



## Self-compassion and women athletes' responses to emotionally difficult sport situations: An evaluation of a brief induction



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To examine self-compassion as a way to promote healthy responses in women athletes when faced with emotionally difficult sport-specific situations.

**Design:** Phase I, cross-sectional; Phase II, experimental.

**Methods:** In Phase I, participants ( $N = 101$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.0$ ,  $SD = 2.8$  years) completed measures of self-compassion, self-esteem, and narcissism, as well as reactions, thoughts, and emotions in response to hypothetical (i.e., responsible for a team loss) and recalled scenarios. Participants returning for Phase II were randomly assigned to a brief self-compassion induction ( $n = 21$ ), self-esteem induction ( $n = 20$ ), or writing control ( $n = 18$ ) group. Following the induction, they responded to the same hypothetical scenario as in Phase I.

**Phase I results:** After partialling out self-esteem and narcissism, self-compassion was related ( $p < .01$ ) to negative affect ( $r = -.40$ ), catastrophizing thoughts ( $r = -.30$ ), personalizing thoughts ( $r = -.32$ ), and behavioral equanimity ( $r = .28$ ) for the hypothetical scenario. A similar pattern was found for the recalled scenario.

**Phase II results:** A MANOVA with Phase I self-compassion, self-esteem, and narcissism as covariates resulted in a non-significant group by time interaction, Wilks' Lambda = .75,  $F(12,96) = 1.27$ ,  $p = .25$ . Follow-up hierarchical regression analysis showed Phase I levels of self-compassion as the only significant predictor for negative affect, personalizing thoughts, and behavioral equanimity.

**Conclusions:** Women athletes with higher self-compassion levels generally responded in healthier ways to emotionally difficult hypothetical and recalled situations in sport than their less self-compassionate counterparts. However, future research needs continued focus on evaluating self-compassion inductions and interventions for use in sport.

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Improved psychological well-being, emotional development, and self-esteem are just some of the psychological benefits women can experience through participation in sport (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Nichols, Sanborn, & Essery, 2007). Despite these benefits, women athletes face both appearance-based and performance-based evaluations in sport (Greenleaf, 2002; Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2009). These judgments result in outcomes such as body image concern and body dissatisfaction (Gerner & Wilson, 2005; Paxton, Norris, Wertheim,

Durkin, & Anderson, 2005), as well as fear, guilt, shame, embarrassment, worry, and anxiety (Conroy, 2001; Sagar, Lavalley, & Spray, 2007, 2009). Women athletes report difficulties with managing appearance- and performance-related demands in sport (Greenleaf, 2002; Mosewich et al., 2009), and often perceive that the evaluative characteristics of the sport environment leaves them vulnerable to maladaptive thoughts and behaviors (Stirling & Kerr, 2012). In addition, women athletes can experience a variety of emotionally painful setbacks in sport, such as poor performance, performance plateau, and injury (Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014). An effective coping method is therefore needed for women athletes to manage emotionally difficult sport situations in a way that provides for a healthier, more positive overall sporting experience.

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The development of self-compassion might be particularly beneficial for coping in circumstances involving negative evaluations and difficult emotional experiences (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Self-compassion entails being moved by one's own suffering along with a desire to alleviate that suffering; and it is comprised of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Self-kindness involves treating oneself with warmth and non-judgmental understanding, rather than harsh self-criticisms. Common humanity requires viewing one's own experiences as part of the larger human experience, rather than considering them isolated. Mindfulness entails identifying with one's painful feelings and not avoiding or repressing them, which helps to put one's personal experiences into perspective and view one's suffering with a sense of clarity (Neff, 2003a). In contrast with self-esteem, self-compassion is not dependent upon positive self-evaluations or evaluations by others, and it offers a way to accept all aspects of one's experiences irrespective of how painful or difficult they may be (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007).

A growing body of evidence suggests that self-compassion might provide a buffer against some of the negative and self-evaluative thoughts for women in sport, offer a resource in times of emotional pain and failure, and promote athletes' psychological flourishing (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2014; Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & DeLongis, 2013; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2014). For example, Mosewich et al. (2011) showed self-compassion to be negatively associated with diverse emotional (e.g., shame-proneness) and cognitive (e.g., fear of failure) outcomes with a sample of women athletes. In addition, self-compassion explained variance beyond that accounted for by self-esteem on many of these same outcomes. However, a limitation of the Mosewich et al. (2011) study is that they did not focus on sport-specific scenarios or use experimental methodologies.

More recently, Mosewich et al. (2013) developed a sport-specific self-compassion intervention that began with an in-person psychoeducational component and a self-compassionate writing exercise. Participants were then provided a module booklet with five writing exercises to be completed over the following week, representing aspects of self-compassion. Modules included: (1) detailing the negative event, (2) thinking about others who experience similar events, (3) expressing kindness to oneself, (4) objectivity perspective taking, and (5) integration of skills. Their research showed that the self-compassion intervention was effective in increasing self-compassion and decreasing self-criticism, rumination, and concern over mistakes for women athletes high in self-criticism. However, a pragmatic limitation with the Mosewich et al. (2013) intervention is the length of time required (i.e., one week). A brief self-compassion induction (i.e., less than 30 min), if shown to be effective, could offer a more practical strategy for athletes, as well as offer a more feasible method for researchers conducting experimental self-compassion studies in sport.

One such approach was used in the research of Leary et al. (2007) whose brief self-compassion induction had three writing prompts, each focused on one of the major components of self-compassion. They asked participants to list ways in which others experience similar events (i.e., common humanity); express understanding, kindness, and concern to themselves in the same way that they might show concern to a friend (i.e., self-kindness); and describe their feelings in an objective and unemotional fashion (i.e., mindfulness). To test the effectiveness of the induction, participants were initially presented with a prompt to "think about a negative event that you experienced in high school or college that made you feel badly about yourself—something that involved failure, humiliation, or rejection" (p. 899). Subsequent results showed that the

self-compassion induction group reported significantly lower negative affect than a self-esteem induction group, a writing control group, and a no-induction group. Supporting its potential for use with athletes, the modules developed by Mosewich et al. (2013) for their sport-specific intervention were modeled after the Leary et al. (2007) writing exercises.

While not focused specifically on sport, Leary et al. (2007) offer a useful framework to explore other research questions related to the role of self-compassion in sport. Across multiple studies, including the self-compassion induction study mentioned above, the underlying goal of Leary et al.'s work was to explore the cognitive and emotional processes by which self-compassionate people deal with unpleasant life events. In one study, participants "... described in two sentences or fewer the worst thing that had happened during the past 4 days" (p. 889). As expected, results showed that self-compassion was positively related to kind treatment of oneself and equanimity (i.e., remaining calm and unflustered) for participants' recalled events. These findings further the idea that self-compassion is linked to kind treatment of the self and, in more general terms, healthy reactions to emotionally difficult scenarios. In another study, Leary et al. examined the unique contribution of self-compassion beyond self-esteem and narcissism across three hypothetical scenarios, one of which was "being responsible for losing an athletic competition for your team" (pp. 891–892). For this sport-specific hypothetical scenario, self-compassion predicted unique variance beyond self-esteem and narcissism for behavioral equanimity, personalizing and equanimous thoughts, and negative affect. As they argued, while self-compassion and self-esteem tend to be related to one another, self-compassion should be related to outcomes differently from self-esteem. Also, self-compassion and self-esteem operate differently once their shared variance is partialled out (Neff & Vonk, 2009). More specifically, as Neff and Vonk (2009) stated, self-esteem remains with positivity of self reflections, while warm feelings associated with an acceptance of oneself without judgment or evaluation remain with self-compassion. In addition, Leary et al. argued for the importance of also controlling for narcissism given that measures of self-esteem tend to be related to narcissism.

The Leary et al. (2007) research provides a framework to study the role self-compassion might play in how women athletes react, think, and feel in response to emotionally difficult situations faced in sport. Most significantly, they developed a set of response measures for hypothetical and recalled scenarios, they created a sport-specific hypothetical scenario, they controlled for both self-esteem and narcissism, and they developed the brief self-compassion induction we chose to use in our study. Where our research differed most significantly was in our focus on a sport-specific sample of women athletes, our use of sport-specific recalled scenarios, and in the implementation of a pre-post experimental design to evaluate the self-compassion induction. In Phase I, we explored women athletes' responses to emotionally difficult, hypothetical and recalled, sport-specific situations. In Phase II, we evaluated the effectiveness of a brief self-compassion induction on women athletes' responses to the same hypothetical scenario used in Phase I.

## Phase I

### Purpose

The purpose of Phase I was to determine if self-compassion is related to reactions, thoughts, and feelings for women athletes faced with emotionally difficult, hypothetical and recalled, sport-specific situations. Based on the work by Leary et al. (2007), it was hypothesized that self-compassion would be positively related

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