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# An examination of the association between mindfulness and compassion for others in Psychotherapists: A mediating role of self-compassion

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*No one who, like me, conjures up the most evil of those half-tamed demons that inhabit the human breast, and seeks to wrestle with them, can expect to come through the struggle unscathed.*

(Freud, 1905/1933, p. 184)

# Previous research and background to the study

# Why this research subject?

Therapists depend heavily upon compassion, a key component of the therapeutic relationship. However, these practitioners may seldom apply this skill to themselves (Norcross & VandenBos, 2018, p. 169; Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011; Neff, 2003a; Rogers, 1961).

A significant proportion of therapists suffer from psychological distress and burnout (Lee *et al.*, 2020; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016; Hannigan *et al.*, 2004).

Self-care in therapists involves self-awareness, self-regulation, and the ability to balance the needs of self and others (Dorian & Killebrew, 2014; Boellinghaus *et al.*, 2013).

The ability to care for oneself is related to the ability to be compassionate toward oneself (Gilbert, 2005).



# Construct 1. Compassion – for others

*...being open to and moved by the suffering of others, so that one desires to ease their suffering. It also involves offering others patience, kindness and non-judgmental understanding, recognizing that all humans are imperfect and make mistakes (Neff, 2003b).*

A central pillar of Buddhist practice and morality (Dalai Lama, 1984).

Two affect regulation systems (Gilbert, 2005):

- threat-focused system
- affiliation-focused system

The relationship between compassion and caregiving (Gilath *et al.*, 2005) is built upon Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory.



# Construct 2. Compassion – for Self

Kristin Neff (2003b) first defined the construct “Self-Compassion”.

- Extending kindness & understanding to oneself vs harsh self-criticism & judgment;
- Seeing one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience vs. separating & isolating; &
- Holding one’s painful thoughts & feelings in balanced awareness vs. over-identifying with them.

The Self-in-Relation Model – a “corrective relational experience” with oneself

(Jordan, 1991b; Jordan, 1997; Jordan *et al.*, 1991).

Theoretical underpinnings:

- Humanistic Psychology
- Emotional Regulation
- Physiology



# Construct 2. Compassion – for Self

Self-compassion has been linked to various components of wellbeing, including (Neff *et al.*, 2007; Neff, 2003a,b):

*...reductions in...*

Anxiety

Depression

Stress

Maladaptive perfectionism

Shame

Suicidality

*...improvements in...*

Life satisfaction

Happiness

Self-confidence

Optimism

Immune functioning



Those who successfully practice self-compassion are more likely to try to prevent the experience of suffering in the first place; better promoting or maintaining well-being (Neff, 2003a,b).

# Construct 3. Mindfulness

Recently, mindful stress-reduction practices such as those of Kabat-Zinn have arisen (e.g., Kabat-Zinn *et al.*, 1992).



Mindfulness...

*a balanced state of awareness that avoids the extremes of over-identification and disassociation with experience and entails the clear seeing and acceptance of mental and emotional phenomena as it arises*

(Neff, 2003a, p. 88).

*...individuals do not avoid or repress their painful feelings, so that they are able to acknowledge and feel compassion for their experience in the first place* (Neff, 2003a, p. 88).



# Construct 3. Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves the integration of ideas and practices from traditional psychologies, such as Buddhism, into cognitive behavioural practice. Buddhism and cognitive therapy share a view that “with our thoughts we create the world”

(Allen & Knight, 2005; Kumar, 2005).

In order for individuals to fully experience self-compassion, they must adopt a mindful perspective (Neff, 2003b).

A compassionate attitude toward oneself can be said to entail the “equilibrated mental perspective” known as mindfulness (Neff, 2003b, p. 224).

Mindfulness is also integrated within  
Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (Linehan, 1993a).



# Combining Constructs

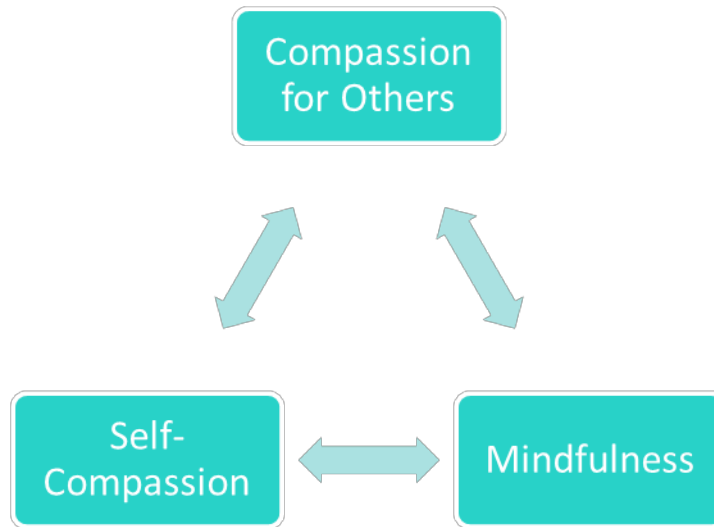
Mindful meditation involves the “dissolving of the boundaries between the self and other beings” which is a “critical element in the development of compassion”

(Allen & Knight, 2005, p. 253).



# Aims of the study

# Aims of the Study – Rationale



# Aims of the Study – The Gap

...and yet the evidence for the inter-relationships between these three constructs is “piecemeal” (Fulton, 2018)...



Do therapists who have compassion for others in the absence of self-compassion experience amplified stress (e.g., Gilbert & Choden, 2013)?

Limited study of whether the development of mindfulness and self-compassion translates to positive states, i.e., compassion toward others (Fulton, 2018).

Linear relationship between mindfulness, self-compassion, and compassion for others unexplored amongst experienced therapists (e.g., Neff & Pommier, 2013).

Prevalence of general or university populations (Condon *et al.*, 2013; Wallmark *et al.*, 2013; Breines & Chen, 2012).

# Aims of the Study – Hypotheses

The current study sets out to explore the relationships between self-compassion, compassion for others, and mindfulness. The hypotheses are as follows:

- H1. There is a significant, positive relationship between mindfulness and self-compassion;
- H2. There is a significant, positive relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others; and
- H3. Self-Compassion mediates the relationship between mindfulness and compassion for others.

# Method

# Method – Participants & Procedure

One hundred at fifty two fully accredited therapists (72% female) voluntarily participated in this cross-sectional study. According to G\*Power (Version 3.1), a sample size of 152 individuals is “ample” for my requirements (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009).

Participants were asked to provide the following demographic information:

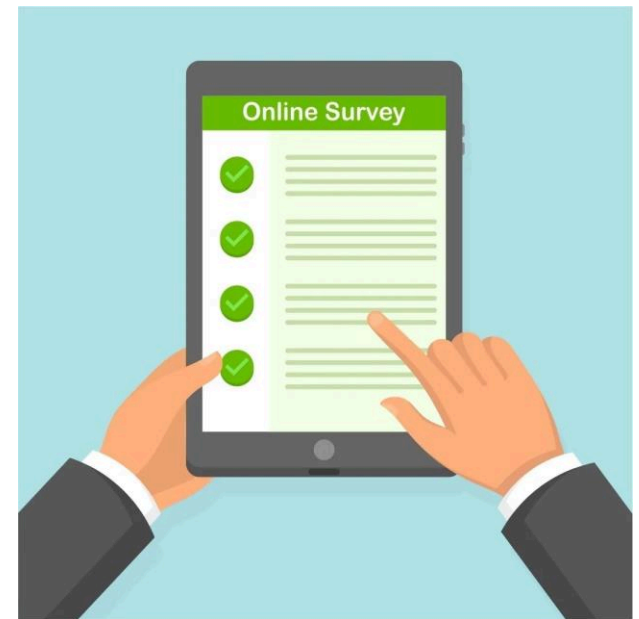
- Age
- Years of clinical experience
- Clinical hours worked per week
- Sector (i.e., public, private, both, charity)
- Education level
- Theoretical orientation

Participants were recruited through convenience / snowball sampling through several representative organisations for therapists in Ireland.



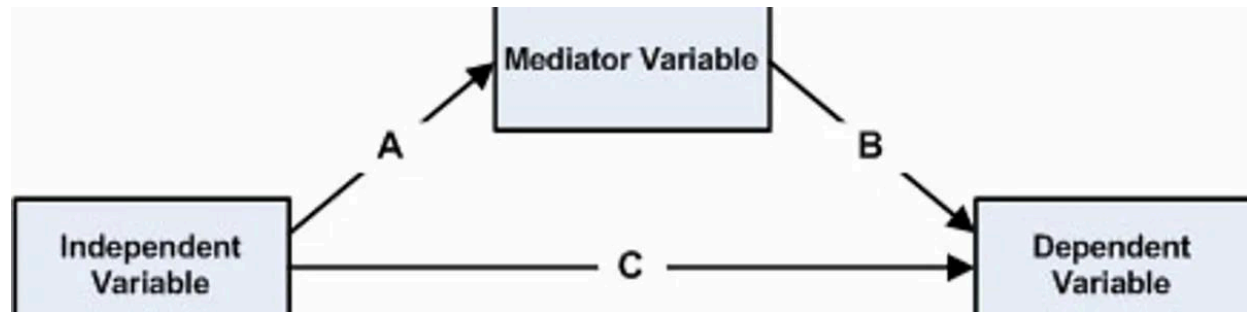
# Method – Scales

- The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) (Baer *et al.*, 2006) is a 39-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure mindfulness in daily life (i.e., trait, not state).
- The Self-Other Four Immeasurables (SOFI; Kraus & Sears, 2009) was developed to measure compassion toward self and others.



# Method – Analysis

- Reliability coefficients were calculated for the study variables;
- Descriptive analysis was calculated for study variables;
- Pearson correlations were conducted to determine the extent to which variables were associated to each other;
- Model 4 from PROCESS v4.1 (Hayes, 2022) used to conduct mediation analyses –
  - mindfulness is the predictor (x) variable;
  - compassion for others is the outcome (y) variable; &
  - self-compassion is the mediator (m) variable;
- A bootstrapping procedure (Arbuckle, 2008) was employed to estimate both direct and indirect effects.



# Results

**Table 1. Reliability Coefficients for the study variables**

<b>Variable</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math>-coefficient</b>
1. Mindfulness	.917
2. Self-Compassion	.814
3. Compassion for Others	.741

**Table 2. Pearson Product-Moment Correlations for the study variables**

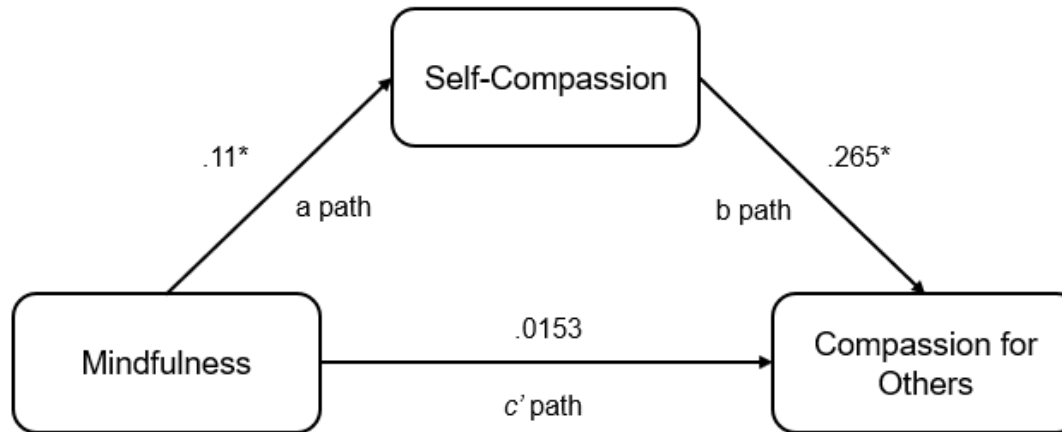
<b>Variable</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Mindfulness	1	.628**	.359**
2. Self-Compassion		1	.454**
3. Compassion for Others			1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (1-tailed)

**Table 3. Indirect Effects and Effect Sizes of Study Variables**

	<b>Effects</b>	<b>BootSE</b>	<b>CI 95% bootstrapping</b>	
			<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>
Indirect effects of Mindfulness via Self-Compassion	.0294	.0082	.0149	.0477

# Results



**Figure 1.** Path model summary of mediation analysis

*\*p < .001*

Using 5000 bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals, the indirect effects of mindfulness on compassion for others through self-compassion was found to be .0294, 95% CI (.0149 to .0477).

As the CI did not cross zero, and the direct effect of mindfulness on compassion for others was not found to be significant, we find that self-compassion fully mediates the relationship between mindfulness and compassion for others.

# Method – Analysis

Finally, which of the hypotheses were supported?

- H1** There is a significant, positive relationship between mindfulness and self-compassion.
- H2** There is a significant, positive relationship between self-compassion and compassion for others.
- H3** Self-compassion fully mediates the relationship between mindfulness and compassion for others.



# Discussion & Conclusion

# Discussion

The importance of self-compassion, compassion for clients, and mindfulness is increasingly recognised in the work of therapists

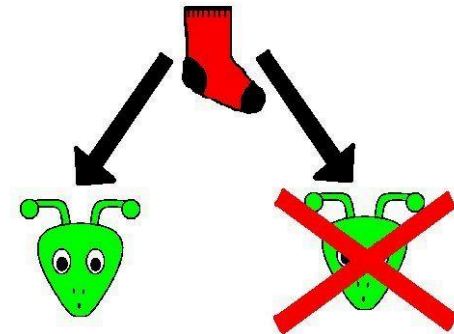
However, the relationships amongst these three constructs remains unclear.

Limited study of whether the development of mindfulness and self-compassion translates to positive states, such as compassion toward others (Fulton, 2018).

The current study is the first to investigate self-compassion, compassion for others, and mindfulness in fully qualified, accredited therapists.

All three hypotheses were supported.

**Q. Where have all my socks gone?**



**Alternate Hypothesis**

=

Extra-terrestrial beings have transported themselves into my house in order to steal my socks.

**Null Hypothesis**

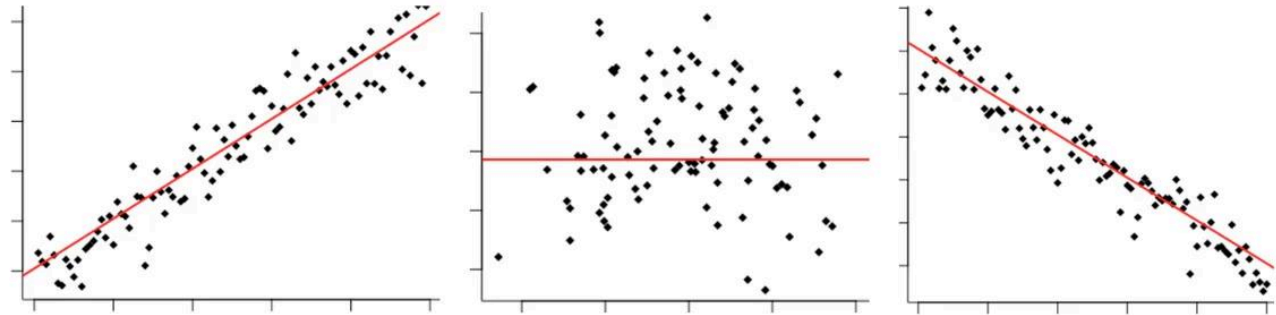
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Aliens are not to blame. There is some other explanation for the disappearing socks.



# Discussion

## *Correlational findings*

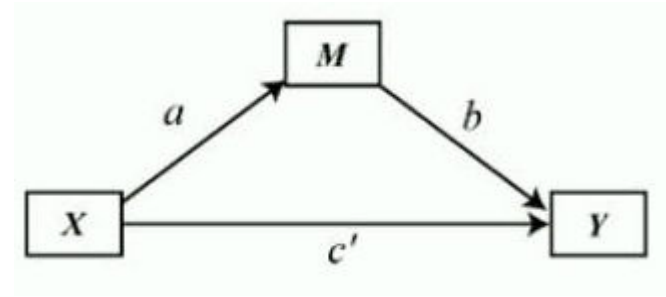


There was indeed a significant, positive relationship between these two constructs - vs Beaumont *et al.* (2016a).

Mindfulness significantly correlated with self-compassion in psychologists (Latorre *et al.*, 2021; Bourgault & Dionne, 2019) – echoed in current study ( $r = .628$ ).

# Discussion

## *Mediational findings*



The findings of the current study closely map to those in Rodríguez-Carvajal *et al.* (2016) – the Mindfulness Integrative Model (MIM). While the different methods preclude direct comparison, their findings of sequential acquisition of 1st) mindfulness trait, 2nd) self-compassion, and 3rd) positive states of mind for both groups are supported by the findings from the current study.

This is a similar finding to Yip and colleagues, where the relationship between mindfulness and compassion to clients was mediated by self-warmth (i.e., the composite of positive qualities in self-compassion) (Yip *et al.*, 2017).

# Discussion

## *Theoretical implications*

The model in the current study demonstrated the important role that self-compassion plays in fully mediating the relationship between mindfulness and compassion for others. Indeed, there was a non-significant relationship between mindfulness and compassion for others.

With respect to mindfulness's role in this interrelationship, Buddhist psychological theory – more recently developed by Neff (2003a,b) in her Western conceptualisation – holds that mindfulness is a prerequisite of self-compassion.



# Discussion

## *Implications and Practical Applications for Therapists*

Importance of incorporating modules in self-compassion and self-care in the curricula of therapist training programs (Patsipoulos & Buchanan, 2011). Mindfulness practice, meditation or other contemplative practices should be included (i.e., Christopher & Maris, 2010).

Inclusion of self-compassion practices in counselor training programmes can help students to build their emotional accessibility (Nelson *et al.*, 2018), a necessary characteristic when forming relational connections with clients (Jordan, 2010).



# Discussion

## *Implications and Practical Applications for Therapists*

Self-compassion within therapist training programmes (Coaston & Lawrence, 2019):

- perspective-taking exercises,
- dimensions within Buddhist principles,
- identifying early signs & symptoms of stress,
- learning to listen differently,
- developing a sense of common humanity, &
- “gratefulness” body scanning.



Compassionate Mind Training (CMT; Gilbert & Procter, 2006): aims to cultivate compassion for others and self. Promising results for trainee psychotherapists: increases in self-compassion scores post training (Beaumont *et al.*, 2017).

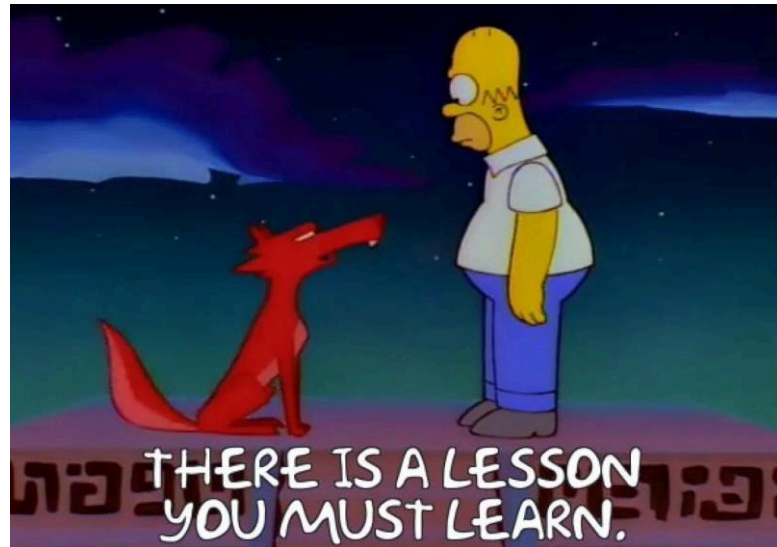
# Discussion

## *Implications and Practical Applications for Therapists*

It is crucial that we are able to determine whether the positive effects of mindfulness practices are lasting (Coleman et al., 2016).

It is important for us to better understand which meditation practices exactly improve therapist compassion for others: mindfulness, or loving-kindness

(Bibeau, et al., 2016).



“Look, just gimme some inner peace, or I’ll mop the floor with ya!” (Simpson, H. J., 1997)

# Discussion

## *Implications and Practical Applications for Therapists*

Finally, the positive constructs self-compassion and compassion for others are closely related to the negative construct, compassion fatigue.

Training interventions, such as that in Beaumont, Durkin, Hollins Martin and Carson (2016a), lend support to the argument that developing a compassionate mind may thwart compassion fatigue (see: Gilbert, 2005; Figley, 2002a,b).

Similarly, such interventions may become protective factors for therapists who, while having compassion for others, lack self-compassion, and thereby risk experiencing amplified stress (e.g., Gilbert & Choden, 2013).

# Discussion

## *Limitations*

The current study used both convenience and snowball sampling.

Non-probability sampling risk bias.

Therapists experiencing difficulty with respect to the three constructs under investigation could be either (a) more averse to participating, or (b) more interested in participating.

Both scales employed were self-report measures; risk of social desirability effect.

Lack of a third-party assessment; self-reflective skills.

Questions imposed upon participants by the scales chosen by the researcher.



# Discussion

## *Future Research*

Using tests of mediation in cross-sectional research is questionable, as mediation consists of causal processes that unfold over time (see, e.g., Maxwell & Cole, 2007) – relationships that cross-sectional design cannot detect. For this reason, a longitudinal design would add to our understanding about the three constructs in the current study.

Therapists often know of the importance of self-compassion and mindfulness, but also often do not practice them. For therapeutic work to be sustainable, as well as effective, a greater understanding of the mechanisms behind this issue would be invaluable to the field. Namely, how is self-compassion incorporated in occupational and educational settings? An exploration of both therapist and client perceptions of the importance of therapist self-compassion would benefit the field (Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011).

# Discussion

## *Future Research*

Training: researchers delivering Compassionate Mind Training (CMT; Gilbert & Procter, 2006) to trainee therapists have found no statistically significant difference post training on the Compassion for Others Scale (Beaumont *et al.*, 2017). This remains an important issue to resolve. Future research should investigate ways in which both compassion for self & compassion for clients may be enhanced in a sustainable manner.

Qualitative design / mixed methods: offers opportunity of expansion of points raised by the researcher, developing upon ideas in an inductive, participant-oriented manner (Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011).

Investigate experiences of *both* therapists and their clients (e.g., Fulton, 2016). To allow analysis of any divergence in the perspectives of therapists and clients as to the ratings of our constructs.

# Conclusion

The current study sought to investigate the relationships between self-compassion, compassion for others, and mindfulness in fully-accredited therapists.

It was found that self-compassion fully mediated the relationship between mindfulness and compassion for others. Further, self-compassion and compassion for others were found to be significantly, positively related.

Finally, the importance of real-world impact was emphasised, with an awareness of the importance of practicing these skills, and in exploring the effectiveness of interventions that claim to enhance them.

# Thank you



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