“The Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress”

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The American Institute of Stress studies show 35 percent of people across 143 countries are living a “stressful” life. While here in the United States, numbers are exceedingly high with 55 percent of people living a stressful life (AIS, 2022). Though we aren’t all living in a state of stress, it is safe to say we have all been impacted by stress at some point in our life. Stress is so common that we often don’t seek to understand why stress occurs, but rather we learn to live with it. The Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress (also known as “CATS”) was developed by Holger Ursin and Hege R. Eriksen, which was meant to further explain how and why stress occurs. The big idea behind CATS was that “we feel stressed whenever there is a discrepancy between our set value and our actual value.”(Ursin & Eriksen, 2004, pp.569). For example, if there was a deadline approaching (Set value) , but we had a large amount of work to complete making us incapable of keeping this deadline (actual value), stress may occur. We then may compensate for this situation by increasing the amount of work we are doing, which in the short term may be obtainable, but not so much in the long term. A coach in business, sports, and life can greatly assist in helping someone with a more successful approach to their “stress” or obstacle they are facing. Throughout this paper we will discuss the application of CATS to successful coaching, reflective learning for coaches, and reflective learning for team members.

A full understanding of The Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress can help a coach successfully lead their team member to greater successes. For athletes that are wanting to obtain performance goals it can be very stressful, as goals are a prime example of a “set value” and their “actual value”. With a coach that understands this conflict, he can lead the athlete to focus on the little things in his day-to-day performance rather than focusing to much on the big picture. It is very easy for an athlete to get caught up in the performance they are aiming for in the future, but by doing so can become paralyzed by stress in the moment. A key principle of a successful coach would be “direct concern with the immediate improvement of performance and the development of skills” (Law, 2013, pp. 95). Goals are great in business, sports, and life, but every goal begins with a “set value” and an “actual value” which is the root cause of stress and is in need of a thought-out approach.

Reflective learning for coaches can be very powerful when dealing with a team members stress. It is said through reflective learning “individuals become free from their limiting beliefs and arrive at an informed and reflective decision” (Law, 2013, 69). For coaches this is important, they need to take the accumulation of knowledge they have, reflect on the situation, and make an educated decision for the best interest of their team member. Through this process the coach may come up with a custom plan for the team member and can help them over come the divide between the goal (set value) and where the team member is currently at (actual value). It has proven through history that coaching can not only beat talent but can overcome David vs Goliath type scenarios/ obstacles.

Reflective learning for a team member can be carried out alone or done with a coach/mentor’s guidance. Doing so can help overcome some of the most common stressors for a team member, such as coming up with new ways to approach a difficult task. Team members that have inadequate or insufficient coping methods are at an increased risk of developing stress. (Vinney, 2019). When a team member reflects “a new consciousness emerges with a new appreciation, understanding and insight about that experience.” (Law, 2013). The big key when applying it to CATS, is “new appreciation” which is defining a new outlook on your set and current values. This can help the team member in return not only ease their stress but creates new coping method that reaches their set value.

In conclusion, CATS idea on stress breaks down the very common feeling many of us have day to day. Though initially stress is not harmful, “if sustained, the response may lead to illness and disease through established pathophysiological processes” (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004, 567). That being said, it is very important to have healthy coping methods as an individual whether you are a coach, athlete, or a team member at your job. Coaches who understand CATS will not only be able to perform better as a coach but will also be able to assist in reflective learning practices that can lead to over coming the gap between a team members current value and their set value’s.

Reference

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