

USING SELF-COMPASSION TO MANAGE DIFFICULT SPORT EXPERIENCES

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YOUNG REVIEWER:



AMELIE

AGE: 13

Do you ever have that awful feeling in your gut after you mess up during an important competition? When training is really tough, do you ever say to yourself, “I am not good enough”? Do not worry, you are not alone in these tough times. All athletes—including us, the authors of this paper—have difficult sport experiences. Fortunately, there are skills we can learn to manage these difficult experiences! We can learn to recognize that sport is sometimes difficult and that all athletes mess up from time to time. We can also learn to be kind to, and supportive of, ourselves just like we would be to a close friend or teammate. Having self-compassion in sport can reduce the negative thoughts and feelings we might have about ourselves, and can decrease fears we might have about failing. Self-compassion can contribute to reaching our potential in sport; but how can we be self-compassionate?

DIFFICULT SPORT EXPERIENCES

Picture the following situation: you are an ice hockey player and have been in love with the sport for what seems like forever. Your mom put you in skates soon after you learned how to walk, and you have basically been playing hockey ever since. You are pretty good at it too. You catch on to new skills quickly, your coaches frequently ask you to demonstrate drills for your teammates, you often lead your team in points, and you know your teammates think of you as a leader. As the new season is about to begin, you are excited to hear who will be named team captain. You were an alternate captain on the team last year, and with last year's captain moving up a division, you figure you are next in line to be team captain. Your coaches plan to announce the new captain after the pre-season tournament. Following the final game in the tournament, you are even more certain that you will be named captain. You played well in the tournament, got two goals and three assists, supported your teammates, and kept a positive attitude when the team was behind on the scoreboard. At the team meeting following the final game, your coaches announce that Jordyn, your teammate who has been playing hockey for only a few years, is the new captain.

If you were the athlete in the above scenario, how might you respond? How would you feel? What would you think or say to yourself? Difficult experiences are very common in sport. They can range from the little mistakes made during practice to bigger mistakes that can result in losing an important competition. Difficult experiences can also occur when learning new skills and techniques, when trying to manage nerves before a big competition, or when feeling frustrated after an official makes an unfair call. Unfortunately, injuries are common in sport and athletes must sometimes face the difficult challenge of being unable to train, practice, or compete. When these or other difficult situations occur, we might feel badly about ourselves, criticize ourselves, and even think or say things like, "I am not good enough." Fortunately, we can use **self-compassion** to help with such difficult sport experiences.

SELF-COMPASSION

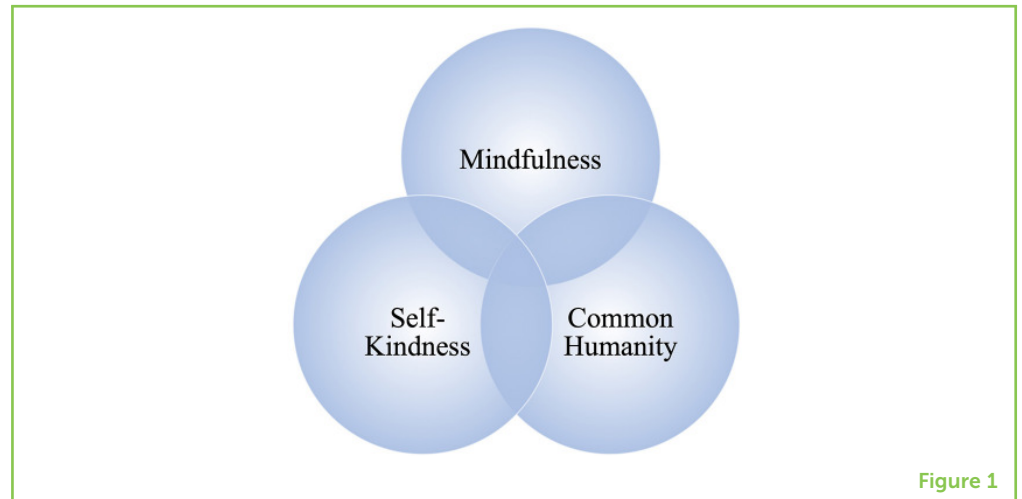
A kind, connected, and balanced attitude we extend toward ourselves when experiencing a difficult situation, specifically involving mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity.

SELF-COMPASSION

Self-compassion might be a new term for some athletes. Sometimes it is easiest to understand self-compassion by thinking about what it is like to have compassion for someone else. Imagine that it was your good friend or close teammate who experienced not being named team captain. How might you respond? How would you feel? What might you say? Chances are, you would have compassion for your friend, meaning you would recognize that your friend is going through a difficult time. You would most likely treat your friend with kindness, and try to make the person feel better. Compassion is a positive and energizing emotion. Out of compassion, you would likely listen if your

Figure 1

The 3 components of self-compassion interact to create a self-compassion mindset. Mindfulness involves recognizing when we are experiencing a difficult situation without becoming overwhelmed by the situation; self-kindness involves being kind and caring toward ourselves instead of being self-critical; and common humanity involves recognizing that other athletes experience difficult situations too instead of feeling alone (1).



friend wanted to talk. You might also say something comforting like, “I think you deserved to be captain, and I know you are going to be a great leader on the team anyway.” Extending compassion helps your friend feel safe and cared for. Self-compassion is very similar. The main difference is that, instead of offering compassion to someone else, we offer it to ourselves.

Self-compassion consists of three components: mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity (Figure 1) [1]. **Mindfulness** involves recognizing that we are going through a difficult experience. It is not about exaggerating the situation or ignoring the situation, but simply acknowledging that it is happening. **Self-kindness** involves being kind and caring toward ourselves instead of being mean or self-critical. **Common humanity** involves recognizing that other athletes experience difficult situations too, and that we are not alone. Being self-compassionate means that we care about ourselves and want to support ourselves in managing difficult experiences. This often means taking action to make the difficult experience better. As such, self-compassion can be very motivating and help us meet our goals in sport.

MINDFULNESS

Acknowledging that we are going through a difficult experience without exaggerating or ignoring the situation.

SELF-KINDNESS

Being kind and caring toward ourselves instead of being mean or self-critical.

COMMON HUMANITY

Recognizing that other athletes experiences difficult situations too, and that we are not alone.

RESILIENCE

The ability to recover from setbacks and difficulties.

WHY BOTHER WITH SELF-COMPASSION?

Researchers have been studying the benefits of self-compassion for almost 20 years. Self-compassionate young people are more likely to take positive risks, learn new skills, and embrace new situations [2]. Being self-compassionate means that we are kinder to ourselves when we fail. So, even if we struggle or experience failure while trying something new (like new drills or techniques in sport), we will not get caught up in negative emotions and we will comfort ourselves rather than being overly self-critical. Young people who are more self-compassionate also have greater **resilience** [2], meaning they have an easier time “bouncing back” from setbacks. Basically,

self-compassion provides young people with ways to cope with challenges as they explore and try new things.

Within sport, researchers have focused mainly on adult athletes (usually 18 years and older) and found that being self-compassionate is linked with more positive thinking, less negative emotions and more positive ones, and healthy coping habits [3]. Some research with athletes between the ages of 14–17 years found that being compassionate toward one's body in sport may help build confidence and encourage a focus on what the body can do [4]. All these research findings suggest that developing self-compassion is worthwhile. Some of us might be more naturally self-compassionate than others; fortunately, there are activities we can do to develop our self-compassion skills.

SELF-COMPASSION ACTIVITIES

So, how can an athlete *use* self-compassion? Again, imagine yourself as the hockey player who was not selected as team captain. How might you be self-compassionate in this situation? Instead of exaggerating the situation (“This is the end of my hockey career!”), you might be *mindful* by recognizing that it is difficult, but certainly not the end of hockey for you. You might think to yourself, “This is really disappointing, and I am pretty upset right now, but it does not change who I am as an athlete.” Instead of being really critical of yourself (“I suck and I will never be good enough to be the captain!”), you could offer yourself *kindness*. Perhaps you give your hand a little squeeze of reassurance to let yourself know it is going to be okay. Instead of feeling alone (“I am the only athlete who has ever been this close to being captain and failed”), you could recognize your *common humanity* with other athletes. You might talk to one of your teammates, friends, or parents about similar experiences they have had. Which do you think is a more effective way to respond: getting down on yourself and spiraling into a cycle of negative self-criticism, or recognizing the difficult scenario and offering yourself the kindness and understanding needed to move forward?

It takes practice to extend compassion toward ourselves, especially if our typical response to failure or a setback includes exaggerating the situation, being self-critical, and feeling alone. Self-compassion may not be an easy or natural response for many of us. The good news is that there are activities we can do to develop self-compassion. As an example, we could ask ourselves how things might change if we responded to a difficult situation in the same way we typically respond to a close friend when they are going through a difficult time. Figure 2 includes the specific instructions for this activity. There are also self-compassion programs specifically for children and teens. One such program is called “Making Friends with Yourself” [5], and it includes several sessions that break down the components of

Figure 2

How would you treat a friend? This is an activity that can help you to develop your self-compassion.¹

¹ Adapted from <https://self-compassion.org/exercise-1-treat-friend/>

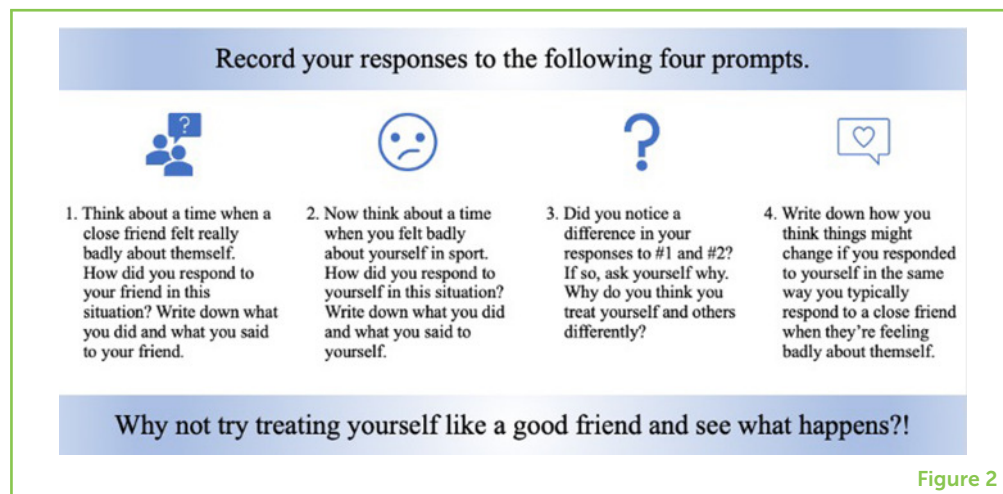


Figure 2

Table 1

Examples of self-compassion activities (adapted from Bluth et al. [5])².

² Some activities are available with full instructions and/or as guided audio meditations at <https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#exercises>

Self-Compassion activity	Brief description
How would you treat a friend?	Write down the things you say to a close friend when they are feeling badly. Consider saying these same things to yourself
Supportive touch	Comfort yourself (gentle hand squeeze, hand on heart, hold hands together) to support yourself and feel calm and cared for
Self-Compassion phrases	Create phrases or cue words that remind you to do three things: (1) acknowledge the difficult moment; (2) extend kindness toward yourself; and (3) recognize that all athletes struggle at times
Mindful breathing	Take some time to pay attention to your breath, which can help train the mind to be more focused and calmer
Body scan	Notice sensations in each part of the body while bringing kindness to the body
Self-compassion break	Think about a difficult sport situation and bring to mind the three components of self-compassion

Table 1

self-compassion into workable activities. Table 1 briefly introduces some activities we can do to develop self-compassion.

Similar to how we learn new skills, techniques, and drills in sport, self-compassion is a skill that we can learn. Self-compassion can be applied in other settings beyond sport, such as in school and with family and friends. The important thing to remember is that it takes practice. Just like we eventually get better at each sport-specific skill we practice, eventually it will become easier to use self-compassion to manage difficult sport experiences.

SELF-COMPASSION AND SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

As athletes, we might be familiar with several sport psychology techniques, or what are often called **mental performance strategies**, such as goal setting, visualization or imagery, and various relaxation

MENTAL PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES

Techniques that can be used to support athletes' wellness and performance, including goal setting, imagery, relaxation, and self-talk.

exercises, like deep breathing. We like to think of these strategies as the various “tools” athletes can use to assist themselves in sport. Self-compassion is another skill or tool that can be added to the mental performance “toolbox.” There is growing interest in the use of self-compassion in sport, including its relevance for high-performance athletes and to support athletes’ mental health. While difficult situations are certain to happen in sport, self-compassion is a useful tool that might help during those times. Go ahead, give it a try!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Maya McHugh for serving as a valuable critical friend at various times throughout the writing of this paper. We would also like to acknowledge Amelie, the Young Reviewer on this article, for offering feedback and asking questions about an earlier draft of this paper.

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SUBMITTED: 25 May 2021; **ACCEPTED:** 22 March 2022;

PUBLISHED ONLINE: 21 April 2022.

EDITOR: Chris Harwood, Loughborough University, United Kingdom

SCIENCE MENTOR: Jean Calleja-Agius

CITATION: Ferguson LJ and McHugh TF (2022) Using Self-Compassion to Manage Difficult Sport Experiences. *Front. Young Minds* 10:672376. doi: 10.3389/frym.2022.672376

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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YOUNG REVIEWER



AMELIE, AGE: 13

I have started practicing judo (I am a yellow-belt) and love playing squash with my friends and swimming. I am very interested in aviation and at school, my favorite subjects are physics, chemistry, and biology.

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Leah (she/her) is an associate professor in the College of Kinesiology at the University of Saskatchewan. As a youth she danced competitively, primarily in tap and jazz, until she was 18 years old. Her experiences as a competitive dancer sparked her interests in sport psychology research and application. Leah's research includes a focus on women athletes' sport experiences, and she explores self-compassion as a resource to promote athletes' wellbeing and performance. Leah is also a mental performance consultant with the Sport Medicine and Science Council of Saskatchewan, and a professional member of the Canadian Sport Psychology Association. She works with athletes, coaches, and teams to apply mental skills to support flourishing in sport. *leah.ferguson@usask.ca



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Tara-Leigh (she/her) is a professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation at the University of Alberta. She competed in sprint kayaking and canoeing for 15 years, from the ages of 5–20 years old. She was also a coach for 6 years and had the opportunity to coach some of her athletes at national championships. Tara-Leigh has experienced the many potential benefits of sport participation and, as such, her program of research is focused on enhancing sport experiences for *all* youth. She is particularly committed to working collaboratively with girls and women, as well as many other young people who are often underrepresented in sport. Tara-Leigh is also a mother to three competitive alpine ski racers and is committed to exploring the important role that parents play in supporting their athletes' sport experiences. Her experiences as an athlete, coach, and sport parent are foundational to her youth-focused program of sport research.