

Be Gentle With Yourself: The Impact of Self-Compassion on Fear of Evaluation in Social Anxiety

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INTRODUCTION

- Self-compassion involves self-kindness, understanding that pain and failure is a shared experience, and holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness (Neff, 2003).
- Harwood and Kocovski (2017) found participants high in social anxiety who engaged in a self-compassion writing task to experience less anticipatory anxiety before a speech task.
- Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is a key feature of social anxiety disorder (APA, 2013). Fear of positive evaluation (FPE) has also been shown to be experienced by socially anxious individuals (Heimberg, Brozovich, & Rapee, 2014).
- The literature has found a negative correlation between self-compassion and both FPE and FNE (Werner et al., 2012; Long & Neff, 2018).
- This in-progress study aims to replicate the findings from Harwood & Kocovski (2017) as well as evaluate the potential impact of the self-compassion exercise on fear of evaluation.

HYPOTHESES

The self-compassion writing task will:

- (1) Reduce anticipatory anxiety more for those higher in social anxiety, in line with Harwood & Kocovski (2017).
- (2) Reduce FNE for those higher in social anxiety.
- (3) Reduce FPE for those higher in social anxiety.

MEASURES

- **Social anxiety:** Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN; $\alpha = .919$; Connor et al., 2000).
- **Self-compassion:** Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; $\alpha = .912$; Neff, 2003).
- **Fear of negative evaluation:** Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale-II (BFNE-II; $\alpha = .957$; Carleton et al., 2006). The wording was altered to assess state FNE.
- **Fear of positive evaluation:** Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale (FPES; $\alpha = .828$; Weeks et al., 2008). The wording was altered to assess state FPE.
- **Anticipatory anxiety:** State Trait Anxiety Inventory State Version (STAI-S; $\alpha = .948$; Spielberger et al., 1983).
- **Anticipatory anxiety:** Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS; Benjamin et al., 2010).
- **Anticipatory anxiety/processing:** Anticipatory Social Behavior Questionnaire (ASBQ; $\alpha = .810$; Hinrichsen & Clark, 2003). A revised version was used (from Harwood & Kocovski, 2017) to measure anticipatory processing pertaining to the speech task.

METHODS

- 67 participants (47 female, 19 male) were recruited from Murray State University. *Mage* = 19.03, 92.5% Caucasian. The present study was designed to be a close replication of Harwood & Kocovski (2017).
- Participants met with a researcher on Zoom while filling out an online form. They were electronically randomized to receive either a self-compassion writing task or a control writing task pertaining to a work-related mistake. The task lasted 10 minutes. As a manipulation check, they were asked how compassionately and critically they wrote about their mistake.
- Next, participants were informed they would have to deliver a speech that would be recorded and evaluated by several research assistants. They then filled out a psychometric battery consisting of the FPES, BFNE-II, STAI-S, SUDS, and ASBQ before being informed that there will be no speech.

ANALYSIS & RESULTS

- For the manipulation check, independent samples t tests were conducted between the experimental and control groups on the self-reported levels of self-compassion and self-criticism they wrote with. This yielded no statistically significant difference between groups for self-compassion, $t(66) = .359, p = .720$, or self-criticism, $t(66) = -1.701, p = .094$.
- Process 1 moderation models were run with baseline social anxiety (SPIN) and writing task as predictors of anticipatory anxiety (STAI-S, SUDS, and ASBQ), fear of positive evaluation (FPES), and fear of negative evaluation (BFNE-II). All these models were significant, but the writing task and moderation term were not significant predictors in any of the models.
- Because of the lower power of these preliminary analyses, a series of independent samples t tests between the experimental and control group were run on the outcome variables of interest that were measured after the anxiety induction (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Independent samples t tests between conditions on fear of positive evaluation, fear of negative evaluation, and anticipatory anxiety.

	Self-Compassion		Control		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
FPES	22.69	14.01	25.20	13.99	-0.733	.466
BFNE	35.11	10.06	40.78	12.76	-1.940	.057
STAI-S	44.22	10.82	49.94	13.37	-1.829	.072
SUDS	41.10	18.74	50.46	23.45	-1.769	.082
ASBQ	27.55	5.74	29.84	6.72	-1.479	.144

DISCUSSION

- These are preliminary analyses of data from an in-progress study, which aims to replicate and extend the findings of Harwood & Kocovski (2017).
- Between conditions, there was not a statistically significant difference in the self-reported levels of how compassionate and critical participants were in their writing, which was a failure to replicate the findings of Harwood & Kocovski (2017). This could be because of a difference in context. The present study was conducted on Zoom during a pandemic, which could have resulted in a lack of adherence to the prompts or a lack of effort in the exercise since they would not physically be required to hand their work to the researcher. Ultimately, this could suggest that experimental methods may not always function in the same way virtually as they do in-person. Future research might explore contextual disparities between online and in-person intervention research in nonclinical samples.
- Despite the lack of statistical significance of the manipulation check, there is still a trending difference in the means of several outcome variables (see Table 1). This suggests that appropriately powered analyses may reveal statistically significant and theoretically consistent differences in FNE and anticipatory anxiety between the group who engaged in the self-compassion exercise and the group who did not.
- Our future research may also explore how the content of participant responses in the writing task relates to their baseline levels of self-compassion as well as the outcome variables.
- Data collection is ongoing. If the completed research provides evidence that the self-compassion exercise can lower fear of evaluation, the literature could have more evidence that self-guided self-compassion exercises could potentially contribute to making exposure easier for those with social anxiety.

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