

# Overcoming failure in sport: A self-forgiveness framework

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## ABSTRACT

Within the winner or loser dichotomy that exemplifies competitive sport, athletic success hinges on the ability to overcome and respond constructively to failure. This article introduces self-forgiveness as an adaptive, purposeful approach to coping with competitive sport performance failure in a way that stimulates personal growth and combats loss of motivation. In contrast to defensive responses that shield self-integrity, genuine self-forgiveness is reached through a process in which athletes (a) accept personal responsibility for their role in the unsuccessful performance outcome and (b) restore self-regard by affirming the self. Although athletes expose themselves to uncomfortable emotional experiences associated with failure, self-forgiveness is proposed as a process that enables athletes to objectively evaluate unsuccessful performances, identify areas warranting improvement, and develop adaptive psychological recovery responses to failure.

**Keywords:** Self-Forgiveness; Failure; Sport; Athletes.

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Imbedded and espoused by sport cultures and social indoctrinations, the pressure to perform (win) is inseparably tethered to competitive sports participation. The polar outcomes that typify mainstream sports, however, signify that experiencing defeat – even for the greatest of athletes – is inevitable. To illustrate, consider two situations. First, in a 64-draw tournament, 63 players will eventually experience a defeat, and for most people the emotional impact of negative experiences far outweigh the effect of positive experiences (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; see also Fredrickson, 1998; Gottman, 1993). In their review of seven literatures, Baumeister et al. (2001) established that emotionally negative events virtually always have more impact than do positive. They concluded that the way people can experience negativity and still retain emotional equanimity is to have many more positive than negative experiences—usually at least three times as many. Second, consider professional male tennis players. Seven of those ranked within the top 50 in singles concluded 2017 with fewer wins than losses, and only three players won at least three times as many matches as they had lost during the course of the year (Association for Tennis Professionals, 2017). These statistics highlight the unavoidability of competitive losses at one time or another, yet such outcomes contradict the performance narratives (i.e., being the best, winning) that typify competitive sport environments (Carless & Douglas, 2012). This paradox is a challenge that athletes must all learn to accept, for achieving success in sport is inextricably linked to an athlete's ability to effectively overcome disappointments.

### **Coping with Failure in Competitive Sport**

In the present article, we adopt a stress-and-coping framework (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to failure in competitive sport. Within this framework, a stressor (i.e., failure in competitive sport) appraised as threatening prompts coping efforts. This process results in consequences, the nature of which depends on how athletes attempt to cope and the effectiveness of their coping responses.

### **Failure in Competitive Sport**

The concept of failure may embody a variety of personally or socially prescribed idiographic meanings (Ball, 1976). For some athletes, the difference between success and failures is distinctly differentiated by the triumph of winning on one side and the devastation of losing on the other (Sagar, Lavalley, & Spray, 2007). For others, failure is a nuanced subjective experience rooted in the quality of one's performance, goal accomplishment, or consequences for self-esteem and self-presentation (Conroy, Poczwardowski, & Henschen, 2001; Sagar, Busch, & Jowett, 2010). For the purpose of our present article, failure refers to an experience that follows an athlete's perceived inability to achieve a competitive performance criterion internalized as a marker of success (e.g., match win or feeling that one made a disproportionate amount of unforced errors).

### **Threat-Perception and Coping with Failure**

Drawing on stress-and-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), competitive performance failure represents a stressor (Fletcher & Scott, 2010) that is appraised as a threat to an athlete's goal-attainment, perceived competence, self-integrity, and basic psychological needs (Bardel, Fontayne, Colombel, & Schiphof, 2010; Sagar et al., 2010; Sagar et al., 2007; Tamminen, Poucher, & Povilaitis, 2017). Threat perception elicits negative emotional responses such as shame, anger, and anxiety (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009; Wilson & Kerr, 1999), along with negative motivational attributions, behaviours, cognition, and physiological responses. In response to failure, athletes generally engage in coping, a dynamic process in which cognitive or behavioural efforts are purposefully expended to manage the stressful experience or the negative emotions (Lazarus,

2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There are over a dozen higher order categorizations of coping that distinguish coping based on topology (e.g., approach versus avoidance coping), function (e.g., problem-versus emotion-focused coping; conservative versus transformative coping), and action type (e.g., primary versus secondary coping; for a review, see Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003).

Research on coping in sport suggests athletes deal with competitive performance failure by using a variety of coping strategies that traverse multiple higher-order categories (Sagar et al., 2010; Sagar, Lavallee, & Spray, 2009). Although the effectiveness of coping responses depends on the complex interplay between personality variables and environmental characteristics, adaptive forms of coping tend to be constructive, coordinated, and personal-growth promoting (Skinner et al., 2003). Engagement-oriented coping efforts are active attempts – problem- and emotion-focused – to manage events and emotional experiences (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Generally, engagement-oriented coping approaches coincide with greater self-reported coping effectiveness and subjective performance satisfaction (Nicholls, Polman, & Levy, 2012; Nicholls, Polman, Levy, & Borkoles, 2010). The advantage of engagement-oriented forms of coping has been corroborated in research that has used objective performance criteria (e.g., making cut-selection in a golf tournament) as indicators of coping effectiveness (Bois, Sarrazin, Southon, & Boiche, 2009; Haney & Long, 1995).

Yet, research indicates that athletes' attempts to cope may not always be adaptive (Conroy et al., 2001; Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Joyce, Smith, & Vitaliano, 2005). Efforts to overcome the distressing experience of competitive failure may deliver short-term benefits, but limit the extent to which psychological needs are satisfied (Skinner et al., 2003), such as the basic need for competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Athletes may also be inadequately equipped with the repertoire of coping skills required to deal with the demands of competitive sport (Martinent, Ledos, Ferrand, Campo, & Nicolas, 2015), such as failure. Thus, competitors' coping efforts may be ineffective or even harmful. Therefore, the premise of this article is to propose genuine self-forgiveness as a frequently constructive approach to coping with competitive performance failure in a manner that promotes self-development and well-being.

### **Self-Forgiveness as One Specific Coping Mechanism**

Since being labelled as the neglected “stepchild” of forgiveness research (Hall & Fincham, 2005), the scientific concept of self-forgiveness has developed rapidly (Woodyatt, Worthington, Wenzel, & Griffin, 2017). Early perspectives conceptualized self-forgiveness strictly as a hedonic end-state characterized by the replacement of negatively-toned self-oriented emotions with those that are more positive (Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008). Yet, researchers have found that returning to an overall positive emotional valence towards the self is achievable through several alternative pseudo self-forgiveness responses such as self-exoneration (i.e., letting oneself off of the hook) or blaming others. Those responses bypass responsibility-taking (Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Hedrick, 2012). While pseudo self-forgiveness mechanisms serve self-protective functions (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013), avoiding the uncomfortable process of examining one's own faults restricts opportunities for personal growth and improvement in one's sport or sport-related emotional performance. Indeed, recent research suggests genuine self-forgiveness is reached through a *eudaimonic* process (i.e., an experience of what is good both for oneself and others) driven by psychological needs generated through the challenging process of thinking about and working through one's shortcomings (Woodyatt, Wenzel, & Ferber, 2017). Accordingly, self-forgiveness refers to a process in which acceptance of responsibility for a wrongdoing or shortcoming is followed by the restoration of positive self-regard (Griffin et al., 2015; Wenzel et al., 2012) by way of constructive responses to the wrongdoing or shortcoming.

## Psychological Well-Being as an Outcome of Genuine Self-Forgiveness

Early conceptualizations of self-forgiveness focused on the shift in a person's emotional state. Research on hedonic indices of well-being is pervasive. Self-forgiveness has consistently been associated with less emotional distress (e.g., lower shame, guilt, anger), better mental health functioning (e.g., lower depression, anxiety), and a reduction in self-condemning thoughts (e.g., rumination, self-blame; Davis et al., 2015; Law & Chapman, 2015; Toussaint, Barry, Angus, Bornfriend, & Markman, 2017). Many of these experiences coincide with those reported by athletes following competitive failure (Sagar et al., 2009; Sagar & Stoeber, 2009; Wilson & Kerr, 1999). Thus, self-forgiveness may offer a potential route to reducing some negative emotional states and self-punishment when athletes' endeavours are unsuccessful.

There is also emerging evidence indicating that the self-forgiveness promotes *living well* (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008) through a *eudaimonic* process. Forgiving oneself corresponds with broad markers of subjective well-being, such as quality-of-life perceptions, satisfaction with life, and life meaning or purpose (Davis et al., 2015; Lyons, Deane, Caputi, & Kelly, 2011; Romero, Kalidas, Elledge, Chang, Liscum, & Friedman, 2006), as well as specific processes, including affirming violated values, engaging in restorative interpersonal behaviours (e.g., making amends), and accepting oneself (Griffin et al., 2015; Woodyatt et al., 2012). Collectively, these findings emphasize self-forgiveness as being a learning and growth-oriented process (Woodyatt, Wenzel, et al., 2017). Although the *eudaimonic* mechanisms to reaching genuine self-forgiveness may differ somewhat for athletes who are confronted with failure compared to someone who (for instance) harms another person, the prospect of self-development is equally likely for such athletes.

### The Self-Forgiveness Context

The forgiveness of self has almost exclusively been applied to interpersonal transgressions against other people (Peterson, Van Tongeren, Womack, Hook, Davis, & Griffin, 2017). From this perspective, other-oriented offenses that violate social values and moral codes of behaviour may be met with disapproval and social rejection (Barnes, Carvallo, Brown, & Osterman, 2010), thwarting one's basic need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By accepting responsibility and reaffirming one's social-moral identity (Griffin et al., 2015; Woodyatt, Wenzel, et al., 2017), the self-forgiveness process enhances the likelihood of restitutive behaviours (e.g., amends-making; Exline & Yadavalli, 2011) and restoring one's relatedness need.

However, self-forgiveness is also highly relevant to wrongdoings or shortcomings that are fundamentally intrapersonal (Peterson et al., 2017), including those in which social-moral standards may be less relevant (like failure) to reach an internal standard (e.g., desired improvement) or external standard (e.g., victory). Of course, there are many times in sport when interpersonal misdeeds are relevant (e.g., ill-treating a team member, cheating, or breaking training regimens or rules). There are also numerous times when other intrapersonal shortcomings (e.g., missing practice or not giving one's full effort in practice) are experienced. However, the present article focuses narrowly on intrapersonal self-forgiveness as it relates to self-perceived competitive performance failures.

Athletes' shortcomings may be wholly intrapersonal, but self-forgiveness may be cultivated within an extrapersonal context. Prior research has emphasized the value of general social support, forgiveness by others, and perceived forgiveness by a divine being in fostering self-forgiveness (Jacinto, 2010; Krause, 2017; McConnell & Dixon, 2012). Athletes often cope with failure by seeking emotional and instrumental support from significant others in (e.g., coach) and out (e.g., friends) of the immediate sporting environment (Sagar et al., 2009). Similar support-seeking engagements may facilitate self-forgiveness among athletes

provided they align with genuine rather than pseudo self-forgiveness. For example, social support that disregards an athlete's personal responsibility for substandard performance is likely to encourage self-exoneration (i.e., pseudo self-forgiveness). However, social support that blames the athlete for his or her poor performance – especially when delivered harshly – might just as easily encourage self-blame by the athlete.

### **A Self-Forgiveness Framework for Coping with Failure in Competitive Sport**

Considerable research exists in support of self-forgiveness as an adaptive response to one's failure to uphold social-moral values (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). Self-forgiveness following competitive performance failure (to the degree it is not simply dependent on superior performance by an opponent) is an adaptive, deliberate form of coping in which an athlete acknowledges appropriate responsibility for the outcome (e.g., lack of effort, concentration lapses), affirms the self, and reconciles uncomfortable emotional experiences (e.g., shame).

#### **Embracing Personal Responsibility for Failure**

Attempts to evade culpability for one's role in a shortcoming are common defensive responses. They seek to shield the self from threats to self-integrity, yet they stifle opportunities for learning (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Without claiming at least some personal responsibility<sup>1</sup> for one's contribution to competitive performance failure, self-forgiveness is neither relevant nor possible (Wenzel et al., 2012). Essentially, there is nothing for an athlete to forgive. Although there are occasions in which an opponent simply outperforms a competitor in a start-to-finish display of perfection, such performances are the exception rather than the norm. Thus, athletes are often at least partially responsible for failing to meet their performance expectations, and acknowledgement of such is key to genuine self-forgiveness.

At times, however, athletes may respond to failure with undue self-blame and disproportionate ascriptions of self-responsibility, prompting excessive condemnation and punishment directed towards the self. Scholars have asserted that self-punitive responses to interpersonal transgressions may be overcome through self-compassion (Neff, 2012; Woodyatt, Wenzel, et al., 2017), a process of reflecting on the self in non-judgmental, accepting manner, and reacting to the self with kindness, benevolence, and love despite one's shortcomings. Much of the research involving self-compassion in sport has focused on female athletes. It has found that self-compassion is negatively associated with maladaptive responses to failure in sport (e.g., self-criticism, rumination, shame; Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2015; Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & DeLongis, 2013). Self-compassion is indeed an important coping mechanism. Yet, research has found that self-compassion is not associated with reduced defensiveness (i.e., less self-exoneration; Woodyatt, Wenzel, et al., 2017), possibly because responsibility-taking is not a prerequisite for self-compassion. As such, self-compassion may endorse the bypassing of accepting responsibility for competitive performance failures, thereby restricting opportunities for personal growth. Genuine self-forgiveness – falling between self-punishment and self-exoneration – acknowledges an athlete's role in the sport failure.

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<sup>1</sup> With reference to self-forgiveness, accepting responsibility is an athlete's acknowledgment of his/her *justifiable* role in competitive performance failure, which is distinguished from ascribing undue responsibility to an athlete or inducing excessive self-blame and self-punishment.

## Restoring Self-Worth and Resolving Emotional Discomfort

By accepting appropriate responsibility for their role in competitive performance failures, athletes expose their weaknesses and admit to their mistakes. This acknowledgement can be an emotionally uncomfortable experience (Griffin et al., 2015) that threatens self-regard. Athletes may engage many mechanisms to restore self-worth, but genuine self-forgiveness is thought to occur through a process in which values are affirmed (Bell, Davis, Griffin, Ashby, & Rice, 2017). Research on interpersonal wrongdoings indicates that self-forgiveness is fostered through perpetrators' affirming the values their actions violated (Woodyatt, Wenzel, et al., 2017). Even though the transgression cannot be reversed, Woodyatt et al. (2014) suggest that this *direct* approach to affirming the self is necessary because the transgressor has the possibility of improving the situation (in the case of interpersonal wrongdoing) by making amends and reconciling with the victim. However, a direct approach may be less effective when shortcomings do not represent a violation of values per se, or when opportunities for improving the situation are unlikely, such as when athletes experience failure. In these instances, it may be appropriate to affirm values through an *indirect* approach in which an athlete restores self-integrity by affirming self-resources that are unrelated to the failure (Sherman & Cohen, 2006) or by committing oneself anew to those personal or external standards not reached.

Indirect self-affirmations channel a person to focus on other salient (valued) aspects of their life and highlight self-worth within the broader context of the self (Critcher & Dunning, 2015; Wakslak & Trope, 2009). When individuals begin to appreciate their self-worth as being defined by more than the implications of the situation they find themselves in, global self-integrity is restored (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009; Sherman & Cohen, 2002). Indeed, several studies have reported increases in variants of self-worth (e.g., self-esteem, self-integrity) following self-affirmations (Brady et al., 2016; Zhong, Chen, Luo, Wang, & Yi, 2014). The process of self-worth restoration may be especially important when athletes experience failure during tournaments in which matches or games closely follow one another (e.g., round robin events). Since self-affirmations sever the link between the threat (e.g., failure) and the self (Sherman & Hartson, 2011), negative emotional stress responses (e.g., anger, anxiety, sadness) are subdued or perhaps even replaced with positively-toned emotions (e.g., happiness, joy; Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008; Emanuel, Howell, Taber, Ferrer, Klein, & Harris, 2018). This is consistent with the affective outcomes associated with self-forgiveness (Davis et al., 2015).

For athletes who experience failure, restoration of self-regard opens up the opportunity to reflect upon the situation holistically (i.e., focus on the entire match rather than the moment the umpire made a questionable call) and impartially (i.e., scrutinize one's own mistakes). Beyond insight, by approaching failure with less bias and defensiveness, athletes increase the likelihood of adaptively using the information associated with the failure (e.g., concentration lapses) to determine and embrace areas in which they can technically, strategically, or psychologically improve (Crocker & Park, 2004).

## Prospective Research Avenues

The self-forgiveness literature has advanced considerably, yet its application has primarily been limited to interpersonal offenses and dysfunctional behaviour (e.g., hypersexual behaviour; Hook et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2017). Basic research is needed to delineate the process of self-forgiveness in response to perceived failure. Responses might differ based on the situational determinants that warrant forgiveness of oneself (e.g., failure resulting from a lack of effort versus choking). Based on theorizing in this paper, the extent to which self-forgiveness has a role in facilitating recovery following experiences of competitive failure in sport requires empirical investigation, which may be demonstrated in athletes' renewed motivation, sustained

commitment, and subsequent competitive performances. There are also commonalities between self-forgiveness and constructs associated with achievement in sport. For instance, the introspective nature of self-forgiveness (Wohl et al., 2008) is likely to heighten athletes' self-awareness, a characteristic that has been linked to mental toughness (Cowden, 2017). Therefore, researchers might consider exploring self-forgiveness as a component of interventions that target the development of athletes' psychological skills.

Self-forgiveness was introduced narrowly in this paper as a constructive response to competitive performance failure, yet athletes' involvement in sport typically occurs within an interpersonal context (e.g., organizations, teams, coaches). Therefore, self-forgiveness likely has broader relevance to sport, which should be reflected in the instruments that are developed to measure it. Although failure may be experienced intrapersonally, the interpersonal context is likely to affect (positively or negatively) whether or not self-forgiveness is granted. For example, poor performance in a team sport might increase guilt that comes from feeling of letting down one's teammates. Research on self-forgiveness outside of sport indicates that individuals are more inclined to forgive themselves when they're confronted respectfully by victims and are able to reconcile with those they have transgressed against, but are less forgiving when victims' responses are hostile and when perpetrators are rejected or experience the threat of social exclusion (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). Comparable research among athletes may reveal the social sport (and non-sport) conditions that promote or deter self-forgiveness among athletes. For instance, in team sport settings, self-condemnation may be exacerbated when athletes are singled out or unduly blamed for competitive losses, whereas team environments that balance personal accountability with encouragement and support are likely to nurture self-forgiveness.

Psychoeducational interventions that promote responsible self-forgiveness is a new area. Despite the over 200 psychological studies on the experience of self-forgiveness (for a review, see Woodyatt, Worthington, et al., 2017), only two studies have sought to promote self-forgiveness via intervention. One is a psychotherapy intervention (Cornish & Wade, 2015), while the other is a do-it-yourself psychoeducational manual (Griffin et al., 2015). The latter, which has had strong effects at promoting self-forgiveness among non-athletes, is highly adaptable to a sport context. Many questions exist regarding efficacious interventions, such as how interventions might be adapted to competitive sport failure, how one might best deliver the intervention (i.e., through personal interaction with a sport psychologist, do-it-yourself workbook, online intervention, or team-based groups), the kinds of sport failures that might best respond to interventions, and the personality traits of athletes that are most likely to use or reject such an intervention.

## CONCLUSION

In the present paper, self-forgiveness was introduced into the sport literature as a constructive response to coping with competitive performance failure in sport. This is complementary to existing interventions in self-compassion in sport (Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2015; Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & DeLongis, 2013). Contrasting common defensive reactions that limit learning opportunities by shielding the self from stimuli that threaten self-integrity, athletes reach genuine self-forgiveness through deciding to accept personal responsibility for their role in unsuccessful competitive performances, affirming the self, and arriving at an end-state in which negative emotional experiences are reconciled. Through the self-forgiveness process, athletes may be more inclined to engage in an impartial analysis of unsuccessful competitive performances, determine areas in which improvements may be made, and recover more adaptively following failure.

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