



*University of Thessaly*

*Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences*

*Greece*

**Developing Coping Strategies from Fear of Failure in Sport:**

**Elite Youth Female Soccer Players**

by

Kendall Ayers

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**Approved by supervising committee:**

Prof. Anthanasios Papaioannou, PhD

Prof. Nikos Comoutos, PhD

Prof. Nikolaos Digelidis, PhD

**Trikala, June 2019**

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The author of this thesis had a remarkable amount of help from professors: Anthanasios Papaioannou, Nikos Comoutos, and Nikolaos Digelidis.

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**Kendall Ayers**

## Abstract

Competitive sports can apply a significant amount of pressure on athletes, especially for youth athletes. The aim of this qualitative study is to investigate the experiences of ten youth elite female soccer players who participated in two studies: a three-week study to develop a coping strategy for fear of failure in three season games, and a five-day control experiment to test self-talk.

Participants, who were chosen based on their previous experience participated with the national team (tried out and played), underwent individual structured interviews about how they experienced fear of failure, define perfectionism, and how they coped with failure in competitions. Interviews were reflected based on a phenomenological approach from their experience with the national team, to find a solution for future play. Four psychological skills were applied: 1) self-talk; 2) deep breathing exercise; 3) imagery; and(4) reframing the mind. Findings were compared from both studies and related them to existing research, discussed the effect of coping strategies on youth athletes, spoke about the progression of the athletes throughout the experiment, and then suggested possible implications for future research for older athletes and higher levels.

**Keywords:** soccer, fear of failure, self-talk, relaxation, imagery, coping strategies, elite youth athletes

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## Introduction

In today's world, competitive sports are happening at a young age such as with pee-wee football, soccer, and gymnastics. With competitive sports, there will always be a pressure as a variable, whether it is pressure from self-esteem, leadership roles on and off the field (coach and parents), perfectionism, or reinjures (Dale, G. A. (2000;Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993a). Soccer can be a competitive sport that can push an athlete to their limit. For athletes who aim to achieve a higher level of competition, such as at a collegiate or professional level, training sessions may increase in intensity. This added pressure can result in loss of personal time and an increase in the level of pressure that the athletes may experience. The earlier occurrence of competitive stress causes fear of failure (FF) to emerge in athletes at a young age.

Psychological characteristics can help elite performers adapt to setbacks and transitions they might face (MacNamara, Button, & Collins 2010). Already, athletes participating in competitive sports are more likely to experience emotional stress, and how they may cope with this stress may influence performance as well as skill development (Lazarus 2000). Applying coping strategies to youth athletes will help them be able to manage emotional stress in their developing age.

Although sport is a continually evaluative environment that has recognized the need for athletes and coaches to set high standards and strive for perfection in sport performance (Clements, 2008), it is imperative that both parties do not put down the athletes' efforts, performance, and self-worth when the results are imperfect. This may lead to early athlete burnout and other negative factors, which is why this study will be conducted.

Fear of failure is inevitable in competitive sports, but it is how you turn a negative emotion (i.e., fear) into a positive state of mind (i.e., increasing confidence). The inability to cope with stress is a significant factor in the role of failure in athletes to be able to function fully in many types of athletic performances (Lazarus, 2000).

There is little research on the development of fear of failure and how athletes may cope with it, along with studies applied toward sample groups with youth athletes. Previous studies show lack of coping strategies related to stress may lead to negative outcomes such as: sport withdrawal (Klint & Weiss, 1986; Smith, 1999), decreased performance (Lazarus, 2000), and athletes not being able to pursue careers in professional sport (Holt & Dunn, 2004). It is therefore important for both researchers and coaches that are working with athletes to have a greater understanding of coping in sport. This research will contribute to better understanding of coping strategies related to fear of failure in youth athletes. The aim of this qualitative study is to investigate the experiences of ten youth elite female soccer players who participated in two studies: a three-week study to develop a coping strategy for fear of failure in three season games and a five-day control experiment to test self-talk. The main research question asked is: “Which strategies can be applied to help increase performance in youth athletes?” Followed by a continuation that asked, “Do psychological skills improve the athlete’s performance?” Furthermore, a phenomenological approach will be used to gain insight on elite youth athletes’ experiences with the national team

A phenomenological approach began the experiment to see the previous experience the athletes went through when participating with the national team. Long in-depth interviews were conducted before the start of the experiment. Following this process, five interviews were held with each athlete. These interviews were used to understand how the athlete feels and experiences.

In a series of two weeks, four psychological skills were applied to find a coping strategy for the athlete: self-talk, imagery, relaxation techniques, and reframing the mind.

By reducing young athletes' FF, practitioners may help enhance their sporting performances, experiences in sport, and overall well-being, and may reduce the negative consequences associated with FF. With coping strategies, young athletes may develop and grow to be able to reach optimal performance. As such, sport practitioners have an opportunity to contribute not only to young athletes' sport performance, but also to the quality of their lives and their social development (Sagar, S. S., Lavalley, D., & Spray, C. M. (2009).

## **Literature Review**

### **Fear of Failure**

The original definition of fear of failure is a motive to avoid failure in evaluative situations based on anticipatory shame and embarrassment upon failure (Atkinson, 1957). Fear of failure can then be construed as a self-evaluative framework that influences how the individual defines, orients to, and experiences failure in achievement situations (Heckhausen, 1991) by not living up to expectations of coaches and other players. A more contemporary definition as proposed by Conroy and colleagues (2002) is the tendency to appraise threat to the achievement of personally meaningful goals when one fails in the performance (Conroy, Willow, & Metzler, 2002). Conroy (2004) continues from his previous definition as the appraisal of threat in evaluative situations activates cognitive beliefs associated with the consequences of failing.

There is a lack of research on where the term “fear of failure” is rooted from. Multiple researchers found different variables in their studies. Teevan (1983) established a study that revealed children who showed a high result in fear of failure had mothers who would punish failure and reward success. Sagar, S. S., Lavalley, D., & Spray, C. M. (2009) found that the “effects of FF was inferred from the results that FF affected the athletes in four ways: their well-being, their interpersonal behavior, their sport performance, and their schoolwork.” Conroy and colleagues (2002) state that there are five fears of failure that have been identified. These are fears that are experienced as: 1) shame and embarrassment; 2) fear of devaluing one’s self-estimate; 3) fear of important others losing interest; 4) fear of having an uncertain future; and 5) fear of upsetting significant others.

According to Sagar, S. S., Lavalley, D., & Spray, C. M. (2009), they explored Conroy’s (2002) fears found in their study that experiencing shame and embarrassment are main variables in perfectionism-fear of failure. In turn, mistakes and pressure from the coach and athletes are characteristics of perfectionism that can be associated with experiencing shame and embarrassment in athletes.

## **Psychological skills**

### ***Emotions***

Participation in sports can lead athletes to experience a variety of emotions. Tangney (2002) found that athletes who participated in sports experienced shame, guilt, and pride. He identifies these emotions as self-conscious emotions that evaluate performance in a negative

manner. Emotions are big aspects of peoples' lives that can have powerful impacts (positive and negative) on their functioning (Lazarus, 1991).

Emotion is a response to an event or a stimulus (Jones, MV 2012) such as feeling anger from missing a penalty kick or experiencing happiness for winning a match. This may be confused with mood, a less intense form of emotion, when the athlete does not know the cause for the feeling that is being used (Jones, Mace, & Williams 2000). Lane & Terry (2000), states that the boundaries between mood and emotion can often be blurred, due to a misunderstanding of definition. Sport researchers focused on how individual athletes appraise stressors (Thatcher & Day, 2008); how they experience, express, and regulate their own emotions (Martinent, Campo, & Ferrand, 2012); and how they cope with stress before and during competitions (Gaudreau, Nicholls, & Levy, 2010; Mellalieu, Hanton, & Shearer, 2008).

M.V. Jones (2012) believed that the understanding of emotional regulation is important to understand how emotions rise. This can help make it a possibility to prevent or limit the intensity of unhelpful emotions in performance.

### ***Coping with FF***

Coping is a dynamic process that involves a person to constantly change their cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (i.e., minimize, reduce, master, tolerate) external and internal demands that are considered as stressors (Lazarus, 1999). Coping strategies involved with fear of failure include: reframing of mentality (to understand they can only control their actions and not the surrounding environment), confronting their fears (Sagar, S. S., Lavalley, D., & Spray, C. M. (2009) such as fear of reinjury, playing time, and mistakes.

With these stressors, there needs to be a solution. Smith's (1999) conclusion on coping is,

*“Therefore, it is important for practitioners to teach young elite athletes to employ effective coping strategies, such as PFC (e.g., seeking instrumental social support, visualization, planning, reframing) to deal with their fears of failure, as these can potentially help them attain a balanced emotional state and a high level of motivation. Such skills may also indirectly impact their sport performance and may assist in social development because they can generalize these coping skills to other areas of their lives.”*

By confronting these fears, optimal performance can be reached. Thus, applying coping strategies to youth athletes can help with coping and development in both sport and in their personal life.

Hardy et al. (1996) commented that the “early recognition and control of anxiety symptoms were associated with superior performance in elite athletes” (p. 171). Teaching athletes to handle stressful situations at a young age is imperative for their future success and self-esteem level. Athletes who understand coping strategies may be beneficial in their growth and development to reach optimal performance.

### ***Imagery***

Imagery is a cognitive process for producing motor actions and performance-enhancing technique used by athletes (Cumming, J., & Williams, S. E. (2012). A main purpose for imagery is to help self-regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and how it can help lead to success (Cumming & Hall, 2002). Imagery is **more realistic with more** details and emotions implicated in scenarios (Simonsmeier, B. A., & Buecker, S. (2017). Athletes can use imagery to deal with timing, technical or tactical challenges that may arise during an event or against a specific opponent (Langton 2015).

Imagery has been defined as “the cornerstone of sport psychology interventions” Cornelius, (2002), combining the senses to design or even recreate, a sporting skill for an athlete (White & Hardy, 1998). Imagery is a useful tool in improving learning, performance, and self-efficacy in an individual. According to Munroe-Chandler & Hall (2007), imagery is used by many athletes at all levels (youth to professional). Imagery can effectively enhance perceived threats such as fear (Sherman, Cialdini, Schwartzman, & Reynolds 1985).

Imagery is promoted by coaches and athletes within many athletic fields. This leads us into the next psychological skill that is applied: applying relaxation techniques

### ***Relaxation***

Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing techniques and progressive muscular relaxation may be useful in reducing stressors (Heil, 1993). Anxiety and fear come together so when the athlete feels the symptoms of anxiety, such as increased heart rate, increased blood pressure or difficult breathing, a relaxation technique can help in controlling the anxiety. Also, where stress occurs as a tension response, a deep muscle relaxation technique can act as the best strategy by tensing a body part; face, leg, or hand (Bali, A. (2015). To enhance relaxation techniques, adding other psychological skills such as imagery is beneficial. An example of relaxation paired with imagery exercises can be used to enable injured athletes to see themselves performing without hesitation or re-injury anxiety (Podlog, L., Dimmock, J., & Miller, J. 2011). Athletes who struggle to achieve appropriate pre-imagery relaxation levels or those who struggle with the clarity and/or controllability of their injury related images may require referral to a sport psychologist.

### ***Self-Talk***

Self-talk can be defined as the recognizable delivery of an internal position that expresses either internally or externally where the message-sender is also the intended receiver. Hardy (2006) says self-talk can be both positive and negative but it's how you interoperate it. Self-talk can contribute to athletes in multiple ways. Furthermore, Hatzigeorgiadis, A., Zourbanos, N., Mpoumpaki, S., & Theodorakis, Y. (2009) found that self-talk can be used in different functions. Self-talk can be positive (“I did it!”), negative (I suck!), motivational (I got this!), and instructional (pass the ball). Athletes such as soccer players have used proactive self-talk to benefit their performance. For example, an athlete using instructional self-talk to master a skill or choosing to use motivational statements such as, “I am strong. I will do this!”, during a competition are examples of proactive self-talk (Theodorakis, Y., et al 2012). In contrast, Van Raalte, J. L. et al (2016) found that negative self-talk resulted in reducing an athlete’s confidence and increased the likelihood of FF, especially in youth athletes. To improve this skill, athletes can practice self-talk.

Positive self-talk will be the main focus in this study. Positive self-talk, such as "you can do it", "it's okay, next time", Conroy and Metzler (2004) found a strong relationship between fear of failure and sport anxiety when it comes to negative self-talk when failing in a situation.

### ***Reframing the Mind***

Reframing/restructuring is an effective strategy to develop robust sport-confidence and highlighted that it is effective because it enables athletes to rationalize what they are experiencing and to rethink the way they approach varying situations (Beaumont, C., Maynard, I. W., & But, J. 2015).

Reframing the mind can be associated with sports as a coping strategy to help athletes shift their focus to something internal such as the love of the game and accomplishing a new skill to cope (Podlog, L., Dimmock, J., & Miller, J. 2011).

### ***Perfectionism***

Perfectionism has been identified as “striving for flawlessness” (Hewitt & Flett, 2002, p.5). Perfectionism is a common characteristic in competitive sports (Dunn, Gotwals, & Causgrove Dunn 2005). It is normal for athletes to set high standards for themselves when it comes to their performance; they want to be the best they can be, but this self-imposed pressure can cause anxiety and lead to the opposite effect when the athlete feels they cannot achieve it. Perfectionism can be related to fear of failure.

Three types of perfectionism have been identified in previous studies: 1) Socially Prescribed Perfectionism, when the individuals feel pressured to be perfect because of beliefs that significant others have excessively high standards for them to meet; 2) Other-Oriented Perfectionism, the setting has unrealistic standards for others by expecting that they will be perfect and stringently evaluating their performance; 3) Self-Oriented Perfectionism, the tendency to set unrealistic standards for one’s self and to harshly evaluate and criticize one’s behavior as a result of a drive to attain perfection and avoid failure (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Athletes react to their environment so it’s important for coaches to understand their role in helping athletes fight fear of failure. Perfectionist striving appears to be motivational quality that can “boost” athletes to do their best, make more effort, and achieve the best results possible

(Stoeber, J 2012).Conroy, et al. (2007) found that with self-oriented perfectionism, this can lead to consequences for athletes.

*“Self-oriented perfectionism involves the tendency to set unrealistic standards for one’s self and to harshly evaluate and criticize one’s behavior as a result of a drive to attain perfection and avoid failure (Hewitt & Flett, 1991b).*

Concern over mistakes predict higher levels of fears of failure, whereas, when all aspects of perfectionism were considered simultaneously, the athlete’s personal standards forecast a lower fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment, validating previous findings that aspects associated with personal standards perfectionism are associated with lower fear of failure (Stoeber & Becker, 2008).

## **Methods**

The current study was broken down into two parts: Study 1 and Study 2. By using a qualitative approach, Study 1 examined ten athletes’ personal experiences in coping strategies through a structured interview process. Study 2 was a control group that consisted of seven athletes to measure individual performance applying self-talk.

### **Study 1**

#### **Technical Self-Talk Aim Test**

The first study, conducted with ten youth female athlete, was an experiment to test instrumental self-talk. Due to their inability to complete the study, only seven athletes were

evaluated. Before the first session began, in a group discussion, the instruction of the experiment was explained for all the athletes to receive the same instruction in the same manner at once. This was so the youth athletes could interpret the information simultaneously. The information given was: three sessions will be conducted in a series of five days. The objective of the experiment is to be able to pass the ball accurately from a certain position of five, ten, and fifteen feet away from the target.

## **Study 2**

### **Application of Psychological Skills for Coping Strategies**

The athletes' interviews consisted of five sections: their view on failure, what failure means to them, how failure affects them, how they are coping with failure, and perfectionism.

A phenomenological approach was applied to the first study to have an understanding of the athlete's experiences when they tried out for the national team, focusing on the fear and perfectionism as a baseline. A phenomenological approach is gathering the detail of the experiences of the individual to have a better understanding of the situations. Previous research argues that this method could help save research from measurement and prediction. This approach implicates anxiety in sport psychology (Nesti 2011). The next steps in the study were performing interviews about the athletes' current season, the pressure that is being applied to them, and how to implicate strategies to help the athletes cope.

### **Participants**

Participants were part of a third division amateur soccer team. They attend school, play on the third division Greek team and are players associated with the national team. Ten female athletes

were asked if they would be willing to participate in Study 1. All athletes were aged 17 or younger (mean age of 15) and Study 2 (mean age of 14.4).

The requirements for participating in this study were they had to be elite athletes, affiliated with the national team (tried out/currently on the team), and under the age of 18. The sample was chosen because there is a lack of research on this study with youth athletes being able to cope with pressure in high pressure situations. This study helps to examine the phenomenological experience that youth athletes endure when dealing with pressure situations and coping strategies. This sample is specified in understanding the stress and pressure youth, female athletes endure. Based on the criteria for participation and purpose, a total of 15 athletes agreed to take part in the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness, (Guba 1981) suggested credibility (triangulation and honesty tactics), transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is one of the most important factors in gaining trust. Triangulation such as observation and individual interviews were used. The athletes were given the opportunity to participate to ensure that they will answer honestly. The athletes were encouraged to speak openly in each session and that the interview sessions were confidential. Transferability ensures future researchers with experiences with fear of failure. Dependability is the methodology being described in order to be repeated. Finally, confirmability is seen with data tables that were tracked or known as an “audit trail.”

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection was gathered face-to-face through a structured interview process over a three-week period. First, a description and the purpose of the study were defined. Next, participants and parents (for those who were under eighteen years old) were asked to sign an informed consent

form. This defined confidentiality and ensured anonymity of the participant. Five pilot studies were conducted to evaluate interview questions, estimate the average length of the interview, and if the result would connect with this study.

The present study was based on the participants' performance in the last three games of their season. The process before the first game consisted of only individual interviews with observation. Coping strategies were not applied during the first game. The process before the second game was conducted in a group session after three coping strategies were assigned to the girls: self-talk and deep breathing techniques with imagery. For the third game, the athletes were assigned one more coping strategy to focus on: reframing the mind. Finally, an exit interview was conducted with each participant asking which psychological skill they utilized as a coping strategy. The week before the first game consisted of in-depth interviews and observation of team practice. The following week, interviews were conducted, and an application of coping strategies was applied throughout the week, then reframing the mind was applied at halftime of the second game. Lastly, the final week of the study (the week before the third game) I held in-depth interviews with the athletes on how the coping strategies affected them, if they continued to use the strategies, and their opinion on the strategies.

## **Results**

From the ten previous athletes, three athletes were unable to participate in this study, leaving seven athletes to complete this experiment. The results from Study 1 concluded that applying self-talk and imagery are effective. Findings from the experiment can be seen in Table 1. The results show from the first control session that there was great improvement. In the first session, there were only eight successful passes out of 21 passes attempted. From individual

performance to the full group, there was an increase. The second and third sessions each had the same group total of 13 completed passes. Although only 13 passes were successful, everyone's accuracy improved. The test results were documented and presented at the end of each session. A group interview was then conducted to understand the emotion and psychological understanding (upset, satisfied, etc.) of each athlete.

Finally, our findings showed that fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment is central to understanding the relationships between perfectionism, fear of failure, and negative effect after failure in competition. Shame is an emotion at the core of fear of failure (McGregor & Elliot, 2005) and involves a negative examination of the entire self and feelings of incompetence (Tangney, 2002). Shame is a painful experience because it can be associated with feeling that one's entire self is a failure. This can make one seek an escape from the shame-eliciting situation (Lewis, 1992; Tangney, 2002). Shame and embarrassment occur when one concludes, through cognitive processes of self-evaluation, that one has failed (Sagar, S. S., & Stoeber, J., 2009). Perfectionism, fear of failure, and effective responses to success and failure: The central role of fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment.

### **Study 1 Inductive Approach**

An inductive approach is when the themes that are identified are strongly linked to the data (Patton 1990). The data was collected via interviews from a focus group of youth elite athletes. The relationship was related to the focus group.

**Session One.** The first day of the study was the control day to find the baseline of the girls' ability. After the results were posted, the group was asked, "How did you feel with your result?". Group discussion was the chosen method for all the athletes to receive the same information in the

same way. In a group, the girls were only given the instruction to “kick the ball.” From the first session, there was not a technical instruction given to the seven athletes; and from the three distances, only eight goals were completed. Table 1, the Self-talk Aim Test table, shows the results of this test. When spoken to after the session, the girls were disappointed in the result. Athlete 8 completed zero passes. Athletes 1, 2, 6, and 7 each completed one pass (all from 5 feet away). Athlete 3 completed two out of three passes (5 feet and 15 feet away). Athlete 9 also completed two out of three passes (from 5 and 10 feet away). Table 2 shows a few of the athletes’ post-session responses. Athlete 8 reported, *“I was not focused. I was thinking of what the other people would say or see if I missed.”* Athletes 1 and 2 agreed with this statement. Athlete 6 commented, *“I just did not feel confident.”* Athlete 7 pointed out, *“After the first pass, I didn’t think about anything.”* Athlete 9 only remarked, *“It was bad”* when she spoke about missing from 15 feet away.

**Session Two.** The next day, I gave the athletes instruction on their technique, applying imagery, telling themselves something positive, and then to pass the ball. After the tactical and technical instructions were applied, 13 passes were completed. This was more than half of the 21 passes attempted which resulted in an improvement on the result alone. Athlete 1 was the only athlete to complete just one pass out of three (5 feet away), but the passes were more accurate to the target than the previous session. Athletes 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9 all completed two out of three passes. Athletes 2, 3, and 8 completed from the 5 feet and 10 feet distances. Athletes 6, 7, and 9 completed their passes from the 5 feet and 15 feet distances. Athlete 8, who previously completed zero passes, asserted, *“I told myself, ‘I can do it’, then I took a deep breath.”* All the athletes agreed they improved with instruction. *“I did better than yesterday.” “I improved”.*

**Session Three.** The last session was on the fifth day with the same instructions to the athletes as the previous session. The final session had the same result as the second session with a

total of 13 completed passes. Although the same number, the result was better than the previous session. All the passes were close to the target and the players were satisfied with the outcome. Athletes 3 and 9 only completed one pass out of three. Athlete 9 made the comment, *“I was closer to the target, so I am happy.”* Athlete 3 reported, *“I am comfortable with how I did because I focused more.”* Athletes 1, 6, 7, and 8 completed two out of three passes from the 5 feet and 10 feet distances. Athlete 1 remarked, *“I was confident I would make two at least.”* Athlete 8 progressed throughout the experiment. On the first day she completed one out of three passes. In the second experiment she completed two out of three passes. By the third and final experiment, she completed two out of three passes, but she felt good with the results. Although she missed the last pass, she was closer to the target. She commented, *“I am okay that I missed. I was barely off... I pictured my teammates each time and passed.”*

Athlete 2 progressed the most out of all the athletes. On the first day, she completed one out of three passes. The second time, she completed two out of three passes. In the third experiment, she completed three out of three passes. Her response to her progress was, *“I felt confident.”*

From the results and what was observed, Study 1 was a great way to see the progression of the athlete. For instance, athletes felt more comfortable and satisfied with their results as shown in this excerpt from Table 2.

**Table 2**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Indicative Quote</b>
Athlete 2	<i>“I feel satisfied with the outcome.”</i>

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 Athlete 5

*“I am comfortable with how I did because I focused more”.*

---

 Athlete 9

*“I am relaxed. I was close to the target. I am happy.”*

---

## **Study 2**

This study contained ten youth female soccer players ranging from ages 13-17 years old.

There was an application of psychological skills to intervention to find a coping strategy. The last three games of these athletes’ soccer season were used for the experiment to dictate if the players will move up into the second division. These games were chosen because they were against stronger teams and had the additional pressure of vying for the title. The first game was only observational for the interview. For the second game, coping strategies relaxation and imagery were applied to the athletes. For the third game, coping strategies self-talk and reframing the mind were applied.

## **Observations**

The first week of the study was an interview on three different terms: fear, perfectionism, and coping. Appendix 1 shows the interview questions. The answers are shown in Table 3.

For the first game, only observation was applied. At the start of the game, a series of player mistakes such as losing the ball, incomplete passes, and improper throw-ins occurred. As the game continued, players were not moving as much on the field when they lost the ball. There was no communication between players. Heads were hanging low by halftime. The playing conditions were miserable. There was frequent rain throughout the game. The field was in poor condition with flooding, and missing lines on the field and in the goal area. The referee also added to the

players' frustration by not calling fouls committed by the other team. During the game, the goalkeeper came out of the goal area and used her hands, but the referee did not call a foul. The referee also did not award two penalty kicks for egregious fouls committed in the goal area. These incidents might have also played a factor in the players behavior.

On the Monday following the game, I interviewed the players. The athletes were not satisfied in the result, the play, and with negative body language.

For the second game, the results showed that regardless of the outcome, the athletes felt more satisfied with their play after using the psychological skills I applied to them. During the interview after the game, their body language was relaxed, and they were happy. The athletes coped with the stress of the game, the outside sources (the referee), and the result which lead to a one to one final score.

Third game, the players were tense by the end of the first half, with their heads hanging low, some players isolating themselves, and the shaking of the leg which can be a sign of anxiety. After speaking about reframing their mind at halftime, you could see the body language was straighter and the nodding of the head of understanding. Finally, by the end of the third game was very successful when it came to the players handling stress. The relaxation, self-talk, and imagery skills were applied before the game, and then reframing the mind was brought in at halftime. After the game, the athletes were very satisfied, celebrated, and appreciated my role as a mental performance coach.

## **Halftime**

Table 4 shows the results of reframing the mind. I asked the group their perspective of the first half. As a group, the athletes spoke about the issues at hand with the first half. This can be

seen in Table 3 where the girls made the comments, “*We are not playing good. No good passes. No communication.*” Instead of focusing on their performance, I asked them to focus on outside factors. “How is the other team playing? What are their weaknesses?” The girls reflected on the other team’s weaknesses and how they could overcome them. “*They are not fast. They have no technique. They are slow.*”

When I asked what the positives of their team were, they responded with, “*We are faster. We have technique. We are stronger than them.*” This is an example of self-analyzing and reframing from the result of the game to individual performance. I directed them to focus on their own potential and strength to beat the player in front of them. During the second half, they performed well with a 3-0 win. The performance, mentality, and overall atmosphere had increased.

Refocusing the mind at halftime can make an impact with the performance on the field. This will help redirect the mindset of the athlete for what is still to come. The second half is a fresh start. Reframing the mind of athletes can help them see the positives they are accomplishing.

The main categories of reframing are: 1) Did you help with the play? 2) Did you try your hardest? 3) Were you in position on the field?

After the final game in the study, A brief interview about the psychological skills that were applied was conducted to determine which one was more accommodating. All ten of the athletes used self-talk for a coping strategy during pressure and anxiety. Six athletes reframed their mind, and four of the players also used relaxation.

In conclusion, when the individual performance was high, the athletes were very satisfied with the outcome whether it was a win or a loss. When the individual performance was poor, the players were not satisfied with the outcome regardless if they won or lost.

Table 5, Observations Throughout Three Games, shows the observations that were taken from all three games.

## Discussion

This study was tested to have a better understanding of what can be applied to fear of failure. From the results, the research questions were accurate with the research and are significant. Psychological skills were successfully used by elite youth women soccer players for coping strategies. Perfectionism did not play a role in this study.

Emotions such as fear can affect performance. The aim of this paper was to find coping strategies for athletes when emotions rise. This solution will help emotional control and improve the athletes' performance. Athletes can be exposed to fear at any time whether it is during mid-play going for a pass or a tackle, to after the game with the fear of not trying hard enough.

Psychological skills such as imagery, relaxation, reframing the mind, and self-talk were applied in this study and proved to be very effective as coping strategies in youth athletes. I could see the changes in the players and they could see the changes in themselves. By introducing young athletes to these concepts and educating them appropriately, they can help them to learn and integrate these skills into their sporting lives (Stallard, 2002, 2005).

Self-talk was the most frequently used psychological skill by the players in this study. When it came to the aim-test, instructional self-talk was implemented. The result was more successful when the technique was added. Theodorakis et al. (2000) said that instructional self-talk (technical and tactical focus) could be helpful in tasks requiring fine motor skills, (aim-test) where information on precision of movement rather than speed or strength of movement

determines success. Also, self-talk is frequently used because it is perceived to be beneficial, possibly because it is simpler to learn than imagery, which shows that some people struggle to learn imagery (Cumming and Williams, 2012).

Perfectionism was examined due to previous research connecting it to fear of failure. These results showed there was no correlation between fear of failure and perfectionism.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The purpose of this research is to develop coping strategies in youth female sports. I indicate that this practice will help female athletes reach their optimal performance in future play to reach the higher competition level, as well as, improvement of their self on and off the field.

There were many variations of limitations present in this study. A limitation that is a factor is that these are amateur youth soccer players who have played less than eight years. Future research should be conducted with a higher competition level of soccer, such as semi-professional or the professional league. Also, to work with more seasoned athletes who have played in the professional league and national team longer than one and two years.

Another limitation is that previous research states that female athletes are more emotional than men causing a more difficult way for them to cope with fear. This makes measurements more biased and difficult to measure. Furthermore, the researcher has previous experiences with the organization. Although there was a lack of communicating or a relationship with the fellow athletes, the athletes understood who the researcher was which caused an influence.

Future research should be applied to bigger sample sizes to get broader readings and findings. Also, this topic should be studied on older ages of female athletes, as well as, higher competitive divisions, such as the first division and professional leagues. More variables can also be included to specify certain findings such as how certain emotions could be used as a coping strategy (force a smile) or how different psychological skills can be applied. Another detail that can help develop this study is to increase its length to a whole soccer season or at least for three to six months. This research has the potential to evolve into a bigger study which can help female athletes grow at an earlier age and optimize their performance potential.

### **Conclusion**

Athletes deal with a lot of pressure, including those who want to reach the collegiate and professional career. Sagar, S. S., et al (2009), found that experiencing shame and embarrassment are main variables in perfectionism-fear of failure. This study demonstrated the importance of coping strategies and with fear of failure. In summary, the present study aimed to fill that gap by examining the phenomenological experience of athletes during three soccer games. Results showed that athletes handled their stress and anxiety with coping strategies.

This study was conducted to test the use of psychological skills with elite youth female soccer athletes. Results found that applying psychological skills did help them develop the coping strategies needed to handle the stressors that come with competitive sports. Four different skills were introduced. The players applied these strategies in practices and game situations. After using them and seeing the benefits, the players understood their importance. They were more confident, motivated, and able to face the challenges that were presented to them. They improved both their

mental and physical skills. Post-game interviews supported the athletes' positive feelings toward the skills. Learning and practicing these coping strategies enhanced their athletic development and they will also be able to carry this skill into their daily lives. The phenomenological approach helped to identify the experiences the athletes had when participating with the higher-level national team in order to determine future play.

In summary, the current study was a success and can start as a base for future research into the study of developing coping strategies for older ages and higher levels of female competitive sports. Results suggest that these skills will improve an athlete's overall performance, both physically and mentally, allowing them the ability to keep fear of failure from developing. Expanding future research into this topic would help female athletes of all ages increase their overall developmental processes.

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## Experiment Outline

### Study 1

Before game- what does fear mean to you.

Apply coping strategies following week.

- Reframing
- Self-talk
- Imagery

Exit interview for how the coping strategies worked.

### Study 2

Aim-Test

3 sessions

3 distances (5,10,15 feet)

- No instruction
- Technical instruction next day

Repeat instruction 3 days later

## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Section 1**

Tell me about your season

Have you heard of fear?

Can you define fear of sport?

What does fear mean to you?

#### **Section 2**

Tell me how you feel before going into a competition?

Tell me about your thoughts before going into a game when it comes to losing, getting beat, and making mistakes.

How does this affect you?

#### **Section 3**

What would you do or tell yourself to help you get over these thoughts?

#### **Section 4**

When is your next important match?

How are you preparing for it?

What is your fear going into this competition?

How are you going to cope with this?

### **Section 5**

Have you heard of the word perfect before?

What does it mean to you?

Describe the perfect player to me.

Do you think you are perfect?

What is keeping you from reaching this?

Thank you for your time.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Post-Game Interview with Athletes**

Tell me about the game.

How do you think you played?

Did you make any mistakes?

How did you cope with this?

Did you apply the skill we worked on?

How are you preparing for the next game?

**Table 1****AIM TEST***Complete passes out of three*

<b>Athlete</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> attempt (no instruction)</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> attempt (Day 2) (given instruction)</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> attempt (3 days later with same instruction)</b>
Athlete 1	1	1	2
Athlete 2	1	2	3
Athlete 3	2	2	1
Athlete 4	-	-	-
Athlete 5	-	-	-
Athlete 6	1	2	2
Athlete 7	1	2	2
Athlete 8	0	2	2
Athlete 9	2	2	1
Athlete 10	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>

*Source: Aim-test findings*

**Table 2****Post-Session Discussion**

<p><b>Session 1</b></p>	<p><i>“I was not focused... I was thinking about what the other people would say or see if I missed.”</i></p> <p><i>“I just did not feel confident.”</i></p> <p><i>“It was bad”</i></p> <p><i>“After the first pass, I didn’t think about anything.”</i></p>
<p><b>Session 2</b></p> <p>Self-talk applied</p>	<p><i>I told myself “I can do it, then I took a deep breath.”</i></p> <p><i>“I did better than I did yesterday.”</i></p> <p><i>I told myself, “I got this. You can do this”</i></p> <p><i>“I did better this time.”</i></p>
<p><b>Session 3</b></p> <p>3 days later</p>	<p><i>“I feel satisfied with the outcome”</i></p> <p><i>“I am comfortable with how I did because I focused more”</i></p> <p><i>“I am relaxed. I was close to the target. I am happy.”</i></p> <p><i>“I am okay that I missed. I was barely off... I pictured my teammates each time and passed.”</i></p>

**Table 3****Girl's Definitions of Three Topics**

<b>Fear</b>	To be scared Afraid Not do something	<i>“a bad pass”</i> <i>“not quick enough”</i> <i>“to make a mistake”</i> <i>“lose”</i>
<b>Perfectionism</b>	To be perfect No flaws A leader The best	<i>“Messi”</i> <i>“someone who is fast, quick, and talks”</i> <i>“communication”</i>
<b>Cope?</b>	To be better To be okay To not let something affect you	<i>“I say next time”</i> <i>“listen to music”</i> <i>“I keep to myself”</i>

Table 4

## Reframe the Mind Discussion

<p><b>"How do you feel after this first half?"</b></p>	<p><i>"I feel bad."</i></p> <p><i>" I am tired. "</i></p> <p><i>"I don't know why I am playing like this."</i></p> <p><i>"We are not playing well. No good passes. No communication."</i></p>
<p><b>Halftime Talk</b></p>	<p>After this, I asked them for the weaknesses of the other team:</p> <p><i>"They are slow."</i></p> <p><i>"No technique."</i></p> <p><i>"Only kick the ball."</i></p> <p>Then I asked for their team strengths:</p> <p><i>"We are fast."</i></p> <p><i>"We have technique."</i></p> <p><i>"We are a family."</i></p>
<p><b>Post-Game Discussion</b></p>	<p><i>"I felt more confident."</i></p> <p><i>" I could relax."</i></p> <p><i>"I felt like a weight was lifted from my body."</i></p> <p><i>"The communication was better."</i></p>

**Table 5****Observations Throughout Three Games**

<b>Game 1</b>	<b>Game 2</b>	<b>Game 3</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body language was tense, tired, and heads down</li> <li>• Players losing the ball, incomplete passes, and improper throw-ins</li> <li>• Field was wet.</li> <li>• Weather was raining on and off.</li> <li>• Field did not have all the lines painted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watched via phone</li> <li>• Body language was more relaxed</li> <li>• More communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletes were excited</li> <li>• Positive, confident body language</li> <li>• More player movement on the field</li> </ul>