

Does the Fear of Self-Compassion Lead to a More Negative Rejection Response?  
Senior Project

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By

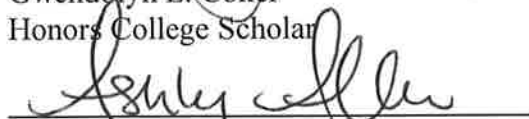
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Methods.....	11
Results.....	14
Discussion.....	15
Reference.....	20
Appendix A.....	23

### **Abstract**

This study investigated whether the low fear of self-compassion buffers individuals against the negative effects of rejection. Based on previous research, self-compassion has been shown to benefit an individual's overall well-being as well as psychological health when experiencing a negative event such as rejection. We hypothesized an interaction between the fear of self-compassion and rejection. We also hypothesized that individuals with high fear of self-compassion would feel less belonging, more burden and more negative affect. Participants ( $N=134$ ) were randomly assigned to two conditions: rejection and acceptance. The fear of self-compassion did not predict rejection reactions; however, participants higher in fear of self-compassion reported more feelings of burden and negative affect. They did not report less feeling of belonging. Our findings show that the fear of self-compassion can result in more feelings of burden and negative affect when experiencing rejection.

### Does the Fear of Self-Compassion Lead to a More Negative Rejection Response?

Since the first self-compassion paper was published in 2003, researchers and the general public have been interested in the concept of showing compassion to one's self. When searching for the term "self-compassion", Psychinfo identified over 1,100 research articles. Popular books such as Dr. Kristin Neff's (2011) *The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself: Self-Compassion* and Beverly Engel's (2015) *It Wasn't Your Fault: Freeing Yourself from the Shame of Childhood Abuse with the Power of Self-Compassion*, have been rated as fan favorites. Self-compassion involves being kind to oneself, recognizing that one is not alone in his or her failures, and acknowledging one's emotions without becoming consumed by them (Neff, 2003). Being self-compassionate allows one to recognize that inadequacies and sufferings are part of the general human condition and everyone, including one's self, deserves compassion. In addition, researchers have identified psychological benefits to being self-compassionate. A meta-analysis done by MacBeth and Gumley (2012) found a strong negative relationship between self-compassion and psychopathology. These findings reveal the importance of self-compassion as it relates to mental health (Macbeth & Gumley, 2012). Many research studies have also focused on ways to help people become more self-compassionate. These studies have found self-compassion to be related to well-being and positive intrapersonal benefits. Because self-compassion is believed to be changeable, programs such as the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program have been created to teach self-compassion skills (Neff & Germer, 2017).

### **Self-Compassion**

There are six main components of self-compassion that are exhibited when individuals suffer from some form of failure or negative event. These six include: self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs. isolation, and mindfulness vs. over-identification. Self-kindness is showing oneself kindness rather than harshly judging his/her self for negative outcomes. Failure to show one's self kindness can result in strong self-criticism as well as harsh judgment. When one is able to be kind towards his or her self, he or she will experience self-acceptance and the impact of the negative event will lessen (Neff, 2003). Common humanity is one's understanding of the shared human experience rather than isolating his/her circumstances. When one fails to remember that failures and sufferings can be experienced by anyone, he or she is at risk of feeling isolated by his or her own negative situation. Mindfulness involves one being consciously and calmly aware of his/her own emotions, feelings, and thoughts during or after a negative event, without letting them overpower one's self (Neff, 2003). When individuals experience pain or failure, they may become consumed by their reactions to negative events, resulting in over-identification. Using mindfulness helps people accept negative situations without being overtaken by them (Neff & Dahm, 2016). These six components are all important in defining the role of self-compassion in individuals. When discussing the positive and negative components of self-compassion, findings suggest that the positive components of self-compassion protect one's psychological well-being while the negative components increase vulnerability to mental health problems (Muris & Petrocchi, 2016).

Many studies show that self-compassion is related to more positive intrapersonal outcomes. Neff (2003) found that self-compassion was positively correlated with life

satisfaction and social connectedness. In addition, Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude (2007) found that self-compassion is also related to psychological strength. Using experimental methods, Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, and Hancock (2007) found that using a self-compassionate approach towards negative situations can result in a more positive mindset that allows one to grow as an individual while gaining understanding of one's self and others. Self-compassion was found to buffer individuals against negative self-feelings during a distressing event (Leary, Tate, Adams, and Hancock, 2007). Through self-report measures of self-compassion, mindfulness and other personality traits; self-compassion was found to be a mediator that resulted in the overall happiness and mindfulness of individuals (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011). Results indicating benefits to both psychological well-being and intrapersonal skills suggest that self-compassion helps decrease the effects of negativity (Neff & Costigan, 2014). This finding was also seen in Shapira & Mongrain (2010) who found self-compassion interventions were beneficial in decreasing depression in individuals and increasing overall happiness.

The improvement in one's psychological health and intrapersonal skills are just a few positive benefits of self-compassion. Self-compassion also aids in enhancing and developing better social relationships. Baker and McNulty (2011) found a positive relationship between self-compassion and the motivation to correct a mistake or conflict within a relationship. Their findings suggest that women who respond to conflicts between themselves and their friend or partner with self-compassion, feel more motivated to mend the relationship and resolve the conflict. In fact, self-compassion is related to a greater willingness to forgive (Neff & Pommier, 2013). As a result, self-compassion can

work to aid broken relationships with others as well as increase the satisfaction level of the relationship.

### **Fear of Self-Compassion**

Although self-compassion is seen as a positive aspect of life, there are individuals who fear it. Existing literature describes individuals who fear self-compassion as people who worry that they are not deserving of self-compassion, that being self-compassionate is emotionally upsetting, or that showing themselves compassion could make them less desirable to other people (Gilbert, McEwan, Matos & Ravis, 2010). The individual may also fear being viewed as weak by others; therefore, the individual may choose not to show themselves compassion (Boykin, & Orcut , 2016; Kelly, Carter, Zuroff, & Borair, 2012; Miron, Seligowski, Boykin, & Orcutt, 2016).

Although no experimental studies have investigated the development of self-compassion or fear of self-compassion, several theoretical viewpoints describe why people might fear self-compassion. Gilbert et. al., (2010) state that the fear of self-compassion can be developed by someone who has low affection for his or her self and is very self-critical. In other words, individuals who dislike themselves and are very self-judgmental can be at risk of developing fear of self-compassion. Other individuals who are at risk of developing fear of self-compassion are victims of abuse. Miron and colleagues (2016) found that children who had exposure to maltreatment and abuse had lower levels of self-compassion. Their findings suggest that low self-compassion can be explained by one's use of resistance in response to self-compassion, resulting in the fear of self-compassion (Miron et. al., 2016). These children may feel as though they do not deserve compassion due to the constant abuse and neglect from others; therefore, they



resist any compassion, especially from themselves. Low self-compassion may also be linked to parental attachment. Pepping, Davis, O'Donovan, and Pal (2014) found that low parental warmth, overprotection, and high parental rejection are associated with low self-compassion. Being that low self-compassion acts as an indicator for fear of self-compassion, it is possible that fear of self-compassion can be developed through parental attachment as well.

As the origin of fear of self-compassion becomes a topic of interest, many researchers are now trying to understand not only the development of fear of self-compassion, but also why individuals resist the use of self-compassion. Some believe that being self-compassionate may lead to passivity which would be a sign of weakness (Neff, 2003). The idea of being viewed as weak due to self-compassion can be the result of one's misinterpretation of how self-compassion works. Robinson, Mayer, Allen, Terry, Chilton, & Leary (2016) found that this lack of understanding has resulted in the belief that self-compassion is equivalent to being self-centered. Having an inaccurate understanding of self-compassion increases the chances of someone fearing self-compassion. In addition, people may feel that being compassionate towards themselves will lessen their chances of being successful because they feel that being harsh or critical of themselves motivates them more (Robinson et. al., 2016). This notion can be combatted by other studies that find self-compassionate people are more likely to try to cope with failure as they struggle to succeed (Gilbert et. al., 2010). It also contradicts findings showing that individuals who do not resist or fear self-compassion actually engage in more self-improvement motivation. Breines and Chen (2012) found that

individuals who were instructed to reflect on a negative event in a self-compassionate way increased their self-improvement motivation.

People may also avoid being self-compassionate because they fear showing themselves kindness will turn them into someone they would not want to be. For these individuals, expressing kindness towards oneself is compared to undesirable characteristics, leading one to question his/her standards as an individual (Robinson, et. al., 2016). These findings suggest that there are misleading ideas of self-compassion which as a result could lead to one's development of fear of self-compassion. If an individual believes that being self-compassionate towards his or her self could lead to passivity, weakness, failure, or undesirable characteristics, he or she will avoid being self-compassionate in times of failure or rejection. As a result, someone who fears self-compassion will have a more negative response to negative life circumstances such as rejection.

### **Fear of Self-Compassion and Rejection**

Rejection may put individuals at risk of being hostile, angry, and distressed (Laws, Ellerbeck, Rodrigues, Simmons, & Ansell, 2017). At a physiological level, the brain has a predictable reaction to being rejected. Kumar, Waiter, Dubois, Milders, Reid, and Steele (2017), found that for patients who were diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), neural regions such as the amygdala, a brain region that corresponds with emotion, were active while experiencing social rejection. Amygdala activation was negatively correlated with the patients' self-esteem scores, suggesting that participants with higher self-esteem had a predictable physiological response to being rejected.

Feelings of belonging and being accepted by others are essential to one's psychological health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary concluded that people have a strong desire to form and maintain interpersonal relationships. Because of this need to belong, individuals seek positive interactions with people. This finding coincides with the findings of Sakiz and Saricam (2015) showing that individuals naturally seek out positive interactions from others; however, if they are rejected, the end result could lead to negative emotions (Sakiz and Saricam, 2015).

As a result, being rejected could threaten this basic need to belong. Being self-compassionate could help protect someone from these negative emotions and threats to psychological well-being (Robinson et. al., 2017; Sakiz & Saricam 2015). Someone who fears self-compassion may have difficulty protecting him or herself from the negative emotions of rejection which could result in a loss of self-worth, isolation, or even self-harm (Sakiz & Saricam, 2015). After negative experiences, such as rejection, individuals can be consumed by the negative emotions that were initiated by the event, resulting in these individuals criticizing themselves and imagining the worst possible outcome (Robinson et. al., 2017). Those who fear self-compassion may criticize themselves more harshly and blame themselves for being rejected. For example, higher self-compassion is associated with a more positive reaction to rejection (Sakiz & Saricam, 2015). This could also be true for individuals with low fear of self-compassion.

### **Study Purpose and Hypothesis**

An extensive amount of research shows the benefits of being self-compassionate. However, little research has been done on individuals who fear self-compassion. Self-compassion has been shown to be beneficial to an individual's overall health and well-

being, especially during times of hardship; however, we know very little about how individuals with high fear of self-compassion cope with these same hardships such as rejection. The purpose of the study is to assess whether low fear of self-compassion buffers people against the negative effects of rejection including more negative affect, less belonging, and less relational value. Individuals who are higher in fear of self-compassion will react to rejection more negatively than individuals who are low in fear of self-compassion. Specifically, we predict that high fear of self-compassion will be linked to outcome variables such as belonging, group burden, and negative affect.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 134 students (men,  $N = 45$ ; women,  $N = 87$ ; other,  $N = 2$ ) from introductory psychology classes at The University of North Carolina at Pembroke who volunteered to participate for research credit. The ethnicity of the sample was as follows: Caucasians (41%), African-Americans (37%), Hispanic (13.2 %), Native American (12.5%), Asian-American (2.2%), and Other (2.9%). Ages ranged from 18 to 34 ( $M = 19.75$ ,  $SD = 3.09$ ) with the majority of participants being 18 years old (39.7%) followed by 19 years old (29.4%). The classification of the students included freshmen (63.4%), sophomores (27.6%), juniors (5.2%), and seniors (3.7%). The sexual orientation of participants included heterosexual (88%), followed by bisexual (6%), and homosexual (1.5%).

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited through SONA, an online psychology experiment database and received course credit for their participation. The study was advertised on

SONA and students could participate by clicking the provided link. The participants were first directed to a standardized informed consent form where they selected "continue" as an indication of consent. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups: rejection or acceptance. In the rejection scenario, participants imagined themselves at a social event (i.e., party) where they encounter a group of people in an attempt to converse. When they try to approach the group, the people walk away. (e.g., at a party you notice some people on the other side of the room who you would like to get to know. You approach them to try and start a conversation, but the people give you half a smile and walk away.) In the acceptance scenario, participants imagined themselves in the same setting; however, when they imagine encountering a group of people, the group smiles and engages them in the conversation (e.g., at a party you notice some people on the other side of the room who you would like to get to know. You approach them to try and start a conversation, and the people smile and start asking questions to get to know you.) Following the scenario, students completed measures of belonging, burden, and negative affect. In addition, participants completed the Fear of Self-Compassion Scale and various demographic questions. After completing the study, participants read a debriefing statement explaining the purpose of the study.

### Measures

**Fear of Self-Compassion.** Fear of self-compassion was measured by the Fear of Self-Compassion Scale (Gilbert, et. al., 2010). The scale contained 15 items on a 0 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Extremely*) Likert rating scale. The items included statements such as "I find it easier to be critical towards myself than compassionate" and "I fear that if I become too compassionate to myself others will reject me" ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Belonging.** Belonging was measured by the Belonging Scale (Williams, 2009).

This scale contained 20 items on a 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Great deal*) Likert rating scale. The items included statements such as “I felt rejected” and “I felt I belonged” ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

**Group Burden.** Group burden was measured by the Group Burden Scale (Van, Cukrowicz, Witte, & Joiner, 2012). This scale contained 12 items on a 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very true*) Likert rating scale. The items included statements such as “The group would have been better off if I were gone” and “I thought I was a burden on the group” ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Negative Affect.** Negative affect was measured using emotions from the PANAS-X scale (Watson & Clark, 1994). This scale consisted of 21 items on a 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*) Likert rating scale. The items included words such as “depressed” and “sad”. ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

**Demographics.** Participants completed a 5 item demographic measure that was used to assess the demographic variables of gender, age, classification in school, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

## Results

### Hierarchical Analyses

Hierarchical regressions were conducted to test the effect of fear of self-compassion and rejection on the three dependent measures (belonging, group burden, and negative affect). Scenarios included both rejection and acceptance conditions. Rejection was dummy coded as 0 and Acceptance was dummy coded as 1. The fear of self-compassion was centered and used as a predictor in the analysis. Zero-centered fear of self-compassion and condition (rejection and acceptance) were entered in Step 1, and their interaction was entered in Step 2. Standardized betas, t-values, and p-values are

reported for each analysis in Tables 1 through 3. Group means were obtained from descriptive analyses and are reported to clarify categorical differences.

### **Belonging**

Fear of self-compassion did not significantly predict less belonging. However, participants who experienced rejection ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) felt less belonging than participants who experienced acceptance ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ). There was no significant interaction.

### **Group Burden**

Fear of self-compassion significantly predicted group burden showing that people who were higher in fear of self-compassion reported feeling more burdensome to the group when recalling the scenario. Participants who experienced rejection ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) felt more burdensome to the group than participants who experienced acceptance ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ). There was no significant interaction.

### **Negative Affect**

Fear of self-compassion significantly predicted negative affect to show that people with higher fear of self-compassion reported feeling more negative emotions when recalling the scenario. Participants who experienced rejection ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) reported significantly more negative affect than participants who experienced acceptance ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ). There was no significant interaction.

## **Discussion**

The present study investigated whether low fear of self-compassion buffers people against the negative effects of rejection. We hypothesized that people with high fear of self-compassion who experienced rejection would have more negative affect, less

belonging, and feel more burdensome. We anticipated that fear of self-compassion would not impact these outcomes for participants who were accepted. Our results revealed no significant interactions between fear of self-compassion and rejection. Surprisingly, these findings were not consistent with Sakiz and Saricam (2015) who found that individuals with low self-compassion would respond to rejection more negatively. We expected a similar finding with individuals who fear self-compassion. Although the interactions were not significant, we did find several significant main effects.

Regarding the impact of the scenario, our findings supported the results reported by Sakiz and Saricam (2015) showing that individuals experience less belonging when reacting to rejection as opposed to acceptance. Given that belonging is essential for psychological well-being, being rejected is harmful to one's sense of well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Our results also showed that individuals who experienced rejection felt more of a burden to the group than participants who experienced acceptance. This finding coincides with Baumeister and Leary (1995) who found that individuals have a strong desire to form and maintain interpersonal relationships. When rejected, the individual may feel as though they were a burden to the other person by not being able to maintain that relationship. Individuals who experienced rejection also had more negative affect than participants who experienced acceptance. This finding reinforces research showing that individuals are at a psychological risk of being hostile, angry, and distressed when experiencing rejection (Laws, Ellerbeck, Rodrigues, Simmons, & Ansell, 2017).

In terms of fear of self-compassion, two of the three outcome variables were significantly related to fear of self-compassion. Individuals who were more fearful of



self-compassion reported feeling more burdensome. When rejected, an individual who is fearful of self-compassion may feel less desirable or believe that they do not meet the standards of the group, resulting in feelings of burden. Fear of self-compassion was also significantly related to negative affect. Individuals who feared self-compassion reported more negative affect when experiencing the scenario. This finding supports Gilbert, et. al., who found that the fear of self-compassion could be developed by someone who has low affection. Our findings are also supported by Robinson, et. al. (2016) who found that self-compassion helps protect individuals from negative emotions when there is a threat to one's psychological well-being; therefore, being fearful of self-compassion could put one at risk of negative emotions during a negative event. We anticipated a significant relationship between fear of self-compassion and belonging, however, we found that people who are high or low in fear of self-compassion are equally likely to feel like they belong. Fear of self-compassion was marginally related to belonging suggesting that people who are more fearful of self-compassion may be slightly less likely to feel as though they belong. However, because the effect was not significant, people who are high vs. low in fear of self-compassion rated their belonging similarly. Previous research has found that self-compassion relates more strongly to negative outcomes as opposed to positive outcomes (Muris & Petrocchi, 2016). Therefore, fear of self-compassion may have a stronger relationship with negative outcomes as well and be less likely to relate to positive outcomes such as belonging.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations existed in this study. The study was composed of two imagined events that required participants to imagine themselves in the scenario and then answer follow-up questions pertaining to the imagined event. It is likely that the events did not relate to all participants. Specifically, the events in the rejection and acceptance scenarios may not have been experienced by all participants in real life; therefore the responses may not have been realistic. Also, the sample consisted of undergraduate students (the majority of them being female), and may not be generalizable to a larger population. The study was also completed online and lacked accountability. Prior to the analyses, 33 participants were removed for failed attention checks.

Future research should attempt to investigate the factors that contribute to the lack of interaction between fear of self-compassion and rejection. Future research should also investigate why individuals with high fear of self-compassion do not feel less belonging when they are rejected. Our research supports the claim that individuals who fear self-compassion feel more burdensome and negative affect when experiencing rejection; however, future research should focus on *why* individuals who fear self-compassion feel more burdensome and more negative affect when experiencing negative events such as rejection.

### **Conclusion**

Through extensive research, self-compassion has been shown to relate to individual's well-being as well as protect one's psychological health (Macbeth & Gumley, 2012). There is limited research on those who fear self-compassion; therefore, our research contributes to this newer approach to self-compassion.. Our study proposed that fear of self-compassion would relate to a more negative response to rejection,

specifically. Also, we hypothesized that individuals with high fear of self-compassion would experience less belonging, more burden, and more negative affect. We anticipated an interaction between the fear of self-compassion and reactions to rejection; however, our findings showed that fear of self-compassion related to burden and negative affect regardless of condition. Further research is needed to determine if fear of self-compassion would have a stronger impact in a more realistic rejection experience.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1. Hierarchal regression analyses looking at the impact of fear of self-compassion, the condition manipulation, and the two-way interaction on belonging.**

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Step 1	.586			.000
FSC		-.104	-1.848	.067
Scenario		.757	13.481	.000
Step 2	.591			.231
FSC * Scenario		-.091	-1.202	.231

**Table 2. Hierarchal regression analyses looking at the impact of fear of self-compassion, the condition manipulation, and the two-way interaction on group burden.**

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Step 1	.235			.000
FSC		.223	2.922	.004
Scenario		-.426	-5.577	.000
Step 2	.235			.925
FSC * Scenario		.010	.094	.925

**Table 3. Hierarchical regression analyses looking at the impact of fear of self-compassion, the condition manipulation, and the two-way interaction on negative affect.**

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Step 1	.434			.000
FSC		.149	2.260	.025
Scenario		-.639 *	-9.716	.000
Step 2	.434			.718
FSC * Scenario		.032	.362	.718