Can self-compassion help people regulate unattained goals and emotional reactions toward setbacks?☆

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined whether self-compassion helps individuals cope with the experience of unattainable goals. Because self-compassion entails taking a balanced perspective of one’s suffering and maintaining emotional stability, this study predicted that individuals high in self-compassion would be more likely to disengage from their unattained goals and reengage in an alternative important goal, and thus, be less likely to experience negative emotions toward their setback in goal attainment. Japanese undergraduates (N = 177), who had completed a measure of self-compassion a week prior, recalled their personal failure of goal attainment and answered items about the degree of goal disengagement, goal reengagement, and current negative emotions toward their setback. Structural equation modeling showed that self-compassion was positively related to goal reengagement and goal disengagement, and that self-compassion had a significant negative indirect effect on current negative emotions via goal disengagement, in addition to a negative direct effect. These results were mainly in accordance with predictions, suggesting that self-compassion is a psychological resource for coping with setbacks in goal attainment.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Keywords:
Self-compassion
Goal disengagement
Goal reengagement
Emotion regulation
Setbacks in goal attainment

1. Introduction

People regulate their behavior to attain important goals (Bauer & McCadams, 2004; Carver & Scheier, 1990, 2016), be it obtaining a good grade, starting a new job, or maintaining harmonious relationships with friends and family. However, people cannot always attain their goals and may have to abandon them. These experiences of unattainable goals harm well-being (Carver & Scheier, 1990, 2016; Wrosch, Scheier, & Miller, 2013), but individuals vary in how they react to these setbacks. Some individuals experience depression and anxiety, whereas others successfully cope with the setbacks and maintain their well-being (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Cumulative evidence has suggested self-compassion—treating oneself compassionately—as a resilient factor in times of suffering (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Neff, 2003, 2016; Zessin, Dickhäuser, & Garbade, 2015). Self-compassion may help people cope with the experience of unattainable goals (Hope, Koestner, & Milyavskaya, 2014; Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009). The aim of the present study was to investigate whether self-compassion helps people regulate their unattainable goals and emotional reactions to their setbacks.

Based on Buddhist philosophies about suffering and compassion, Neff (2003, 2016) defined self-compassion as a kind and compassionate mindset toward the self in times of suffering caused by personal failures and negative life events. Specifically, individuals high in self-compassion have three characteristics: self-kindness rather than self-judgment, an understanding of common humanity and connection rather than isolating oneself from others, and mindful awareness of one’s negative thoughts and emotions rather than getting entangled in them (Neff, 2003, 2016). Research has consistently shown that self-compassion is related to low depression, anxiety, stress responses, and negative emotions, and to high life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and positive emotions (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Miyagawa & Taniguchi, 2016; Neff, 2003; Zessin et al., 2015). Furthermore, self-compassion buffers individuals against the detrimental effects of life events, such as child maltreatment (Vettese, Dyer, Li, & Wekerle, 2011), natural disasters (Zeller, Yuval, Nitzan-Assayag, & Bernstein, 2015), HIV infection (Brion, Leary, & Drabkin, 2014), aging-related losses (Allen & Leary, 2014), and transitioning to an unfamiliar environment (Terry, Leary, & Mehta, 2013). Based on the one-week experimental sampling methodology, Hope and colleagues (Hope et al., 2014) found that self-compassion eliminated negative emotions caused by the stagnation of goal progress. On the other hand, self-compassion did not moderate the
impact of daily goal progress on positive emotions (Hope et al., 2014). Because self-compassion means being open to one’s suffering and aiming to alleviate it with kindness (Neff, 2003, 2016), it may be more applicable to prevent the increase in negative emotions, rather than the decrease in positive emotions. Based on these previous studies, we predicted that self-compassion would help individuals regulate their negative emotional reactions toward setbacks in important goal attainment.

However, it remains unclear how self-compassion is related to adaptive emotional reactions toward setbacks in goal attainment. Thus, the present study aimed to examine the above relationship by identifying a possible mediator. It was hypothesized that the relation of self-compassion to lower negative emotions toward setbacks would be mediated by adaptive goal regulation. Because self-compassion offers a kind and open attitude toward one’s suffering (Neff, 2003, 2016), individuals high in this trait can better cope with negative events (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007). For example, they are more likely to adopt a positive reinterpretation and acceptance of situations, and less likely to use maladaptive avoidant coping in the face of stressors (Neff, Hseih, & Dejthirat, 2005; Sirois, Molnar, & Hirsch, 2015). Furthermore, Zhang and Chen (2016) found that both trait- and experimentally induced self-compassion were positively related to the acceptance of regret experiences, which facilitated their personal improvement. Therefore, self-compassion would help people effectively cope with their setback in goal attainment, which facilitates the adaptive regulation of emotional reactions toward it.

Wrosch and colleagues (Wrosch et al., 2013; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003) defined two types of goal regulation (i.e., goal disengagement and goal reengagement) when people must stop pursuing important goals. Goal disengagement refers to reducing one’s effort and commitment toward unattained goals. The primary function of this goal regulation is to prevent the same and similar failures and reduce related suffering by keeping a psychological distance from the unattained goals. Goal reengagement entails finding an alternative meaningful goal, committing to it, and making efforts for its attainment. The primary function of this goal regulation is to find a new meaning of life and establish one’s identity by shifting focus from an unattained goal to another new important one. Previous studies found that both goal disengagement and goal reengagement were negatively related to intrusive thoughts, perceived stress, and negative emotions, and positively related to life satisfaction (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). These two types of goal regulation were related to reduced depressive symptoms among caregivers of children with cancer (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003), and reduced catastrophic cognition and negative rumination among cancer patients (Schroevers, Kraaij, & Garnefski, 2008).

Importantly, Neely and colleagues (Neely et al., 2009) reported the relations of self-compassion to goal disengagement and goal reengagement. Although self-compassion was not significantly correlated with goal disengagement in Study 1, the positive relationship between them was significant in Study 2. Although further investigation is needed because of the inconsistent results, they imply that self-compassion helps people reduce efforts and commitment toward unattained goals. Individuals high in self-compassion can pay mindful attention to their suffering, rather than being entangled in it, and embrace it with kindness and understanding (Neff, 2003, 2016); thus, they can let go of their unattained goals without being obsessed with them. In addition to its relation to goal disengagement, Neely and colleagues (Neely et al., 2009) reported a positive correlation between self-compassion and goal reengagement across two studies. Individuals high in self-compassion have a higher motivation for self-improvement because they care about themselves (Neff, 2003, 2016; Zhang & Chen, 2016). Thus, they would be motivated to find and commit to another important goal.

Considering the relations between goal regulation and well-being (Schroevers et al., 2008; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003), it is hypothesized that individuals high in self-compassion are more likely to disengage from unattained goals and reengage in alternative important goals, and thus, be less likely to experience negative emotions toward their setbacks (see Fig. 1). By testing this prediction, the present study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the process through which self-compassion is negatively related to negative emotional reactions toward setbacks in goal attainment.

This study also addresses the influence of the characteristics of setbacks that participants recalled (i.e., temporal distance, how painful it was, and how much effort people had exerted toward the goal). Although a previous study (Neely et al., 2009) did not control for this, the characteristics of setbacks might explain the relation of self-compassion to emotional reactions toward setbacks. For example, individuals high in self-compassion might be more likely to recall setbacks that had happened long ago so that they are better able to regulate their emotions. To address this issue, the present study
2. Method

2.1. Participants

Japanese undergraduates from three classes in a university in Japan answered two sets of self-report questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed on two separate instances to reduce their psychological burden. A total of 227 participants completed both questionnaires. Among them, data from 7 participants were excluded because they were judged to have responded carelessly and/or because they reported on daily events that happened to them (e.g., “I could not eat what I wanted for lunch today”) rather than on important goals in their lives. In addition, data from 10 participants were excluded because of missing data. Furthermore, 33 participants reported no setback in goal attainment and thus these data were excluded from further analyses. Thus, the final sample comprised 177 Japanese undergraduates (86 men, 91 women), who had described their personal experience of unattained goals in their lives. Their mean age was 19.3 years (SD = 1.3), ranging from 18 to 25 years.

2.2. Procedure

At the beginning of this study, participants were provided with the consent form and those who agreed participated in the study during class time. One week after completing a measure of self-compassion, the participants were asked to recall their setback in goal attainment, answer items regarding the characteristics of the experience, and complete the measures of goal regulation and current negative emotions toward it. At the end of the study, they were debriefed and thanked. This research has been approved by the ethical committee of the university to which the first and second authors belong, and informed consent was obtained from participants in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Trait self-compassion

The participants completed the Japanese version of the Self-Compassionate Reaction Inventory (SCRI; Leary, Terry, Allen, & Guadagno, 2011) developed and validated by Miyagawa and Taniguchi (2016). The SCRI captures self-compassion as defined by Neff (2003, 2016). The SCRI presents 8 negative situations, such as “You make a stupid mistake,” and 4 response options for each situation. Among the 4 response options, two represent self-compassionate reactions, such as “I would remind myself that everyone makes stupid mistakes” and the others are filler items. The participants are asked to choose the two responses they would make if faced with each of the situations. Thus, their score for self-compassion ranges from 0 to 2 for each situation. Trait self-compassion is calculated by the sum of the self-compassionate reactions over the 8 situations. Therefore, the total score ranges from 0 to 16 (α = 0.84, M = 7.34, SD = 3.93).

2.3.2. Characteristics of personal setbacks in goal attainment

The participants first recalled and wrote about their personal experience of not attaining an important goal in their lives that had occurred within the last 5 years (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). They indicated how much time had passed since the experience (M\text{month} = 23.66, SD = 16.09), how much they suffered when it happened (1 = not at all, 6 = very much; M = 4.90, SD = 1.18), and how much effort they had made toward their unattained goal (1 = not at all, 6 = very much; M = 4.64, SD = 1.19).

2.3.3. Goal regulation

Participants completed a measure of two types of goal regulation (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003) regarding their recalled experience on 5-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Goal reengagement includes 6 items such as “I thought about other new goals to pursue” and goal disengagement consists of 4 items such as “It was easy for me to reduce my effort towards the goal.” In this study, we translated the original scale into Japanese and conducted an exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring with promax rotation) for the 10 items. We found that the Japanese version has the same factor structure as the original scale. The six items of goal reengagement and the four items of goal disengagement showed loadings greater than |0.56| on intended factors and cross-loadings lower than |0.19|. Therefore, following the previous study (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003), we calculated the mean score of the 6 items as goal reengagement (α = 0.88, M = 3.02, SD = 1.01). After reverse-scoring 2 items, we calculated the mean score of the other 4 items as goal disengagement (α = 0.77, M = 3.38, SD = 0.97).

2.3.4. Current negative emotions toward setbacks

Participants indicated their current negative emotions toward their setback in goal attainment using the depression-anxiety subscale of the Multiple Mood Scale (Terasaki, Kishimoto, & Koga, 1992). They answered how strongly they experienced 10 items, such as feeling “depressed” or “anxious,” regarding their recalled experience on a 4-point scale (1 = I do not feel this emotion at all, 4 = I clearly feel this emotion). The mean score of the 10 items was used as current negative emotions toward setbacks (α = 0.94, M = 2.22, SD = 0.91).

2.4. Data analyses

First, descriptive statistics and Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficients were calculated using SPSS 22.0. Second, structural equation modeling tested the model fit of the proposed model using the weighted least squares means and variance (WLSMV) estimator of Mplus for Windows, Version 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2016). In this analysis, the items of the SCRI were treated as ordered categorical variables. Although not depicted in Fig. 1, the model included a measurement model, where self-compassion, goal regulation, and negative emotions are latent factors which had each of the corresponding items as indicators. To assess the model fit, this study used the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) with 90% confidence intervals. Finally, this study used Mplus for the estimation of the proposed indirect effects and their bootstrap confidence intervals. Indirect effects were considered significant if the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

3. Results

3.1. Correlations

Table 1 shows the Spearman’s rank-order correlations of study variables. Self-compassion was not related to time since setbacks (ρ = −0.01, p = .940) and the effort participants had made (ρ = 0.04, p = .593), but was marginally and negatively related to suffering at that time (ρ = −0.14, p = .057). As predicted, self-compassion was positively correlated with goal reengagement (ρ = 0.17, p = .024) and goal disengagement (ρ = 0.19, p = .010), and negatively correlated with current negative emotions toward setbacks (ρ = −0.36, p < .001).

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1 The t-test showed that those who reported setbacks were significantly lower in self-compassion (M = 7.34, SD = 3.93) than those who did not (M = 8.91, SD = 3.69), t (208) = 2.12, p = .032, d = 0.40.
Table 1
Correlations among study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-compassion</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>2. Time since setbacks</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Suffering at that time</td>
<td>-0.14†</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<td>4. Efforts made</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
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<td>5. Goal disengagement</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.48***</td>
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<td>6. Goal reengagement</td>
<td>0.17†</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.13†</td>
<td>0.17†</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Current negative emotions toward setbacks</td>
<td>-0.36***</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.28***</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.49***</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
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† *p < .10.
* **p < .05.
** ***p < .01.
*** **p < .001.

Based on Preacher and Hayes (2008), we tested the proposed indirect effects of self-compassion on current negative emotions toward setbacks via goal reengagement and goal disengagement using 2000 bootstrap samples and bias-corrected 95% CIs. The results indicated that the total indirect effect through the proposed mediators was significant ($B = -0.012, SE = 0.064, 95% CI [-0.298, -0.012]$). More importantly, whereas goal reengagement was not a significant mediator ($B = -0.008, SE = 0.038, 95% CI [-0.070, 0.039]$), the specific indirect effect through goal disengagement was significant ($B = -0.121, SE = 0.072, 95% CI [-0.271, -0.012]$), indicating that the negative relation of self-compassion and current negative emotions was mediated by higher goal disengagement.

©). Time since setbacks, suffering when they occurred, and the efforts made were also entered into the model as covariates (see Fig. 2). The CFI and TLI fit indices of the proposed model were below the conventional cutoff values of 0.95 (CFI = 0.905, TLI = 0.894), but the RMSEA met the 0.08 criterion (RMSEA = 0.034 (90% CI [0.021, 0.045]; Schreiber, Stage, King, Nora, & Barlow, 2006). We considered the fit of the proposed model acceptable following Kenny and McCaugh's (2003) suggestion that the RMSEA should be used to determine the model fit rather than the CFI and the TLI which tend to decrease as the observed variables in a model increase. This model explained 41.3% of the variance in current negative emotions toward setbacks.

Self-compassion was positively related to goal reengagement ($\beta = 0.19, p = .024$) and goal disengagement ($\beta = 0.18, p = .041$) when controlling for the time since setbacks, suffering when they occurred, and the efforts made. In addition, the negative direct effect of self-compassion on current negative emotions was significant ($\beta = -0.27, p < .001$). Whereas goal reengagement was not associated with current negative emotions ($\beta = -0.03, p = .736$), goal disengagement was negatively related to them ($\beta = -0.52, p < .001$).

Fig. 2. Results of structure equation modeling for the proposed model.

Note. Standardized values are presented. Indicators of latent variables are omitted for the sake of clarity. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.  

3.2. Structural equation modeling

We investigated the indirect effects of self-compassion on current negative emotions toward setbacks via goal regulation. We entered self-compassion, goal reengagement, goal disengagement, and current negative emotions toward setbacks as latent variables. Standardized factor loadings of each item on intended latent factors ranged from 0.34 to 0.90, all of which were significant ($p < .05$). Time since setbacks, suffering when they occurred, and the efforts made were also entered into the model as covariates (see Fig. 2). The CFI and TLI fit indices of the proposed model were below the conventional cutoff values of 0.95 (CFI = 0.905, TLI = 0.894), but the RMSEA met the 0.08 criterion (RMSEA = 0.034 (90% CI [0.021, 0.045]; Schreiber, Stage, King, Nora, & Barlow, 2006). We considered the fit of the proposed model acceptable following Kenny and McCaugh's (2003) suggestion that the RMSEA should be used to determine the model fit rather than the CFI and the TLI which tend to decrease as the observed variables in a model increase. This model explained 41.3% of the variance in current negative emotions toward setbacks.

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4. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to investigate whether self-compassion helps individuals regulate unattained goals that have been important in their lives and negative emotions toward setbacks. The results showed that individuals high in self-compassion were more likely to disengage from their unattained goals, and thus, were less likely to show negative emotional reactions toward setbacks. Furthermore, they were better able to reengage in alternative and meaningful goals. The relationship of self-compassion to goal regulation and emotional reactions remained significant when the characteristics of personal setbacks were statistically controlled. Thus, the above relationships were not spurious relationships owing to the characteristics of recalled experiences, which addresses the limitation of a previous study (Neely et al., 2009).

The mediation model showed a direct effect of self-compassion on negative emotional reactions toward setbacks. When people experience setbacks to the pursuit of their important goals, they experience psychological distress (Carver & Scheier, 1990, 2016; Wrosch et al., 2013). However, self-compassion helps people perceive setbacks as part of the human condition and embrace them with kindness and understanding (Neff, 2003, 2016). This distinctive function of self-compassion serves to soothe their negative reactions toward the setbacks in goal attainment. This finding is in line with previous findings that self-compassion helps people cope with traumatic life events such as HIV infection (Brion et al., 2014), maltreatment in childhood (Vettese et al., 2011), and natural disasters (Zeller et al., 2015).

Although self-compassion had a strong direct effect on negative emotional reactions, this study also found that its relation to these actions was partly explained by goal disengagement. In other words, self-compassion motivated people to employ goal disengagement, whose function is to reduce negative emotions and depressive symptoms (Srooers et al., 2008; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). This finding is useful for understanding whether individuals high in self-compassion use avoidance-focused coping strategies for emotion regulation. Previous studies have found that they are more likely to employ active coping strategies and less likely to depend on maladaptive avoidance-focused strategies such as denial (Neff et al., 2005; Sirois et al., 2015). However, little research has focused on the relationship between self-compassion and adaptive avoidance-focused coping strategies and its influence on emotional reactions. Combined with the current and previous findings (Neely et al., 2009; Neely et al., 2005; Sirois et al., 2015), it is conceivable that individuals high in self-compassion would not depend on maladaptive avoidance-focused coping strategies, but rather employ avoidance-focused strategies that are more adaptive, such as disengaging from unattained goals, so that they experience less negative emotional reactions to setbacks.

Goal reengagement did not mediate the relationship between self-compassion and negative emotions toward setbacks. This is partly because goal reengagement was no longer significantly related to negative emotions once goal disengagement, self-compassion, and the characteristics of setbacks were statistically controlled. Indeed, some research evidence has indicated that the relationship between goal reengagement and negative aspects of well-being, such as depression, is weaker compared with the relation to goal disengagement (Wrosch et al., 2013). Because the primary function of goal reengagement is to find meaning in one's life (Wrosch et al., 2013), it may not have been related to negative emotional reactions once goal disengagement and self-compassion, both of which function to alleviate suffering, were statistically controlled.

This study has three limitations. First, we excluded participants who did not recall any setbacks in goal attainment from the analyses but inspection of their level of self-compassion indicated that they were higher in self-compassion than those who did report instances of setbacks. Individuals high in self-compassion might have positively reinterpreted their setbacks as chance for growth (see Neff et al., 2005; Sirois et al., 2015). Future studies should address how self-compassion influences recall of past experiences. However, this difference of self-compassion would not undermine the current findings, because this study focused on how self-compassion helps people cope with the experiences they identify as setbacks.

Second, this study only focused on negative emotional reactions toward setbacks. Given that self-compassion is also related to positive well-being (Zessin et al., 2015), self-compassion could be related to higher positive emotional reactions toward setbacks, such as feelings of growth. Future studies should address this possibility and also examine whether goal reengagement may mediate the above relationship.

Third, this study employed a cross-sectional design and self-report measures. Thus, it could not draw any firm conclusions about the causal effect of self-compassion on goal regulation. It is possible that past goal regulation promotes self-compassion. Future studies could use a longitudinal design and measure change in self-compassion, goal regulation, and emotions over time. Nonetheless, our study showed one possible process through which self-compassion is related to lower negative emotional reactions toward setbacks. We believe that our findings should serve as a useful foundation for further research.

5. Conclusions

The current study contributed to understanding the role of self-compassion in the face of setbacks in goal attainment. This study found that self-compassion was related to higher goal reengagement and goal disengagement. It also found that self-compassion had negative direct and indirect (via goal disengagement) effects on negative emotions toward setbacks. In sum, self-compassion is a positive psychological resource for helping individuals regulate their goals and negative emotions when they experience setbacks in goal attainment.

References