



Overcoming Fear of Failure: Self-Compassion in Sports Psychology

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Abstract

The effects of self-compassion training, compared to traditional sports psychology imagery practices, on coping with fear of failure in collegiate female athletes were examined. We studied 33 female basketball and softball athletes who participated in various exercises over an 8 week period. Levels of self-compassion, fear of failure, sport satisfaction, and sport performance were measured. Results showed that the participants, following the self-compassion intervention, elicited higher sport satisfaction and lessened amounts of both fear of failure and negative self-evaluation than the traditional sports psychology manipulations. Due to the observed benefits, further research and implementation of self-compassion in athletics should be considered.

Overcoming Fear of Failure: Self-Compassion in Sports Psychology

Athletes of all ages are exposed to pressures from parents, coaches, peers, and themselves. According to research done with youth, the number one reason that kids quit playing sports is because it isn't fun anymore (Butcher, Lindner & Johns, 2002). In the same study, Butcher et al. found that the main reason for withdrawal among elite athletes is excessive pressure to perform well. The demands for superior performance often lead to self-criticism, which many athletes believe to be a key aspect to reaching optimal performance. Self-criticism is viewed as a way to oppose complacency (Sutherland et al., 2014). However, research has exposed the dichotomy between the relationships of such negativity in regards to success. Stoeber and Becker (2008) surveyed female soccer players and found that perfectionism can be either highly beneficial or destructive. When striving for perfection as motivated by hope of success there was a negative correlation for fear of failure and a positive correlation with self-serving attribution. On the other hand, negative reactions to imperfection correlated positively to fear of failure and avoidance motivation while negatively correlating with self-serving attribution. Currently in sports psychology, negative motivations, behaviors, and emotions are battled through practicing various psychological skills such as relaxation, positive self-talk, increasing concentration, and visualization. The goal is to teach athletes how to reach optimal performance by, for example, changing their motivation from only seeking success and avoiding failure to becoming mastery-oriented (Weinburg & Gould, 2011).

Relaxation, positive self-talk, concentration, and visualization are among the widely accepted sports psychological activities used with athletes. Relaxation and proper breathing is seen as one of the easiest and most effective ways to control anxiety and reduce muscle tension (Weinburg & Gould, 2011). Progressive muscle relaxation is a common type of mediation practice, where individuals first tense the muscle before relaxing it, used to trigger a relaxation response. Positive self-talk is used to cope with negative thoughts either by stopping the thoughts before they harm performance, changing them from negative to positive, or by "parking" the thoughts and coming back to them at a later time. The idea is that negative thoughts and emotions are harmful to performance so they should be eliminated. Learning the appropriate attentional focus for various situations is currently another important concept in sports psychology. Having the wrong type of focus often leads to choking, an event described by broken concentration where the body acts accordingly with increased muscle tension, breathing, and heart rate. Distraction training and trigger words are taught to maintain appropriate attentional focus in difficult situations. Visualization, also known as imagery, is a familiar practice used among many athletes already. It is a type of mental preparation that athlete's use to create or recreate experiences in the mind. Through vividness and controllability athletes are able to have real sensory experiences which can be very effective when you can manipulate the images to end with success. (Weinburg & Gould, 2011).

Within the last decade, mindfulness has proven itself to become an integral part of aiding athletes to excellence. An intervention done by Bernier, Thienot, Codron and Fournier (2009) found that mindfulness training resulted in increased athletic performance, flow, and satisfaction for the nationally ranked golfers. Gardner and Moore (2012) echo the importance of mindfulness in their development of Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment protocol which shows promise in giving rise to furthered sport performance and satisfaction. Such findings led a select few researchers such as, Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, and DeLongis (2013), Mosewich et al.

(2011), and Sutherland et al. (2014), to take mindfulness a step forward and seek out the effects of self-compassion in the sport world.

Self-compassion is different from self-esteem, even though the correlations between the two are strong (Neff, 2011). Where self-esteem relies on the evaluation of self or others, compassion is instead, a non-judgmental kindness given to all. Neff (2003) defines self-compassion as split into three distinguishing characteristics: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness includes acknowledging individual imperfection, accepting it, and treating ourselves with kindness. Common humanity is an understanding that part of being human is to have imperfections and as because of that, we are never completely alone in times of life's difficulties. Mindfulness is a present moment awareness allowed with non-judgment. Self-compassion has been shown to have many positive links between connectedness, emotional intelligence, self-determination, subjective well-being, and mastery goals. There is also an inverse correlation between self-criticism, depression, anxiety, fear of failure, rumination and thought suppression (Neff, 2005). Although compassion has been studied at length in regards to the self over the last ten years, it has not been explored thoroughly in the sports sphere.

Because women tend to have higher self-criticism and rumination than men, they are prime candidates for compassion interventions (Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski & DeLongis, 2013). There is evidence to show that self-compassion is particularly effective for those struggling with physical and mental evaluations, fear of failure and negative perfectionism, all of which are common vulnerabilities for women. Athletics, additionally, provide numerous challenges and difficulties including injury, failure, and missed opportunities, where effective coping strategies are needed (Sutherland et al., 2014). Self-evaluations, evaluations by others, social comparisons are not unfamiliar to those in the sport world and can lead to unhealthy behaviors like eating disorders or overtraining when injured (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack & Sabiston, 2014).

Because of this research on self-compassion with athletes, Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski and DeLongis (2013) developed a compassion intervention, and compared it to an attention control group, for female varsity athletes participating in 12 different sports. Both groups followed the same format: a 10 minute psycho-education presentation, an applied writing task to do immediately following the presentation, and then they received a series of writing modules to complete over the next week. The self-compassion intervention group wrote in detail about significant setbacks or failures in their sport over the last year. They then wrote about self-compassion principles of common humanity, self-kindness, and mindfulness and how they could apply it to their difficult situations previously described. The attention control group followed the same format but the focus was on how writing is often used in sport, something that was not expected to have any influence on the study variables. The results showed that the athletes in the self-compassion intervention group had higher levels of self-compassion and lower levels of state self-criticism, state rumination, and concern over mistakes. As an extension of this study, our goals are to determine the effects of an acceptance-based model of self-compassion on female collegiate athletes compared to current traditional sports psychological practices. In particular, we will be examining fear of failure, self and other compassion levels, sport satisfaction, and performance after completing compassion and traditional interventions.

Our primary research goal is to examine the effects of self-compassion on coping with fear of failure. Additionally we want to know the effects on sport satisfaction, compassion levels, and performance. We hypothesize that the participants will experience increased sport

satisfaction, compassion levels and performance while decreasing fear of failure and negative self-evaluations following the compassion intervention.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 33 in season female varsity collegiate athletes from Fort Lewis College, 18 softball athletes and 15 basketball athletes. Institutional Review Board and coach approval was received. All participation was voluntary and the athletes were not compensated.

Procedure

The participants began with baseline pretest surveys and then performed exercises, in one of two conditions (Traditional or Compassion), over a 4 week period. The interventions consisted of an approximate 30 minute session, twice a week, where the athletes were taught and practiced concepts of relaxation, positive self-talk, concentration, and imagery, each manipulated to the respective condition. At the end of the 4 weeks, posttest surveys were completed. The participants then switched groups, completed the next intervention, and concluded with the final surveys. Because the basketball athletes were studied at the end of their season they were not able to complete the full 8 weeks of the study. One meditation and one concentration exercise were taken out to make the intervention last 3 weeks. Only data from the first condition was used.

The traditional group focused on using various strategies to fix their mistakes of muscle tension, negative emotions and thoughts, and inappropriate attentional focus. Before the athletes performed the practice exercises, they were taught the concept for the week, with examples from Weinburg and Gould's (2011) book *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (5th ed). To practice relaxation, a guided breathing meditation and progressive muscle relaxation were performed. Positive self-talk began by writing down difficult sport situations and negative self-narrations. Trigger words and actions were individually chosen to act as a reminder to stop negative thoughts and emotions. The athletes imagined success using their trigger words in times of negativity. For the second exercise negative self-talk statements were changed to positive ones. For example, "*I can't believe I'm playing so bad*" could be changed to "*just keep calm and focused.*" Athletes again imagined success using their trigger words as a reminder to adjust their thoughts from negative to positive.

The following week the importance of concentration was taught by explaining the 4 different types of attentional focus: broad, narrow, external, and internal, as described by Weinburg and Gould (2011). The consequences of improper focuses were also discussed. For instance, a broad rather than narrow focus when shooting the game winning free throws can lead to rushing, impaired timing and coordination, and inability to attend to task-relevant cues (Weinburg & Gould, 2011). Practice maintaining concentration was done by having a sport relevant object to observe for 5 minutes. Cue words were used to bring attention back if thoughts wandered. The second exercise was distraction training where participants performed a sport specific task, such as free throws or batting, while their teammates acted as distracters. The goal was to maintain the appropriate focus despite the disturbances surrounding them. Guided imagery was the last activity where all of the principles from the last 3 weeks were put together. Participants first imagined, in detail, an unsuccessful pressure situation to find where the mistakes were made. Then a successful situation was visualized to see what went right and how

success was reached. The final exercise used controllability to change the unsuccessful situations into successful ones.

The self-compassion group focused on changing athlete's relationship to difficult emotions and thoughts in a non-judgmental way rather than viewing them as mistakes that need to be fixed. Before the participants performed the practice exercises, they were taught the concept for the week, with research to back it up, and then instruction followed. Evidences were given from Brantley and Hanauer's (2008) book *The Gift of Loving-Kindness: 100 Mindful Practices for Compassion, Generosity & Forgiveness* and Germer's (2009) book *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*. A full loving-kindness meditation was used for the first relaxation exercise. It was followed by a meditation that worked on mindfulness of emotion in the body. Positive self-talk began the same as it did for the previous group by writing down difficult sport situations, negative self-narrations, and emotions. The participants then labeled the emotions felt in those circumstances because according to Germer (2009), labeling difficult emotions like "anger" or "fear", makes it easier for us to sit with them. It also allows us to see them as "just emotions" rather than getting caught up in them.

The second exercise built upon that by exploring and befriending the thoughts and feelings in a curious and nonjudgmental way. Loving-kindness phrases were individually chosen to aid participants in treating negative thoughts with compassion. Common humanity and caring for ourselves as we would a close friend were also discussed in this exercise. Next, was learning to maintain focus when observing a sport specific object like a basketball or softball glove. Rather than merely examining the object as the traditional group did, the compassion group learned to go towards the object by allowing it to remind them of the memories, passions, and relationships built due to athletic participation. If distractions arose they took note of it and practiced compassion. Mantras, a tool for the mind, were introduced to help calm the mind with loving-kindness (Germer, 2009). The second concentration exercise was distraction training, carried out exactly as it was for the traditional group. The only difference was that the self-compassion participants were taught to view distractions as part of the challenge and joy of sports, rather than something that should be avoided. The last exercise of imagery, as previously described, put together all of the principles taught over the previous 3 weeks. Participants first visualized an unsuccessful pressure situation in detail to recognize the need for self-compassion. Then a successful situation was recalled and enjoyed as the participants were instructed to sit with and relish the feeling of success. Finally, the unsuccessful situation was controlled, using compassion, to accept both success and failure as part of sports.

Measures

Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (Long-Form, 25 Items) was used to measure levels of fear of failure broken into six subcategories: Fear of Experiencing Shame & Embarrassment, Fear of Devaluing One's Self-Estimate, Fear of Having an Uncertain Future, Fear of Important Others Losing Interest, Fear of Upsetting Important Others, and General Fear of Failure (Conroy, Willow, & Metzler, 2002). Examples of questions asked are "When I am failing, I blame my lack of talent" or "When I am failing, I worry about what others think about me". Responses were scored on a scale ranging from -2 "Do Not Believe At All" to +2 "Believe 100% of the Time" where higher numbers indicate higher fear of failure.

The Sport Motivation Scale (Pelletier et al., 1995) was modified to measure the satisfaction the athletes received from their sport in the last two weeks. Responses were scored

on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 “*Does not correspond at all*” to 7 “*Corresponds exactly*”. Higher scores indicate higher satisfaction. Scores were divided between intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation/ satisfaction.

Self-Others Four Immeasurables (SOFI) was used to analyze positive and negative feelings towards self and others within the past week (Kraus & Sears, 2009). This compassion scale ranges from 1 “*very slightly or not at all*” to 5 “*extremely*” and higher numbers indicate higher levels of positive or negative feelings. Friendly, joyful, accepting, and compassionate were the positive feelings measured and hateful, angry, cruel, and mean were the negative ones.

A Performance Rating was completed by the head and assistant coach. The rating was used to examine performance levels based on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 “*less than normal*” to 7 “*Better than normal*”. It should be noted that post surveys included additional open ended questions such as: “Which exercise/ group did you like the best and why?” and “How useful was this segment of the project for you?”

Results

A 2 (pre-post) x 2 (compassion vs. traditional) mixed model ANOVA with alpha set at .05 was conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that the compassion group would decrease fear of failure ratings and increase sport satisfaction better than their traditional counterparts. We were specifically looking for interactions in this study. There were no significant differences between the basketball and softball athletes so we collapsed them into one group. Results are summarized in Table 1.

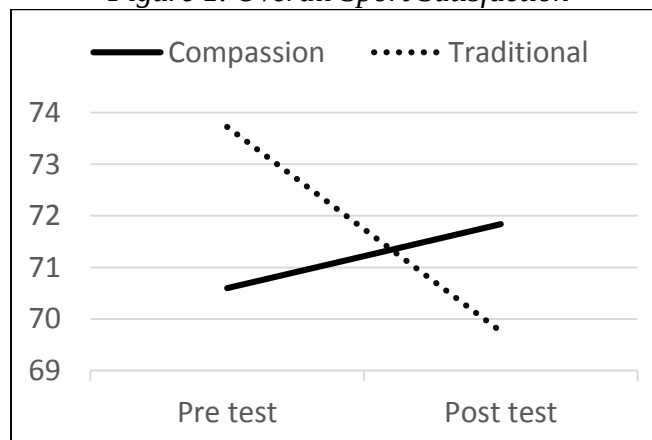
Table 1 ANOVA Interactions between Test Time and Intervention Type

	Compassion		Traditional		F
	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	
Sport Satisfaction	70.60 (11.28)	71.84 (13.39)	73.72 (11.56)	69.76 (13.55)	4.149*
Fear of Failure	-0.29 (0.78)	-0.56 (0.77)	-0.51 (0.78)	-0.48 (0.90)	33.82**
Fear of Uncertain Future	-0.19 (0.83)	-0.82 (0.90)	-0.76 (0.93)	-0.78 (0.80)	5.65*
Fear of Upsetting Important Others	0.02 (0.92)	-0.35 (0.83)	-0.49 (0.82)	-0.32 (0.99)	6.31*
Negative Self Feelings	7.28 (3.20)	6.24 (2.55)	6.60 (3.07)	6.88 (3.72)	3.49
Coach's Ratings of Performance	4.52 (0.84)	5.26 (1.11)	4.62 (0.95)	5.20 (1.03)	19.99**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

As shown in Figure 1, an interaction for overall Sport Satisfaction was found as the compassion group increased levels of satisfaction, beginning with an average score of 70.60 ($SD=11.28$) and final score of 71.84 ($SD=13.39$) whereas the traditional group decreased greatly as time went on; *pretest Mean*=73.72 ($SD=11.56$) and *posttest*=69.76 ($SD=13.55$), $F(1,48) = 4.19$, $p=.046$.

Figure 1. Overall Sport Satisfaction



A General Fear of Failure interaction approached significance, $F(1,48) = 33.82, p=.056$ as the compassion group lessened their levels of fear of failure $pretest=-0.29$ ($SD=0.78$) $posttest=-0.56$ ($SD=0.77$) while the traditional participants increased $pretest=-0.51$ ($SD=0.78$) $posttest=-0.477$ ($SD=0.90$) (see Figure 2). A closer look showed that the fear of failure specifically came from Fear of Uncertain Future $F(1,48) = 5.65 p=.022, pretest=-0.19$ ($SD=0.83$) $posttest=-0.82$ ($SD=0.90$) for the compassion group and $pretest=-0.76$ ($SD=0.93$) $posttest=-0.78$ ($SD=0.80$) for the traditional group (Figure 3). Fear of Upsetting Important Others was also significant $F(1,48) = 6.31, p=.015$ where $pretest=0.02$ ($SD=0.92$) $posttest=-0.35$ ($SD=0.83$) for the compassion group and $pretest=-0.49$ ($SD=0.82$) $posttest=-0.32$ ($SD=0.99$) for the traditional condition. For General Fear of Failure, Fear of Having an Uncertain Future, and Fear of Upsetting Important Others, the self-compassion participants were able to more effectively decrease their fear.

Figure 2. General Fear of Failure

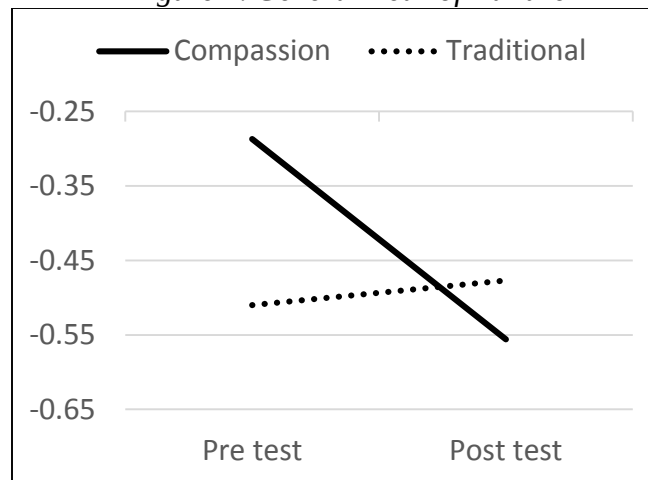
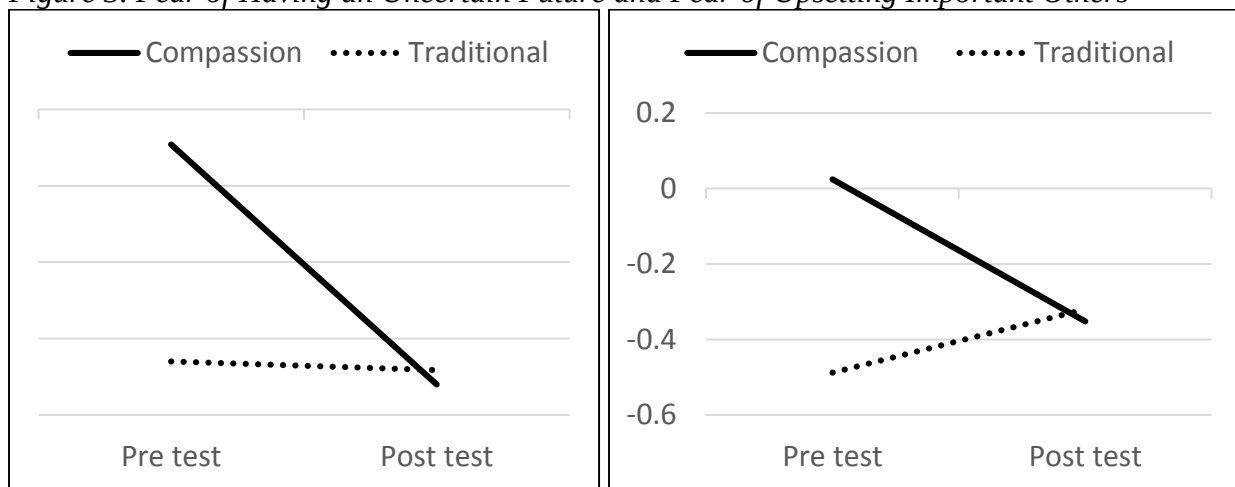


Figure 3. Fear of Having an Uncertain Future and Fear of Upsetting Important Others



The pattern continued as an interaction for negative-self feelings also approached significance $F(1,48) = 3.49, p=.068$. Figure 4 shows that the compassion group was able to lessen their negative feelings $pretest=7.28$ ($SD=3.20$) $posttest=6.24$ ($SD=2.55$) while the traditional group actually increased $pretest=6.60$ ($SD=3.07$) $posttest=6.88$ ($SD=3.72$).

Figure 4. Negative-Self feelings



Coaches equally rated increased performance for both groups, $F(1,48) = 19.95, p=.000$. The compassion group received average scores of 4.52 ($SD=.84$) and 5.26 ($SD=1.11$) and the traditional group received average scores of 4.62 ($SD=.95$) and 5.20 ($SD=1.03$) pre to post test.

There were no other significant interactions found for Fear of Experiencing Shame & Embarrassment, Fear of Devaluing One's Self-Estimate, Fear of Important Others Losing Interest, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, amotivation, positive others, positive self, negative others, or performance (all $p>.10$).

Discussion

Our findings supported our initial hypothesis that participants in the self-compassion group would increase overall sport satisfaction while decreasing fear of failure better than those practicing traditional sports psychology. More specifically, the decreases in fear came from Fear of Having an Uncertain Future and Fear of Upsetting Important Others. Additionally, participants following the self-compassion intervention decreased the intensity of negative self-feelings where the traditional intervention participants increased negativity. These findings are consistent with previous literature that suggests that a mindfulness and acceptance-based model would be beneficial for athletes (Bernier, Thienot, Codron & Fournier, 2009; Gardner & Moore, 2012). To expand on mindfulness, we focused on a self-compassionate approach which emphasizes self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003). As hypothesized, the results for the self-compassion intervention were in line with Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski and DeLongis (2013) who found that the athletes, after completing a self-compassion intervention, had higher levels of self-compassion and lower levels of state self-criticism, state rumination, and concern over mistakes.

In addition to what has been suggested in previous literature, we found that the traditional sports psychology practices, in all cases, were counter to the self-compassion results.

Although only the interactions were statistically significant, the traditional group increased fear of failure, negative self-evaluation, and decreased in sport satisfaction. These results are crucial to understanding why athletes drop out of sports. According to Butcher, Lindner and Johns (2002) one of the highest hindrances to continued athletic competition for youth is lack of enjoyment. And for elite competitors it is the extreme pressure to perform well. This pressure of extraordinary performance can easily lead to perfectionism, and if this perfectionism is motivated by negative reactions to imperfections, it can be detrimental to the athlete's motivation (Stoeber & Becker, 2008). Fear of failure is one of the byproducts of this negativity. If athletes can learn to adequately deal with their fear of failure and negative self-evaluations, not only will the dropout rate likely decrease, but the athletes will be happier in their respective sports. It is possible that the perfectionism motivated by fear of failure could be changed to perfectionism motivated by hope for success which is healthier and more satisfying. According to our research, self-compassion is a promising venue to accomplish this goal.

It is speculated that fear of failure, negative self-feelings, and overall sport satisfaction significantly improved because self-compassion teaches acceptance of mistakes and difficult emotions. Collegiate athletes are at a level of competition where perfection is sought after and expected by coaches. Stoeber and Becker (2008) teach us that self-criticism is often a side effect of that search for faultlessness, which opens the door for self-compassionate skills. Fear of Having an Uncertain Future and Fear of Upsetting Important Others were the two fear of failure variables that self-compassion most reduced. We anticipate that with increased sample size, the remaining fear of failure variables, Fear of Shame & Embarrassment, Fear of Devaluing Self-Estimate, and Fear of Important Others Losing Interest could also reach statistical significance. Performance would also likely improve for athletes practicing self-compassion rather than just the mindfulness, visualization, and other traditional psychological practices currently accepted in sports psychology. The other variables we examined, extrinsic motivation, amotivation, and negative and positive feelings about others, may not be as easily influenced by self-compassion because the focus is on the self rather than outward things.

Some limitations to our study were the small sample size, time constraints, and only female participants. Because the basketball athletes were studied at the end of their season, they were only able to complete the first intervention which was shortened to 3 weeks in hopes that 6 total weeks could be completed. Only 5 weeks of the study were finished, so data from the second condition were not used. The complex perception of self-compassion is also recognized, as some athletes expressed concern of becoming less competitive or too "soft". The newness of the concept could have influenced the application of the principles taught. Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, and Sabiston (2014) found similar hesitancy to the continued application of self-compassion, after the intervention, even though the athletes acknowledged the benefits of it.

In spite of these limitations, significant results were found in the mere 3-4 weeks spent per condition. Conventionally, meditation interventions are 8 weeks long which makes a case that self-compassion is powerful. This is the first study done comparing the effectiveness of current sports psychology with self-compassion interventions. Other strengths include, the true experimental design, using random assignment to the conditions of self-compassion and current sports psychological practices, with athletes in real time. This is a unique contribution to the existing literature, where randomizing conditions within teams has not been done. While the sample size was small, significant findings suggest the sample size was adequate, and two different athletic teams, basketball and softball, were used to give variety to the results. All instruction and collection of data was done while the athletes were in season. Athletes reported

interest, enjoyment and benefits from participating in this study. The softball coaches, in particular, requested copies of all the self-compassion exercises due to the perceived improvement of their players.

Further implications of this study suggest that there is a gap in the current sports psychology literature and additional research should be done on the effects of self-compassion with athletes, both male and female. Continued research on the practices currently used in sports psychology, should be done in respect to increasing levels of sport fulfilment and compassion as well as lessening fear of failure. Factors such as personality types, age, and levels of performance should also be investigated. The eventual goal would be to develop reliable self-compassion interventions for the varying factors. Educating coaches, parents, athletes, and sports psychologists is another important step forward.

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