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Can Self-Compassion Reduce Depression and Anxiety in Adolescents?

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Abstract

Self-compassion has been explored as a new intervention strategy for adolescents suffering from depression and anxiety. These two mental illnesses are increasingly prevalent among this age group due to a variety of factors, including transitional difficulties and social stressors (Muris, Meesters, Pierik & de Kock, 2016; Neff & McGehee, 2010). Studies have shown that individuals who practice self-compassion have fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Bluth & Blanton, 2015). Conversely, insecure attachment, low self-esteem, and belief in the personal fable, symptoms common in depressed and anxious individuals, negatively correlate with self-compassion (Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Muris et al., 2016; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jakson, Martin, & Bryan, 2011). The components of self-compassion—namely self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness—appear to combat the negative psychological processes associated with depression, supporting the possibility of self-compassion as an effective intervention strategy for adolescents (Van Dam, Sheppard, Forsyth, & Earleywine, 2011). Additional research suggests that self-compassion is a more effective strategy than self-esteem interventions for combatting adolescent depression and anxiety (Marshall et al., 2015).

Can Self-Compassion Reduce Depression and Anxiety in Adolescents?

Two of the most common mental illnesses among adolescents are depression and anxiety (Muris, Meesters, Pierik, & de Kock, 2016). In fact, recent statistics suggest that approximately one out of every four high school students suffer from anxiety or depression (Bluth et al., 2016). Though several factors contribute to this high statistic, common traits correlated with depression include self-criticism, isolation, negative self-evaluation, and high stress levels (Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Bluth et al., 2016; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010). Between the ages of 12 and 17, individuals can be especially affected by feelings of negative self-evaluation because of the transition process and self-identification that takes place during these years (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Studies have explored numerous coping strategies and interventions counteract depression and anxiety, including distraction, cognitive reappraisal and acceptance, and mindfulness (Diedrich, Grant, Hofmann, Hiller, & Berking, 2014; Edwards, Adams, Waldo, Hadfield, & Biegel, 2014; Muris et al., 2016; Odou & Brinker, 2015; Van Dam, Sheppard, Forsyth & Earleywine, 2011). Self-compassion has also received research attention as a technique for reducing depression and anxiety.

Self-compassion is described by Neff and Dahm (2015) as comprising three components: kindness towards self, awareness of common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-compassion embodies an attitude of kindness towards one's own weaknesses, an acknowledgement of the similar challenges and weaknesses common to all humanity, and a consciousness of one's present state. Research on the effects of self-compassion is relatively new, with most major research occurring within the last decade (Neff & Dahm, 2015). However, studies on the effects of mindfulness (a trait closely related to self-compassion) have been underway for more time and show that mindfulness helps to combat negative effects associated with depression and anxiety, such as low self-esteem and stress (Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Bluth et al., 2015; Neff & Dahm, 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010). Mindfulness is defined as "being open and present to one's own suffering" (Bluth, Gaylord, Campo, Mullarkey, & Hobbs, 2015, p. 480). Self-compassion is positively correlated with mental well-being and positive traits (Bluth & Blanton, 2015). This

literature review will examine the effectiveness of self-compassion in combatting the negative effects of low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. This review will first explore several variables that confer risk for psychological maladjustment in adolescents, including transitional struggles and life stressors. It will also summarize negative psychological processes associated with depression and anxiety such as low self-esteem, insecure attachment, and the personal fable. Finally, the review will inspect positive psychological strategies associated with self-compassion such as self-worth, mindfulness, and connectedness.

Adolescent Development and Psychopathology

Transitional Difficulties

As a part of the transitional progression between childhood and adulthood, adolescents are engaged in the process of identity formation (Neff & McGehee, 2010). As part of this developmental stage, teenage minds often find it difficult to distinguish both between their own thoughts and those of others, and between mere thought and truth (Muris et al., 2016). This difficulty may lead to a tendency to internalize and over-associate these issues with themselves as people (Muris et al., 2016). For example, a teenager may experience loneliness and, rather than view this as a temporary emotion, he or she may create a longstanding belief that he or she is truly unloved and unwanted. This pattern may help to explain adolescents' seemingly limited self-compassion, as they tend to magnify negative beliefs and lack objective, kind behavior toward themselves. Furthermore, the developmental stage is often accompanied by a heightened vulnerability to negative self-evaluation and stress, which can grow into deeper, more harmful emotions (Muris et al., 2016).

Social Stressors

This developmental stage also brings with it various stressors unique to adolescents which may increase depression and anxiety (Muris et al., 2016). Some stressors that (although not unique to adolescents) are especially prevalent during teenage years include body image, peer and family relationships, and academic expectations (Edwards et al., 2014; Muris et al., 2016; Neff & McGehee, 2010). Relationships with family members can be a particularly potent source

of stress, depending on circumstances and the quality of relationships. Neff & McGehee (2010) assert that stable family relationships are likely associated with the presence of self-compassion, while dysfunctional family relationships are associated with negative self-views and low self-compassion. Adolescents coming from minority groups may experience even more stressors because of the presence of discrimination and lower income households (Edwards et al., 2014). Clearly, external factors play a major role in the presence of self-compassion.

Another prevalent stressor is the negative self-evaluation that often accompanies many adolescent mindsets (Bluth et al., 2016). Vulnerability to depression may partially stem from negative self-evaluation and stress that accompany the developmental phase (Bluth et al., 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010). This negative self-evaluation can be linked to the transitional process and self-identification that take place during the teenage years (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Bluth et al. (2016) reported that negative psychological stress responses are triggered by negative self-evaluation and threatened social status (Bluth et al., 2016). These results indicate that resulting stress is not an imagined effect but a tangible presence. Social stressors have been shown to exacerbate depression and anxiety (Bluth et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2014). The difficulties associated with transitional stressors can therefore serve as predictors for depression and anxiety, and thus can present potential areas for intervention. As self-compassion has been shown to act as a protective agent against some of the negative effects caused by life stressors, its implementation can, by extension, be presumed to combat the onset of depression and anxiety in teenagers (Van Dam et al., 2011).

Negative Traits Correlated with Depression and Anxiety

Insecure Attachment

Attachment styles describe habits of codependency that stem from early parent-child relationships (Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, & Bryan et al., 2011). According to attachment theory, early childhood relationships affect the way humans connect with others throughout their lifetimes as well as their perception of their own worth (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011). Secure attachment has consistently shown a positive correlation with the possession of self-compassion

(Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011; Wei, Liao, Ku, & Shaffer, 2011). Research also supports a correlation between attachment style and well-being: secure attachment style shows a positive correlation with well-being, and anxiety and avoidance attachment shows a negative correlation (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011; Wei et al., 2011). In other words, individuals are more likely to both see and treat themselves in positive and caring ways when raised by nurturing parents or guardians (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011).

Avoidance attachment is characterized by a tendency to withdraw from social relationships, while anxiety attachment is often accompanied by an overpowering worry about relationships (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011). Because the ability to connect socially with others is thought to significantly enhance well-being, both avoidance and anxiety attachment styles can have negative effects on mental health (Wei et al., 2011). Secure attachment indicates an absence of both avoidance and anxiety behaviors, and may be a happy medium between avoidance and anxiety attachment styles (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011).

Results from multiple studies support Neff and McGehee's (2010) explanation of the negative correlation between insecure attachment styles and self-compassion. Neff and McGehee stated that those with insecure attachment styles likely have a lessened ability to exhibit kindness towards themselves because they received limited kindness during childhood (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011; Wei et al., 2011). Thus, levels of self-compassion tend to be lower with those who have insecure attachment compared to those with secure attachment. Research additionally supports a correlation between high anxiety or avoidance tendencies and low levels of mattering—a belief that one is cared about and depended upon by other people—which may further affect levels of self-esteem and mental well-being (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011). As previously stated, self-esteem plays a large role in a person's well-being.

Low Self-Esteem and Negative Self-Evaluation

Self-esteem can be defined as “a person's overall cognitive and emotional evaluation of his or her own worth across various domains” (Muris et al., 2016, p. 609). Low levels of self-esteem often accompany depression and anxiety, as well as suicide risk (Marshall et al., 2015; Muris et al., 2016). In contrast, high levels of both self-esteem and self-

efficacy are negatively associated with depression and anxiety (Muris et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Marshall et al. (2015), adolescents exhibiting low self-compassion were most affected by low levels of self-esteem as shown by greater mental health decline. Conversely, those with high levels of self-compassion did not seem to be significantly affected by either high or low self-esteem levels (Marshall et al., 2015). Thus, self-compassion can be seen as a buffering agent against the negative effects of low self-esteem. While self-compassion did not yield significant results among adolescents who were not lacking in self-esteem, it did appear to regulate the mental health of those that were. Furthermore, these results were supported over a six-month period, supporting the idea that self-compassion produces greater long-term effects than self-esteem (Marshall et al., 2015). This indicates that self-compassion contributes more to adolescents' well-being than self-esteem.

Direct interventions geared at increasing self-esteem have been attempted, yet have often failed due to the difficulty of influencing self-esteem and the relatively short-term effects that result (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Self-esteem interventions have also tended to increase egotistical tendencies and decrease healthy social relationships in adolescents (Marshall et al., 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010). On the other hand, self-compassion is thought to be an alternative point of intervention that can be more easily influenced, produce greater long-term effects, and increase resilient and compassionate tendencies (Marshall et al., 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010). Self-kindness, as one of the three components of self-compassion, may act in direct opposition to self-criticism and negative self-evaluation, thereby counteracting a factor of depression risk. Self-compassion has also been shown to rely less on external circumstances than self-esteem, making it a more stable strategy for change (Van Dam et al., 2011).

Personal Fable

Mindsets that are focused on increasing self-esteem tend to produce more egotistical inclinations. When one is egotistical, he or she may experience what many call "the personal fable": the idea that one's experiences are completely unique, and that one is therefore completely alone in his or her challenges (Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010). The personal fable often comes as a result of an inability to distinguish correctly between one's own

perspectives and those of others, and is partially due to a lack of full development (Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010). As a result, adolescents often confuse others' thoughts with their own and perceive that they are constantly being watched by an audience. This can further lead to feelings of being misunderstood, which can lead to isolation and anxiety (Bluth & Blanton, 2015).

Part of self-compassion is the idea of common humanity—the belief that one is not the only individual experiencing certain things, such as pain or loneliness. Studies have demonstrated that adolescents who believe they are completely unique in their circumstances—in other words, those who favor the personal fable—exhibit more signs of depression and suicide risk (Neff & McGehee, 2010). On the other hand, research suggests that individuals with high self-compassion appear better able to depersonalize unpleasant feelings and experiences rather than catastrophize their feelings (Bluth et al., 2016). Furthermore, high self-compassion individuals seem to possess a buffering agent that offsets feelings of anxiety that may come from over-associating themselves with weaknesses (Bluth et al., 2016). Therefore, the presence of self-compassion acts as a protective agent against egocentric tendencies to associate experiences too heavily with oneself, which may aid in combatting adolescent depression.

Positive Traits Correlated with Self-Compassion

When the positive traits correlating with self-compassion are nurtured or encouraged, they help combat depression, reduce anxiety, and lead to possible interventions that enhance self-compassion. Traits such as compassion and joy have recently been shown to increase resilience and mental well-being (Van Dam et al., 2011). As mentioned before, the traits of self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity are building blocks to self-compassion. Along with these components are positive attributes that will be addressed as potential points of intervention, including self-worth, mindfulness, and social connectedness.

Stable Sense of Self-Worth

Self-compassion has shown to be associated with a stable sense of self-worth that is both more powerful and longer-lasting than high self-esteem (Neff & McGehee, 2010). As discussed before, the possession of self-esteem often denotes an egocentric characteristic in

which one's worth is dependent on one's qualities or accomplishments (Marshall et al., 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010). In comparison, self-compassion may draw from a less egocentric point of view as it promotes the use of self-kindness and common humanity, both of which allow an individual to accept weaknesses and dissociate personal failings with his or her value as a person. Both self-esteem and self-compassion appear to contribute to adolescent well-being; however, self-compassion is viewed as the more stable predictor (Muris et al., 2016). Another related predictor is self-efficacy, which measures an individual's belief in his or her ability to accomplish something. Muris et al. (2016) conducted a study measuring the relationship among self-compassion, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in adolescents, and found a positive relationship among the three. Self-worth appears to be influenced by all three self-concepts, although in different ways. Where self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to focus on more egotistical views of self-worth, self-compassion employs the common humanity aspect which aids in eluding comparison. Nevertheless, the three appear to work together to construct positive self-concepts in adolescents, helping to ward off anxiety and depression (Muris et al., 2016).

Another measure of self-worth can be seen in the possession of mattering. Mattering is the belief that one is important to other people, and is positively correlated with the possession of self-compassion (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011). Along with self-compassion, mattering has been found to have a mediating effect on negative mental health caused by unhealthy attachment styles (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011; Wei et al., 2011). Interventions focused on enhancing self-worth and mattering may therefore be used to combat the onset of anxiety and depression.

Mindfulness

Self-compassion promotes mindfulness (a purposeful and objective view of one's own thoughts and surroundings) and vice versa (Edwards et al., 2014; Van Dam et al., 2011). As one is kind to oneself, one tends to be more aware of one's surroundings, allowing for a distance between self and thoughts (Neff & Dahm, 2015). In the previously mentioned study by Muris et al. (2016), mindfulness was found to be the most influential of the three components of self-compassion in terms of helping treat anxiety and depression. This

strategy may also diminish the personal fable belief by minimizing the potency of personal thoughts. Mindfulness can help prevent negative response patterns to thoughts which, according to Muris (2015), affect one's wellbeing more than the thoughts themselves. Mindfulness and self-compassion are concerned with broadening perspectives rather than avoiding unpleasantness, making them proactive strategies that are focused on promoting rather than resisting (Marshall et al., 2015). Because of this broadening of perspectives, people who possess these traits may be better able to greet challenges and successfully handle difficult circumstances in healthy and effective ways.

Mindfulness and self-compassion interventions have also shown to regulate negative effects of stress and increase self-compassion. A study conducted by Edwards et al. (2014) examined the effectiveness of a mindfulness intervention among Latino adolescents. After an eight-week period of participating in mindfulness activities, the adolescents showed significant increases in mindfulness and self-compassion, and decreases in levels of stress. Other successful mindfulness interventions support that mindfulness and self-compassion can work hand in hand to combat anxiety and depression (Neff & Dahm, 2015).

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness has shown a positive correlation with self-compassion (Bluth et al., 2016; Neff & Dahm, 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010) and constitutes another predictor of mental well-being (Wei et al., 2011). The ability to connect with others and obtain social support provides protection that has been shown to lessen amounts of physiological stress that accompany threatened social status (Bluth et al., 2016). Self-compassion may also influence one's ability to show compassion toward others as these two traits stem from a similar place in the brain (Neff & Dahm, 2015). In a study by Welp and Brown (2014), self-compassionate individuals were found to respond with greater compassion to an individual in need, particularly when that person was thought to be at fault for his or her own situation. It appears that self-compassion influences an ability to view others in a similar context to that in which one views oneself. A self-compassionate individual sees the responsibility and weakness of other human beings but tends to display compassion despite human failings. This tendency appears to follow the pattern of the common

humanity component of self-compassion, which accepts weaknesses and failings as part of the human experience.

As mentioned previously, early parent-child relationships provide an important basis for lifelong patterns of social connection. Secure models of attachment are associated with strong social connections with childhood parental figures, while withdrawal from others often stems from relationships with unresponsive parents (Wei et al., 2011). The enhanced psychological well-being associated with secure attachment can lead to increased abilities to respond to and obtain social support, thereby creating a chain effect of positive coping strategies. Additionally, secure attachment can lead to positive self-other working models (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2011; Wei et al., 2011). This allows adolescents to form both healthy social relationships and wholesome self-perceptions

Conclusion

As the prevalence of depression and anxiety increases among adolescents, self-compassion can pose a viable point of intervention for mediating these psychological symptoms. The relationship between self-compassion, depression, and anxiety is still not fully understood—further research is needed to understand whether a causal relationship exists between the two and, if so, in which direction the causality runs. Nevertheless, the power of self-compassion in mediating negative effects caused by insecure attachment, low self-esteem, and the personal fable can provide an important strategy for fighting depression and anxiety (Bluth & Blanton, 2015; Neff & McGehee, 2010). Future research may further expand the possibilities and use of self-compassion as an effective intervention strategy for adolescents.

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