



Future-outlook mediates the association between self-compassion and well-being

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ABSTRACT

Self-compassion has been strongly associated with high levels of life satisfaction and low levels of depressive symptoms, but relatively little research has explored mechanisms that may underlie these associations. This study investigated whether three indicators of future-outlook – balanced time perspective, optimism, and savouring-anticipating – mediate these relationships. A sample of 157 undergraduates ($M_{age} = 33.21$, $SD = 11.32$) completed an online survey. As hypothesised, multiple mediation analyses found that balanced time perspective and savouring-anticipating mediated self-compassion's relationships with life satisfaction and depressive symptoms; where high trait self-compassion was associated with a well-balanced time perspective and high savouring-anticipating tendencies which, in turn, were associated with high life satisfaction and low depressive symptoms. Against expectation, optimism did not mediate either relationship when assessed as one of three parallel mediators. These results add to the budding literature on mechanisms underlying self-compassion's positive effects on well-being.

1. Introduction

Self-compassion is a positive self-attitude that helps us to negotiate episodes of personal suffering or failure (Gilbert, 2009; Neff, 2003a, 2003b). According to Neff (2003a, 2003b), self-compassion involves responding to difficult situations with self-kindness rather than harsh self-judgement; viewing suffering as a common human experience that promotes feelings of connection with others rather than isolation; and being mindfully aware of our negative responses without over-identifying with them. Robust relationships have been observed between self-compassion and many indicators of positive subjective well-being, including low levels of depressive symptoms and high life satisfaction (Barnard & Curry, 2011; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Zessin, Dickhäuser, & Garbade, 2015), yet relatively little research has attempted to identify mechanisms that may underlie these relationships.

Specific emotion regulation strategies and skills (Diedrich, Burger, Kirchner, & Berking, 2017; Johnson & O'Brien, 2013; Krieger, Altenstein, Baettig, Doerig, & Holtforth, 2013; Raes, 2010) and cognitive styles and processes (Arimitsu & Hofmann, 2015; Diedrich et al., 2017; Krieger et al., 2013; Wadsworth et al., 2018; Zhou, Chen, Liu, Lu, & Su, 2013) have been identified as mediators of the predictive relationship between self-compassion and depressive symptoms; and positive automatic thoughts (Arimitsu & Hofmann, 2015) and hope (Yang, Zhang, & Kou, 2016) have been found to mediate the association

between self-compassion and life satisfaction. The current study extends this line of investigation, by determining whether self-compassion's associations with depressive symptoms and life satisfaction are mediated by three indicators of future-outlook – balanced time perspective, optimism, and savouring-anticipating.

1.1. Self-compassion and future-outlook

Self-compassion promotes adaptive responses to difficult past or present life experiences. For example, it can increase motivation to make amends and to avoid repeating past mistakes (e.g., Johnson & O'Brien, 2013; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010), and has been associated with goal reengagement, intrinsic motivation, personal initiative, mastery goals, and adaptive coping (e.g., Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejjitterat, 2005). These responses to past adversity also represent personal abilities that may help us to manage difficult future situations, and are therefore likely to influence how we view the future.

Optimism, savouring-anticipating, and balanced time perspective are three indicators of future-outlook that may represent outcomes of self-compassion. Optimism involves holding positive expectations about future experiences (Malouff & Schutte, 2017), and savouring-anticipating involves deriving pleasure from anticipating future positive events (Bryant, 2003). Balanced time perspective refers to the

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notion that how we approach the future is influenced by the relative emphasis we place on the past, present, and future. According to [Zimbardo and Boyd \(1999\)](#), people focus on five time-perspectives in varying degrees, and possessing an ideal temporal profile allows one to operate in a time perspective that meets situational demands. This so-called balanced time perspective comprises high levels of past-positive (sentimental past), moderately high levels of future (goals and rewards) and present-hedonistic (pleasure seeking), and low levels of past-negative (aversive past) and present-fatalistic (belief in external control) time perspectives ([Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008](#)).

I recently used experimental methodology to investigate the effects of self-compassion on optimism, balanced time perspective, and savouring-anticipating ([Phillips, 2018](#)). Student participants were asked to write self-compassionately about a recent negative event. The self-compassion writing exercise induced state self-compassion and influenced levels of savouring-anticipating and balanced time perspective. Among students with high trait self-compassion, experimental participants reported higher levels of savouring-anticipating than control participants. In contrast, experimental participants reported a more balanced time perspective than control participants among students with low trait self-compassion. Overall, high levels of self-compassion correlated strongly with a well-balanced time perspective, savouring-anticipating, and optimism in the student sample.

Although the abovementioned experiment did not increase optimism, [Smeets, Neff, Alberts, and Peters \(2014\)](#) found that female students who participated in a three-week self-compassion intervention reported greater increases in optimism than participants in a time-management control condition. Thus, while ample evidence supports a strong association between self-compassion and optimism, the evidence is mixed regarding a possible causal role. However, strong bivariate associations have been consistently observed between trait self-compassion and high levels of optimism ([Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007](#); [Neff & Vonk, 2009](#); [Phillips, 2018](#)). A moderately strong positive bivariate relationship has also been found between self-compassion and total savouring ability, which involves savouring past, present, and future events ([Ford, Klibert, Tarantino, & Lamis, 2017](#)).

1.2. Future-outlook, depressive symptoms, and life satisfaction

Evidence suggests that a balanced time perspective, high optimism, and high savouring-anticipating may be products of self-compassion. It is also possible that improvements in these future-outlook indicators may represent mechanisms through which self-compassion conveys its positive effects on depressive symptoms and life satisfaction. This possibility is supported by large positive relationships between life satisfaction and balanced time perspective ([Stolarski, Vowinckel, Jankowski, & Zajenkowski, 2016](#)), optimism ([Chang & Sanna, 2001](#)), and savouring ([Smith & Hollinger-Smith, 2015](#)); and strong inverse relationships between depressive symptoms and balanced time perspective ([Mooney, Earl, Mooney, & Bateman, 2017](#)), optimism ([Chang & Sanna, 2001](#)), and savouring ([Ford et al., 2017](#); [Smith & Hollinger-Smith, 2015](#)).

Additionally, intervention outcomes have indicated that optimism and savouring may causally influence levels of depressive symptoms and life satisfaction. For example, students who completed a brief optimism intervention reported higher levels of life satisfaction than control participants one week later ([Peters, Meevissen, & Hanssen, 2013](#)), and depression vulnerable individuals who underwent an online optimism intervention were less depressed three months later ([Shapira & Mongrain, 2010](#)). Similarly, compared to control participants, students who completed a savouring the moment intervention reported lower levels of depressive symptoms ([Hurley & Kwon, 2012](#)), and undergraduates who completed a 6-week positive emotion regulation program (which included savouring) reported increased life satisfaction and decreased depressive symptoms ([Weytens, Luminet, Verhofstadt, & Mikolajczak, 2014](#)).

1.3. The current study

Researchers have begun to investigate possible mechanisms by which self-compassion conveys its positive effects on well-being (e.g., [Arimitsu & Hofmann, 2015](#); [Diedrich et al., 2017](#)). Utilising two multiple mediation models, this study aimed to determine whether balanced time perspective, optimism, and savouring-anticipating mediate self-compassion's predictive effects on depressive symptoms and life satisfaction. I hypothesised that high levels of self-compassion would be associated with a more balanced time perspective, high optimism, and high savouring-anticipating which, in turn, would be associated with high levels of life satisfaction and low levels of depressive symptoms.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Mainly mature-aged undergraduate psychology students took part in return for course credits. The sample comprised 157 participants (84.1% female) aged between 18 and 67 years ($M = 33.21$, $SD = 11.32$, $Median = 32.00$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Self-compassion

The 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; [Neff, 2003a](#)) was used to measure self-compassion. Participants indicated agreement with statements describing responses to difficult experiences on a scale from 1) *almost never* to 5) *almost always*. SCS total scores were calculated by averaging all items after reverse-scoring negative items. The SCS exhibited high internal consistency in the current dataset ($\alpha = 0.95$).

2.2.2. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; [Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985](#)) was used to assess participants' agreement with five evaluative statements on a scale from 1) *strongly disagree* to 7) *strongly agree*. Variable scores were calculated by summing items. The SWLS demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$).

2.2.3. Depressive symptoms

Current depressive symptoms were assessed by the seven item depression subscale of the Depression and Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-D; [Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995](#)). Participants rated how often they generally experience each of seven depressive symptoms. Variable scores were calculated by summing items. The DASS-D demonstrated high internal consistency in the current dataset ($\alpha = 0.92$).

2.2.4. Balanced time perspective

Deviation from the Balanced Time Perspective (DBTP; [Stolarski, Bitner, & Zimbardo, 2011](#)) indicated balanced time perspective, where lower scores indicate greater balance. DBTP was calculated from past-positive, past-negative, present-hedonistic, present-fatalistic, and future positive items of the short form Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZPTI-Short; [Košťál, Klicperová-Baker, Lukavská, & Lukavský, 2015](#)). Participants rated "How true is this of me?" in response to items on a scale from 1) *very untrue* to 5) *very true*. Stolarski et al.'s DBTP formula and cut-offs were used to calculate DBTP.

2.2.5. Optimism

The Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; [Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994](#)) comprises 10 statements that assess expectations of favourable future outcomes. Participants indicated their agreement with each statement on a scale from 0) *strongly disagree* to 4) *strongly agree*. Total scores were calculated by averaging all items after reverse-scoring negatively-worded items. The LOT-R was reliable in this dataset ($\alpha = 0.83$).

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