

Self-compassion, Achievement Goals, and Coping with Academic Failure

Kristin D Neff , Ya-Ping Hsieh & Kullaya Dejitterat

To cite this article: Kristin D Neff , Ya-Ping Hsieh & Kullaya Dejitterat (2005) Self-compassion, Achievement Goals, and Coping with Academic Failure, *Self and Identity*, 4:3, 263-287, DOI: [10.1080/13576500444000317](https://doi.org/10.1080/13576500444000317)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576500444000317>



Published online: 17 Feb 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 6725



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 390 View citing articles [↗](#)

Self-compassion, Achievement Goals, and Coping with Academic Failure

KRISTIN D. NEFF
YA-PING HSIEH
KULLAYA DEJITTERAT

University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

Two studies examined the relationship between self-compassion, academic achievement goals, and coping with perceived academic failure among undergraduates. Self-compassion entails being kind to oneself in instances of failure, perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience, and holding painful feelings in mindful awareness. Study 1 (N = 222) found that self-compassion was positively associated with mastery goals and negatively associated with performance goals, a relationship that was mediated by the lesser fear of failure and greater perceived competence of self-compassionate individuals. Study 2 confirmed these findings among students who perceived their recent midterm grade as a failure (N = 110), with results also indicating that self-compassion was positively associated with emotion-focused coping strategies and negatively associated with avoidance-oriented strategies.

Many have criticized self-esteem programs in the schools as a primary way of encouraging positive self-attitudes among students, arguing that an over-emphasis on evaluating and liking the self may unwittingly lead youths to develop narcissistic attitudes or distorted self-concepts (Damon, 1995; Finn, 1990; Hewitt, 1998; McMillan, Singh, & Simonetta, 1994; Seligman, 1995). “Self-compassion,” a construct derived from Buddhist psychology, has recently been proposed as an alternative way to conceptualize healthy self-attitudes (Neff, 2003b). Research indicates that self-compassion offers similar psychological health benefits to self-esteem, but that it has fewer of its drawbacks (Neff, 2003a). Although these findings are promising, research on self-compassion is still in its early stages and the relation between self-compassion and other important psychological processes needs to be investigated further. There are several theoretical reasons to believe that feelings of compassion towards the self (or the lack thereof) may impact the learning process, and this article presents two studies that attempt to explore this relationship—specifically, the link between self-compassion, academic achievement goals, and coping with academic failure. First, however, the construct of self-compassion will be discussed in greater detail.

Received 11 June 2004; accepted 26 September 2004

Address correspondence to Kristin Neff, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station, D5800, Austin, TX 78712, USA. E-mail: kristin.neff@mail.utexas.edu

The definition of self-compassion is related to the more general definition of compassion itself. When individuals feel compassion for others, they allow themselves to be touched by another's experience of suffering. When this occurs, feelings of kindness and caring for the person's welfare spontaneously arise. When compassion is felt for someone who has made a mistake or performed a misdeed, it means that an open-minded, non-judgmental attitude is taken towards the person as opposed to an attitude of harsh criticism or severe judgment. Another unique feature of compassion is that you recognize your shared humanity with another person. When you see someone who has failed or who is suffering, instead of saying, "That's terrible but thank goodness it's not my problem," you say "There but for fortune go I."

In the same way, self-compassion involves being open to and aware of one's own suffering, offering kindness and understanding towards oneself, desiring the self's well-being, taking a nonjudgmental attitude towards one's inadequacies and failures, and framing one's own experience in light of the common human experience (Neff, 2003b). Because this self-reflective process requires taking the stance of an "other" towards oneself, self-compassion avoids many of the problematic aspects of self-pity. Self-pity is a solipsistic process in which individuals become absorbed in their own problems and forget that others are experiencing similar problems. Self-pitying individuals also get carried away by their subjective reactions—a process that can be termed "over-identification" (Neff, 2003b). Over-identification leads individuals to exaggerate the extent of their personal suffering and prevents them from adopting a more objective perspective on their situation. The common humanity component of self-compassion, in contrast, allows for the recognition of the related experiences of self and other, thus breaking the cycle of self-absorption. Moreover, remembering that others are suffering in similar, or perhaps worse, ways tends to put one's own experiences into greater perspective.

For this reason, self-compassion can be said to entail "mindfulness" (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness is a balanced state of awareness in which thoughts and feelings are nonjudgmentally observed as they are—without avoiding or changing them, but also without exaggerating or running away with them. When individuals acknowledge their pain and extend compassion to themselves, they avoid repressing their thoughts and feelings, and when they recognize the broader human context of their experience, they also avoid the trap of over-identification. Self-compassion, therefore, operates as an effective emotional regulation strategy, by neutralizing negative emotional patterns and engendering more positive feelings of kindness and connectedness.

Recently, Neff (2003a) developed a scale to measure the main components of self-compassion: extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh self-criticism and judgment; seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than as separating and isolating; and holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them. This research (Neff, 2003a) also found that self-compassion was related to positive psychological functioning and emotional health. Self-compassion was found to have a significant negative association with self-criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination and thought suppression, as well as a significant positive association with connectedness, emotional intelligence, self-determination, and subjective well-being. Self-compassion was also significantly correlated with self-esteem, but unlike self-esteem, it was not significantly correlated with narcissism. Thus, it appears that self-compassion is link to the ability to experience positive emotions toward oneself without having to protect or bolster one's self-concept.

In fact, one of the advantages of self-compassion over self-esteem is that self-compassion is *not* based on the performance evaluations of self and others, or on congruence with ideal standards. Rather, self-compassion circumvents the entire self-evaluation process altogether (positive or negative), focusing instead on feelings of kindness and understanding toward oneself and the recognition of one's common humanity. To better understand this point, it is helpful to consider the contrast that Buddhists draw between judgment and discriminating wisdom (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987). According to this perspective, judgment entails a narrow, rigid categorization process that reifies persons as "good" or "bad" based upon their actions or performances. Discriminating wisdom, in contrast, clearly evaluates the positive or negative quality of actions, but does so with a compassionate understanding of the complex, dynamic, situational factors that impact these actions, so that particular performances are not taken as indicators of self-worth. A lack of "self-evaluation" on the part of self-compassionate individuals does not mean that they cannot discern the quality of their own performances, but instead means that performance evaluations are not personalized, and that the self is not valued according to the outcome of evaluations. Thus, while self-compassion entails being kind to the self in instances of failure, it does not entail complacency or lax standards for the self. In support of this proposition, research has found that self-compassion is negatively related to neurotic perfectionism (Neff, 2003a), in which individuals are driven by the need to continually escape feelings of inferiority, but that it has no association with the level of performance standards adopted for the self. In other words, self-compassionate individuals are motivated to achieve, but this goal is not driven by the desire to bolster one's self-image. Rather, it is driven by the compassionate desire to maximize one's potential and well-being.

The construct of self-compassion shares similarities with other constructs that have recently been offered as alternatives to self-esteem, such as "true self-esteem" (Deci & Ryan, 1995) or "non-contingent self-esteem" (Kernis, 2003). Deci and Ryan (1995) define true self-esteem as a sense of self-worth that is not dependent on set standards but which is assumed to be an inherent aspect of being, and which develops when an individual's actions reflect his or her authentic core self rather than being performed in response to external threats or rewards. Similarly, Kernis (2003) proposes the notion of non-contingent self-esteem, in which a positive sense of self-worth is not dependent upon the attainment of specific outcomes or validation from others. While these constructs certainly offer useful ways to distinguish healthy from unhealthy forms of high self-esteem, they still retain an inherent focus on feelings of value and self-worth.

The novel contribution made by the self-compassion construct is that it focuses on the emotional stance that individuals take towards themselves with when faced with an experience of failure or suffering, rather than feelings of self-worth per se. Self-compassion entails feelings of loving-kindness towards oneself stemming from an open heart which has not been closed by harsh judgment, a process which is conceptually distinct from that of positively valuing one's worth. Also, by focusing on feelings of shared humanity rather than isolation when taking this emotional stance, the self-compassion construct highlights the importance of social connectedness as an essential aspect of well-being in ways that the concepts of true or non-contingent self-esteem do not. In fact, one might argue that the emphasis on autonomy and self-determination found in conceptualizations such as true self-esteem leave them vulnerable to criticisms (fairly or unfairly) of being overly individualistic (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). Finally, self-compassion is

unique in its focus on emotional-regulation as one of its core components. Because self-compassion necessarily entails mindfulness rather than over-identification with negative emotions, it can be linked to the large body of work already existing on mindfulness (Shapiro, Schwartz, Santerre, 2002) and emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Thus, the seeds of understanding how to increase self-compassion are sown into its very definition, with potential developmental pathways already existing in well-established interventions such as Kabat-Zinn's (1990) mindfulness-based stress reduction programs, or the school-based emotional intelligence programs discussed by Goleman (1995).

Because research on self-compassion is so new, however, more basic work needs to be done to establish that this self-attitude construct is linked to positive outcomes in various life spheres. One promising avenue of research concerns the relationship between self-compassion and academic achievement goals. It would seem that variation in self-compassion levels should be reflected in the types of learning goals that students adopt in the classroom, since emotions and cognitions about the self play an important role in achievement goal formation and pursuit (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Turner, Husman & Schallert, 2002). Self-compassion should be also be linked to adaptive coping with academic failure, because it may enable them to see failure situations clearly without the loss of perspective that stems from excessive self-criticism, feelings of isolation and over-identification with one's experience. Therefore, the first study presented in this article was designed to examine the link between self-compassion and academic achievement goals, while the second study was designed to examine the link between self-compassion, achievement goals and coping after a perceived academic failure.

Study One

Educational psychologists often make a distinction between mastery-based and performance-based academic achievement goals (e.g., Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). Students with a mastery orientation towards learning are motivated by curiosity and the desire to develop skills, master tasks and understand new material. They tend to set their own standards for achievement, make effort attributions for success and failure, and view the making of mistakes as a part of the learning process. Students with a performance orientation, on the other hand, are motivated to defend or enhance their sense of self-worth. They tend to make ability attributions for success and failure, and to evaluate their ability through social comparisons with others. There are two different types of performance goals, moreover, oriented either towards achieving success or to avoiding failure (Elliot & Church, 1997; Middleton & Midgley, 1997). Students with performance-approach goals try to outperform others in order to demonstrate their competence, while those with performance-avoidance goals attempt to avoid situations in which they might fail because they fear being labeled stupid or incompetent. Interestingly, Elliot (1999) argues that the adoption of both types of performance goals are motivated by fear of failure. However, those with performance-approach goals tend to have high perceptions of competence, so that they believe it is possible to achieve success, while those with performance-avoidance goals tend to have low perceptions of competence, rendering the possibility of failure more salient.

Research suggests that mastery goals are more academically adaptive than performance goals, being linked to higher levels of intrinsic motivation, greater effort and persistence at tasks, and willingness to seek help with school-work (Ames, 1992;

Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Ryan & Pintrich, 1998). In contrast, performance-avoidance goals have been linked to lower levels of intrinsic motivation, learned helplessness, disorganized studying, an unwillingness to seek help, and anxiety (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001; Skaalvik, 1997). The findings for performance-approach goals have been more mixed. These goals have been associated with increased intrinsic motivation, greater effort and more persistence at tasks, but also with unwillingness to seek help, anxiety, and disruptive classroom behavior (Butler, 1992; Harackiewicz et al., 1998; Smiley & Dweck, 1994; Urdan, 1997; Wolters, Yu, & Pintrich, 1996).

Because self-compassionate individuals have an emotionally positive self-attitude that is not contingent on performance evaluations, they should be freer to engage in activities out of interest rather than out of a desire to protect or enhance their self-esteem. High levels of self-compassion should also be associated with less fear of failure because failure situations are met with kindness and understanding rather than harsh self-condemnation, enabling failure to be seen as a learning opportunity rather than an indictment of self-worth. In addition, self-compassion should be related to higher levels of perceived competence. This is not so much because self-compassion itself enhances perceptions of competence, but because a lack of self-compassion tends to lower perceptions of competence. Previous research has linked the tendency to react with negative self-conscious emotions, such as shame, to low perceptions of self-efficacy (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002), suggesting that highly self-compassionate individuals, who take a balanced perspective on their shortcomings rather than amplifying them through harsh self-judgment, feelings of isolation, or over-identification with their emotional reactions, should have relatively more positive perceptions of their abilities than those with low levels of self-compassion. Thus, we hypothesized that self-compassion would be positively associated with mastery goals and negatively associated with performance goals—especially performance-avoidance goals. Moreover, the link between self-compassion and academic goals was anticipated to primarily stem from the greater perceived competence and lesser fear of failure experienced by self-compassionate individuals. It should be noted that we expected self-compassion to be related to students' subjective reactions to their academic performances, rather than to their performances themselves (e.g., grades), although the question of whether or not self-compassion would be related to actual achievement was an open one.

We also investigated two outcome variables commonly associated with achievement goals—intrinsic motivation and anxiety—because these are key indicators of the emotional state of well-being experienced by students as they pursue their education. Past research has indicated that mastery goals tend to be associated with high levels of intrinsic motivation (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996), and that performance goals (especially performance-avoidance goals) tend to be associated with high levels of anxiety (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). In turn, self-compassion has been found to have a negative association with anxiety, and a positive association with self-determination (Neff, 2003a), a construct closely aligned with that of intrinsic motivation (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). For these reasons, we were curious to examine the extent to which the relationship between self-compassion, anxiety, and intrinsic motivation might be mediated by the different achievement goals that self-compassionate individuals tend to adopt. It was expected that self-compassion would be negatively associated with anxiety and positively

associated with intrinsic motivation, and that achievement goals would play a mediating role in this relationship. However, we also expected that self-compassion would have a direct association with intrinsic motivation and anxiety levels (in addition to mediating pathway of achievement goals), given the generally positive state of mental health engendered by self-compassion (Neff, 2003a).

Method

Participants

The study included a total of 222 undergraduates (84 male and 138 female, age $M = 20.94$, $SD = 2.03$), who were randomly selected from an educational-psychology subject pool at a large southwestern university. Students who participated in the study filled out an anonymous survey questionnaire, while meeting in groups of no more than thirty. The ethnic breakdown of the sample was 57% White, 22% Asian, 14% Hispanic, 3% Black, and 4% other.

Measures

Self-compassion. Participants were given the 26-item self-compassion scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a), which includes the 5-item self-kindness subscale (e.g., “I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don’t like”), the 5-item self-judgment subscale (e.g., “I’m disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies”), the 4-item common humanity subscale (e.g., “I try to see my failings as part of the human condition”), the 4-item isolation subscale (e.g., “When I think about my inadequacies it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world”), the 4-item mindfulness subscale (e.g., “When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation”), and the 4-item over-identification subscale (e.g., “When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong.”). Responses are given on a 5-point scale from 1 = “almost never” to 5 = “almost always.” Mean scores on the six subscales are then summed (after the negative items have been reverse-coded) to create an overall self-compassion score. In past research (Neff, 2003a) confirmatory factor analyses determined that a single higher-order factor of self-compassion explained the inter-correlations between the six subscales (Rindskopt & Rose, 1988). It should be noted that self-compassion is conceptualized as an overarching factor that is constituted by the combination of subscale components (so that it is necessary to have self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and so on, in order for self-compassion to emerge), rather than as a pre-existing factor that underlies the various components.

The SCS has demonstrated good internal and test–retest reliability in past research, and has been shown to differentiate between groups in a theoretically consistent manner (Neff, 2003b). The internal consistency reliability obtained for this measure in the current study was $\alpha = .94$.

Achievement goals. To assess achievement goals, participants were given the revised goal orientation scales (Midgley et al., 1998) that are included in the patterns of adaptive learning survey (PALS; Midgley et al., 1997). The “task goal orientation” subscale assesses mastery goals, the “ability-approach goal orientation” subscale assesses performance-approach goals, and the “ability-avoid goal orientation”

subscale assesses performance-avoidance goals. The task goal orientation subscale contains six items representing concern with understanding and learning class material (e.g., “I like school work that I’ll learn from, even if I make a lot of mistakes”), the ability-approach goal orientation subscale contains six items reflecting concern with trying to outperform others in order to demonstrate one’s own ability (e.g., “I would feel really good if I were the only one who could answer the teacher’s question in class”), while the ability-avoid goal orientation subscale includes six items representing concern with not looking incompetent or inferior to others (e.g., “It’s very important to me that I don’t look stupid in my classes”). Responses were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = “almost never” to 5 = “almost always.” In past research, this scale has demonstrated good internal reliability, test–retest reliability and construct validity (Midgley et al., 1998). In the current study internal reliability was $\alpha = .81$ for mastery, $\alpha = .81$ for performance-approach, $\alpha = .86$ for performance-avoidance.

Fear of failure. The measure of fear of failure used in this study was developed by Herman (1990). It assesses the various components of fear of failure that were identified by Atkinson and Feather (1966), including risk taking, goal setting, task completion or persistence, effort, self-image, and attribution. The 15-item scale contains statements such as, “When I start doing poorly on a task, I feel like giving up,” and “If given a choice, I have a tendency to select a relative easy task rather than risk failure.” Responses were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = “almost never” to 5 = “almost always.” In past research the scale has demonstrated good reliability and construct validity (Elliot & Church, 1997), and in the current study reliability was $\alpha = .81$.

Perceived competence. To assess perceived competence, participants were given the perceived competence for learning scale (Williams & Deci, 1996). The scale includes four items that are used to assess students’ feelings of competence about taking a particular college course, although the scale was adapted for the current study to assess participants’ feelings about their college courses in general. A sample item from the scale is: “I feel confident in my ability to learn the material in my courses.” Respondents were asked to rate items on 5-point scale: 1 = “not at all true of me” to 5 = “very true of me.” Internal reliability for the scale was $\alpha = .88$.

Intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation was assessed with the 7-item autonomous regulation subscale of the learning self-regulation questionnaire (Williams & Deci, 1996). Although the original scale was used to assess motivation in a medical interviewing course, it has been successfully adapted for other types of courses (Black & Deci, 2000), and for the current study the measure was adapted to assess students’ motivation in their courses in general. Sample items are: “The reason that I will work to expand my knowledge in my courses is because it’s interesting to learn more about the nature of the course topics,” and “I will participate actively in my courses because I feel like it’s a good way to improve my understanding of the material.” Respondents were asked to rate items on a 5-point scale: 1 = “not at all true of me” to 5 = “very true of me.” Internal reliability for the scale was $\alpha = .72$.

Anxiety. This study employed a commonly used measure to assess anxiety levels: the Spielberger state–trait anxiety inventory – trait form (Spielberger, Gorsuch, &

Lushene, 1970). The 20-item scale assesses anxiety levels with items such as: “I feel nervous and restless,” and “I have disturbing thoughts.” Internal reliability for the scale was $\alpha = .92$.

Self-reported grade point average (GPA). In order to obtain self-reported GPA, participants were asked, “What is your overall GPA at [name of university] so far (please estimate if you do not know for certain)?” on a standard 4-point scale.

Results

As the first step in conducting analyses, all study variables were intercorrelated to determine if associations would be obtained in the expected direction. Table 1 presents these zero-order correlations. As expected, a positive correlation was found between self-compassion and mastery goals, a negative correlation was found between self-compassion and performance-approach goals, and an even stronger negative correlation was found between self-compassion and performance-avoidance goals. Also, as anticipated, self-compassion was negatively correlated with fear of failure but positively correlated with perceived competence. Moreover, self-compassion was positively correlated with intrinsic motivation but negatively correlated with anxiety. (All correlations were significant.) Finally, it was found that self-compassion was not significantly correlated with self-reported GPA, but that it was significantly correlated with gender. The gender association replicates findings of previous research (Neff, 2003a), in which women were found to have slightly lower levels of self-compassion than men.

It had been hypothesized that the association between self-compassion and academic achievement goals would be mediated by the greater degree of perceived competence and lesser fear of failure experienced by self-compassionate individuals. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), in order to conclude that a mediating relationship exists three conditions must be met: (1) There must be significant relationships between the predictors and the outcome variables; (2) there must be significant relationships between the predictors and the mediating variables; and (3) there must be significant relationships between the mediators and the outcome variables when all of these variables are entered into the same equation, and these relations must reduce the direct effects of the predictors on the outcomes. Therefore, sequential regression analyses were conducted to test each of these three conditions (Judd & Kenny, 1981). The first set of analyses regressed the proposed mediating variables of fear of failure and perceived competence on self-compassion, the second set directly regressed achievement goals on self-compassion, while the third set of analyses simultaneously regressed achievement goals on self-compassion, fear of failure and perceived competence. In all regression analyses, GPA and gender were included as controls, given that these variables were correlated with other variables of interest in this study.

The first set of analyses indicated that when fear of failure and perceived competence were regressed on self-compassion, self-compassion negatively predicted fear of failure ($\beta = -.54, p < .001$) and positively predicted perceived competence ($\beta = .33, p < .001$). This confirmed the link between the predictor and mediating variables. The second set of regressions, which examined the direct association between self-compassion and academic goals, can be found under the columns of Table 2 labeled “Model 1.” As with the correlational analyses, results indicated that self-compassion was positively associated with mastery goals, and negatively

TABLE 1 Zero-Order Correlations between Study Variables

<i>Measure</i>	<i>SCS</i>	<i>Mast</i>	<i>P-App</i>	<i>P-Avd</i>	<i>FF</i>	<i>PC</i>	<i>IM</i>	<i>Anx</i>	<i>GPA</i>	<i>Gender</i>
Self-compassion (SCS)	1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Mastery Goals (Mast)	.28**	1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Performance-Approach (P-App)	-.13*	.24**	1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Performance-Avoidance (P-Avd)	-.29**	.04	.61**	1.00	—	—	—	—	—	—
Fear of Failure (FF)	-.51**	-.32**	.26**	.43**	1.00	—	—	—	—	—
Perceived Competence (PC)	.35**	.45**	.12	-.16*	-.36**	1.00	—	—	—	—
Intrinsic Motivation (IM)	.30**	.71**	.24**	.04	-.24**	.45**	1.00	—	—	—
Anxiety (Anx)	-.66**	-.22**	.15*	.28**	.58**	-.44**	-.34**	1.00	—	—
GPA	-.03	.20**	.17*	-.07	-.07	.24**	.22**	-.07	1.00	—
Gender	-.14*	.00	.06	.15*	.07	-.05	.09	.07	.11	1.00

Note: $N = 222$. Gender is coded: 0 = Males; 1 = Females.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

associated with performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. These results confirmed the link between the predictor and outcome variables. The third set of analyses simultaneously regressed academic goals on self-compassion, fear of failure and perceived competence. Results are presented in Table 2 under the columns labeled "Model 2." As expected, the association between self-compassion and achievement goals reduced (to the point of non-significance), indicating that the relationship between self-compassion and achievement goals was mediated by the increase in perceived competence and decrease in fear of failure that are associated with self-compassion. Note, however, that fear of failure was the only significant mediator for the academic goal of performance-avoidance.

In addition, it had been hypothesized that the association between self-compassion, intrinsic motivation and anxiety would be mediated by the different types of achievement goals associated with self-compassion, but that self-compassion would also make a direct contribution to intrinsic motivation and anxiety. Sequential regression analyses were again conducted to test the mediational model, following Baron and Kenny (1986). We decided also to include fear of failure and perceived competence as potential mediators in the model, given that these variables appear to be explaining the link between self-compassion and achievement goals in the first place. The step in the mediation model that required establishing a direct relationship between the predictor of self-compassion and the proposed mediating variables of achievement goals, fear of failure and perceived competence was already accomplished (see previous paragraph). Thus, the first set of regressions examined the direct association between the predictor of self-compassion and outcomes of intrinsic motivation and anxiety (with GPA and gender included as control variables).

Results (found under the "Model 1" columns of Table 3) indicated that, as expected, self-compassion had a positive association with intrinsic motivation and a negative association with anxiety. The next analyses involved simultaneously regressing outcomes of intrinsic motivation and anxiety on predictors of self-compassion, achievement goals, fear of failure and perceived competence (controlling for gender and GPA). Results are presented under the "Model 2" columns of Table 3. It was found that the positive relationship between self-compassion and intrinsic motivation was mediated by the greater perceived competence and mastery goals associated with self-compassion, but that self-compassion also made a direct contribution to increased intrinsic motivation. In addition, it was found that the negative relationship between self-compassion and anxiety was mediated by the lesser fear of failure and greater perceived competence associated with self-compassion, but that self-compassion also made a direct contribution to anxiety levels. In fact, after all other variables were taken into account, self-compassion was still the strongest predictor of anxiety levels by far ($\beta = -.47$).

The links between study variables established in the preceding regression analyses are presented in Figure 1 to help illustrate how self-compassion, fear of failure, perceived competence, achievement goals, intrinsic motivation and anxiety are interrelated. While the model may appear to portray causal associations, it should be understood that no causality can be inferred by regression equations and the figure should be interpreted as a means visually to portray study findings only.

Discussion

Results of this study suggest that self-compassion is associated with adaptive academic motivational patterns. Self-compassion was positively related to the

TABLE 2 Standardized Regression Coefficients for Self-compassion, Mediating Variables (Fear of Failure and Perceived Competence), and Control Variables (GPA and Gender) Predicting Academic Goals

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>Mastery</i>		<i>Performance-Approach</i>		<i>Performance-Avoidance</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
Self-compassion	.27**	.07	-.13*	-.03	-.30**	-.10
Fear of Failure	–	-.16*	–	.31**	–	.36**
Perceived Competence	–	.35**	–	.21**	–	-.03
GPA	.19**	.10	.17**	.14*	.07	.10
Gender	.01	.02	.04	.05	.10	.10
ΔR^2	–	.14	–	.08	–	.10
ΔF	8.43**	9.23**	3.75**	9.61**	8.80**	12.44**
Total adjusted R^2	.10	.23	.04	.11	.10	.19

Note: $N = 222$. Model 1 included self-compassion and control variables of gender and GPA only; Model 2 included self-compassion, control variables, and hypothesized mediators of fear of failure and perceived competence. Gender is coded: 0 = Males; 1 = Females.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

TABLE 3 Standardized Regression Coefficients for Self-compassion, Mediating Variables (Fear of Failure, Perceived Competence, Academic Goals) and Control Variables (GPA and Gender) Predicting Intrinsic Motivation and Anxiety

Predictor	Intrinsic Motivation		Anxiety	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Self-compassion	.32**	.15**	-.66**	-.47**
Fear of Failure	—	.07	—	.28**
Perceived Competence	—	.14*	—	-.23**
Mastery Goals	—	.59**	—	.09
Performance Approach Goals	—	.11	—	.06
Performance Avoidance Goals	—	-.05	—	-.03
GPA	.20**	.05	-.06	-.02
Gender	.10	.10	-.02	-.03
ΔR^2	—	.41	—	.11
ΔF	11.97**	36.72**	54.79**	9.80**
Total adjusted R^2	.14	.53	.43	.53

Note: $N = 222$. Model 1 included self-compassion and control variables of gender and GPA only; Model 2 included self-compassion, control variables, and hypothesized mediators of academic goals. Gender is coded: 0 = Males; 1 = Females.
 * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

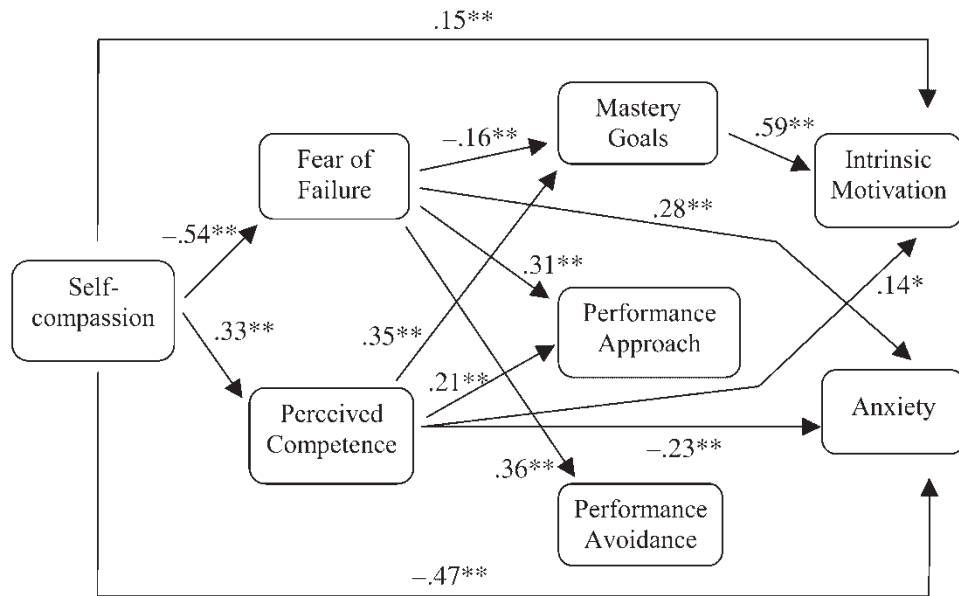


FIGURE 1 Summary of regression analyses.

adoption of mastery goals in learning contexts, suggesting that self-compassionate individuals may be better able to see failure as a learning opportunity and to focus on accomplishing tasks at hand. Moreover, self-compassion was found to be negatively associated with the tendency to adopt performance goals—especially performance-avoidance goals. This suggests that individuals who lack self-

compassion may try to enhance their self-image through demonstrating their superiority to others (in the case of performance-approach goals) or else to defend against the label of “failure” by avoiding situations in which they may be perceived as incompetent (in the case of performance-avoidance goals).

Moreover, results indicate that the primary way in which self-compassion is linked to mastery goals is through the greater perceived competence and lesser fear of failure associated with self-compassion. By not harshly judging the self or blowing one’s failures out of proportion, self-compassion is associated with greater self-confidence in one’s ability to learn and less trepidation concerning possible failure, which in turn is linked to greater mastery goal adoption. Note that self-compassion was not related to actual competence in terms of grade-point average, however. Rather, it appears that self-compassion is more relevant to the motivational patterns underlying academic achievement. Results indicate that the negative association between self-compassion and performance-avoidance goals was primarily explained by the lesser fear of failure experienced by self-compassionate individuals. Perceived competence did not appear to play a role in this relationship, perhaps because perceived competence is a weaker predictor of performance-avoidance goals than fear of failure (Elliot & Church, 1997).

The mediating links between self-compassion and performance-approach goals were a little more complicated, though results were consistent with our hypotheses. Self-compassion was positively associated with perceived competence but negatively associated with fear of failure. In turn, perceived competence and fear of failure were both positively associated with performance-approach goals—a finding that is consistent with past research (Elliot & Church, 1997). This means that the greater perceived competence experienced by self-compassionate participants was linked to an increase in the tendency to adopt performance-approach goals, while the lesser fear of failure experienced by self-compassionate participants was linked to a decrease in this tendency. The opposing directionality of these mediating links may help explain why the direct relationship between self-compassion and performance-approach goals was not as strong as that which was found between self-compassion and performance-avoidance goals.

Of course, one might ask whether or not the negative relationship between self-compassion and performance-approach goals is necessarily a good thing, since some have argued that performance-approach goals have certain benefits (Harackiewicz et al., 1998). For instance, research indicates that performance-approach goals lead to improved course grades among college students (Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliot, 1997), a relationship that was also found in the current study. From our point of view, however, the concern with demonstrating superiority over others that drives the adoption of performance-approach goals is deeply problematic. As many prominent psychologists and educators have argued (Covington, 1992; Damon, 1995; Elias, 1989; Finn, 1990; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996), feelings of self-centeredness and disconnection from others are a problem among today’s students—feelings that are likely to be fostered by performance-approach goals. Moreover, research indicates that the type of contingent self-esteem represented by performance-approach goals is linked to prejudice and even violence towards those perceived to threaten the ego (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987). For these reasons, there is strong cause to question the beneficial nature of performance-approach goal adoption.

Mastery goals are typically considered to be the most positive and adaptive type of achievement goal, due in part to the strong association between mastery goals

and intrinsic motivation (Heyman & Dweck, 1992; Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999). When people are intrinsically motivated, they experience life as more enjoyable and satisfying (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consistent with past research, this study found that mastery goal adoption was the strongest predictor of intrinsic motivation in academic contexts. As expected, self-compassion was linked to higher levels of intrinsic motivation through the mediating variable of mastery goal adoption, although self-compassion was also found to have a direct association with intrinsic motivation. Past research has indicated that self-compassionate individuals tend to experience a greater sense of autonomy and self-determination in their lives (Neff, 2003a), which may be one reason why self-compassion makes an independent contribution to increased intrinsic motivation in learning contexts (Deci et al., 1991).

Finally, it was hypothesized that self-compassion would be linked to lower levels of anxiety through its negative association with performance goals, but that self-compassion would also have a direct association with anxiety levels. The latter part of the hypothesis was confirmed, but not the former. In a regression analysis that examined the link between self-compassion, perceived competence, fear of failure, and achievement goals simultaneously, it was found that self-compassion was the strongest predictor of anxiety, followed by fear of failure and perceived competence, but that performance goals did not significantly predict anxiety levels. The finding that performance goals were *not* significantly associated with anxiety levels stands in contrast to past research (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997). One reason for this discrepancy may be that past research has tended to focus on the relationship between achievement goals and test anxiety in particular rather than general anxiety levels, although both types of measures have been used (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Another explanation may be that previous findings linking achievement goals to anxiety levels have typically not accounted for the differing levels of perceived competence and fear of failure associated with the various goals. Either way, the answer to these questions is beyond the scope of the current study and will need to be addressed in future research.

Study 2

The results of the first study were largely interpreted in terms of the ability of self-compassion to provide students with emotional resiliency in the face of failure, and therefore to foster adaptive academic achievement goals. However, the link between self-compassion and academic achievement goals was not assessed in the context of an actual academic failure, so that other possible explanations for the findings could be advanced. For instance, what if self-compassion is merely a reflection of the belief that one is not likely to fail in the first place? After all, self-compassion was found to be significantly correlated with perceived competence, and perhaps it is the confidence that failure is unlikely to occur that leads self-compassionate individuals to adopt mastery rather than performance-avoidance goals. Of course, we do not believe this to be a credible alternative hypothesis. Nonetheless, we thought that it would be useful to conduct a second study that assessed the link between self-compassion and achievement goals shortly after a perceived academic failure, to determine if self-compassion would still be positively associated with mastery goals and negatively associated with performance goals in this context. (Conducting a second study also allowed us to replicate the findings of the first study in a more naturalistic context.)

TABLE 4 Standardized Regression Coefficients for Self-compassion and Control Variables (Exam Score and Gender) Predicting Achievement Goals, Intrinsic Motivation and Perceived Competence

	<i>Mastery</i>	<i>Performance Approach</i>	<i>Performance Avoidance</i>	<i>Intrinsic Motivation</i>	<i>Perceived Competence</i>
Self-compassion	.33**	-.16	-.50**	.23*	.33*
Exam Score	-.05	.25*	-.04	.10	.11
Gender	-.17	-.04	.09	.18	.01
<i>F</i>	3.31*	2.81*	7.55**	4.71**	3.26*
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.12	.06	.20	.12	.08

Note: *N* = 110. Gender is coded: 0 = Males; 1 = Females.

**p* ≤ .05; ** *p* ≤ .01.

TABLE 5 Correlations between the Self-compassion Scale (SCS) and COPE Strategies

<i>Coping Strategies</i>	<i>SCS</i>
Problem-focused Strategies	
Active Coping	.05
Planning	-.03
Suppression of Competing Activities	-.10
Restraint Coping	.03
Seeking Instrumental Social Support	-.02
Emotional-focused Strategies	
Seeking Emotional Social Support	-.01
Positive Reinterpretation and Growth	.24**
Acceptance	.22*
Venting of and Focus on Negative emotions	-.30**
Avoidance-oriented Strategies	
Denial	-.22*
Behavioral Disengagement	-.16
Mental Disengagement	-.20*

**p* ≤ .05; ** *p* ≤ .01.

For similar reasons, we wanted to examine the association between self-compassion, intrinsic motivation and perceived competence after an academic failure. We expected that the positive association between these variables would still hold, especially as Mantzicopoulos (1997) has found that excessively blaming oneself for an academic failure can lead to lowered perceptions of competence and a loss of intrinsic motivation. Moreover, examining perceptions of competence after an actual test performance would allow us to determine the link between self-compassion and perceived competence while holding test grades constant, confirming that self-compassion is associated with *perceptions* of competence rather than actual competence.

We were also interested in examining the link between self-compassion and coping strategies when faced with academic failure. In many ways, self-compassion can be thought of as a useful coping strategy that helps individuals to maintain a balanced

perspective in the face of failure, and which transforms negative emotions of shame and self-condemnation into more productive emotions of compassion for one's imperfect humanity. In the coping literature, coping is typically defined as: "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding resources of the person" (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991, p. 210). Coping strategies are generally classified into three broad categories: (1) problem-focused; (2) emotion-focused; and (3) avoidance-oriented (Zeidner, 1995). Problem-focused coping attempts to change stressful situations by taking proactive actions to change circumstances for the better. This coping strategy may employ attempts directly to remove the stressor, to plan out future productive action, to curtail other activities in order to focus on the problem at hand, or to seek instrumental help in the situation. Emotion-focused coping attempts to change the way a person attends to or interprets the situation so that the resulting affective reaction is altered. This may involve efforts to seek emotional support, to reappraise the meaning of a situation, to focus on and vent negative feelings, or to accept a situation with equilibrium. Avoidance-oriented coping is aimed at avoiding the stressor rather than facing it, and may include denying the reality of a situation, giving up, or mentally disengaging through excessive sleep or intoxicants.

Problem-focused coping is often considered to be the most psychologically adaptive strategy, whereas avoidance-oriented coping is typically viewed as dysfunctional (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Traditionally, emotion-focused coping was also viewed as pathological or maladaptive. However, it is now recognized that emotion-focused strategies in which individuals make effortful attempts to maintain awareness of, and understand, their emotions are related to positive psychological adjustment (Pennebaker, 1993; Stanton, Kirk, Cameron, & Danoff-Burg, 2000), and that these strategies are especially useful when nothing can be done to change one's circumstances. It is highly adaptive to use emotion-focused strategies when dealing with a failed academic performance, therefore, since the situation has already occurred. As Zeidner (1995) comments, functional coping with academic failure involves: "learning to tolerate or adjust to the reality of failure, maintaining a positive self-image, maintaining emotional equilibrium and decreasing emotional stress, and maintaining a satisfying relationship with the environment" (p. 128).

Past research (Neff, 2003a) has found that self-compassion is strongly linked to emotional intelligence, which entails the ability to experience one's feelings with clarity and to repair and regulate negative mood states. Thus, we hypothesized that self-compassion would facilitate adaptive emotion-focused coping strategies in dealing with perceived academic failure situations by allowing individuals to clearly face and accept their feelings about the failure. Also, the emotional balance provided by the mindfulness component of self-compassion should allow individuals to reframe failure situations so that their growth potential is acknowledged, as opposed to becoming over-identified with the failure and exaggerating its importance. However, we expected the mindfulness aspect of self-compassion to have a negative link with the emotion-focused strategy of focusing on and venting of negative emotions. This type of behavior has a ruminative quality—for example, one item in Carver, Scheier and Weintraub's (1989) measure that represents this type of coping is: "I feel a lot of emotional distress and I find myself expressing those feelings a lot." Rumination, however, is psychologically maladaptive, and has been strongly associated with depression and anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991). A negative correlation between self-compassion and rumination has also been found (Neff, 2003a).

In addition, we expected a negative association between self-compassion and avoidance-oriented coping strategies. Because having self-compassion means that individuals do not engage in harsh self-condemnation, they experience the emotional safety needed to face situations without running away from them. In fact, it has been found (Neff, 2003a) that self-compassion is negatively associated with attempts to avoid or repress unwanted thoughts, especially those involving negative affect (Wegner & Zanakos, 1994). As for the potential association between self-compassion and problem-focused coping, we did not advance any firm hypotheses. This is because it is unclear how relevant problem-focused coping strategies are to the task of dealing with the negative emotions that stem from an academic failure experience. Because this task involves coping with a situation that has already occurred and cannot be altered, strategies such as active coping, which involve efforts to remove or circumvent stressors (e.g., “I take additional action to try to get rid of the problem”) are of questionable utility in such circumstances.

Method

Participants

Originally 214 undergraduate students agreed to participate in the study, recruited from several courses in engineering and psychology departments at two large urban universities. The sample was 49% male and 51% female, with a mean age of 20.65 years ($SD = 1.98$), and was 73% White, 11% Asian, 9% Hispanic, 1% Black, and 6% other. Because the study was focused on reactions to perceived academic failure, however, most of the study data presented here only examines the responses of those participants (51%, $n = 110$) who indicated that they were highly dissatisfied with their recent midterm exam grade in the course. Note that there were no significant gender, age, or ethnic group differences between those who were satisfied with their grade and those who perceived it as a failure, nor were there any significant differences in the self-compassion levels of either group.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from college courses that were specifically chosen for their difficulty, so that it would be likely that many students would receive unsatisfactory grades. On the class day immediately following the one in which students received the results of their midterm exam (which occurred 2–5 days later), participants were given a self-report survey questionnaire during class. After some initial demographic questions, participants were asked to report their grade on the midterm, and the degree to which they were dissatisfied with the grade. Next, participants were given measures assessing their achievement goals, intrinsic motivation, perceived learning competence, and coping behaviors. The self-compassion measure was given last so as not to potentially bias responses to the previous measures. Instructions for the coping measure indicated that students who were dissatisfied with their recent midterm grade should fill out the coping items while focusing on their reactions to their poor test performance. Students who were satisfied with their recent midterm grade were told that they should fill out the questions in reference to a previous experience of academic failure. However, because we wanted to examine the responses of students for whom the failure

experience was emotionally current, the study focused on the responses of students who indicated that they were dissatisfied with their grade. Note that we decided to focus on participants who *perceived* their performances as failures rather than those who actually received an “F” failing grade, as we felt that subjective perceptions of failure were most relevant to achievement goals. However, actual test grades were used as covariates in analyses to ensure that actual test performances weren’t accounting for results.

Measures

Grade satisfaction. To assess perceptions of grade satisfaction, two questions were taken from Turner’s (1998) contextual conditions of test feedback questionnaire, which was designed to assess students’ general perception of the grades they receive. Using a 7-point scale (1 = “*strongly disagree*” to 7 = “*strongly agree*”), students were asked to indicate the extent to which: “I received the grade I want,” and “I consider this grade to be a failure” (the first question was reverse coded). The reliability for this two-item scale was $\alpha = .75$. The median grade satisfaction score for the original sample was 4.0, and only participants who scored at or below the median were included in the current sample.

Achievement goals. Students’ academic achievement goals for the course were assessed using the Elliot and Church (1997) goal-orientation scale, which contains three six-item subscales: mastery goals ($\alpha = .91$), performance-approach goals ($\alpha = .94$), and performance-avoidance goals ($\alpha = .83$). Responses were given on a 7-point scale (1 = “*not at all true of me*” to 7 = “*very true of me*”). Note that it was decided to use a slightly different scale to measure achievement goals in Study 2 than in Study 1 (which employed Midgley et al.’s, 1998, goal orientation scales), in order to bolster the generalizability of findings across measures.

Intrinsic motivation. This study used the intrinsic motivation scale developed by Elliot and Church (1997). The scale includes eight items, such as: “I think this class is interesting,” “I’m glad I took this class,” and “I don’t like this class at all.” Responses were given on a 7-point scale (1 = “*strongly disagree*” to 7 = “*strongly agree*”). The reliability for the scale was $\alpha = .93$.

Perceived competence. To assess perceived competence, participants were given the perceived competence for learning scale (Williams & Deci, 1996) used in Study 1.

Coping with failure. The strategies used by students to cope with the negative feelings and stress that stemmed from their unsatisfactory grade were assessed using an adapted version of Carver, Scheier and Weintraub’s (1989) COPE scale. The scale contained twelve subscales and forty-eight items in total, with responses being given on a 4-point scale of (1 = “*I don’t do this at all*” to 4 = “*I do this a lot*”).

The subscales classified as problem-focused coping were:

- *Active coping*—exerting efforts to remove or circumvent the stressor ($\alpha = .69$);
- *Planning*—thinking about how to confront the stressor or planning one’s active coping efforts ($\alpha = .85$);
- *Suppression of competing activities*—avoiding involvement in other activities in order to concentrate more completely on dealing with the stressor ($\alpha = .72$);

- *Restraint coping*—coping passively by holding back one’s coping attempts until they can be of use ($\alpha = .64$); and
- *Seeking instrumental social support*—seeking assistance, information, or advice about what to do ($\alpha = .82$).

The subscales classified as emotion-focused coping were:

- *Seeking emotional social support*—getting sympathy or emotional support from another ($\alpha = .88$);
- *Positive reinterpretation and growth*—making the best of the situation by growing from it or viewing it in a less negative light ($\alpha = .74$);
- *Acceptance*—accepting the fact that the stressful event has occurred ($\alpha = .75$); and
- *Focus on and venting of emotions*—an increased awareness of one’s emotional distress, and a concomitant tendency to ventilate or discharge those feelings ($\alpha = .87$).

The subscales classified as avoidance-oriented coping included:

- *Denial*—an attempt to reject the reality of the stressful event ($\alpha = .78$);
- *Mental disengagement*—psychological disengagement from the event through daydreaming, sleep, or self-distraction ($\alpha = .57$); and
- *Behavioral disengagement*—giving up on the attempt to attain one’s goals ($\alpha = .59$).

Note that because the purpose of current investigation was to examine coping behaviors in academic context, two subscales in the original COPE measure, “turning to religion” and “alcohol/drug use” were not included in this study.

Self-compassion. Participants were given the 26-item SCS (Neff, 2003a), which was described in Study 1.

Results

First, it should be noted that there was no difference in the self-compassion levels of those who perceived their exam grade as a failure ($M = 17.67$, $SD = 4.03$) and those who did not ($M = 18.05$, $SD = 4.60$), $F(1, 213) = .40$, $p = .53$. Similarly, there was no significant correlation between self-compassion and perceptions of one’s grade as a failure ($r = -.10$, $p = .18$), or between self-compassion and one’s actual grade on the exam ($r = .09$, $p = .24$).

For those individuals who perceived their grade as a failure, we examined the association between self-compassion and academic achievement goals using regression equations, as this allowed us simultaneously to control for the variance due to actual grade on the exam and gender (as done in Study 1), while providing results in a format that would be directly comparable to those obtained in Study 1. Results are presented in Table 4. As expected, it was found that the SCS had a significant positive association with mastery goals, and a significant negative association with performance-avoidance goals. The association between the SCS and performance-approach goals was not significant. Also as expected, the SCS had a significant positive correlation with intrinsic motivation and perceived competence.

Table 5 presents correlations between the SCS and coping strategies for those who perceived their grade as a failure. As expected, self-compassion had a significant positive correlation with the two emotion-focused coping strategies of positive reinterpretation/growth and acceptance, and a significant negative correlation with the emotion-focused strategy of focus on/venting of negative emotions. Also as hypothesized, self-compassion showed a significant negative correlation with the two avoidance-oriented strategies of denial and mental disengagement. No significant associations were found between self-compassion and problem-focused coping strategies.

Discussion

As was found in Study 1, self-compassion had a significant positive association with mastery goals and a significant negative association with performance-avoidance goals, even shortly after an academic failure. The association between self-compassion and performance-approach goals in the current study was not significant, although it should be noted that the directionality and size of the β -weight was similar to that found in Study 1, which was significant. (The difference in significance levels in the two studies was probably attributable to the smaller sample size of Study 2.) These findings help confirm the idea that because self-compassionate individuals are kinder to themselves when they fail, are more aware that failure is part of the common human experience, and are more mindful of their negative emotions, they are more able to see failure experiences as a chance to learn and grow rather than becoming consumed with fear about what a negative performance says about their self-worth. This resilience allows for the adoption of more adaptive academic achievement goals.

A significant positive association was also found between self-compassion and intrinsic motivation in Study 2. Even after receiving a disappointing grade, it seems that self-compassionate individuals were more able to remain interested and involved in the course topic. This may be due to the fact that self-compassionate individuals do not launch into excessive self-blame when they fail or feel isolated and over-identified with their failure—behaviors that are likely to detract from the ability to remain interested in learning for its own sake. Another benefit of this emotionally balanced stance was that self-compassionate individuals were found to retain higher levels of perceived competence relative to their less compassionate counterparts (even when controlling for actual test performance).

Moreover, when examining the relationship between self-compassion and coping with a perceived academic failure, it was found that self-compassion was significantly associated with the tendency to cope with one's negative feelings by using the adaptive emotion-focused strategies of positive reinterpretation/growth and acceptance. Given that a failure situation cannot be reversed once it has taken place, it is sensible to accept that the situation has occurred with as much calm and equanimity as possible, and then to see how one might learn and grow from the failure experience. As we had also expected, self-compassion showed a significant negative correlation with the emotion-focused strategy of focus on and venting of negative emotions. Excessively focusing on and talking about one's negative experience is a type of ruminative behavior that has been shown to be psychologically dysfunctional (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991). With self-compassion, although negative feelings are acknowledged and accepted with mindful awareness, one does not run away with the feelings so that one becomes consumed with distress. Self-compassion showed no correlation with the emotion-focused strategy of seeking emotional

support, perhaps because self-compassion is an internal process that does not necessarily involve interpersonal discussion. In fact, past research (Neff, 2003a) has found that self-compassion is significantly associated with the emotional processing of one's feelings, but not with the expression of those feelings to others.

Also as hypothesized, self-compassion showed a negative link with all three avoidance-oriented strategies, though only the correlations with the strategies of denial and mental disengagement were significant. This suggests that when one treats failure situations with compassion, there is no need to deny, repress, or avoid one's feelings—the feelings can be acknowledged, accepted, processed, and allowed to pass. Ironically, when individuals do attempt to repress or deny their negative emotions, the strategy inevitably backfires, as evidenced in Wegner's (1989) well-known "white bear" experiments. Thus, holding negative emotions in compassionate awareness is a more adaptive way of dealing with failure, so that one does not become inadvertently fixated on thoughts of inadequacy and self-doubt.

Finally, this study did not find significant correlations between self-compassion and any of the five problem-focused coping strategies. These strategies focus either on taking active steps to remove the problem causing stress, making plans that will help avoid the problem, cutting back on other activities in order to focus on solving the problem at hand, or asking others for help in resolving the situation. However, it is not clear to what extent the problem-focused scale items used in this study even made sense to participants, given that the problem on which they were focusing was an unsatisfactory midterm grade that had already occurred and therefore could not be fixed or resolved. It should be noted that another recent study (Neff, Kirkpatrick, Rude, & Dejithirat, 2004) included an examination of the link between self-compassion and coping styles without reference to specific situations, and in this case self-compassion was found to have a significant positive correlation with the problem-focused coping styles of active coping and planning. Moreover, it was found that the greater emotional clarity associated with self-compassion helped to mediate the link, suggesting that in situations that can be changed, the balanced mindset of self-compassionate individuals also helps them to take effective steps to eliminate the causes of stress.

Conclusions

First, some of the limitations of these two studies should be addressed. One limitation has to do with the issue of causality. Both studies relied on correlations and regressions for their analyses, which cannot determine the directionality of effects between variables. Thus, although the theoretical model positing that self-compassion leads to more adaptive achievement goals and coping strategies is coherent, it is possible that achievement goals and coping strategies also impact self-compassion levels. Future research will be needed in order to further examine this issue. Also, the two studies relied entirely on self-report measures, and more experimentally-based methods will be needed to provide additional insight into the role of self-compassion in academic motivation and coping. Still, results do suggest that self-compassion is associated with adaptive motivational patterns and coping strategies in academic contexts, and that further examination of these associations is warranted.

Overall, findings from these studies suggests that self-compassion helps to facilitate the learning process by freeing individuals from the debilitating consequences of harsh self-criticism, isolation, and over-identification in the face

of failure, and instead provides students with self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and emotional balance. This constructive attitude towards the self appears to help students focus on mastering tasks at hand rather than worrying about performance evaluations, to retain confidence in their competence as learners, and to foster intrinsic motivation. Results also suggest that self-compassion is associated with lower anxiety levels, and that self-compassionate individuals are more likely to adopt adaptive coping strategies when confronted with academic failure. Thus, this research suggests that the encouragement of self-compassion among students could be highly beneficial in learning contexts. Many educators are struggling to understand how to encourage positive self-attitudes among their students in a way that doesn't run the risk of inadvertently encouraging narcissism and downward social comparisons. School-based interventions, which draw upon the self-compassion construct, may prove to be a useful alternative to self-esteem-based interventions, by helping to remediate debilitating self-attitudes in a more constructive manner. It may be that when dealing with students who are struggling with particular course topics, the encouragement of self-compassion on the part of teachers—in conjunction with an emphasis on mastery rather than performance goals—may prove particularly effective. Of course, research on self-compassion is still in its nascent stages and more research will need to be done before any policy implications can be drawn. Nonetheless, there are enough positive indicators from these two studies to suggest that more research on this topic would be a worthwhile pursuit.

References

- Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 84*, 261–271.
- Ames, C., & Archer, J. (1988). Achievement goals in the classroom: Students' learning strategies and motivation processes. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 80*, 260–267.
- Atkinson, J. W., & Feather, N. T. (Eds.). (1966). *A theory of achievement motivation*. New York: Wiley.
- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51*, 1173–1182.
- Baumeister, R. F., Smart, L., & Boden, J. M. (1996). Relation of threatened egotism to violence and aggression: The dark side of high self-esteem. *Psychological Review, 103*, 5–33.
- Black, A. E., & Deci, E. L. (2000). The effects of instructors' autonomy support and students' autonomous motivation on learning organic chemistry: A self-determination theory perspective. *Science Education, 84*, 740–756.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 822–848.
- Butler, R. (1992). What young people want to know when: Effects of mastery and ability goals on interest in different kinds of social comparisons. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 62*, 934–943.
- Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., & Weintraub, J. K. (1989). Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56*, 267–283.
- Covington, M. V. (1992). *Making the grade: A self-worth perspective on motivation and school reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Crocker, J., Thompson, L. L., McGraw, K. M., & Ingerman, C. (1987). Downward comparison, prejudice, and evaluations of others: Effects of self-esteem and threat. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, 52*, 907–916.

- Damon, W. (1995). *Greater expectations: Overcoming the culture of indulgence in America's homes and schools*. New York: Free Press.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1995). Human autonomy: The basis for true self-esteem. In M. H. Kernis (Ed.), *Efficacy, agency, and self-esteem* (pp. 31–49). New York: Plenum Press.
- Deci, E. L., Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Ryan, R. M. (1991). Motivation and education: The self-determination perspective. *Educational Psychologist, 26*, 325–346.
- Dweck, C. S. (1986). Motivational processes affecting learning. *American Psychologist, 41*, 1040–1048.
- Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and performance. *Psychological Review, 95*, 256–273.
- Elias, M. J. (1989). Schools as a source of stress to children. An analysis of causal and ameliorative influences. *Journal of School Psychology, 27*, 393–407.
- Elliot, A. J. (1999). Approach and avoidance motivation and achievement goals. *Educational Psychologist, 34*, 169–189.
- Elliot, A. J., & Church, M. A. (1997). A hierarchical model of approach and avoidance achievement motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 218–232.
- Elliot, A. J., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (1996). Approach and avoidance achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: A mediational analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 461–475.
- Elliot, A. J., & McGregor, H. A. (1999). Test anxiety and the hierarchical model of approach and avoidance achievement motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76*, 628–644.
- Elliot, A. J., McGregor, H. A., & Gable, S. (1999). Achievement goals, study strategies, and exam performance: A mediational analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(3), 549–563.
- Finn, C. E. (1990). Narcissus goes to school. *Commentary, 89*, 40–45.
- Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1991). Coping and emotion. In A. Monat & R. S. Lazarus (Eds.), *Stress and coping: An anthology* (pp. 207–227). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Goldstein, J., & Kornfield, J. (1987). *Seeking the heart of wisdom: The path of insight meditation*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Harackiewicz, J., Barron, K., & Elliot, A. (1998). Rethinking achievement goals: When are they adaptive for college students and why. *Educational Psychologist, 33*, 1–21.
- Harackiewicz, J., Barron, K., Carter, S. M., Lehto, A. T., & Elliot, A. J. (1997). Predictors and consequences of achievement goals in the college classroom: Maintaining interest and making the grade. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 1284–1295.
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Herman, W. E. (1990). Fear of failure as a distinctive personality trait measure of test anxiety. *Journal of Research and Development in Education, 23*, 180–185.
- Heyman, G. D., & Dweck, C. S. (1992). Achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: Their relation and their role in adaptive motivation. *Motivation and Emotion, 16*, 231–247.
- Hewitt, J. P. (1998). *The myth of self-esteem: Finding happiness and solving problems in America*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Judd, C. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1981). Process analysis: Estimating mediation in evaluation research. *Evaluation Research, 5*, 602–619.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your mind to face stress, pain and illness*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go there you are*. New York: Hyperion.
- Kernis, M. H. (2003). Toward a conceptualization of optimal self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry, 14*, 1–26.

- Linnenbrink, E. A., & Pintrich, P. R. (2002). Achievement goal theory and affect: An asymmetrical bidirectional model. *Educational Psychologist, 37*, 69–78.
- McMillan, J. H., Singh, J., & Simonetta, L. G. (1994). The tyranny of self-oriented self-esteem. *Educational Horizons, Spring*, 141–145.
- Mantzicopoulos, P. (1997). How do children cope with school failure? A study of social/emotional factors related to children's coping strategies. *Psychology in the Schools, 34*, 229–237.
- Middleton, M., & Midgley, C. (1997). Avoiding the demonstration of lack of ability: An underexplored aspect of goal theory. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*, 710–718.
- Midgley, C., Kaplan, A., Middleton, M., Maehr, M. L., Urdan, T., Anderman, L. H., Anderman, E., & Roeser, R. (1998). The development and validation of scales assessing students' achievement goal orientations. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 23*, 113–131.
- Midgley, C., Maehr, M., Hicks, L., Roeser, R., Urdan, T., Anderman, E., & Kaplan, A. (1997). *Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS)*. Michigan, MI: The University of Michigan.
- Neff, K. D. (2003a). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 2*, 223–250.
- Neff, K. D. (2003b). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity, 2*, 85–102.
- Neff, K. D., Kirkpatrick, K. L., & Dejitthirath, K. (2004, January). *Self-compassion: Research on a promising alternative self-attitude construct*. Poster presented at the 5th Annual Convention of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Austin, Texas.
- Nicholls, J. (1984). Achievement motivation: Conceptions of ability, subjective experience, task choice, and performance. *Psychological Review, 91*, 328–346.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Morrow, J. (1991). A prospective study of depression and posttraumatic stress symptoms after a natural disaster: The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 61*, 115–121.
- Pennebaker, J. W. (1993). Putting stress into words: Health, linguistic, and therapeutic implications. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 31*, 539–548.
- Pintrich, P. R., & Schunk, D. H. (1996). *Motivation in education: Theory, research and applications*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Rawsthorne, L. J., & Elliot, A. J. (1999). Achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: A meta-analytic review. *Personality & Social Psychology Review, 3*, 326–344.
- Richardson, F., Fowers, B., & Guignon, C. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rindskopf, D., & Rose, T. (1988). Some theory and applications of confirmatory second-order factor analysis. *Multivariate Behavioral Research, 23*, 51–67.
- Roeser, R. W., Midgley, C., & Urdan, T. C. (1996). Perceptions of the school psychological environment and early adolescents' psychological and behavioral functioning in school: The mediating role of goals and belonging. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 88*, 408–422.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*, 54–67.
- Ryan, A. M., & Pintrich, P. R. (1998). Achievement and social motivational influences on help seeking in the classroom. In S. A. Karabenick (Ed.), *Strategic help seeking: Implications for learning and teaching* (pp. 117–139). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Ryan, A. M., Pintrich, P. R., & Midgley, C. (2001). Avoiding seeking help in the classroom: Who and why? *Educational Psychology Review, 13*(2), 93–114.
- Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition & Personality, 9*, 185–211.
- Seligman, M. E. (1995). *The optimistic child*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

- Shapiro, S. L., Schwartz, G., & Santerre, C. (2002). Meditation and positive psychology. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 632–645). London: Oxford University Press.
- Skaalvik, E. M. (1997). Self-enhancing and self-defeating ego orientation: Relations with task and avoidance orientation, achievement, self-perceptions, and anxiety. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*(1), 71–81.
- Spielberger, C. D., Gorsuch, R. L., & Lushene, R. E. (1970). *STAI manual for the state–trait anxiety inventory*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Smiley, P., & Dweck, C. (1994). Individual differences in achievement goals among young children. *Child Development, 65*, 1723–1743.
- Stanton, A. L., Kirk, S. B., Cameron, C. L., & Danoff-Burg, S. (2000). Coping through emotional approach: Scale construction and validation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*, 1150–1169.
- Turner, J. E. (1998). An investigation of shame reactions, motivation, and achievement in a difficult college course (Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin). *Dissertation Abstracts International, 59*, 1911.
- Turner, J. E., Husman, J., & Schallert, D. L. (2002). The importance of students' goals in their emotional experience of academic failure: Investigating the precursors and consequences of shame. *Educational Psychologist, 37*, 79–89.
- Urdan, T. (1997). Achievement goal theory: Past studies, future directions. In M. Maehr & P. Pintrich (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation and cognition* (pp. 350–378). New York: Guilford Press.
- Wegner, D. M. (1989). *White bears and other unwanted thoughts: Suppression, obsession, and the psychology of mental control*. New York, NY: Viking/Penguin.
- Wegner, D. M., & Zanakos, S. (1994). Chronic thought suppression. *Journal of Personality, 62*, 615–640.
- Williams, G. C., & Deci, E. L. (1996). Internalization of biopsychosocial values by medical students: A test of self-determination theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 767–779.
- Wolters, C., Yu, S., & Pintrich, P. (1996). The relation between goal orientation and students' motivational beliefs and self-regulated learning. *Learning and Individual Differences, 8*, 211–238.
- Zeidner, M. (1995). Adaptive coping with test situations: A review of the literature. *Educational Psychologist, 30*, 123–133.