure, as they require time and effort to master, potentially causing anxiety and unease among athletes (Jones et al., 2009). Lastly, adaptability pressure may influence training pressure as well. When training environments or conditions change, athletes must adapt to new situations and demands, which may increase their psychological burden (Smith et al., 1995). Therefore, understanding and managing these different forms of training pressure is essential for alleviating athletes' psychological fatigue. By implementing effective coping strategies such as developing realistic training plans, providing psychological support, and fostering a positive team atmosphere,

athletes can better cope with training pressure, enhancing their psychological resilience and adaptability.

### **Coping with Setbacks and Self-demand**

When athletes encounter setbacks, they may experience an increase in psychological fatigue. Setbacks can arise from failures, injuries, missed opportunities, or other unfavorable circumstances (Smith & Ptacek, 2005). Failure experiences are an inevitable part of athletes' growth processes. However, experiencing consecutive or particularly significant failure may negatively impact their confidence and motivation, increasing the risk of psychological fatigue (Hanton & Connaughton, 2002). Injuries can lead to long-term training interruptions and recovery periods, which may increase psychological pressure and fatigue (Johnson & Ivarsson, 2011). Missing opportunities, such as essential competitions or team exclusions, can cause athletes to feel discouraged and disappointed, contributing to psychological fatigue (Thelwell et al., 2005). The key to dealing with these setbacks is establishing healthy psychological resilience, which involves accepting failure, learning from it, setting realistic goals and expectations, seeking social support, and accessing professional psychological counseling (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

On the other hand, self-imposed demands are also a significant factor leading to psychological fatigue in sports. Athletes often set high standards and expectations for themselves to pursue excellence or meet others' expectations. However, when these expectations are excessively high and unattainable, they can result in feelings of discouragement, anxiety, and psychological fatigue (Hill & Curran, 2016). Some athletes may exhibit perfectionistic tendencies, constantly striving for flawless performance and finding it challenging to satisfy themselves even after making significant progress. This perfectionism increases the psychological burden (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). To address this issue, athletes must learn to relax and adjust their expectations, accept their limitations, and recognize that their efforts and progress are worthy of acknowledgment. Psychological counseling and cognitive-behavioral therapy can help athletes cope with perfectionism (Myers & Feltz, 2008).

### **Life Pressure**

Life stressors play a crucial role in developing psychological fatigue in sports (Jones & James, 2020). Athletes, while pursuing their athletic careers, also face various challenges in their personal lives. Issues such as family relationships, financial pressures, and academic demands may negatively impact the psychological well-being of athletes (Lee & Smith, 2021). Effective time management is also a significant concern, as athletes must balance training, competitions, and personal life commitments (Garcia & Martinez, 2019). Social pressures, including media attention, public expectations, and praise or criticism, pose significant challenges and can affect athletes' self-esteem and identity, thereby increasing the risk of psychological fatigue (Johnson et al., 2018). Additionally, interpersonal conflicts or sudden life events, such as conflicts with coaches, teammates, or family members, can exacerbate stress and contribute to psychological fatigue among athletes (Robinson & Brown, 2020). Therefore, understanding and effectively addressing life stressors are crucial for alleviating psychological fatigue among athletes.

### **Physiological Factors**

Physiological stress plays a vital role in the development of sports mental fatigue. Prolonged high-intensity training and competitive matches may increase the body's physiological load,

which can negatively affect the mental state. This physiological stress can affect the mental state of athletes through various mechanisms.

First, physiological stress can cause physical fatigue, including muscle fatigue, energy depletion, and decreased recovery. These physical sensations may cause discomfort and exhaustion in athletes, which can affect their mental state. For example, muscle fatigue may lead to feelings of heaviness, which can affect athletes' confidence and motivation (McMorris et al., 2018).

In addition, physiological stress may also affect brain function and cognitive performance. Prolonged high-intensity training and competitive play may lead to neurological fatigue, affecting cognitive performance and decision-making (Kaplan et al., 2017). Athletes may experience cognitive fatigue, reduced concentration, and delayed reaction times, negatively affecting their mental state.

Finally, physiological stress also affects mental fatigue by influencing sleep and nutrition (Halson, 2014). Lack of sleep and poor dietary habits may lead to a decline in athletes' physical health, affecting their mental and physical performance (Lastella et al., 2018). This physiological burden may exacerbate athletes' feelings of stress and mental fatigue.

In summary, physiological stress plays a crucial role in the development of mental fatigue in sports by influencing physical state, cognitive functioning, and lifestyle, which can significantly impact athletes' psychological state. Therefore, effective management of physiological stress is crucial for preventing and alleviating psychological fatigue in sports.

### **Factors affecting psychological fatigue**

#### **The relationship between athletes' psychological fatigue and exercise motivation**

The psychological fatigue of athletes is closely related to their exercise motivation, which plays a significant role in their training and competition processes. Prolonged psychological fatigue may negatively impact athletes' exercise motivation, leading to poor performance and affecting sports results. Additionally, there may be a bidirectional relationship between psychological fatigue and exercise motivation, where psychological fatigue decreases athletes' exercise motivation, and decreased exercise motivation may increase psychological fatigue. However, certain factors may moderate this relationship, such as good mental resilience and practical stress management skills, which help alleviate the adverse effects of psychological fatigue on exercise motivation (Gustafsson et al., 2017). Lastly, athletes' exercise motivation may effectively prevent psychological fatigue, as intrinsic solid motivation and clear goals can help them better cope with pressure and fatigue (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, understanding and effectively managing the relationship between psychological fatigue and exercise motivation significantly improves athletes' mental health and competitive performance.

#### **The relationship between mental fatigue and stress in athletes**

In sports, there is a close relationship between psychological fatigue and stress. With the intensification of competition and the increase in training loads, athletes often face various forms of pressure and stressors, such as competition stress, team dynamics, and injury recovery (Chang et al., 2012). These stressors may lead to psychological fatigue in athletes, manifested by symptoms like low mood, lack of concentration, and decreased motivation (Stults-Kolehmainen & Sinha, 2014). Conversely, psychological fatigue may also be a stressor, exacerbating athletes' mental burdens (Hanton et al., 2009). Therefore, understanding and managing athletes' psychological fatigue is crucial for addressing stress in the sports domain.

Sports teams and coaches can assist athletes in effectively managing psychological fatigue by providing psychological support, teaching stress-coping skills, and devising appropriate training plans to help athletes better adapt to competitive environments and enhance performance.

### **The Relationship between Athletes' Psychological Fatigue and their Feelings**

The relationship between psychological fatigue and athletes' self-perceptions is intricate. When athletes are under the pressure of prolonged training and competition, psychological fatigue can produce a variety of adverse self-perceptions, including feelings of physical and mental exhaustion, a depressed mood, lack of concentration, and diminished motivation. In addition, psychological fatigue may lead to adverse changes in athletes' self-perceptions, such as self-doubt, concerns about performance outcomes, and ambiguity about future accomplishments. Conversely, athletes' self-perceptions may also influence the intensity and duration of their psychological fatigue. Positive self-perceptions and self-confidence may mitigate the effects of psychological fatigue, whereas negative self-perceptions and adverse emotions may exacerbate the effects of psychological fatigue (Stults-Kolehmainen & Sinha, 2014). Therefore, understanding and effectively managing the interplay between psychological fatigue and self-perception is critical to optimizing athletes' competitive performance and psychological well-being.

### **The Relationship between Athletes' Mental Fatigue and Physical Fitness**

Chronic psychological stress and mental strain may decrease physical performance, making athletes more susceptible to fatigue and discomfort. Research has shown that psychological fatigue affects the functioning of various body systems, including the immune, nervous, and endocrine systems, thereby affecting athletes' fitness and overall health (Raglin, 2001). In addition, mental fatigue may impair athletes' performance, affecting their fitness and technical proficiency. On the other hand, maintaining good physical fitness may help athletes better cope with psychological stress and fatigue and enhance their adaptive capacity, thereby reducing the occurrence and effects of mental fatigue (Kellmann & Kallus, 2001). Therefore, maintaining good physical fitness is crucial for preventing and managing mental fatigue, which can help improve athletes' competitive performance and overall health.

### **Recovery Methods and Applications**

In sports, athletes often face high levels of psychological stress, which can lead to mental fatigue and affect performance. Understanding and adopting effective mental fatigue recovery strategies is critical to enhancing athletes' mental health and performance. Ensuring that athletes are well-rested and effectively managing sleep is critical. Research has repeatedly shown that maintaining a regular sleep pattern and getting adequate sleep are essential for restoring athletes' mental and physical states and enhancing their performance (Chennaoui et al., 2015).

In addition, relaxation techniques and meditation have been recognized as valuable tools for reducing stress and anxiety in athletes, promoting mental relaxation, and facilitating recovery (Birrer et al., 2012). Mental training, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), positive thinking, and imagery techniques, has also received attention in the literature. These methods help to develop mental resilience in athletes, enabling them to better cope with stress and fatigue (Hanton et al., 2005).

In addition, social support from family, coaches, and teammates is crucial for athletes to recover from mental fatigue. Research has shown that positive social support can help reduce anxiety and stress levels in athletes, contributing to their psychological well-being. Participation in leisure activities and recreation can also help athletes distract themselves and relax, contributing to recovery from mental fatigue.

In some cases, athletes may need to seek professional counseling or therapy. Individualized counseling and therapy have been shown to help athletes cope with mental fatigue and improve their sporting performance (Arnold et al., 2017). In conclusion, implementing a comprehensive strategy for mental fatigue recovery is essential for athletes' mental health and performance. Athletes can optimize their mental health and performance by incorporating various recovery strategies tailored to individual needs. Further research and practical applications will contribute to developing effective interventions and support systems for athletes facing mental fatigue challenges in sports.

### **Research Limitations**

Firstly, in terms of research tools, scholars typically employ subjective emotional experience reports or fatigue scales to study the relationship between the occurrence of psychological fatigue, influencing factors, and coping strategies. However, subjective emotional experience reports are often heavily influenced by individual factors such as knowledge and language proficiency, making it challenging to precisely examine the emotions expressed by individuals. Secondly, in terms of sample selection, many researchers in the study of psychological fatigue choose relatively small samples, with some studies failing to meet the requirements of large samples in psychology. Consequently, the representativeness of the experimental data is limited, and the research conclusions cannot be widely generalized. Lastly, most scholars currently explore the relationship between psychological fatigue and experimental procedures in the laboratory. However, this short-term psychological fatigue differs somewhat from the real psychological fatigue present in everyday life. Therefore, some laboratory conclusions regarding psychological fatigue lack external validity, and caution must be exercised when generalizing these results or drawing broader conclusions. Thus, the next step is to develop a high reliability and validity psychological fatigue scale, select emotional experience reporting methods less affected by individual knowledge, increase the number of participants to reduce experimental errors, and continuously conduct in-depth research to reveal the true nature of psychological fatigue accurately.

### **Contribution**

This review discusses the concept of Athlete's mental fatigue, and analyzes its cause, mechanism and background in detail. Through the synthesis many kinds of research results, has provided to the athlete psychological fatigue phenomenon the thorough understanding. The study identified and classified the main sources of mental fatigue, including long-term cognitive tasks, emotional stress and inadequate recovery. This classification helps to tailor interventions. Research has highlighted the detrimental effects of mental fatigue on athletic performance, such as decreased endurance, impaired decision-making and increased perceived effort. In addition, the study highlights the importance of coping with mental fatigue to maintain optimal performance levels.

The theoretical contribution of this review lies in the detailed discussion of effective coping strategies and interventions to mitigate the effects of psychological fatigue. These measures include psychological techniques as well as practical methods. The study also points out the

gaps in the current literature and provides suggestions for future research. By highlighting areas that have not yet been fully explored and suggesting methodological improvements, it provides a valuable road map for scholars seeking to advance their understanding of mental fatigue in sport.

The findings of this review have practical implications and provide evidence-based recommendations for coaches, teachers, and sports psychologists in training programs. This ensures that strategies for coping with mental fatigue are based on scientific research. Overall, this review contributes significantly to the field of sports psychology and sports science by integrating existing knowledge, identifying new insights, and providing viable strategies for coping with mental fatigue. As a key resource, it provides researchers and practitioners with ways to improve athletic performance.

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