

The Effect of Self- Forgiveness Training on Sports Burnout Among Adolescent Female Soccer Players

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Forgiveness is one of the concepts recently introduced in positive psychology, aimed at enhancing individual talents when facing challenges. Athletes use forgiveness as a way to reduce negative factors and emotions. The aim of this research was to investigate the effect of self-forgiveness training on the sports burnout of female soccer players.

Methods: The study employed a quasi-experimental design. Soccer players (N = 28) were purposively and voluntarily selected, and then randomly divided into either an experimental or control condition. Pre-tests showed that the two groups had similar scores on the Heartland Forgiveness Questionnaire (2005) and Raedeke and Smith's Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (2001). Self-forgiveness training was provided only to the experimental group in three sessions per week, each lasting half an hour, for two weeks. Post-test questionnaires were completed by both groups. The data were analyzed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) in SPSS software version 27 at a significance level of 0.05.

Results: The findings revealed differential intervention effects across burnout dimensions. While no significant effects were found for physical-emotional exhaustion or reduced sense of accomplishment, a large and significant intervention effect was observed for sport devaluation, with the forgiveness training successfully lowering negative attitudes toward sports participation ($p=0.008$).

Conclusion: Self-forgiveness training affected players' sports burnout. The implications are that coaches pay special attention to self-forgiveness training in order to improve the player's mental health.

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Introduction

In Striving and practicing extensively are commonly considered necessary and essential for attaining sporting success, whether at the individual or team level. However, previous research indicates that increased practice does not necessarily result in sporting success (1). A key variable in this regard is burnout, which is a response to chronic stress and continued demands in a sport or activity without the opportunity for physical and mental healing and recovery. It is defined as a syndrome of continual workout and stress, resulting in staleness, overtraining, and ultimately burnout (2). The first definition of burnout was in the early 1970s by Freudenberg (1974). It is a pattern of behavior suffered by volunteers of the Free Clinic of New York for drug addicts. This pattern involves a progressive loss of energy, loss of motivation, and lack of interest in work until exhaustion. Forty-five years later, the syndrome has become a popular topic among athletes and coaches (3).

After many definitions of the syndrome in sport psychology, Raedeke's definition is now the most accepted in this context. He defined burnout as a psychological syndrome composed of three dimensions: (a) physical/emotional exhaustion, (b) reduced sense of accomplishment, and (c) sport devaluation (4). Based on his proposal, Raedeke and Smith (2001) established the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) for

measuring these three dimensions (5). Burnout development can be a very personal experience and can be affected by a variety of antecedents (6). There are many areas to focus on for prevention and strategies related to burnout treatment. For instance, stress has been identified as an important construct researched in the literature for many decades due to its impact on mental health (7). Some researchers have even found that stress is a remarkably similar sign manifestation reported by individuals with chronic fatigue syndrome (8). According to all studies about the relation between stress and burnout, researchers have found stress to be a predictor of burnout (9).

On the other hand, Conversely, studies that utilized Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) have proven that these strategies are effective in dealing with burnout cases by overcoming these symptoms (10). This is made possible by changing maladaptive thoughts and behaviors that normally cause exhaustion, which helps patients cope with these conditions. Moreover, interventions involving mindfulness and acceptance-based strategies have also come to be considered some key parts in burnout prevention and treatment (11). Additionally, another study with athletes has found that dispositional mindfulness is negatively associated with athlete burnout (12). Furthermore, according to research on perfectionism and burnout, it has been claimed that perfectionistic concerns may increase the risk of burnout in athletes. In order to reduce this risk, coaches

should consider helping athletes reduce their perfectionistic tendencies. Clinical studies have shown that cognitive-behavioral interventions and guided self-help can be effective in reducing perfectionistic concerns (13). However, more studies are needed to determine the efficacy of these interventions specifically in athletes.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy and self-forgiveness therapy interventions may also be beneficial for preventing and treating burnout symptoms in athletes (12). Since being labelled as the neglected “stepchild” of forgiveness research (14). Self-forgiveness, once considered a neglected area in forgiveness research, has gained recognition and developed rapidly (15). Initially, self-forgiveness was defined as a state characterized by the replacement of negative self-oriented emotions with positive emotions (16). Different definitions of self-forgiveness can be found in social science and philosophy literature. In social science, self-forgiveness is seen as respecting oneself and practicing self-love despite wrongdoing, while in philosophy, it involves showing goodwill towards oneself and preventing self-hatred and self-contempt arising from hurting others (17). Holmgren (1998) suggests that self-forgiveness means separating one's personality from their wrongdoing (18). The most well-known definition of self-forgiveness in psychology literature is "a willingness to let go of self-resentment in the face of one's own acknowledged objective wrong and instead foster compassion, generosity, and love towards oneself" (19).

Self-forgiveness has been conceptualized as a motivational process whereby an individual experiences at least three pivotal changes: a reduced motivation to avoid both internal and external reminders of their offense, reduced motivation to engage in self-punishing or retaliatory behaviors, and heightened motivation to treat the self with greater care and benevolence. This framework bears some resemblance to interpersonal forgiveness, as both involve the active avoidance of inner experiences associated with hurt. However, it is unique in that the avoidance is directed inward - toward one's thoughts, feelings, and situations linked to the wrongdoing - rather than outward toward another person. Over time, as self-forgiveness is reached, this defensive avoidance decreases because the individual reaches a state of acceptance and peace about their actions and the ensuing consequences (5, 19).

Although the role of effort in sports has long been acknowledged, overtraining may cause issues of burnout, which is a debilitating condition with severe consequences for athlete well-being and performance. Although interventions such as CBT and mindfulness techniques are proven beneficial, there is a major gap in research regarding the application of self-forgiveness in dealing with this condition, which has been found highly effective in addressing issues concerning stress and depression. This study is therefore essential to explore a potentially transformative psychological intervention that could offer athletes a more compassionate and effective path to recovery

and resilience. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of self-forgiveness training in reducing sports burnout among female soccer players.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The present study, investigating the effect of forgiveness training on burnout in women soccer players, employed an applied research design. A quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test and control group was utilized. Participant sampling was done voluntarily and purposively, where 28 adolescent female soccer players aged 14-18 years were selected and randomly divided into an experimental or control group, each containing 14 participants. This sample size is consistent with prior self-forgiveness intervention studies (20). Inclusion criteria consisted of having played soccer for at least two years, being physically and psychologically healthy, having trained at Isfahan Rif Club since 2019, and committing to attend all forgiveness training sessions, which involved watching related instructional videos. Failure to attend all sessions served as the exclusion criterion.

Measures

A) Forgiveness

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) was used to measure forgiveness. This scale, developed by Thompson et al. (2005), has three subscales: self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. For the first validation study, Cronbach's alpha

coefficients for the subscales were 0.75 for self-forgiveness, 0.78 for forgiveness of others, 0.79 for forgiveness of situations, and 0.86 for the total scale, which was good for internal consistency. The correlation between the subscales was 0.33, 0.18, 0.25, and 0.34, respectively, all significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (21). The psychometric properties of this instrument, including its validity and reliability, have been confirmed as acceptable in Iranian populations (22).

B) Athlete Burnout

Raedeke and Smith's (2001) Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) were employed to assess burnout in athletes. ABQ is a 15-item instrument developed on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The ABQ measures three dimensions of burnout: reduced sense of accomplishment, physical/mental exhaustion, and devaluation of sport. Prior studies have confirmed the internal consistency of subscales using Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 for reduced sense of success, 0.89 for physical/mental burnout, and 0.89 for devaluation of sport. Test-retest reliability of the survey has also been optimum with the values of 0.86 for reduced sense of success, 0.92 for physical/mental burnout, and 0.92 for sport devaluation (5). The psychometric properties of this instrument, including its validity and reliability, have been confirmed as acceptable in Iranian populations (23).

Procedure

Following approval from the management and coaching personnel of Rif Isfahan Club, as well as ethical clearance from respective academic supervisors, 28 female futsal players were selected using a non-random voluntary sampling. The inclusion criteria were to have played futsal for a minimum of two years and to be physically and mentally healthy. Specially selected participants were subsequently randomly assigned to an experimental group ($n = 14$) or a control group ($n = 14$). The experimental group's forgiveness intervention training was adapted from the Dr. Everett Worthington book protocol, *Forgiving toward Forgiveness*. Permission to translate and use was formally obtained. Training sessions were conducted in the gymnasium adjacent to the field prior to regular practice sessions.

There were six structured sessions in the intervention:

Session 1: Participants completed pre-test questionnaires (burnout and forgiveness). The aims of the training for forgiveness were explained, and the operational definition of forgiveness was provided. Participants were requested to reflect on interpersonal transgressions in their past and select one specific episode to focus on.

Session 2: Emphasis was placed on improving interpersonal relations. Participants practiced preparing and delivering a confession to the person who had been wronged.

Session 3: Mental rumination as a construct was addressed, and contrasts with

similar constructs such as stress were mentioned.

Session 4: Participants moved towards forgiveness through writing and signing a forgiveness commitment letter.

Session 5: Rebuilding self-acceptance and engaging in self-forgiveness were the emphasis.

Session 6: Titled "Deciding to Have a Real Life Away from Fantasies," this session aimed at making participants apply the learned skills to real life. A general conclusion was made.

Both groups, following intervention, were required to complete the same questionnaires as post-test measures.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were presented as mean \pm SD. Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed normal distribution of all the variables ($p > 0.05$). For comparison of intervention effects after controlling for baseline differences, a series of ANCOVA were conducted with pre-test scores as covariates for their respective post-test outcomes. All statistical analyses were done using SPSS version 26, with the significance level at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Pre-analysis of participants' demographics, including age, height, and weight, confirmed there were no significant differences between experimental and control groups, which indicated baseline homogeneity of demographic variables. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics—mean

(M) and standard deviation (SD)—of the principal research variables (i.e., burnout and forgiveness components) at pre-test and post-test stages for both groups.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables in Pre-test and Post-test Phases

variables	Groups	Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Physical-emotional exhaustion	experimental	9.57	2.928	9.29	2.585
	control	11.93	2.645	11.29	3.221
Reduced sense of accomplishment	experimental	7.00	2.449	7.36	2.845
	control	9.79	4.693	9.71	4.462
sport devaluation	experimental	8.57	2.065	6.43	1.222
	control	9.29	4.375	9.64	3.973

As Table 1 indicates, there were no significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores in the main variables within the control group. Contrariwise, the experimental group showed a decrease in mean scores on the post-test relative to the pre-test, especially on the sport devaluation subscale. Keep in mind that lower scores for burnout components indicate a more desirable result (i.e., less burnout). In continue, Shapiro–Wilk test was used to test for normality, and $p > 0.05$ findings indicated a normal distribution of data in all variables.

In light of the difference in the pre-test score between the experimental group and the control group, A series of one-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were conducted to examine the effect of the forgiveness training intervention on the three dimensions of burnout, with pre-test scores controlled for. The assumptions below were checked and met for all the analyses: (a) homogeneity of variances using Levene's test ($p > .05$ for all variables), (b) linearity of the covariate and

the dependent variable, as regards significant pre-test effects, and (c) homogeneity of regression slopes, which was confirmed using non-significant interaction terms for the covariate and group factor. The data also met the assumption of normality of residuals.

The findings indicated a pattern of differential effects between the burnout dimensions. For physical-emotional exhaustion, no substantial intervention effect was found ($F(1, 25) = 0.222, p = .642, \eta^2 = .009$) after pre-test scores were controlled for, which significantly predicted post-test scores ($F(1, 25) = 16.272, p < .001$). Similarly, for reduced sense of accomplishment, the group effect was not significant ($F(1, 25) = 0.152, p = .700, \eta^2 = .006$), although it correlated very highly with pre-test scores ($F(1, 25) = 22.662, p < .001$).

On the other hand, a significant large intervention effect of sport devaluation was observed ($F(1, 25) = 22.490, p < .001, \eta^2 = .474$), which is large in effect size. The adjusted mean scores of the experimental

group ($M = 6.70$) were significantly lower than those of the control group ($M = 9.38$), indicating that the forgiveness training did lower the negative attitudes toward sports participation successfully.

Discussion

The present research investigated the effects of forgiveness training on female soccer players' burnout. While previous studies of positive psychology have determined that forgiveness is beneficial to general mental health indicators—i.e., reducing anxiety and depression, and enhancing life satisfaction—its potential in athlete burnout was not extensively explored. Our findings suggest that forgiveness training differentially affected these dimensions, with statistically significant gains recorded on sport devaluation alone, and that physical-emotional exhaustion and reduced sense of accomplishment failed to show significant difference after controlling for pre-test scores.

The substantial reduction in sport devaluation is consistent with established theoretical models. According to Enright's model of the process of forgiveness, the letting go and reframe of aversive interpersonal relationships can repair an individual's sense of worth and engagement in value-laden activities—such as sports (24, 25). This is in line with Mirshekari et al., who highlighted that psychological interventions concerning motivation and self-concept decrease aversive athletic outcomes (26). In addition, our results validate Maltby et al.'s

contention that forgiveness increases adaptive coping and social support, both of which are known to protect against loss of interest and cynicism in sport (27).

The non-significant differences in physical-emotional exhaustion and decreased sense of accomplishment suggest that forgiveness training may have a greater effect on affective and evaluative dimensions of burnout than on subjective experience of bodily tiredness or performance-based self-rating. Physical fatigue may be more directly influenced by recovery and physiological processes, while a decreased sense of accomplishment may be concerned with objective performance feedback and accomplishment environments—areas not necessarily addressed by forgiveness-based interventions. Further, the differential impact of forgiveness training on burnout facets can be explained through cognitive-affective processes. Forgiveness interventions directly target maladaptive cognitive processes—i.e., rumination and negative attribution—with direct relevance to sport devaluation. With its potential to help athletes reappraise interpersonal transgressions and release resentment, the training was likely to have facilitated more positive cognitive reappraisal of their sport experience. However, physical-emotional exhaustion involves considerable physiological elements related to training load and recovery, while reduced sense of accomplishment is highly correlated with objective performance feedback and levels of achievement. These dimensions may require more physiology-specific management and

performance-based interventions alongside psychological interventions to note substantial change.

These results should be considered in light of this study's limitations. First, the short duration of the intervention and the lack of a follow-up assessment phase limit the conclusions regarding the long-term efficacy and sustainability of the forgiveness training. Second, the small sample size, from only one sports club, limits the generalizability of the findings to other wider athletic groups. Additionally, reliance upon self-reporting measures may introduce response biases. Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs with follow-up assessments, recruiting larger and more diverse samples of athletes, and incorporating multi-method approaches (e.g., combining self-reports with physiological measures of fatigue or qualitative interviews) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention's effects on athlete burnout.

Conclusion

In short, the research here demonstrates the potential for forgiveness training to dramatically affect the sport devaluation among female athletes, and how it can mitigate both the motivational and emotional burnout aspects. Although it had no effect on either physical-emotional exhaustion or reduced sense of accomplishment, the intervention is a particular and valuable tool for addressing the central cognitive-affective burnout elements. These findings justify the

inclusion of forgiveness-based interventions within athlete mental skills training in an effort to promote long-term sport participation and well-being.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

Data Availability Statement

The data is available from the authors at a reasonable request.

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Ethical considerations

All ethical principles were considered in this study. These included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring the confidentiality of information, and allowing participants the right to withdraw from the research at any time. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Arak University.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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