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 (Stamitz, Clark, & Ellen, 2002; Stinson & Filipp, 2003; Stamitz et al., 2003; Letz & Lewis, 2002).
- Self-compassion promotes adaptive cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes in young adults (Neff, 2003).
- Women tend to have lower self-compassion than men (Neff et al., 2015).
- Self-compassionate women have better body satisfaction, higher motivation, and less anxiety regarding body image (Neff, Shilgalis, & McElheen, 2010).
- Following a self-compassion induction, women experienced less physiological responses to social stress (Arch et al., 2004).
- 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; Lory et al., 2007) 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 emotions, identity, and more empowerment than participants in a control condition.

METHOD
Study 1: 144 female undergraduate participants
- 72% Caucasian
- Age M = 22.06, SD = 4.77
Study 2: 71 women staying at a domestic violence shelter
- 41% Caucasian
- Age M = 33.83, SD = 10.79

RESULTS

Study 1 Procedure
- Received a self-compassion prompt or a verbal prompt only
- Answered several comprehension questions
- Read an imagined sexual assault scenario
- Responded to the scenario in a self-compassion way or by free-writing
- Reported how they anticipated they would follow the scenario (i.e., emotions, perceived identity)
- Received a private individual debriefing upon the completion of the survey by the research assistant who explained the purpose and hypothesis 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 and tried to fight him off, but the more you said no, the angrier he would get. He overpowered you. You fell to the floor, ripped your underwear, and raped you. You begged him to stop. Once he was done, he acted 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 who left shelter completed the post-test form during their exit interview.

DISCUSSION
- In Study 1, the self-compassion manipulation led to less negative emotions and less negative identity for participants who had never experienced sexual assault.
- 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 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
- Review of self-compassion coupled with a verbal learning prompt OR a verbal prompt only
- What is your current sexual assault experience?
- How do you cope with your sexual assault experience?

Guiding Question
Will people who are more self-compassionate or those who are not more likely to experience negative emotions, negative identity, and perceptions of their support systems?

Theoretical Foundations
- Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)
- Self-compassion (Neff, 2003)
- Emotional coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

METHOD

Study 1: Experimental Design
- Participants: Control, Self-Compassion, Sexual Assault History, and Interaction
- Manipulation Check: Self-compassion (1-7 scale)
- Empowerment: Group Support (3-5 scale)

RESULTS

Negative Emotion Results
- Control group: Mean = 4.3, SD = 1.25, Control Condition: Mean = 4.69, SD = 3.26, t = 3.86, p < .05

Positive Emotion Results
- No UC Support Group: Mean = 2.5, SD = 1.1, UC Support Group: Mean = 3.4, SD = 1.3, t = 2.13, p < .05

DISCUSSION

Limitations
- Study 1: Need for generalization to other sexual assault survivors
- Study 2: Need for larger sample size

Future Directions
- Future research should focus on understanding the impact of self-compassion on the effectiveness of a self-compassion support group in a controlled experimental setting.