



# The benefits of being self-compassionate on days when interactions with body-focused others are frequent



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## ABSTRACT

We examined whether a woman's level of self-compassion on a given day (within-persons) and over a week (between-persons) influenced her eating, body image, and affect in the face of frequent daily and/or weekly interactions with body-focused others. For seven nights, 92 female undergraduates reported on their daily social interactions, self-compassion, body image, eating, and affect. On days when women were less self-compassionate than usual, frequent interactions with body-focused others were associated with more body image concerns and negative affect, and less body appreciation and intuitive eating. However, these relationships were absent or inverted on days when women were more self-compassionate than usual. Self-compassion played a similar buffering role at the between-persons level. Results suggest that by treating themselves with a higher degree of self-compassion than what is typical for them, young women may be able to maintain healthier approaches to eating and body image when faced with body image threats.

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## Introduction

There is a wealth of evidence indicating that exposure to individuals who are preoccupied with dieting and body image concerns is costly for one's own body image and eating habits. [Gravener, Haedt, Heatherton, and Keel \(2008\)](#) found that young adult women who perceived their peers to be dieting were more concerned with becoming thin themselves. In addition, studies have found that women whose friends engage in dieting behaviors are at elevated risk of current and future eating disorder symptoms ([Eisenberg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010](#); [Hutchinson, Rapee, & Taylor, 2010](#); [Keel, Forney, Brown, & Heatherton, 2013](#); [Peterson, Paulson, & Williams, 2007](#); [Shomaker & Furman, 2009](#)). There is also a large research literature showing that simply hearing a peer make self-disparaging comments about her body or eating habits, also known as "fat talk," increases body dissatisfaction in the listener ([Clarke, Murnen, & Smolak, 2010](#); [Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003](#)). The negative eating and body image consequences of interactions with body-focused others reveal the importance of identifying the factors that might protect women in the face of these social threats, and help them maintain a healthy approach to eating and body image.

Self-compassion has recently emerged as an important protective factor against threats to body image (see [Braun, Park, and Gorin \(2016\)](#) for a review) and as a facilitator of positive forms of body image (e.g., [Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016](#); [Schoenfeld & Webb, 2013](#)). At its essence, self-compassion is compassion that is directed inward and can therefore be defined as an awareness of and sensitivity toward personal suffering coupled with a commitment to prevent and alleviate this suffering ([Dalai Lama, 1995](#); [Gilbert, 2009](#)). Most empirical research on this construct relies on [Neff's \(2003\)](#) operational definition of self-compassion as comprised of self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity. These respectively entail responding to personal distress and disappointment with care and understanding rather than judgment, balanced rather than magnified attention, and the belief that suffering unites rather than divides human beings. Just like self-esteem, self-compassion is a positive self-attitude, and the two variables are moderately correlated ([Neff, 2003](#)). However, self-esteem derives from an assessment of one's qualities and attributes, and can thus fluctuate with achievements and setbacks; conversely, self-compassion is a care-based form of positive regard that promotes self-acceptance even in the face of failure ([Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007](#)). Empirical studies have found that self-compassion accounts for unique variance in mental health outcomes beyond self-esteem, and in the domain of body image and eating behaviors, often explains even more variance

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(Kelly, Vimalakanthan, & Carter, 2014; Wasylikiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012).

Because self-compassion is a response to feeling upset or inadequate, its benefits in the body image realm should be especially evident when individuals are exposed to known triggers or correlates of body dissatisfaction. Several studies have found support for this notion. Kelly, Vimalakanthan, and Miller (2014) found that college women who had a higher body mass index (BMI), which is generally associated with more eating pathology and body dissatisfaction, did indeed endorse these features but only if they had low or moderate levels of self-compassion. Among women who had high levels of self-compassion, BMI was unrelated to eating pathology and body image. Tylka, Russell, and Neal (2015) similarly found that perceived sociocultural pressures to be thin were associated with a higher level of internalization of the thin ideal among women with low and average, but not high, levels of self-compassion. Other studies have similarly found that the links between various threats to body image – including the tendencies to make body comparisons, survey one's body from an observer's perspective, and base one's self-worth on appearance – were more strongly related to negative body image in women who were lower in self-compassion (Homan & Tylka, 2015; Liss & Erchull, 2015). Together, these studies offer empirical support for the notion that a higher level of self-compassion may protect women from the potentially negative consequences and correlates of body image threats.

### Self-Compassion as a Within-Persons Protective Factor

Self-compassion is typically conceptualized as a trait (Neff, 2003), and most research on the topic, including in the body image domain, has investigated its relationship to other variables at the between-persons level. That is, studies have investigated differences between people (usually women) in their overall levels of self-compassion to understand differences in the way these people eat and feel about their bodies. As with other personality variables (Fleeson, 2001; Moskowitz, Brown, & Côté, 1997), however, self-compassion levels vary not only between persons but also within a person. Indeed, daily diary studies reveal that between 37 and 42% of the variance in undergraduate students' self-compassion levels occur within-persons (Breines, Toole, & Chen, 2014; Kelly & Stephen, 2016; Zuroff, Kelly, Leybman, & Gilbert, 2012), indicating that there are substantial fluctuations in a given person's level of self-compassion from one day to the next. Experimental studies also reveal that it is possible to increase self-compassion levels both momentarily and over time (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2015; Kelly, Wisniewski, Matin-Wagar, & Hoffman (in press); Leary et al., 2007), further supporting the idea that levels of self-compassion can vary within a person. Therefore, it appears that in addition to examining the role that individuals' typical or average level of self-compassion plays with regards to their body image and eating, it may also be worthwhile to examine whether fluctuations in their own personal levels of self-compassion are important.

To address this question, Breines et al. (2014) conducted a four-day study in which college women reported on their daily level of appearance-related self-compassion. The authors found that participants had less disordered eating on days when they had a higher level of self-compassion than usual vis-à-vis their appearance concerns (i.e., a level of self-compassion that was higher than their personal mean level over the four days). In a seven-day daily diary study, Kelly and Stephen (2016) also found that on days when college women treated themselves more self-compassionately than usual, they reported eating in a more intuitive (i.e., eating based on hunger and satiety) and less restrictive way, and also reported a higher level of body appreciation and body satisfaction. Together, these two studies suggest that among college women, variability in

levels of self-compassion from one day to the next are associated with variability in body image and eating experiences.

Given that self-compassion is a way of responding to stress and distress, an important next step is to examine whether within a given person, fluctuations in levels of self-compassion influence the way she copes when faced with body image stressors in daily life. In other words, it will be important to build on the aforementioned studies of within-persons relationships, which examined the main effects of self-compassion, by investigating whether self-compassion interacts with body image stressors at the within-persons level to predict eating and body image. Although a fairly large body of literature now shows that women who have a higher level of self-compassion than others (i.e., between-persons level of self-compassion) are more protected from body image threat(s) (Homan & Tylka, 2015; Tylka et al., 2015), these studies have been cross-sectional and only allow us to conclude that being a person who is generally high in self-compassion offers protection from generally high levels of body image threats. It therefore remains unknown whether within a given individual, a self-compassionate response during periods of high body image stress offers benefits during these stressful times. Addressing this gap would not only provide a stronger test of current theorizing on self-compassion, but would also provide evidence to support the idea that independent of one's typical level of self-compassion, cultivating self-compassion during periods of body image stress can help to preserve more adaptive forms of body image and eating during these periods.

### Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Our first and primary objective was to examine the within-persons interaction between self-compassion and frequency of interactions with body-focused others in predicting criteria variables. To explore this research question, multiple repeated measurements from a given person over time are required. We therefore asked participants to provide nightly ratings, for seven days, of how self-compassionate they were and how frequently they interacted with body-focused others each day. We operationalized within-persons self-compassion as the extent to which a participant's level of self-compassion on a given day deviated from her personal mean level of self-compassion across study days. Within-persons social interactions with body-focused others similarly represented the difference between a participant's frequency of interactions with body-focused others on a given day and that participant's personal mean frequency of interactions across study days. The statistical interaction between these two within-persons variables would allow us to examine our research questions.

Given the growing emphasis on distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive functioning in the body image domain, we examined intuitive eating (i.e., eating in accordance with hunger and satiety signals rather than dietary rules) and body appreciation (i.e., acceptance of and respect for one's body) as indicators of the former, and body image concerns and negative affect as indicators of the latter. We chose this subset of variables because of the research showing that various forms exposure to body-focused others can influence eating, body appreciation, body image concerns, and negative affect (Jones, Crowther, & Ciesla 2014; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999; Wasylikiw & Butler, 2014).

We hypothesized that more interactions with body-focused others on a given day would be associated with a lower level of intuitive eating and body appreciation, and a higher level of body image concerns and negative affect, but only on days when women were less self-compassionate than usual. On days when women were more self-compassionate than usual, we expected that these relationships would be absent or inversed. We reasoned that relationships might be inversed because self-compassion is a form of

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