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IG Supplement 2022**

Fostering the Fierce Inner Fan: Developing Women Athletes' Self-Compassion to Thrive in Sport

Despite the many benefits of sport participation (O'Reilly et al., 2018), the demanding and evaluative nature of competitive sport exposes women athletes to an environment fraught with challenges that can result in maladaptive emotions, cognitions, and behaviours (Krane et al., 2001; Mosewich et al., 2009; Neely et al., 2021). Self-compassion offers an adaptive way to respond to and treat the self during demanding experiences (Neff, 2003), and it has been found to help women athletes manage sport-related challenges (Adam et al., 2021; Mosewich et al., 2013) and predicts elements of thriving (i.e., well-being and performance; Ferguson et al., 2014, 2015; Killham et al., 2018). The purpose of this multi-phase research program is to enhance women athletes' thriving in sport (Brown et al., 2017) through an athlete-tailored and user-identified self-compassion intervention. In the first (and current) phase of research, we are exploring how competitive women athletes prefer to learn and practice self-compassion. To date, six women athletes ($M_{age} = 20.5$ years; $SD = 4.6$ years; provincial to international competitive levels) have participated in online focus groups, with nine more athletes scheduled to do so (target sample size of 20-25 athletes). Following our analysis of focus group data, the women athletes will engage in a town hall knowledge exchange where preliminary findings will be presented and participants will discuss, provide feedback on, and refine the results. Findings will also be cross-checked with Neff and Germer's (2018) self-compassion workbook to further inform self-compassion activity selection, modification, and specification for the athlete-tailored intervention to be piloted and tested in subsequent research phases. Our research will respond to Sport Canada's request for innovative ways to serve the unique needs of women in sport by enhancing their skill sets to manage their sport demands in healthy and constructive ways, and thus contribute to enhancing their lived experiences.