



Implementing Self-compassion Strategies with Female College Gymnasts

Mandi Rodriguez & Vicki Ebbeck

To cite this article: Mandi Rodriguez & Vicki Ebbeck (2015) Implementing Self-compassion Strategies with Female College Gymnasts, Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 6:1, 44-53, DOI: [10.1080/21520704.2014.991052](https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2014.991052)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2014.991052>



Published online: 31 Dec 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 219



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Implementing Self-compassion Strategies with Female College Gymnasts

MANDI RODRIGUEZ and VICKI EBBECK

Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, USA

This article describes practical strategies that can be used to infuse self-compassion into practice and competition. While the target audience is women's gymnastic coaches, the concepts that are discussed have relevance for coaches, educators, and practitioners in an array of sport and physical activity settings. Strategies are described and then a brief critique is provided of the benefits as well as challenges of each activity from a coach's perspective. The aim is to present self-compassion as a multifaceted psychological construct that is a valuable, albeit underutilized, tool for coaches and athletes seeking optimal performance as well as personal well being.

KEYWORDS *coaching, motivation, self-perceptions*

Women's gymnastics is a sport in which perfection is pursued and even attainable. As an outcome of the scoring system and inherent goal to achieve a perfect 10.0, college gymnasts often experience a high degree of pressure, not only from themselves, but also from their teammates, coaches, support staff, community, and university. There are a multitude of possible scenarios, however, where a gymnast is confronted with imperfection that can disrupt a gymnast's positive mental state and cause her to lose focus or motivation during practice and competition. By demonstrating the psychological construct of self-compassion toward themselves, these athletes will have the power to overcome their mistakes and minimize or eliminate the negative impact of the mistake moving forward.

This article will describe practical strategies for women's gymnastic coaches that can be used to infuse self-compassion into practice and competition. While the target audience is women's gymnastic coaches, the concepts

Address correspondence to Vicki Ebbeck, College of Public Health and Human Sciences, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331, USA. E-mail: vicki.ebbeck@oregonstate.edu

that are discussed certainly have relevance for coaches, educators, and practitioners in an array of sport and physical activity settings. The strategies to be discussed in this case example have been utilized in the real-world setting, demonstrating what is possible and providing insights to assist other coaches in attempting to adopt similar strategies. The aim of this article is to translate the concept of self-compassion to ideas that are meaningful and relevant to performers seeking perfection in their athletic pursuits.

THE NATURE OF SELF-COMPASSION

According to Neff (2003), self-compassion “involves being touched by and open to one’s own suffering, not avoiding or disconnected from it, generating the desire to alleviate one’s suffering and to heal oneself with kindness” (p. 87). Neff explains that self-compassion is comprised of three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness is being understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than berating ourselves with self-criticism. Common humanity refers to the recognition that suffering and feelings of inadequacy are part of the shared human experience; that is, we are not alone in these experiences. Finally, mindfulness signifies a balanced approach in that negative feelings and thoughts are not suppressed or exaggerated, rather they are observed and acknowledged. These three components of self-compassion are considered by Neff to be conceptually distinct yet they interact to enhance one another.

Individuals who practice compassion toward themselves generally demonstrate greater psychological health than those with low levels of self-compassion. Thus, a compassionate attitude toward oneself is associated with a range of beneficial psychological outcomes, including less neurotic perfectionism and lower anxiety (Neff, 2003). Furthermore, self-compassion is associated with a greater use of positive cognitive restructuring, as opposed to avoidance and escape strategies (Allen & Leary, 2010). As demonstrated by Breines and Chen (2012), having an accepting approach to personal failure through self-compassion may create a strong motivation for individuals to better themselves. Their study revealed that self-compassion led to increased self-improvement motivation across scenarios pertaining to a moral transgression, personal weakness, and test failure. Moreover, Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, and DeLongis (2013) reported that a self-compassion intervention was effective in assisting women athletes, who self-identified as being self-critical, to manage self-criticism, rumination, and concern over mistakes.

Self-compassion is not passivity or inaction with regard to weaknesses perceived in the self (Neff, 2003). Quite the opposite, self-compassion means that actions for ideal functioning and health are encouraged with kindness

and patience. Self-compassion also varies greatly from the construct of self-esteem, as it is not grounded in the evaluations of self and others with regard to performance, or in accordance with ideal standards (Neff, 2003). Rather, self-compassion removes the whole self-evaluation process, focusing instead on feelings of compassion toward oneself and acknowledging the aspect of common humanity rather than engaging in self-judgment.

IMPLEMENTATION OF SELF-COMPASSION INTO GYMNASTICS

Our goal is to share the lead author's experience as an assistant coach experimenting with strategies to promote self-compassion in a college gymnastics program. Strategies that were utilized across a season are described, and then a brief critique is provided of the benefits and challenges of each activity from the coach's perspective. These strategies were employed at a Division-I university. Throughout implementation, the gymnastics team maintained a ranking in the top 12 nationally, and was comprised of 15 athletes, both scholarship and non-scholarship. The assistant coach herself had competed as a Division-I gymnast and has been in her current position for three years.

According to Weinberg and Williams (2010), for psychological skills to be of maximum value, athletes must consciously and consistently utilize mental training methods, which requires a high level of commitment. Consequently, implementing new skills or techniques into a competitive athletic setting will always require buy-in from athletes and coaches alike. As is the case with self-compassion, a topic that arguably has received little to no attention in the gymnastics world, it is important that the self-compassion program be understood and supported by the coaching staff, external sport psychology consultant, and athletes. Therefore, athletes and coaches received separate orientation sessions before the start of the program, in which self-compassion was described, the plan for the meetings and curriculum was made transparent, and the option to participate or not participate was emphasized. Additional conversations with the sport psychology consultant were also held that received full support and encouragement to move forward with the program.

Meetings that were typically an hour in duration occurred weekly or biweekly, and worked best when scheduled on the days that the gymnasts did not have practice so that the group could spend time in a personal and confidential setting without the worry of outside distractions. The meetings were comprised of group activities, distribution and explanation of worksheets, and group debriefings. In order for the implementation of the self-compassion strategies into gymnastics practices as well as daily routines to be successful, it was vital to create a climate in which the athletes felt comfortable discussing and applying the strategies. As time passed, athlete-to-athlete, coach-to-athlete, and athlete-to-coach reinforcement of key phrases

or strategies began to develop, which was arguably a result of the athletes feeling empowered by the new strategies they were exploring.

MODIFIED SELF-COMPASSION STRATEGIES FOR THE PHYSICAL DOMAIN

Utilizing Neff's website (www.self-compassion.org), the strategies presented below for cultivating self-compassion were modified for a gymnastics setting. These strategies, which garnered the greatest feedback during discussion groups, created the strongest response in the gym, and were most successful overall, encompassed all aspects of self-compassion: self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity. Each strategy is described and then discussed in terms of benefits and challenges.

How Would You Treat a Teammate?

As an introductory exercise to self-kindness, the team is asked to complete a writing assignment that was created by Neff (2003) and modified to fit the gymnastics setting. On the worksheet, the gymnasts are instructed to consider a time when a teammate felt really bad about herself and struggled during practice or competition. The gymnasts write down how they would treat this teammate including what they would say to her and what type of tone they would use. Next, the gymnasts are instructed to consider a scenario or circumstance when they felt bad about themselves or struggled in practice or competition. The gymnasts are then asked to record how they responded to themselves in these situations, including the words and tone used. After completing this portion of the exercise, the gymnasts evaluate if there was a difference between their two responses (where individuals tend to be more harsh towards themselves than others), as well as what factors or fears might cause them to react the way they did. Finally, the gymnasts are asked how things may be different if they responded the same way to themselves as they did to their teammate in times of hardship and suffering.

The exercise is beneficial in getting the athletes to initially examine and become cognizant of the nature of their self-talk. Athletes might grapple with why they tend to be so self-critical and harsh toward themselves, but even if they cannot provide answers at this stage with regard to why they do what they do, this exercise offers a mechanism for raising awareness about what it is they tend to do. This is an impactful introductory activity to use with athletes as it familiarizes them with how they react to themselves during their own suffering, as well as planting the idea of demonstrating compassion toward their teammate during times of difficulty, which was cited as a key strategy for coping with setbacks in research evaluating the experiences of

high-performance female athletes (Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014). The element of group discussion about reactions to the activity may help athletes identify more easily with others that have had similar experiences and recognize that they are not alone in being self-critical. This activity can result in more conscious thought by the athletes toward their actions and reactions during times of negative emotions.

Self-compassion Break

Neff offers a Self-Compassion Break, which is a strategy that involves an individual taking a break from a difficult situation and working through the self-compassion process and its three components. This activity was slightly modified to focus specifically on gymnastics. It begins with the athletes visualizing a scenario or situation in gymnastics that is difficult and causes them stress and discomfort. The three self-compassion cues offered by Neff include (1) This is a moment of suffering (mindfulness), (2) Suffering is a part of life (common humanity), and (3) May I be kind to myself (self-kindness). For this activity, gymnasts spend a week formulating their own cues for this process and determine what worked the best for them individually. An example of the self-compassion break with regard to the gymnastics setting may be as follows: (1) This is a hard day, (2) Every gymnast falls, and (3) May I let it go.

This activity may be met with initial skepticism. Athletes' reaction at the outset can be that they do not have adequate time in a given difficult moment to go through this 3-step process. However, while many athletes may not have utilized the steps of the process consciously and systematically, many of them already use self-talk in order to overcome a difficult situation. In this respect, doing this exercise is a good way for gymnasts to solidify the cues they want to use during frustrating and challenging moments. Each individual is encouraged to experiment with different cues until they discover terms and language that feel natural, helpful, and authentic. This activity can be instrumental for recognizing how to cultivate self-compassion during a difficult time and move forward.

Identifying What We Really Want

Another strategy created by Neff that was modified for use by the gymnasts was a worksheet that first requires gymnasts to consider the ways in which they use self-criticism as a motivator and identify what, if any, personal trait for which they criticize themselves (e.g., too lazy, too overweight, etc.). Next, the gymnasts are asked to create a kinder and more caring way to motivate themselves to make a change if necessary, including what language could be used to encourage them to do something different while still being

supportive. They might, for example, not chastise themselves for their weight so much as assess whether their nutritional habits are healthy and determine if a change in their eating patterns might be a way to take better care of themselves.

This activity enables gymnasts to be cognizant of the pain their self-judgment causes them as well as the support that is provided by self-compassion. Ideally, there would be time allotted to debrief this activity as group discussion allows the athletes to recognize the element of common humanity in each others' suffering and self-criticism. This exercise is also useful in allowing the athletes to identify what, if any, trait about them receives overly harsh criticism and how they can improve their reaction to themselves as well as take action toward improving any shortcomings in a positive manner.

NOVEL SELF-COMPASSION STRATEGIES FOR THE PHYSICAL DOMAIN

The following three exercises were not modifications of existing self-compassion strategies, but new strategies created by the authors specifically for the gymnasts to align with their particular needs and circumstance. One incorporated the use of beads as a concrete prompt that reinforced the idea of being mindful about one's thinking. A second was designed to counter athletes equating self-compassion with "self-coddling" that could create resistance because athletes often feel they need to be harsh on themselves and self-critical to get motivated and maximize their performance (Mosewich et al., 2014). The third strategy aligned with a message communicated by the coaches that many unfavorable outcomes can be prevented, and emphasized the fact that preventing suffering is part of self-compassion along with responding to suffering (Neff, 2003).

A Bead for your Thoughts

Gymnasts are provided with two different colored beads, where we opted for beads consistent with the school colors, as well as two small containers. Beads of one color signified every time gymnasts were aware of their negative self-talk or self-criticism, while beads of the other color showed every instance positive self-talk or affirmation was used. Athletes bring the containers with them throughout their day, changing the beads from the supply container to the output container each time they recognize their self-talk, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. They log their results to identify any personal trends (e.g., times of day they are most mindful, how their

mindfulness during practice compares to the rest of their day, how many times they use one color of beads versus the other color of beads, etc.).

This activity is an excellent introduction to mindfulness as a component of self-compassion, and an enjoyable and constructive way for the athletes to notice the amount and type of self-talk they employ. This activity is perhaps best utilized at the beginning of the program to get the athletes familiar with becoming mindful of their thoughts and self-talk. Also, this is an effective method to begin grounding a focus on compassion in sensory-based processes (e.g., use of objects). In support of this, Lee (2005) suggested that use of certain smells can link or cue feelings of compassion.

If athletes forget to bring their containers with them or mark down the bead count for the day, they can just indicate that on the worksheet. While it is important for the athletes to track their beads for a specified amount of time (about 10 days worked well), it is also not unusual for them to forget a day. Many gymnasts find it easier to keep track of their beads electronically or by using a small notepad after the first few days of taking their containers everywhere with them.

The athletes responded with enthusiasm and positive regard for this activity. It was especially exciting to notice the terminology that developed over time, both between the athletes and the coaches and amongst the athletes themselves, which involved them pointing out when someone was heard verbalizing a bead thought of a particular color in reference to a negative or positive comment, as in “That was a black bead thought.” When possible, it is good to get coaches involved by having them monitor their own bead count alongside their athletes.

Self-compassion Is Not Self-coddling

This strategy relates self-compassion to the physical necessities athletes require to be successful in an effort to counter the notion that self-compassion is comparable to self-coddling. Athletes are challenged in this exercise with questions such as, “Would you withhold water from yourself during your 4-hour practice to be tough on yourself? Would you refrain from eating breakfast before practice because you need to be hard on yourself? Would you not sleep the night before an important competition because you feel the need to be strict with yourself?” Athletes consistently and readily can discern the benefits derived from these performance aids and recognize that taking care of themselves with adequate water and sleep and nutrition does not make them less motivated but rather better prepares them for competition.

Perfectionism is a construct characterized by setting unrealistic goals, a self-focus on performance, and high self-criticism over flaws and mistakes (Ellison & Partridge, 2012). In a study by Mosewich, Crocker, and Kowalski (2014), athletes expressed that they were inherently self-critical as part of

their competitive nature, and that self-criticism was necessary to assess and solve any problems, which would make way for improvement. However, the authors noted that the athletes in actuality were really trying to learn from problems by using constructive self-evaluation that allowed them to avoid ruminating on a past setback. This suggests that self-criticism is not necessary to be successful. Essentially, negativity in the form of self-criticism can have a damaging impact on performance that the authors noted results in “an increased discrepancy between present status and desired standard, which athletes label ‘perfection’” (Mosewich et al., 2014, p. 13).

This activity can provide a breakthrough moment for some athletes. They recognize the many other ways in which they take care of themselves and that hydration during competition is no more self-coddling than concern for oneself during a difficult time, or sleep deprivation is no more helpful than going without a kind word. In those cases where there are athletes that remain resistant or doubtful toward the benefits and importance of self-compassion, this exercise becomes especially valuable. Athletes begin to understand that in harboring negative thoughts or self-criticism in order to make themselves tougher, they are actually harming themselves and their performance.

Self-compassion Is Prevention

It is important to recognize that individuals with self-compassion will try to prevent themselves from experiencing suffering in the first place (Neff, 2003). Therefore, self-compassion should inspire proactive behaviors aimed at promoting or maintaining well-being. In this exercise, a worksheet is created for distribution to athletes. The first part of the worksheet includes a two-column table in which the athletes fill out one “prevention strategy” for every “adverse outcome.” For example, if an adverse outcome is “not being in physical shape for pre-season training,” the prevention strategy to avoid suffering could be “keeping up with offseason conditioning and maintaining healthy eating.” The worksheet is divided into two parts; prevention strategies for individuals and prevention strategies based around situations faced by the team.

The athletes can work in pairs to fill out the table relating to the team, and work individually for the table specific to themselves. This exercise works best when the prevention strategies created are then discussed as a large group, as this is a means for each team member to hear ways of preventing adverse outcomes that they have experienced in the past. Additionally, it is valuable for each team member to discuss what she can do as an individual, which will not only contribute to the group effort as a whole, but also allow for teammates to help keep that gymnast accountable. Overall, this activity shows self-compassion in a new light (prevention of suffering

and not just reaction to suffering) and puts it into a very literal and relatable context for the athletes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is not uncommon in American society for young athletes to be taught to have “mental toughness,” learn to “push through the pain,” and be encouraged to win at all costs by doing “whatever it takes.” It is this mindset that can offer an explanation regarding the resistance demonstrated by a few of the athletes who participated in this program. Understandably, utilizing self-compassion in sport can be vastly different than anything many of them have ever tried before. Thus, introducing self-compassion strategies during the offseason or preseason may have advantageous effects as the athletes will have more time to process and practice this new set of tools and begin to counter the engrained need to be critical of oneself in sport and physical activity contexts.

For the aforementioned athletes, self-compassion was not only encouraged for its usefulness in gymnastics, but also in areas such as academic endeavors, body image, nutritional choices and physical activity behaviors, in their quest to be successful. The literature supports that self-compassion is linked to the inclination to display mastery goals (focused on understanding the material) rather than performance goals (focused on evaluating ability in comparison to others) in academic situations (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005), fewer body concerns independently of self-esteem (Wasylikiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012), facilitating people to maintain their diets (Adams & Leary, 2007), and lower levels of obligatory exercise (Magnus, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2010). Self-compassion is a multifaceted psychological construct that is relevant to all individuals in countless aspects of life and certainly a valuable, albeit underutilized, tool for coaches and athletes seeking optimal performance as well as personal well being.

REFERENCES

- Adams, C. E., & Leary, M. R. (2007). Promoting self-compassionate attitudes toward eating among restrictive and guilty eaters. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 26*(10), 1120–1144.
- Allen, A. B., & Leary, M. R. (2010). Self-compassion, stress, and coping. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 4*, 107–118.
- Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2012). Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 38*(9), 1133–1143. doi:10.1177/0146167212445599
- Ellison, J., & Partridge, J. A. (2012). Relationships between shame-coping, fear of failure, and perfectionism in college athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 35*(1), 19–39.

- Lee, D. A. (2005). The perfect nurturer: A model to develop a compassionate mind within the context of cognitive therapy. In P. Gilbert (Ed.), *Compassion: Conceptualizations, research and use in psychotherapy* (pp. 326–351). London, England: Brunner-Routledge.
- Magnus, C. M., Kowalski, K. C., & McHugh, T. L. F. (2010). The role of self-compassion in women's self-determined motives to exercise and exercise-related outcomes. *Self and Identity*, *9*(4), 363–382. doi:10.1080/15298860903135073
- Mosewich, A. D., Crocker, P. R. E., & Kowalski, K. C. (2014). Managing injury and other setbacks in sport: Experiences of (and resources for) high-performance women athletes. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise, and Health*, *6*, 182–204. doi:10.1080/2159676X.2013.766810
- Mosewich, A. D., Crocker, P.R.E., Kowalski, K.C., & DeLongis, A. (2013). Applying self-compassion in sport: An intervention with women athletes. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, *35*(5), 514–524.
- Neff, K. (2003). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, *2*(2), 85–101. doi:10.1080/15298860309032
- Neff, K. D., Hsieh, Y.-P., & DeJitterat, K. (2005). Self-compassion, achievement goals, and coping with academic failure. *Self and Identity*, *4*, 263–287. doi:10.1080/13576500444000317
- Wasylikiw, L., MacKinnon, A. L., & MacLellan, A. M. (2012). Exploring the link between self-compassion and body image in university women. *Body Image*, *9*(2), 236–245. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2012.01.007
- Weinberg, R. S., & Williams, J. M. (2010). Integrating and implementing a psychological skills training program. In J. M. Williams (Ed.), *Applied sport psychology* ((6th ed., pp. 361–391). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.