

Self-reported Practices of Self-compassion of Business Students at Times of COVID-19

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Abstract

Self-compassion focuses on personal well-being, self-forgiveness, and connection to others who may also be struggling with life stressors. Self-compassion practices have been found to support well-being across a variety of populations, including individuals in intellectually and emotionally demanding professional or academic environments. A significant body of research has focused on the impact of self-compassion and associated mindfulness interventions for practitioners and students within the helping professions; however, there is a dearth of research examining self-compassion among those in business and business students. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic created a challenging environment marked by disconnection, isolation, and health-related stressors that affected everyone. The following study examined how business students practiced self-compassion, noted changes in said practice, and how said practice changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Self-compassion, COVID-19, Business, Business education, Wellness

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the United States, causing unprecedented shutdowns of educational, work, and home environments. The worldwide experience of distress resulting from the pandemic has been well documented (McGinty et al., 2020) including the challenges placed upon students. Previous research has examined the definitions of self-compassion and how social work students who utilized self-compassion during the pandemic (Wampole & Kohli, 2022, 2023); however, the literature remains limited on the use of self-compassion in business education programs and its role in COVID-19-related distress among this population. Given the known stressors in business education (Dahlin et al., 2011; Law, 2010), a focus on self-compassion could be beneficial to student wellness.

Literature

Self-compassion

In comparison to compassion, which is an experience of caring emotions and empathy for the world external to oneself, self-compassion reflects this same empathy and non-judgment inward for well-being and regulation. Best researched and defined by Neff (2003), self-compassion is “experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude toward one’s inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one’s own experience is part of the common human experience” (p. 224). Self-compassion notes human fallibility and focuses on the need for forgiveness of oneself and our own mistakes. Neff’s definition also includes six elements- self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification (Neff, 2023). Those practicing acts of self-kindness, recognition that humanity shares common bonds of suffering, and practicing mindfulness of suffering and pain, all can lessen the experience of distress and help one decrease chronic suffering. Participating in self-judgment, isolation, or overidentification with pain can lead one to be absorbed in pain.

Research has grown by examining the use of self-compassion as a means for mitigating work distress in a variety of professions, including social work (Miller et al., 2020), nursing (Joy et al., 2022), and education (Ragni et al., 2023). Additionally, research on self-compassion in university students is growing (Wampole & Kohli, 2022; Kotera, Green, et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022). Research is now expanding outside of more traditional “helping” professions to explore self-compassion in the business world.

Business

Much of the interest in self-compassion in the business world focuses on the role of self-compassion to promote mental well-being and as a protective factor against burnout. In a

study on measuring burnout levels among business students, Law (2010) found that business students reported extreme burnout before final exams and exhibited high levels of emotional exhaustion, even compared to other professions with high rates of burnout. Likewise, Dahlin et al. (2011), discuss the prevalence of stress and mental health concerns among business students and the hesitance of those students to seek help, largely due to a psychosocial climate that stigmatizes mental illness and discourages members from taking actions that can be perceived as a show of weakness.

For individuals in business, whether academically or professionally, self-compassion can be an important tool for improving both their success and mental well-being. Breines and Chen (2012) found that self-compassion improved feelings of well-being and mental health while also helping individuals to perceive their weaknesses as changeable, an attitude that led to greater engagement with self-improvement. Additionally, self-compassion was noted to act as a buffer between evaluative concerns, perfectionism (or the placing of rigidly high expectations on oneself), and feelings of depression (Abdollahi et al., 2020). Likewise, Leary et al., (2007), Shepherd and Carlson (2009), and Rukundo et al. (2020) discuss the value of self-compassion as a tool for managing stress in adverse situations, whether unpleasant life events or failed business projects, and having the resilience to recover from those situations and learn from them.

In a study focusing more specifically on college students, Neely et al. (2009) found that self-compassion had a greater and more reliable impact on well-being than goal management, stress, and availability of support. Additionally, Bui et al (2021) found that students who practiced mindfulness and scored higher on self-compassion also reported significantly lower levels of perceived stress. In another study, Kotera et al. (2019) compared business students to social work students and found that the former showed lower levels of self-compassion, higher levels of shame, were more likely to have reduced mental health, and were generally more prone to help avoidance. The authors of the study attributed the difference between the groups to the fact that self-care and self-compassion are part of the social work curriculum. In contrast, these topics receive little to no attention in business school curricula.

COVID-19

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented experience of distress and mental challenges worldwide. University students were noted to report ongoing anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation (Son et al., 2020; Fruehwirth, 2021; Patankar, 2023). Garvey and colleagues (2023) specifically noted an increase in anxiety of a variety of levels, specifically with business students, during high lockdown times of the pandemic. A concern exists for those areas of education which have had limited to no focus on wellness prior to this

unexpected crisis. For some career paths, such as social work and psychology, interpersonal challenges and stressors, including secondary trauma, can be expected. As such, focus has been made on teaching self-care and self-compassion as a foundation for professional well-being. Similarly, the use of self-compassion by university students during the COVID-19 pandemic has been studied in social work (Wampole & Kohli, 2023), yet a dearth of literature exists examining the same topic in business students.

Given the above noted need for business students to manage mental wellness, the increased distress experienced as a result of the pandemic, and the knowledge that self-compassion can be a buffer against negative emotions, the following research explored these questions:

1. How are you practicing self-compassion at this time of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has your view of self-compassion changed due to the pandemic and related stressors?
3. Has your frequency of self-compassion practice changed with the spread of COVID-19? If yes, how?

Methodology

This exploratory qualitative research is part of a larger, mixed-methods, multistep research project. This research was approved by the University's Office of Research Compliance, and the respondents were guaranteed anonymity. We employed a qualitative systematic content analysis (SCA) approach as defined by Krippendorff (2019) and Schreier (2012). SCA is an appropriate design for analyzing pre-collected data to excavate meaning and key themes.

Research Team

The research team consists of three individuals. The primary author holds a Doctorate of Clinical Social Work and was a tenure-track faculty member in the School of Social Work in the New England region. The second author holds a Ph.D. in business and is a tenured professor in Operations and Supply Chain Management in the School of Business. The third author is a tenured professor in the School of Social Work and has examined self-compassion for several years. The fourth author worked as a graduate student assistant, examining and preparing literature to inform the study.

Trustworthiness

Throughout the study, we employed strategies to ensure rigor and soundness. Using a research team, our rigor was enhanced through the researchers serving as a check and balance for all research activities, including research design, sample selection, and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln,

2011). Our work was collaborative and utilized a consensus coding process as described by Halpin (2024). Additionally, we engaged in team discussions to reduce the impact of our assumptions on the research.

Sampling Procedures and Inclusion Criteria

A convenient sampling strategy was employed, as participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the School of Business at a northeastern metropolitan university where all researchers were employed. All students enrolled in the Spring 2020 semester were invited to participate in this web-based survey descriptive research project. The data were collected online using the Qualtrics Survey Software during four months beginning in March, 2020. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants received \$5 Amazon gift cards. Students were presented with the Informed Consent form as the first page of the Qualtrics survey and were able to proceed to the study questions once they confirmed their consent.

Participants

In total, 109 undergraduate and graduate business student responses were received for the larger research project, representing a response rate of 27% from the sample size of 400 business students. From the 109 respondents who completed the multiple surveys, 82 students provided codable information on how they were practicing self-compassion during the pandemic, 78 provided codable data on how the pandemic affected their views of self-compassion, and 69 provided information on whether and how the frequency of self-compassion practice changed with the spread of COVID-19. About 81% of the respondents identified as Caucasian. According to the United States Census Bureau (2024), 93.7% of the residents in the study area identify as White/Caucasian only; therefore this study's participants may reflect those of a more diverse racial background. Only 22% of the respondents identified as male, 83% were heterosexual, about 62% were single, and 20% of the respondents reported being either married or in a civil union. About 24% lived in urban areas, about 21% lived in rural areas, and the remaining lived in suburban areas. Forty-four percent of respondents identified as Democrats, 16% Republicans, and the remaining identified themselves as Independent. Forty-four percent identified as atheist, 10% agnostics, and 39% Christian. Nineteen percent of the respondents identified as having a disability.

Data Analysis

We utilized Krippendorff's (2019) four-step process of unit identification, sampling, coding, and reducing. The unit to be analyzed was the data collected from a multi-step mixed-method study on the students' practices of self-compassion during the COVID-19 pandemic and how student

views of self-compassion were changed by the pandemic. The raw data for the two qualitative questions were cleaned, and the transcripts were coded and analyzed. After careful and repeated examination of the transcripts, categories and subcategories of analysis were developed and defined. As noted above, inter-coder agreement (Halpin, 2024) was employed for accuracy and trustworthiness. The categories of themes evolved during the analysis as more patterns, variations, and concepts were identified. Analysis was further accomplished by identifying the themes that emerged most frequently across the transcripts.

Results

How were students enrolled in business programs practicing self-compassion during the COVID-19 pandemic?

A total of 82 students provided feedback related to our first research question. The results from our respondents yielded six thematic areas: Hobbies, Physical Care, Mental Health Care, Relationships, Pandemic Practices, and Self-prioritization.

Participants noted that engaging in hobbies helped defray the stress brought on by the pandemic. Activities included gaming, reading, spending time with pets, and investing in the stock market. In addition, others noted that focusing on their physical care includes cooking nutritious meals, hiking, practicing yoga, and even smiling. Participants frequently mentioned mental health skills. Many noted they continued to attend therapy and practice skills learned in treatment. Others journaled, practiced self-forgiveness, acceptance, and meditation to care for their internal selves. Participants also noted the importance of focusing on their relationships with others, including maintaining socially distanced connections with friends and family as a means to practice self-compassion. Others also noted that setting boundaries with loved ones at this time was critical to their needs. Respondents also noted that they felt engaging in pandemic practices including social distancing and safety measures was their means of practicing self-compassion. Finally, self-prioritization included responses that noted pacing oneself and challenging old self-expectations as well as reorienting to the here and now and taking things one step at a time. As one respondent noted:

I have truly discovered self-compassion during the pandemic. I've been at a job that's mistreated me for years, and I've finally built up the courage to leave. I discovered self worth as well as self-compassion. The job had a negative impact on my mental health, and I really had to discover self-compassion to get me through the difficult time.

One participant noted, "...it's okay for things to feel out of control emotionally and out of sorts during this time." Another participant stated, "Trying to go easy on myself when something bad/sad/irritating happens while also allowing myself to feel my real emotions."

Eight participants noted having no change or no use of self-compassion during this time. Little information was provided to expand upon their answers. In another case, one participant shared a concerning view on the space for self-compassion and feelings of perfectionism:

I'm not able to practice this as everything I do effects (sic) my life and those involved in it. I have no room for failure and this is very hard on me as I am a young growing adult trying to navigate life.

Yet another participant answered the prompt, "falling into a depression."

How did the pandemic affect students' views of self-compassion?

A total of 78 students provided responses related to our second research question. Sixteen of our participants noted that their self-compassion views were not changed by the pandemic. The remaining responses resulted in two major themes: Interpersonal and Personal. Some respondents noted that during the pandemic, they had a greater focus and appreciation for time with family and noted how much they missed social connections. As one student noted,

I had not realized how much of a role socializing (sic) played in my self care(sic). It has been difficult to meet friends for coffee or lunch. This has contributed to my feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Others noted the pandemic led to greater self-reflection, a realization of the need for their own independence and self-care, and permission to be flexible with their own self.

I realized that I was too hard on myself in the first year of college (last year) and was filling my schedule with way more than I could handle. I usually do not like the term (sic) of "self-compassion" but I have more respect for it now.

I realized that being very hard on myself will only foster failure, not success

I am more grateful for what I have, and have been practicing different techniques to not be as hard on myself

Before the pandemic, I was a waitress working a full schedule in addition to upper level college courses. I was busy, always moving, and when I have a day off I spent it catching

up on work and chores. Now, I spend all my days at home. I am working less in a physical sense, which makes me feel less deserving of rest. I feel like I am less deserving of tenderness because I am in the comfort of my home office space all day.

How did the frequency of self-compassion practice change with the spread of COVID-19?

Finally, 69 students provided responses related to our third research question. Regarding this question, 36 respondents reported no change to their practice, while 19 and 2 respondents noted increased and decreased practice, respectively. An additional three students noted that although they did not specify a change in frequency of practice, they did share how their practice had changed. For instance, one participant noted, "I do not track any practices of self-compassion. My focus has been on creating and maintaining a new routine which keeps me busy and complies with public health best practices."

For those reporting a decrease in practice, most noted that either their practice fell out due to the stress of the pandemic, or because their prior practice involved socialization, which was then compromised by social distancing. As one respondent shared

...it's not as frequent. For example, I used to workout daily, now I just do a workout a couple of times a week. Also, all my favorite activities that I used to do with my friends are non-existent (sic) now. It's a little more isolating in my self-compassion practices.

Students who reported an increase in self-compassion practice predominantly attributed it to the additional time available due to the lockdown. For instance, "...I have more time to do things for myself like take nature walks, read, and meditate," and "there has been more time to be home and have time to do things that are therapeutic for me." Others noted that the pandemic and ensuing stress caused a response of self-reflection. "I am much more mindful of being compassionate to myself now," noted one respondent, while another stated, "I have been focusing more on myself and loving myself in a time of isolation."

Discussion

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, students and faculty faced unprecedented changes to education and wellness. As such, students' self-compassion needs were evident. Students reported a variety of themes related to self-compassion practices, including hobbies, physical self-care, mental health care, relationships, pandemic-related practices, and prioritizing the self. Many students shared similar practices or an overlap of different themes, all of which were used during the pandemic. As noted above, a concern was raised given two respondents' expressions around depression and perfectionism. This highlights the need for students in

business programs to receive education on wellness and self-compassion, not just during stressful times, but also for personal health and life balance, aligning with prior research findings (Abdollahi, 2020).

A challenge with this question is determining the differences between students' understanding of self-compassion versus their actions of self-care. It is recommended that in future research, participants be provided with definitions of self-compassion and self-care to assist in their responses and self-evaluation.

Regarding pandemic-related changes in views of self-compassion, the responses from participants who noted changes were focused on both the interpersonal and personal aspects. Many respondents shared that the pandemic brought about a realization of the importance of connection with family and friends, and that social distancing took a toll on their emotional well-being. This aligns with the self-compassion element of common humanity (Neff, 2003), which prompts the recognition that not only do all beings experience pain, but that connection with one another can also lift us from feelings of isolation and loneliness.

For many, the pandemic altered their perspective on self-compassion, leading to a realization of the need to focus on the self. This includes recognizing when students are too hard on themselves, practicing self-forgiveness, and giving themselves permission to rest. These findings mirror the elements of self-kindness and mindfulness (Neff, 2003). By practicing self-kindness over judgment, students give themselves room to recognize the normalcy in life's ups and downs and create validation and warmth for themselves. Similarly, mindfulness in self-compassion involves creating space between the suffering and the self. Students who recognize their pain mindfully can note that such discomfort is a natural response to a pandemic, which may then lessen their tendency to personalize pain.

Along similar lines, some respondents noted that they turned to the practice of gratitude for what they did have and how others may be in more need. This again highlights the understanding of common humanity and mindfulness (Neff, 2003), noting that all are experiencing the pain of a pandemic and that this pain is not a singular, individual experience. One challenge with this question was that it invited a closed-ended answer of not experiencing change to practice. With this in mind, future research is needed in the form of in-person interviews with follow-up probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of how current practices benefit individuals in challenging times.

A limitation of this study is the overall homogeneity of demographic identifiers of our participants. Since the study's population reflects a majority white demographic, future

research must include a more diverse student population to ensure broader representation and applicability.

The researchers encountered a limitation with the use of a closed-ended question on changes in self-compassion practices during the pandemic, which led to many responses lacking detail and depth. Of those who did answer, results varied. It is worth noting that the social distancing measures implemented during COVID-19 affected many participants who referenced the inability to connect to others as a barrier to self-compassion practices. For many, the pandemic itself drew attention to the need for self-compassion practices, and some reported increasing these practices in response to this realization.

It is apparent from our findings that many student participants used self-compassion practices during the pandemic and that many had such practices in place prior to the pandemic. It remains essential to ensure that all students are provided with resources such as self-compassion education to support their personal and professional well-being. Despite this need, little is known about the existence of self-compassion training in business programs. As such, programs can benefit from collaborating with other educators in areas such as social work (Kotera et al., 2019), nursing, and education. While these professions focus on managing and supporting others through growth and change, incorporating self-compassion practices for those in business programs can reframe students' perception of failure and growth.

Conclusion

While it is hoped that a worldwide traumatic experience will not recur soon, much can be learned by examining how students define and practice self-compassion as it can be applied to everyday life and acute stress events. The COVID-19 pandemic affected education in various ways, including removing students from community living, altering communication, and switching classroom-based education to online platforms. As such, many students experienced anxiety, depression, and a sense of disconnection. Our study notes that self-compassion became a means for participants to reframe their situation and note the importance of both caring for oneself and connecting with others. Future research should expand on understanding how interconnectedness and focusing on the self can enhance one's well-being in times of distress to improve student mental health and success.

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