

## Goal Setting and Monitoring for Self-Care: Facilitating a Mindful and Grateful Attitude

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### **Abstract:**

It is not uncommon for athletes to set goals to meet physical performance demands or achieve certain performance outcomes. However, how often do athletes set goals related to self-care? If athletes use goals to enhance their performance physically and mentally, they should also use goals to promote self-care practices that are beneficial to their performance and overall well-being.

**Keywords:** goal setting | self-care | mindfulness | sports psychology

### **Article:**

It is not uncommon for athletes to set goals to meet physical performance demands or achieve certain performance outcomes. However, how often do athletes set goals related to self-care? If athletes use goals to enhance their performance physically and mentally, they should also use goals to promote self-care practices that are beneficial to their performance and overall well-being.

### **What Is Self-Care and Why Do We Need It?**

Self-care is the ability to care for oneself and to perform activities necessary to optimize one's functioning and well-being (Richard & Shea, 2011). More importantly, "self-care is not an indulgence. It is an essential component of prevention of distress, burnout, and impairment. It should not be considered as something 'extra' or 'nice to do if you have the time'" (Barnett et al., 2006, p. 263). Athletes experience physical and emotional distress from intense training and competitions in a "normal" world, and even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic when it has become difficult to maintain their routines and competitiveness. Self-care practices, including physical (e.g., adequate sleep) psychological (e.g., mindfulness and gratitude) strategies, are crucial for athletes to perform at their best and be satisfied with their lives (Chen & Chang, 2017).

## **Mindfulness and Gratitude Self-Care Practices**

Even though self-care promotes well-being and performance (Frentz et al., 2020), one common excuse for not practicing self-care is “not having enough time.” It is important to be aware that self-care strategies like mindfulness and gratitude can be done fairly quickly and be incorporated into athletes’ established routines to alleviate emotional distress. Below are several evidence-based strategies (see Shankland & Rosset, 2017 for a review) that athletes can use as part of a self-care routine:

- **Mindful breathing:** Athletes who are beginners can set a timer for 3–5 minutes to practice mindfulness (i.e., non-judgmental, present-moment awareness of one’s thoughts and emotions) by paying attention to the breath and observing how their mind wanders. After seeing progression with less mind-wandering, athletes can proceed to longer mindfulness sessions and add other components (e.g., body scan, walking).
- **Mindful self-compassion exercise:** Athletes who often are self-critical can add positive self-talk and self-compassion—a combination of mindfulness, common humanity (i.e., a realization that everybody struggles), and self-kindness (i.e., empathetic acts toward ourselves)—to reduce stress and anxiety from not meeting performance goals or expectations (Frentz et al., 2020). Athletes may simply include three self-compassion statements along with mindfulness practices (see Center for Mindful Self-Compassion for more exercises):
  - “I’m feeling really stressed/anxious/upset right now” (mindfulness)
  - “Everyone feels this way sometimes” (common humanity)
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- **Gratitude journaling:** Athletes can schedule gratitude journaling daily or weekly to foster positive emotions. Entries should be specific (i.e., things/events/people one is grateful for) and relevant to one’s thoughts and feelings (e.g., “I’m grateful for my teammate who reached out and listened to me when I could not attend practices”). Writing down a grateful thought and relevant feelings, rather than just thinking about those in their minds, helps athletes more intentionally savor small good things that have happened in their sport and life (Chen & Chang, 2017).
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## **Goal Setting and Monitoring**

As previously noted, athletes and other performers alike may not set goals for self-care practices. To enhance accountability and consistency, athletes can implement SMART goal setting principles to set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound self-care goals. For example, an

athlete might set the goal of “I will express my gratitude every Sunday by writing down five things I am grateful for in my sport and life.” Knowing that it is hard to pursue a new goal or start a habit, monitoring self-care goals is necessary. Athletes can adopt a habit tracker (via the internet or mobile apps) that visually shows goals that they have achieved or is working toward. A habit tracker also helps assess process goals, assist with adjustments if deemed appropriate, and eventually facilitate a lifestyle of consistent self-care practices.

The mindfulness and gratitude practices discussed above are just a sample of many self-care options available to athletes. Athletes can explore other strategies (e.g., yoga, social media “diet”) that promote self-care to see what best fits their needs and established routines. Similar to any other physical and psychological skills, self-care takes time to build and master to facilitate holistic athlete development and optimal performance. Best of luck with your self-care—an essential component in the journey toward performance excellence!

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