

## SELF-COMPASSION OF ATHLETES DURING TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### Abstract

*Objective: The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time as it spreads around the world. Athletes, coaches, referees are all being affected in some way; some sport clubs and training places are temporarily closing. COVID-19 has also affected athletes psychologically besides the obvious health risks. However, self-compassion can help as it reduces anxiety. Athletes want to respond to the contagion in a wise manner – with preventive measures that benefit themselves and others. The aim of the current study is to investigate the self-compassion through COVID-19 pandemic of athletes and to determine gender differences. Method: participants were 92 athletes (average age =19.99 ± 2.82 years) from a variety of sports (soccer, volleyball, athletics, swimming: basketball: swimming: taekwondo: weightlifting, handball) using descriptive approach with self-report questionnaires SCS to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in sport by applying aspects of mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness. Results: The results of the current study revealed that athletes have reported moderate self-compassion scores, and have also revealed that males had slightly higher levels of common humanity and mindfulness than females during COVID-19 pandemic. Conclusion: Self-compassion training through COVID-19 pandemic would help athletes focus better on their performance, gain a healthier relationship to their sport, improve their general well-being and promote optimal psychological recovery from COVID-19 and improve athletes understanding of the psychological impacts of COVID-19.*

**Key words:** *self-compassion, COVID-19 pandemic, athletes, self-kindness, mindfulness, common humanity.*

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a new threat that affects the adaptive mechanisms of the human being what leads to affecting world population and high-performance athletes. COVID-19 has affected and is likely to affect people from many countries in many geographical locations. The COVID-19 experience presents a highly challenging period for sport performers (e.g., athletes, coaches, referees) and this is a fundamental challenge for elite sporting professionals. For sporting organizations, restrictions have forced a temporary but ongoing cessation of major events and competitions worldwide. Moreover, these restrictions have extended to the closure of training facilities, including private and commercial gymnasiums. These closures present a fundamental problem for general population health, as well as elite sporting professionals. On March 14, Jordan Olympic Committee (JOC) decided to hold all sporting events, and to obligate all sports federations to enforce this decision immediately. The Jordanian government announced a lockdown on March 17, which was later turned into a strictly-enforced curfew that was described as one of the world's strictest measures. The JOC encouraged all athletes to become part of the "Be the champ, stay at home" social media campaign, which promoted the critical importance of the wider public following the Ministry of Health's policies aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19. After a suspension of over two months as part of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Jordanian government decided to reopen sports clubs and sporting events in June 10. Athletes suffered from these restrictions and some

of them have lost their performance and abilities through COVID-19 crisis. Self-care is important if athletes are to maintain a stable mindset during challenging times. COVID-19 crisis has presented us and athletes with a unique set of challenges, the like of which athletes 've never seen before. Self-Compassion is a type of self-to-self relating that represents a compassionate rather than uncompassionate stance toward one's self when faced with personal sufferings conceptualized as containing 3 core components: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over identification, when relating to painful experiences. (Neff, 2003b, 2016) Germer. K. & Neff, D 2013). Neff (2003) defined self-compassion as composed of three main components; self-kindness, a sense of common humanity and mindfulness. Self-kindness entails being gentle, supportive and understanding towards oneself. Rather than harshly judging oneself for personal shortcomings, the self is offered warmth and unconditional acceptance. Coronavirus can cause the athlete to lose concentration and motivation. Self-kindness is that an athlete puts a hand on heart or some other soothing place, what helps calm some of his or her anxiety through touch. So, what words does athlete need to hear to comfort or reassure himself or herself about the virus right now? Are they realistic? Can athlete talk to himself or herself in a warm, compassionate voice? What actions does athlete need to take to protect himself or herself?

A sense of common humanity viewing oneself as part of the larger human experiences rather than

isolated, it involves recognizing the shared human experience, understanding that all humans fail and make mistakes, that all people lead imperfect lives. For example, when athletes hear news of people struggling with the virus, can they allow this to enhance their sense of being part of a global family rather than feeling separate? Can they imagine their self in their situation and say, "Just like me?"

Mindfulness involves being aware of one's present moment experience of suffering with clarity and balance, without running away with a dramatic storyline about negative aspects of oneself or one's life experience accepting painful emotions and thought while not over identifying with them, Neff (2003b, 2016) Cormier, et al (2013). Athletes Become aware of how their feel about the virus. For example, is their mind preoccupied with the virus? Study cited by Breines and Chan (2012) found that self-compassion leads to better performance and enhances motivation, and enhances well-being (Gilbert & Irons., 2005). Self-compassion can help if the virus is causing athletes unnecessary anxiety. Self-compassion is very important to our life, because it helps people deal with life struggles and it can provide social support and encourage interpersonal trust with their roommates. Researchers found that self-compassion is linked to less psychopathology (Barnard & Curry, 2011). Furthermore, Tate, Leary, et al (2007) found that individuals who scored higher in self-compassion demonstrated less extreme reactions, less negative emotions, more accepting thoughts, and a greater tendency to put their problems into perspective while at the same time acknowledging their own responsibility.

Some researchers found that self-compassion was positively associated with psychological health such as motivation, health behaviors, and positive body image (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Zessin, Dickhauser & Garbadee, 2015 ; Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2014; Allen, Goldwasser & Leary, 2012; Breines & Chen, 2012; Sbarra, Smith & Mehl, 2012). Others found self-compassion was directly associated with psychological strengths such as happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Performance in sport is greatly influenced by individual's ability to be mindful to remain in the present. Mindfulness offers many benefits to focusing and athletic performance (Taylor & Wilson. 2005). Self-compassion has been associated with a number of beneficial factors in sport, such as increased well-being and reduced body image concerns, and fear of negative evaluation (Eke, Adam, Kowalski, & Ferguson, 2019; Reis, Kowalski, Mosewich, & Ferguson, 2019). Moreover, Sutherland et al., 2014 found that athletes were often highly self-critical, considering this to be crucial for sporting success.

Research in sport and self-compassion including both female and male athletes found that self-compassion was positively related to adaptive

coping, social support, well-being, and perfectionist strivings. Fontana, Fry, & Cramer, 2017; Huysmans, & Clement, 2017; Jeon, Lee, & Kwon, 2016; Lizmore, Dunn, & Dunn, 2017). Moreover, negative life events often increase stress and high stress correlates with low-self compassion and that could serve as an indicator of risk for unnecessary anxiety for athletic, there is a negative correlation with stress and self-compassion (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen & Hancock, 2007; Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010).

Regarding gender differences in self-compassion, Individual studies demonstrated mixed results. Neff (2003) found significant lower SC scores among women. Women scored higher than men in self-criticism, isolation and over-identification, and had lower mindfulness scores. Previous studies (Castilho et al., 2015; Yarnell et al., 2015) found that males tend to be more able to hold their feelings of suffering with a sense of warmth, connection and a mindful awareness than females. However, some researchers did not find statistically significant differences attributed to "gender". Research results suggest SC gender differences remain an open issue (Neff & McGehee (2010).Teleb & Al- Awamleh (2013) found no statistically significant differences between males and females in Self-Kindness and Common Humanity.

Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a), which can be used to assess the three positive and three negative components of self-compassion separately (Neff, Whittaker & Karl, 2017).

The purpose of the current study was to determine the three positive and three negative components of self-compassion for Jordanian athletes through COVID-19 pandemic and to determine gender differences among athletes in self-compassion during COVID-19 pandemic .

## Hypothesis

(H1) : Athletes will have a higher level of self-compassion.

(H1): Self-compassion does not differ significantly at significant level (0.05) as attributed to "gender". The current study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What is the level of self-compassion for Athletes through COVID-19 pandemic?
- Are there any differences between participants in self-compassion attributed to gender?

## Materials and Methods

### Participants

The participants were (92) Jordanian athletes; (37) males and (55) females, who had competed in a variety of individual and/or team sports (e.g soccer, volleyball, athletics, swimming: Basketball: Swimming: Taekwondo: Weightlifting, handball). Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) ,developed by Neff (2003) ,was used for data collection.

The researcher has used the Arabic version (Teleb & Al-Awamleh 2013) of the scale which assesses the six components of self-compassion: Self-Kindness (e.g., "I try to be understanding and patient toward aspects of my personality I don't like"), Self-Judgment (e.g., "I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies"), Common Humanity (e.g., "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition"), Isolation (e.g., "When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world"), Mindfulness (e.g., "When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation"), and Over-identification (e.g., "When I'm feeling down, I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong").

Mean scores from the six subscales were then summed (after the negative items were reverse coded) to create an overall self-compassion score. The mean was approximately 3.0 on the 1-5 scale. A score of 1-2.5 indicated low self-compassion, 2.5-3.5 indicated moderate self-compassion, and 3.5-5.0 indicated a high self-compassion. Furthermore, higher averages for the self-judgment, isolation, and over-identified subscales indicated less self-compassion before reverse-coding and more self-compassion after reverse-coding. Responses are given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = "Almost Never" to 5 = "Almost Always" Appendix (1). In order to calculate a total self-compassion score, a grand mean is taken of the six subscale means after items in the negative components were reverse coded. The validity and reliability of the SCS was determined by a series of three studies conducted by Neff (2003b; Teleb &

Al-Awamleh 2013). In order to demonstrate the reliability of the Arabic version of self-compassion scale, the coefficient of internal consistency was used to determine the reliability of (SCS) Arabic version. Results demonstrated that the self-compassion scale has good reliability indicators it was (.81), and the test-retest reliability was (.82) after 3-weeks.

#### Coding Key

- Self-Kindness Items: 5, 12, 19, 23, 26
- Self-Judgment Items: 1, 8, 11, 16, 21
- Common Humanity Items: 3, 7, 10, 15
- Isolation Items: 4, 13, 18, 25
- Mindfulness Items: 9, 14, 17, 22
- Over-identified Items: 2, 6, 20, 24

Subscale scores are computed by calculating the mean of subscale item responses. To compute a total self-compassion score, reverse score the negative subscale items - self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification (i.e., 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, 5 = 1) - then compute a total mean Neff. (2003).

This study was performed online using Microsoft Forms internet platform. A demographic questionnaire asked Athletes to indicate their gender, current age, and type of sports.

#### Appendix

Please read each statement carefully before answering. Indicate how often you behave in the stated manner during times of COVID-19 Pandemic, using the following scale:

**Almost  
never**  
1

2

3

4

**Almost  
always**  
5

- \_\_\_ 1. I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
- \_\_\_ 2. When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
- \_\_\_ 3. When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.
- \_\_\_ 4. When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.
- \_\_\_ 5. I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.
- \_\_\_ 6. When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
- \_\_\_ 7. When I'm down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.
- \_\_\_ 8. When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.
- \_\_\_ 9. When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.
- \_\_\_ 10. When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.
- \_\_\_ 11. I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.
- \_\_\_ 12. When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
- \_\_\_ 13. When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
- \_\_\_ 14. When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
- \_\_\_ 15. I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- \_\_\_ 16. When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.
- \_\_\_ 17. When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.
- \_\_\_ 18. When I'm really struggling, I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.
- \_\_\_ 19. I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- \_\_\_ 20. When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.

- \_\_\_ 21. I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
- \_\_\_ 22. When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.
- \_\_\_ 24. When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.
- \_\_\_ 25. When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.
- \_\_\_ 26. I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like

**Results**

The researcher analyzed the data using SPSS (version 25). Descriptive statistics, Means, and standard deviations were calculated for each self-compassion dimension. T- test was applied to find the gender differences.

In order to determine the level of self-compassion of athlete results indicated that the overall self-

compassion mean was of a moderate degree as its scored a mean of (3.20). Based on the mentioned results, the hypothesis is not accepted for all the compassion dimensions (except " mindfulness"). The mindfulness had reported the greatest mean as it ranked first with a mean of (3.58) while isolation had scored the least mean and ranked last with a mean of (2.76). Table (1) indicates the values of means and standard deviation for compassion's dimensions.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for self-compassion's dimensions.

No.	Dimensions	M	SD	level	Rank
1	self kindness	3.48	0.54	moderate	2
2	self judgment	3.08	0.70	moderate	4
3	common humanity	3.46	0.73	moderate	3
4	isolation	2.76	0.66	moderate	6
5	mindfulness	3.58	0.68	high	1
6	over identified	2.84	0.70	moderate	5
	self compassion	3.20	0.35	moderate	

Means class categories (1-2.5 low; 2.51-3.5 moderate; 3.51-5.00 high)

The self-kindness mean was of a moderate level with a mean of (3.48). The self-judgment mean was in a moderate level with a man of (3.08). The common humanity mean was of a high level (3.46). The over identified mean was of a moderate level as it scored a mean of (2.84). A T-test was conducted in order to find the differences between males and females the finding of current study revealed no gender difference was found on overall self-compassion. Table (2) shows the results of mean differences for self-compassion according to gender.

The results of t-test clearly revealed a significant difference in the common humanity (0.000) and mindfulness (0.006) which were (< 0.05) between males and females. Such mean differences were in favor of males (note that three dimensions were reversed when calculating the overall degree of self-compassion). It was clear that the other dimensions were > 0.05 suggesting no significant mean differences were considered according to gender in these dimensions.

Table 2. T test for mean differences in self compassion according to gender.

Self-compassion dimensions	gender	n	mean	sd	t	p
self-kindness	Males	37	3.61	0.51	1.85	0.067
	Females	55	3.40	0.54		
self-judgment	Males	37	2.94	0.66	1.63	0.106
	Females	55	3.18	0.72		
common humanity	Males	37	3.67	0.66	2.26	0.026
	Females	55	3.33	0.74		
isolation	Males	37	2.66	0.68	1.17	0.244
	Females	55	2.83	0.65		
mindfulness	Males	37	3.82	0.67	2.81	0.006
	Females	55	3.42	0.65		
over identified	Males	37	2.88	0.59	0.40	0.689
	Females	55	2.82	0.77		
self-compassion	Males	37	3.26	0.32	1.34	0.182
	Females	55	3.16	0.37		

Based on the mentioned results, the hypothesis is accepted for all the compassion dimensions (except the common humanity and mindfulness).

## Discussion

The aim of the current study was to determine the level of self-compassion through COVID-19 pandemic of athletes and to determine gender differences. Based on the results, the first hypothesis, athletes will have a higher level of self-compassion, was not supported. Athletes recorded moderate level in the overall self-compassion (except the mindfulness). The world now is facing the COVID-19 pandemic which has brought about suffering, pain, pressures for a lot of athletes.

Gyms and athletic facilities, like universities schools, have been closed. This situation is processed differently by each of athletes; for example coaches and support staff are kept at a

distance. Reis et al, 2015 found that athletes with higher self-compassion levels responded in healthier ways to emotionally difficult hypothetical and recalled situations in sport than their less self-compassionate counterparts. Moreover, negative life events often increase stress and high stress correlates with low-self compassion and that could serve as an indicator of risk for unnecessary anxiety for athletic as there is a negative correlation with stress and self-compassion (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen & Hancock, 2007; Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010). Based on the small sample size of athletes, the current study found that the mindfulness had reported the highest level for athletes. See Figure (1) Mindfulness involves being aware of one's present moment experience of suffering with clarity and balance; athletes become aware of how their feel about the virus knowing that it's part of the current situation we're all in. For example, is their mind preoccupied with the virus?.

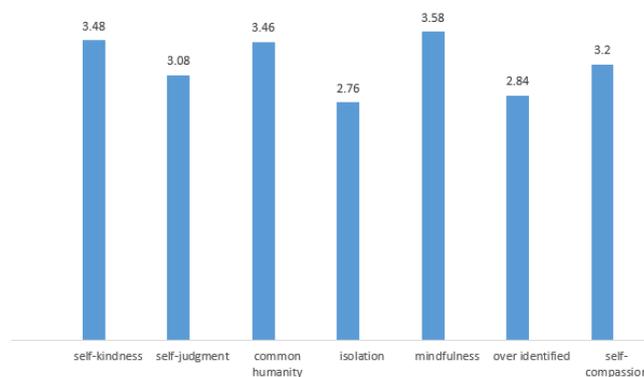


Figure 1. Level of self-compassion through COVID-19 pandemic of athletes.

Mindfulness offers many benefits to focusing and athletic performance (Taylor & Wilson. 2005). The current findings provide insights into the use of self-compassion in sport, and may help inform the development of Athletes performance. Ceccarelli et al. (2019) found that Athletes with higher levels of self-compassion showed adaptive psychological and physiological responses relative to a recalled sport failure compared to those lower in self-compassion. Furthermore, self-kindness and common humanity were of a moderate level, while Isolation subscale had reported moderate level in the overall self-compassion. In Jordan most sporting events have been postponed, or cancelled, adding uncertainty to athletes' lives. Athletes suffered from these restrictions and some of them have lost their performance and abilities through COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic has presented us and athletes with a unique set of challenges the like of which athletes 've never witnessed before. Athletes suffered from restrictions and some of them have lost their performance and abilities through COVID-19 pandemic. The Jordanian restrictions through COVID-19 pandemic have extended to the closure of training facilities, including private and commercial gymnasiums. This awful suffering is part of the athlete's experience. Also, loneliness was rife at the moment due to

social distancing and isolation. In fact, not only Isolation subscale was on moderate level but also all negative subscale items - self-judgment and over-identification. The finding of current study revealed no gender differences were found on overall self-compassion. These findings are consistent with previous research studies conducted by Neff (2003), Neff et al. (2005), and Neff & Vonk (2009) which have not found any significant differences in self-compassion between males and females on overall self-compassion.

Previous studies (Castilho et al., 2015; Yarnell et al., 2015) found that males tend to be more able to hold their feelings of suffering with a sense of warmth, connection and a mindful awareness than females. The current study revealed a significant difference in the common humanity and mindfulness between males and females in favor of males. Based on the mentioned results, the hypothesis is accepted for all the compassion dimensions (except the common humanity and mindfulness). These findings aren't consistent with (Al-Awamleh,2020) study where female have scored higher in self-compassion, further, it addressed athletes self-compassion and gender differences. Self-compassion training would help athletes focus better on their performance and

training what is important in promoting optimal psychological recovery from COVID-19 pandemic.

### Conclusion

In sum, athletes of higher self-compassion levels generally responded in healthier ways to emotionally difficult hypothetical and recalled situations in sport than their less self-compassionate counterparts. Self-compassion training through COVID-19 pandemic would help athletes focus better on their performance, gain a healthier relationship to their sport and improve

their general well-being and promote optimal psychological recovery from COVID-19 suffering and improving athletes understanding that the psychological impacts of COVID-19 is essential.

Finally, coaches should understand how self-compassion develops, and how it could best be developed among athletes through COVID-19 pandemic, and this issue remains as an important focus on COVID-19 pandemic future research because it may have implications for performance enhancement, recovery and health outcomes, helping athletes perform better at the same time.

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