



## Can self-compassion help people regulate unattained goals and emotional reactions toward setbacks? ☆



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Self-compassion  
Goal disengagement  
Goal reengagement  
Emotion regulation  
Setbacks in goal attainment

### ABSTRACT

The current study examined whether self-compassion helps individuals cope with the experience of unattainable goals. Because self-compassion entails taking a balanced perspective of one's suffering and maintaining emotional stability, this study predicted that individuals high in self-compassion would be more likely to disengage from their unattained goals and reengage in an alternative important goal, and thus, be less likely to experience negative emotions toward their setback in goal attainment. Japanese undergraduates ( $N = 177$ ), who had completed a measure of self-compassion a week prior, recalled their personal failure of goal attainment and answered items about the degree of goal disengagement, goal reengagement, and current negative emotions toward their setback. Structural equation modeling showed that self-compassion was positively related to goal reengagement and goal disengagement, and that self-compassion had a significant negative indirect effect on current negative emotions via goal disengagement, in addition to a negative direct effect. These results were mainly in accordance with predictions, suggesting that self-compassion is a psychological resource for coping with setbacks in goal attainment.

### 1. Introduction

People regulate their behavior to attain important goals (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Carver & Scheier, 1990, 2016), be it obtaining a good grade, starting a new job, or maintaining harmonious relationships with friends and family. However, people cannot always attain their goals and may have to abandon them. These experiences of unattainable goals harm well-being (Carver & Scheier, 1990, 2016; Wrosch, Scheier, & Miller, 2013), but individuals vary in how they react to these setbacks. Some individuals experience depression and anxiety, whereas others successfully cope with the setbacks and maintain their well-being (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Cumulative evidence has suggested self-compassion—treating oneself compassionately—as a resilient factor in times of suffering (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Neff, 2003, 2016; Zessin, Dickhäuser, & Garbade, 2015). Self-compassion may help people cope with the experience of unattainable goals (Hope, Koestner, & Milyavskaya, 2014; Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009). The aim of the present study was to investigate whether self-compassion helps people regulate their unattainable goals and emotional reactions to their setbacks.

Based on Buddhist philosophies about suffering and compassion,

Neff (2003, 2016) defined self-compassion as a kind and compassionate mindset toward the self in times of suffering caused by personal failures and negative life events. Specifically, individuals high in self-compassion have three characteristics: self-kindness rather than self-judgment, an understanding of common humanity and connection rather than isolating oneself from others, and mindful awareness of one's negative thoughts and emotions rather than getting entangled in them (Neff, 2003, 2016). Research has consistently shown that self-compassion is related to low depression, anxiety, stress responses, and negative emotions, and to high life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and positive emotions (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Miyagawa & Taniguchi, 2016; Neff, 2003; Zessin et al., 2015). Furthermore, self-compassion buffers individuals against the detrimental effects of life events, such as child maltreatment (Vettese, Dyer, Li, & Wekerle, 2011), natural disasters (Zeller, Yuval, Nitzan-Assayag, & Bernstein, 2015), HIV infection (Brion, Leary, & Drabkin, 2014), aging-related losses (Allen & Leary, 2014), and transitioning to an unfamiliar environment (Terry, Leary, & Mehta, 2013). Based on the one-week experimental sampling methodology, Hope and colleagues (Hope et al., 2014) found that self-compassion eliminated negative emotions caused by the stagnation of goal progress. On the other hand, self-compassion did not moderate the

☆ Declarations of interest: none. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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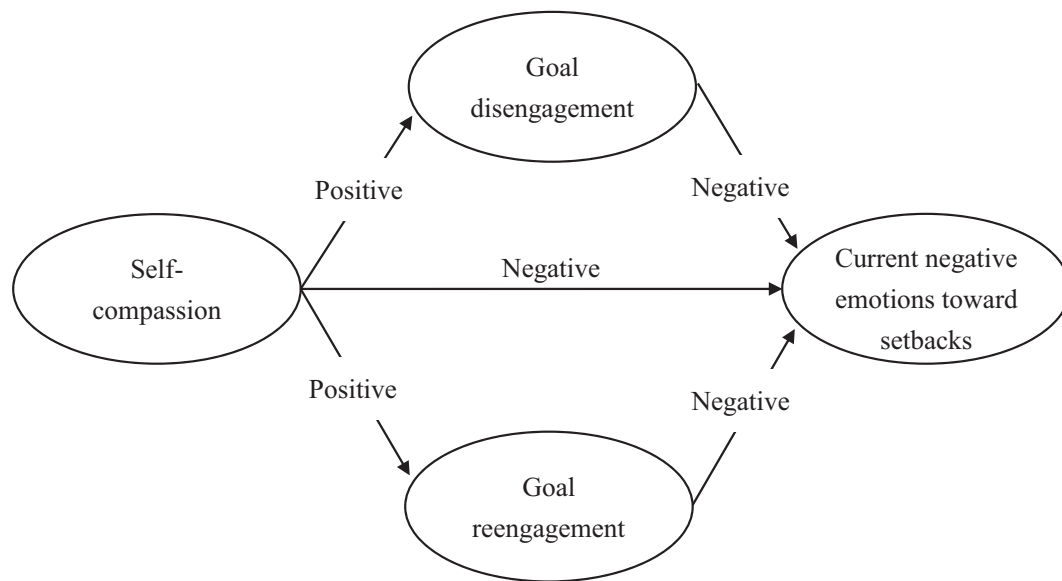


Fig. 1. The hypothesized mediation model in this study.

Note. Positive represents a positive relationship. Negative represents a negative relationship.

impact of daily goal progress on positive emotions (Hope et al., 2014). Because self-compassion means being open to one's suffering and aiming to alleviate it with kindness (Neff, 2003, 2016), it may be more applicable to prevent the increase in negative emotions, rather than the decrease in positive emotions. Based on these previous studies, we predicted that self-compassion would help individuals regulate their negative emotional reactions toward setbacks in important goal attainment.

However, it remains unclear how self-compassion is related to adaptive emotional reactions toward setbacks in goal attainment. Thus, the present study aimed to examine the above relationship by identifying a possible mediator. It was hypothesized that the relation of self-compassion to lower negative emotions toward setbacks would be mediated by adaptive goal regulation. Because self-compassion offers a kind and open attitude toward one's suffering (Neff, 2003, 2016), individuals high in this trait can better cope with negative events (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007). For example, they are more likely to adopt a positive reinterpretation and acceptance of situations, and less likely to use maladaptive avoidant coping in the face of stressors (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejithirat, 2005; Sirois, Molnar, & Hirsch, 2015). Furthermore, Zhang and Chen (2016) found that both trait- and experimentally induced self-compassion were positively related to the acceptance of regret experiences, which facilitated their personal improvement. Therefore, self-compassion would help people effectively cope with their setback in goal attainment, which facilitates the adaptive regulation of emotional reactions toward it.

Wrosch and colleagues (Wrosch et al., 2013; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003) defined two types of goal regulation (i.e., goal disengagement and goal reengagement) when people must stop pursuing important goals. Goal disengagement refers to reducing one's effort and commitment toward unattained goals. The primary function of this goal regulation is to prevent the same and similar failures and reduce related suffering by keeping a psychological distance from the unattained goals. Goal reengagement entails finding an alternative meaningful goal, committing to it, and making efforts for its attainment. The primary function of this goal regulation is to find a new meaning of life and establish one's identity by shifting focus from an unattained goal to another new important one. Previous studies found that both goal disengagement and goal reengagement were negatively related to intrusive thoughts, perceived stress, and negative emotions, and

positively related to life satisfaction (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). These two types of goal regulation were related to reduced depressive symptoms among caregivers of children with cancer (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003), and reduced catastrophic cognition and negative rumination among cancer patients (Schroevers, Kraaij, & Garnefski, 2008).

Importantly, Neely and colleagues (Neely et al., 2009) reported the relations of self-compassion to goal disengagement and goal reengagement. Although self-compassion was not significantly correlated with goal disengagement in Study 1, the positive relationship between them was significant in Study 2. Although further investigation is needed because of the inconsistent results, they imply that self-compassion helps people reduce efforts and commitment toward unattained goals. Individuals high in self-compassion can pay mindful attention to their suffering, rather than being entangled in it, and embrace it with kindness and understanding (Neff, 2003, 2016); thus, they can let go of their unattained goals without being obsessed with them. In addition to its relation to goal disengagement, Neely and colleagues (Neely et al., 2009) reported a positive correlation between self-compassion and goal reengagement across two studies. Individuals high in self-compassion have a higher motivation for self-improvement because they care about themselves (Neff, 2003, 2016; Zhang & Chen, 2016). Thus, they would be motivated to find and commit to another important goal.

Considering the relations between goal regulation and well-being (Schroevers et al., 2008; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003), it is hypothesized that individuals high in self-compassion are more likely to disengage from unattained goals and reengage in alternative important goals, and thus, be less likely to experience negative emotions toward their setbacks (see Fig. 1). By testing this prediction, the present study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the process through which self-compassion is negatively related to negative emotional reactions toward setbacks in goal attainment.

This study also addresses the influence of the characteristics of setbacks that participants recalled (i.e., temporal distance, how painful it was, and how much effort people had exerted toward the goal). Although a previous study (Neely et al., 2009) did not control for this, the characteristics of setbacks might explain the relation of self-compassion to emotional reactions toward setbacks. For example, individuals high in self-compassion might be more likely to recall setbacks that had happened long ago so that they are better able to regulate their emotions. To address this issue, the present study

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