

Being kind to yourself: Investigating the effects of a brief self-compassion intervention on self-oriented perfectionism in post-secondary students

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Perfectionism

Scholars describe perfectionism as the tendency to have exceptionally high standards and being overly critical when these standards are not met (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Perfectionism is especially common in post-secondary students, and recent trends have demonstrated that these rates are continuing to increase (Curran & Hill, 2019). There are two types of perfectionism: *adaptive perfectionism* involves setting high standards, but feeling content with the efforts invested into achieving these standards, even if they are not necessarily met (Alanna et al., 2022). In contrast, *maladaptive perfectionism* involves setting high standards and being overly critical when these standards are not obtained (Alanna et al., 2022). Research has shown that individuals who portray maladaptive

perfectionist behaviors often experience more negative mental health outcomes such as increases in psychological distress (Alanna et al., 2022; Koutra et al., 2023) and decreases in academic self-efficacy (ASE) which describes one's confidence in their abilities to succeed in various academic tasks (Chemers et al., 2001).

There are various types of maladaptive perfectionism, but the form most people are familiar with is referred to as *self-oriented perfectionism* (SOP), as categorized by Hewitt and Flett (1991) in their Multidimensional Model of Perfectionism. SOP describes those who place unrealistic standards on themselves and are highly critical of their own performance when their standards are not met. Individuals who exhibit more SOP often struggle to be kind to themselves and experience more psychological distress (Alanna et al., 2022; Biskas et al., 2022).

Self-Compassion

The concept of self-compassion is derived from the idea of compassion, which entails approaching the suffering of others in an accepting, non-judgemental way that allows the receiving person's suffering to be acknowledged and understood (Neff, 2003a). In relation to this, *self-compassion* can be described as a process that involves approaching one's own suffering with the same understanding and kindness we would give to others.

Neff's (2003a) model of self-compassion consists of three main components. The first element involves self-kindness, which emphasises the importance of being kind and understanding of one's hardships rather than being harsh and engaging in unnecessary self-criticism. The second element is mindfulness, which refers to being aware of one's negative emotions that arise from experiences of failure or hardship, but not over-identifying with them. Lastly, common humanity consists of the idea that an individual's hardships and struggles are part of the human experience and should not be perceived as isolating. In relation to students who possess high levels of perfectionism, practicing self-compassion has shown to decrease maladaptive perfectionism (Bearden et al., 2024). In addition to this, practicing self-compassion has shown to have significant effects on increasing psychological well-being (Fong & Loi, 2016) and ASE (Martin et al., 2019) in student populations.

Self-Compassion Interventions

Self-compassion intervention strategies, administered in varying forms, have shown to elicit significant increases in self-compassion in participants (Ko et al., 2018; Lui et al., 2023). Not only do these interventions promote self-compassion, but they have shown to have positive impacts on other aspects such as perfectionism, ASE, and well-being in student populations

(Bearden et al., 2024; Dundas et al., 2017; Lui et al., 2023). These interventions are typically eight weeks in length (Bearden et al., 2024; Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017), but significant results have been found in interventions in as little as two weeks (Dundas et al., 2017). Partaking in these interventions often requires participants to complete, on average, one to two hours of self-compassion per week (Bearden et al., 2024; Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017), and thus are fairly time intensive. Considering post-secondary students are often under immense levels of stress pertaining to academics, finances, and interpersonal relationships (Pitt et al., 2017), engaging in these time-intensive practices may not be feasible. Furthermore, practicing self-compassion requires a level of consistency (Ward & Wheaton, 2022), which also may not necessarily work for busy students.

Present Study

The purpose of the current study was to determine whether completing a five-minute self-guided self-compassion audio practice multiple times a week would yield changes in self-compassion, SOP, ASE, and well-being in post-secondary students. It was hypothesized that the brief self-compassion intervention would show decreases in SOP, and increases in self-compassion, ASE, and well-being in participants.

Method

Participants

The participant sample consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in a first year psychology course at Red Deer Polytechnic. These students were assigned to the experimental group ($n = 33$) or the control group ($n = 22$) based on the course section in which they were enrolled. The final sample of students ($N = 55$) were primarily female, Caucasian, and in their first year of study, which was representative of the student population at RDP. The mean age of participants in the experimental group and the control group were 22.53 years and 24.33 years, respectively.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through recruitment materials that described the details of the current study, which were sent to and distributed to instructors. The researchers also made appearances in various classes to discuss the project to potential participants. Those who were interested were instructed to email the researchers. During the first week of the study, participants were emailed an online pre-test survey that was to be completed. Additionally, each week of the intervention consisted of the experimental group completing a self-guided audio self-compassion practice that was approximately five

minutes in length. With this, participants were asked to aim to complete this practice five times a week. At the end of each week, participants were asked to record how many times they completed the practice. This process was repeated for a total of five weeks. After the five-week period, a post-test survey was administered to both conditions.

Measures

Four validated and reliable measures were used in this study. The first scale was the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b) which assessed levels of self-compassion in the form of the three components of self-compassion: self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity. Higher scores of this scale indicated greater self-compassion. The second measure was the Self-Oriented Perfectionism subscale, which was from the full Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Higher scores of this scale indicated higher levels of SOP. The third measure was the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (Chemers et al., 2001) which evaluated one's experiences in various academic tasks. Higher scores on this measure demonstrated higher ASE. The fourth scale used was the Brief Inventory of Thriving (Su et al., 2014) which measured individuals' psychological well-being. Higher scores on this scale suggested higher levels of thriving.

The self-guided audio self-compassion practices used in this study originated from Dr. Kristen Neff's self-compassion website. Five of the available self-compassion practices were chosen to be included in this study with each week of the intervention utilizing a different practice. These practices were slightly different in terms of the focus/topic, but were all focused on fostering self-compassion. These practices ranged from four to eight minutes in length. Additionally, the post-test survey for the experimental group consisted of open-ended questions that evaluated the experiences of participants with completing the self-compassion practices. Demographic questions were also included in the post-test surveys.

Results

Pre- and Post-Test Analyses

Participants reported completing, on average, approximately three self-compassion practices a week, yielding between 15-25 minutes of self-compassion completed each week. Results from repeated-samples *t*-tests revealed that the experimental group increased significantly in self-compassion, ASE, and well-being, and decreased significantly in SOP at post-test compared to the pre-test. The control group demonstrated no significant differences in self-compassion, ASE, or SOP at the

post-test compared to the pre-test. Interestingly, well-being significantly increased in the control group at post-test.

MANOVA

The results of the MANOVA analysis indicated there was a significant multivariate main effect of the intervention with approximately 26% of the variance of the dependent variables being attributed to the intervention. A follow-up discriminant analysis revealed that participants who reported higher levels of self-compassion, ASE, and well-being, and lower levels of SOP were involved in the intervention. Likewise, participants who reported lower levels of self-compassion, ASE, and well-being, and higher levels of SOP were part of the control group.

Open-Ended Responses

Participant responses to the open-ended questions demonstrated that participants overall enjoyed completing the self-compassion practices. In terms of perceived benefits, participants reported that benefits from completing the practices involved noticing increases in self-awareness and self-reflection (e.g., “I found that I became more in touch with my feelings, and how to accept them more often”) and increases in self-compassion (e.g., “It made me think about how we all go through hard times and self-doubt, even when someone else’s life seems to be perfect compared to ours”). Participants also

reported that the practices provided them with an opportunity to decompress and relax (e.g., “It just gave me time to calm down, especially if I’ve had a rough day, and it helped me to just take a second to breathe”). With this, most participants reported a high likelihood of practicing self-compassion in the future, but perhaps using different methods of self-compassion (e.g., “I see myself continuing to practice self-compassion in the future, however I think I prefer to use another method other than the guided audio”).

Participants did report some difficulties with completing the practices, citing time management as a primary reason (e.g., “It felt like one more thing to do on busy days”). Another difficulty reported involved feeling disengaged from the practices, or struggling to connect with the practices (e.g., “Some of them didn’t feel overly relevant to me so I struggled to connect”). Additionally, participants also reported difficulties with being consistent with completing the practices (e.g., “I found it hard to remember to do the practices, only remembering when the end of the week email was sent out”).

Discussion

The findings of the current study align directly with the proposed hypothesis, demonstrating that the brief self-compassion intervention yielded significant differences in self-

compassion, SOP, ASE, and well-being. Considering the relatively small sample size, these findings make an important contribution to the current literature as it furthers the understanding of the utility of brief self-compassion interventions on post-secondary students.

Intervention Effects

At post-test, participants who completed the brief self-compassion intervention demonstrated significant decreases in SOP, and increases in self-compassion, ASE, and well-being compared to those in the control group, which reflect similarities in other research findings regarding self-compassion interventions, particularly of both formal (Bearden et al., 2024) and brief (Lui et al., 2023) interventions. This highlights how brief self-compassion interventions can yield similar results as longer, formal self-compassion interventions. With this, however, the findings of the current study differ from previous self-compassion practices, specifically in terms of how much self-compassion is practiced. For instance, other brief self-compassion interventions involve completing between a total of 3-4.5 hours of self-compassion (Dundas et al., 2017; Lui et al., 2023). The participants of the current study completed, on average, between 1.25-2 hours of self-compassion in total during the intervention. This reflects how practicing less self-

compassion can still yield significant changes in self-compassion, as compared to other brief self-compassion interventions.

The current study highlights how practicing self-compassion can have significant effects on SOP, ASE, and well-being, but self-compassion has been found to be associated with a number of other positive benefits. For example, self-compassion has shown to increase self-esteem (Muris & Otgaar, 2023), emotional regulation (Pauksik et al., 2022), and interpersonal relationship satisfaction (Lathren et al., 2021). These findings suggest that the participants in this study who practiced self-compassion may have also experienced enhanced well-being in areas beyond what was measured in the present study.

Although practicing self-compassion has shown to have numerous benefits, engaging in formal self-compassion practices, such as workshops or courses, may not be feasible for busy post-secondary students (Pitt et al., 2017). With increasing mental health issues amongst students (Linden et al., 2021), institution mental health supports are struggling to meet the mental health demands of students (Watkins et al., 2011), making it challenging for students to access the services they require. As the current findings reflect, practicing self-compassion for a few minutes a day can have significant impacts

on well-being in students, among other benefits relating to SOP and ASE. These findings suggest a brief self-compassion intervention may be a useful tool that can help support students' mental health while they wait to access formal mental health services.

Open-Ended Responses

Participant responses regarding their experiences with the self-compassion practices used in the current study were primarily positive. Firstly, participants explained how they derived various benefits from completing the practices that enhanced their perceptions of themselves. More specifically, the benefits derived from the practices highlighted increases in the three elements of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Participants reported that expressing kindness to oneself, recognizing they are not alone in their feelings, and feeling more grounded led to increases in self-compassion. Additionally, completing the self-compassion practices gave participants an opportunity to take a break to focus on themselves. Participants reported that taking a moment to decompress allowed them to feel less stressed and more relaxed, highlighting how the self-compassion practices aided in enhancing mental health and well-being of those in the experimental group. Furthermore, participants reported that by

engaging in these practices, they now feel more prepared to approach their emotions in a more positive light, focusing on the importance of being kinder to oneself when experiencing hardship.

Participants did report experiencing some difficulties when completing the self-compassion practices with a primary barrier involving finding time to complete the practices. Considering students are busy with numerous other things (Pitt et al., 2017), this is to be expected. With this, however, participants who completed a few practices a week still noticed benefits from completing them. This suggests that completing a small amount of self-compassion can still yield positive impacts on the well-being of students.

Limitations and Future Directions

A main limitation within this study lies within the fact that follow-up analyses were unable to be conducted to determine the long-term effectiveness of the intervention due to constricting project timelines. Future studies should implement a longitudinal approach to address this limitation. With this, however, it would be important to consider whether participants continued to practice self-compassion after the intervention to determine if the intervention alone was effective, or if participants are required to continue practicing self-compassion

after the intervention. A second limitation involves using self-report measures, which could have resulted in social-desirability bias in participant responses. Additionally, considering the participant sample was primarily female and Caucasian, including a more diverse sample of participants would increase the generalizability of results and would create a better understanding of how a brief self-compassion intervention impacts a broader demographic of individuals. Lastly, future studies could implement the use of various types of self-compassion practices (e.g., journaling, engaging in self-care) to gauge whether any differences between the effectiveness of each technique would arise, leading to the possibility that one technique may be more effective in a brief self-compassion intervention dynamic.

Conclusion

With increasing levels of perfectionism in post-secondary students (Curran & Hill, 2019), students are in need of accessible ways to combat the effects associated with perfectionism, specifically in terms of their academic success and mental health. Recent studies highlight the importance of self-compassion and how it can be used to enhance a multitude of aspects relating to well-being (Bearden et al., 2024; Lathren et al., 2021), especially in post-secondary students. The present

study sought to explore whether brief self-compassion interventions may have comparable results to longer, more time intensive efforts to increase self-compassion. Indeed, the present study did demonstrate that engaging in a brief self-compassion intervention can yield significant impacts on self-compassion, ASE, SOP, and well-being in post-secondary students, which align with findings from other self-compassion interventions (Dundas et al., 2017; Lui et al., 2023). Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on the effects a brief self-compassion intervention has on post-secondary students, specifically in terms of its impacts on SOP, ASE, and well-being.

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