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Enhancing capacity: Integrating self-compassion in sport

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ABSTRACT

Self-compassion represents a shift in how to support performance and well-being in sport, and there has been recent attention directed toward the construct in both research and applied domains. To inform next steps in research and practice, we have reflected on self-compassion intervention and practice based on the current state of the literature and present key considerations for progressing understanding of self-compassion in sport. For the potential of self-compassion in supporting performance and well-being to truly be understood and harnessed, it is necessary to be strategic in addressing remaining fundamental questions.

KEYWORDS

Athlete; coping; mental skills; psychological skills

Athletes, coaches, and others involved in sport continually strive for better performances and greater feats, and, subsequently, persist in seeking strategies to get them there. The pursuit of a psychological edge is not a new phenomenon in sport or other achievement domains. However, what constitutes a psychological edge, and how one might attain it, continues to become more refined, with additional options emerging, such as those that emphasize the development of resilience (e.g. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) or mindfulness (e.g. Gross et al., 2018). Self-compassion in sport has garnered recent attention as it has considerable potential for athletes to adaptively manage the sometimes grueling demands of sport and achieve their performance potential, as well as enhance and maintain high levels of well-being (see Mosewich [in press], for a comprehensive review of research on self-compassion in sport and exercise).

Self-compassion is a way of relating to oneself that is positive, accepting, and understanding (Neff, 2003), which runs counter to the often harshly critical and overly evaluative tactics engaged by many athletes (Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014). Self-compassion, initially introduced by Kristin

Neff (2003) to the general psychology literature, parallels the aims and intention of having compassion for others; however, the focus of care and support is directed toward the self rather than others. Neff conceptualizes self-compassion as consisting of three interrelated components. Self-kindness entails extending understanding and kindness to oneself, as opposed to being overly self-critical. Common humanity is prefaced on the idea that experiences are not isolating; other people have similar experiences. Finally, mindfulness involves keeping thoughts and feelings in a balanced awareness as opposed to dwelling on them or, conversely, ignoring them entirely. Each component is distinct, yet interacts and mutually enhances the other. Thus, all components are necessary for self-compassion to be engendered.

With each sport event, whether it be a challenge or triumph at a developmental level, or an elite athlete's experience at a world championship or Olympic Games, a worthwhile trend in conversation continues to emerge: How can we support athletes in navigating the sport context and reaching their potential in an adaptive way? The attention garnered by self-compassion in the sport psychology literature to date may be due to its potential to support performance and well-being through what might be considered a "new" approach – one that may not be a typical practice for those in sport, yet might complement existing resources. Our main objective for this paper is to discuss key practical considerations, illustrating needs and necessary next steps in self-compassion research and practice.

The future of self-compassion in sport

Moving forward with intervention and promotion

As we look towards future intervention work, and perhaps more widespread integration into sport, researchers stand to benefit from a clear and systematic direction and a critical evaluation of efforts to foster self-compassion. For example, Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, and DeLongis (2013) developed a successful intervention for a group of women athletes who self-identified as self-critical. As a result, a key question becomes: Is self-compassion therefore a skill that should be targeted at specific groups, or types of individuals (i.e. via intervention), or is there merit in widespread promotion efforts, similar to what was undertaken with the self-esteem movement? Further, as part of these promotion and/or intervention efforts, factors including, but not limited to, intervention efficacy and effectiveness, personal and environmental facilitators and barriers, establishment of normative data and key associations, and continued systematic evaluation require attention.

Intervention efficacy and effectiveness

Relevance of self-compassion intervention in diverse populations and contexts within the sport domain needs to be considered, with attention to efficacy and effectiveness as main areas of focus (Mosewich, in press). Considerations surrounding ideal dosage and length (Kirby, 2017), modality (e.g. in-person or self-directed; writing, psychoeducation, or other strategy), length of intervention and intervention activities, timing of execution, accessibility (e.g. online platform), and athlete characteristics (e.g. initial levels of self-criticism or self-compassion [Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis, Kowalski, Ferguson, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Crocker, 2015], past experience with mental skills, competitive level, age, culture, stage of development [e.g. cognitive, physical, emotional, social]) can facilitate program differentiation (i.e. identifying essential features of a program) and are necessary elements still to be understood in the area of self-compassion promotion and intervention (Mosewich, in press). Attention to research design and careful construction of specific treatment conditions will promote further understanding in this area.

Personal and environmental facilitators and barriers

Factors that contribute to environments that promote, as well as thwart, the development of self-compassion should be considered in self-compassion promotion and intervention efforts (Crozier, Mosewich, & Ferguson, 2019; Ingstrup, Mosewich, & Holt, 2017). Involvement of coaches, parents, and teammates in such efforts may serve to more strongly embed ideas and concepts into regular training and competition routines, since they can help to identify areas of application, support efforts, and model behaviors. Evaluation of promotion and intervention efforts should also include the obtainment of user feedback regarding experience, barriers, relatability, and accessibility to facilitate future refinement. Identification of personal strengths and challenges through incorporating self-awareness into programing will also assist individualization of application and directly target potential barriers and capitalize on each athlete's current abilities. The athlete characteristics positioned in the previous section as an asset to evaluating program differentiation will also inform athlete-level (i.e. personal) barriers and facilitators to self-compassion development.

Establishment of normative data and key associations

Establishment of normative data for athletes would also guide intervention appropriateness and progress, informing when promotion or intervention may be of benefit. Additionally, using measures that have normative data with clinical cutoffs would permit calculation of clinical and reliable change

scores (Kirby, Tellegen, & Steindl, 2017) enabling further evaluation of intervention efficacy and effectiveness. Assessment of the frequency and intensity (Kirby et al., 2017) with which athletes experience self-compassion, as well as variables thought to be impacted by self-compassion promotion and intervention, would further our understanding of how self-compassion is experienced, how it relates to other variables, and, depending on the research design, how it impacts other variables. Such assessment necessitates focus on longitudinal tracking of self-compassion and more emphasis on examination at a state level. The data or normative scores on which we are reflecting must not be removed from context – what is the norm of self-compassion among athletes on a global level (i.e. across all life domains), in their sport, and in other pursuits, such as academics? An understanding at both a between and within level for athletes and non-athletes would broaden our understanding of the impact of self-compassion on various constructs and in different life contexts. The development of athlete- or sport-specific measurement would assist in differentiating relations to other variables, as would complementing self-report measures with physiological or behavioral measures.

Continued systematic evaluation through large scale randomized control trials

Finally, after initial support of self-compassion in sport is garnered through the feasibility studies and small scale randomized control trials we currently see emerging from the literature, a necessary next step is to conduct larger scale randomized control trials (Kirby et al., 2017) comparing self-compassion intervention with other established protocols, such as Mindfulness Acceptance Commitment Approach (Gardner & Moore, 2007). However, prior to getting to this stage, it must be recognized that self-compassion intervention or promotion efforts will depend on a number of important factors, many of which are currently unknown – including, but not limited to, those presented next. It is imperative that such factors be adequately addressed.

Overcoming fear of self-compassion

To reap the benefits of self-compassion in sport, athletes need to “buy in” to a resource that fundamentally requires self-kindness, acceptance, and compassionate understanding in a domain that is often ripe with harsh evaluations by the self and others, stringent performance demands and expectations, and the belief that self-criticism is needed to flourish (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2014). Our research team has identified that some athletes are hesitant to embrace self-compassion in sport, though this evidence is currently limited to women athlete samples

(Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2014; Sutherland, Kowalski, Ferguson, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Crocker, 2014). Athletes have expressed concern that extending compassion towards the self may lead to complacency and settling for “good enough” in sport. Though the athletes identified potential advantages of self-compassion, they explained that being self-compassionate might not always be in their best interest because they believe they need to be hard on themselves to achieve their goals.

Some individuals, particularly highly self-critical individuals, often find it difficult to, and are even fearful of, extending compassion towards the self (Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, & Ravis, 2011). Athletes actively resisting self-compassion may be at a large disadvantage as they strive to reach their potential in sport, as those who fear self-compassion have greater passive reactions to hypothetical emotionally difficult sport situations (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2015). Moreover, fear of self-compassion combined with self-criticism has been found to have detrimental associations with athletes’ well-being (Ferguson et al., 2015). Additionally, there is a difference between harsh, excessive self-criticism and being constructively evaluative (Mosewich, in press).

Given the advantages of self-compassion in sport, overcoming athletes’ hesitation or fear towards embracing self-compassion presents a complex area that requires attention. Part of the challenge may be identifying the optimal way(s) to introduce and talk about self-compassion with athletes so they are able to understand, process, and utilize the resource in their sport environments. Translating self-compassion to athletes requires exploration and identification of meaningful language that resonates with athletes while still accurately represents the essence of the construct. Exploring effective translations of self-compassion may be particularly important as representative populations are included in sport self-compassion research.

Attention to representative populations

Men athletes

Initial self-compassion research in sport focused on women athlete samples; however, there is an increased trend in the inclusion of men athletes, primarily within mixed gender samples (e.g. Fontana, Fry, & Cramer, 2017; Huysmans & Clement, 2017). The work of Wasylikiw and Clairo (2018) suggests self-compassion research with men athletes focusing on masculinity in sport shows particular promise. Sport is often considered a signifier of traditional masculinity that emphasizes and reinforces accompanying norms (Kidd, 2013), which might present a particularly unique challenge for men (e.g. not being able to express vulnerability) that a resource like self-compassion might buffer. Thus, men athletes who endorse traditional

masculine norms might be particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of rejection and failure. Therefore, while men athletes might benefit from self-compassion, there are likely significant barriers to implementation - particularly for those with a strong adherence to traditional masculine norms - that must be addressed by future research to appropriately guide self-compassion intervention with men athletes.

Cultural diversity

Like many areas of psychology, research focused on self-compassion in sport runs the risk of becoming comprised of studies that include unrepresentative samples of western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). In her early research, Neff (2003) argued that it is unclear whether the development of self-compassion is “helped or hindered” by cultural norms. More recent research (i.e. Neff, Pisitsungkagarn, & Hsieh, 2008) highlighted cultural differences in self-compassion, suggesting that self-compassion in sport promotion and interventions may need to accommodate such nuances. We are unaware of any published sport studies examining cultural differences in athletes’ levels of self-compassion. Researchers working in the area of self-compassion are at a critical point whereby they can choose to continue to focus on typically unrepresentative populations, or they can focus on culturally diverse and representative samples to contribute to the development of a “broader, richer, and better grounded understanding” (Henrich et al., 2010, p. 23) of self-compassion in sport.

Within the Canadian context, for example, focusing on culturally diverse and representative samples necessitates working with Indigenous athletes. The Canadian Sport Policy (Canadian Heritage, 2012) identified inclusivity as one principle to ensure accessible and equitable sport programs that reflect the diversity of Canadian society. To date, self-compassion in sport research and interventions in Canada have not necessarily been inclusive of culturally representative populations. Our research team is committed to engaging in collaborative research with Indigenous athletes to explore ways to enhance sport and we have noted the need to explore self-compassion from an Indigenous perspective as a potential resource to promote positive movement experiences (Ferguson & Philipenko, 2016).

Shifting to a new norm: Supporting athletes with the adoption of self-compassion

Given the potential of self-compassion, there is considerable and understandable interest in how self-compassion develops, and how it might be promoted to harness its benefits in sport. Consideration of formative

development suggests “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” (Ingstrup et al., 2017, p. 23). As well, the potential of others to thwart self-compassion through modeling of self-critical behaviors, or promotion of norms that do not align with self-compassion, should not be overlooked (Crozier et al., 2019). Expanding directives to include assisting coaches, psychologists, mental skills consultants, parents, and others in supporting athletes to learn and be self-compassionate is critical.

Adoption of self-compassion does not merely involve being introduced to, or learning about, this new approach. As with any mental skill, the construct in question – in this case self-compassion – must be accepted as relevant to the athlete, and the learned components must be successfully integrated into the athlete’s unique training and competition context. Such transfer is likely to be effortful and conscious at first, but with practice, increased skill, and proper execution, strategies should become more automatic. Helping athletes to constructively reflect on the past as they move forward is necessary to foster self-compassion, as is supporting habitual practice and an environment that supports and emulates such approaches. These elements are not always present in sport environments, with self-criticism often positioned as normative and required for success. Thus, successful integration of self-compassion may require a marked shift in approach and culture. Addressing reluctance, acknowledging challenges, and identifying instances for relevant, athlete-tailored integration is paramount. Athlete background and needs – physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, social, and cultural–must be considered.

In research and application of self-compassion, there may be a tendency to separate well-being and performance outcomes that can be attributed to, or at least associated with, self-compassion. As we move forward with self-compassion in sport, it is important to recognize the interrelatedness between the two. Self-compassion represents an approach that stands to assist with the goal of facilitating successful and positive sport experiences that ultimately lead to the fulfillment of athletic potential and well-being.

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