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The effectiveness of cognitive self-compassion training on academic well-being among ninth-grade students

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Abstract

Introduction: Nowadays, the study of the factors affecting the academic achievement is considered as one of the main concerns in evaluating education since this system mainly tries to accomplish the academic achievement. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effect of the cognitive self-compassion training on the academic well-being among ninth-grade male students.

Materials and Methods: The population of this study included all ninth-grade male students in Yazd city during 2018-2019. The academic well-being questionnaire of Tominin-Sweeney et al. (2012) and the educational package of Gilbert (2009) were used for collecting the data. The samples were selected by cluster random sampling method. In this regard, district 2 in Office of Education and Training in Yazd was first determined, and then, one school was selected for each. In the next step, the students were randomly assigned to the experimental (eight 90 minute sessions) and control groups. The data were analyzed using ANOVA.

Results: The results indicated that cognitive self-compassion training plays a significant role on reducing the academic burnout and increasing the engagement with school assignments, school value, and academic satisfaction ($P < 0.001$, $F = 20.10$).

Conclusion: It seems that cognitive self-compassion training can play a role in increasing the academic well-being of students.

Keywords: Academic well-being, Cognitive self-compassion, Students.

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Introduction

The human capabilities and an emphasis on his/her growth and development are considered one of the priorities of positivist psychology, proposed by some researchers and theorists in recent decades. This approach highlights the study of positive characteristics and benefits of healthy mental states (1). With the advent of the positivist movement in psychology and positive semantic structures in various fields of psychology, well-being is considered a positive and satisfying state of mind, including energy or passion, along with a sense of commitment and fascination attachment. In psychology, academic well-being has been the focus of a group of researchers (2) by highlighting the active role of the student and his or her abilities in creating a lively academic environment (3,4). Researchers consider academic well-being as the students' attitudes toward the study, making sense in the dimensions of the general attitudes toward academic life, attitudes to the teacher, peers, and building, where the students are studying (5). The lack of academic well-being leads to mental incapability such as anxiety, depression, repression, hostility, or fear. Individuals with academic burnout often experience symptoms such as a lack of enthusiasm about the content of the course, inability to continue attending class, lack of participation in classroom activities, frequent absences, and feelings of meaninglessness and inadequacy in learning the lessons (6). Self-compassion is considered one of the personality traits of human beings, leading to the changes caused by the lack of academic well-being, resulting in understanding and correcting maladaptive patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior. Further, self-compassion creates an absolute emotional position for self-care (7). Accordingly, a new structure called "self-compassion" was proposed in psychology, which is a kind of replacement for the concept of self-worth (8). This concept means being kind to oneself and having a non-judgmental understanding of oneself. In other words, self-compassion refers to the belief that all people are not perfect and have shortcomings (9). According to Neef (10), the structure of self-compassion represents the warmth and acceptance of the unpleasant aspects of oneself

and life, including three main elements. First, whenever a person realizes his/her inefficiency and suffers from it, he/she loves and understands his/her existence. The second is related to a sense of common human characteristics, upon which pain and failure are the common, inevitable aspects in the experience of all human beings. Ultimately, self-compassion represents a balanced awareness of one's emotions, including the ability to deal with painful thoughts and feelings instead of sadness and regret for oneself (11). These elements facilitate the recognition and acceptance of reality and increase the response capacity of the individual in any condition (12). Cognitive self-compassion training is defined as a positive attitude toward oneself, promoting mental health among individuals (13). Individuals with more self-kindness are less likely to blame themselves and more likely to take care of themselves and improve their health (14). A distinctive feature of self-compassion is that it is directed toward personal pain and suffering, which is considered an essential component of a positivist psychology approach (15).

The research in cognitive self-compassion in psychology is at its infancy, and a few studies have been conducted in this regard. Also, Nazeri et al. (16) compared the effectiveness of cognitive self-compassion and mindfulness on the academic well-being of overweight students and reported that these methods could significantly increase their academic well-being. Further, Karami et al. indicated that cognitive self-compassion increases all aspects of academic well-being (17). Thus, academic well-being is considered a new structure in the field of educational psychology in Iran. Given the emotional and psychological consequences of cognitive self-compassion and the importance of promoting academic well-being among students, the present study evaluated the effectiveness of cognitive self-compassion training on the academic well-being of ninth-grade male students in Yazd.

Materials and Methods

The statistical community of this study included all ninth-grade male students in Yazd city (5060) during 2018-2019. After obtaining

the necessary approvals from the Public University and the General Department of Education in Yazd, the samples were selected by cluster random sampling method. First, one school was selected among the first high schools in district 2 in the Office of Education and Training in Yazd. Then, a ninth-grade was selected as the sample, and the students were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. The inclusion criteria included ninth-grade students aged 16 ± 1 years and signing the research consent form. The exclusion criteria included illness, unwillingness to cooperate for completing the questionnaires, obtaining incomplete questionnaires, and boring the training.

Then, the experimental intervention was performed for the experimental group by training cognitive self-compassion for eight 90-min sessions. However, the students in the control group did not receive any intervention. Before intervention, the participants were informed of the confidentiality of data, and voluntarily participation. After explaining how to complete the questionnaire, the experimental and control groups answered the questionnaire as the pre-test. The post-test was performed on both groups after training.

Research instrument

A) *The Academic Well-being Questionnaire (AWBQ)* (Tominin-Sweeney et al., 2012): This questionnaire included 31 questions and four subscales of school value, school burnout, academic satisfaction, and engagement with the assignments. Tominin-Sweeney (2012) confirmed the validity of this scale and its four structures through confirmatory factor analysis. In addition, the reliability of the dimensions of school value, school burnout, academic satisfaction, and engagement with the assignments was 0.64, 0.77, 0.91, and 0.94, respectively. In Iran, Moradi et al. validated in Iran by using exploratory and confirmatory analysis, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was utilized to evaluate its internal consistency. The results of factor analysis indicated that the questionnaire includes the four factors mentioned earlier. The fit indices of confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the existence of four factors in this questionnaire. Further, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole questionnaire, school value, school burnout, academic satisfaction, and engagement with the assignments was 0.87, 0.88, 0.73, and 0.73, respectively (19).

Table 1. The steps used for cognitive self-compassion training of Gilbert (20)

Steps	Content of the sessions
First session	Implementing the pre-test, evaluating the level of metacognitive beliefs and emotions, describing and explaining the emotions and factors related to its symptoms, and conceptualizing cognitive self-compassion training
Second session	Empathy training: Training to understand that the students feel that they follow the affair with the empathic attitude
Third session	Empathy training: Forming and creating more and diverse emotions related to students' issues to increase the care and pay attention to their health
Fourth session	Forgiveness training: Accepting mistakes and forgiving yourself for the mistakes to speed up the changes
Fifth session	Training to accept problems: Accepting the changes ahead and enduring difficult and challenging conditions due to the variability of life trends and students facing various challenges
Sixth session	Teaching the development of valuable and transcendent emotions: Creating valuable emotions in one-self to deal with the environment appropriately and efficiently
Seventh session	Responsibility training: It is an essential component of self-compassion training when students learn to have self-critical thinking to create new and more effective perspectives and feelings
Eighth session	Skill training and practice: Reviewing and practicing the skills presented in previous sessions to help students cope with different life situations in different ways and implementing post-test

Results

The participants' demographic data indicated that they had the same characteristics in terms of age, sex, and level of education. Regarding the socio-economic status variable, 17 parents were government employees, 7 were farmers, and six were self-employed, and six students had employed mothers. Considering the educational

level, 15 parents (25%) had a diploma, 33 (55%) had a bachelor's degree, and 12 (20%) had a higher than bachelor's degree. They were male students with a mean age of 16 years and two months. The grade point average of three students (10%) was above 19.75, nine (30%) above 19, three (10%) above 18.50, six (20%) above 18, and six (20%) below 18.

Table 2. The descriptive statistics of academic well-being in pre-test and post-test stages

Group membership stage		Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Experimental group	School value	33.70	6.74	40.39	9
	School burnout	46.90	5.40	41.70	6.80
	Academic satisfaction	11.70	2.10	16.70	2.20
	Engagement with the assignments	39.73	7	43.50	7.20
	Total academic well-being	131.33	15.21	142.73	16.10
Control group	School value	37.30	10.50	37.12	10.30
	School burnout	43.70	7.60	44.31	7.41
	Academic satisfaction	14.60	2.30	14.70	2.91
	Engagement with the assignments	42.50	4.50	43.20	4.83
	Total academic well-being	138	17	139.31	16.60

As indicated in Table 2, the mean scores of school value, academic satisfaction, and engagement with the assignments increased in the experimental group compared to that of the control group. However, in academic burnout, the score of control group increased compared to the experimental group. It means that the cognitive self-compassion training increased students' academic well-being. Based on the results of the evaluating ANCOVA assumptions such as linear relationship, regression as indicated in Table 2, the mean scores of school value, academic satisfaction, and engagement with the assignments increased in the experimental group compared to that of the control group. However, in academic burnout,

the score of control group increased compared to the experimental group. It means that the cognitive self-compassion training increased students' academic well-being. Based on the results of the evaluating ANCOVA assumptions such as linear relationship, regression homogeneity, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, uniformity of variances, and lack of linear relationship between the remaining variances, these assumptions were not violated. Therefore, MANCOVA can be used for data analysis. For example, the Box's M test results were examined to ensure that the assumption of the uniformity of matrix-covariance was not violated. As shown in Table 3, this assumption was not violated ($P > 0.001$).

Table 3. The results of testing the assumption of the homogeneity of matrix-covariance

F	Box's M	df 1	df 2	Sig.
1.70	19.80	6	3977.90	0.079

Table 4. The results of MANCOVA on the mean scores of academic well-being

Test	Value	F	DF of hypothesis	DF of error	Sig.	Eta square	Statistical power
Pillai's Trace	0.80	20.10	4	22	0.0001	0.80	1
Wilks Lambda	0.21	20.10	4	22	0.0001	0.80	1
Hotelling's Trace	3.70	20.10	4	22	0.0001	0.80	1
Roy's Largest Root	3.70	20.10	4	22	0.0001	0.80	1

As shown in Table 4, a significant difference is observed between the experimental and control groups, at least in terms of one of the components of academic well-being ($P < 0.001$, $F = 20.10$). Therefore, self-compassion training increased the academic well-being in the experimental group, and the hypothesis was confirmed.

The impact or difference rate is equal to 0.80; namely, 80% of the individual differences in the academic well-being of the experimental group were related to the effect of self-compassion training. The one-way ANCOVA was used ANCOVA to see which components of academic well-being differ between the two groups (Table 5).

Table 5. The results of the mean scores of academic well-being among the students in experimental and control groups with pre-test as the control variable

Variable	Source of change	Sum of squares	DF	Mean square	F	Sig.	Eta square	Statistical power
	Pre-test	1282.70	1	1282.70	44.80	0.0001	0.64	1
School value	Group	346.40	1	346.40	12.72	0.001	0.33	
	Error	716	25	28.63				
	Pre-test	1111.20	1	1111.20	215.20	0.0001	0.90	1
School burnout	Group	223.40	1	223.40	43.30	0.0001	0.63	1
	Error	129.10	25	5.20				1
	Pre-test	86.84	1	86.84	24.12	0.0001	0.50	1
Academic satisfaction	Group	82.04	1	82.04	22.80	0.0001	0.50	1
	Error	90	25	82.04				1
	Pre-test	700.40	1	700.40	49.53	0.0001	0.70	1
Engagement with the assignments	Group	62.83	1	62.83	4.44	0.045	0.20	0.52
	Error	353.50	25	14.13				

Discussion

By controlling the effect of the auxiliary variable (pre-test) on the dependent variable, there is a significant difference between the two groups in terms of the school value ($P < 0.01$, $F = 12.72$), school burnout ($P < 0.01$, $F = 43.30$), academic satisfaction ($P < 0.01$, $F = 22.80$), and engagement with the assignments ($P < 0.05$, $F = 4.44$) (Table 5). The results indicated that self-compassion training could increase the dimensions of academic well-being among students. The present study examined the effect of cognitive self-compassion training on the academic well-being of ninth-grade male students in Yazd. Based on the results, cognitive self-compassion training significantly influenced the dimensions of academic well-being, reduced school burnout, and increased engagement with the assignments, school value, and academic satisfaction. The results are consistent with the studies by Nazeri et al. (16), and Karami et al.

(17). In this regard, Karami et al. (17) evaluated the effect of cognitive self-compassion training on the academic well-being of female students in second-grade high school. They found that cognitive self-compassion training plays a significant role in all dimensions of academic well-being. In another study, Nazari et al. (16) considered the impact of cognitive self-compassion and mindfulness on the academic well-being of overweight adult students. They concluded that cognitive self-compassion and mindfulness significantly increase the academic well-being of overweight students. Accordingly, cognitive self-compassion training can positively affect the academic well-being of male and female students. In addition, the results of this study can be compared with the findings of the past studies in terms of the educational level. Given that the conducted studies evaluated the cognitive self-compassion training on the

eleventh grade and adult students and the present study examined the effectiveness of this training on the ninth-grade students, the cognitive self-compassion training is practical on all students in the first and second-year of high school. The results are in line with those in the previous studies regarding the method and data analysis (ANCOVA). Furthermore, the sample size of this research is different from the previous studies. Accordingly, self-compassion results in understanding and modifying maladaptive patterns of thinking, feeling, and behavior, which creates an absolute emotional position for self-care (7). On the other hand, Diener, Oishi, and Lucas argued that the students with a high sense of well-being have positive emotions. In contrast, students with a low level of academic well-being assess their educational events as unfavorable and experience negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and anger. The self-compassionate person tries to distance him/herself from experiencing pain and suffering. Additionally, self-compassion has a positive relationship with life satisfaction, progress, and inner motivation and a negative relationship with self-criticism, anxiety, and depression (22).

Accordingly, when individuals with high self-compassion realize their inefficiency, they love and understand their existence and accept the failures. Further, they believe that all human beings can make mistakes, and they have a balanced awareness of their emotions. Therefore, the self-compassionate individuals experience more mental health compared to those with less self-compassionate.

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Given the high acceptance of self-compassionate individuals, they are less likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, sleep problems, etc. Therefore, self-compassion triggers behaviors to maintain and promote psychological well-being (23). The present study had some limitations such as collecting the data only through the questionnaire, lack of using interview method, and lack of the possibility of controlling other variables influencing the academic well-being of students such as socio-economic class and parental educational style. Based on the results, it is suggested that cognitive self-compassion skills can be used to increase students' academic achievement.

Conclusion

The cognitive self-compassion training changes students' emotional relationships, which are detrimental to their mental health, leads to greater self-care and support, increases the ability to accept distress, and reduces emotional turmoil among students. This method enables the student to relax and control more and experience higher well-being.

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