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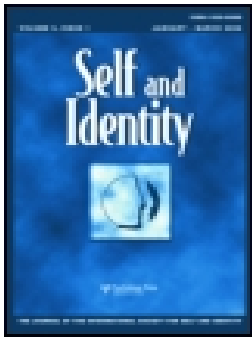


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ARTICLE



New frontiers in understanding the benefits of self-compassion

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There has recently been an exponential increase in research into the psychological health benefits of self-compassion. Since the first two studies on the topic were published by Neff (2003a, 2003b) 15 years ago, there are now more than 1600 studies or dissertations on self-compassion, with over half of these published in the last two years (based on a Google Scholar search of entries with “self-compassion” in the title). Self-compassion is a way of relating to ourselves in times of suffering that is characterized by increased kindness and reduced self-judgment, increased feelings of common humanity and decreased isolation, and greater mindfulness and less over-identification with difficult thoughts and feelings (Neff, 2003b). Self-compassion has been consistently linked with positive mental health. Meta-analyses synthesizing 98 studies have reported that self-compassion is related to decreased psychopathology and increased positive well-being in both adults and adolescents (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Marsh, Chan, & MacBeth, 2017; Zessin, Dickhäuser, & Garbade, 2015). Self-compassion appears to be an important source of strength and resilience when faced with life stressors such as divorce (e.g., Sbarra, Smith, & Mehl, 2012), combat (e.g. Hiraoka et al., 2015) parenting an autistic child (e.g., Wong, Mak, & Liao, 2016), the transition to college (e.g., Terry, Leary, & Mehta, 2012), chronic health issues (e.g., Brion, Leary, & Drabkin, 2014), or adolescent peer victimization (e.g., Jiang et al., 2016). Further, more is becoming known about the beneficial role of self-compassion in terms of health (e.g., Biber & Ellis, 2017), body image and disordered eating (e.g., Braun, Park & Gorin, 2016), motivation (e.g., Breines & Chen, 2012), interpersonal relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013) and physiological functioning (e.g., Arch, Landy & Brown, 2016).

Self-compassion research is starting to be conducted with more diverse populations such as Iranian Muslims (Ghorbani, Watson, Chen, & Norballa, 2012), post-Mao Beijing older women (Shea, 2014), LGBTQ adults (Greene & Britton, 2015), or survivors of domestic violence (Allen, Robertson, & Patin, 2017). The methodology of self-compassion research is also expanding. While the vast majority of research still employs the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a) to examine self-compassion, which has been translated into 16

languages (Neff et al., *in press*), increasingly researchers are using other methods such as experimental mood inductions (e.g., Diedrich, Hofmann, Cuijpers & Berking, 2016), brief self-compassion training (e.g., Dundas, Binder, Hansen, & Stige, 2017), self-compassion interventions (e.g., Friis, Johnson, Cutfield, & Consedine, 2016) or novel methods such as virtual reality (e.g. Falconer et al., 2016) or mobile applications (e.g. Rodgers et al., 2018) to examine the link between self-compassion and well-being.

This special issue presents seven studies which are at the frontiers of self-compassion research. For example, Parrish and colleagues present the first study on the neuro-correlates of self-compassion, specifically the relationship between scores on the SCS and fronto-amygdala connectivity during a social feedback task. DeLury and Poulin are the first to measure the impact of a self-compassion mood induction on implicit thought processes, in the context of demonstrating how self-compassion buffers the effect of a self-esteem threat on academic task performance. Although few studies have explored the impact of self-compassion on well-being longitudinally, Stutts, Leary, Zeveney and Hufnagle do so by examining self-compassion scores as a moderator of the relationship between perceived stress and outcomes such as depression and anxiety among university students over a six-month period. By assessing constructs at three points of time, this study suggests that self-compassion has a causal influence on well-being. Vigna, Poehlmann-Tynan and Koenig examine self-compassion in an understudied population – youths with multiple minority identities – and investigates how self-compassion scores are related to both bias-based bullying and mental health concerns. This work broadens our knowledge of how self-compassion functions in populations with diverse racial backgrounds and sexual orientations.

Two studies in this issue examine the findings of self-compassion interventions on various health-related outcomes. Lathren, Bluth, Campo, Tan and Futch present the qualitative findings of a novel online video-chat 8-week intervention for young adult cancer survivors, adapted from the Making Friends with Yourself program (Bluth, Gaylord, Campo, Mullarkey, & Hobbs, 2016). Findings illuminate the experience of these young adults as they learn the skill of self-compassion, and provide insight on how this kind way of relating to oneself may promote well-being following treatment for serious, life-threatening illness. Butz and colleagues examine the impact of self-compassion on sleep quality across three studies. The first study examines the relationship between trait self-compassion, sleep quality and rumination, the second experimentally induced two brief self-compassion conditions both of which were compared to a control group and assessed sleep quality and rumination, and the third investigated the results of a week-long daily self-compassion intervention in depressive patients on sleep quality and rumination.

Finally, Neff and colleagues provide the most comprehensive study to date of the association between self-compassion and psychological well-being. It uses the SCS to examine self-compassion in terms of a total score, six individual subscale scores, and two means taken from subscales that represent increased compassionate and reduced uncompassionate self-responding. Fifty-two outcomes are examined in the domains of psychopathology, positive psychological health, emotional intelligence, self-concept, body image, motivation, interpersonal functioning, and sympathetic nervous system activity after stress. Overall, results suggest that both compassionate and reduced uncompassionate self-responding are central to self-compassion and that both help to explain its link to healthy psychological functioning.

By presenting research that examines self-compassion with a variety of populations and methodologies, it is our hope that this special issue will inspire even more innovative empirical investigations into this adaptive mind-state that can be evocatively described as loving, connected, presence. One of the exciting aspects of self-compassion is that it is a skill that can be learned through targeted interventions (eg., Bluth et al., 2016; Neff & Germer, 2013) and brought to bear on the struggles of living an imperfect human life. It will be important as we move forward to have a deeper understanding of how self-compassion functions and facilitates the alleviation of suffering, so that this body of research can ultimately be used to help people learn to thrive in the midst of their struggles and find inner happiness.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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