

Social Perfectionism and the Youth Mental Health Crisis: Self-Compassion as an Approach to Youth Mental Health Recovery

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Rates of depression and anxiety are at all-time highs among youth. Suicide is the second leading cause of death, surpassing accidents, and childhood cancer (CDC, 2024). Paralleling these mental health trends is the increase in perfectionism observed in adolescents and young adults, driven by a multitude of factors including the competition for college admissions and job attainment, controlling parental styles, and comparisons promoted by social media (Curran & Hill, 2019; Fernandez-Garcia et al., 2023; Kawamoto et al., 2023).

What is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality trait characterized by perfectionistic striving (a desire for flawlessness and setting unrealistically high standards for oneself) and perfectionistic concern (being hypercritical of one's efforts). Perfectionism can be directed towards the self (self-oriented), and others (other-oriented), or perceived as an expectation of others (socially prescribed). Perfectionism can lead to rigid thinking, hypercriticism of self and others, repetitive negative framing of mistakes, self-doubt, and fear of failure (Fernandez-Garcia et al., 2023).

Although healthily striving towards high standards and goals can lead to adaptive outcomes, when anything short of perfectionism is perceived as a failure perfectionistic striving can become problematic and increase the risk of developing both physical and mental health problems like anxiety and depression (Melero et al., 2020). Perfectionistic concern refers to the fears and anxieties associated with not achieving perfection and is considered maladaptive (Kawamoto et al., 2023). A heightened sensitivity to errors, flaws, and criticism can lead adolescents and emerging adults to view anything short of perfection as a failure and increase their risk of experiencing shame, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment. Fear of failure and feeling these negative emotions can lead youth to avoid certain tasks and experiences, limiting exposure and growth and reinforcing a negative approach to future mistakes.

Self-oriented perfectionism, in which people hold unrealistic expectations of and harshly evaluate themselves, has been shown to increase one's vulnerability to psychological difficulties. It is proven to be positively associated with depression, eating disorders, and early death in college students, correlates with suicidal ideation, and can predict increases in depression over time (Curran & Hill, 2019).

Socially prescribed perfectionism refers to the beliefs about expectations one thinks others have of them. Individuals with socially prescribed perfectionism believe they are being judged harshly by others and that perfection is necessary to secure their approval (Curran & Hill, 2019). Failure to meet these expectations is internalized, leading to self-criticism and the belief that one is letting not only themselves but also everyone important in their lives down. Repeatedly failing to meet these expectations can lead to a learned sense of helplessness or worthlessness. This type of perfectionism is positively associated with major psychopathologies including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, and is a stronger predictor of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation over time when compared to self-oriented perfectionism (Curran & Hill, 2019). Social perfectionism can derive from and be reinforced by the greater social context including the college admissions climate which encourages fierce competition among peers, and in which the most decorated students are rewarded for their achievements.

How Does Perfectionism Present?

Perfectionism can present as procrastination or avoidance of difficult tasks, difficulty prioritizing tasks, burnout from unhealthy perfectionistic striving, anger, attention seeking, fear of disapproval, high sensitivity to criticism, anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicidal behavior (Fernandez-Garcia et al., 2023; Melero et al., 2020). Notably, among college students, academic performance has not been shown to differ significantly between adaptive and -maladaptive perfectionists (Kawamoto et al., 2023). Chronic stress derived from perfectionistic concern can lead to the development of depression, which is associated with physical presentations like sleep disorders, headaches or migraines, and digestive problems (Bluth et al., 2023).

Self-Compassion to Combat Perfectionism and Mental Distress

Self-compassion is the ability to provide compassion toward the self in times of perceived inadequacy, failure, or suffering. The core components of self-compassion include mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness. Mindfulness is the awareness of difficult feelings and thoughts without ruminating on or suppressing them. Common humanity is the understanding that imperfection and failure are parts of the shared human experience and not a reflection of isolating personal inadequacy. Kindness to self is showing warmth and accepting mistakes unconditionally as opposed to harsh criticism of self (Neff, 2003). Youth with a more balanced drive for excellence can experience satisfaction from all their academic and non-academic efforts, regardless of the outcomes. Approaches to combatting perfectionism can promote growth by allowing youth to practice positively reframing their perceived failures and ensuring that they integrate lessons learned from making mistakes (Smeets et al., 2014).

Practicing the components of self-compassion can be both protective against the development of maladaptive perfectionism and facilitate recovery when incorporated into more traditional interventions for mental distress. Numerous studies have found that self-compassion is significantly associated with psychological wellness (Smeets et al., 2014; Zessin et al., 2015). Recent research has highlighted the role of self-compassion as a significant mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and presentations of psychological distress including depression, generalized anxiety, and academic stress (Kawamoto et al., 2023).

Self-compassion interventions tested with adolescents have proven to be feasible, and acceptable and to decrease psychopathology scores. Early adolescence is a developmental stage during which youth believe their experiences are unique to themselves, that they are constantly being watched or judged, and when youth are actively developing their identity and establishing their sense of self-worth (Seekis et al., 2023). Practicing the core components of self-compassion including recognizing distress as part of the human condition and cultivating self-kindness can help youth in this stage to relate to themselves in more emotionally healthy ways and to self-soothe during distressful experiences in the transition to adulthood (Smeets et al., 2014). In an Australian pilot study of a four-week class-based self-compassion program, 14-to-17-year-old participants demonstrated increased self-compassion, peer connectedness, and resilience and decreased social and general anxiety scores (Seekis et al., 2023). A 2023 randomized control trial testing feasibility, acceptability, and depression outcomes of the Mindful Self-Compassion for Teens (MSC-T) intervention found the intervention efficacious in preventing the development of clinically significant depression in adolescents with subsyndromal depression (Bluth et al., 2023).

Brief self-compassion interventions that include the core components of self-compassion have also shown promising results with college students in recent studies. These interventions include elements that encourage awareness of difficult experiences while discouraging avoidance of them, building connection instead of isolating oneself, and showing self-kindness instead of harsh criticism and judgment of inadequacies. These brief interventions have reduced maladaptive perfectionism, imposter feelings, and rumination in college populations but have demonstrated mixed outcomes for psychological distress scores in the short term. People who experience the imposter phenomenon believe their achievements result from external factors

instead of their efforts and fear failure and being exposed as fraudulent owing to this belief. Imposter feelings are correlated with depression and anxiety. A 2023 study investigated the effects of a brief self-compassion intervention for college students with the imposter phenomenon. The intervention significantly reduced maladaptive perfectionism and imposter phenomenon but with no significant change in psychological distress measures in participants between the intervention and control groups (Liu et al., 2023). Investigators noted that this finding could have resulted from the participant sample not reporting significant experiences of psychological distress before the intervention. In addition, a brief 4-week self-compassion intervention might have better uptake in college settings when compared to longer interventions but not be comprehensive enough to address the many aspects of one's life experience contributing to psychological distress during this stage (Liu et al., 2023).

Similarly, in a 2014 study on the effectiveness of a 3-week self-compassion group intervention, female undergraduate students who received the intervention demonstrated enhanced resilience and well-being compared with controls, but no significant improvement in mood. Notably, although there was no impact on mood in the short term, the intervention was associated with reductions in rumination, a significant mediator of the link between self-compassion and decreased depression indices. Researchers noted that such an intervention may have a more robust impact on mood over time, identifying the lack of follow-up measurements as a limitation and recommendation for future research (Smeets et al., 2014).

A 2023 study piloting the effectiveness of an online group brief mindfulness-self-compassion intervention, tested the intervention with subjects presenting with clinically significant depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. Significant differences were observed in depression and stress subscales when compared to the control group in addition to improved self-compassion and reduced self-criticism (Torres Lancheros et al., 2023).

Thoughts for the Future

In a post-pandemic era in which rates of mental distress and suicide are high among youth and with an increasing demand for mental health services, it is important to screen and intervene for other factors that could be contributing to the development of mental distress in this population. A rise in rates of perfectionism compared to previous generations coincides with the steadily increasing rates and severity of mental distress among youth populations. Socially prescribed perfectionism has been demonstrated to have a larger association with psychopathologies such as depression and suicidal ideation and has increased two-fold compared to levels of self-orientated perfectionism (Curran & Hill, 2019). Self-compassion has been shown to mediate the relationship between perfectionism and the development of psychological challenges. Screening youth in schools and colleges for factors like perfectionism and combining brief self-compassion interventions with more traditional treatment approaches can be both preventative and aid in the recovery of mental distress presentations. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies and follow-up assessments to determine the lasting outcomes and benefits of self-compassion interventions on youth mental health over time. Continued efforts should be made to validate, replicate, and expand self-compassion-based approaches in other contexts like schools and afterschool programs.

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