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**Article Title:** The Development of Self-Compassion Among Women Varsity Athletes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that contributed to the development of self-compassion among highly self-compassionate women varsity athletes. More specifically, the research question was: how did women varsity athletes with high self-compassion perceive they became self-compassionate? To purposefully sample participants, 114 women varsity athletes completed the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b). Ten athletes with high self-compassion scores then participated in individual interviews and a follow-up second interview. Data were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Analysis produced three main themes that contributed to the development of self-compassion: (a) role of parents (seeking and receiving help from parents, parents teaching self-kindness, parents putting experiences in perspective); (b) gaining self-awareness; and (c) learning from others (peers, siblings, coaches, sport psychologists). These findings provide insights into the ways in which self-compassion can be learned and taught, and have implications for practitioners who work with women athletes.

Keywords: parents, coaches, sport, childhood, adolescence, sport, mindfulness
Self-compassion is a form of compassion directed toward the self that can facilitate mental health (Neff, 2003a; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). It is comprised of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Practicing self-kindness requires individuals to be kind to themselves, particularly in times of struggle or failure, instead of being harsh and self-critical. Common humanity encourages individuals to understand that they are not alone in their experience, and to embrace the innate imperfection of humanity. Mindfulness is the ability to be aware of one’s thoughts and feelings, keeping them in balanced awareness.

In the general psychology literature, self-compassion has been associated with improved life satisfaction, wellbeing, happiness, optimism, and positive affect (Neff, 2009; Neff & McGehee, 2010). Individuals who are high in self-compassion are capable of interpreting adverse events in a positive manner (Allen & Leary, 2010). Accordingly, high self-compassion has been associated with improved coping with unpleasant life events (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007), reduced body dissatisfaction (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2014; Breines, Toole, Tu, & Chen, 2013), and reduced negative affect and depression (Diedrich, Grant, Hofmann, Hiller, & Berking, 2014). Self-compassion also has the potential for neutralizing negative emotions, promoting positive states of mind, and attenuating the effects of negative self-evaluation (Neff, 2009).

Although self-compassion has been conceptualized as a healthy self-attitude and an approach akin to a trait (Neff, 2003a; 2003b), there is evidence that it is malleable and can be fostered (e.g., Adams & Leary, 2007; Bluth, Gaylord, Campo, Mullarkey, & Hobbs, 2016; Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & Delongis, 2013, Neff & Germer, 2013), suggesting self-compassion could also been seen as a set of skills or resources to be developed and applied. But while self-compassion can change and be taught, little is known
about how self-compassion is developed. This is a gap in the literature and, as Neff (2011) suggested, “an exciting new direction for research concerns how self-compassion might be developed…” (p. 9).

We focused on the development of self-compassion among women athletes in the current study. Women athletes have reported difficulties with managing the evaluative characteristics of the sport environment, including appearance- and performance-based evaluations made by the self and others (Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014). Self-compassion may assist in attenuating evaluative concerns and in managing the challenges and demands of sport (Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Mosewich et al., 2014). Previous research has also shown that self-compassion is a useful approach for athletes coping with adversity (Mosewich et al., 2013), including poor performances, injuries, and performance plateaus (Mosewich et al., 2014). In a study with women athletes, Mosewich, and colleagues (2011) found self-compassion was negatively related to shame proneness, guilt-free shame proneness, social physique anxiety, objectified body consciousness, fear of failure, and fear of negative evaluation. Conversely, self-compassion was positively related to shame-free guilt proneness and authentic pride, both of which can be considered adaptive.

In addition to a role in managing negative events, self-compassion has also been associated with wellbeing among athletes. In a study with women athletes, Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, and Sabiston (2014) showed self-compassion and eudaimonic well-being were highly correlated, with both constructs positively related to responsibility, initiative, and self-determination. In follow-up interviews with participants, they reported that positivity, perseverance, and responsibility could be positively influenced by the practice of self-compassion. Similarly, Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, and Sabiston (2015) showed that, in young women athletes, increased self-compassion was
associated with increased autonomy, greater meaning and enjoyment in sport, along with increased body appreciation. Additionally, self-compassionate athletes had more positive reactions to adverse situations in sport and fewer negative reactions to adversity than athletes with lower self-compassion.

In light of these encouraging findings about the benefits of self-compassion in sport, several researchers have noted the need to develop a better understanding of how women athletes develop self-compassion. Reis, Kowalski, Ferguson, Sabiston, Sedgwick, and Crocker (2015) stated that “understanding how self-compassion develops, and how it could best be developed, among women athletes remains as an important focus for future research” (p. 24). Similarly, Mosewich et al. (2011) highlighted the need for future research to examine “how best to foster a sense of self-compassion in young women athletes” (p. 120). If self-compassion is to be taught and learned, it is essential that researchers and practitioners have more insight into how the practice is developed in the context of sport.

Interventions involving psychoeducation sessions and writing exercises can increase self-compassion among athletes (e.g., Mosewich et al., 2013). Furthermore, self-compassion may develop through social interactions (Mosewich et al., 2014). In a qualitative study, Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson, and McHugh (2010) investigated how young, active women applied self-compassion toward their body image. One finding from the thematic analysis was that self-compassion was developed within a supportive social network and through positive experiences with role models. Other research (not conducted with athletes) has shown that parents can play a role in the development of self-compassion (e.g., Neff & McGehee, 2010; Pepping, Davis, O’Donovan, & Pal, 2010). Hence, it appears that developing self-compassion is an individual process facilitated by interactions with others, but the personal processing and types of interactions
that may create pathways to the development of self-compassion have not been adequately accounted for in the sport psychology literature to date (Mosewich et al., 2011; Reis et al., 2015). Therefore, to address these gaps in the literature, the purpose of this study was to explore factors that contributed to the development of self-compassion among highly self-compassionate women varsity athletes. More specifically, the research question was: how did women varsity athletes with high self-compassion perceive they became self-compassionate?

**Method**

**Purposeful Sampling**

Purposeful sampling involves recruiting participants who can provide the ‘best’ and ‘most’ information to address the purpose of a study (Mayan, 2009). This study required a sample of athletes who were highly self-compassionate. Therefore, a homogeneous sampling strategy was used (as recommended by Smith, 2017), which is appropriate when the purpose of a study is to address characteristics specific to a particular group of interest (in this case, we required women athletes with high self-compassion). To sample athletes with high self-compassion, having obtained institutional research ethics board approval and participants’ consent, 114 women varsity athletes from a Canadian university completed the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003b). This 26-item measure is scored on a Likert scale (ranging from 1-5) and has five questions that measure self-kindness, five questions that measure self-judgement, and four questions each for common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Self-judgement, isolation, and over-identification are reversed scored. The composite self-compassion score was calculated by adding up the mean of each subscale and dividing that total by six.

The composite SCS score had an internal consistency of .89, which is comparable to results with another sample of women athletes reported by Mosewich et al. (2011; α = .87). The composite
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self-compassion score for all 114 participants was 3.09 ($SD = 0.53$) out of a maximum score of five. Individuals with scores equal to or greater than 3.50 are considered to be high in self-compassion (Neff, 2003b). Twenty-nine athletes had a score that was equal to or greater than 3.50. Initially, the 10 participants with the highest self-compassion scores were invited (via e-mail) to participate in the interviews. Three participants did not respond to repeated e-mail invitations. As such, the next three highest scoring athletes were invited to participate in the qualitative part of this study. The overall mean self-compassion score for the 10 interviewed participants was 3.95 ($SD = 0.19$), with a range of 3.73 to 4.23.

Participants

Interview participants were aged 18-23 years and participated in the sports of tennis ($n = 1$), rugby ($n = 1$), basketball ($n = 1$), soccer ($n = 3$), hockey ($n = 1$), swimming ($n = 1$), and volleyball ($n = 2$) in the Canadian interuniversity sport system. Two athletes were in their first year of eligibility, three athletes were in their second year of eligibility, two athletes were in their third year of eligibility, and three athletes were in their fourth year of eligibility. They represented a university with a strong athletic program that, in each sport, regularly competes for conference and national championships. Given we were interested in recruiting self-compassionate athletes, rather than athletes from a particular sport, no attempt was made to restrict participation to any sport type (e.g., individual or team). Furthermore, we are not aware of any evidence showing self-compassion varies by sport type.

Qualitative Methodology

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003) was used to address the purpose of this study. It is an appropriate methodological selection when the purpose of a study involves gaining insights into participants’ subjective experiences and understanding how they
processed and understood events (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). More specifically, the aim of IPA is to explore how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds and the meanings that particular experiences and events hold for them (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Given that we were interested in participants’ perceptions of how they became self-compassionate, the focus on their perceptions of experiences and events and the meaning ascribed to them was important, because it enabled us to focus on what these experiences and events meant for participants with reference to the development of their self-compassion. Furthermore, in IPA, “the researcher has to interpret people’s mental and emotional state from what they say” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 54), which means that the researcher plays an important role in making interpretations about how participants’ perceptions of experiences and events contribute to their current understandings of themselves. In other words, IPA involves understanding and interpretation, which was useful for the current study because we wanted to understand participants’ perceptions of factors that contributed to self-compassion and also interpret (using previous conceptions of self-compassion as a guide) how these factors contributed to self-compassion. The interpretative aspect of IPA was important because people may not realize they are self-compassionate, and the language used to describe self-compassion in the literature is not language used in everyday life. Furthermore, IPA focuses on understanding the individual experience before moving to looking at shared experiences across individuals (which is what we wanted to do in this study), and includes very clear descriptions of the analytic strategies (e.g., Smith et al., 2009), making it useful for neophyte phenomenologists (Smith, 2017).

This IPA was conducted from an interpretive paradigm, which involves epistemological constructionism and ontological relativism (Mayan, 2009). Epistemologically, this research was concerned with the subjective experience in which each participant developed a practice of self-
compassion, with the research interest focusing on understanding and interpretation. Ontologically, it was based on the assumption that individuals hold unique perceptions of their social reality, but there are some shared perceptions that can be identified via analysis. The analytic strategies used in this study involved the identification of these shared perceptions.

**Interviews**

The lead author, who received extensive training and had completed interviews for unrelated studies in the past, conducted all the interviews. The first interview lasted, on average, 45 minutes. The interview guide was informed by the IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009) and qualitative interviewing literatures (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The questions were developed based on those used in previous studies and findings from previous research (e.g., Mosewich et al., 2014; Sutherland, Kowalski, Ferguson, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Crocker, 2014). Prior to data collection a pilot interview was conducted with a woman athlete. Changes to the interview guide (e.g., structure, question wording, and clarity) were made following the pilot interview.

The interview guide began with an introduction (information about the study and instructions for participants), demographic questions, and warm-up questions to help put participant at ease in the interview setting. Main questions then focused on adverse experiences in sport. Participants were asked to describe experiences of adversity when they had coped well and, conversely, when they had coped poorly. Probing questions were used to obtain specific examples, clarify details, and to invite further explanation of experiences. At this point none of the participants had been told this was a study of self-compassion and the term was not used in the recruitment materials to avoid unduly leading them.
During the next phase of the interview participants were ‘debriefed’ and told that the focus of this study was self-compassion and the questionnaire they completed was a measure of self-compassion. The interviewer explained that self-compassion has three main components (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) and each component was described (see interview guide). Participants were told they had scored highly on the SCS (Neff, 2003b) and were given a breakdown of their scores. They were then asked, “What is your initial reaction to finding out you have high self-compassion?” “Do you agree that you are self-compassionate?” All participants agreed that they were self-compassionate.

Athletes were then asked a follow-up question of “How do you think you became self-compassionate?” and their responses were probed for details and specific examples (e.g., if a participant said her parents were important, the interviewer probed, in detail, for examples of what parents did to help her become self-compassionate). Next, participants were asked a series of detailed questions in a more structured manner pertaining to the development of specific components of self-compassion (i.e., self-kindness, mindfulness, common humanity, self-judgement, over-identification, and isolation). Having explained the component in lay terms, participants were asked to explain if and how they learned to develop these skills. To conclude this section participants were asked summary questions to revisit how they may have developed self-compassionate practices (e.g., “Can you tell me about any times in which you may have been exposed to self-compassion and some self-compassionate practices?” “Can you think of a time when you may have learned one of the components of self-compassion [self-kindness, common humanity, or mindfulness?]”). In closing, participants were asked to give their advice to young athletes about coping with adversity, what types of educational resources they think would be useful, and if they had anything else to add.
Second Interview

Approximately three weeks after the initial interview (which provided sufficient time to transcribe and initially analyse their interview), participants completed a 30-minute follow-up interview. There was no formal interview guide for the second interview because questions were primarily based on the participants’ responses during their first interview along with the results from the initial analysis. The second interview was free-flowing and conversational, but some common questions were posed, which included: “The purpose of this study was to look at how you learned to become self-compassionate. Could you comment on your process with learning and practicing self-compassion?” “Can you tell me about any more examples of where you have been kind to yourself after a difficult situation in sport?” “How do you think you learned to pay attention to your thoughts/emotions?” “Can you speak a bit more about how your parents helped you learn to be compassionate towards yourself?” In addition, individualized questions were designed to elucidate further information about any key issues or themes based on each participant’s first interview. We focused on understanding more about the experiences that contributed to the development of self-compassion. Hence, the second interviews provided participants to reflect and provide further elaboration on the development of self-compassion and aided our interpretation of the data (e.g., in terms of helping to establish that the themes we identified were plausibly connected to the development of self-compassion rather than ‘merely’ features of the participants’ lives and experiences more generally).

Data Analysis

Audio files were transcribed verbatim. Identifying information (e.g., names of other people mentioned during an interview) was removed from the transcripts and participants were assigned a pseudonym. Data analysis was conducted manually using Microsoft Word. Consistent with IPA
methodology (Smith et al., 2009), data analysis began once the first data were collected and continued in an iterative manner throughout the data collection period. Data analysis procedures in IPA involve a series of steps designed to identify themes, beginning with a focus on the individual before moving to establishing themes that represent shared perceptions across individuals (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis was led by the first author and regularly reviewed by a co-author. Data analysis moved through six stages: (1) reading and re-reading, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, (5) moving to next case, and (6) looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). This analytic process repeated for each transcript and was replicated for the data collected via the second interviews (following deBeaudrap, Dunn, & Holt, 2016; Lee, Causgrove Dunn, & Holt, 2014).

Throughout the analysis we sought to identify themes and, through our interpretations, linked them to aspects of self-compassion, focusing on how the participants’ experiences contributed to the development of their self-compassion in the context of sport. As analysis progressed emerging themes were discussed among members of the research team. Initial findings were also presented to graduate students unconnected to the research, who acted as a group of ‘critical friends’ and provided feedback on the clarity and the extent to which data extracts ‘fit’ with the themes presented. During the final stages of analysis a written narrative was produced, which was subjected to further scrutiny by all members of the research team. Consistent with the methodological approach and philosophical underpinnings of this study, we identified shared commonalities between the participants’ experiences. Those themes that were most common (i.e., shared or convergent; Smith, 2017) are presented as the results.
‘Goodness’ Considerations

Smith (2011) provided some guidelines for ‘what makes a good IPA paper.’ It should be noted that these guidelines have been debated; both criticized for being too general (e.g., Chamberlain, 2011) and praised for providing specific guidance (e.g., Shaw, 2011). We drew on some of these guidelines in designing the process of the study and reporting the ‘product’ of this paper. We did not stringently apply the criteria but rather adopted a more relativist approach to select criteria that were most appropriate for this study. Smith (2011) argued that ‘good’ IPA studies should have a clear focus and typically involve homogeneous samples, which we addressed by articulating the purpose/research question and how it was designed to add to the literature and via the homogenous sampling strategy used to recruit individuals with high self-compassion. IPA studies must have strong data, derived from good interviews. We attempted to produce strong data by ensuring the interviewer received training (including conducting a pilot interview) and engaging the participants in two interviews. We also addressed sensitivity to content (Yardley, 2008) by ensuring interview questions consistently connected back to the context of sport (rather than self-compassion in life in general), which was important because the SCS (Neff, 2003b) is not specific to sport. The lead researcher (a former woman athlete who retired from varsity sport due to injury) maintained a reflexive journal, shared her experience with participants during the first interview, and focused on maintaining a balanced awareness of her interpretations of the participants’ accounts. She also reflected on her own experiences of excessive self-criticism to provide a sense of perspective on the participants’ accounts. In addition, the other two researchers on this project engaged in regular conversations with the lead researcher about the data and the analysis, and provided critical and supportive feedback on the emerging results. This reflective
engagement was important because the results of IPA studies are co-created by researchers and participants (Smith et al., 2009).

In terms of rigorous presentation of the results, Smith (2011) recommended for larger IPA sample sizes (10 participants or more), researchers should give illustrations from at least three or four participants per theme and also provide some indication of how prevalence of a theme is determined. We adhered to this (i.e., minimum of three quotes per theme, used themes reported by 7-10 participants, with the exception of working with a sport psychologist, which was reported by six participants but seemed particularly germane to report in a sport psychology study). IPA analysis should be interpretive and not just descriptive. In this regard we tried to link back to dimensions of self-compassion during the analysis and, in the presentation of results, attempted to show our interpretations of how each theme related to the development of self-compassion. We further interpreted the findings in the discussion section. Of course, specific techniques do not ensure the quality of a study but, combined, such steps contribute incrementally to increasing its methodological rigour (Mayan, 2009).

Results
Role of Parents in the Development of Self-Compassion

The first major theme was the role of parents in the development of self-compassion. This is presented as a theme in its own right because the parents appeared to play a very important role (later, we describe the role of other people who, while important, played a less central role than parents). Indeed, the vital importance of parents was captured succinctly by Laura, a soccer player, who said: “I think it all started with my parents being super loving and supportive and basically making me love myself or just be self-compassionate. Yeah, it all started with them” (first interview). We identified three principal ways (presented as sub-themes) in which parents helped
participants to become self-compassionate in sport. Participants sought and received help from their parents, parents taught participants to be kind to themselves, and helped participants keep experiences in perspective.

**Seeking and receiving help from parents.** Parents created an environment in which participants were capable of seeking out and accepting help instead of isolating themselves. We interpreted this as a feature of common humanity (in the sense of participants understanding they are not alone in their experience). For instance, in terms of seeking help, Jane (a tennis player) talked about how her parents were always available for her. She said:

> My parents were always really receptive with it so I’d always [ask] them for help with things… my parents have always been like ‘if you’re stressed, if you need anything just, you can talk to us.’ And so I’ve always been like that (first interview).

Brynlee, a soccer player, reported a similar relationship with her mother. She explained:

> “… my mom, if I am upset about something that happened in the game or something I’ll talk to her because she’ll let me vent and stuff…” (second interview). Kyra, a swimmer, discussed how she could talk to her father if she was struggling with adversity in her sport:

> [I talked] a lot of my dad because he was always the one that I would go talk to if, you know, if I wasn’t feeling well. I think even a couple years ago I was sick one year… and so the meet right before I was sick I was swimming just really, really bad, and so I called him… He always helped me work through those things… (second interview).

The ways in which parents provided support seemed to be important. Jessie (a hockey player) explained how her parents provided support after games:

> They watch all my games and everything and so they know when I’m going to be upset about certain things… they don’t try to just force themselves upon [me], they don’t try to just cover me up, but they just chat with me slowly, and they wait for me to talk about it, and [they are] awesome (second interview).
Whereas some of these quotes suggest parents played a role in helping their children deal with adversity in general, our interpretation (supported by the further reflections provided by participants during the second interview) was that parents created an environment for their children where they recognized their common humanity through seeking and receiving support, instead of isolating themselves in difficult moments in their sporting careers. Hence, seeking and receiving help from parents contributed to the development of self-compassion in terms of creating an understanding of common humanity.

**Parents teaching self-kindness.** Participants explained that their parents taught them about engaging in positive self-talk, which we interpreted to reflect the self-compassion component of self-kindness (i.e., being kind to oneself in times of struggle rather than being harsh and self-critical). For example, Paige, a volleyball player, discussed how her father advised her to be kind and compassionate to herself. She said sometimes he would tell her to “back off and show self-compassion for yourself and stop pushing yourself towards such a stressful situation, and he also just helps [me in] staying positive…” (second interview). Mariah, a soccer player, explained that her father helped her to understand the importance of being kind to herself (through self-talk). She explained that, “… my dad [was] the one to tell me, ‘OK, you need to think of this in a positive way instead of being so hard on yourself.’ So that’s when I started being more positive about everything really.” As the quote from Mariah suggests, the participants in this study were not necessarily predisposed to practice self-compassion (in our interpretation reflected by self-talk in this example) when they were young. Rather, it was something they learned and were guided by their parents to do. For instance, Jane discussed how when she was younger she struggled with harsh self-criticism. She explained how her parents helped her
to change her thought patterns during car rides after competitions. Her parents would tell her:

… ‘you know, don’t be so hard on yourself. Why are you freaking out? You played amazing.’ Anytime I picked myself apart as a kid or when I was playing sports or any of that, my mom [said] ‘don’t do that, it’s dumb, you’re only going to make yourself worse and you’re going to make yourself feel bad, don’t do that, stop doing that.’ They [parents] just made sure that I was always kind to myself. They stressed on that when I was little and growing up and even now (first interview).

Therefore, in these examples, parents helped participants learn about self-kindness (expressed through self-talk) and this contributed to the development of self-compassion.

**Parents putting experiences into perspective.** Parents taught participants skills that we interpreted as reflections of mindfulness (i.e., awareness of one’s thoughts and feelings) and self-kindness (i.e., being kind to oneself in times of struggle) by encouraging them to take a broader perspective, particularly in instances of adversity. Stella, a volleyball player, talked about how her parents helped her keep perspective as she recovered from an injury. She said, “My parents, they always like to put things in perspective and would remind me, ‘it’s only your first practice back’ or stuff like that” (first interview). Brynlee mentioned how keeping perspective helped her with her self-criticism when she said, “I think I’m always the hardest on myself out of everyone but my dad has drilled ‘keep it in perspective’ type thing” (first interview). This sense of perspective seems to suggest that Brynlee’s parents helped her to become more mindful of her thoughts and kinder to herself. Kyra also talked about how her family taught her to keep perspective and not get too caught up in failure. She said:

… a lot of it was my family I think and the way that they taught me how to react after something bad happens or how to deal with something that didn’t go the way you wanted it to. They just always told me ‘it’s okay’ instead of ‘oh you have to do this and you have to do well at this’… (second interview).
In this example, Kyra appears to be suggesting that by her parents being accepting she was able to react to situations with a more balanced sense of awareness.

**Gaining Self-Awareness**

The second major theme focused on participants’ personal ‘processing’ of past experiences. That is, by reflecting on their past experiences, participants gained self-awareness (which we interpreted as another important aspect of mindfulness, and ultimately self-compassion). Paige exemplified this when she said:

> … I know that I’ve had to deal with a lot of stuff over however many years I’ve played, and I’ve learned that not being self-compassionate is not a good thing. Because I’ve had experiences where I wasn’t [self-compassionate], and so now just valuing how important it is to stay positive just so you can still have passion for the sport… (first interview).

When asked to expand upon this during her second interview, Paige went on to say ‘…well you just learn from your mistakes, if you know something went well, then you are going to want to do that again, and if you know something was bad, you don’t want to do that again…’ (second interview).

Similarly, Taylor, a rugby player, explained how learning from experiences in sport helped her gain more perspective. She said:

> So obviously the more successful times were more fun, but the unsuccessful times I have learned a lot more from. So I do understand a lot more now with coaching decisions, and how different coaches act, and different teammates, and myself, I have just learned a lot more about myself too. So now that I’m 23 versus when I was younger, I am able to cope with things a lot better. I find I’m able to leave things, I’m able to get them out of my game, and I’m able just to play now (first interview).

This personal processing to gain a sense of perspective is consistent with (and likely connected to) the roles of parents in helping participants gain perspective. Furthermore, through her different sporting experiences, we suspect that Taylor learned not to over-identify (which is
the opposite of mindfulness) with adversity but to push it out of her game, applying a broader perspective to her environment. Similarly, we interpreted that the following quote from Jessie showed how her self-awareness helped her realize the negative impact over-identification had on her:

I think it was when I was pretty young, I knew when I would think too much about things I would just be off, and I couldn’t really bring myself back fast, so I just started not thinking about things too deeply. So that helped a lot (first interview).

Jessie elaborated on this process in the second interview when she said:

… I just learnt how I felt… nobody likes to feel bad or sad, and so I know that when I just become aware of what I feel, and what I feel at certain times, I was able to kind of create an atmosphere for myself that would make me feel the happiest, or the best (second interview).

Hence, our interpretation here is that having the ability to reflect upon and learn from their experiences allowed athletes to adopt a more self-compassionate practice in response to adversity in sport. Again, it is important to note that many participants shared examples that showed there were times when they were not self-compassionate, but that they learned to be more self-compassionate by reflecting on their experiences and gaining self-awareness.

**Learning From Others**

The third major theme was that the participants learned about self-compassion from others (i.e., people other than parents). They discussed three main groups; peers/siblings, coaches, and sport psychologists.

**Learning through observing peers/siblings.** Participants also observed the behaviour of their teammates and siblings to see how they coped with adversity. Our interpretation here is that learning through observing others reflects aspects of common humanity (i.e., participants appeared able to relate to others and understand that they were not alone in their experiences). Mariah
explained she would watch “…teammates go through similar things, and then being like ‘OK, what did they do to change it, and what can I do?’” (first interview). When asked to expand on this in her second interview, Mariah told us how sitting on the bench in her first couple seasons with the university team helped her realize that she was not alone in that experience. She said:

> I mean it’s nice to see that other people are in the same space as you and it’s way easier to get through something when you have had the experience by yourself and with others so that you can compare that you’re not alone. That has really helped me be more self-compassionate (second interview).

Jessie discussed what she learned from observing her older brother, and how he managed the challenges he faced in sport. She said:

> Well my brother, he used to play [ice] hockey through his whole life and he broke a lot of bones and all the time, every year he’d break a bone or something and he would never come back and be sad about anything. He would just move on, get better and then go back out. So I just learned to just move on (first interview).

This example suggests that Jessie’s brother modelled mindfulness, or a balanced awareness of his thoughts and feelings, by being able to have perspective on his injury and not over-identifying with it, and self-kindness by not acting overly harsh or judgemental towards himself because he was injured. We suggest that by paying attention to how her brother handled adversity, Jessie was able to see that setbacks are experiences shared by other athletes. She realized that she was not alone in her experiences of adversity in sport. Similarly, Laura told us about learning from her sister. She said:

> Even my sister, she’d make a mistake but the next competition, she’d go out there and do her personal best. So seeing her do that, it was inspiring me that you know what, it doesn’t matter, just go and do it better the next time. If you don’t, then just keep working on it until you do at some point…

Like Jessie’s brother, Laura’s sister was a model of balanced awareness and this appeared to help her develop self-compassion toward herself and her own performances.
Learning from coaches. Coaches provided positive feedback and supported athletes through adversity and this appeared to contribute, in at least some degree, to the fostering of self-compassion. For example, Stella worked with a one-on-one mentor coach. Stella explained her coach encouraged her not to focus on negative ideas. She said:

… say you’re having a bad passing day, you don’t say ‘oh I’m a bad passer’ but you know, [you say] ‘you’re a good passer, you can do this’ and then you just have to know that you have the confidence, and skill wise she [coach] would give me a few pointers as well (first interview).

Here, Stella’s mentor coach encouraged positive self-talk instead of over-identifying and judging herself harshly (which reflects the promotion of self-kindness), and taught her to have a broader perspective on her situation (which reflects mindfulness). Jane also had a coach who helped her focus on the positives of her performance. She said her coach would tell her:

If you don’t play so well one day but you still won, it’s still a win, and even if you lost and you played well, well you still played well. I think doing that, and talking through it too, like ‘OK, I did this really well. This is what I did well, this is what I did bad, this is what maybe needs more improvement, this was great.’ I’m really proud of myself for doing this (first interview).

Kyra had a similar experience with her coaches and she explained that: “…coaches helped a lot specifically to sport, when things don’t go well usually [the] coaches that I had were really good at saying like ‘hey it’s okay’ and making you see the positives in some of the situations” (second interview). Hence, by reassuring their athletes after a bad performance, coaches helped steer their athletes away from engaging in harsh self-criticism. By teaching their athletes to look for the positives, coaches encouraged athletes to take a broader perspective, which helped them engage in a more mindful practice. Additionally, when coaches reminded their athletes that they were not alone they fostered common humanity rather than isolation. It is likely, we suspect, that such actions from ‘others’ in isolation may not be sufficient to foster self-compassion, but when
combined with participants’ relationships with their parents and personal processing of experiences, others could nonetheless play an important complementary role.

**Learning from sport psychologists.** Six athletes worked with sport psychologists at some point during their careers. Sport psychologists taught these participants about positive self-talk, which appeared to contribute to the development of self-compassion (specifically in terms of mindfulness and self-kindness). Laura specified how mental training sessions helped her with negative self-talk:

> Again, when I was dealing with all this negative self-talk, we had mental training sessions and that was really eye opening for how you could [use] self-talk or face adversity in sport… it’s hard not to realize how adversity can be faced in a more positive way (first interview).

In teaching positive self-talk, we interpreted this to mean that the sport psychologist perhaps indirectly taught Laura how to implement self-kindness into her practice (i.e., rather than being harsh and judgemental after a mistake). In addition to self-talk, both Kirsten (a basketball player) and Stella discussed how the sport psychology sessions were effective in teaching mindfulness. When asked how they learned to become more mindful of their thoughts, they said: “Probably mindfulness through sports psych sessions…” (Kirsten, first interview), and “The mindfulness, from different team psychs…” (Stella, first interview).

Finally, Paige discussed how the sport psychology skills helped when applied to a game setting:

> … also just through sports psych, and mental game sessions. ‘Cause I’ve had a good number of those during the summer and stuff, during [provincial team]. So yeah, you would think ‘oh this is boring, it’s everything we’ve already heard, [have] positive thoughts,’ but when you actually apply in the game it’s amazing how much it actually helps. And then when you have those experiences in the past where you didn’t do those [things] and then versus when you did do them, you’re like ‘wow, look at the difference’ (first interview).
When asked to elaborate on this point, Paige said, “self-compassion, it’s taught, but you have to apply it in order for it to work” (first interview).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that contributed to the development of self-compassion among highly self-compassionate women varsity athletes. The findings of this study contribute to the literature by showing different ways in which highly self-compassionate athletes learned about self-compassion (cf. Berry et al., 2010; Mosewich et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2015). Specifically, athletes learned about aspects of self-compassion from others (peers, siblings, coaches, and sport psychologists), with the role of parents being especially important and distinct. Self-compassion development was also internally driven, with participants gaining self-awareness by reflecting on past experiences. Our overall interpretation of the findings is that a combination of social interactions and experiences with parents, combined with personal processing, and complemented by learning from others, contributes to the development of self-compassion. Furthermore, self-compassion appeared to arise from participants learning a range of skills (or developing a set of resources) through their experiences. Therefore, self-compassion was not a mental skill or coping mechanism per se, but rather a collection of skills and resources. These findings have the potential to inform applied sport psychology work intended to foster self-compassion among athletes (e.g., through parent education, individual work between athletes and sport psychologists, writing exercises, and psychoeducation sessions).

In general, our findings concerning the role of parents support previous research (not conducted with athletes) showing that parental warmth, harmonious family functioning, and secure attachment are associated with high self-compassion (Neff & McGehee, 2010; Pepping et al., 2015). We contend that the current findings depict some of the strategies parents engage in to help
their offspring develop self-compassion in the context of sport. From a practical perspective, the findings about the role of parents can inform parent education initiatives that could target the types of sport-specific examples reported in this study. For instance, participants could turn to their parents when faced with adversity in sport, and parents can teach athletes about being kind to themselves in relation to their performances, and put performances in perspective. These parenting behaviours plausibly reflect some of the unique ways in which parents help their children in the achievement setting of sport that may differ to other instances of adversity or life challenges. Hence, adopting a warm and supportive approach to parenting, encouraging a secure attachment type, and facilitating an adaptive family dynamic that is compatible with the challenges of sport deserves consideration from an applied perspective.

We presented data to support the interpretation that participants were able to cultivate their self-awareness by reflecting on past adverse experiences. Reflecting on adverse experiences can be a vehicle through which women athletes are able to increase their self-awareness and gain personal growth (Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013). Individuals with high self-compassion are capable of interpreting adverse events to see them in a more positive manner (Allen & Leary, 2010) and able to assume a level of responsibility when negative life events occur (Leary et al., 2007). Self-compassion should promote more accurate self-appraisals and self-awareness, as it provides the emotional safety to perceive the situation without the fear of harsh self-criticism (Neff, 2003a). Interestingly, in the current study, it appeared that participants not only became more self-aware and self-compassionate by reflecting on negative experiences in sport, but by being self-aware and self-compassionate they were able to avoid excessive self-criticism following negative experiences. These findings suggest that sport psychologists should encourage athletes to
reflect on negative experiences in sport while ensuring athletes cognitively process these experiences without engaging in harsh self-criticism.

We did not examine connections between self-compassion and performance, although it should be noted that all participants competed in a strong university athletics program. As such, these participants could be considered to be ‘successful’ athletes. Previous research in the sporting domain suggests that self-compassion is an important resource for dealing with emotionally difficult setbacks in sport such as poor performance, injury, and performance plateau (Mosewich et al., 2014). These findings are consistent with Germer and Neff’s (2013) assertion that self-compassionate individuals do not berate themselves for not being ‘good enough’ but are able to soothe themselves and offer comfort before considering ways to address the problem. Interestingly, other research has suggested that some women athletes may feel that they require a level of self-criticism to achieve optimal performance and that extending too much compassion towards the self may be linked with passivity or settling for mediocrity (Ferguson et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014). Whereas Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, and Rivis (2011) also suggested that people may sometimes fear being compassionate towards themselves, fears about being self-compassionate are most prevalent among individuals who report low levels of self-compassion (Gilbert et al., 2011; Kelly, Carter, Zuroff, & Borairi, 2012).

Neff (2009) also argued against the idea of fear of being too self-compassionate, noting that self-compassionate individuals “do not berate themselves when they fail, they are more able to admit mistakes, modify unproductive behaviours and take on new challenges” (p. 213). Our findings support Neff’s perspective, but nonetheless highlight an interesting applied issue in that potential fear of self-compassion may be an issue consultants encounter when working with individuals with low self-compassion, who may be somewhat resistant to engaging in self-
compassionate practices. In such cases there may be a need to educate athletes about the potential benefits of self-compassion. However, more research is needed to examine links between self-compassion and performance, because it is likely athletes will be persuaded to develop self-compassion if it can be shown to improve performance.

Participants discussed their capacity to relate to the experiences of their peers and siblings. Although is it unknown if these social interactions alone are sufficient to foster self-compassion (i.e., in the absence of the roles played by parents and personal processing of events), the findings about interactions with peers and siblings (along with coaches and sport psychologists) are consistent with previous work that has shown self-compassion is developed among women athletes and exercisers within a supportive social network (Berry et al., 2010; Mosewich et al., 2014). For instance, Mosewich et al. (2014) found that social support was an important aspect of setback management for women athletes, particularly in instances where the individual offering support had been through a similar adverse experience. Similarly, Berry et al. (2010) found that women exercisers were able to take a more self-compassionate approach towards their body by receiving social support and by gaining the understanding that others had similar concerns about their body image. Our interpretation here is that the understanding that others have experienced similar adverse experiences likely contributes to the development of common humanity (Sutherland et al., 2014). From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of surrounding athletes with a supportive social network and that self-kind and/or mindful behaviours modelled by others might facilitate the development of those elements in the self.

Participants remembered their coaches as being supportive and teaching them self-compassionate ways to cope during difficult experiences. Coaches can have a positive influence on athletes’ psychological development (Cronin & Allen, 2015) and can provide social support
during times of adversity, such as when athletes are recovering from injury (e.g., Johnston & Carroll, 1998). Additionally, Cranmer and Sollitto (2015) found that when athletes receive informational, emotional, and esteem support from their coach they were more likely to be receptive to messages from their coach that reinforced their abilities and self-esteem. The specific role of coaches in fostering self-compassion has not been widely reported in the literature previously, so the current findings make a useful contribution to the literature by showing ways in which coaches may help to promote self-compassion in their athletes. Again, as with our interpretations regarding learning from peers, it is unknown whether relationships with coaches in isolation are sufficient to foster self-compassion, but do appear important when combined with participants’ relationships with their parents and personal processing of experiences.

Practitioners may engage athletes in reflection and self-awareness exercises to promote self-compassion. A self-guided writing exercise designed to prompt reflection on difficult sport experiences from a self-compassionate perspective was effective in increasing self-compassion and decreasing state self-criticism, state rumination, and excessive concern over mistakes in a group of women varsity athletes (Mosewich et al., 2013). Encouraging reflection, though writing or other modalities that prompt interpretation of the event in a self-kind and mindful manner that acknowledges common humanity, may help support self-compassion development. The current results could inform future exercises sport psychologists use with athletes. For instance, for writing exercises participants could also be encouraged to reflect on the role of their parents and how they may have learned from observing others in relation to the development of self-compassion. Mosewich et al. (2013) coupled writing exercises with psychoeducation sessions. Current findings may also help inform the content of such psychoeducation sessions, which could be delivered in individual or group (e.g., team) settings and include the information presented about the role of
parents and learning from others, as well as the experiential examples of personal processing of
events provided in the current study. Through such psychoeducation sessions athletes can be taught
about the importance of a supportive social network, adopting an understanding approach to the
self, maintaining a balanced awareness, and viewing adversity from a broader perspective. The
quotes provided in the current study may provide some useful examples to be used in such
psychoeducation sessions.

It should be noted that while a one-week self-compassion writing and psychoeducation
intervention was successful in fostering self-compassion (Mosewich et al., 2013), a shorter
induction by Reis and colleagues (2015) was unsuccessful. Whereas we have offered some
practical implications arising from the current study, we acknowledge that more research is needed
to understand the best approaches to self-compassion development, from both intervention and
promotion perspectives, considering modality, length of time, and athlete characteristics (such as
initial levels of self-criticism or self-compassion, which may impact intervention effectiveness;
Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2015). Future research should also explore the efficacy and
effectiveness of self-reflection exercises, psychoeducation delivery, and modelling by parents,
peers, siblings, coaches, and sport psychologists in increasing athletes’ self-compassion.
Nonetheless, the results of this study may be a useful aid for sport psychology consultants who
wish to increase levels of self-compassion among athletes.

In the future it will also be important to determine why some individuals are more self-
compassionate than others so that dispositional and environmental conditions that help or hinder
self-compassion can be more clearly distinguished (Neff et al., 2007). In sport settings, previous
research has shown that social agents such as parents, coaches, and teammates can create conflict
and be sources of stress for adolescent and young women athletes (e.g., Holt & Knight, 2014; Holt,
Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012; Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Presumably such negative interactions could thwart the development of self-compassion. However, as Neff et al. (2007) pointed out, research suggests that individuals develop cognitive schemas for self-to-self relating based on their prior interpersonal interactions with attachment figures (e.g., Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). Such attachment experiences likely play a role in the degree to which individuals are compassionate with themselves (Gilrath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005). Hence, experiences with others who are accepting or critical can become internalized and expressed as self-acceptance or self-criticism.

A limitation of this study was that we did not distinguish between factors that contributed to the development of self-compassion during distinct developmental periods. By way of comparison, in a recent study (using similar methods to those used in the current study), the authors distinguished between factors that contributed to the development of optimism during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood (deBeaudrap et al., 2016). In the current study, it appeared that some of the ‘roots’ of self-compassion were establishing during childhood, strengthened during adolescence, and then became a feature of the participants’ self as young adults. However, this type of developmental analysis was not applied in the current study so our interpretations are speculative. Future research that more specifically delves into factors associated with self-compassion during distinct developmental periods would add to the literature. In this vein, another limitation of the current study was that we did not speak with the parents of the athletes interviewed. Parents played an important role in the development of self-compassion, and therefore they could have provided important insights about the ways they contributed to the development of self-compassion during childhood and adolescence. For instance, our findings focused on specific aspects of parenting behaviours, but the parenting style (i.e., the general emotional climate parents create in the family home) may also be important in creating secure
attachment experiences and it may change as children age (cf. Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009).

Additionally, the interview guide used in the first interview was relatively structured (whereas IPA interviews are typically ‘looser’ and less structured) and while we attempted to conduct the interviews in a conversational manner and used many open-ended questions and probes, they were directed by concepts from the self-compassion literature. We felt this was necessary because some of these concepts (and language used) are specific and, at times, esoteric. Nonetheless, a broader, less structured initial interview may have revealed additional insights and been less constrained by existing theory and research. In terms of results, for a study with 10 participants, we had more themes (seven, including sub-themes) than recommended (five) for an IPA study of this size (Smith, 2011). The limitation is perhaps not the number of themes per se, but rather that we did not explore the convergence and divergence of the participants’ accounts of each theme. Rather, we focused on convergence (i.e., shared perspectives) and the divergent ways in which individuals develop self-compassion were not examined in detail. The point here is there may be other (i.e., divergent) ways in which individuals develop self-compassion. People may have their own unique paths based on their personal characteristics (e.g., cognitive self-schemas; Neff et al., 2007) that were not captured by the results. Finally, it is also important to consider that the findings most readily apply to women athletes similar to those studied here. In fact, the majority of self-compassion research in sport to date has focused on young women athletes (e.g., Berry et al., 2010; Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2013, 2014; Reis et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2014) and future research is required to examine the development of self-compassion among men participating in sport.
Strengths of this study included the purposeful (homogenous) sampling approach used to recruit a sample of self-compassionate athletes. The mean self-compassion score (for the 114 athletes who completed the questionnaire) was 3.09, which compares favourably with mean reported self-compassion scores in other studies ($M$ self-compassion score = 3.11 in Mosewich et al., 2013; $M$ self-compassion score = 2.97 in Mosewich et al. 2011). Therefore, the athletes selected for interviews were not only high in self-compassion compared with athletes in the current study, but they were also high in self-compassion compared to athletes in other studies. The mean self-compassion score of the 10 athletes interviewed was 3.95, which is higher than the 3.50 threshold Neff (2003b) suggested should classify an individual as high in self-compassion. Furthermore, during the first interview, all participants agreed they were self-compassionate. Hence, it can be confidently asserted that the participants in this study perceived they were high in self-compassion.

The retrospective approach was appropriate and conceptually consistent with IPA and our philosophical perspective because in an IPA study the focus is on the recalled event as participants experienced and perceived it, and therefore it is the meaning associated with the experience and not necessarily the experience itself that is of importance (Smith et al., 2009). Engaging the participants in two interviews helped provide detailed and rich information, increased the saturation of reported themes, and also assisted with our interpretations regarding how the themes identified contributed to self-compassion.

In conclusion, the results of this study add to a growing body of literature by showing the value of self-compassion in sport. Self-compassion has been conceptualized both from a trait perspective (Neff, 2003a, 2003b) and from skill or strategy perspective, with the latter presenting self-compassion as coping resource (e.g., Allen & Leary, 2007) or emotion regulation strategy (e.g., Neff, Hseih, & Dejitthisat, 2005). While individuals high in self-compassion (assessed by
the original SCS; Neff, 2003b) adopt the healthy self-attitude and frame of mind across situations, there is evidence to suggest that self-compassionate frames of mind can be prompted or applied (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Mosewich et al., 2013). Self-compassion has been explored in context-specific domains and situations, including sport (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015; Mosewich et al., 2011; 2013; Reis et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2014), exercise (e.g., Berry et al., 2010; Magnus, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2010), and dance (Tarasoff, Ferguson, & Kowalski, 2017). It is plausible that some people employing a self-compassionate approach do so automatically as a function of their trait, but that others ‘adopt’ or chose the approach when coping with difficult events. Further research is needed to understand differences between more effortful and automatic applications of self-compassionate approaches. Nonetheless, the current study has provided insight into the roles of parents, important others (e.g., coaches, sport psychologists, peers, siblings), and the self that can help with future applied efforts. To this end, an important conclusion from this study is that self-compassion appeared to be a set of skills or resources that were learned through personal reflection and interactions with others.
References


Introduction:
I am interested in looking for new ways to help athletes cope with adversity because I was a varsity athlete who suffered a career ending injury. The transition out of sport was incredibly difficult for me, but eventually I learned to cope. With this research I hope to provide insight into some mechanisms athletes may be able to use to help them with adversity in sport.

To give you a more formal explanation, this research is attempting to look at mechanisms athletes use to cope with adversity. Specifically, I am trying to find ways to help athletes cope with adversity. I am interested in your thoughts, opinions, and experiences that surround the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers, and your identity will be kept confidential. You are free to withdraw at any time during or after the interview, and you do not have to answer any questions that may bring up unpleasant memories.

You will receive a copy of your transcript once it has been typed up and you can remove any parts of the interview you do not want to be included in the research.

There will be a 30-minute follow up interview to discuss the research findings to ensure our initial conclusions accurately represent your experiences. If you have any questions or concerns you can contact me through email at any time. My information will be on the letter you were given at the start of this interview.

Demographic Information:
Age:
Years playing their sport:
Years playing for the University:

Opening (Warm-up) Questions:
1. First, please tell me about your background in sports.

   Follow-up questions:
   - What other sports did you play when you were young?
   - How did you get involved in sports in the first place?
   - How did you end up focusing on SPORT?
   - What is your most positive memory from playing sport?

Main Questions:
2. Can you tell me about a time when you faced adversity in your sport and coped with it really well? (Note – adversity can be anything athlete defines as adversity).
   Probe for details about experience and coping.
Follow-up questions:

- What did you tell yourself after your experience of adversity?
- Can you explain some of your thought processes during the adverse experience?
- What were your thoughts towards the end of the experience?
- Was there anything you did during this challenging time that was effective to any extent?
- How did you know the coping process you were using was ineffective?
- Why did you think it was ineffective?
- Upon reflection, what advice would you give to a teammate if she was facing a similar situation of adversity to the one you described?

3. Now, can you tell me about a time when you faced adversity in your sport and DID NOT cope with it really well? Probe for details about experience and coping or lack thereof.

4. How, if at all, have your parents, influential family members, teammates, friends or coaches helped you through setbacks and adversity? Probe for details about experience and coping.

5. Changing direction a little, I want to ask you about self-talk. Often athletes engage in negative self-talk (i.e., the things they say internally to themselves). Take a moment to think about a time when you realized you were being harder on yourself that you should have been, or in a way that was not constructive. Can you explain that situation to me please? (Probe for details and thought processes).

Follow-up questions:

- Sometimes people become “less hard” on themselves as they get older. Do you think this applies to you? [please expand]. I’m wondering if context plays a role?
- What types of things do you think have helped you to become “less hard” on yourself? What were the reasons for this? And can you give me a rough timeline?

6. To summarize this section, can you explain what skills you have developed to deal with adversity in sport?

Follow-up questions:

- How do you think you developed these skills?
- Are there other skills you are trying to further develop to help you deal with adversity in sport?
Self-Compassion Questions

Now I’d like to tell you a little bit about a psychological mechanism called self-compassion. The questionnaire you completed was actually a measure of self-compassion. You were invited to participate in this interview because you scored highly on the self-compassion scale.

First let me explain self-compassion. It is comprised of three main components, namely self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Practicing self-kindness requires individuals to be kind to themselves, particularly in times of struggle or adversity, instead of being harsh and self-critical. Common humanity encourages a person to accept and understand that he or she is not the only one who experiences challenges and that tough times, mistakes, and setbacks happen to everyone. Finally, mindfulness is the ability to be aware of one’s thoughts and feelings, keeping them in balanced awareness rather than dwelling on them or avoiding them, and maintaining the understanding that the current painful state will pass.

Consistent with the practice of self-compassion, individuals are encouraged to keep instances of adversity or suffering within perspective and to avoid negative self-thoughts or evaluations. Additionally, the practice of self-compassion does not condone laziness, self-pity, or act as an excuse for adversity. If practiced properly, self-compassion encourages the individual to strive for their goals, while working towards the development of their best self.

Here are your scores on the subscales of the self-compassion scale:

Self-kindness:
Mindfulness:
Common humanity:
Self-judgement:
Over-identification:
Isolation:

7. What is your initial reaction to finding out you have high self-compassion?

8. Do you agree that you are self-compassionate?

Follow-up question [if applicable]:

- How do you think you became self-compassionate? Can you give me any examples?

Regardless of whether or not you consider yourself to have high self-compassion, it seems that you do have some of the skills that we typically associate with self-compassion and these may help you cope with adversity. So I would like to ask you about some of these skills.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your thoughts on the topic.
Self-kindness questions:

9. What does kindness mean to you?
10. Please give me an example of how you are kind to yourself.

Probing Questions:

- Was there a particular moment when you responded to a situation with self-kindness in a way that you found particularly useful?

11. How do you think you learned to be kind to yourself?

Probing Questions:

- What helped facilitate you learning this skill?
- Is there anything you can think of that hindered this skill? Please explain.

Mindfulness questions:

12. What does being mindful mean to you?
13. Please give me an example of how you are mindful of your thoughts. (If not, why don’t you think you are mindful of your thoughts)? If you are trying to be mindful of your thoughts, can you give me some examples of times where you have had success when practicing mindfulness?

Probing Questions:

- What helped facilitate you learning this skill?
- Is there anything you can think of that hindered this skill? Please elaborate.
- [If applicable] How do you think you learned to be mindful of your thoughts?

Common humanity questions:

14. What does it mean to you if I say “that other individuals have had similar experiences of adversity to your own”? [Probe to see if this is a sentiment the athlete understands].

15. Please give me an example of a time when you recognized that you were not the only one that has experienced adversity in sport.

Probing Questions:

- Can you give me some examples of practicing common humanity successfully within sport?
- If not, why don’t you think you practice common humanity?
16. [If applicable] How did you learn to recognize that other athletes have had similar experiences to your own?

**Probing Questions:**

- *What helped facilitate you learning this skill?*
- *Is there anything you can think of that hindered this skill? Please elaborate.*

**Self-judgement questions:**

17. What does self-judgement mean to you?

**Probing Questions:**

- Please give me an example of a time when you chose not to be judgemental towards yourself in a situation of adversity.
- How did you learn to become less judgemental of yourself in difficult situations?

**Over-identification questions:**

18. Over-identification is a term used to refer to being consumed in a repetitive thought process. Can you give me an example of an experience with a repetitive thought process?

**Probing Questions:**

- Please give me an example of a time when you stopped yourself from becoming too consumed in a repetitive thought process.
- How did you learn to stop yourself from getting consumed with negative or repetitive thoughts?

**Isolation questions:**

19. What does the term ‘isolation’ mean to you?

**Probing Questions:**

- Please give me an example of a time when you sought out support from others during a time of adversity.
- How did you learn to seek out support from others instead of isolating yourself when you were experiencing a difficult time?

**Other Self-compassion questions:**

20. Can you tell me about any times in which you may have been exposed to self-compassion and some self-compassionate practices?
Probing questions:

- Can you think of anyone (family members, close friends) who may have introduced you to some self-compassionate practices?

- Can you think of a time when you may have learned one of the components of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, or mindfulness)?

- How did you learn not to respond with self-judgement, isolation, or over-identification?

21. Have you ever tried to increase your awareness?

Probing questions:

- How did becoming more aware help you?
- How do you think you learned to be more aware?

Closing Questions:

22. What advice would you give to a younger athlete on how to cope with a negative sport experience?

Probing questions:

- What advice would you tell the athlete to tell him or herself?

23. Do you wish there was more information or help available for you to help with some of the negative psychological emotions experienced during adversity in sport? If yes, what? If no, why not?

24. Do you think self-compassion is a useful tool for athletes? Why or why not?

Follow-up question:

- How do you use the individual components of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness) in your sport?
- [If applicable] How do you think we could teach athletes to be more self-compassionate to help them cope more effectively with adversity in sport?
- What would be some challenges associated with teaching self-compassion to athletes?

25. Is there anything else you would like to add?