

The Benefits of Self-Compassion in Mental Health Professionals: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research

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Abstract: The importance of cultivating self-compassion is an often neglected issue among mental health professionals despite the risks to occupational well-being present in psychological care, such as burnout or compassion fatigue. In this context, this literature review has a twofold aim. Firstly, to contribute to raising awareness of the benefits of self-compassion among professionals, based on empirical research findings. Secondly, to coherently organize the available evidence on this topic, which to date appears scattered in a variety of articles. A systematic search on the APA PsycInfo database was conducted, and 24 empirical studies focused on the topic of the benefits of self-compassion in mental health professionals were finally selected. Concerning their methods, only 4 of the selected studies used experimental or quasi-experimental designs, 14 were cross-sectional studies, 3 presented qualitative research, and 3 were literature reviews. The research, regardless of methods used, points mainly to the benefits of self-compassion on the therapists' mental health and well-being; prevention of occupational stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatization as well as improvement of therapeutic competencies and professional efficacy-related aspects. In the review, self-compassion appeared as a process that could explain the benefits (eg on burnout) of cultivating other skills (eg mindfulness). To further explore this point, an additional review included 17 studies focused on the effects of mindfulness or compassion-based interventions on therapists' self-compassion. In conclusion, our work joins those who have recommended the inclusion of self-compassion trainings in the curricula of mental health professionals.

Keywords: self-compassion, mental health professionals, burnout, well-being, therapeutic skills

Introduction

Self-compassion is a topic that is attracting great interest in current psychology. Following Neff's¹ definition, self-compassion entails self-kindness, mindfulness, and feelings of common humanity. Self-kindness refers to an attitude of benevolence towards oneself, rather than self-criticism and self-judgment. Mindfulness involves being aware of one's inner experiences from an open, accepting and non-judgmental perspective rather than being fused or over-identified with thoughts and emotions. Finally, the common humanity component is referred to the understanding of suffering and pain as universal aspects of the human shared experience, instead of feeling isolated, separate, strange, weird or marginalized when disturbing events occur or problematic emotions arise.

Self-compassion has been shown to be consistently associated with benefits for mental health and well-being across diverse populations.^{2,3} Specific interventions aimed to cultivate self-compassion skills, such as the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program^{4,5} have even been designed. In addition, this particular training protocol, or adaptations of it, have been demonstrated as effective in several studies carried out in community samples⁶⁻⁸ and clinical settings.⁹