

Paris Olympics 2024: Under immense pressure to win, athletes need to practice self-compassion

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Over the past couple of weeks, millions around the world have witnessed the phenomenal achievements of elite athletes performing under huge

pressure at the Olympics. High points have included Cindy Ngamba securing a medal for the Refugee Olympic team in boxing, and Noah Lyles becoming the world's fastest man in the 100 meter sprint, snatching gold in a thrilling finish.

However, as with any competition, there are winners and losers—and many athletes are left feeling like they have fallen short, particularly in the face of the intense media scrutiny that comes with taking part in elite sports.

The difference between winning and losing can be a matter of milliseconds—as we saw in the men's 100m sprint and the [women's quadruple rowing sculls](#). But whoever wins, all athletes who have made it to the Olympic Games will have put in comparable effort, dedication, focus and training in preparing for their event.

But if the fallout from losing is not dealt with effectively, athletes are more likely to be at [risk of psychological distress](#).

My [research](#) explores the use of mindfulness, rational emotive behavioral therapy (REBT) and [self-compassion](#) in helping athletes to deal with pressure and protect their mental well-being. Recently, this has focused on the use of a [multi-approach intervention](#) to help athletes face the pressure of competitions in a more healthy way—a little like students facing the stress of key exams.

The intention was to change the participants' perspective and response to a setback such as losing in a match or getting a poor exam result. This was achieved through a series of exercises that explored circumstances from a perspective of self-compassion. This helped them to understand the universal fear of failing when facing pressure to succeed, and fostered a supportive and honest environment for everyone to express themselves.

Our work revealed the pivotal role self-compassion can play in aiding performance and mental well-being, and applies to everyone, including Olympic athletes potentially facing career-defining moments.

From self-criticism to self-compassion

A natural response to a disappointing result is self-criticism, which tends to involve harsh, unforgiving and judgmental blaming. Sometimes we can perceive this inner critic as helpful—motivating us to do better and work harder. Research shows that both [male](#) and [female](#) athletes have a habit of using self-criticism in the face of setbacks, which they believe can help them reach their full potential.

However, some athletes have acknowledged the dark side of self-criticism, which leads to [self-doubt](#), driving a compulsion to achieve [impossible levels of perfection](#) that can erode [self-confidence](#). More importantly, excessive self-criticism has been found to [play a role](#) in psychological distress, reducing the ability of athletes to flourish mentally—in other words, stunting cognitive growth and development.

Despite recognizing the negative repercussions of self-criticism, many of us still see value in this response. We're more comfortable with being self-critical than being self-compassionate, which is a much healthier—and more useful—mindset.

Self-compassion is the practice of kindness and non-judgment to oneself, which encompasses three elements: mindfulness, self-kindness and common humanity.

Mindfulness is being in the [present moment](#) and holding an objective view of what is happening right now. Self-kindness is giving yourself what you need to hear or do in that moment, being supportive and understanding of oneself. Common humanity is recognizing that we are

all fallible human beings, and that we all make mistakes and fail from time to time.

Often there are misconceptions that self-compassion leads to complacency, self-pity or selfishness. To the contrary, self-compassion enables a person to recognize and acknowledge what has happened—to provide an honest perspective and space to think about how to best move forward.

Self-criticism can lead to someone overthinking and spiraling downwards into endless "what if?" scenarios, distracted from progressing forward and isolating themselves further from others. But self-compassion can help people connect with others in a moment of hardship—such as failing—and recognize they are not alone in their experience.

We can see examples of self-compassion in great Olympians like Simone Biles during the Tokyo Olympics, when she listened to herself and made the brave decision to take a break from competing. It was doubtless a difficult decision, but one that was crucial for her mental well-being. This is fierce self-kindness in action.

British swimmer Adam Peaty has been through a difficult couple of years regarding his mental health and relationship with swimming. But he has [transformed his mindset](#) from one of anger and resentment over losing (which is indicative of [self-criticism](#)), to one of mindfulness and gratitude—even when he missed out on gold in the [men's 100m breaststroke](#).

We have all encountered similar moments where we have wanted to succeed but have not. No one is immune to these experiences, not even the elite athletes.

Self-compassion can have a hugely positive impact on factors such as [psychological strength](#) and [performance](#) if athletes take emotional responsibility for themselves. If they can practice this throughout training and competition, it becomes a useful habit that allows them to progress without sacrificing their mental well-being.

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