



Self-compassion and adaptive psychological functioning

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Abstract

Two studies are presented to examine the relation of self-compassion to psychological health. Self-compassion entails being kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical; perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as isolating; and holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them. Study 1 found that self-compassion (unlike self-esteem) helps buffer against anxiety when faced with an ego-threat in a laboratory setting. Self-compassion was also linked to connected versus separate language use when writing about weaknesses. Study 2 found that increases in self-compassion occurring over a one-month interval were associated with increased psychological well-being, and that therapist ratings of self-compassion were significantly correlated with self-reports of self-compassion. Self-compassion is a potentially important, measurable quality that offers a conceptual alternative to Western, more egocentric concepts of self-related processes and feelings.

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1. Introduction

In the last few years, researchers have begun to examine the construct of self-compassion as an adaptive form of self-to-self relating (Gilbert & Irons, 2005; Leary, Adams, & Tate, 2004; Leary et al., 2005; Neff, Hseih, & Dejiththirat, 2003a, 2005). This paper presents

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two studies designed to further investigate the link between self-compassion and well-being. Self-compassion involves being caring and compassionate towards oneself in the face of hardship or perceived inadequacy (Bennett-Goleman, 2001; Brach, 2003; Hanh, 1997; Kornfield, 1993; Salzberg, 1997). Neff (2003a, 2003b) has defined self-compassion as being composed of three main components: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. If individuals are self-compassionate when confronting suffering, inadequacy or failure, it means that they offer themselves warmth and non-judgmental understanding rather than belittling their pain or berating themselves with self-criticism. This process also involves recognizing that being imperfect, making mistakes, and encountering life difficulties is part of the shared human experience—something that we all go through rather than being something that happens to “me” alone. Self-compassion requires taking a balanced approach to one’s negative experiences so that painful feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. One cannot be compassionate towards feelings that are repressed and unacknowledged, but self-compassion quickly turns into melodrama when one is so carried away by negative emotions that all perspective is lost. Instead, self-compassion involves having the right amount of distance from one’s emotions so that they are fully experienced while being approached with mindful objectivity (see Neff, 2003b for an in-depth theoretical overview).

The self-compassion construct provides an appealing alternative to the more familiar concept of self-esteem. Although psychologists extolled the benefits of self-esteem for decades, recent research has exposed potential costs associated with the pursuit of high self-esteem (Crocker & Park, 2004), including narcissism (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), distorted self-perceptions (Sedikides, 1993), prejudice (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000), and violence toward those who threaten the ego (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Self-compassion should confer many of the same benefits as self-esteem in that it provides positive self-affect and a strong sense of self-acceptance. However, these feelings are not based on performance evaluations of the self or comparisons with others. Rather, they stem from recognizing the flawed nature of the human condition, so that the self can be seen clearly and extended kindness without the need to put others down or puff the self up.

Gilbert (2005) suggests that self-compassion enhances well-being because it helps individuals to feel cared for, connected, and emotionally calm. Using social mentality theory (Gilbert, 1989)—which draws on principles of evolutionary biology, neurobiology, and attachment theory—he proposes that self-compassion deactivates the threat system (associated with feelings of insecurity, defensiveness and the limbic system) and activates the self-soothing system (associated with feelings of secure attachment, safeness, and the oxytocin–opiate system). In contrast, self-esteem is viewed as an evaluation of superiority/inferiority that helps to establish social rank stability and is related to alerting, energizing impulses and dopamine activation (Gilbert & Irons, 2005). The self-soothing qualities of self-compassion are thought to engender greater capacities for intimacy, effective affect regulation, exploration and successful coping with the environment (Gilbert, 1989, 2005).

Neff (2003a) recently developed the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) to measure the main components of self-compassion. Initial studies designed to evaluate the SCS (Neff, 2003a) indicated that it exhibits an appropriate factor structure, has good internal and test–retest reliability, shows no significant correlation with social desirability bias, and displays both convergent and discriminant validity. Findings indicated that self-compassion was strongly related to psychological health: higher scores on the SCS were negatively associated with self-criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression, and neurotic

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