

Pep talks secret to better sporting performance

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Margo Adam. Credit: Dave Stobbe for the University of Saskatchewan

Giving oneself a pep talk may be key to improving female athletes' sporting performance and mental health, new University of Saskatchewan research shows.

Kinesiology Ph.D. student Margo Adam found that [female athletes](#) saw self-compassion, not self-criticism, as the go-to strategy for enhancing their performance.

Her research has shown that women who reported being self-compassionate could reframe sporting failures as learning experiences rather than defeats, and be more confident facing difficult situations.

Self-compassion is a Buddhist belief about being kind to and supporting oneself emotionally when facing challenges. Leah Ferguson, Adam's supervisor, has been among the first to research self-compassion in sport since the early 2010s.

"More female athletes now understand that taking care of their mental well-being as part of their sport life is important," said Ferguson.

Some athletes reported it was easier to talk to coaches about injuries that would force them to miss competitions or training. Others used self-compassion to positively reframe teammates' and coaches' criticism of their performance.

"They thought that self-compassion could help them become better athletes, without being unnecessarily hard on themselves," said Adam.

Her study, funded by the federal agency SSHRC and published in *Sport, Exercise and Performance Psychology*, involved more than 80 Saskatchewan women and is part of a larger research project that included almost 300 athletes who compete across Canada.

The athletes who showed more self-compassion also had a more positive relationship with their body image and with food, as well as higher levels of well-being.

"Our society puts a lot of pressure on women about their looks, and often what society expects and what sports require in terms of physical appearance is very different, so self-compassion helped the athletes accept their [body image](#) and have better eating habits," said Adam.

The USask researchers also found that women who were more self-critical thought that their performance was worse than it was. These findings build on previous USask research showing that athletes saw [self-criticism](#) as a [performance](#) booster.

The women in this study played sports such as hockey, volleyball, soccer and basketball, as well as swimming, gymnastics and fencing.

"We received wonderful support from Huskie Athletics and Sask Sport Inc. which helped us reach female athletes to include in the study, and these groups follow our research with great interest," said Ferguson.

"They want our help to understand ways to one day include the teaching of effective [self-compassion](#) practices as part of sport training, and to help raise awareness about this among athletes."

Because the majority of women in Adam and Ferguson's research identified as European Canadians, they hope they will be able to work in the future with Indigenous and international athletes, and also transgender [women](#) athletes, while exploring less "mainstream" sport contexts.

More information: Margo E. Killham et al. Women athletes' self-compassion, self-criticism, and perceived sport performance., *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/spy0000127](#)

Provided by University of Saskatchewan

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