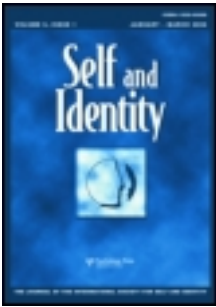


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Self-compassion as a Buffer against Homesickness, Depression, and Dissatisfaction in the Transition to College

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Life transitions that include moving to a new location are stressful, particularly if difficulties arise in the new environment. This study focused on the role of self-compassion in moderating students' reactions to social and academic difficulties in the transition to college. Before starting college, 119 students completed a measure of self-compassion, the degree to which people treat themselves kindly during distressing situations. At the end of their first semester, participants answered questions about their social and academic difficulties and completed measures of homesickness, depression, and satisfaction with their decision to attend the university. Students who scored higher in self-compassion weathered difficulties more successfully, reported lower homesickness and less depression, and expressed greater satisfaction with their decision to attend the university.

Keywords: Self-compassion; Homesickness; Depression; Regret; Transition.

Although transitions from one major social role to another are often stressful (Compas, Wagner, Slavin, & Vannatta, 1986; Fisher, 1986; Holmes & Rahe, 1965), the transition to college is particularly distressing for many people because it involves simultaneous changes in lifestyle, routines, responsibilities, and, often, geographical location (Fisher, 1989). Furthermore, first-year college students often experience doubts about their academic abilities and social acceptance, along with changes in their academic and social self-concepts (Compas et al., 1986; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1983; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). And, if they move away from home to attend school, students may also lose connections to family, friends, peer groups, favorite activities, and social support networks.

One common result of transitions in which people move by themselves to a new location—such as when students move away from home to attend college—is homesickness (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Fisher, Murray, & Frazer, 1985). Homesickness is a “state of distress among those who have left their house and home and find themselves in a new and unfamiliar environment” (van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, & van Heck, 1996, p. 899). Although most new students adjust fairly well to the

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transition from high school to college, a high proportion experience difficulties that, if unresolved, can lead to homesickness, depression, and dissatisfaction with their decision to attend college (Bell & Bromnick, 1998; Eurelings-Bontekoe, Vingerhoets, & Fontijn, 1994; Fisher, 1989; Fisher et al., 1985). College students who experience homesickness often have problems with concentration and low motivation, which can undermine their academic performance. Homesickness has also been linked to insomnia, disruptions in appetite, and gastrointestinal problems, as well as more serious health problems such as immune deficiencies and diabetes (see van Tilburg et al., 1996). Homesickness is also associated with both depression (Vershuur, Eurelings-Bontekoe, & Spinhoven, 2004) and loneliness (Stroebe, van Vliet, Hewstone, & Willis, 2002). As a result of their lack of social connections and faltering grades, homesick students are three times more likely to drop out of college than those who are not homesick (Burt, 1993).

Homesick people tend to ruminate, sometimes to the point of obsession, about home and their desire to leave the new environment (Fisher & Hood, 1987; van Tilburg et al., 1996). Homesickness is associated with having negative expectations for the new surroundings and expecting that one's homesickness will be prolonged (Fisher, 1989; Thurber & Walton, 2007). Socially anxious students fare particularly poorly when they start college because social anxiety inhibits their ability to form friendships and social support networks that mitigate homesickness (Urani, Miller, Johnson, & Petzel, 2003). In contrast, having high-quality friendships (Hartup & Stevens, 1999) lowers homesickness and helps students adjust more quickly (van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, & van Heck, 1999). Furthermore, students who self-disclose at higher levels experience less homesickness during the transition to college (Bell & Bromnick, 1998), possibly because they make social connections more quickly.

Many studies have examined factors that promote coping in college generally—such as locus of control, neuroticism, and perfectionism (Martin & Dixon, 1994; Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007; van Tilburg et al., 1999)—but only a few have focused specifically on homesickness, and even fewer have explored factors that attenuate homesickness when students start college. Our focus was on the role that self-compassion may play in students' adjustment to college with respect to the experiences of homesickness, depression, and satisfaction with their decision to attend the university.

Self-compassion involves treating oneself with the same kind of caring, concern, and kindness that one conveys to loved ones who are facing difficult life situations. According to Neff (2003a), self-compassion “involves being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness” (p. 87). Neff suggested that self-compassion is composed of three primary features: self-kindness (being kind as opposed to critical toward oneself when faced with failure, rejection, loss, or other painful situations), common humanity (recognizing that one's difficulties are a part of the larger human experience as opposed to feeling isolated or alone when life is difficult), and mindfulness (holding one's suffering in balanced awareness, neither ignoring nor over-identifying with negative emotions). Together, these perspectives are associated with an approach in which people respond to life's problems with greater acceptance, self-soothing, and equanimity (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, 2003a, 2011).

Self-compassion appears to buffer people against negative reactions to undesired events, such as failure, humiliation, rejection, awkward social situations, and thoughts of previous negative events in one's life (see Neff, 2009, for a review). For

example, compared to participants low in self-compassion, participants who were high in self-compassion experienced less negative emotion when recalling unpleasant personal events, experiencing difficulties in their everyday lives, imagining situations involving failure or humiliation, receiving unflattering feedback from another person, and participating in an embarrassing task (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007). Self-compassion also moderated how students responded when they performed poorly in a class (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). Not surprisingly, self-compassion is associated with lower depression, lower anxiety, and greater life satisfaction (Neff, 2003b).

The few studies that have investigated how self-compassion relates to people's reactions to real events (Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005) have often focused on one-time occurrences, such as recalling a past humiliation, participating in an embarrassing task, or receiving a bad grade. Yet, a recent study has demonstrated that self-compassion may play an important role in difficult life transitions, such as when going through a divorce (Sbarra, Smith, & Mehl, 2012). People higher in self-compassion during the beginning of a marital separation experienced less distress about their divorce during the following year (Sbarra et al., 2012). Thus, self-compassion may be particularly important in buffering negative emotions when events unfold over a period of time. Rather than involving a single negative event, transitions consist of a series of difficult experiences over a period of time. Any one of these events may be only mildly troubling, yet the cumulative and prolonged nature of the novel and difficult circumstances may contribute to a high level of unhappiness and distress. In the case of homesickness, for example, a college student who spends a single Saturday night alone may be bored but otherwise not distressed, but repeated lonely Saturday nights may foster homesickness, depression, and dissatisfaction about choosing to attend that institution.

Thus, self-compassion may be particularly useful in attenuating the kinds of long-term experiences that create homesickness. People who treat themselves especially kindly when things are going badly (self-kindness), recognize that homesickness is a natural and nearly universal experience that indicates nothing peculiar about them (common humanity), and face their feelings with equanimity (mindfulness) should manage situations that evoke homesickness more successfully. Given that homesick people often engage in self-blame and wishful thinking and score higher on measures of rigidity (Eurelings-Bontekoe et al., 1994), homesickness may be exacerbated when people fail to treat themselves compassionately when they encounter difficulties in adjusting to their new environment.

The present research examined whether self-compassion moderates feelings of homesickness, depression and decision satisfaction for first-year college students who experience social or academic difficulties. We expected that self-compassion would be associated with lower depression, less homesickness, and higher satisfaction with the decision to attend the university. More importantly, this effect should be greatest for students who have difficulties adjusting to the new environment. Specifically, we focused on the two domains that are typically related to adjustment to college—social life and academic life. Academic and social difficulties are major reasons that undergraduate students consider leaving school and seeking therapy (Cepeda-Benito & Short, 1998), and students who are more satisfied with their academic and social lives adjust better than those who have problems in these domains. Thus, self-compassion should be particularly important for students who confront academic or social difficulties.

Method

Participants

Undergraduates (58 men, 56 women, 5 did not report their gender) entering their first year of college at a midsized private university in the southeastern United States. A random selection of incoming first-year students whose contact information was provided by the Dean of Students ($n = 250$) were invited by e-mail and offered a \$15 gift card for completing both parts of the study. One hundred nineteen students completed all measures using a secure online website at both Time 1 and Time 2.

Measures

Self-compassion. Participants completed the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b), a 26-item scale that measures the three components of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness). Sample items include: "I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering" and "When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure" (reverse-scored). Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (1 = *Almost never*; 5 = *Almost always*). Previous administrations of this scale indicate it has high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > .90$), and considerable research supports the scale's validity as a measure of the degree to which people respond to difficult situations with self-directed kindness and equanimity (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003b; Neff et al., 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics for all measures.

Depression. Participants also completed 10 items from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D Scale asks respondents to rate how many times in the past week they have felt depressed or behaved in ways consistent with a depressive state. Sample items include: "I felt depressed," "I felt that everything I did was an effort," and "I felt hopeful about the future" (reverse-scored). Ratings were made on a 4-point scale (1 = *Rarely or none; less than one day*, 2 = *Some or a little of the time; 1-2 days*, 3 = *Occasionally or a moderate amount of time; 3-4 days*, 4 = *Most or all of the time; 5-7 days*). The CES-D Scale has high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$) and concurrent validity, predicting both clinical reports and self-report variables.

Homesickness. Participants also answered 10 items from the Homesickness Questionnaire (Archer, Ireland, Amos, Broad, & Currid, 1998), which asks respondents to rate various aspects of homesickness including distress when thinking about home, negative affect regarding the new place, restlessness, and preoccupation with thoughts of home. Sample items include: "I get really upset when I think about home," "I hate this place," and "I can't seem to get settled here at the university." Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all true*; 5 = *Extremely true*). Research supports the reliability and validity of the measure (Archer et al., 1998).

Satisfaction. To measure social and academic difficulties, we asked participants to report how satisfied they were with both their social life (1 = *Not at all satisfied*; 5 = *Extremely satisfied*) and their academic life (1 = *Not at all satisfied*; 5 = *Extremely satisfied*). Finally, as a measure of decision satisfaction, participants rated how

TABLE 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-order Correlations among Variables

	α	M (SD)	Self-compassion	Homesick	Depression	Satisfaction with decision to attend	Satisfaction with social life
Self-compassion	.94	21.46 (5.33)	—				
Homesickness	.83	19.47 (5.80)	-.36***	—			
Depression	.83	18.16 (5.11)	-.49***	.56***	—		
Satisfaction with decision to attend	n/a	4.14 (0.87)	.37***	-.62***	-.40***	—	
Satisfaction with social life	n/a	3.28 (0.87)	.26**	-.37***	-.30**	.50***	—
Satisfaction with academic life	n/a	2.92 (0.88)	.17	-.02	-.25*	.11	.18*

Notes: Tests of correlations are one-tailed; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are presented only for multi-item measures.

satisfied they were with their decision to attend the university (1 = *Not at all satisfied*; 5 = *Extremely satisfied*).

Procedure

To ensure that the measurement of self-compassion reflected preexisting individual differences that were unaffected by experiences after arriving at college, self-compassion was assessed 4–6 weeks before participants arrived on campus for the fall semester. Then, a few weeks before the end of their first semester, participants received an e-mail link to complete the Time 2 questionnaire (which contained the depression and homesickness questionnaires and the satisfaction items).

Results

Correlations among all predictor and outcome variables are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, self-compassion correlated negatively with homesickness and depression and positively with satisfaction with the decision to attend the university and satisfaction with social life. Self-compassion was not correlated with satisfaction with academic life.

Statistical Analyses

Because our interest was in determining whether the interaction between self-compassion and the experience of difficulties predicted homesickness, depression, and decision satisfaction, we followed the recommendations of Kashy, Donnellan, Ackerman, and Russell (2009) for analyzing interactions between continuous predictors on a continuous outcome variable. The data were analyzed in hierarchical multiple regression analyses in which homesickness, depression, and satisfaction with the decision to attend the university were used as outcome variables. In each regression analysis, the measure of perceived social difficulties (i.e., satisfaction with social life) or perceived academic difficulties (satisfaction with academic performance) was used as a predictor, along with self-compassion and the interaction of self-compassion and the target social or academic difficulty.

In each analysis, self-compassion scores assessed at Time 1 were zero-centered and entered on Step 1. (Self-compassion scores were entered on Step 1 because they had temporal precedence, having been collected before students arrived on campus.) On Step 2, the measure of either academic or social difficulty was zero-centered and entered. On Step 3, the product term between self-compassion and the predictor variable entered on Step 2 was entered to test the interaction between self-compassion and that specific difficulty. Significant interactions were probed via tests of simple slopes as recommended by Aiken and West (1991). The tests of simple slopes examined whether the perceived difficulties predicted the outcome variables (homesickness, depression, decision satisfaction) differently for participants who were low versus high in self-compassion. R^2 , standardized beta coefficients, and effect sizes (semi-partial correlations) for each step are in Table 2.

Homesickness

As can be seen in Table 2, participants who were higher in self-compassion (measured before arriving at the university) and those who were more satisfied with

TABLE 2 Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Homesickness, Depression, and Satisfaction

	Outcome variables		
	Homesickness	Depression	Satisfaction with decision
<i>Predictor: Satisfaction with social life</i>			
Step 1: Self-compassion	Total $R^2 = .27^{***}$ β $-.36^{***}$ sr^2 .10	Total $R^2 = .25^{***}$ β $-.49^{***}$ sr^2 .24	Total $R^2 = .38^{***}$ β 0.37^{***} sr^2 .10
Step 2: Satisfaction with social life	$-.33^{***}$ sr^2 .07	$-.11$ sr^2 .00	0.46^{***} sr^2 .15
Step 3: Self-compassion \times Satisfaction with social life	0.20^* sr^2 .04	0.05 sr^2 .00	$-.18^*$ sr^2 .01
<i>Predictor: Satisfaction with academics</i>			
Step 1: Self-compassion	Total $R^2 = .20^{***}$ β $-.36^{***}$ sr^2 .10	Total $R^2 = .27^{***}$ β $-.49^{***}$ sr^2 .24	Total $R^2 = .14^{***}$ β 0.37^{***} sr^2 .10
Step 2: Satisfaction with academics	0.04 sr^2 .00	$-.19^*$ sr^2 .03	0.05 sr^2 .00
Step 3: Self-compassion \times Satisfaction with academic life	$-.27^{**}$ sr^2 .07	0.02 sr^2 .00	$-.03$ sr^2 .00

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. R^2 is from the third step of each model (with both main effects and the interaction in the model). β is the standardized regression coefficient. The sr^2 shows the proportion of unique variance in the outcome variable that is accounted for by the effect being tested while controlling for the other effects in the model on that step.

their social life reported being less homesick. More central to our hypothesis, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction of self-compassion by satisfaction with social life. As seen in Figure 1, participants who were low in self-compassion ($-1 SD$) felt significantly more homesick the less satisfied they were with their social life, simple slope = -2.79 , $t(83) = -3.69$, $p < .001$. In contrast, for participants high in self-compassion ($+1 SD$), homesickness was unrelated to satisfaction with social life, simple slope = -0.42 , $t(83) = -0.46$, *ns*. This pattern suggests that self-compassion buffered participants who were dissatisfied with their social lives against homesickness.

Additionally, a significant interaction between self-compassion and satisfaction with academic life was obtained on homesickness. Participants low in self-compassion ($-1 SD$) felt significantly more homesick the less satisfied they were with their academic lives, simple slope = -1.90 , $t(83) = (2.24)$, $p = .03$. On the other hand, for participants who were high in self-compassion ($+1 SD$), homesickness did not vary as a function of their satisfaction with their academic life, simple slope = 1.57 , $t(83) = 1.64$, *ns*.

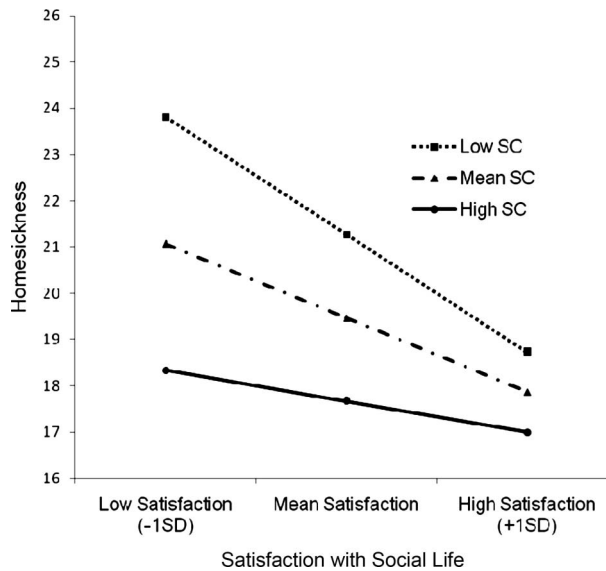


FIGURE 1 Homesickness. Solid circle = high levels of self-compassion; dashed triangles = mean levels of self-compassion; dotted square = low levels of self-compassion.

Depression

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting depression from satisfaction with social life, self-compassion, and their interaction yielded only a significant main effect of self-compassion. Using satisfaction with academic performance and self-compassion to predict depression yielded the main effect of self-compassion and a significant main effect of satisfaction with academic performance (see Table 2).

Decision Satisfaction

Students who were higher in self-compassion and more satisfied with their social lives were more satisfied with their decision to attend the university (see Table 2).

Again, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction of self-compassion and satisfaction with social life that was identical to the effect for homesickness. Among participants who were low in self-compassion (-1 SD), those who were less satisfied with their social life also felt significantly less satisfied with their decision to attend the university, simple slope = 0.57, $t(83) = 5.38$, $p < .0001$. On the other hand, among participants who were high in self-compassion ($+1$ SD), satisfaction with social life did not significantly predict satisfaction with their decision to attend the university, simple slope = 0.23, $t(83) = 1.79$, *ns*. Hierarchical regression analyses using satisfaction with academics and self-compassion to predict satisfaction with the decision to attend the university revealed only the main effect of self-compassion.

Social vs. Academic Predictors

Because satisfaction with the social and academic aspects of college were correlated, we wanted to determine whether the moderating effects of self-compassion were specific to one domain or the other. Thus, the hierarchical regression analyses described previously were re-run while controlling for the other influence (i.e., social vs. academic difficulties).

The significant interaction of satisfaction with social life by self-compassion on homesickness, $t(90) = 2.05$, $p = .04$, $sr^2 = .04$, remained significant while controlling for satisfaction with academic life, $t(89) = 2.15$, $p = .04$, $sr^2 = .04$. The significant interaction of satisfaction with academic life by self-compassion interaction predicting homesickness, $t(90) = 2.70$, $p = .008$, $sr^2 = .07$, remained significant when controlling for satisfaction with social life, $t(89) = 2.35$, $p = .02$, $sr^2 = .05$.

Discussion

The results of this study extend earlier research showing that people who are high in self-compassion handle difficult and distressing situations more effectively than those who are low in self-compassion. The findings revealed not only that self-compassionate first-year college students are less depressed (e.g., Neff, 2003b) but also that they experience less homesickness and experience less dissatisfaction about their decision to attend the university. People who score high in self-compassion presumably exercise self-compassion on a regular basis, thereby reducing the emotional impact of both small and large events as they arise (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2009). As a result, they move through life feeling more satisfied and less depressed.

More important than the general influence of self-compassion is the finding that self-compassion moderated the relationship between students' perceptions of their life circumstances and both homesickness and satisfaction with their decision to attend the university. Students who scored lower in self-compassion were more sensitive to variations in the perceived quality of their social and academic lives, experiencing greater homesickness and lower satisfaction when circumstances were not as they desired. When students who were low in self-compassion disliked their social lives, they experienced greater homesickness and were less satisfied with their decision to attend the university, but students who were high in self-compassion were comparatively unaffected by their social difficulties. Viewed differently, self-compassion was more strongly related to homesickness and decision satisfaction when students' lives were unsatisfactory; when things were going well,

self-compassion was less important. This pattern resembled results by Allen, Goldwasser, and Leary (in press) showing that physical problems predicted negative emotions among elderly individuals who were low in self-compassion but not among those who were high in self-compassion.

Although self-compassion moderated reactions to social difficulties, it had a weaker relationship to academic struggles. On only one outcome variable, homesickness, did self-compassion buffer participants against the emotional fallout from academic difficulties. Students who were low in self-compassion reported being more homesick the more dissatisfied they were with their academic life. But self-compassion did not attenuate the effects of dissatisfaction with academic life on depression or satisfaction with the decision to attend the university.

For satisfaction with the decision to attend the university, self-compassion moderated reactions to social difficulties but not academic difficulties. This difference may have occurred for two reasons. First, the students in this sample were highly academically capable and admission to the university is selective. So, although many students initially experienced uncertainties about their academic performance, most probably believed that their academic success was largely in their own hands and felt reasonably confident that they would eventually do well. In contrast, many students may harbor deep uncertainty regarding their social success because admission to the university did not depend on their social capabilities and their social outcomes are less under their personal control than their academic outcomes (Ruthig *et al.*, 2008). Second, at the time that participants completed the outcome measures late in the first semester, the promise of a new semester may have allowed them to imagine that they would find future courses less difficult, but there would be no reason for them to believe that their social lives would be dramatically better in the next semester.

Most research on homesickness in college students has been either cross-sectional, examining relationships among variables measured on a single occasion (Fisher *et al.*, 1985) or retrospective, asking participants to recall how they felt when they arrived on campus (Urani *et al.*, 2003). In both cases, the possibility exists that the personality variables used as predictors of college adjustment have themselves been influenced by the student's experiences at college. The present study improved upon earlier designs by measuring self-compassion well before students arrived at college and then obtaining the outcome measures toward the end of the first semester. Thus, we can be certain that the obtained relationships between self-compassion and students' ratings at the end of the first semester were not spuriously influenced by common events.

Limitations of the current study include the use of single-item measures of satisfaction and academic and social difficulties. Future research may benefit from multi-item measures of these constructs to increase their reliability and predictive validity. Also, data collection occurred at two time points (before arriving at the university and at the end of the first semester), and future research could measure the outcome variables at several points in time to explore how self-compassion is related to the trajectory of perceived social or academic difficulties over time.

Interestingly, recommendations for coping with homesickness vary with respect to whether they recommend a self-compassionate approach or not. On one hand, some approaches to reducing homesickness advocate ideas that are compatible with self-compassion, such as helping the homesick person maintain perspective or acknowledge that the feelings are normal (Thurber & Walton, 2007), viewing homesickness as a process (Tognoli, 2003), and focusing on secondary coping strategies (*i.e.*, changing oneself to fit the new conditions as opposed to attempting to change the

conditions to fit oneself; Thurber & Weisz, 1997). On the other hand, some approaches to homesickness are decidedly not self-compassionate. For example, some writers instruct people to ignore or suppress their feelings of being homesick and their thoughts about home (Baier & Welch, 1992), which may lead to rumination (Gold & Wegner, 1995). A self-compassionate approach would presumably help people to hold their homesickness in mindful awareness without either suppression or exaggeration (Neff, 2003a). Furthermore, a self-compassionate approach would suggest that students treat their social or academic difficulties as transient and as likely to improve over time. People who see negative events and emotions as malleable and controllable have higher well-being and experience lower depression during the transition to college (Tamir, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2007).

The results of this study suggest that a self-compassion intervention might help certain students adjust to college. Some schools have implemented programs, such as First Year Experience Programs, to help students deal with social, academic, and emotional challenges during their first year at college (Schrader & Brown, 2008), and self-compassionate training may be a beneficial addition to such programs. If students were instructed to think about the difficulties they encounter as typical for college students and encouraged to treat themselves kindly when social and academic problems occur, they may be less affected by academic and social struggles (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2011; Neff et al., 2005). In addition, promoting a sense of common humanity should increase students' perception that their struggles are shared by others and lead to more self-disclosure about one's problems that aid in managing homesickness and other negative emotions. The fact that highly self-compassionate students were less depressed, less homesick, and more satisfied with their decision to attend the university and that self-compassion attenuated the negative effects of academic and social problems suggests that programs designed to promote self-compassion would benefit students and possibly reduce first-year attrition.

The tendency to respond with self-compassion and treat oneself kindly in the face of difficulties clearly benefited students during the transition to college, suggesting that self-compassion may be viewed as a useful tactic for coping with negative events (Allen & Leary, 2010; Neff, 2011; Sbarra et al., 2012). Although the benefits of self-compassion were most clearly evident with respect to social difficulties, students who were high in self-compassion were able to weather both academic and social difficulties better than those who were low. Their ability to be compassionate toward themselves, maintain equanimity, and treat themselves kindly allowed students to experience academic or social difficulties without excessive depression, homesickness, or dissatisfaction with their decision.

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