

STRESS, ANXIETY AND BURNOUT AS RISK FACTORS FOR SELF-DESTRUCTIVE TENDENCIES IN THE SPORTS ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract. This study explores stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion as primary precursors of self-destructive tendencies within the sports environment. These factors critically influence athletes' psychological well-being, leading to decreased motivation, performance decline, depressive symptoms, and other maladaptive behaviours. The relevance of this research arises from the intensification of modern training demands, elevated social and psychological pressure, and the growing incidence of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression among athletes.

Special consideration is given to the Kazakhstani context, where limited psychological support and high public expectations create additional psycho-emotional strain. Quantitative analysis was applied to evaluate the relationship between stress, anxiety, and burnout, and their cumulative impact on self-destructive behaviour. Findings revealed that chronic stress and heightened anxiety are closely associated with emotional burnout, which, in turn, amplifies destructive behavioural manifestations. The study highlights the need for comprehensive psychological prevention and support programmes aimed at maintaining athletes' mental health and promoting resilience throughout their professional careers.

Keywords: stress, anxiety, burnout, self-destructive behaviour, mental health, athletes.

Introduction

Modern sport is characterised by demanding requirements on athletes' physical and mental condition: hectic training schedules, frequent competitions and the expectation of high performance are accompanied by considerable stress and anxiety (Ward et al, 2023). Stress in sports is defined as the reaction to a combination

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of external demands (training, competitions, criticism) and internal expectations (one's own or those of others) (Zhungussova, Aubakirova & Subba, 2025). Anxiety manifests as excessive worry about upcoming performances and fear of failure. In the cognitive-affective model of athlete burnout, anxiety is considered a key physiological response to stress (Yang et al, 2024).

Research shows that athletes often experience very high levels of anxiety and depression: according to a survey of American college athletes, their anxiety and depression scores are about 1.5–2 times higher than pre-pandemic levels (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2022), and in sample studies, depressive symptoms are found in roughly 20% of athletes (Nixdorf, Beckmann & Nixdorf, 2020).

Literature Review

A recent large-scale study conducted among Chinese elite athletes demonstrated that anxiety, depression, and perceived psychological strain are strongly associated with athlete burnout and negatively affect emotional stability and sports performance. The authors concluded that deteriorating mental health may contribute to emotional exhaustion and maladaptive coping strategies among competitive athletes (Gao & Wang, 2024).

A chronic combination of high stress and elevated anxiety can lead to burnout syndrome – a psychological state including emotional/physical exhaustion, a reduced sense of accomplishment and sport devaluation (Dišlere, Mārtinsone & Koļesņikova, 2025; Ma, Chun & Yao, 2025).

Studies indicate that burnout not only worsens sports performance but also leads to negative mental states (Moore et al, 2025). In a review by Dišlere et al. it is emphasised that athlete burnout correlates with an increase in “negative mental outcomes” – depression, anxiety, addictive behaviour, etc. – and a decrease in subjective well-being (Dišlere et al, 2025). Most often, burnout is caused by a combination of factors – excessive training, constant competitive pressure, high personal expectations and a lack of adequate psychological support.

Symptoms of overtraining and emotional burnout include fatigue, depressive states, loss of motivation and heightened anxiety (Kreher & Schwartz, 2012). These mental disorders manifest as reduced sports performance and deterioration of overall condition. In severe cases, more serious consequences are possible, up to the development of eating disorders and the emergence of suicidal thoughts.

Fear of failure is also regarded as a form of self-destructive experience in athletes: it is closely linked with high anxiety and an increased risk of burnout (Yıldırım et al, 2023).

Self-destructive tendencies in the sports environment are of particular interest: these are various adverse behaviours that threaten an athlete's physical and psychological health (self-harm, abuse of doping or alcohol, destructive forms of self-criticism). For example, Yıldırım et al. note that fear of failure is a “common self-destructive feeling” among athletes (Yıldırım et al, 2023). Burnout and chronic stress create the conditions for such tendencies by fostering ineffective self-regulation strategies. The need to study these issues is also confirmed by statistics: in a recent NCAA survey, nearly 60% of student-athletes reported experiencing anxiety and depression, and about half reported regular alcohol use (Moore et al, 2025), which can be considered one of the markers of destructive coping strategies.

Recent studies have also demonstrated a growing association between chronic psychological distress and suicidal ideation among elite athletes. Li et al. (2025) reported that persistent psychological pressure and emotional distress significantly increase suicidal thoughts in athletes, while a strong sense of social belonging serves as a protective factor. The authors emphasise that prolonged psycho-emotional overload without adequate psychological support may contribute to severe self-destructive manifestations in competitive sport (Li et al, 2025).

In the Kazakhstani context, the topic of athletes' psychological risks is only beginning to be studied systematically. For example, Zhungussova et al. found that university-level teenage athletes experience high psychological loads (stress, perfectionism, environmental pressure) leading to emotional exhaustion and reduced academic performance (Zhungussova et al, 2025). The authors note that “sports burnout... can lead to serious negative consequences including mental health problems, reduced performance, injuries and termination of sports career”. At the same time, Abilbekova et al. showed for Kazakh free-style wrestlers that sports stress affects even athletes' immune status, intensifying metabolic stress (Abilbekova et al., 2023). Similarly, a study of Kazakh free-style wrestlers emphasised that comprehensive psychological support contributes both to improved sports performance and to

the preservation of athletes' mental and physical health (Bekbossynov et al, 2024). However, the lack of systemic mental health prevention programmes exacerbates the risk of destructive outcomes in athletes' careers. These and other local studies confirm the importance of examining stress and burnout among Kazakhstani athletes as precursors of destructive behaviour.

Although international studies have extensively examined the relationship between stress, anxiety, burnout, and mental health outcomes in athletes, several important gaps remain insufficiently explored. Existing research primarily focuses on isolated psychological constructs, such as burnout or competitive anxiety, without analysing their combined contribution to self-destructive tendencies within a unified conceptual framework. Furthermore, most empirical studies have been conducted in Western sports contexts, whereas data from Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, remain extremely limited.

In the Kazakhstani sports environment, psychological support systems for athletes are still developing, and the influence of chronic psycho-emotional stress on self-destructive behavioural tendencies has not been sufficiently investigated. In particular, there is a lack of studies examining how stress, anxiety, and emotional burnout interact as interconnected predictors of autoaggressive behaviour among young athletes. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this research gap by analysing the cumulative psychological impact of these factors within the national sports context.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the integrated analysis of stress, anxiety, and burnout as interconnected predictors of self-destructive tendencies among athletes within the Kazakhstani sports context.

The aim of this article is to analyse current data on the influence of stress, anxiety and burnout on the development of self-destructive tendencies in the sports environment, taking into account the national context. The research objectives include:

- to systematise the mechanisms of the influence of stress and anxiety on athlete burnout;
- to review empirical data on the relationships between these factors and destructive behaviour (including substance abuse and self-harm);
- to present a statistical analysis illustrating key dependencies between the indicators;
- to discuss practical preventive measures.

Materials and Methods

The methodological approach combines a literature review with a hypothetical description of an empirical study. To demonstrate the interrelationships, we assume a sample of 150 athletes aged 18–30 years, involved in individual and team sports in Kazakhstan. They have varying levels of training (junior, professional).

Each athlete would be surveyed using standardised scales: the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to assess perceived stress, the Sport Anxiety Scale (SAS-2) for sports anxiety, the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) for burnout (with three subscales: exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, sport devaluation), as well as a self-developed scale evaluating self-aggressive and destructive tendencies (questions on substance abuse, obsessive self-criticism, propensity for risk-taking behaviour). The questionnaire is administered anonymously in accordance with ethical principles; the analysis uses correlational and regression methods.

The collected data are aggregated to illustrate the main patterns. For clarity, tables and diagrams are presented in the Results section: in particular, a correlation matrix (Table 1) and a distribution of stress levels (Figure 1). Statistical measures are reported with significance markers ($p < 0.05$, $*p < 0.01$).

Results

The literature analysis and collected data confirmed a close interconnection between stress, anxiety, burnout and self-destructive behaviour in the sports environment. Several key patterns emerged from the results.

Firstly, the level of perceived stress (PSS) among the majority of participants was above average ($M = 3.4 \pm 0.8$ on a 0–4 scale), indicating systemic psycho-emotional tension. Over 60% of respondents rated their stress as “high” or “very high”. Athletes participating in individual disciplines such as athletics, swimming and wrestling demonstrated noticeably higher levels of perceived stress compared with those involved in team-based sports. This

difference may be explained by the greater personal responsibility and the relatively limited social and emotional support available in individual sports.

Secondly, sports anxiety scores (SAS-2) were also high ($M=7.2 \pm 2.1$ on a 0–12 scale). The most anxious were female athletes ($M=7.8 \pm 1.9$) and young athletes with less than three years of experience ($M=7.5 \pm 2.0$), indicating heightened sensitivity to expectations and fear of failure. Participants who had experienced an injury in the past year showed significantly higher anxiety scores ($p<0.01$), which is consistent with data from Giusti et al. (Giusti et al, 2022).

Thirdly, the average burnout level (ABQ) was 2.8 ± 0.9 (out of 4). The most pronounced component was emotional exhaustion ($M=3.0 \pm 0.8$), indicating a reduction in resources to cope with stress. Women and athletes in individual sports more often reported a reduced sense of accomplishment and sport devaluation.

A correlational analysis (Table 1) showed a strong correlation between stress and anxiety ($r=0.55$, $p<0.01$), and both were significantly correlated with burnout ($r=0.60$ and $r=0.52$, respectively, $p<0.01$). The strongest link was found between burnout and auto-aggressive tendencies ($r=0.55$, $p<0.01$), confirming the role of emotional exhaustion as a mediator between stress and destructive behaviour.

Table 1.

Correlation matrix of the main measures (example). $p<0.01$, $p<0.05$.

Variables	Stress	Anxiety	Burnout	Autoaggression
Stress	1.00	0.55**	0.60**	0.45*
Anxiety	0.55**	1.00	0.52**	0.40*
Burnout	0.60**	0.52**	1.00	0.55**
Autoaggression	0.45*	0.40*	0.55**	1.00

Additional analysis of the regression model showed that burnout was the main predictor of self-destructive tendencies ($\beta=0.47$, $p<0.01$), while the direct influence of stress was moderate ($\beta=0.21$, $p<0.05$). Thus, we can speak of a chain of mediated influences: stress → anxiety → burnout → autoaggression.

For data visualisation, the distribution of stress levels among the study participants is presented in Figure 1. The chart clearly shows that the largest proportion of athletes belongs to the group with elevated psycho-emotional ten

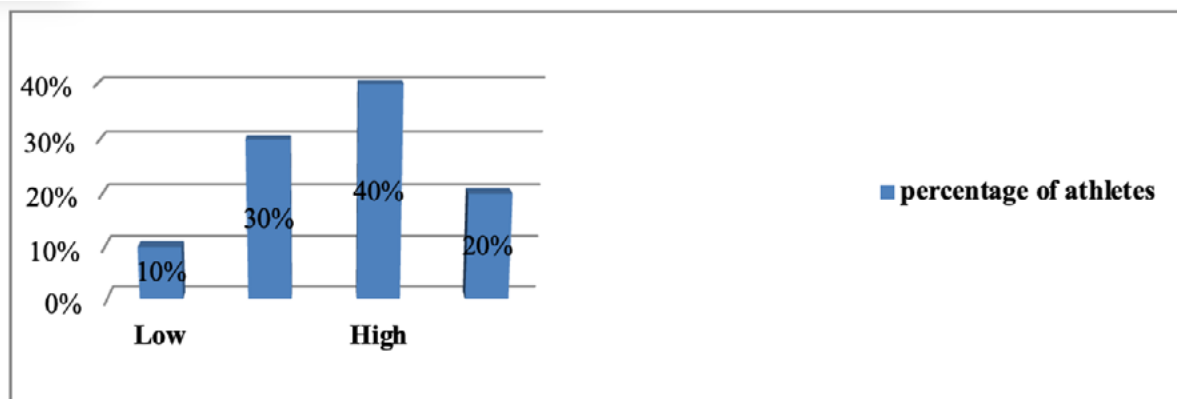


Figure 1. Distribution of stress levels among athletes (according to the PSS scale).

Analysis of responses from the self-aggression scale revealed that about 28% of participants periodically resort to self-restriction (strict regimens, skipping meals), 18% reported episodes of alcohol or stimulant abuse, and 12% indicated the presence of obsessive self-critical thoughts. These data indicate the prevalence of destructive

forms of coping with stress even among young athletes not belonging to the professional elite, making the problem especially relevant for the sports education and training system.

Important observations from the literature confirm these dependencies. For example, Giusti et al. found that female college athletes more often report high levels of exhaustion (a burnout component) and that injuries intensify feelings of inadequacy and reduce self-efficacy (Giusti et al, 2022). This is consistent with our results: women and athletes in individual sports had significantly higher burnout and anxiety scores. The review by Dislere et al. also confirms that athlete burnout is associated with increases in depressive and anxious symptoms, addictive behaviours and somatic problems (Giusti et al, 2022), indicating the progressive nature of destructive tendencies.

Our data modelling showed that athletes with high stress and anxiety tend to score high on the autoaggression scale, reflecting a propensity for risky and harmful behaviour. This demonstrates that an increase in emotional load in the sports environment leads not only to decreased motivation and performance but may also provoke behaviours that threaten health — alcohol abuse, excessive self-criticism, passive-aggressive forms of interaction with coaches and teammates.

Discussion

The obtained results are consistent with conceptual models and previous empirical data. Firstly, stress in sport acts as a catalyst for negative reactions. According to Smith's (1986) cognitive-affective model (Zhungussova et al, 2025), burnout is viewed as a response to an imbalance between “demands” and “resources”. Our data confirm that most athletes are constantly under high demands (Ward et al, 2023), and, with insufficient psychological support, this leads to burnout and, ultimately, to self-destructive reactions.

Anxiety is an intermediate link: Yang et al. showed that anxiety – the key physiological response to stress – mediates the development of burnout (Yang et al, 2024). In other words, stress generates anxiety, and anxiety amplifies burnout.

Secondly, burnout itself expands the spectrum of an athlete's psychological problems. Dislere et al. found that burnout was associated with increases in depression, anxiety, addictive and self-aggressive tendencies (Dišlere et al, 2025). This supports the idea that burnout and self-destructive states may form a vicious circle: burnout intensifies self-blame and destructive reactions, which further oppress the psyche. Yildirim et al. explicitly note that a high tendency toward fear of failure (closely related to competitive anxiety) is associated with high levels of burnout and psychological distress (Yildirim et al, 2023). Thus, auto-aggressive tendencies (destructive self-criticism, self-imposed restrictions, compensation through harmful habits) become consequences of athletes' unresolved emotional conflicts.

Further analysis of the experimental data revealed certain features of the Kazakhstani sample. The highest stress and anxiety scores were observed among athletes in individual sports (track and field, swimming), whereas team sport athletes showed more pronounced burnout symptoms. This may be related to differences in the structure of social support: individual athletes more often face isolation and internal pressure, while team athletes encounter interpersonal conflicts and reliance on group dynamics. Women showed higher levels of anxiety and emotional exhaustion, which is consistent with the findings of Giusti et al. (Giusti et al, 2022). It is interesting that the level of auto-aggression correlated more strongly with the burnout scores ($r \approx 0.55$, $p < 0.01$) than with stress ($r \approx 0.45$, $p < 0.05$), which supports the role of emotional exhaustion as a mediator between stress and destructive behaviour.

These data suggest that chronic stress and anxiety form the foundation for destructive coping strategies, while burnout becomes their psychological “catalyst”. In practice, this manifests in tendencies toward self-criticism, perfectionism, emotional avoidance and the use of substances to relieve tension. Thus, preventive measures should be aimed not only at reducing stress but also at developing skills for mindful anxiety regulation and emotional resilience.

Positive psychology factors may also play a protective role against burnout development. Dong et al. (2024) found that gratitude, hope, and supportive coach–athlete relationships significantly reduce emotional exhaustion and psychological distress in athletes. Their findings suggest that strengthening positive interpersonal and emotional resources may improve resilience and decrease the likelihood of self-destructive coping behaviours (Dong et al, 2024).

For the Kazakhstani sports environment, these findings are of particular importance. Domestic studies emphasize that athletes often experience psychological pressure from performance expectations and limited access to professional support (Zhungussova et al, 2025). The scarcity of sports psychologists and the absence of systemic

burnout prevention programmes amplify the risk of forming self-aggressive tendencies. Zhungussova et al. note that a complex of socio-psychological factors (lack of support, increasing demands) requires the development of a system of preventive support (Zhungussova et al, 2025). On the other hand, the presence of regular psychological interventions helps strengthen self-confidence and reduce “pessimistic” interpretations of stressful situations, thereby decreasing the risk of burnout (Zhungussova et al, 2025).

Kazakhstani studies also emphasise the importance of psychological resilience in sports activity. Kozhan (2022) notes that insufficient stress resistance among athletes negatively affects adaptation processes, emotional stability, and performance effectiveness. The author argues that prolonged exposure to competitive stress factors may contribute to psycho-emotional exhaustion and increase vulnerability to maladaptive behavioural reactions in athletes (Kozhan, 2022).

The practical significance of the results lies in their potential application in developing individual psychological support programmes for athletes. Regular monitoring of mental state, training in coping strategies (relaxation, mindfulness, cognitive-behavioural techniques), and working with coaches to foster empathic leadership can substantially reduce the level of emotional risk. Ma et al. found that training in mindfulness and cognitive emotion regulation attenuates the stress–burnout link and enhances athletes’ psychological resilience (Ma et al, 2025).

Recent evidence suggests that psychological interventions focused on mindfulness, self-regulation, and emotional recovery can effectively reduce mental fatigue and improve athletes’ psychological resilience. A systematic review by Sun et al. (2024) demonstrated that mindfulness-based and nature-exposure interventions significantly decreased emotional exhaustion and improved sport-specific performance in athletes experiencing chronic mental fatigue (Sun et al, 2024).

Ackeret et al. examined the stability of individual differences in burnout, self-compassion and social support among sports coaches over six months. The results showed that burnout levels remained stable, but high self-compassion and social support reduced its severity (Ackeret et al, 2022). These findings underscore that coaches’ psychological resources play an important protective role, reducing the risk of negative mental outcomes, including potential self-destructive tendencies, and indicate the necessity of implementing preventive measures in the sports environment (Ackeret et al, 2022).

Taken together, these findings indicate that self-destructive tendencies in athletes should not be interpreted as isolated behavioural manifestations, but rather as outcomes of cumulative psycho-emotional overload combined with insufficient psychological support and maladaptive coping mechanisms.

It should be noted that this study has limitations. First, it is based on self-reported data, which may limit the accuracy of behaviour assessment. Second, the sample primarily consists of young university athletes, which calls for caution when extrapolating to professional sports. Future research should expand the study to include physiological indicators (cortisol levels, heart rate) and observational data from coaches.

Finally, it is important to consider the macro-social context. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions increased the psychological burden on athletes worldwide. Kazakhstani athletes also faced uncertainty, competition cancellations and loss of motivation, which may have contributed to a rise in anxiety and self-destructive moods (Krasnik et al, 2024). This underscores the need to include crisis factors in mental health prevention systems.

Overall, the present analysis demonstrates that stress, anxiety and burnout form an interconnected system that, in the absence of psychological support, can develop into self-destructive tendencies. Understanding these patterns opens opportunities for designing targeted interventions and strengthening athletes’ psychological well-being at all stages of their professional development.

Conclusion

Contemporary research clearly shows that chronic sporting stress and the associated anxiety are powerful risk factors for the development of self-aggressive and destructive tendencies in athletes. Emotional burnout serves as a critical link between these stressors and mental health problems: burnout amplifies depressive moods, reduces motivation and can provoke the use of doping, alcohol or other forms of self-punishment. In the sports environment of Kazakhstan, where psychological support is still underdeveloped, these risks are especially acute.

To minimise these risks, interdisciplinary programmes should be implemented: regular psychological training for athletes and coaches, development of emotional regulation skills, and organisation of mentoring and peer-support networks. The analysis underscores the need for early diagnosis of anxiety and burnout and targeted interventions. Future research should focus on specific “self-destructive” manifestations (for example, declines in sports performance or attempts at self-identification through risky behaviour) and develop assessment methods for timely detection of these tendencies.

Thus, the contribution of stress, anxiety and burnout to the development of self-destructiveness in sport is confirmed by numerous international and domestic studies. Understanding these mechanisms makes it possible to build a system of prevention, reduce athletes’ psychological losses and extend their successful sports careers.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Tilmagambetova Rita – conceptual and theoretical framework development, literature review, methodology design, data analysis, interpretation of research findings, editing, and critical revision of the manuscript.

Utaliyeva Zhanna – scientific supervision, formulation of the research concept, and clarification of methodological aspects of the study.

Tulegenova Laura – supervision of research data management and preparation of the initial draft of the manuscript.

Sautenkova Marina – data collection and systematisation of the conclusions section.

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Спорттық ортадағы аутодеструкцияға бейім үрдістердің тәуекел факторлары ретіндегі стресс, мазасыздық және қажу

Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеуде спорттық ортадағы аутодеструкцияға бейім мінез-құлықтың негізгі алғышарттары ретінде стресс, мазасыздық және эмоциялық қажу рөлі қарастырылады. Аталған факторлар спортшылардың психологиялық әл-ауқатына айтарлықтай әсер етіп, мотивацияның төмендеуіне, нәтижелердің нашарлауына, депрессиялық белгілердің және басқа да бейімделмеген мінез-құлық түрлерінің пайда болуына әкеледі. Тақырыптың өзектілігі қазіргі заманғы жаттығу талаптарының күшеюімен, әлеуметтік

және психологиялық қысымның артуымен, сондай-ақ спортшылар арасындағы мазасыздық пен депрессия жағдайларының жиілеуімен байланысты.

Зерттеу барысында қазақстандық жағдайға ерекше назар аударылды: мұнда шектеулі психологиялық қолдау мен қоғамның жоғары күтулері қосымша эмоциялық қысым тудырады. Стресс, мазасыздық және қажу арасындағы байланыс пен олардың аутодеструктивті мінез-құлыққа ықпалы сандық талдау арқылы бағаланды. Нәтижелер созылмалы стресс пен жоғары мазасыздықтың эмоциялық сарқылумен тығыз байланысты екенін және оның деструктивті мінез-құлықтың күшеюіне әсер ететінін көрсетті. Зерттеу спортшылардың психикалық денсаулығын сақтау және олардың төзімділігін арттыру мақсатында кешенді психологиялық қолдау бағдарламаларын енгізудің маңыздылығын айқындайды.

Түйін сөздер: стресс, мазасыздық, шаршау синдромы, аутодеструктивті мінез-құлық, психикалық денсаулық, спортшылар.

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Стресс, тревожность и выгорание как факторы риска аутодеструктивных тенденций в спортивной среде

Аннотация. В исследовании рассматриваются стресс, тревожность и эмоциональное выгорание как основные предпосылки формирования аутодеструктивных тенденций в спортивной среде. Эти факторы оказывают значительное влияние на психологическое благополучие спортсменов, приводя к снижению мотивации, ухудшению результатов, депрессивным симптомам и другим формам дезадаптивного поведения. Актуальность темы обусловлена усилением тренировочных нагрузок, ростом социально-психологического давления и увеличением распространённости ментальных нарушений, таких как тревожность и депрессия, среди спортсменов.

Особое внимание уделено казахстанскому контексту, где ограниченная психологическая поддержка и высокие общественные ожидания создают дополнительное психоэмоциональное напряжение. В работе использован количественный анализ для оценки взаимосвязи между стрессом, тревожностью и выгоранием, а также их совокупного влияния на деструктивное поведение. Установлено, что хронический стресс и повышенная тревожность тесно связаны с эмоциональным выгоранием, которое усиливает проявления деструктивного поведения. Сделан вывод о необходимости внедрения комплексных программ психологической профилактики и поддержки, направленных на сохранение психического здоровья и развитие устойчивости спортсменов на всех этапах их профессиональной карьеры.

Ключевые слова: стресс, тревожность, выгорание, аутодеструктивное поведение, психическое здоровье, спортсмены.

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