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Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is an open-hearted way of relating to negative aspects of oneself and one's experience that enables greater emotional resilience and psychological well-being. According to the definition proposed by Neff, self-compassion is composed of three key factors: (a) self-kindness – extending kindness and understanding to oneself in instances of perceived inadequacy or suffering rather than harsh judgment and self-criticism, (b) common humanity – seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating, and (c) mindfulness – holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them in an exaggerated manner.

Western psychologists have only recently begun to examine self-compassion, but the construct is central to the 2,500 year old tradition of Buddhist psychology. Interest in self-compassion has been fueled by a larger trend towards integrating Buddhist constructs such as mindfulness with Western psychological approaches, exemplified in clinical interventions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. While mindfulness has received more research attention than self-compassion (with dozens of studies supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions), the two constructs are intimately linked. Mindfulness refers to the ability to pay attention to one's present-moment experience in a non-judgmental manner.

Self-compassion entails holding negative self-relevant emotions in mindful awareness, generating feelings of kindness towards oneself and insight into the interconnected nature of the human experience. There is some evidence to suggest that increased self-compassion may actually help explain the success of mindfulness-based interventions: one study found that increased self-compassion levels after participation in a six-week MBSR program mediated reductions in stress associated with the program.

While self-compassion has similarities to the concept of unconditional self-acceptance proposed by humanistic psychologists such as Albert Ellis or Carl Rogers, self-compassion is a broader construct. In addition to accepting oneself with kindness and non-judgment, self-compassion entails emotional equanimity and recognition of interconnectedness. Moreover, while self-acceptance may theoretically entail passivity towards personal shortcomings, self-compassion involves the desire to alleviate one's suffering, and is therefore a powerful motivating force for growth and change.

Most research on self-compassion has been conducted using the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), a self-report measure created by Neff. The scale has strong psychometric properties and demonstrates concurrent, discriminate, and convergent validity (e.g., significant correlations with therapist and partner reports of self-compassion, positive correlations with emotional intelligence and negative correlations with self-criticism). Research suggests that self-compassion is strongly related to emotional well-being. For instance, higher levels of self-compassion have been associated with greater life satisfaction, social connectedness, self-determination, and self-concept accuracy, as well as greater emotional equanimity when confronting daily life events. Self-compassion has also been associated with less anxiety, depression, rumination, thought suppression, and

perfectionism. One study, for example, examined how self-compassion levels predicted behavior in a mock job interview task in which participants were asked to write about their greatest weakness. Those scoring higher in self-compassion experienced less anxiety during the writing exercise, and also used more interconnected and less isolating language when discussing their weaknesses.

A study designed to examine the link between self-compassion and other positive psychological strengths found that self-compassion was associated with greater happiness, optimism, positive affect, wisdom, curiosity and exploration, and personal initiative. The study also examined relations with the Big Five personality traits, and found that self-compassion was associated with less neuroticism and more agreeableness, extroversion, and conscientiousness, though self-compassion was still a significant predictor of psychological strengths when controlling for personality.

Self-compassion appears to be adaptive in academic contexts. Self-compassion is positively associated with mastery goals, which focus on the joy of learning for its own sake, and negatively associated with performance goals, which involve defending or enhancing one's sense of self-worth through academic performances. Research suggests that the link between self-compassion and mastery goals is mediated through the greater perceived competence and lesser fear of failure associated with self-compassion. By not harshly judging the self or blowing one's failures out of proportion, self-compassion engenders self-confidence in one's ability to learn and lessens the self-condemning aspects of failure, which in turn helps to foster mastery goal adoption. Research also indicates that self-compassionate students exhibit more adaptive ways of coping with academic failures.

Self-compassion appears not only to benefit oneself, but also others within interpersonal relationships. In a study of heterosexual romantic partners, self-compassionate individuals were described by partners as being more emotionally connected, accepting and autonomy-supporting while being less detached, controlling, and verbally or physically aggressive. Self-compassion was also associated with more relationship satisfaction (as reported by oneself and one's partner) and greater attachment security. Because self-compassion includes recognition of human connectedness, it allows for caring behavior with partners while reducing the need for ego-defensiveness associated with the desire to control or strike out against others.

In many ways, self-compassion is a useful alternative to the construct of self-esteem, providing similar psychological health benefits while avoiding its more problematic aspects. As Seligman argued in his book *The Optimistic Child*, self-esteem programs tend to emphasize feeling good about oneself rather than building competence, and may hamper the giving of critical feedback to children out of fear of protecting their self-esteem. High self-esteem is often associated with inflated and inaccurate self-concepts, making self-improvement difficult. Individuals may put others down in order to feel better about themselves, and high rather than low self-esteem is associated with narcissism and prejudice. High self-esteem is also associated with anger and aggression towards those perceived to threaten the ego. Because self-esteem is contingent on success in particular domains, moreover, it tends to falter in failure situations, leading to unstable feelings of self-worth.

Self-compassion, in contrast, is not based on self-evaluations, social comparisons, or personal success. Rather, it stems from feelings of human kindness and understanding

in the face of life's disappointments. For this reason, self-compassion does not require feeling "above average" or superior to others, and provides emotional stability when confronting personal inadequacies. In a large community-based study, it was found that self-compassion displayed a moderate correlation with self-esteem, as should be expected given that both constructs tap into positive self-affect. However, self-compassion was a stronger predictor of healthy self-to-self relating than was global self-esteem, including more stable and less contingent feelings of self-worth, less narcissism, anger, social comparison, and public self-consciousness. In a series of lab-based studies conducted by Leary and colleagues, self-compassion was also associated with more emotional balance than self-esteem when participants encountered potentially humiliating situations or received unflattering interpersonal feedback. When feelings of self-compassion versus self-esteem were fostered through a mood induction exercise, moreover, participants in the self-compassion condition were more likely to acknowledge their role in painful remembered life events without feeling overwhelmed with negative emotions (as compared to those in the self-esteem or control conditions).

Many theorists assume that high self-esteem is essential to psychological health. For instance, proponents of terror management theory argue that self-esteem is necessary because it provides a sense of meaning, symbolic immortality, and security that buffers existential anxiety. At the same time, they acknowledge that the need for self-esteem can create a type of ego-defensiveness that may harm relations with others and inhibit growth and change. Self-compassion offers a sense of meaning, belonging and security that is not dependent on bolstering one's ego or on evaluating the self in contrast to others. Rather, it stems from recognizing and feeling tenderness for the shared human experience. Self-

compassion provides a caring motivation for personal growth, while reducing the need for distorting, positive illusions about the self.

Given the strong association between self-compassion and mental health, self-compassion is likely to have important applications in clinical settings. The compassionate mind training (CMT) program developed by Gilbert is an intervention program designed for individuals who experience chronic shame and self-criticism. In the program, clients are taught how to be self-soothing and to generate feelings of compassion and warmth towards themselves when they feel threatened, defensive, or self-critical. A pilot study on the effectiveness of CMT found that clients experienced significant reductions in depression, anxiety, self-criticism, shame, inferiority and submissive behaviors.

Researchers are beginning to examine group differences in self-compassion, including variables such as age, gender, and culture. For instance, a recent cross-cultural study compared average levels of self-compassion in Thailand, Taiwan and the United States. It was found that self-compassion levels were highest in Thailand, where original Buddhist teachings on self-compassion are integrated with daily life, and lowest in Taiwan, where there is a strong Confucian emphasis on self-improvement through self-criticism. Americans fell in between these two poles. Self-compassion was associated with interdependent self-construal in Thailand but with independent self-construal in Taiwan and the U.S., and increased self-compassion was associated with less depression and greater life-satisfaction in all three cultures. Such findings suggest that the prevalence of self-compassion is linked to specific societal features such as parenting practices and

philosophical worldviews than with general East-West differences in culture or self-construal, and that self-compassion may have universal psychological benefits.