



# Sports as a Stress Management Strategy for Young People

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## Abstract

Stress among the young generation has emerged as a significant and growing concern, further exacerbated by the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting on their mental and physical well-being. The paper delves into a sociological perspective to explore the efficacy of sports and related relaxation techniques as self-management strategies for facing stress in young people. These often encounter stressors from families and academic pressures, peer dynamics, social expectations, and personal challenges. From this perspective, sports linked with relaxation techniques can represent a way to empower the young generation to manage stressful situations and provide opportunities for skill development. Moreover, a growing body of literature supports the notion that regular engagement in sports and relaxation activities is associated with long-term psychological benefits, including reduced levels of anxiety, improved mood, enhanced self-esteem, and better overall mental health. Despite this evidence, current trends indicate a worrying decline in sports participation among young people, paralleled by a significant increase in sedentary lifestyles. Notably, these patterns persist in many European countries despite the implementation of numerous public policies aimed at promoting youth physical activity (WHO, 2023). It seems necessary for scholars to spread more about the under-estimated benefits of sports on stress and anxiety reduction and to start projects to make sports part of the extracurricular activities of university students and other young people.

**Keywords:** *Sports; Youth; Stress; Self-help; Relaxation.*

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The relationship between body and physical activity can be considered an essential expression of social facts, a space of corporeity as a struggle against limits, of the self and relationship making a space of unwritten culture, and even more importantly in liquid/global societies a process of reappropriation and construction of identities. In this context, the methods that can help deal with stress become a significant factor in contemporary life. Learning and adaptation are found above all in walking as the basic

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physical movement that constitutes humanity's first step on earth: by walking men and women realize their growth, they transform physically and mentally, they also know and change the environment in which they imprint the seal of their thoughts and actions. Through these symbolic movements, they communicate to others, until becoming expressive forms in which the motor possibilities of the body - sport, dance, play - develop to the maximum, essential in an orientation towards democratic and sustainable growth. In line with such perspective, sports and relaxation techniques can represent an important way to get awareness of one's condition and manage moments of stress, in particular concerning young people who seem more affected by problems of this type, which have dramatically increased during and after the pandemic for Covid-19 (Habibirwe and Porrovecchio, 2018; Malizia et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the youth are pressured by family, academic, and social expectations. It seems then urgent to give them an answer regarding instruments they can learn and self-manage to face these new vulnerabilities (Croog, 1970; James and Lamnin, 1985). To this extent, it doesn't correspond to an increase in sports practice and activities† but rather a decrease in sports participation and worrying growth of sedentary lifestyle, as if young people's reaction to stress was one of total apathy (Carson et. al., 2016).

This inactivity crisis is extended across the Western world affecting the pediatric population. Recent data from the Canadian Health Measures Survey suggest that only 7% of children and youth aged 6-19 years participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day, thus not meeting the current physical activity guidelines from Canada, the U.S., the U.K., Australia and the World (WHO, 2010).

Moreover, the social policies implemented on this issue haven't affected the European governments. At an institutional level, there are significant initiatives aimed at promoting sporting activity, supported by the European Union and Commissions, the European Sport Week itself promotes sport and physical activity guided by the belief that sport contributes to the health and well-being of European citizens. Similarly, the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2022) shows that respondents who regularly do physical activity for recreational or non-sporting reasons do not constitute the majority in any EU Member State. The multi-purpose survey of the Italian National Statistical Institut (Istat, 2022) notes that the lack of sports practice in Italy is a growing phenomenon to the point of speaking of physical inactivity or general sedentary lifestyle for both sexes (evidencing their increase after the Covid-19 pandemic).

Table no. 1. Italian Lack of Sport Practice (Source: Istat, 2022)

Year	Male	Female	GAP
2013	38.0%	54.0%	16.0%
2017	51.0%	71.0%	20.0%
2022	62.0%	70.0%	8.0%

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† According to the WHO (2023) definition, sports activity is «any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires an expenditure of energy greater than that at rest» with improving effects on general health: physical and mental. The distinctive criterion concerning sport is its extension well beyond the practice of sport itself as planned, repetitive, and codified by rules - which in turn is divided into amateur and professional. Physical activity also concerns common everyday activities such as walking, climbing stairs, cycling, playing, gardening, and housework, i.e. forms defined as spontaneous motor activity.

The same data are confirmed in the 2023 survey with a double problem: the demographic one: the lack of sports practice is linked to the population's age. For the adult ones, the reason is a lack of time, while for the older ones is a cultural exclusion from active life, but it's surprising for the young generations in all the Italian areas, the absolute sedentary lifestyle, seems a sort of insurmountable obstacle, structurally linked to the status, education, gender, and geography of the population.

These are elements that highlight the need for a greater effort to involve people of all ages in sports due to the now well-known and underestimated benefits that sport has on people's physical and mental well-being (Eurostat, 2022), even in the face of increasing levels of stress, anxiety, depression in contemporary societies (Johnson and Murray, 2008; Șerban, 2025). Despite the great potential of sports in individual well-being, there are increased difficulties in the involvement in its practice, in particular concerning young people. The pandemic has worsened the condition of a sedentary lifestyle confining them in their houses, locked inside their problem, mostly alone, and without any motivation to go out or play sports. Though different in each country, the percentage of young people playing sports is widely low (Smith, 2023). Of the 45.0% of Europeans who do not play sports, many are young people, who should not have major time constraints that would prevent them from playing sports. In reality, most international research highlights the substantial importance of parents or other reference adults in encouraging and supporting school-age children to regularly participate in sporting activities (Jago et al., 2010). The paternal role seems crucial in initiating and supporting children in practicing sports. If the family is also supported by the group of peers/friends and the school in encouraging the boy/girl to continue sporting activity at a certain moment in life, the conditions for good mental and physical conditions can be created. Instead, the main obstacle in practicing physical activity seems to be linked to a multifactorial set of issues: lack of time, poor motivation, and absence of family support, in a dynamic highlighting how low income corresponds to low education, and low sports practice (Rodrigues et al., 2018). In response, the Health Life Style Commission campaign is committed to continuing to carry out awareness-raising projects on the importance of a healthy lifestyle for all generations and social groups. Over time, the lack of sports participation has become even more accentuated and, in the Italian case, neither the number of sports facilities nor the number of practitioners has increased significantly; in particular, mass sports practice appears to be little encouraged, if not discouraged. However, professional sport is exalted as a predominantly televised passive spectacle.

On the other hand, the research in the field (Esmaeilzadeh & Kalantari, 2013) highlights how half of the sport's practitioners express the desire to exercise outdoors, a desire which is supported by the EU Commission's efforts to make sport and physical activity properly healthier, greener, and more sustainable; elements for which interventions by state bodies are necessary for the construction or maintenance of open public spaces. People, therefore, even if they are tired, go on to make further efforts to "get more tired", but the fact of doing it for themselves makes the difference, as a moment of reconquered freedom, escape from alienation, self-affirmation, ability to breathe and listen to the world around. As a result, sport becomes a source of pleasure, a means of self-satisfaction, and maintenance of a long journey/desire for physical activity. The 74.0% (Gustafson and Rhodes, 2006) of those who practice a sport note how it improves their professional and studying behavior, which increasingly depends on a type of skill that is acquired slowly and through constant practice; similarly, the importance of quick

reflexes and self-confidence is growing, all elements that develop with a certain degree of relaxation ability that sport helps to develop and maintain.

In particular, young people who regularly practice sports have lower levels of stress, are better able to develop their emotions, and have higher levels of self-efficacy than more sedentary young people (Pearling, 1989).

The reasons why sports can play a significant role in stress reduction are linked at first to the simple fact that sports practice implies a movement of the person from one activity to another, mostly from one place to another - sometimes outdoors (Décamps, 2012.). In this way, the individuals start to detach from a situation that generates stress or triggers anxious and stressful thoughts by shifting their focus to the activity at hand and the environment around them. This change in perspective can provide the beginning of much-needed relief from stress and promote a sense of well-being, giving the person the strength to face the problem (if there is one), once the person's energies have recharged a little.

It should also be deemed the fact that movement – whether it's walking, running, dancing, or practicing any sporting activity, helps the body release endorphins, neurotransmitters at the basis of the subject's psychological balance which can strongly counteract bad mood and stress. Moreover, breath plays a significant role: proper breathing not only ensures that individuals execute sports movements correctly but also facilitates a connection with their inner selves (Miragaya and Da Costa, 2006). Deep breathing together with mindfulness and meditation, constitutes essential relaxation techniques. These practices induce progressive muscle relaxation and have garnered recognition for their effectiveness in stress reduction among individuals. Engaging in sports fosters the restoration of proper posture, which in turn enhances breathing and self-esteem.

Furthermore, the opportunity to partake in sports alongside others offers a chance to break free from isolation, fostering a sense of community and support. If one adds to these elements the possibility of expressing one's frustrations or pains through a sport, whether it be combat sports, Yoga, or dance, it becomes apparent how the inherent discipline in these activities aids individuals in redirecting negative energies in a positive vibe, through rules of respect for oneself and others, until they become resources (Giulianotti et al., 2016). To ensure a lasting impact from these resources, certain strategies can be implemented, primarily through a form of mentorship. This entails having a relaxation coach or mentor, someone whom young people trust and who can periodically assist them in acquiring relaxation techniques, identifying reasons why they may have struggled to practice them in certain circumstances, and so forth (Quick, 2013).

Alongside this mentorship role, peers can also play a crucial role in providing mutual support and understanding, sharing reciprocal difficulties, and engaging in self-help and mutual assistance (even if for the young generation peer confidence has become very difficult).

Another key aspect of this practice is the diary technique. It means that by using a diary as a tool to express and release anxiety and stress, individuals can externalize their emotions and observe them from another perspective, gaining insights and a sense of control over them, becoming aware that negative thoughts come from stress condition (Nguyen, 2006).

This approach aligns with that adopted by one of the major Italian football teams - Juventus - whose management turned to a cognitive therapist to teach athletes a stress management method that has given good results: the S.F.E.R.A. Training (Vercelli, 2007), adopted in a transitional analysis similar to the one defined by the acronym ABCDE. Each letter corresponds to a phase of the subject's process of awareness and change to make decisions quickly enough on the best possibilities available to improve results, self-consciousness, and relaxation.

Properly stress can be defined as: any cause (physical, chemical, or psychic) capable of exerting a harmful stimulus on the organism, to provoke a 'negative' reaction; nervous tension, and harmful condition. The WHO (2010) underlines how it is characterized by three symptoms: feelings of mental or physical exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's work, and reduced professional effectiveness. In a sociological perspective, stress is a dynamic concept that changes depending on exogenous and endogenous variables: from the physical health of the subject to the environmental and social context aspects. A change in those aspects can have positive or negative consequences on the individual and social well-being.

Similarly, Aaron Beck (1976), psychiatrist and father of Cognitive Therapy, defined stress as the result of errors in reasoning, errors that create cognitive distortions: thoughts can deform reality to the point of leading people to define situations (which do not present specific dangers) as negative or threatening until the point that negative thoughts become capable of ruining one's life<sup>4</sup>. Stressful thoughts are involuntary and automatic because they are intended to warn of hypothetical dangers. To face such situations and act on one's thoughts Albert Ellis (1975) a precursor of Cognitive Psychology, created the mentioned ABCDE technique:

- A is the Antecedent or the potentially stressful event, fact, or situation (for example criticism from a colleague).
- B is the Belief or the thought one has regarding the event (for example when one thinks: I'm worthless, or I'm stupid).
- C is the emotional and behavioral consequences of the preceding phases (if a colleague has criticized us, we can start thinking not to be worth it, feel depressed, and may adopt behaviors linked to that distortion). The consequences of our actions can change depending on our beliefs/thoughts about the event. Therefore, the work implied in the ABCDE dynamic consists of creating new beliefs (new thoughts) that will start more positive emotions and behaviors. A further step is then to change the interpretation of the event. In this way, the subject will act on his proper emotions and therefore, consequently, on his behavior.
- The D phase is, in fact, the discussion which means that it is necessary to put under discussion the present beliefs to test their veracity. To better manage stress it is essential to interrupt the flow of thoughts that cause it, starting by identifying stressful ones and then questioning them. In this phase, it is essential to observe one's internal dialogue. That background noise that people live without paying much attention to. Once the person starts doing this exercise, at least for a week, he/she realizes that destructive thoughts are always associated with negative emotions.
- Finally, in the E phase, the person arrives at feeling relaxed and good effect of this process on the emotional and behavioral condition. The path can be long but once the person has experienced the resulting state of well-being and he/she begins to understand

that certain insecurities are caused by a moment of stress or by an excess of demands on oneself, thus re-centering the human balance on accepting and welcoming one's limits, becoming able to tell oneself that error is human (Ellis, 1997).

This process implies that the persons, in particular the young ones ask for help and step by step get the ability to manage it by themselves. The issues implied in such methodology don't work alone, as the sport itself does not, but more aspects link together – with the government, the school, the family support - can start a process to answer the young generation's problems. The ABCDE methodology is oriented on:

### **Implications**

If our negative beliefs about ourselves are well-founded, avoid catastrophizing. Even if the belief is correct, we have to ask ourselves: “What does this mean?” “How likely is it that the worst-case scenario will occur?” If the answer is negative, one can start thinking of positive alternatives.

### **Evidence**

The most effective way to challenge a negative belief is to demonstrate that it is factually incorrect. For example, reflecting on the fact that in other circumstances one has been able to face and solve certain situations, then start saying to oneself: “I've already been doing it”, so to unmask the distortions of catastrophic explanations and confront the difficulty of the task, the little or high time dedicated to considering the alternatives to get through it, (trying to study more or considering the possibility of a professor's non-objective evaluation, confront with the result obtained by others, tiredness).

### **Alternatives**

Almost nothing that happens to an individual is due to a single cause. To discuss a belief, one shall analyze all the possible intervening causes, focusing on those that can be changed, which are specific and not personal (Cohen and Sherman, 2014).

From a sociological perspective, the relevance of this approach consists in its application to the relational dimension of the group/team.

Sport alone will not solve all our problems but, in addition to the obvious benefits for our health, it also has the unique potential to connect us and to make us feel part of a community. Sport has an important role in building cohesive societies, one of the greatest challenges for Europe today (Schinas, 2022).

The need to reiterate these elements becomes necessary also because sporting practice implies the will to assert oneself through competition, in a situation in which the means to satisfy this desire to win decrease, and as Merton observed – already in 1949 - there is not enough discredit of illicit means to achieve certain results, permeated by the myth of the good guys who always win, in a competitive dynamic, little inclined to compassion for the loser. Long-term stress reduction and self-management through sports are an eligibility way to empower the young generation to manage stressful situations and opportunities for individual and social skill development. Recent surveys show, in fact, the beneficial effects of sports on reducing stress facing competition in a loyal way (to the self and the other) (Tremblay, 2011).

Participating in sports demands focus and concentration also improving children's school performance – effectively acting as a form of mindfulness in motion. Individuals are compelled to stay present when immersed in the game, leaving little room for ruminating over past regrets or fretting about future uncertainties.

A significant role in promoting sports practice and strategies to face stress and the values implied in them can also be played by the school, in fact as far as it is concerned, children understand sports educational discourse very well, whereas, on the other hand, at home or with sporting societies, the situation is problematic, there is more stress, competition at all costs, careerism and money contamination, so that it may seem that values are neglected.

These are important elements because children grow up at school not only at an educational/cultural and didactic aspect but also at an emotional and sporting level (Kennett, 2013). Scholars and universities as well can play a significant role in spreading about the benefits of sports on stress and anxiety reduction and starting projects to include sports in the extracurricular activities of university students.

The nature of sports fosters discipline, goal-setting, and resilience, which are vital for stress management. Being part of a team or a school/university team cultivates a sense of belonging and camaraderie, creating a supportive environment where individuals can lean on each other during challenging times. The bonds formed through shared victories, defeats, and the collective pursuit of a common goal can serve as a buffer against stress, offering reassurance and companionship in times of need (Janssen and LeBlanc, 2010).

The state of flow implied in sports, characterized by complete absorption in the activity at hand, can be profoundly calming, providing a temporary escape from stressors and fostering a sense of inner peace, even more so if accompanied by music, which contributes in a significant way in relieving tensions (Janssen and LeBlanc, 2010). Few societies do not have dances, mock fights, acrobatic or musical shows, that is, without social institutions that provide emotional relief to counterbalance the tensions and stress of daily life, with its real struggles, real dangers, risks, and constraints. The Euro-barometer survey absorbs these assumptions, highlighting how the main reason why one carries out physical activity is the desire to improve one's health, followed by the wish to feel fitter and to find methods of relaxation, increase physical and mental well-being, all elements promoted by the European Commission.

Similarly, the International Charter for Physical Education affirms:

Article 1. The practice of physical education, physical activity, and sports is a fundamental right for everyone,

Every human being has the fundamental right to physical education, physical activity, and sport, without discrimination based on [...] must be supported by all government, sporting and educational institutions.

Inclusive, adapted, and safe opportunities for participation in physical education, physical activity, and sport must be guaranteed to all human beings [...] (Unesco, 2015).

A society that does not provide its members, especially the younger ones, with sufficient opportunities of this type can run the risk of making the very lives of its citizens boring, without reason, since they are not able to provide complementary corrective measures for the tensions caused by the routine of social life. Many of the values of sporting practice can be traced back to those of peace and inclusiveness, gender equality, cooperation, and loyalty, in establishing a variety of relationships with the group that asks to be implemented.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Received: January, 25<sup>th</sup> 2025

Reviewed date: March, 5<sup>th</sup> 2025

Accepted for Publication: June, 6<sup>th</sup> 2025