Relationship of Self-Compassion, Hope, and Emotional Control to Perceived Burdensomeness, Thwarted Belongingness, and Suicidal Ideation

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Abstract. Background: Cultivating positive feelings of self in relationships with others can affect perceptions of belongingness and burdensomeness. Aims: The present study examines the relationships of self-compassion, hope, and emotional control to thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation. Method: Participants were 481 college students who completed scales measuring self-compassion, hope, emotional control, thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation. Results: Correlation and parallel mediation analysis results show relationships between self-compassion, hope, and emotional control with perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation. Limitations: The study is limited by its cross-sectional design, sample demographics, and inability to distinguish between individuals with suicidal ideation and those who attempt suicide. Conclusion: The results show that the relationships of self-compassion, hope, and emotional control to perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation are worth further investigation.

Keywords: self-compassion, hope, interpersonal theory, suicidal ideation

Suicide is a national public health tragedy. The suicide rate in the United States for adolescents and young adults has witnessed a 30% increase since the year 2000 (Miron, Yu, Wilf-Miron, & Kohane, 2019). More than half of the people who die by suicide do not have any known mental illness, and suicide is often not attributed to any single factor (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Recognized theoretical models in conjunction with extant data suggest several interpersonal influences that contribute to suicide risk (Kim et al., 2015). Researchers have called for a shift to focus on the role that interpersonal factors may play in averting suicide (Rabon, Sirois, & Hirsch, 2018). The present study examines the potential protective influences of self-compassion, hope, and emotional control on thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation.

Interpersonal Theory of Suicide

The interpersonal theory of suicide predicts that thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness affect suicidal ideation (Van Orden et al., 2010). Thwarted belongingness is a feeling of alienation from others, being disconnected from any meaningful group, having only weak social relationships, and being disengaged from society. Perceived burdensomeness expresses a sense of expendability, feeling like a hindrance to others, and believing others would be better off without you. A feeling of hopelessness that this sense of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness will never change can stimulate suicidal ideation (Chu et al., 2017; Van Orden et al., 2010).

Chu et al. (2017) provide a meta-analysis of studies that test the interpersonal theory of suicide. They find support for the theory. However, they also call for research that challenges and refines the theory. Other researchers
suggest examining how positive feelings about oneself can serve as a protective influence in reducing feelings of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation (Krysinska, Lester, Lyke, & Corveley, 2015; Lapierre Dubé, Bouffard, & Alain, 2007). Several positive influences that are worth further investigation are self-compassion, hope, and emotional control (Umphrey & Sherblom, 2014, 2017, 2018).

**Self-Compassion, Hope, and Emotional Control**

**Self-Compassion**

Self-compassion means embracing self-kindness, being mindful of our thoughts and feelings, and accepting that personal inadequacy is part of our common human experience (Neff, 2003; Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Neff & Germer, 2017). Self-compassion has been found to be associated with social acceptance and relational closeness (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). It facilitates a general sense of well-being, even when faced with disappointment or failure (Neff, 2011).

Self-compassion enables interpersonal trust, helps us balance the needs of self and others, and can facilitate the resolution of interpersonal conflicts. It reduces self-criticism, depression, anxiety, and fear of failure (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). It enhances social connectedness, curiosity, happiness, optimism, personal initiative, positive affect, life satisfaction, and psychological health (Neff, 2009).

The potential relationship of self-compassion to suicide has received little attention in the literature. One study did examine the effects of self-compassion on suicidal behavior in college students. That study found that self-compassion helps protect against suicidal behavior by buffering depressive symptoms and facilitating engagement in wellness behaviors (Rabon et al., 2018).

**Hope**

Hope, and hopelessness, are often measured as vague, generalized concepts (Umphrey & Sherblom, 2014). Countering this conceptual ambiguity, Snyder (1994, 2000, 2002) offers a well-considered and widely accepted definition of hope as an active, integral part of a person’s way of thinking. Snyder defines hope as the ability to identify alternative pathways and a goal-directed determination to persevere even when faced with obstacles to achieving one’s goals (Snyder, 2000).

Research studies link hope to psychological wellbeing (Snyder, 1994, 2000, 2002). People who engage in hopeful thinking are more adaptive at problem-solving, better able to engage in coping strategies, and less prone to depression (Chang & Banks, 2007). Hopeful thinkers report more self-worth, creativity, positive emotions, and life confidence (Snyder, 2000, 2002). Hope has been shown to build resiliency for dealing with negative life events, increase the potential for success in psychotherapy, and reduce the likelihood of suicide (Davidson, Wingate, Rasmussen, & Slish, 2009).

**Emotional Control**

Emotional control means being able to recognize one’s emotions, moderate social-emotional responses, and regulate one’s impulsive behaviors (Riggio, 1986, 2005; Riggio & Canary, 2003). It describes the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify social–emotional–relational responses. It can facilitate relational growth and promotes more satisfying personal relationships (Mongrain, Chin, & Shapira, 2011).

Past research has linked greater emotional control to a reduction in self-injury behaviors (Zelkowitz, Cole, Han, & Tomarken, 2016). One study reports that emotional intelligence can act as a protective factor against suicidal ideation and behavior (Mérida-López, Extremera, & Rey, 2018). Another study shows that emotional understanding and regulation protect against suicidal behavior (Dominguez-García & Fernández-Berrocal, 2018).

**Summary**

Self-compassion, hope, and emotional control are ways of thinking that encourage positive psychological health. Each should affect reductions in perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation. Current research, however, offers little direct evidence of these influences. The studies that do exist suggest the need for further examination of each (Gunn, 2017; Krysinska et al., 2015; Mitchell, Cukrowicz, Van Allen, & Seegan, 2015).

**The Present Study**

We anticipate that self-compassion, hope, and emotional control are moderately correlated. Consistent with previous research, we expect perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness to be related to suicidal ideation (Chu et al., 2017). In addition, we make the following predictions.

**Hypotheses**

H1: Perceived burdensomeness is inversely related to (a) self-compassion, (b) hope, and (c) emotional control.
H2: Thwarted belongingness is inversely related to (a) self-compassion, (b) hope, and (c) emotional control.
H3: Suicidal ideation is positively related to perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, and inversely related to (a) self-compassion, (b) hope, and (c) emotional control.
H4: Thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness mediate the relationships of (a) self-compassion, (b) hope, and (c) emotional control with suicidal ideation.

Method

Participants
Survey participants were 481 undergraduates at a university in the southwestern United States. The sample comprised 343 females (71%) and 138 males (28.7%). Participant ages ranged from 19 to 72 years with a mean of 29. Of these, 318 were single (66.1%), 124 were married (25.8%), and 39 were divorced (8.1%). A total of 292 participants identify as Caucasian/White (60.7%), 29 as African American (6%), 17 as Asian/Pacific Islander (3.5%), 13 as Native American (2.7%), 107 as Hispanic (22.2%), and 23 as other (4.8%).

Questionnaire
The university’s institutional review board approved the study and participants signed informed consent forms prior to engaging in the survey. The questionnaire contained measures of self-compassion, hope, emotional control, perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation. To reduce participant confusion or potential measurement error, all responses were recorded on 5-point Likert-type scales.

Self-Compassion
We measured self-compassion using Raes, Pommier, Neff, and Van Gucht’s (2011) 12-item Self-Compassion (short form) Scale. Items include, “When I’m going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need,” and “I’m disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies” (Cronbach’s α = .84).

Hope
We used Snyder’s (1994) 8-item Hope Scale to measure hope. These items include, “I can think of many ways to get out of a jam” and “Even when others get discour-aged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem” (Cronbach’s α = .81).

Emotional Control
We measured emotional control using the 15 emotional control subscale items from Riggio’s Social and Emotional Skills Inventory (Riggio, 1986, 2005). Items include, “I can be strongly affected by someone smiling or frowning at me” and “I am not very skilled in controlling my emotions” (Cronbach’s α = .73).

Perceived Burdensomeness
We measured perceived burdensomeness using the 7-item subscale of the Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire (INQ; Van Orden, Cukrowicz, Witte, & Joiner, 2012). Survey items include, “These days the people in my life would be happier without me” and “These days I think I make things worse for the people in my life” (Cronbach’s α = .95).

Thwarted Belongingness
We used the 9-item Thwarted Belongingness subscale of the Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire (INQ) to measure thwarted belongingness (Van Orden et al., 2012). Items include, “These days, I feel like I belong” (reverse coded) and “These days, I often feel like an outsider in social gatherings” (Cronbach’s α = .90). Other researchers have used a modified 3-point scale with the INQ and found that a shortened response scale retains construct validity (Parkhurst, Conwell, & Van Orden, 2016).

Suicidal Ideation
We used the 7-item Concise Health Risk Tracking Scale to measure suicidal ideation (Trivedi et al., 2011). Scale items include, “I have thoughts about how I might kill myself” and “I have been having thoughts of killing myself” (Cronbach’s α = .91).

Data Analysis
We computed descriptive statistics and correlations using SPSS 24. We also conducted a mediation analysis in the PROCESS module in SPSS to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals for estimates of the indirect effects based on 5,000 bootstrap samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Hayes’s (2017) PROCESS analysis investigates the proposed relationships by reviewing the results for direct and indirect effects.
Results

Participants showed self-compassion ($M = 3.29, SD = .66$), hope ($M = 4.10, SD = .49$), and emotional control ($M = 3.35, SD = .77$). They also reported low levels of perceived burdensomeness ($M = 1.62, SD = .81$), thwarted belongingness ($M = 2.20, SD = .72$), and suicidal ideation ($M = 1.56, SD = .70$). Table 1 presents the correlations and descriptive statistics.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that perceived burdensomeness is inversely related to self-compassion, hope, and emotional control. This hypothesis was supported. Results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant negative association between perceived burdensomeness and self-compassion ($r = -.44, p < .01$), hope ($r = -.21, p < .01$), and emotional control ($r = -.19, p < .01$).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that thwarted belongingness is inversely related to self-compassion, hope, and emotional control. This hypothesis also received support. Results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant negative association between thwarted belongingness and self-compassion ($r = -.56, p < .01$), hope ($r = -.37, p < .01$), and emotional control ($r = -.18, p < .01$).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that suicidal ideation is positively related to perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, and inversely related to self-compassion, hope, and emotional control. This hypothesis was supported. Results of the Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant positive association between suicidal ideation and perceived burdensomeness ($r = .80, p < .01$) and thwarted belongingness ($r = .52, p < .01$), and a negative association between suicidal ideation and self-compassion ($r = -.51, p < .01$), hope ($r = -.32, p < .05$), and emotional control ($r = -.13, p < .01$).

Finally, Hypothesis 4 predicted that thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness mediate the relationships of self-compassion, hope, and emotional control with suicidal ideation (Table 2). Hypothesis 4a predicted that the effect of self-compassion on suicidal ideation is mediated by thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. The total effect for self-compassion and suicidal ideation was significant and negative, $b = -.55, t(480) = -13.18, p < .001$, indicating an inverse relationship. An increase in self-compassion predicted a decrease in suicidal ideation. The indirect effect with thwarted belongingness as a mediator was also significant, $b = -.21; 95\% CI [-.27, -.15]$. The relationship between self-compassion and suicidal ideation remained significant, even when thwarted belongingness was included in the model, $b = -.34, t(479) = -7.21, p < .001$, which suggests that thwarted belongingness is a partial mediator between self-compassion and suicidal ideation. The indirect effect with perceived burdensomeness as a mediator was also significant, $b = -.33; 95\% CI [-.41, -.25]$. The relationship between self-compassion and suicidal ideation remained significant, even when perceived burdensomeness was included in the model, $b = -.22, t(479) = -7.00, p < .001$, which suggests that perceived burdensomeness is also a partial mediator between self-compassion and suicidal ideation.

Hypothesis 4b predicted that the effect of hope on suicidal ideation is mediated by thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. The total effect for hope and suicidal ideation was significant and negative, $b = -.45, t(480) = -7.15, p < .001$. An increase in hope predicted a decrease in suicidal ideation. The indirect effect with thwarted belongingness as a mediator was also significant, $b = -.26; 95\% CI [-.35, -.18]$. The relationship be-

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-compassion</th>
<th>Hope</th>
<th>Emotional control</th>
<th>Perceived burdensomeness</th>
<th>Thwarted belongingness</th>
<th>Suicidal ideation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<td>3.36</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>2.20</td>
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<td>SD</td>
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<td>.49</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actual range</td>
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<td>2.38–5 (2.63)</td>
<td>1.25–5 (3.75)</td>
<td>1–5 (4.0)</td>
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<td>1–5 (4.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skewness</td>
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<td>-.12</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>1.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kurtosis</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ** $p < .01$. 

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between hope and suicidal ideation remained significant, even when thwarted belongingness was included in the model, $b = -.19$, $t(479) = -3.16$, $p < .001$, which indicates that thwarted belongingness is a partial mediator between self-compassion and suicidal ideation. The indirect effect with perceived burdensomeness as a mediator was also significant, $b = -.25$; 95% CI [$-.35$, $-.15$]. The relationship between hope and suicidal ideation remained significant, even when perceived burdensomeness was included in the model, $b = -.19$, $t(479) = -4.86$, $p < .001$, which suggests that perceived burdensomeness is also a partial mediator between hope and suicidal ideation.

Hypothesis 4c predicted that the effect of emotional control on suicidal ideation is mediated by thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. The total effect for emotional control on suicidal ideation was significant and negative, $b = -.12$, $t(480) = -2.87$, $p < .01$, indicating an inverse relationship between emotional control and suicidal ideation. The indirect effect with thwarted belongingness as a mediator was also significant, $b = -.09$; 95% CI [$-.13$, $-.04$]. However, the relationship between emotional control and suicidal ideation was no longer significant when perceived burdensomeness was included in the model, $b = -.03$, $t(479) = -.91$, $p = .36$, which indicates that thwarted belongingness mediates the relationship between emotional control and suicidal ideation. The indirect effect with perceived burdensomeness as a mediator was also significant, $b = -.13$; 95% CI [$-.21$, $-.06$], and the relationship between emotional control and suicidal ideation was no longer significant when perceived burdensomeness was included in the model, $b = .02$, $t(479) = 0.65$, $p = .52$, which suggests that perceived burdensomeness also mediates the relationship between emotional control and suicidal ideation.

### Discussion

The focus of this study was to examine the positive influences of self-compassion, hope, and emotional control on thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation. Consistent with expectations, thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness showed similar influences on suicidal ideation as found in previous studies. In addition to these effects, taking the correlation and meditational analysis results together, we found support for the predicted relationships of self-compassion and hope to thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation. Self-compassion and hope had influential relationships to suicidal ideation that were partially mediated by thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. Emotional control showed a relationship to suicidal ideation that was more fully mediated by thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness.

Past studies have largely ignored self-compassion and provided only limited evidence of a relationship of hope, rather than hopelessness, to suicidal ideation. Mitchell et al. (2015) report a relationship between hope and acquired suicide capability, but only after controlling for gender. Lapierre et al. (2007) provide some limited evidence of a hope agency effect.

The present results suggest the potential for intervention programs that promote the practice of self-compassion and hope. Self-compassion and hope are habitual ways of thinking that are malleable (Fieldman & Dreher, 2012; Marques, Lopez, & Pais-Ribeiro, 2011; Yohani, 2008). Several researchers suggest that cultivating positive perceptions of oneself can mitigate feelings of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness (Krysinska et al., 2015; Lapierre et al., 2007). Intervention programs
that promote the practice of self-compassion and cultivate hope may serve to help buffer the social pain resulting from life challenges and perceived failures (Marques et al., 2011; Umphrey & Sherblom, 2014). These results show that self-compassion and hope are positive influences on feelings of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation, and suggest an important direction for future research exploration and therapeutic programs.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to the present analysis. First, the cross-sectional design and unidirectional relationships limit the generalizability of these findings. Second, given the statistical differences in suicidal ideation found among demographic groups, the present analysis of a largely single (66.1%), White (60.7%), female (71%) sample may not produce results that are equally applicable to other groups (Laederach, Fischer, Bowen, & Ladame, 1999). Third, the present study does not distinguish between people with suicidal ideation and those who attempt suicide (May & Klonsky, 2016). Finally, the present study used a 5-point Likert scale to measure thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness rather than the original 7-point scale, and therefore caution should be used when comparing these results with those of other studies.

**Conclusion**

The present results are heuristic and suggest the usefulness of further exploration into the positive influence of self-compassion and hope on perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation. These results suggest the therapeutic potential of programs designed to develop self-compassion and hope. Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of how these positive ways of thinking can alleviate feelings of perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation.

**References**


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