



# A daily diary study of self-compassion, body image, and eating behavior in female college students



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## ABSTRACT

Although self-compassion is associated with healthier body image and eating behavior, these findings have generally emerged at the between-persons level only. The present study investigated the unique contributions of within-person variability in self-compassion, and between-persons differences in self-compassion, to body image and eating behavior. Over seven days, 92 female college students completed nightly measures of self-compassion, self-esteem, dietary restraint, intuitive eating, body appreciation, body satisfaction, and state body image. Multilevel modeling revealed that within-persons, day-to-day fluctuations in self-compassion contributed to day-to-day fluctuations in body image and eating. Between-persons, participants' average levels of self-compassion across days contributed to their average levels of body image and eating over the week. Results generally held when controlling for within- and between-persons self-esteem. Evidently, the eating and body image benefits of self-compassion may come not only from being a generally self-compassionate person, but also from treating oneself more self-compassionately than usual on a given day.

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## Introduction

A growing body of literature has found that self-compassion is linked to more adaptive and less maladaptive forms of body image and eating (e.g., Homan & Tylka, 2015; Kelly, Vimalakanthan, & Carter, 2014; Wasylikiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012; Webb & Forman, 2013). Neff (2003) defined self-compassion as the tendency to treat oneself with care and kindness at times of distress and disappointment. Gilbert (2005) proposed that self-compassion originates from humans' capacity for caregiving, and involves the courage to face and be moved by one's own suffering, and an active desire to alleviate it. Although self-compassion is a form of positive self-regard like self-esteem, and the two correlate moderately (Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, 2003), there are important differences between the constructs. Self-esteem is a global evaluation of one's attributes, skills, and qualities (Rosenberg, 1965), whereas self-compassion derives from an orientation of care, not evaluation (Gilbert, 2010). Furthermore, whereas self-esteem is associated with the tendency to be defensive and downplay one's role in failures (Kernis & Goldman, 2003), self-compassion is associated with a tendency to

acknowledge one's contribution to failures and a motivation to learn from one's mistakes and self-improve (Leary et al., 2007). Self-compassion and self-esteem account for unique variance in mental and physical health outcomes with several studies suggesting that self-compassion's contribution to eating behavior and body image may be larger (Breines, Toole, Tu, & Chen, 2014; Kelly et al., 2014).

To date, researchers have primarily studied the between-persons relationships between self-compassion and functioning in the body image and eating domain. By this we mean that researchers have looked primarily at whether people who are highly self-compassionate have better body image and more adaptive eating habits than those who are less self-compassionate. Although such findings are informative and interesting, their practical implications are limited: these between-persons results provide no indication as to whether a given individual stands to gain from treating herself more self-compassionately than what is typical for her in a given moment, on a given day, or on a given week. Because self-compassion has primarily been conceptualized and measured as an individual difference variable, it is natural that most studies have focused on exploring differences between people rather than within-persons. It is nevertheless the case that as with most "personality" variables, self-compassion has both trait- and state-like properties (Moskowitz, Brown, & Coté, 1997). Indeed, numerous studies have found that brief experimental manipulations can influence levels of self-compassion (e.g., Adams & Leary, 2007; Kelly & Carter, 2015; Leary et al., 2007), and one daily diary

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study found that self-compassion showed intra-individual variability from one day to the next (Zuroff, Kelly, Leybman, Sadikaj, & Gilbert, 2012).

It is plausible that natural fluctuations in self-compassion levels within a person may influence her eating behavior and body image. Indeed, several experimental studies have found that self-compassion primes and interventions have produced adaptive changes in body image and eating behavior (Adams & Leary, 2007; Albertson, Neff, & Shackleford, 2014; Kelly & Carter, 2015). In day-to-day life, it could also be that when women treat themselves with more self-compassion than usual, they experience better body image and approach eating in a less disordered and more adaptive way. Mindfulness is considered a component of self-compassion (Neff, 2003); therefore, treating oneself more self-compassionately may help an individual to acknowledge and tolerate her negative emotions more than usual, and be less inclined to suppress or distract from them with emotional eating or fixate on feelings of dissatisfaction with one's body. Indeed, responding to a negative body image experience with self-compassion might protect individuals from the temptation to try and alter their shape and weight. According to Gilbert (2005), when an individual practices self-compassion, feelings of safeness and calmness, and an orientation of trust and acceptance, ensue; as a result, feelings of anxiety and shame, and attention to potential threats and dangers, decrease (Depue & Morrone-Strupinsky, 2005; LeDoux, 1998). One might therefore imagine that when an individual treats herself with more self-compassion than usual, she may become more trusting of her body signals to direct her eating, and as such approach eating in a more relaxed and less anxious manner. She might also feel more accepting of her body as it is, and less preoccupied with and threatened by its imperfections.

Only one study to our knowledge has investigated the within-person relationship between naturalistic fluctuations in self-compassion and functioning within the eating and body image realm. Breines et al. (2014) conducted a four-day daily diary study in which female undergraduates reported on their levels of appearance-related self-compassion on days when they had moments of feeling badly about their looks. Results indicated that on days when women responded to their perceived appearance flaws with greater self-compassion, they reported less disordered eating (Breines et al., 2014). This finding held when controlling for daily self-esteem. These preliminary results therefore suggest that having a higher than usual level of self-compassion vis-à-vis one's appearance may protect women from maladaptive eating patterns.

Although Breines et al.'s (2014) study suggests there may be a within-person relationship between self-compassion and eating behavior in women's daily lives, there remain several unanswered questions. First, the study assessed appearance-specific self-compassion, not global self-compassion. As a result, it is unclear whether day-to-day variability in global self-compassion – that is, how compassionately individuals respond to personal difficulties and distress *in general*, not just in the appearance domain – is related to eating behavior. Second, the study only examined the relationship between appearance-based self-compassion and disordered eating on days on which participants felt badly about their appearance. It is therefore possible that Breines et al.'s finding reflects an interaction between feeling unattractive on a given day and being self-compassionate toward one's appearance on that day. As such, it is unclear whether a within-person relationship between self-compassion and disordered eating exists independent of one's daily body image concerns. Third, the authors' only criterion variable was disordered eating. Therefore, it remains unknown whether within-person fluctuations in self-compassion are associated with more adaptive forms of eating, such as intuitive eating, and whether fluctuations in an individual's level of self-compassion are associated with fluctuations in her body image.

The present study sought to build on Breines et al.'s (2014) research and address its aforementioned limitations in a sample of young college women. First, we extended the four-day time frame from their study to seven days, which would allow for a broader time span from which to examine within-person variability. We also assessed daily levels of global self-compassion, rather than appearance-specific self-compassion, and administered various daily measures of eating behavior and body image, which served as our criteria variables. Given the growing emphasis on understanding adaptive functioning in the eating and body image domain (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a), we included a measure of body appreciation, which refers to being grateful for and respectful toward one's body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). We also assessed both dietary restraint, a disordered approach to eating that involves trying to under-eat in order to lose weight or prevent weight gain (Stunkard & Messick, 1985), and intuitive eating, an adaptive approach to eating that involves eating more freely in response to hunger and stopping when full (Tylka, 2006).

The overarching goal of the present study was to determine the unique contribution of day-to-day within-person fluctuations in self-compassion to young women's body image and eating. This within-person predictor was represented by the extent to which an individual's level of self-compassion on a given day deviated from her personal mean level of self-compassion over the study week; we therefore refer to this variable as *daily* self-compassion. Given the robust cross-sectional between-persons association between self-compassion and eating and body image, we also decided to examine the between-persons relationships between self-compassion and our criteria variables. Here, individuals' mean level of self-compassion across the seven days served as our between-persons predictor, and we refer to this variable as *weekly* self-compassion. Of note, ours would be the first study to our knowledge to examine self-compassion as a between-persons predictor using data from one more than assessment point.

We hypothesized that controlling for body mass index (BMI), which is generally positively associated with disordered eating and negatively associated with body image, both daily and weekly self-compassion would predict eating behavior (i.e., less dietary restraint and more intuitive eating) and body image (i.e., higher body satisfaction and appreciation). Specifically, we predicted that body image and eating approaches would be better and more adaptive on days when college women displayed a higher level of self-compassion than usual. We also predicted that women who had higher average levels of self-compassion than others would have more adaptive body image and eating habits over the week. We expected that these relationships would remain when controlling for daily and weekly levels of self-esteem.

A second more exploratory objective was to examine the cross-level interaction between daily and weekly levels of self-compassion. We thought it would be possible for the relationships between daily levels of self-compassion, body image, and eating behavior to vary as a function of individuals' average level of self-compassion over the week. For example, day-to-day fluctuations in self-compassion might be more strongly related to fluctuations in body image and eating behavior among individuals with lower mean levels of self-compassion.

## Method

### Procedure

The university's research ethics office approved the study and all participants consented to its procedures. The study was advertised as "A Daily Diary Study of Personality, Feelings, and Body Image" and was made available to all female undergraduate

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