



You have passion, but do you have self-compassion? Harmonious passion, obsessive passion, and responses to passion-related failure



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ABSTRACT

When people fail at a passion in their lives, how do they respond? We conducted two studies with undergraduates to test whether self-compassionate responding and being fearful of engaging in self-compassion following failure depended on whether the passion was relatively harmonious or obsessive (Vallerand, 2015). In Study 1 ($n = 349$), we found support for a model whereby fear of self-compassion was positively predicted by obsessive passion and negatively predicted by harmonious passion. Fear of self-compassion, in turn, predicted lower levels of self-compassion. We extended these findings in Study 2 ($n = 82$) by testing the causal relationship between obsessive passion and fear of self-compassion using a mindset induction procedure. We found that participants in an obsessively passionate mindset reported greater levels of fear of self-compassion compared to those in a control condition. Self-compassion is known to produce adaptive responses to failure (Neff, 2009). The present findings suggest that people with a predominant obsessive passion are more likely to avoid treating themselves with kindness and compassion when faced with failure, a tendency that likely contributes to the known maladaptive outcomes that are characteristic of an obsessive passion in times of adversity.

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1. Introduction

People often fail while engaging in their passions. Actors forget lines, musicians stumble on solos, cooks burn soufflés, writers receive rejection letters, and athletes literally and figuratively drop the ball. One way that people can respond in these types of situations is to be compassionate towards themselves; that is, they can treat themselves with kindness, maintain a balanced perspective, and see the failure as something that most people experience (Neff, 2003b). But some people are reluctant, even *afraid*, to respond in this way when they fail at a passion (e.g., Neff, 2003a). To some, responding with self-compassion could be a sign of weakness that means that they are giving up, making excuses, being self-indulgent, or that they do not care about failing in the first place. The aim of this research was to study people's tendencies to be self-compassionate and fearful of engaging in self-compassion when they fail at a passion in their lives and, relying on the dualistic model of passion (Vallerand, 2015), to determine if these responses were influenced by the *type* of passion one has for an activity.

1.1. Self-compassion

Self-compassion derives from the Buddhist principle that compassion is an essential and adaptive response to one's own suffering and the suffering of others (Neff, 2003a). Research in psychology has started to focus on self-compassion as a coping resource and has conceptualized it as consisting of three interrelated components (Neff, 2003b). First, *self-kindness* involves being kind and understanding towards oneself instead of responding with harsh self-criticism and judgment. Second, *common humanity* means recognizing that others also face difficult times, rather than feeling alone or isolated in one's experiences. Finally, *mindfulness* involves maintaining a balanced perspective with one's thoughts and emotions instead of over-identifying and becoming excessively preoccupied with them. While these three elements are conceptually distinct, they combine and interact to create a self-compassionate mindset (Neff, 2003b; Neff, 2009).

Research conducted over the past decade has found overwhelming support for the adaptive benefits of being compassionate towards oneself following failure (Neff, 2009). Self-compassion has been linked with many positive outcomes including decreased rumination, self-criticism, and concern over mistakes (Mosewich, Crocker, Kowalski, & DeLongis, 2013), fewer negative emotions in response to distressing situations (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007), lower levels of shame and fewer symptoms of depression (Johnson & O'Brien, 2013),

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dampened psychobiological responses to stress (Arch et al., 2014), and higher levels of overall well-being and satisfaction in life (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2015; Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009; Neff, 2003a; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Not only does self-compassion predict multiple forms of well-being, but research also suggests that being self-compassionate can lead to enhanced self-improvement motivation. A series of experiments reported by Breines and Chen (2012) found that self-compassion led to viewing one's personal weaknesses as more changeable, having a stronger desire to make amends for past transgressions, devoting more time towards improving one's performance on a test, and engaging in the improvement-focused act of upward social comparison. Others have supported these results by finding that self-compassion is associated with greater levels of initiative to develop as a person (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007), and with the adoption of mastery-oriented goals (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejithirath, 2005). Overall, the research to date suggests that engaging in self-compassion leads to enhanced well-being while also increasing motivation to improve.

Despite all the benefits that come with self-compassion, many people are reluctant to treat themselves with compassion and give themselves a break following instances of failure. In fact, as part of the initial pilot testing of the items for the Self-compassion Scale, many focus group participants reported that too much self-compassion would lead to "letting yourself get away with anything" (Neff, 2003a, p. 226). Other researchers have found that many people report being afraid or reluctant to engage in self-compassion. For example, many young women athletes report that self-criticism is necessary for optimal performance and that being self-compassionate can lead to mediocrity, passivity, and complacency in sport (Ferguson, Kowalski, Mack, & Sabiston, 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014). Similar beliefs have been reported by older women, many of whom believe that self-compassion towards their physical appearance makes it more difficult to be physically and socially active and fear that it could obstruct their efforts to defend against the aging process (Bennett, Hurd Clarke, Kowalski, & Crocker, 2016). Gilbert and Procter (2006) also reported that mental health patients participating in a compassionate mind training program often felt fearful of being self-compassionate because it would be a sign of weakness and would mean that they were letting their guards down (see also Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, & Rivis, 2011; Lawrence & Lee, 2014). Findings such as these explain why the self-compassion literature has taken steps to acknowledge, and refute, the common belief that self-compassion leads to passivity (e.g., Neff, 2003b, p. 87) and self-indulgence (e.g., Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 913).

Although it appears quite common to report being fearful of engaging in self-compassion, it is unclear who might be more prone to experiencing this fear. Our aim in this research was to study this question in the context of passionate pursuits; that is, to study the extent to which people were self-compassionate or fearful of engaging in self-compassion following instances of failure in a passion. Relying on the dualistic model of passion (Vallerand, 2015), we predicted that levels of self-compassion and fear of self-compassion would depend on whether one has a more harmonious or obsessive relationship with their passion.

1.2. Dualistic model of passion

The dualistic model of passion (Vallerand, 2015; Vallerand et al., 2003) treats passion as a motivational construct and defines it as a strong inclination towards a specific activity that a person enjoys, values, incorporates in one's identity, and spends a significant amount of time and energy doing. A key component of this model is the existence of two types of passion. The first type, *harmonious passion*, emerges when an activity is freely incorporated into one's identity and the person engages in the activity with a sense of volition and purposefulness. With harmonious passion, the

activity does not conflict with other life domains and is congruent with one's personal values. The second type, *obsessive passion*, involves feeling pressured to pursue an activity and emerges when an activity is performed because of external or internal contingencies connected with it. With obsessive passion, the person feels compelled to engage in an activity, and often does so at the expense of other life domains. In line with the dualistic model, research conducted across various age groups, genders, cultures, and activity domains has found that harmonious passion generally predicts adaptive outcomes while pursuing a passion, while obsessive passion is typically unrelated to adaptive outcomes, and can at times predict maladaptive outcomes (for reviews see Vallerand, 2010, 2015).

Although research has yet to explore the relationship between harmonious and obsessive passion types and self-compassion, there are theoretical connections between these constructs. The autonomous functioning characteristic of harmonious passion should allow people with high levels of harmonious passion to perceive ongoing experiences, including experiences involving failure, with openness and with a desire to interpret them accurately (Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Vallerand, 2010). This openness to experience likely facilitates self-compassionate thoughts, feelings, and behavior by allowing one to adopt a mindful approach oriented towards interpreting instances of failure without distortion, defensiveness, or criticism (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). Research conducted in various contexts has found that harmonious passion predicts an open and mindful approach towards activity engagement. For instance, harmonious passion predicts greater experiences of flow and concentration during activity engagement (Philippe, Vallerand, Andrianarisoa, & Brunel, 2009; Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1), higher levels of trait mindfulness (Verner-Filion, Lafrenière, & Vallerand, 2013), and even better accuracy in affective forecasting (Verner-Filion, Lafrenière, & Vallerand, 2012). In contrast, obsessive passion is associated with ego-invested self-structures, meaning that ongoing experiences are interpreted with the goal of maintaining one's self-worth instead of perceiving the world accurately (Vallerand, 2010). This controlled orientation towards activity engagement likely prevents people with high levels of obsessive passion from being self-compassionate following failure by promoting a defensive mode of functioning that results in becoming preoccupied and over-identified with one's emotions and with experiences that pose a threat to the self (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). In line with this reasoning, research has found that obsessive passion predicts ruminating about a passion (Philippe, Vallerand, Andrianarisoa, et al., 2009), negative emotions and distress when prevented from engaging in a passion (Schellenberg, Bailis, & Crocker, 2013; Stoeber, Harvey, Ward, & Childs, 2011), and aggressive behavior when facing passion-related obstacles (Donahue, Rip, & Vallerand, 2009; Philippe, Vallerand, Richer, Vallières, & Bergeron, 2009).

In addition to predicting lower levels of self-compassion, it is likely that obsessive passion also predicts being fearful of engaging in self-compassion. Passions occupy more dominant, overpowering roles in the identities of people to the extent that they are obsessive about them (Vallerand, 2015). This leads to self-relevant outcomes, such as life satisfaction and state self-esteem, becoming contingent on performance in a passion (Lafrenière, St-Louis, Vallerand, & Donahue, 2012; Mageau, Carpentier, & Vallerand, 2011). There is therefore a lot at risk when pursuing an activity with high levels of obsessive passion. With the stakes so high, people with high levels of obsessive passion might be wary of any behavior, such as self-compassion, which they believe could put themselves at risk of becoming mediocre or complacent in their passion (Ferguson et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014), making them less likely to attain their goals (Bennett et al., 2016). This mode of functioning would be in accordance with previous research finding that obsessive passion predicts being fearful of failure in achievement settings (Bélanger, Lafrenière, Vallerand, & Kruglanski, 2013a; Vallerand et al., 2008).

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