Surviving Sexual Assault: How Self-Compassion Impacts Emotions, Identity, and Empowerment
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INTRODUCTION

Guiding Question
Will people who are more self-compassionate or those who are induced to respond self-compassionately cope better with a painful life event (i.e., sexual assault) than less self-compassionate or control participants?

Theoretical Foundations
- Survivors of sexual assault experience negative emotions, psychological distress, and self-blame, as well as feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment following the assault (Koss, Cheraskin, & Ellis, 2001; Lachman & Filipek, 2002; Lachman et al., 2007; & Levis, 2002).
- Self-compassion promotes adaptive cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes in young adult women (Neff, 2005).
- Women tend to have lower self-compassion than men (Yee et al., 2010).
- Self-compassionate women have better body satisfaction, higher motivation, and less anxiety regarding body image (Hietanen, Neff, & Sheldrick, 2014; Magnus, Kowalik, & McElnay, 2010).
- Following a self-compassion induction, women experienced less physiological responses to social stress (Arch et al., 2016).
- Previous self-compassion manipulations have shown that self-compassion is a mindset that can be taught. Several short-term self-compassion inductions have been published (Brown & Chen, 2012; Luyt et al., 2017) showing that such inductions lead to positive emotional and behavioral outcomes.

HYPOTHESES
- Participants who are naturally self-compassionate or who experience a self-compassion induction will experience less negative emotional and negative identity and more empowerment than participants in a control condition.

METHOD

Study 1: 144 female undergraduate participants
- 72% Caucasian
- Age M = 22.06, SD = 4.71

Study 2: 71 women staying at a domestic violence shelter
- 41% Caucasian
- Age M = 33.83, SD = 10.79

Study 1 Procedure
- Received a self-compassion coupled with a verbal learning prompt OR a verbal prompt only
- Answered several comprehension questions
- Received an imagined sexual assault scenario
- Responded to the scenario in a self-compassionate way or by free-writing
- Reported how they anticipated they would feel following the scenario (i.e., emotions, perceived identity)
- Received a private individual debriefer upon the completion of the survey by the research assistant who explained the purpose and hypotheses of the study. This educational debriefing also clarified important information regarding sexual assault.
- Received a resource card to take or share with a friend

Scenario: Your best friend Melissa and her boyfriend are throwing a party at his house... You really hit it off with one guy; he was really cute and very nice... At the end of the night, he offered to drive you home... He started trying to kiss you and attempted to take off your clothes. You kept saying no, but he persisted. He raped you. When you called someone, he ran away. He threatened you and promised to hurt you if you told anyone. Once he was done, he smiled as though he had done nothing wrong and dropped you off at home.

Study 2 Procedure
- Women who entered the shelter were given the chance to complete a pre-test form at their first victim advocate meeting.
- Pre-test included items assessing negative emotion, state self-compassion, empowerment, and perceptions of safety.
- While in shelter, women could attend support groups including the self-compassion support group.
- Self-compassion support group occurred 1 time each week and focused on topics such as self-compassion’s benefits and controlling one’s emotions.
- Women left shelter completed the post-test form during their exit interview.

RESULTS

Study 1: Hierarchical Regression Analyses
Manipulation Check - State Self-compassion (1 to 7 scale)
Self-compassion condition: M = 4.28, SD = 1.23; Control Condition: M = 4.05, SD = 1.28; β = .16, p = .022

Negative Emotion Results

Negative Identity Results

Study 2: Only 31 participants completed both pre and post test measures.
Length of stay was included as a potential moderator as women who were in shelter a long time experienced benefits regardless of support group attendance.

Hierarchical Regression Analyses
Predictors: Support Group Attendance, Length of Stay, and the Interaction

DISCUSSION

- In Study 1, the self-compassion manipulation led to less negative emotions and less negative identity for participants who had no prior sexual assault experience.
- Therefore, a short self-compassion induction was not as effective for women who had a previous history of sexual assault.
- In Study 2, mixed results showed attending a self-compassion support group led to stronger empowerment and more positive emotions, but only for women who stayed in shelter a short amount of time.

Limitations
- Study 1 used a short self-compassion manipulation and an imagined scenario.
- Study 2 used a quasi-experimental design as women were not free to choose whether to attend group.
- Study 2 had a high attrition rate as many women left shelter without taking the posttest questionnaire.

Future Directions
- Is it possible for a short-term self-compassion induction to reduce negative outcomes for sexual assault survivors?
- Future researchers should strive to look at the effectiveness of a self-compassion support group in a controlled experimental setting.

References available upon request
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INTRODUCTION

Study 1 Procedure
- Received a self-compassion manipulation with a verbal learning protocol or a verbal protocol only
- Received a control condition
- Participation was voluntary

Guiding Question
- How does self-compassion impact women's emotional responses to sexual assault?

Theoretical Foundations
- Emotional responses to sexual assault are influenced by self-compassion
- Women who perceive themselves as loving and accepting of their own weaknesses and failures tend to experience lower levels of emotional pain and distress

RESULTS

Hypotheses
- Hypothesis 1: Women who receive the self-compassion manipulation will report lower levels of negative emotion and identity
- Hypothesis 2: Women who receive the self-compassion manipulation will report higher levels of positive emotion and identity

Method
- Study 1: 2 groups (self-compassion manipulation or control condition)
- Study 2: 3 groups (self-compassion manipulation, support group attendance, or control condition)

DISCUSSION

Empowerment Results
- No SC Support Group
- SC Support Group

Positive Emotion Results
- No SC Support Group
- SC Support Group

Limitations
- Study 1 used a between-subjects design
- Study 2 used a quasi-experimental design

Future Directions
- Study 3: Explore the effectiveness of a self-compassion support group in a randomized controlled trial
- Future research should include a larger sample size to generalize findings

References available upon request