

Self-compassion and its Relevance to the Academic Performance and Achievement

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Abstract

Many of us know how to be there for others, how to comfort when someone is going through a hard period of their life when they need our actions, warm words, or just our presence. But what is stopping us to be that to ourselves? Being compassionate towards oneself may bring a big change in how we see ourselves as well as the world and other people in it. A way of growth is by accepting what we are facing right now and doing our best at the moment to solve the possible problem. Even unsolved problems do not mean that we are stuck for the rest of our lives. In the school environment, self-compassion may be one of the crucial aspects of self-perception, not necessarily related to achievement, but for sure related to not giving up and not losing hope that one can make it with hard work, and that results do not need to be present now to feel that we are on the right path of overall success.

Keywords: *Compassion; Self-compassion; Self-esteem; Academic achievement*

1. Introduction

Even in individualistic societies, the idea of self-caring is still not practiced or understood well enough by the majority. If we are to ask a group what being a good person means, a big percent would mention among many other adjectives, that it is someone kind, caring and good to others. This then leads us to understand what is compassion, and it is caring that includes a set of cognitive competencies, which is something that distinguishes humans from nonhuman caring present among animals [1]. Compassion also, according to Oxford English Dictionary, is defined as 'suffering with another; participation in suffering; fellow feeling', coming from the Latin word *compati* which means 'to suffer with'. According to some big names in history who were trying to understand human emotions, such as Lazarus, as mentioned in Strauss et al. [2], compassion is not only defined as being moved by someone suffering, but also wanting to help. According to Strauss et al. compassion then, is to be seen as being aware of someone who is suffering, being emotionally and cognitively moved by it (one feels uncomfortable

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tolerating seeing one suffer) and acting or at least being motivated to help. By defining it as such, compassion may be understood as one of the necessary emotions for one society, or even making it more comprehensive, for humankind. Being there for each other, being able to understand what one is feeling, and doing what is in one person's hands to improve the situation or condition of another being is what brings and keeps us functioning together as a society. If we are to reinforce prosocial behavior in the youth, and in this case, specifically in the school-age children, we would see improvement in many areas. But being there for others is not enough for one to experience a sense of well-being and good mental health. How we deal with ourselves is in many ways affecting how we deal with others, be it that individual is behaving opposite to themselves or how they do towards others, or on the other hand the same way, either be bad or good.

2. Self-compassion

We will now go from interpersonal towards intrapersonal compassion, which we would call self-compassion. According to Neff [3], 'self-compassion involves being influenced or touched and open about one's suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness'. This, in different words again we would define as treating oneself with the same kindness and concern one would treat a good friend who is in need, focusing on self-kindness and not self-criticism.

So, what are exactly the experiences one portrays when showing compassion towards others and what does it feel like? One firstly needs to notice suffering; again, being moved by it means that one should be uncomfortable to not do anything and not feel anything; one then offers understanding and kindness when an individual fails or makes mistakes; and lastly, before acting, you understand that suffering, failure, and imperfection are all part of the human existence and experience. And self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself when you are going through some difficult time, time of failure, or just going through a period of not liking something about yourself.

Professor. Dr. Neff, [3], has developed the model containing three elements of self-compassion which include: self-kindness vs. Self-judgement; common humanity vs. Isolation; and Mindfulness vs. Over-Identification. The first element, self-kindness vs. Self-judgement says that self-compassionate people recognize that they are imperfect, that they may fail, and that life difficulties are inevitable for them. This understanding makes them more gentle toward themselves when they are in the situation confronting some painful experience, rather than getting angry at themselves or others when life is not going through the ideal path we had made in our heads. So, caring for ourselves as we would care for others in the same situation. The second element, the Common humanity vs. Isolation, says that self-compassion involves the recognition that not only I as an individual am facing suffering or personal inadequacy, but that it is a part of shared human experience, is something all human beings, are going through, rather than relating it to oneself by saying 'it only happens to me'. The recognition of the common humanity, that we all share pain throughout life should be a moment of connection with others. The third element, Mindfulness vs. Over-identification, says that self-compassion, is leaning toward tranquility which requires taking more of a balanced approach to the negative emotions, where emotions should not be either suppressed or exaggerated, but one should be open to the reality of the present moment.

If we have defined what self-compassion is, we would also need to note what self-compassion is not, as it has been misunderstood by self-pity, self-indulgence, or self-esteem. Self-compassion is not self-pity, because one is not to become self-

centered to be kind toward themselves and forget about others and their similar or same problems while being completely immersed in their own. Individuals who come to the stage of self-pity, ignore their interconnections with other people while feeling that they are the only ones in the world who are suffering and dealing with such problems. Self-compassion is not self-indulgence, as one can think that they should only do things that please them, such as taking drugs, or giving too much free time- not doing anything, leads to harm to well-being. But in reality, for happiness and health, one may need to involve an amount of displeasure for the sake of well-being and overall satisfaction, such as quitting smoking or losing weight [4].

3. Self-compassion and Self-esteem

When we talk about self-esteem, we may notice that in reality the cultivation and artificial magnification of self-esteem in individuals may lead to and come with the problematic aspects of it. According to Damon and Seligman, as mentioned in Neff [3], high levels of self-esteem may lead to some negative analogies, such as that an over-emphasis on liking and evaluating oneself may lead to narcissism, self-centeredness, self-absorption, lack of concern for others, which is not what self-compassion is about. We hear that self-esteem is one of the healthy attitudes one may have, but it has been suggested [5], that self-esteem works as a self-defense mechanism when individuals are not able to verify their identities, and self-esteem is produced by the previous successful efforts at the self-verification, it protects the individuals from the possible distress related to the lack of the self-verification, leading to preservation of the threatened structural arrangements. Here then, according to tot Cast and Burke, self-esteem is used as a reservoir that when used, becomes empty and is in need of fulfillment again until the next threatening situation comes.

Surprisingly, self-esteem tends to make self-improvement difficult as it involves inflated and inaccurate self-concepts in the pursuit of it, as well as that high and not low self-esteem, is associated with narcissism and prejudice, as well as anger and aggression [6]. Self-esteem includes and puts in front the ego and the threat in front of which one needs to show off and defend their existence, and abilities, self-compassion on the other hand provides greater emotional resilience and stability. Also, it includes less self-evaluation, ego-defensiveness, and self-enhancement, where ego moves from front to the background, and self is not seen as a distinct, separate individual but rather as a part of a greater interconnected self [7].

4. Self-compassion and Academic Achievement

Self-esteem is a construct that we think of most to be related to success at schools, universities, career paths, and work where one has positive feelings about oneself, as well as feeling and believing that one is valued by other people. If we are to talk about the period where an individual goes through the most life changes, from physiological, mental, personality formation and characteristics, we can say that school ages students, and every milestone until adulthood is something which affects the individual and their learned beliefs, attitudes, impressions of the individual toward oneself. This is something that makes the idea of self-concept, which according to Emanuel [8], who looked at the correlation between motivation, self-concept, and academic performance of students, found that self-concept and academic performance are highly correlated. Even though there are the studies supporting that adolescence is the crucial and critical period in the individual's development, and that self-esteem plays a very important role in the development in this period, one study done by Minev et al. [9], shows that high self-esteem has no positive effect on the school performance, and that same study showed how artificially magnified self-esteem leads to the poorer performance in school. This comes hand in hand with the previously mentioned negative effects or consequences of self-esteem, and the possible counterproductive result of it which is poorer academic performance.

This is one of many reasons why self-compassion is supposed to be introduced and reinforced in students as the quality which will help them in dealing with the obstacles related, both intrapersonal and interpersonal. One may ask themselves what self-compassion has to do with education and academic achievement, and how being kinder and being there for yourself would help you in your academic success and overall wellbeing. Another question that may arise is, what attributes and skills do students need to be successful? And to answer this question, we would among many other mention growth mindset, organization, persistence, ability to deal with failure, self-motivated, self-aware, high emotional intelligence, and belief in themselves. Emotional intelligence includes again self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

When a student faces challenges in school, such as failure, it becomes a test for the self-concept and self-view on how one would deal with it. Resilience is defined as the capability to face challenges and youth resilience factors include the interpersonal as well as intrapersonal, and community experiences, where culture influences all three areas while dictating the levels of resilience [10]. We are going to talk about school achievements, academic performance, and test anxiety concerning self-compassion, as these are situations and conditions a student may be in where he or she needs to be there for themselves. According to Leary et al. [11], self-compassion is an important construct that moderates the reactions toward distressing situations, such as failure, embarrassment, rejection, and negative events. Also, according to their study, self-compassionate people have an easier time and happen to be more ready to accept the undesirable aspects of their character and behavior, than would other people with lower levels of self-compassion who would rather turn to obsessing, becoming defensive, and feeling bad in general.

According to Tang [12], resilience is the facilitator of self-compassion responsible for moderating the reactions to bad events, and according to a study, when experiencing a personal failure or situation which happens to be ego threatening, self-compassionate people tend to portray greater emotional resilience. In the study, Tang wanted to explore resilience, self-compassion, achievement emotions, test anxiety, intolerance to uncertainty, and academic performance induced by examination, where he came up with the following findings. Self-compassion can significantly predict the undergraduates' test anxiety and later predict the intolerance of uncertainty, meaning that students with high cognitive test anxiety had lower levels of self-compassion. Also, students who had obtained a high score in the self-compassion had a good emotional regulation which is positively related to psychological outcomes and positive emotions such as optimism, happiness, and emotional intelligence, as well as the high levels of positive future orientation, as the self-compassion is helping an individual with the proactive coping with uncertainty. And lastly, we can mention that individuals with high levels of self-compassion have more positive and bright expectations for the future, as they believe in their ability to cope with the problems that may come their way. When seeing those results, we can say that it would be beneficial to try and integrate more self-compassion programs in schools and academic life, rather than the self-esteem programs as a primary way of encouraging the positive self-attitudes among students, where there won't be such an emphasis on liking and evaluating oneself while comparing to other students, which as we have already mentioned with self-esteem, may lead to the narcissistic behaviors and distorted concepts of self.

According to Neff et al. [13], self-compassionate individuals would rather see failure as a learning opportunity and would focus on accomplishing the task they have at hand. On the other hand, individuals who are lacking self-compassion would rather go through the way of enhancing their self-image by demonstrating to others their superiority or also acting in defense against the label of failure by simply avoiding the situations in which they may be perceived as incompetent by others. So, we can also

add that self-compassion brings about greater self-confidence in the individual and less fear regarding possible failure, where an individual would more easily make master goals which by itself act as the motivation for those who know how to use it. To touch on motivation, we need to add that according to the same study, self-compassion tends to be more relevant to the motivational patterns of academic achievement. Which makes sense and is something to be cultivated in students, as motivation can be seen as being intrinsic and extrinsic, and according to Ryan and Leci [14], people who are intrinsically motivated experience life as more enjoyable and satisfying. So this again brings us back to self-esteem, which is extrinsic motivation in a way because we need the outside approval that we are better and that we are improving, while with self-compassion, one is giving their best in the resolution at the moment, but they are not going to punish themselves or think of it as a blocking problem, rather as a new situation where they will cultivate new learnings.

Another very important aspect of self-compassion related to education and academic achievement we can say is that those who have high levels of self-compassion also tend to adopt the growth mindset [15]. Self-compassionate people tend to see their growth potential and are ready to invest their efforts to improve whatever they are doing. This also reinforces the belief that it is possible to improve, and that the road towards achieving goals is by putting in hard work. The opposite of a growth mindset is a fixed mindset, which tends to be limiting, where an individual would be avoiding challenges, giving up easily in front of the smallest obstacles, feeling threatened by other people's success, and have a desire to look smart, they ignore feedbacks, and their efforts are fruitless. While the growth mindset represents freedom, involving one preserving in the face of failure they encounter, they are aware that effort is necessary for improvement, they accept criticism and have a desire to learn and improve their abilities. For students, school as the institution was supposed to support and reinforce the growth mindset, where students are to take challenges and have the desire to do better and not stop at obstacles but see them as a way of learning. We must add that, for the cultivation and learning about self-compassion in the educational environment, teachers are the ones who carry the most responsibility as for many students, teachers are also the adults they interact with the most. One of the ways one may practice self-compassion includes: treating yourself as a friend, letting yourself make mistakes, practicing mindfulness, trying not to judge yourself as well as reaching out to others, and lastly but maybe most importantly, cultivating healthy self-talk which does not include self-blame or self-punishment.

5. Conclusion

Failure is part of being a human, meaning that it is part of every aspect of human life, including education, career, and life altogether, but if we learn to appreciate and put effort to see it as a lesson, we would use an opportunity to learn and grow with it. Self-compassion is not something we are born with, but we need to learn and teach about it as well as practice it. We have seen that self-compassion is not the same as self-esteem, but more of a better choice with a similar aim, of feeling good while using the intrinsic motivation which comes to be long-lasting.

'It is okay wherever I am in my life right now and the fact that I have failed does not define me and is not something which should put me down. Whatever I am facing will help me to learn new ways to deal with problems in my life, and I can do it, as I am not the first nor the only one that is going through this.'

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