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Is there an upside of vulnerability in sport? A mindfulness approach applied in the pursuit of psychological strength

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Abstract

The present article proposes a strength-based approach to vulnerability. Moreover, a mindfulness-based self-reflection intervention designed to enhance well-being and sustainability in high performance coaches is described. The intervention organically uncovered the potential value and upside of vulnerability. Furthermore, in this article we highlight some of the recent criticisms and progress within the area of psychological strengths, before encouraging the reader to consider the value of self-awareness for exploring a more comprehensive understanding of vulnerability beyond its traditional association with weakness. We conclude with a suggested definition of the upside of vulnerability and invite practitioners and researchers alike to consider this within their work.

Keywords: High performance, self-reflection, self-compassion, mental health
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Stress and demands are ubiquitous in high performance sport. Unsurprisingly, research shows that coaches' and athletes' experiences of such demands makes them vulnerable to burnout and mental health problems (Moesch et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the culture of high performance sport has been described as one in which vulnerability and support-seeking are often perceived as weaknesses, with individuals in such environments masking stress, burnout and psychological ill-being. To continue to push performance limits, athletes, coaches and applied sport psychologists have predominately advocated the pursuit of psychological strengths and attributes. Typically, this has been done with sparse attention to psychological ill-being, resulting in some criticism that the divide between undesirable (i.e., “mentally weak”) and desirable (i.e., “mentally tough”) characteristics further increase stigma and the threshold for help-seeking (Bauman, 2016). It is therefore somewhat ironic that the more recent mindfulness and acceptance approaches that originated from treatment in clinical psychotherapy have been applied to high performance sports to enhance performance and build resilience (Baltzell, 2016; Noetel, Ciarrochi, Van Zanden, & Lonsdale, 2017; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2017).

Mindfulness is typically defined by Kabat-Zinn (1990) as paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and doing it non-judgmentally. Noticing and paying attention to the “inner world” allows us to enhance self-awareness and to “be” with painful feelings just as they are, and importantly to experience vulnerability non-judgmentally.

In contrast, Gucciardi, Hanton, and Fleming (2017) argued that it is too premature to determine whether mental toughness and mental health are contradictory terms. However, there is still reason to believe that the context of high performance sport may foster conditions in which personal resources such as those encompassed by psychological strengths (e.g., overcoming obstacles, perseverance) are valued so highly that individuals may be less likely or unwilling to show vulnerability or seek help for mental health issues because of the anticipation...
of being perceived as weak or treated unfairly (Gucciardi et al., 2017). Moreover, considering this cultural stigma toward mental “weakness” – with a co-existence of poor self- or emotional-awareness, it is quite plausible that a given individual would be unable or reluctant to disclose to others, unable to or unwilling to reflect on their own limitations, mistakes, or needs, resulting in a desire to control or suppress any kind of perceived weakness. Altogether, these beliefs arguably limit help seeking behavior.

Many of the resources associated with psychological strengths are likely to benefit individuals in the face of adversity, and our aim is not to critique mental toughness theory or any other psychological strength research, but to articulate our view that there is “space” for greater attention to, and integration of, psychological resources that are not traditionally desirable or associated with performance and well-being. Consequently, there is a value in devoting scholarly attention to those concepts that have traditionally been conflated with “mental weakness” in order to reduce stigma and the threshold for help-seeking. One such concept is vulnerability.

“…to be vulnerable is to be human.”

Quote from a Swedish high performance coach in track and field

**Current approaches to vulnerability**

Vulnerability is a noun, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally”. Typically, vulnerability is regarded as a weakness, not least in sport cultures. This is fully captured by Smith (1999) who disclosed his private struggle with depression and described what goes on inside his head during a scene at the psychiatrist’s office

...I was terrified of talking to someone and the stigma of it petrified me. (.)...Pull yourself together, Brett. You shouldn’t be here. Men don’t go and see anyone about these “softs” and “wimpy” things. Yeah, you read about “women” being depressed, but
“men”, no way! “Men deal with these little side issues themselves – don’t they?... (p. 274).

Yet, there may be a flipside to vulnerability in the context of competitive sports waiting to be discovered. The literature on vulnerability in sport is nascent despite the presence of vulnerable narratives within for instance, work on resilience and mental toughness (Sarkar & Fletcher 2014; Uphill, 2014; Uphill & Hemmings, 2016). In comparison, the potential value and strength based approach of vulnerability have received viral attention outside of sport, primarily due to the work of Brené Brown. In her book Daring Greatly (2012), Brown argued, “Vulnerability is uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Vulnerability is also the birthplace of courage, creativity and change”. Despite popular acclaim, limited empirical research exists that supports Brown’s conceptualization of vulnerability. Regardless, Brown (2012) is often credited with bringing the potential value of vulnerability to academia and applied practice.

We propose that training and competing in high performance sport inherently means exposing one-self to vulnerability. When athletes and coaches prepare for and enter competition it is common for them to experience feelings associated with fear of failure, risk, harm, uncertainty, emotional and physical exposure. These individuals knowingly expose themselves to the possibility of being harmed, in some sports, both physically and emotionally, by their own inner self-critic, opponents, coaches, judges, spectators and media.

**Vulnerability uncovered in a mindfulness-based intervention**

In 2016, a mindfulness-based self-reflection intervention started with two groups of Swedish high performance coaches from track and field and figure skating, respectively. Based on previous research (Lundqvist, Ståhl, Kenttä, & Thulin, 2018) this intervention included a daily mindful self-reflection exercise for eight weeks and follow-up focus-group interviews. In an organic way, narratives of vulnerability emerged from the participants when the coaches engaged in the focus-group interviews; specifically, that sharing one’s vulnerability resulted in deeper connection and understanding. One of the coaches expressed the following:
Often it feels a bit better when you talk about your concerns with someone (who is close to you) who listens and shows compassion. It can be very difficult sometimes, but afterwards you feel so much better. It does not mean I'm not brave or strong, but when I show my vulnerability, I'm brave and strong. The connection gets deeper, I think.

Another participant noted a positive experience from “being kind to oneself” by mobilizing social support and discussing their concerns. Such acts have association with the concept of self-compassion, which Neff (2003) conceptualized as having three parts: self-kindness (i.e., extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh judgement and self-criticism); common humanity (i.e., the ability to see one’s experiences as a part of a larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating) and; mindfulness (i.e., the holding of one’s thoughts in balanced awareness, simply noticing thoughts and emotions in the current situation without evaluation).

The coaches were also asked to write down a personal definition of vulnerability. Two sides of the concept emerged; the traditional perspective on vulnerability reflected by the use of words such as weakness, but also a contrasting perspective reflected by words such as courage and strength.

**How might awareness of vulnerability benefit individuals in sport?**

Despite culturally-inferred perceptions that vulnerability is a weakness, we propose that it only becomes a weakness when an individual is not aware of their vulnerability or when they are aware, but try to hide it from themselves and others; this is often referred to as “armoring up”, in order to be “bulletproof” (cf. Uphill & Hemmings, 2016). In addition, Brown (2006) argued that vulnerability is often kept as a secret simply because of shame. Extending this notion, Brown presented a continuum reflecting the extent to which individuals acknowledge personal vulnerabilities, with those being more aware of their vulnerabilities showing greater “shame resilience”. According to Brown, individuals who had not acknowledged their vulnerability or perceived invulnerability as the experience of shame reported even more pain.
and confusion about what they were feeling or why they were feeling it. Importantly, Brown (2006) argued that awareness of when and with whom to share stories about vulnerabilities, and then to receive empathy and not to be shamed for our experiences, ultimately unfold the strength in vulnerability. The illusion of invulnerability in sports, as part of the culture that is driven by bulletproof athletes, might welcome the study and development of psychological strengths by exploring vulnerability beyond traditional beliefs.

A proposal to shed light on the upside of vulnerability

In line with the discussion above, we suggest that practitioners adopt a more comprehensive approach to vulnerability (i.e., beyond traditional perspectives limited to weakness) in order to experience and be in touch with more of everything, including pain and love. As previously noted, mindfulness training can become one important method to fully connect, open up to, and non-judgmentally accept pain, suffering and vulnerabilities. Instead of judgmentally labelling any moment of suffering or vulnerability as a weakness and surrendering to this experience of suffering, there is an opportunity to notice “a choice point” and make committed actions based on what is important in life. Moreover, mindfulness that emphasizes self-compassion also includes recognizing and accepting moments of suffering as part of the human experience. In this process it is also important to acknowledge that this experience is part of a common humanity embracing being kind to oneself and others. Consequently, creating a safe-place to share stories of vulnerabilities may strengthen this experience and enhance the perception of support and relatedness. For instance, one way this approach could be conveyed within applied practice is a workshop format.

The first step toward a full vulnerability experience can be described as an intra-individual core process driven by self-reflection and self-awareness. This is paying attention with a purpose and noticing the inner world. For this purpose, a brief daily mindfulness based self-reflection exercise can provide momentum. The subsequent step is the interdependent behavior-oriented process that fully capitalizes on this awareness to stimulate the upside of
vulnerability by personal growth and strength. However, more attention and research is needed to better understand the role vulnerability plays in high performance sports.

We propose the upside of vulnerability to be, at first, “the ability to accept and connect with all of one’s own feelings with compassion. This builds self-awareness and the courage to uncover and know one’s shortcomings and weaknesses as well as the possibility to develop strengths and resources. Secondly, it is having the courage and capacity to share experiences, seek support and knowing when to share, with whom and to what extent”. This suggested definition is based on our collective professional experience and definitions provided by the coaches in the intervention alluded to earlier, and inspired by the work of Brené Brown, plus research on mindfulness and self-compassion.

It is important to keep in mind the emphasis placed on the experience of vulnerability in the definition provided above and not being vulnerable *per se*. Indeed, self-compassion has previously been misunderstood as: a form of self-pity, weakness, selfishness, self-indulgent behavior, a form of making excuses, and something that might undermine motivation. The willingness to fully open up to the experience of vulnerability may also eventually be a critical step towards sustainability in high performance settings. A non-judgmental awareness of this experience may lead to adaptive responses such as viewing help-seeking behavior from a strength based perspective, and in turn, potentially closing the divide between undesirable (i.e., “mentally weak”) and desirable (i.e., “mentally tough”).

With this proposal, we invite practitioners and applied researchers, to consider the upside of vulnerability to facilitate mental health and sustainability in high performance settings. In doing so, we have outlined a strength based approach to vulnerability based on a mindfulness self-reflection intervention.
References


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