

8

Self-Compassion in Sport and Exercise

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The sport and exercise context can present a multitude of challenges. Performance, appearance, and interpersonal demands are numerous and varied, and result in diverse cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses that can further contribute to other demands. Athletes and exercisers differ in how they respond to the demands placed on them, and these responses may vary markedly in adaptiveness and effectiveness. However, healthy, positive, and successful experiences in sport and exercise are founded on an ability to respond in an adaptive and constructive manner when navigating experiences in sport or exercise, whether they accompany success; are wrought with adversity, evaluation, and/or failure; or fall somewhere in between.

Self-compassion is one approach with considerable potential to facilitate the ability of athletes and exercisers to adaptively manage the demands they encounter and simultaneously foster attainment of their performance potential, while also enhancing and sustaining high levels of well-being. Self-compassion represents an emerging construct in sport and exercise psychology, but has garnered considerable attention with novel research findings and practical applications surfacing at an exponential pace. Much of the interest appears to align with self-compassion representing somewhat of a “new” approach to assist in avoiding or attenuating negative cognitions, emotions, or behaviors, as well as facilitate adaptive responses and outcomes. Therefore, self-compassion may complement existing efforts to address areas of particular relevance for athletes and exercisers, such as managing evaluation and excessive self-criticism, coping with demands, and supporting achievement of one’s potential. Summarized at a global level, self-compassion involves a positive, accepting, and understanding way of relating to the self (Neff, 2003b). As such, self-compassion parallels the elements and intent of having compassion to others, but with the care and support directed toward the self (Neff, 2003b). Such an approach

shows promise in supporting adaptive cognitions, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes in sport and exercise contexts and optimal functioning among athletes and exercisers.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of self-compassion, situating it within the psychological literature and establishing how the construct has been conceptualized and measured. The main aim of the chapter is to provide a detailed discussion around self-compassion in sport and exercise. Readers interested in a global synopsis of self-compassion within general psychology are directed to a number of general reviews (e.g., Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2009a, 2009b). Empirical findings pertaining to self-compassion in the sport and exercise context are presented, including discussion around self-compassion as a resource to foster adaptive cognitions, emotions, and behaviors; to manage setbacks and navigate difficult times; and to support advancement towards one’s potential. Application efforts in sport and exercise are highlighted, including discussion around development and intervention. A comment on the fear of self-compassion and the trend of reluctance toward self-compassion follows. The chapter concludes with an exploration of future research directions and considerations surrounding possible next steps in understanding, integrating, and applying self-compassion in sport and exercise.

What Is Self-Compassion?

An accepting, supportive, and nonjudgmental attitude toward the self—and all of the accompanying perceived shortcomings, mistakes, imperfections, and limitations—lies at the crux of the concept of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b). Self-compassion is deeply rooted in Buddhist tradition, though Kristen Neff (2003a, 2003b) can be credited with introducing the concept into the

general psychological literature. Neff (2003b) describes self-compassion as consisting of three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. *Self-kindness* involves extending support and understanding to the self during setbacks, experiences of failure, or other challenging times, as opposed to engaging in excessive self-criticism. Such a response runs in stark contrast to the self-critical response employed by many athletes and exercisers during arduous times or when working toward a goal. *Common humanity* is the recognition that making mistakes, experiencing failure, and encountering adversity are part of the shared human experience, and need not be isolating. *Mindfulness* involves keeping thoughts and feelings in a balanced awareness, rather than becoming emotionally and cognitively overcome through rumination and overidentification, or ignoring such thoughts and feelings entirely. Thus, when mindful, one is neither suppressing nor exaggerating, but rather viewing and accepting the experience for what it is.

While initially conceptualized from a trait perspective (Neff, 2003a, 2003b), there is evidence to support that self-compassion can also be prompted or applied as a resource or strategy (e.g., Adams & Leary, 2007; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006; Kelly, Zuroff, Fou, & Gilbert, 2010; Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & DeLongis, 2013; Neff & Germer, 2013). Hence, it has been suggested that some people engender self-compassion automatically as a function of their disposition, while others adopt or engage in the approach when coping with difficult events and pursuing goals (Ingstrup, Mosewich, & Holt, 2017). Based on their qualitative research findings with older women, Bennett, Hurd Clarke, Kowalski, and Crocker (2017) suggest self-compassion is contextual: more fluid than fixed, changing over time and context, as well as impacted by age, experience, and social, cultural, and historical factors. Thus, it is important to consider self-compassion from a trait as well as a state perspective, and appreciate global responses as well as context specificity.

How best to categorize self-compassion could be considered a topic of debate. The trait conceptualization lends itself to labeling self-compassion as a personality trait, while the state-like and context-specific nature of self-compassion leads to multiple options for categorization, including as a skill or strategy (e.g., coping strategy, emotion regulation strategy), an attitude, a belief about the self, or an emotion. The current state of the literature reflects these multiple labels. For example, Neff, Hseih, & Dejithirat (2005) have conceptualized self-compassion as an emotion regulation strategy that may help neutralize negative emotions and facilitate positive cognitive states. Allen and Leary (2010) have acknowledged a conceptual link between self-compassion and cognitive restructuring. They also highlight that self-compassion

could have an influence on many aspects of the stress and coping process, including appraisal, coping options, and coping effectiveness, and may ultimately function as a coping strategy or resource itself (Allen & Leary, 2010). Accordingly, self-compassion has been empirically explored in many of these roles. Researchers in sport and exercise psychology have positioned self-compassion as an adaptive conceptualization of the self (Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson, & McHugh, 2010; Magnus, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2010), an approach to relate to the self (Sutherland, Kowalski, Ferguson, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Crocker, 2014), a positive self-attitude (Bennett et al., 2017; Berry et al., 2010; Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2014, 2015; Lizmore, Dunn, & Causgrove Dunn, 2017; Smith, 2013), and as a (mental or coping) skill, resource, or strategy (Bennett et al., 2017; Fontana, Fry, & Cramer, 2017; Huysmans & Clement, 2017; Mosewich et al., 2013; Mosewich, Crocker, & Kowalski, 2014; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Reis, Kowalski, Ferguson, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Crocker, 2015; Sutherland et al., 2014; Tarasoff, Ferguson, & Kowalski, 2017). While there is diversity in the labels, many overlap conceptually to some degree. Further, Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) suggest that self-compassion appears to reflect a *collection* of skills and resources. Given this ongoing deliberation, self-compassion will be referred to more generally as an *approach* or *resource* throughout this chapter to encompass the various roles in which it has been explored. Despite the lack of unifying descriptor, self-compassion is universally considered an adaptive and effective approach for individuals in a variety of life contexts to manage difficult experiences, especially those related to failure or evaluation, and to support optimal functioning and goal pursuit.

Self-Compassion as a Unique Complement to Self-Esteem

In the process of integrating self-compassion in the psychological literature, considerable effort has been taken to differentiate it from other constructs. The predominant focus has been on establishing self-compassion as distinct from self-esteem. Self-esteem reflects a person's evaluation of the self, including one's qualities, character, roles, and attributes (James, 1890). These competency-based evaluations of the self arise from the individual, as well as others. Both reflecting positive self-attitudes, self-compassion and self-esteem do tend to be significantly related with correlations ranging from .60 to .71 in samples of athletes and exercisers (Magnus et al., 2010; Mosewich et al., 2011; Reis et al., 2015). However, recent empirical evidence provides support for the contention that self-compassion is a separate construct with unique

contributions to the promotion of adaptive functioning in sport and exercise. Specifically, in a sample of adult women exercisers, self-compassion contributed unique variance beyond self-esteem on introjected motivation, ego goal orientation, social physique anxiety, and obligatory exercise (Magnus et al., 2010). Additionally, self-compassion explained variance beyond self-esteem on shame proneness, guilt-free shame proneness, shame-free guilt proneness, objectified body consciousness, fear of failure, and fear of negative evaluation in a group of adolescent women athletes (Mosewich et al., 2011). In another group of young women athletes, after controlling for self-esteem, self-compassion remained a significant predictor of adaptive responses (i.e., reduced negative affect, catastrophizing thoughts, and personalizing thoughts, and increased behavioral equanimity) to hypothetical and recalled sport scenarios (Reis et al., 2015). These findings highlight the unique role of self-compassion in the sport and exercise experience. One of the main reasons for the unique variance explained by self-compassion might be the reduced role self-evaluation plays in the self-compassion process, compared with self-esteem, which centers on self-evaluation (Mosewich et al., 2011).

Within the general psychological literature, Neff (2003b) situates self-compassion as an *alternative* to self-esteem—a more adaptive approach to striving for a positive attitude toward oneself. Much of this position focuses on highlighting that self-compassion seems to elude many of the possible downsides of self-esteem. For example, self-esteem, but not self-compassion, is positively associated with narcissism and negatively related to contingent self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Trait self-esteem can be difficult to promote, and efforts to enhance or maintain self-esteem are often accompanied by unanticipated or undesirable outcomes such as self-absorption, self-centeredness, and a lack empathy for others (Neff, 2003b; Seligman, 1995). Self-compassion circumvents the emphasis on evaluation of the self relative to others, while self-esteem requires such evaluation, and as such, concerns such as narcissism and an overreliance on downward social comparison to maintain positive evaluations of the self are more likely to develop as a function of self-esteem than self-compassion (Neff, 2003b). By not requiring comparisons of the self relative to others, self-compassion avoids the need for an unrealistic view of oneself in an effort to feel that one stands out in comparison with others (Neff, 2004). Self-compassion is also less contingent on outcomes than self-esteem, and as such self-compassion should also be more resilient and stable (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007; Neff & Vonk, 2009). Thus, contrary to self-esteem, which is contingent on positive self-evaluations and outcomes, self-compassion

presents an opportunity to cultivate and maintain positive feelings toward the self through an authentic, self-supportive, and adaptive process.

The contrasts between self-compassion and self-esteem do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that efforts to promote self-esteem should be abandoned. There is evidence to suggest that self-esteem has a role and place in sport and exercise (e.g., Adachi & Willoughby, 2013; Whitehead & Corbin, 1997). Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, and Schimel (2004) have suggested that the pursuit of self-esteem need not be viewed as either positive or negative, but rather as one option to support coping and regulation of behavior. Therefore, self-compassion has been positioned by researchers in sport and exercise psychology as a resource to *complement* self-esteem in the maintenance and/or development of an adaptive perspective of the self, rather than as an alternative. Such a contention was first put forward by Magnus and colleagues (2010) in the exercise domain, and next echoed by Mosewich and colleagues (2011) in sport. The promotion of self-compassion may be a useful complement to self-esteem in both sport and exercise, assisting athletes and exercisers in managing various demands and striving to reach their potential. Self-compassion appears especially relevant and useful during times of difficulty, failure, or perceived inadequacy, contexts in which self-esteem is likely to waver (Neff, 2008).

Measurement of Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is a unique construct, and the trait and state level considerations, combined with multiple options for categorization, lends for multiple and complex considerations regarding measurement. The foundational work in sport and exercise psychology around self-compassion has largely adopted and been directed by Neff's conceptualization of the construct (i.e., self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness combining to form self-compassion). Researchers conducting quantitative studies of self-compassion in sport and exercise contexts have relied exclusively on the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) (Neff, 2003a) or its abbreviated version, the Self-Compassion Scale—Short Form (SCS-SF) (Raes, Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011), both of which arise from Neff's conceptualization of self-compassion.

The Self-Compassion Scale and the Self-Compassion Scale—Short Form

In their original form, both the SCS and SCS-SF capture self-compassion at a trait level, assessing typical responses across all life contexts. The SCS is a 26-item scale that consists of six subscales (Neff, 2003a). Three

represent the components of self-compassion (*self-kindness* [5 items, e.g., “I’m kind to myself when I’m experiencing suffering.”], *common humanity* [4 items, e.g., “When I’m down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.”], and *mindfulness* [4 items, e.g., “When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.”]). The remaining three are constructs in opposition to the three components of self-compassion (*self-judgment* as opposed to self-kindness [5 items, e.g., “When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.”], *isolation* as opposed to common humanity [4 items, e.g., “When I fail at something that’s important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.”], and *overidentification* as opposed to mindfulness [4 items, e.g., “When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong.”]). Responses are made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). Composite and subscale means can be reported, aligning with the conceptualization that the components of self-compassion are distinct, yet interact to mutually enhance each other (Neff, 2003a). The total self-compassion score (composite mean) is calculated by reverse scoring the negative subscale items (i.e., self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification) and computing a total mean.

Researchers have found that scores from the SCS demonstrate good internal consistency reliability, test-retest reliability, discriminant validity, and concurrent validity (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003a; Neff et al., 2005). Acceptable internal consistency reliabilities have been reported in samples of athletes ($\alpha = .79-.95$; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2013), exercisers ($\alpha = .88$; Magnus et al., 2010), and dancers ($\alpha = .88$; Tarasoff et al., 2017). Convergent validity of SCS scores is supported by high correlations between ratings of self-compassion from therapists and romantic partners (Neff & Beretvas, 2012; Neff et al., 2007). The SCS is distinct from measures of self-esteem, such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and does not appear to be influenced by social desirability bias (Neff, 2003a). During initial psychometric development, a single higher order factor was found to explain the intercorrelation of the subscales on the SCS, justifying the use of a total score (Neff, 2003a). Collectively, there is evidence in support of the reliability and validity of SCS scores.

The SCS-SF is an abbreviated 12-item version the SCS (Raes et al., 2011). Each of the six subscales in the original SCS is represented in the SCS-SF (two items for each subscale, rather than 4–5 items per subscale in the original SCS). However, the SCS-SF is designed for the generation of a composite or total score only, with the SCS being more appropriate if there is interest in assessing self-compassion at a subscale level. Examination of model fit supported the unidimensional structure of the

SCS-SF with Dutch and English samples and a high correlation between the SCS-SF and Neff’s (2003a) original 26-item SCS ($r = .97$) has been reported (Raes et al., 2011). Evidence in support of acceptable internal consistency reliability has also been reported in a sample of men and women athletes ($\alpha = .71$; Huysmans & Clement, 2017). Thus, like the original SCS, there is a body of research evidence in support of the validity and reliability of SCS-SF scores.

While there is evidence of psychometric support, measurement of self-compassion via the SCS and SCS-SF has not been void of criticism. Recently, arguments for a bidimensional model (a single self-compassion factor consisting of the positive items on the SCS and a single self-criticism factor consisting of the negative items on the SCS) and issues regarding the negative SCS subscales potentially inflating relations with psychopathology have emerged leading to challenges regarding the assessment of self-compassion (see López et al., 2015; Muris, 2016; Muris, Otgaar, & Petrocchi, 2016; Muris & Petrocchi, 2017). Muris (2016) has recommended removal of the negative items from the SCS and SCS-SF (i.e., items assessing self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification), which would result in assessment of self-compassion by items that reflect its positive approach to the self, and, by extension, its protective nature (i.e., self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness). Such a position speaks to the conceptualization of self-compassion and positions the construct in terms of presence of the protective, positive factors (i.e., self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness) that does not require an absence of the negative factors (i.e., self-judgment, isolation, and overidentification). In response, Neff and her colleagues (Neff, 2016b; Neff, Whittaker, & Karl, 2017) presented bifactor analyses indicating that at least 90% of the reliable variance in SCS can be explained by an overall self-compassion factor as evidence and support for use of the total score of the SCS, including the negative subscales. In addition, the 6-factor subscale model also had evidence of model fit, supporting use of all SCS subscale scores (positive and negative; Neff, 2016b). For further details on what is likely to be an ongoing discussion that will not only impact and direct measurement of self-compassion, but also how the construct is conceptualized, see López et al. (2015), Muris (2016), Muris et al. (2016), Muris & Petrocchi (2017), Neff (2016a, 2016b), and Neff et al. (2017).

Measurement Modifications and Advancement for Sport and Exercise Contexts

Researchers have largely employed the original, trait-level versions of the SCS and SCS-SF in initial studies focused on sport and exercise, establishing how athletes

and exercisers typically respond across various life contexts, which allowed for exploration of the role of trait self-compassion in cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. As interest in and attention to the context specificity of self-compassion have grown, some researchers have made modifications to the SCS and SCS-SF to explore typical responses in the sport context by narrowing the focus of the instructions to responses in sport (e.g., Fontana et al., 2017; Lizmore et al., 2017), as well as slight wording changes to the items to reflect the sport context (as one example, Lizmore and colleagues [2017] changed “When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation” to “After I play poorly in my sport, I take a balanced view of the situation.”). Lizmore and colleagues (2017) reported support for model fit at a unidimensional level in their sample of male and female athletes, though one item (“I see my failings as part of the overall human condition.”) was removed. Modification efforts in both studies yielded acceptable internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .84$ and $.85$ in the Fontana et al. [2017] and Lizmore et al. [2017] studies, respectively), and surpasses results with athletes using the original SCS-SF ($\alpha = .71$, Huysmans & Clement, 2017). While modifications to the SCS and SCS-SF have been successful in satisfying research needs and offer a viable approach to a sport or exercise-specific measure, there is a merit in formal development of a sport-specific, as well as an exercise-specific, measure of self-compassion, with options for trait and state assessment. Such progression may build from the modifications to the SCS established by other researchers, or may well necessitate a larger revision or creation of a new instrument adopting language specifically selected for sport and exercise.

To further assist advances in measurement and conceptualization of self-compassion in sport and exercise, it is important for researchers to consider the contribution of each component of self-compassion through reporting subscale means and examining their relation and relative contribution to outcomes. This practice has not been standard in sport and exercise psychology to date, with attention in initial foundational research focused on self-compassion more globally (i.e., the higher order composite of self-compassion). However, to better understand self-compassion and its components, a more thorough investigation is necessary. Such examination will also allow for evaluation of self-compassion assessment encompassing only the positive factors, or also including absence of negative factors, constituting action in response to the questions and concerns around measurement and conceptualization outlined earlier in this chapter. Evaluation of reliability and validity needs continued emphasis as research in sport and exercise psychology progresses, regardless if the measurement

instrument is new, modified, or existing. This will inform conceptualization and establish a strong foundation for measurement.

As the field continues to explore self-compassion within specific contexts, additional measurement options are likely to emerge. One recent example of relevance to both sport and exercise is the creation of the Body Compassion Scale (BCS) (Altman, Linfield, Salmon, & Beacham, 2017), designed to measure compassion directed toward one’s physical body. The BCS items were created based on the SCS subscales and integrate appearance, competence, and health dimensions consistent with Cash’s (2015) concept of body image, emphasizing attitudes toward the physical body. Development and initial validation work with men and women undergraduate students supported three subscales: *defusion* (9 items, e.g., “When my body is not responding the way I want it to, I tend to be tough on myself”), *common humanity* (9 items, e.g., “When I am injured, ill, or have physical symptoms, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like me.”), and *acceptance* (5 items, e.g., “I am tolerant of my body’s flaws and inadequacies.”). Internal consistency and reliability have been supported, and evidence for the concurrent validity of the items has been established through positive relations with body image flexibility, self-compassion, mindfulness, and positive affect, and negative relations with disordered eating and negative affect. Indices for model fit support the use of subscale scores, as well as a higher order composite assessing body compassion. This seminal work by Altman and colleagues (2017) is likely to be followed by future validation work, and serves as an important first step in assessing body compassion, which may inform our understanding of how individuals relate to their bodies, and the impact on health- and performance-related cognitions and behaviors. Such a focus is of interest in sport and exercise. Emphasis on advancing measurement into other contexts of relevance to sport and exercise, such as training and competition performance and situations regarding physical limitations and injury, has potential to broaden understanding of self-compassion.

Qualitative approaches should not be overlooked as viable avenues to advance conceptualization and inform measurement. Qualitative approaches have provided rich options and increased flexibility in exploring self-compassion among athletes and exercisers, with interviews, focus groups, and photo-elicitation techniques being integrated into research efforts (Bennett et al., 2017; Berry et al., 2010; Ferguson et al., 2014; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Mosewich, Vangoor, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2009; Mosewich et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014). Videos (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014) and researcher-led explanations (e.g., Bennett et al., 2017;

Ingstrup et al., 2017) have been employed to introduce the construct of self-compassion to athletes and exercisers. The findings from existing and future qualitative studies can inform language, context, and conceptualization, which are all central to measurement.

Self-Compassion in Sport and Exercise: Empirical Findings

While still a relatively new construct in sport and exercise, self-compassion is showing promise as a resource in both managing the demands that are inherent to sport and exercise contexts as well as supporting well-being and attainment of one's potential. Research and application pertaining to self-compassion in the sport and exercise context will be overviewed in the following section.

Self-Compassion as Resource to Support Adaptive Cognitions, Emotions, and Behaviors

There is a growing body of empirical evidence in support of the association between self-compassion and the cognitions, emotions, and behaviors of athletes and exercisers. While largely descriptive, this body of work provides evidence of the role of self-compassion in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in athletes and exercisers and provides a foundation upon which to refine conceptualization of self-compassion and direct application in sport and exercise contexts.

Self-Compassion, Evaluation, and Cognitions

Sport and exercise contexts provide ample opportunity for evaluation and comparison. Men and women in sport and exercise frequently manage evaluations and expectations related to their appearance and performance, including those that are contradicting (Galli & Reel, 2009; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Krane, Stiles-ShIPLEY, Waldron, & Michalenok, 2001). Research focused on how young women athletes navigate issues related to muscularity and the body led to the suggestion that the promotion of a "self-compassionate muscularity" (p. 113) could counter the expectations and evaluation many women athletes report in connection to their performance, as well as their physique (Mosewich et al., 2009). In an exercise context, body self-compassion in young women was found to involve appreciating the functionality of one's body, along with its uniqueness in terms of function and appearance (Berry et al., 2010). Engaging in body self-compassion afforded women a lens through which to acknowledge and respect, rather than harshly self-criticize, the body's limitations and a means to avoid social comparison. Similar findings were

reflected in a group of men with spinal cord injury who were former athletes. Self-compassion surrounding the body, including appreciating what it could do, was a motivating factor to engage in leisure time physical activity and helped them to avoid harsh criticism regarding personal imperfections and limitations (Smith, 2013). Self-compassion offers a means of acceptance and appreciation regarding the body's appearance and how it performs.

The role of self-compassion in the management of self-evaluative cognitions in relation to the physique and performance has been explored in sport, exercise, and dance contexts. In a group of young women athletes, self-compassion was negatively related to social physique anxiety, objectified body consciousness, fear of failure, and fear of negative evaluation (Mosewich et al., 2011). A similar pattern of results was found in a group of dancers, with self-compassion exhibiting a negative relation to trait and state social physique anxiety, trait and state fear of negative evaluation, personalizing thoughts, and catastrophizing thoughts (Tarasoff et al., 2017). Findings are echoed in the exercise domain, with self-compassion exhibiting a negative relation with social physique anxiety in a group of women exercisers (Magnus et al., 2010). Considering negative cognition more globally, Lizmore and colleagues (2017) report negative relations between self-compassion and rumination, pessimism, and perfectionistic concerns in men and women athletes. Overall, self-compassion appears particularly relevant in connection to managing negative cognitions (Berry et al., 2010; Lizmore et al., 2017; Magnus et al., 2010; Mosewich et al., 2009, 2011; Smith, 2013; Tarasoff et al., 2017).

Self-Compassion and Emotion

Self-compassion demonstrates promise in helping athletes and exercisers achieve adaptive emotional states. Self-compassion has been positioned as a construct that attenuates negative emotion and promotes positive emotion (Neff et al., 2005), with findings in sport and exercise reflecting this view. For example, self-compassion has been negatively associated with negative affect in women dancers (Tarasoff et al., 2017) and men and women athletes (Jeon, Lee, & Kwon, 2016; Reis et al., 2015). Conversely, self-compassion has exhibited positive relations with positive emotion in a sample of men and women high school and university student-athletes (Jeon et al., 2016) and equanimity among women dancers (Tarasoff et al., 2017) and women athletes (Reis et al., 2015).

Self-compassion also appears to have an adaptive connection with self-conscious emotions. In a sample of young women athletes, self-compassion was negatively related to shame proneness and guilt-free shame proneness (Mosewich et al., 2011). Self-compassion was also negatively related to shame in a group of adults participating in

recreational sport (Fontana et al., 2017). Shame is viewed as a maladaptive self-conscious emotion that is elicited due to a perceived or actual setback or failure, involves a negative evaluation of the self as a whole, and is associated with withdrawal and avoidance (Tangney, 2003). Inherently, experiences of shame are in direct opposition to the self-kindness component of self-compassion which emphasizes understanding. Shame is also incongruent with mindfulness, the component of self-compassion that supports a self-aware acknowledgment of difficult thoughts and feelings but limits overidentification. Importantly, self-compassion was also positively related to shame-free guilt proneness (Mosewich et al., 2011). Guilt is an emotion that, while still negatively valenced, can be considered adaptive during times of setback or failure, as it is connected to the behavior (not the global self as is the case with shame) and is associated with reparative actions such as physical activity motivation and behavior (Sabiston, Brunet, Kowalski, Wilson, Mack, & Crocker, 2010).

Collectively, these findings pertaining to self-conscious emotion suggest that athletes with high self-compassion are still capable of experiencing shame-free guilt when appropriate but bypass the less adaptive emotion of shame (Mosewich et al., 2011). Thus, self-compassion may help women athletes to navigate setbacks or perceived failures without shame-fueled self-criticism while still taking responsibility for and acknowledging the consequences of their role in a transgression (i.e., experiencing guilt where appropriate; Mosewich et al., 2011). This supports Neff's (2003b) conceptualization that even though self-compassion requires an absence of harsh self-criticism when standards go unattained or mistakes are made, it does not mean that one's failures, faults, or deficiencies are left unaddressed. A self-compassionate athlete is able to experience guilt and avoids shame and its maladaptive outcomes (Mosewich et al., 2011). Additionally, self-compassion may be a useful tool to manage guilt and shame if these emotions are experienced (Mosewich et al., 2011). Neff (2003b) contends that a self-compassionate approach provides an individual with "the emotional safety needed to see the self clearly without fear of self-condemnation, allowing the individual to more accurately perceive and rectify maladaptive patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior" (Neff, 2003b, p. 87). The pattern of association with shame and guilt in athletes provides evidence of emotional responses in sport that could support such a progression.

Mosewich and colleagues (2011) further explored the relation between self-compassion and self-conscious emotion by extending to the context of pride. Self-compassion was positively related to authentic pride in young women athletes. This adaptive form of pride is associated with other positive indicators of well-being, such as emotional stability, positive mental health, and

adoption of constructive goals (Tracy & Robins, 2007). However, the observed association between self-compassion and authentic pride may be largely driven by the shared variance between self-compassion and self-esteem (i.e., self-compassion did not explain additional variance beyond self-esteem on authentic pride; Mosewich et al., 2011). Additionally, Fontana and colleagues (2017) did not find a significant relation between self-compassion and authentic pride in their research with adult recreational athletes. Perhaps of greater importance is the null relation between self-compassion and hubristic pride, the less adaptive, narcissistic aspect of pride (Tracy & Robins, 2007), reported by both Fontana et al. (2017) and Mosewich et al. (2011). Thus, levels of self-compassion do not predispose an athlete to experience this less adaptive emotion. Overall, self-compassion exhibits consistent adaptive relations with emotions.

Self-Compassion and Coping

The proposed utility of self-compassion during difficult times (Neff, 2003a) has led to examination of the construct within the coping process. Self-compassion has been explored within the context of coping and sport injury in men and women varsity athletes. Huysmans and Clement (2017) put forth the conceptualization that, when compared to an athlete low in self-compassion, an athlete high in self-compassion should be better equipped to cope effectively with stressors presented in sport and life, thereby reducing the magnitude of the stress response (such as attention disruption or maladaptive muscle tension) that could predispose an athlete to injury. While there were no significant findings pertaining to self-compassion and reduction of injury risk, there were findings that suggest self-compassion might facilitate adaptive responses to stress. Specifically, self-compassion was negatively related to somatic anxiety, and the accompanying worry and concentration disruption, as well as avoidance-coping strategies. The negative relation between self-compassion and avoidance-coping parallels previous findings outside of the sport context (see Allen & Leary, 2010). However, Huysmans and Clement found self-compassion to be negatively related to both emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping in their sample of athletes. The negative relation with emotion-focused coping is in contrast with previous research in a student population (Neff et al., 2005), while the direction of the relation between self-compassion and problem-focused coping has been equivocal in past research outside of the sport context (see Allen & Leary, 2010). Thus, given the ambiguous relations, it may be that self-compassion should be considered in light of coping effectiveness, whether as a

strategy itself or in relation to strategies that are effective, rather than simply in terms of engagement in particular strategies or coping functions that range in effectiveness depending on the context.

To explore the impact of self-compassion on response tendencies—namely, how individuals respond to sport-related failures and setbacks—context-specific hypothetical and recalled scenarios have been employed. Women athletes and dancers with higher levels of self-compassion generally tend to exhibit more adaptive responses to emotionally difficult hypothetical and recalled situations in sport and dance than their counterparts who are less self-compassionate (Ferguson et al., 2015; Reis et al., 2015; Tarasoff et al., 2017). For example, self-compassion was negatively related to negative affect, catastrophizing thoughts, and personalizing thoughts, and positively related to equanimous thoughts and behavioral equanimity for hypothetical and recalled sport-specific scenarios that were emotionally difficult (i.e., being responsible for a team's loss and the worst event to happen to the athlete in sport over the past year where the athlete was or was not at fault, respectively; Reis et al., 2015). These findings are complemented by a similar pattern of results among women athletes responding to a set of various hypothetical situations, including the responsibility for loss, failing to reach a goal, making a mistake in competition, being injured or unable to train or compete, and experiencing a performance plateau (Ferguson et al., 2015), which have been identified by women athletes as circumstances that present difficulties in coping (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2014). Self-compassion was related to lower ruminative, passive, and self-critical reactions (Ferguson et al., 2015). Additionally, self-compassion was positively associated with positive, perseverant, and responsible reactions. Moreover, women with higher self-compassion reported lower levels of negative self-evaluations in response to an evaluative ballet dance class scenario (Tarasoff et al., 2017). Thus, self-compassionate athletes appear to have greater “constructive reactions” (e.g., positive, perseverant, and responsible) and lower “destructive reactions” (e.g., catastrophizing, ruminative, passive, and self-critical) to difficult situations in sport (Ferguson et al., 2015, p. 1272). These findings support that self-compassion appears to facilitate a supportive, understanding, and nonjudgmental attitude that attenuates negative responses associated with failure or perceived evaluation (Ferguson et al., 2015; Reis et al., 2015; Tarasoff et al., 2017), while also illustrating how self-compassionate athletes might respond when confronted with difficult situations in sport (Ferguson et al., 2015).

Self-compassion has also been explored in relation to dispositional tendencies in responses to poor sport performance. Specifically, perfectionist strivings and perfectionistic concerns (conceptualized as the more and less

adaptive dimensions of perfectionism, respectively; Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn, & Stoll, 2012), self-compassion, optimism, pessimism, and rumination were explored in a sample of men and women varsity athletes. After controlling for gender and perfectionistic strivings, as perfectionistic concerns increased, athletes exhibited less tendency to engage in self-compassion and optimistic thinking, and a greater tendency to engage in pessimistic thinking and rumination following a poor personal performance in sport (Lizmore et al., 2017). While perfectionistic concerns seemed to hinder the ability to engage in self-compassion, perfectionistic strivings positively predicted self-compassion. After controlling for gender and perfectionistic concerns, athletes high in perfectionistic strivings tended to engage in increased self-compassion and optimistic thinking, and less pessimistic thinking following poor sport performances. As such, Lizmore and colleagues (2017) identified high self-compassion, along with high optimism, low pessimism, and low rumination, as components that can contribute to psychological resilience in sport.

Self-compassion may also facilitate athletes in attaining support. Self-compassion appears to attenuate the typical reduction in help-seeking that accompanies conformity to the masculine norms typified in sport, with higher self-compassion predicting more positive attitudes toward help-seeking in men athletes, regardless of masculinity levels (Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2016). More specifically, there is evidence that self-compassion can promote help-seeking in men athletes, regardless of their adherence to traditional masculine norms (Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2016). Self-compassion does appear to have a role in the coping process, with multiple illustrations of self-compassion adaptive responses to adverse events.

Self-Compassion, Thriving, and Attainment of Potential

While often conceptualized as an approach for use during difficult times, there are research findings that suggest self-compassion need not be limited only to management of adversity. From a theoretical perspective, Neff (2003b) positions self-compassion as an approach that facilitates proactive behaviors directed at enhancing or maintaining one's well-being. Findings outside of sport and exercise, such as the positive relations exhibited between self-compassion and constructs such as mastery goals, competence, and exploration (Neff et al., 2005), support such a contention.

Ferguson and colleagues (2014, 2015) have identified self-compassion as a viable resource for achieving optimal functioning and potential in sport. Their series of studies has been foundational in illustrating the potential of self-compassion to contribute to positive psychological states and flourishing among young women athletes.

Findings support a positive relation between eudaimonic well-being (a state of optimal functioning and flourishing commonly characterized by autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relatedness, purpose in life, and self-acceptance; Ryff, 1995) and self-compassion (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015). Self-compassion was also positively related to responsibility, initiative, and self-determination, and negatively related to passivity (Ferguson et al., 2014). To more fully understand the association between self-compassion and positive well-being, Ferguson and colleagues (2015) explored the relations between self-compassion and proxy measures of eudaimonic well-being. Significant positive correlations were found with autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Self-compassion also predicted self-acceptance, with positivity, perseverance, responsibility, rumination, and passivity emerging as process variables (Ferguson et al., 2015). Further, through examining a model of multiple mediation, self-compassion, passivity, responsibility, initiative, and self-determination accounted for 83% of the variance in eudaimonic well-being (Ferguson et al., 2014). Findings from the mediation model suggest that self-compassionate athletes are actively engaged (as opposed to passive), take initiative, and are autonomous and assume responsibility for their emotions, cognitions, and behaviors (Ferguson et al., 2014). There were also indirect effects of self-compassion on eudaimonic well-being through passivity and initiative, which suggests that being actively engaged and taking purposeful action are possible processes through which self-compassion may be related to eudaimonic well-being (Ferguson et al., 2014). Such exploration provides some insight into *how* self-compassion might be connected to attainment of potential in young women athletes. While the researchers do acknowledge that the mediation model should be considered in light of the cross-sectional design, the findings provide important insight into possible processes and mechanisms through which self-compassion might promote optimal functioning.

To further understand if and how self-compassion might be useful in sport, and the role it could play in facilitating flourishing in sport, Ferguson and colleagues (2014) drew upon the perspectives of young women athletes using a collective case study approach. The athletes identified a number of situations in which self-compassion was thought to have usefulness in sport: when failing to attain a personal goal or expectation, when a mistake was made during competition, during a plateau in performance, and when managing an injury. The themes associated with how self-compassion might contribute to the attainment of potential suggest that adopting a self-compassionate approach might attenuate negative responses such as rumination and promote positivity, perseverance, and

responsibility. Collectively, these findings lead to the suggestion that a major role of self-compassion in well-being in the sport context involves self-compassion as a means to attenuate a “negative spiral” (p. 210) and engage in goal pursuit in a constructive and adaptive manner (Ferguson et al., 2014). Recent findings with men and women athletes further support this contention, with self-compassion exhibiting a negative relation to rumination and pessimism, and a positive relation with optimism (Lizmore et al., 2017).

Evidence of self-compassion supporting a constructive pursuit of goals is also present in exercise contexts. Self-compassion was found to assist women exercisers in acknowledging their personal limitations and recognizing unhealthy or less than constructive behaviors (Berry et al., 2010). The provision of clarity and identification supported through adoption of a self-compassionate perspective positions an individual to take positive actions and evoke constructive changes to improve health and well-being and foster personal growth (Berry et al., 2010). Self-compassion is also associated with adaptive motivational tendencies among women exercisers, specifically greater intrinsic motivation and lower external and introjected motivation and ego goal orientation (Magnus et al., 2010). Women exercisers higher in self-compassion also reported less obligatory exercise (Magnus et al., 2010). In men with a spinal cord injury, self-compassion toward the body was a motivating factor for engagement in leisure time physical activity (Smith, 2013). Thus, self-compassion appears to be related to motivation and behaviors that facilitate advancement of potential in exercise contexts.

How Is Self-Compassion Developed?

Factors that contribute to the development of self-compassion through an athlete’s formative years and into young adulthood have been explored among highly self-compassionate women athletes (Ingstrup et al., 2017). The findings led Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) to suggest 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” (p. 23). Specifically, athletes learned about aspects of self-compassion from others, including parents, peers, siblings, coaches, and sport psychologists. Athletes also acknowledged their own roles in their self-compassion development. Through processing and reflecting on their own past experiences, athletes cultivated self-awareness that contributed to their self-compassion. Developing a range of skills (e.g., self-awareness and reflection) and resources (e.g., support from parents, coaches, siblings, peers,

and sport psychologists) while navigating experiences appears instrumental in fostering self-compassion (Ingstrup et al., 2017).

The role of parents in the development of self-compassion emerged as a key factor in “learning” to be self-compassionate (Ingstrup et al., 2017). Athletes shared that parents played a key role in learning to be self-compassionate through their provision of help and support during adversity, teaching and encouraging self-kind responses, and helping to put experiences into perspective. Such findings parallel the general psychological literature suggesting parental warmth, harmonious family functioning, and secure attachment are associated with high self-compassion (Neff & McGehee, 2010; Pepping, Davis, O’Donovan, & Pal, 2015). Thus, Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) recommend engaging in supportive parenting, encouraging a secure attachment type, and fostering an adaptive family dynamic to facilitate development of self-compassion to support the navigation of demands and challenges inherent in sport.

The influence of others in self-compassion development was not limited to parents. Peers, siblings, coaches, and sport psychologists were also seen to play an important role through both modeling and encouraging self-compassionate responses, particularly during negative events (Ingstrup et al., 2017). Mosewich and colleagues (2014) also highlighted the importance of social support for women athletes managing setbacks, with support coming from an individual who had gone through a similar experience being seen as especially influential. The importance of social support in fostering self-compassion was also supported by Jeon et al. (2016), backed by the finding that self-compassion was found to partially mediate the relation between social support and subjective well-being in a group of high school and university student-athletes. In the exercise domain, women exercisers reported that social support, as well as becoming aware that others shared similar body-related concerns, assisted in enabling an ability to undertake a more self-compassionate approach toward their body (Berry et al., 2010). Collectively, in addition to illustrating the element of common humanity, this speaks to the importance of considering the environment, the impact of others, and social networks when attempting to foster self-compassion in athletes. However, although others can help to develop and promote self-compassion, it should be noted that they can also potentially thwart development through modeling of self-critical behaviors or promotion of norms that do not align with self-compassion. Factors that contribute to environments that promote, as well as hinder, self-compassion development is an avenue for continued study (Ingstrup et al., 2017).

Internally driven processes such as reflection and self-awareness were also identified by women athletes as

important in the development of self-compassion (Ingstrup et al., 2017). Athletes refined their self-awareness by reflecting on past adverse experiences. Athletes 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 (Ingstrup et al., 2017). Helping athletes to constructively reflect on the past as they move forward is of relevant emphasis when fostering self-compassion.

Collectively, the development of self-compassion appears to require individual effort and the support of others. While considerable direction has been established by Ingstrup and colleagues (2017), future research needs to explore how other populations, including men and boys, become self-compassionate, and also consider development of self-compassion within exercise contexts. Some shared processes may be at play, but exploring different contexts and populations may identify additional or unique avenues of development.

Self-Compassion Intervention

The preceding discussion focused on self-compassion development through an organic progression (i.e., no formal intervention), alongside other learning and development as an individual progresses through the formative years. A collection of skills can be amassed and forms a foundation for how an athlete approaches a situation, leading to traitlike expression of self-compassion where one automatically engages in self-compassion, as if by default. As alluded to earlier in the chapter, there is also evidence to suggest that self-compassion can be prompted (in terms of a frame of mind or attitude) or applied (as a strategy or skill) in the case where an individual does not have a tendency to automatically respond to or approach a situation with self-compassion.

An evidence base for fostering self-compassion through intervention efforts has begun to emerge. Extending beyond sport and exercise and considering the field of psychology in general, there are examples of a variety of intervention strategies with evidence of effectiveness including compassionate imagery (Gilbert & Irons, 2004), compassionate writing (Leary et al., 2007; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010), and psychoeducation (Adams & Leary, 2007). Many interventions employ a multimodal design. For example, Gilbert and Proctor (2006) addressed shame and self-criticism using compassionate imagery and writing, along with therapeutic guidance. A smoking cessation program designed by Kelly and colleagues (2010) utilized compassionate imagery, writing, and psychoeducation. Neff and Germer’s (2013) Mindful Self-Compassion program consists of educational and discussion-based group

sessions, applied skills, and meditation to enhance self-compassion. Building on successful intervention efforts in other contexts, intervention efforts tailored to athletes have been developed and empirically evaluated and will be the focus of this section. To date, intervention efforts have targeted women athletes. While self-compassion and the concerns targeted through self-compassion intervention have applicability to men, as well as with an exercise context, these areas have yet to be explored.

Mosewich and colleagues (2013) developed a sport-specific self-compassion intervention that consisted of an in-person psychoeducation session and self-directed writing exercises with the aim to increase levels of self-compassion and decrease levels of self-criticism, rumination, and excessive concern over mistakes in relation to sport setbacks identified as personally significant to the athlete. Women athletes involved in varsity sport who identified as being self-critical in a way they perceived to be less than constructive were recruited to participate. The target variables had been previously identified as common obstacles that women athletes have acknowledged as difficult to manage, despite their current resources (Mosewich et al., 2014). This effort by Mosewich and colleagues (2013) represents the first empirically evaluated self-compassion intervention in sport.

The psychoeducation component formed the first phase of the intervention and began with a 10-minute presentation that briefly overviewed basic tenets of stress and coping in sport (Mosewich et al., 2013). The premise of self-compassion was also explained, and relevant empirical work was highlighted, along with an explanation of why adoption of a self-compassionate approach might be effective in managing sport-related demands. To address possible concerns about self-compassion leading to complacency, evidence was provided that self-compassion does not promote passivity, and that self-compassion is an adaptive approach to navigate challenges and promote goal progress with an effective, attuned focus to sport-specific tasks. Such justification was seen as critical, as Gilbert (2009) has suggested that individuals who have high expectations of themselves and have an emphasis on performance may fear that self-compassion may limit their goal progression and prevent goal attainment. Fear of self-compassion has also been voiced by athletes, many of whom are particularly reluctant to relinquish the self-critical engagement within their sport pursuits, seeing it as integral for performance (Ferguson et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014). This barrier will be further explored later in this chapter.

Following the presentation in the psychoeducation session, the athletes participated in an applied example of

self-compassionate writing (Mosewich et al., 2013). The task required reflection on a difficult sport experience, which Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) suggest is an important element in the promotion of self-compassion. Athletes were instructed to: "Think about a negative event in sport that occurred over the past week that was personally demanding" and were asked to provide a written description of the event, including what happened leading up to the event, who was there, what happened, and thoughts and actions that happened during the event (Mosewich et al., 2013). Athletes then responded in writing to three prompts designed to promote thinking about the event in a self-compassionate way, the structure of which was based on a previous self-compassion writing induction by Leary and colleagues (2007). To evoke common humanity, athletes were asked to "list ways in which other people experience similar events" (to the one they just described). Self-kindness was prompted through having athletes "write a paragraph expressing understanding, kindness, and concern to yourself." They were instructed to "write as if you are communicating to a close friend in the same situation." It was explained that often people are much harder on themselves than they would be to others in the same situation, and taking the perspective of a friend often makes it easier to give advice and see the issue in a more objective and balanced manner. The mindfulness prompt requested athletes to "describe the event in an objective and unemotional manner," requiring acknowledgment and a view not clouded by overidentification. After completing the applied task, each athlete was provided with a booklet containing modules of writing exercises to be completed over the course of the next 7 days. Each module was some variation of the applied writing task from the psychoeducation session. Modules involved detailing a negative event that was personally meaningful and demanding, thinking about others who experience similar events, expressing kindness and support to oneself, promotion of an objective perspective, and integration of skills.

The 7-day self-compassion psychoeducation and writing intervention was effective, with women athletes in the intervention group reporting higher levels of self-compassion and lower levels of state self-criticism, state rumination, and concern over mistakes compared with an attention control group 1 week following completion of the intervention (Mosewich et al., 2013). These findings were maintained 1 month later. In addition to the significant results on all variables of interest, moderate to strong effect sizes were reported. This study provides further support for the relevance of self-compassion and also confirms it can be promoted among women athletes, highlighting the potential of this self-compassion intervention strategy in sport. Such results are promising, especially when combined with considerations

regarding the length (shorter in duration than many other self-compassion interventions outside of the sport domain; e.g., Gilbert & Irons, 2004; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006; Kelly et al., 2010; Neff & Germer, 2013) and the commendable adherence and engagement with intervention protocol reported by athletes. Examination of the use of self-compassion skills at the 1-month follow-up indicated many athletes continued to engage in self-compassionate approaches and use resources beyond the structured 7-day intervention, suggesting that such an intervention structure bodes well in terms of successful integration into existing approaches and routines.

Despite the promising results of this intervention, a number of issues must be addressed prior to widespread dissemination, including those pertaining to replication, intervention fidelity, context, and delivery (Mosewich et al., 2013). Self-critical women athletes were targeted, which may affect the generalizability of the intervention to other populations. While shorter than many self-compassion interventions, the length of time required (i.e., 7 days) may still present a barrier. As Reis and colleagues (2015) point out, a brief self-compassion induction (e.g., less than 30 minutes) could offer a more practical strategy for athletes and provide a feasible method for researchers conducting experimental studies.

Reis and colleagues (2015) explored the effectiveness of a brief self-compassion induction in changing athletes' reactions, thoughts, and emotions in comparison to self-esteem induction and writing control groups. Athletes in the self-compassion induction group responded to the three self-compassion prompts developed by Leary et al. (2007) in response to a hypothetical scenario (i.e., being responsible for losing a competition for their team). Athletes listed ways in which other people also experience similar events; wrote a paragraph expressing understanding, kindness, and concern to themselves in the same way that they might express concern to a friend in a similar situation; and wrote about the event objectively and unemotionally. While it was expected that the self-compassion induction would result in more adaptive reactions and thoughts (i.e., behavioral equanimity) and less maladaptive thoughts (i.e., catastrophizing and personalizing) and emotions (i.e., negative affect) compared to the self-esteem and writing control groups, no support was found. Although there has been support for the effectiveness of brief self-compassion inductions outside of the sport and exercise context (e.g., Adams & Leary, 2007; Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007) and for self-compassion as an important predictor of women athletes' reactions, thoughts, and emotions in response to emotionally difficult sport scenarios (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015; Mosewich et al., 2011; Reis et al., 2015), it may be difficult to induce self-compassion in women

athletes relying solely on a brief induction procedure (Reis et al., 2015). However, factors related to the athlete (e.g., competitive level, age, mental skill experience and aptitude) warrant further examination as certain factors might necessitate different approaches. Additionally, athlete characteristics such as initial levels of self-criticism or self-compassion may impact intervention effectiveness (Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2015). The athletes in the Mosewich et al. (2013) intervention identified as being self-critical in a less than constructive way and targeted events that athletes disclosed as being personally demanding, while the athletes participating in the Reis et al. (2015) induction were recruited more broadly and responded to a hypothetical situation that may or may not have held direct relevance to them. Targets and context are worthy of further examination.

Those in applied practitioner roles have also shared their experiences with promoting and integrating self-compassion into sport and exercise contexts. Self-compassion intervention with a group of gymnasts involved a variety of activities tailored for relevance for the sport context including (1) a writing task that highlighted discrepancies between how one would treat a teammate and how one would treat oneself, (2) creation of "self-compassion cues," (3) generation of kind and supportive "motivators" to replace self-critical ones, (4) a bead transfer exercise to increase awareness and identification of constructive versus negative self-talk (reinforcing the goal of being mindful about one's thinking), (5) provision of sport-specific physical examples to counter the notion that self-compassion is self-coddling, and (6) engaging in proactive behavior by identifying prevention strategies for adverse outcomes (Rodriguez & Ebbeck, 2015). Baltzell (2016) acknowledged that in regard to application and integration into the sport context, "we are just at the beginning of bringing self-compassion directly into the training of athletes" (p. 64). Baltzell (2016) shares that in her experience as a sport psychologist, harsh self-criticism among athletes appears to be increasing, and suggests compassionate attention, compassionate reasoning, compassionate behavior, compassionate imagery, and compassionate scripting are practical ways in which athletes can self-support and find a sense of balance to pursue optimal performance. Ebbeck and Austin (2018) have advanced recommendations for use of self-compassion in the exercise domain, suggesting personal trainers can employ self-compassion as a framework to facilitate a supportive and accepting environment, both for themselves and for their clients, that is health-focused as opposed to concentrated on appearance. They suggest personal trainers use self-compassion to address their own perceived physical inadequacies, as well as to mitigate fat bias toward their clients. More applied examples and best practice guidelines are likely to emerge in sport and exercise, and empirically informed practice must be the aim.

Self-compassion intervention in sport and exercise is still in its infancy, and further research is needed to understand the best approaches to self-compassion development, both in terms of promotion and intervention. More thorough establishment of efficacy and effectiveness can be supported through replication and inclusion of assessment of maintenance of change over extended periods of time (e.g., at least 6 months; Flay et al., 2005; Mosewich et al., 2013). To support evaluation of treatment/intervention fidelity, assessment of adherence and engagement should be incorporated into study design. Additionally, modality (e.g., in-person versus self-directed; writing, psychoeducation, or other strategy), accessibility (e.g., online platform), length of intervention and intervention activities, timing of execution, athlete characteristics (e.g., initial levels of self-criticism or self-compassion [Mosewich et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2015], past experience with mental skills, competitive level, age), and included content all warrant consideration and stand to better inform program differentiation, or essential features of an intervention. Self-reflection exercises, modeling, compassionate imagery, cues, affectionate breathing, group-based exercises, and proactive planning through creation of prevention strategies have been offered as possible options for inclusion in future intervention attempts (Baltzell, 2016; Ebbeck & Austin, 2018; Ingstrup et al., 2017; Rodriguez & Ebbeck, 2015). There are numerous activities and modality options that could be included in intervention protocols. Researchers and applied practitioners are encouraged to use ingenuity in developing strategies and protocol that stand to be feasibly incorporated into sport and exercise contexts. Currently, relatively little is known about how athletes and exercisers practically execute self-compassion both inside and outside of the sport and exercise context, but is worthy of exploration, as this can further inform development and integration efforts. In addition to considerations around integration, means of effective dissemination to athletes, exercisers, and those working with them also warrants attention. With vast options to explore, the development, promotion, and application of self-compassion represent an exciting area of study.

Fear of Self-Compassion and the Reluctance to Abandon Self-Criticism

Despite the potential benefits of self-compassion, some athletes have voiced hesitancy toward adoption of the approach. There are athletes who feel they require some level of self-criticism in order to achieve optimal performance (Ferguson et al., 2014; Mosewich et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014) and express concern that self-compassion might generate passivity and acceptance of

mediocrity in sport (Ferguson et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014). Such disinclination is not limited to the sport context. Older physically active women have described self-compassion as idealistic and challenging to adopt in relation to their own age-related changes, with some expressing outright reluctance to this conceptualization rooted in “new age bullshit” (Bennett et al., 2017, p. 77). As such, fear of self-compassion (Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, & Ravis, 2011) is a relevant consideration when promoting self-compassionate approaches to athletes (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015; Reis et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2014) and exercisers, and should remain at the forefront as the field continues to refine intervention and promotion efforts. Any advantages of a self-compassionate approach are void if athletes or exercisers are reluctant or refuse to adopt the approach due to a default to a more favored endorsement of self-criticism (Ferguson et al., 2014). Understanding athletes’ and exercisers’ fear of self-compassion is one avenue to increase our understanding, and ability to address, athletes’ and exercisers’ reliance on and attraction to self-criticism as well as their apprehension with extending compassion toward the self (Ferguson et al., 2014).

This is not to say that such concerns about self-compassion are universal. The women athletes high in self-compassion who were involved in the research by Ingstrup and colleagues (2017) did not share concerns about being too compassionate or understanding toward oneself. Rather than exuding a wariness of self-compassion, these athletes embraced self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Ingstrup et al., 2017). Thus, such concerns may be most relevant when attempting to intervene or promote self-compassion with athletes or exercisers who are low in self-compassion. Indeed, individuals low in self-compassion tend to report the highest fear of self-compassion (Gilbert et al., 2011; Kelly, Carter, Zuroff, & Borairi, 2013).

The fear that complacency might accompany self-compassion was addressed by Neff (2003b) when she first introduced the construct. She contended that self-compassion does not result in passivity, and conversely, it is individuals high in self-criticism who are likely to avoid dealing with problems or painful feelings. There is evidence to support such a claim. For example, self-compassionate people are more likely to accept responsibility for mistakes and failure (Leary et al., 2007) and are less likely to procrastinate (Sirois, 2014) than those low in self-compassion. Self-compassion is also positively related to mastery goal orientations (a positive approach to achievement striving that emphasizes proficiency), as well as viewing failure as a learning opportunity (Neff et al., 2005). Findings from the sport context can also be taken as further evidence. The positive relation between self-compassion and shame-free guilt proneness in young

women athletes suggests that while self-compassion leads to an absence of harsh self-criticism for failing to reach a desired standard, it does not mean failures or shortcomings are not acknowledged or addressed (Mosewich et al., 2011). Self-compassion has also been shown to be negatively related to passivity and positively related to initiative and responsibility in women athletes (Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015). Additionally, men and women athletes higher in self-compassion engage in less avoidance coping (Huysmans & Clement, 2017). Perhaps even more convincing, *fear of self-compassion*—not self-compassion—was positivity associated with ruminative, passive, and self-critical reactions and negatively related to positive, perseverant, and responsible reactions in women athletes (Ferguson et al., 2015). Thus, a considerable body of evidence is beginning to accrue to counter concerns that self-compassion might lead to complacency. The key, however, will be for athletes and exercisers to truly “buy in” to the approach and internalize the evidence. Assisting athletes and exercisers in establishing the difference between “constructive” and “excessive” when it comes to engaging in what they view as “self-criticism” may also help to address and combat the hesitancy toward a focus on self-compassion over self-criticism.

Continuing to build the case that self-compassion can be beneficial to sport and exercise performance may help to further mitigate fear of self-compassion among athletes and exercisers. Self-compassion is related to cognitions, behaviors, and emotions that are thought to be beneficial to sport and exercise performance (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015; Huysmans & Clement, 2017; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2013; Reis et al., 2015). However, a major void in addressing potential concerns over self-compassion is the lack of empirical evidence examining the association between self-compassion and objective physical performance. While there is evidence to suggest that self-compassion and high performance can co-exist, as illustrated by the highly self-compassionate athletes competing in varsity level sport (Ingstrup et al., 2017), causality cannot be inferred. Examination of the effects of self-compassion on objective physical performance will endow researchers with another avenue to address the concerns raised by athletes, as well as further understand the role of self-compassion in pursuit of performance potential.

Future Directions and Considerations

While the tenets underpinning self-compassion have always been viable, the construct represents a new approach for many athletes and exercisers. Numerous questions remain as we seek to fully understand and

actualize the role of self-compassion in sport and exercise, with several already identified in the preceding sections of this chapter. This final section will briefly highlight four areas with potential to advance significant contributions to the literature surrounding self-compassion in sport and exercise.

Mechanisms of Self-Compassion

Researchers should continue to pursue examination of the mechanisms of self-compassion to further our understanding of exactly *what* self-compassion is and *how* it functions in sport and exercise. Examination of self-compassion as an *antecedent* as well as considering self-compassion as an *outcome* serves to enhance our knowledge around the processes of self-compassion, further inform our conceptualization of self-compassion, and better direct applied efforts. Researchers have pointed to the challenges that arise with interpretation when self-compassion could be the antecedent or the outcome (Huysmans & Clement, 2017; Lizmore et al., 2017); therefore, experimental designs with the ability to examine causation should be considered. Models of mediation and/or moderation, as well as other conceptual frameworks, need to be empirically tested. Given recent research findings with older physically active women that suggest self-compassion is contextual, changes over time, and is as impacted by age, experience, and social, cultural, and historical factors (Bennett et al., 2017), identification of personal (e.g., age, skill level, experience, personality traits, gender) and environmental predictors (e.g., motivational climate, sport type and level, coaches, peers, parents, group norms) will also help with both conceptualization and more specifically targeted and tailored intervention efforts. Research employing longitudinal designs that allow for examination of stability and lability over time is also necessary. Collectively, these efforts will help to inform conceptualization and create frameworks that will provide a solid foundation for research and application.

Addressing Semantic Barriers to Self-Compassion

The language associated with self-compassion has been identified as potentially difficult and esoteric (Ingstrup et al., 2017), presenting what could be considered an abstract concept (Berry et al., 2010) that is currently not familiar to many individuals involved in Westernized sport and exercise culture. Additionally, the definition and description of self-compassion presented by Neff (2003b) and subsequently adopted by researchers in sport and exercise psychology is not entirely reflective of the terms or references typically used by those involved

in sport and exercise. Addressing semantic barriers that accompany self-compassion will promote more effective research and application in sport and exercise. The novel nature of the construct stands to present issues in recall of experience by producing challenges in ascertaining whether one has or has not experienced self-compassion, and if there was awareness of it, and that, along with unrelatable language, can pose an obstacle to effective discussions around the topic (Berry et al., 2010). Future research needs to translate self-compassion into “language” that is more consistent with sport and exercise, and familiar, relatable, and accessible to athletes and exercisers.

Establishment of a more conducive language surrounding self-compassion in sport and exercise will also stand to improve measurement of the construct. While there is some psychometric support for both the SCS and the SCS-SF in sport and exercise contexts (Magnus et al., 2010; Mosewich et al., 2011, 2013; Tarasoff et al., 2017), issues with the factor structure of the SCS in a sample of athletes have been reported (Fontana et al., 2017). This finding led Fontana and colleagues (2017) to suggest that items on the SCS may not pertain well enough to sport, and the wording of the items might lack reliability to athletes. Lizmore and colleagues (2017), who modified the SCS-SF to assess self-compassion in a sport context, found removal of an item to be necessary to support model fit when examining the factor structure of their sport-modified SCS-SF, which could possibly be due to the wording (“I see my failings as part of the overall human condition.”). While the potential causes of these measurement issues may encompass a variety of factors, item wording may be a contributor and warrants consideration.

While some researchers have shown proactive engagement in addressing issues surrounding the language used in the items and their relatability and relevance to the sport and exercise population by making modifications to existing self-compassion scales, there is a need for systematic development and validation of sport- and exercise-specific measurement instruments. Best practice of examining and reporting evidence for score validity and reliability should also be adopted in future research pursuits. Such process will help to evaluate the quality of the sport- and exercise-specific instruments, subsequently providing evidence for their use or guiding necessary modifications. Creation of a standard instrument, or set of instruments, that could be employed across the majority of future research studies will also assist in comparing scores across samples, a task that is difficult to do at present due to the common, but not standardized, practice of scale modification in sport and exercise psychology research. Establishment of best practice for measurement will also support effective

monitoring of self-compassion levels over time, which will be of considerable interest in tracking and intervention studies, as well as in applied efforts.

Understanding Self-Compassion in Men Athletes and Exercisers

Of considerable note in the preceding sections is the emphasis on women athletes in past research. While there has been some exploration of self-compassion among women exercisers (e.g., Bennett et al., 2017; Berry et al., 2010; Magnus et al., 2010), and men athletes included in mixed-gender samples (e.g., Fontana et al., 2017; Huysmans & Clement, 2017; Jeon et al., 2016; Lizmore et al., 2017), only one study in sport has placed specific emphasis on examination of self-compassion in men (Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2016). In exercise, self-compassion emerged as a finding relating to motivation for physical activity among former men athletes who had sustained a spinal cord injury, but the focus of the study was not on self-compassion. Although Huysmans and Clement (2017) reported no significant difference in self-compassion between the men and women athletes in their sample, it cannot be concluded that experiences, meaning, antecedents, and outcomes are equivalent. Self-compassion holds relevance for men’s experiences in sport and exercise as they also must navigate evaluation and expectations, manage setbacks, and strive for their potential. Further attention to the role of self-compassion in men’s sport and exercise experiences would address a current gap in the literature.

The Appropriateness of Self-Compassion Promotion and Intervention

Finally, further examination of when and for whom self-compassion might be relevant, useful, and effective is warranted. Exploration of potential drawbacks of self-compassion should not be ignored in this process. It should not be assumed that self-compassion is an adaptive approach for all individuals, across all contexts. Research must address the issue of promotion versus intervention, and establish where and when each are appropriate. Whether self-compassion is a construct that should be widely and universally promoted to all athletes and exercisers, or targeted through intervention when necessary and appropriate, has yet to be established. When promoting, it will be important to consider what will be the most accessible and effective methods, and care must be taken to avoid pitfalls of promotion efforts (known or yet to be identified) through appropriate monitoring. For intervention, it will be necessary to address questions such as who should be targeted (and how they

will be identified), when intervention should commence, how to tailor efforts, and how to monitor progress. Promotion and intervention need to be systematic, strategic, and—above all—empirically informed.

Conclusion

As we look to support those in sport and exercise in striving to reach their potential, we cannot lose sight that quality of experience and well-being are of importance, and the pursuit of high performance does not come without challenge. Self-compassion offers an approach where individuals in sport and exercise can pursue optimal performance while not compromising health and well-being. There is still much to understand about self-compassion. However, there has been a substantial growth of research

in the area, and that trend stands to continue. As our evidence base increases, we need to effectively disseminate and translate knowledge to enable empirically supported and systematic application of self-compassion in the field. At the same time, we must keep on top of new research findings and developments to ensure we are pursuing pertinent research questions that will further advance knowledge. Research findings can inform application, and efforts in application can inform future research direction. The progression of self-compassion research is positioned to be interesting and fast paced, and has potential to address current gaps in skills and resources and contribute to the promotion of adaptive, positive, and successful experiences in sport and exercise. Self-compassion represents an exciting area of research, with many key contributions integral to the understanding and application of the construct likely still to come.

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