

Can Self-Compassion Impact Relationship Satisfaction, Romantic Jealousy, and Willingness to Forgive? Findings of a brief virtual intervention

Anahita Dembi¹, Shreshtha Sharma¹, Megha Dhillon²

Abstract: The aim of the study was to design and assess the effectiveness of a brief virtual intervention to enhance the self-compassion levels of individuals, and examine its impact on Relationship Satisfaction, Willingness to Forgive, and Romantic Jealousy. The design involved a randomised controlled trial with an experimental group and a control group assessed both before and after a week-long intervention. Data was collected online through four questionnaires. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and comprised of 67 men and women (aged 18-24 years) involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship at the time of the study. The intervention was successful in enhancing the self-compassion levels of the individuals in the experimental group. The levels of relationship satisfaction of those in the experimental group were also significantly higher as compared to the control group, post the intervention. No significant inter-group differences were found with regards to the levels of romantic jealousy and willingness to forgive.

Keywords: *Self-compassion, Relationship Satisfaction, Intervention, Forgiveness, Jealousy*

Introduction

One often hears 'You must love yourself before you can love somebody else.' Building on such notions, research in the last few decades has focused on exploring the connection between self-compassion and the role that it may play in relationships. Compassion has been an integral part of the Eastern Philosophical traditions. In Buddhism, Karuna (compassion) is said to incorporate two elements: 'loving-kindness' which is the desire for beings to be happy and the desire that others remain free from suffering (Phelps, 2004). However, discussions by Buddhist monks and scholars have extended the act of compassion to one's own self. For instance, His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2011) has spoken of the importance of self-love in order to develop compassion for others. Embedded in such views of Eastern philosophical thought as well as contemporary psychological ideas of 'the self', Neff (2003a) conceptualized a new perspective on healthy self-attitudes, and proposed the concept of: Self-Compassion (SC), or "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" (Neff, 2003b, p. 87). SC as defined in this way consists of three core constituents, in the face of hardship or personal failure: Self-Kindness, Mindfulness, and Common Humanity. Self-Kindness refers to extending understanding and consideration towards oneself as opposed to being disparaging. The construct of Mindfulness urges one to be aware of any emotional distress without any over-identification, trivialisation or judgement. Lastly, SC entails perceiving one's painful experiences as part of a collective experience all humans share, i.e., Common Humanity. It is this element of SC that distinguishes it from self-centredness (Neff, 2003a), grounding it in compassion for and inter-connectedness with others.

Self-compassion is considered to be a salient self-attitude

owing to its benefits for psychological functioning. SC has been negatively correlated with levels of psychological distress (Marsh et al., 2017; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). An Indian study conducted on young adults found that higher levels of SC resulted in higher general positive affect and life satisfaction (Bhat & Shah, 2015). In another undergraduate population, components of self-compassion displayed positive significant correlations with hedonic human flourishing, social well-being, psychological well-being, and overall human flourishing (Verma & Tiwari, 2017). Sharma and Davidson (2015) found a positive correlation between SC and personal imitativeness, curiosity and exploratory behaviour. This suggests that having an open and accepting stance toward oneself is related to being open to the world, in general.

Self-Compassion has also been associated with interpersonal well-being (Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Neff and Beretvas (2013) found that individuals having high levels of SC were more likely to report high levels of relationship satisfaction, and SC was found to significantly predict the same. Studies have found a positive correlation between SC and relationship quality among undergraduates (Bolt et al., 2019; Jacobson et al., 2018). Self-compassionate individuals have also been found to report lower levels of romantic jealousy mediated by their willingness to forgive (Tandler & Peterson, 2018). Such aspects are what seem to contribute towards relationship satisfaction experienced by self-compassionate individuals. Research on Indian samples has indicated that young people report SC to be efficacious in enhancing perceived self-understanding, positive self-regard, forgiveness, resilience, hope, optimism, well-being, emotional strengths and decreased stress. It catalyses positive intra-personal and interpersonal relationships (Tiwari et al., 2020). Tanwar and Garg (2020) found a negative significant correlation between SC and depression among female teachers from government colleges in Delhi and Meerut city.

¹ Undergraduate Student, Department of Psychology, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi;

² Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi

Corresponding Author: Anahita Dembi, Email : anahitadembi12@gmail.com

It is not surprising therefore, that contemporary psychologists are exploring self-compassion as a therapeutic tool. Forms of psychotherapy like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) echo the historical Hindu and Buddhist practices of mindfulness (Shah, 2020) and view acceptance as a way to achieve freedom from suffering. The DBT manual for borderline personality disorder includes several exercises designed to encourage SC (Linehan, 1993). Acceptance is a core process of ACT that has been linked theoretically to SC and aims at reducing self-criticism (Neff & Tirsch, 2013).

Existing studies have employed exercises like self-compassionate writing (Johnson & O'Brien, 2013), self-affirmation techniques (Lindsay & Creswell, 2014), oral practice activities (Mantelou & Karakasidou, 2017), and group sharing sessions (Smeets et al., 2014) to enhance SC levels.

While there is no dearth of correlational studies linking SC with relationship satisfaction there has been no systematic attempt to establish a causal relationship between the two.

In the present study, the foremost aim became to structure an intervention with the objective of enhancing the SC levels of individuals in heterosexual romantic relationships. The next aim was to see if enhanced levels of SC have any bearing on the relationship satisfaction of individuals, and related constructs like their willingness to forgive and romantic jealousy. The final aim was to implement a brief, completely virtual intervention.

Thus, the following hypotheses were developed:

- The self-compassion scores of the experimental group will be significantly higher as compared to the active control group after the self-compassion intervention.
- The relationship satisfaction scores of the experimental group will be significantly higher as compared to the active control group after the self-compassion intervention.
- The experimental group will demonstrate significantly greater willingness to forgive than the active control group after the self-compassion intervention.
- The experimental group will report significantly lesser romantic jealousy as compared to the active control group after the self-compassion intervention.

Method

Participants

A total of 67 individuals from the Delhi- NCR region in India, participated in the study (12 men and 55 women) with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years ($M=19.72$ years; $SD=1.38$). Participants were recruited through convenience purposive sampling. The inclusion criterion for the sample was individuals in a heterosexual romantic relationship for at least 3 months at the time of the study. Informed consent was taken from each participant and their comfort with engaging in an

online research process was adequately gauged before recruitment.

Measures

All participants filled out the same questionnaire twice-once prior to the intervention and once immediately after the last day of the intervention. Each participant was administered four self-report measures.

Self-compassion (SC): The 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a) was utilized to assess self-compassion. It consists of six sub-scales, viz. Self-Kindness, Mindfulness, Common Humanity, Self-judgement, Isolation, and Over-identification. Responses are indicated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). For example, "I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain". Reverse scoring was done on the negative facets (Self-judgement, Isolation, Over-identification). A total SC score is obtained by taking the mean of all items. Test-retest correlation for the Self-Compassion Scale (overall score) have been reported as .93 (Neff, 2003a). Higher-order CFA confirmed that a single higher-order factor of self-compassion explained the inter-correlations between the six factors (NNFI = .90; CFI = .92) (Neff, 2003a).

Relationship Satisfaction (RS): The level of satisfaction with one's relationship was measured through the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, Dicke & Hendrick, 1998). It consists of 7 items (e.g., "To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?"). It includes a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). Items 4 and 7 are reversed. Higher scores on this scale indicate higher relationship satisfaction. The test-retest reliability of RAS has been found to be .85 and the alpha coefficient has been reported as .73 (Hendrick, Dicke & Hendrick, 1998).

Willingness to forgive another person: The 18-item Transgression-related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al. 2006) was administered to gauge how willing participants are to forgive an individual that caused them hurt (e.g., "Even though his/her actions hurt me, I have goodwill for him/her"). Responses were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Out of the three sub-scales two were negatively scored (Avoidance motivations and Revenge motivations) and Benevolence motivations sub-scale was positively scored, such that higher scores obtained on the scale imply greater willingness to forgive. The scale displays high internal consistency (.85), moderate test-retest reliability (e.g., 8-week test-retest reliability .50), and provides evidence of construct validity (McCullough et al., 1998).

Romantic jealousy (RJ): An 8-item self-report scale adapted by Melamed (1991) from the Romantic Jealousy questionnaire by Pines and Aronson (1983) was employed to assess this construct (e.g., Whenever your partner goes out

without you, do you worry that they will be unfaithful to you?). Participants were required to indicate their responses using a 7-point Likert Scale ranging from Never/Not at all to Always/Very much and the mean of all items resulted in a final jealousy score. Higher scores on the test mean higher levels of romantic jealousy. Split-half reliability of this scale has been found to be 0.84 and item-whole reliability of Cronbach is 0.87 (Melamed, 1991).

Procedure and Design

The randomised controlled trial involved an experimental group and a control group assessed pre-test and post-test. The independent variable was self-compassion which was manipulated through the intervention. The dependent variables were relationship satisfaction, willingness to forgive, and romantic jealousy. An online document consisting of a consent form and demographic details was released to only those who met the inclusion criterion. Upon recruitment the individuals were randomly assigned to the two groups.

Baseline assessment was done using an online survey which included the four measures. It informed the participants of a 30-minute-long session they could be part of in the following days. Four time slots were presented for participants to choose from. The sessions were conducted via online video meeting platform.

The final number of individuals who opted to continue in the experimental group was 37 and that of the control group was 30. The experimental group participants took part in the SC intervention and completed a series of short written exercises. The active control group performed written exercises pertaining to time management. After this, participants (both

groups) were given another short writing exercise to complete every day for the next 6 days by themselves. On the sixth day, survey forms containing all the four scales previously administered were sent to them for impact assessment.

In order to control extraneous sources of variation, the experimental and control group sessions took place simultaneously with each researcher conducting one of the sessions. Both researchers conducted an equal number of experimental and control sessions to minimise the researcher's effects. The instructions for both groups were read out from a predetermined script. Furthermore, all participants performed the same number of writing exercises.

After data collection, the participants were sent a debriefing video. Questions regarding the study were also addressed.

Interventions

The design and exercises for the SC intervention were closely adapted from Smeets et al. (2014) which was found to be effective in enhancing SC levels of the experimental group. The activities were modified moderately to suit the aim of the present study. For instance, the present intervention condensed the three-week long intervention by Smeets et al. (2014) into a week, and did not include any group sharing exercises used previously.

Self-compassion intervention (Experimental Group): The participants were explained that they would be engaging in four short self-reflective writing exercises. Some guidelines were provided, like keeping cameras turned on while doing the activities. They were informed of their rights as research participants. The exercises are described in the table below, in order of conduction.

Table 1
Self-compassion Intervention Exercises

Exercise 1: Mapping critical thoughts	The aim was to get participants to explore their inner self-critical voice by listing their most recurring, negative, and disapproving thoughts about themselves. Two to three minutes were given to write as many such thoughts as they wanted.
Exercise 2: Component A: Recalling a from moment of suffering	Participants were given 5 minutes to recall and write any one moment of suffering their life- a low point marked by difficulty or pain- along with some of the thoughts and emotions going through their mind when it happened.
Component B: Self-compassionate letter	Participants had to keep in mind the experience they just described, and take 10 minutes to write a paragraph expressing understanding, kindness, and concern to themselves, the way they might express it to a friend. The goal was to inculcate understanding towards self by thinking about: "What would you as a compassionate figure say to yourself to ease your suffering?"
Exercise 3: Letter of common humanity to self	Participants were asked to write 5-6 sentences offering a message to common humanity. The concept of common humanity was explained to them with the hope that seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience could help them realize that one is not alone in their suffering.
Exercise 4: Flip the thought	The task was to convert self-critical thoughts that participants had noted down earlier (in Exercise 1) into more compassionate ones. In response to their self-critical thoughts, they had to come up with a few kind, positive phrases/affirmations for themselves in about two minutes. As participants came up with these phrases, they were asked to go over them again and again, silently to themselves.

Participants were asked to repeat the last exercise- i.e., write down the positive phrases for themselves- every day for the next 6 days leading up to the post-intervention assessment. Participants were sent a regular reminder message and they also shared a picture of their daily affirmations.

Time management intervention (Active-Control Group): This consisted of four short reflective exercises, including a time efficiency rating, identifying how they can manage time better, and classifying tasks according to the Eisenhower Matrix. Participants were asked to repeat the time efficiency rating exercise every day for 6 days leading up to the post-intervention assessment.

Results

Independent t-test was used to examine the differences between the experimental group and the active control group. The means and standard deviations of the experimental and control group for all the variables were calculated (Table 2). Shapiro-Wilk test did not indicate a significant departure from normality for SC and Forgiveness for both groups, while RS and RJ did (Table 4).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Independent t test Results at Baseline for all Variables

	Experimental Group (N=37)	Control Group (N=30)	Group	t value	p-value
	M (SD)	M (SD)			
SC	79.68 (16.53)	73.93 (14.35)		1.42	.161
RS	29.81 (3.86)	28.87 (4.04)		0.97	.333
Forgiveness	55.76 (13.80)	54.4 (13.26)		0.41	.065
RJ	20.03 (9.81)	20.03 (8.96)		-0.002	.998

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, SC= Self Compassion, RS= Relationship Satisfaction, RJ= Romantic Jealousy

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Independent t test Results Post Intervention for all Variables

	Experimental Group (N=37)	Control Group (N=30)	Group	t value	p-value
	M (SD)	M (SD)			
SC	86.27 (15.44)	75.4 (15.83)		2.83	.003
RS	30.30 (3.61)	28.53 (4.65)		1.75	.043
Forgiveness	53.92 (12.85)	53.9 (14.06)		0.006	.498
RJ	18.16 (9.04)	17.5 (8.13)		0.31	.378

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, SC= Self Compassion, RS= Relationship Satisfaction, RJ= Romantic Jealousy

Baseline assessment revealed no significant differences between the two groups with regards to self-compassion levels, relationship satisfaction, willingness to forgive and romantic jealousy levels. The first hypothesis was confirmed as a one-tailed t-test after the intervention found that SC scores of the experimental group were significantly higher when compared to the control group. The results also confirmed the second hypothesis which stated that the relationship satisfaction scores of the experimental group will be significantly higher as compared to the control group after the intervention. After the

intervention, a one-tailed t-test revealed that the relationship satisfaction scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than the active control group. Contrary to hypothesis 3, a one-tailed t-test revealed no significant differences between the experimental group and the active control group with regards to their willingness to forgive after the self-compassion intervention. A one-tailed t-test found no significant differences in the levels of romantic jealousy between the SC experimental and control group post the intervention, rejecting the final hypothesis.

Table 4
Shapiro-Wilk test for Normality

		w	p-value
SC	Experimental group	.983	.830
	Control	.964	.395
RS	Experimental	.929	.021
	Control	.908	.013
Forgiveness	Experimental	.971	.430
	Control	.97	.535
RJ	Experimental	.864	<.001
	Control	.895	.006

Note: Significant results suggest a deviation from normality

Discussion

The primary aim of the study was to create a self-compassion intervention and explore its efficacy in increasing not only self-compassion but also relationship satisfaction, relationship jealousy and willingness to forgive. The intervention was successful in enhancing the SC levels of the experimental group participants. The self-compassion levels of the experimental group were higher than those in the control group after the intervention, $t(65) = 2.83$, $p = 0.003$. These results are consistent with Smeets et al. (2014)'s work that involved writing exercises similar to the ones used in this study. Further, whereas past researches (Bolt et al., 2019; Jacobson et al., 2018; Neff & Beretvas, 2013) have hinted at significant positive correlations of SC with relationship satisfaction and relationship quality, the present study is a direct demonstration of how enhanced self-compassion levels can contribute to increased relationship satisfaction.

The activities targeted each individual component of SC i.e., Self-kindness (self-compassionate letter, flip-the-thought), Mindfulness (recalling a moment of suffering), and Common Humanity (letter to common humanity). This aimed to clearly define the construct of self-compassion. The additional one

week-long daily affirmation activity could have helped in sustaining the self-compassionate attitude that was learnt about by the participants in the session. One meta-analysis found that the most robust evidence exists for SC interventions of longer duration, consisting of self-practice elements in between sessions (Kotera & Gordon, 2021). Moreover, instead of presenting them with general affirmations, each of the participants were encouraged to consider their individual set of circumstances (self-critical thoughts, painful experiences) and use those as a foundation to develop their personal phrases. Writing about an important personal value is more self-affirming and helps in increasing self-compassionate feelings as compared to writing about an unimportant value (Lindsay & Creswell, 2014).

Previous literature gives various explanations for why self-compassionate individuals may report higher levels of relationship satisfaction. It is useful to refer to Neff and Beretvas' (2013) work demonstrating how being happy, authentically expressing one's feelings and feeling worthy contribute to greater relational well-being. To the extent that SC can enable people to feel worthier, it may be able to contribute to improved perceptions of one's relationship and a greater connectedness with one's partner due to enhanced resiliency

(Yarnell & Neff, 2013). The degree to which people are kind to themselves is associated with the kindness they display to their partners. Highly self-compassionate individuals tend to be perceived as significantly more caring, affectionate, warm, and accepting by their respective partners, instilling a sense of relatedness and intimacy while also providing autonomy (Neff & Beretvas 2013).

Crocker and Canevello (2008) found that individuals high in self-compassion have more compassionate goals in their social relationships, and lower psychological entitlement. Compassionate goals predict an increase in support and trust among the individuals. Higher levels of SC are linked to a greater likelihood to compromise, a decreased tendency to self-subordinate needs and lower levels of emotional distress (Yarnell & Neff, 2013), which are likely to be associated with productive conflict resolution and eventually higher relationship satisfaction.

There is evidence of how self-compassion can improve resilience, which in turn could potentially impact one's romantic relationships. Leary et al. (2007) found that SC can be effective in buffering people against negative life events. While recalling recent difficult events, participants with higher SC tend to view their problems as a normal part of life, and thus display a lesser tendency to personalize or catastrophize their problems. Further, when faced with failure, self-compassion encourages emotional-focused coping as opposed to emotional suppression (Neff et al., 2005). Such resilience may help in dealing with interpersonal conflict in a productive manner and maintain psychological health within relationships.

Some research suggests that being self-critical could lead to negative impacts on romantic relationships. For instance, self-critical individuals report their partners as less loving, and feel as if their partners were treating them coldly (Mongrain, 1998). Such individuals were also prone to more negative cognitive-affective reactions, hostility, and anger (Zuroff & Duncan, 1999; Gilbert & Miles, 2000). Since studies have shown how lower self-compassion can often lead people to ruminate on their negative emotions (Neff, 2003a; Raes, 2010), it may be possible that such an overreaction during conflict with a partner could stem from here. Even outside of conflict scenarios, being overly harsh towards themselves can make people feel isolated (Brown, 1999). On the other hand, being compassionate towards oneself- owing to the realization of common humanity- alleviates such feelings, giving space for more interconnectedness (Fromm, 1963) with others (which may include romantic relationships) (Rubin & Rubin, 1975).

Since a lot of the underlying mechanisms that operate in romantic relationships seem to be positively impacted by SC, the present intervention was able to successfully increase the overall relationship satisfaction of individuals by means of enhancing SC, without actively including activities targeting RS. According to the Broaden and Build theory, positive

emotions tend to broaden an individual's "thought-action repertoire" i.e., one positive emotion leads to the urge to experience other positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004. p.11). Further, each positive emotion experienced has the ability to enhance personal, social, and psychological resources, not just momentarily but for the long term. These personal resources can then be drawn upon in times of need, transforming individuals into more creative, knowledgeable, socially integrated and healthy people (Fredrickson, 2004). Hence, for instance, by experiencing positive emotions such as SC, the individual may develop other personal resources such as resilience (Leary et al., 2007). These positive emotions also diminish the impact of negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2000), potentially allowing people with higher levels of SC to cope better against emotionally difficult situations in a relationship.

Some findings of the present study, however, were inconsistent with previous researches that revealed how higher self-compassion correlates with higher tendency to forgive others (e.g., Enright et al., 1998; Neff & Pommier, 2013) and a lower likelihood of experiencing jealousy.

Studies evaluating forgiveness interventions have often demonstrated that forgiveness can take some time to be produced. On assessing brief psychoeducation-based forgiveness interventions, Worthington et al. (2000) suggested that for the impact to be prolonged and reliable, interventions must be longer than a few minutes or hours- the more time is spent empathizing with the transgressor, the more forgiveness there will be toward them, suggesting that forgiveness may be difficult to alter within a short span of 6 days.

It has been found that across the world, that the readiness to forgive increases with age. In fact, young adults usually exhibit the lowest level of forgiveness (Kaleta & Mróz, 2018; Kumar & Dixit, 2014). Young adults seem to be more influenced by the attitude of the transgressor when it comes to forgiveness (Girard & Mullet, 1997; Sandilya & Shah Nawaz, 2014). Since the present sample consisted of young individuals, their age could have influenced the effectiveness of the intervention on them.

With respect to the results about insignificant changes in levels of jealousy, one explanation might be the sample consisting of non-married individuals. It has been observed that daters have a tendency to experience greater overall jealousy as compared to married individuals (Aylor & Dainton, 2001; Khurana & Ahuja, 2020) since they have lower commitment levels and greater uncertainty compared to married individuals (Afifi & Reichert, 1996)- this may have made it tougher to reduce jealousy. Moreover, it may be important to consider how the mean scores of romantic jealousy reported by the participants were already very low. The total score that could be obtained on the jealousy scale is 56 whereas the pre-intervention mean of the participants of both groups were approximately 20.03.

Limitations and Future Directions

One important takeaway from this study could be the potential usefulness of employing brief and individual-centred SC interventions in couples' therapy and relationship counselling. The findings suggest that SC interventions in a virtual context can also prove to be effective. Although the present results clearly support an increase in relationship satisfaction as a result of the SC intervention, it is appropriate to recognize several limitations. Firstly, the number of women in the sample greatly outnumbered the men. The sample consisted largely of young adults with an average age of 19.72 years. A varied sample would have been more beneficial for the purpose of generalising the results. The constructs of the study were assessed through self-report measures which are subject to social desirability.

Conducting long-term assessments much after the SC intervention has been completed can prove to be insightful in determining the stability of its effectiveness. A comparison between how SC can help in enhancing relationship satisfaction of individuals in a committed relationship versus those who are married can be explored. Influence of similar interventions could also be assessed with individuals in non-heterosexual relationships.

Conclusion

SC allows one to extend open-mindedness and kindness towards oneself and others. Enhanced inter-connectedness with others, especially a romantic partner seems to contribute to greater satisfaction with one's interpersonal romantic relationships. Hence, the practice of SC may be the key to maintaining emotional well-being- and health in relationships with not just the self but others as well.

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