



## Self-compassionate and apologetic? How and why having compassion toward the self relates to a willingness to apologize



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### ABSTRACT

After offending someone, transgressors can offer an apology to attenuate the destructive consequences of their actions. Unfortunately, even though apologies can be immensely beneficial, transgressors often withhold an apology because it can feel uncomfortable to accept blame for wrongful behavior. We sought to enhance our understanding of factors that shape transgressors' responses by investigating whether self-compassion is associated with greater willingness to apologize. Because self-compassionate people withhold self-judgment and become less overwhelmed by experiencing negative emotions, they tend to face rather than withdraw from challenging situations. We therefore predicted that self-compassionate people would be more willing to apologize because they are less likely to withdraw in the context of transgressing, and we found support for this prediction in one study using a large sample. These findings expand our knowledge of factors that aid in conflict resolution and demonstrate that being understanding toward one's failures promotes constructive responses to those failures.

Sometimes, we hurt the people we love and care about with actions that can be as innocent as telling a white lie or as severe as being unfaithful to a romantic partner. Although we often experience regret following such harmful actions (Fisher & Exline, 2010), we tend to hurt others quite often, with recent data from a diary study suggesting that we transgress against others almost once a day (Schumann, 2014). These offenses can have destructive consequences for both transgressors and their victims, including damage to their relationship (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Cramer, 2000) and psychological and physiological distress (Bastian et al., 2013; Bastian & Haslam, 2011; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). These offenses can even have negative implications for people in their broader social networks, such as their children (Katz & Gottman, 1993) and work colleagues (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Morrison, 2008). In fact, because offenses can threaten people's relationships and expose them to negative social interactions, they have the potential to severely undermine wellbeing (Cohen, 2004; Parker-Pope, 2010).

Fortunately, offenses do not always result in such negative consequences, as transgressors can engage in actions that can repair their hurtful behavior. One of the most effective strategies that transgressors can use is an apology. Apologies help victims empathize with their transgressors (Barkat, 2002; McCullough, Worthington, Maxey, &

Rachal, 1997) and view them more positively (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Hareli & Eisikovits, 2006; Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003). As such, apologies increase victim forgiveness (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Exline, Deshea, & Holeman, 2007; Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; McCullough et al., 1997; Schumann, 2012; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001) and reduce victim aggression toward the transgressor (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989), thus promoting reconciliation rather than continued anger and resentment. However, even though apologies can be immensely beneficial, transgressors often do not apologize (e.g., Exline et al., 2007), and may even respond defensively by denying responsibility, blaming the victim, or minimizing the severity of the harm (Hall & Fincham, 2005). As recent findings suggest, transgressors may avoid apologizing because they anticipate that doing so will feel humiliating and stressful (Leunissen, De Cremer, van Dijke, & Folmer, 2014). Apologizing requires admitting fault and accepting blame for wrongful actions, which people are motivated to avoid doing to maintain their positive sense of self (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hedrick, 2013; Schumann, 2014; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008).

What, then, influences transgressors' general willingness to engage in the highly constructive response of apologizing? At present, little is known about the predictors of apology behavior. Yet, as the research findings reviewed above suggest, developing our understanding of factors that promote greater willingness to apologize is important, as

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the actions a transgressor chooses to take after committing an offense—such as apologizing or withholding an apology—can have important implications for everyone involved. The present research thus seeks to enhance our understanding of factors that shape transgressors' responses to the people they have hurt. Specifically, we investigate one individual difference predictor that we believe exerts an important influence on transgressors' willingness to apologize: self-compassion. In addition, we investigate why self-compassion might relate to willingness to apologize by examining shame and guilt proneness and behavioral tendencies that are associated with shame and guilt proneness as potential mediators.

### 1. Self-compassion and willingness to apologize via shame and guilt proneness

Self-compassion refers to how we treat ourselves in the face of our own failures and mistakes (Neff, 2003). It is thought to include three components, namely the tendency to treat oneself with kindness rather than harshness, to recognize that making mistakes is part of being human rather than something that only “I” do, and to accept one's negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors without judgment rather than either with defensiveness or self-deprecation (Neff, 2003, 2016).

When it comes to apologizing, compassion toward one's flaws and shortcomings might conceivably lead transgressors in either direction. On the one hand, self-compassion might make transgressors more willing to apologize by decreasing their need to hide from or minimize their mistakes; not feeling this need to withdraw might therefore make them feel more comfortable confronting and accepting responsibility for their wrongdoing via an apology (Schumann, 2014; Schumann, *in press*). On the other hand, self-compassion might make transgressors less willing to apologize because they might attribute mistakes to being human; in showing kindness toward themselves, they might preemptively excuse their actions and therefore not feel the need to repair these actions by offering an apology. These two possibilities suggest different pathways through which self-compassion might relate to a willingness to apologize: (1) that self-compassion will be *positively associated* with transgressors' willingness to apologize through a reduced need to withdraw in shame, or (2) that self-compassion will be *negatively associated* with transgressors' willingness to apologize through a reduced need to repair actions they feel guilty about.

Based on past research, however, we expected to find support for the first possibility, as self-compassion has been associated with fewer withdrawal behaviors and greater reparative behaviors. For example, self-compassionate people tend to use fewer avoidance-oriented strategies when dealing with challenging situations (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejjterat, 2005), are more likely to acknowledge responsibility for personal mistakes and interpersonal offenses (Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007), and are more willing to try to repair these mistakes (Breines & Chen, 2012; Howell, Dopko, Turowski, & Buro, 2011).

Moreover, self-compassion is associated with decreased proneness to feeling ashamed (i.e., negative evaluations of oneself), and is not associated with proneness to feeling guilty (i.e., negative evaluations of one's behavior; Barnard & Curry, 2012; Lewis, 1971; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Woods & Proeve, 2014). As the conceptual definition of self-compassion implies, a self-compassionate attitude should make people less prone to making negative self-evaluations when faced with challenging situations, but should not necessarily lead them to view the negative aspects of their behavior in a more positive or more negative light (Neff, 2003). Instead, it should lead them to view their mistakes and the consequences of those mistakes accurately, rather than denying or exaggerating them (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003).

Shame and guilt also tend to have differential associations with responses to committing transgressions. Whereas shame has often been associated with defensive and withdrawal behaviors as a way to protect

a defective self-concept (Gausel, Leach, Vignoles, & Brown, 2012; Luyten, Fontaine, & Corveleyn, 2002; Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman, 2010; Tangney, 1990; Tangney, Stuewig, & Martinez, 2014; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992), guilt has been associated with greater willingness to apologize as a way to repair one's negative behavior (Freedman, Wallington, & Bless, 1967; Lewis, 1971; Riek, Luna, & Schnabelrauch, 2014; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). We therefore predicted that self-compassion would be associated with a reduced tendency to hide and withdraw in shame, and that this reduction would be associated with an increased willingness to apologize. By contrast, even though guilt has consistently been associated with greater willingness to apologize, we did not expect guilt proneness to mediate a relationship between self-compassion and willingness to apologize due to its lack of association with self-compassion.

### 2. Present research

In the present research, we investigated the associations between dispositional self-compassion and willingness to apologize as mediated by the dispositional tendencies to engage in ashamed and guilty responses to committing transgressions. Although previous research has found associations between self-compassion and willingness to apologize (Breines & Chen, 2012; Howell et al., 2011) and between self-compassion and the tendency to feel ashamed (Barnard & Curry, 2012; Mosewich et al., 2011; Woods & Proeve, 2014), to our knowledge no research has tested the associations among these variables simultaneously. We believe this is important, because understanding the psychological process through which self-compassionate people become more willing to apologize provides useful information about what active psychological ingredients might be targeted to promote more constructive, apologetic behavior. Thus, we sought to replicate past work demonstrating a link between self-compassion and willingness to apologize and extend this work by testing whether shame or guilt proneness mediate this link.

As an additional aim and novel contribution of the present research, we distinguished between the tendency to *feel* guilt and shame and the tendency to engage in ashamed and guilty *behaviors*. According to recent research (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011), both shame and guilt include emotional responses (shame: feeling bad about yourself; guilt: feeling bad about how you acted) and action tendencies (shame: hiding or withdrawing from the situation; guilt: intentions to correct a negative behavior). We therefore measured all four types of responses to determine whether one or more of these mediated the relationship between self-compassion and willingness to apologize. To measure these four distinct responses, we used the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (Cohen et al., 2011), which assesses people's general tendency to respond to committing transgressions with emotional and behavioral shame, as well as emotional and behavioral guilt. Because self-compassion helps people view their shortcomings through a lens of kindness and confront rather than hide from these shortcomings (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007), we expected it to be associated with a reduced tendency to experience both the emotional and behavioral aspects of shame. However, we anticipated that the behavioral tendency to withdraw in shame might be the stronger predictor of willingness to apologize, as transgressors who tend to hide in shame should be particularly unlikely to face their victim and their wrongdoing via an apology. We therefore expected the tendency to withdraw in shame to be the primary mediator of the relationship between self-compassion and willingness to apologize.

To examine these hypotheses, we collected data from a large sample of participants ( $N = 1272$ ) to provide a powerful test of our model. We achieved this sample size by collecting data from as many participants as we could during the course of three college semesters. Based on the moderate to large associations observed in past work on self-compassion, apologies, and shame (e.g., Barnard & Curry, 2012; Breines & Chen, 2012; Howell et al., 2011; Mosewich et al., 2011), this sample

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