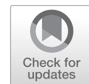

2 Self-Compassion and Mindfulness

Shauna Shapiro and Anna Fitch

Introduction

The word mindfulness—*Sampajañña* in Pali—means clear comprehension. Mindfulness helps us to see clearly, so we can make wise choices and respond to life's challenges effectively and with a clear mind. Awareness of the present moment inhibits the automatic biases that frequently dominate cognitive processing, such as attention to perceived threat or negative thoughts about oneself or the world. In doing so, mindfulness is thought to facilitate more impartial interpretation of reality, giving rise to "clear seeing" or "clear knowing" (Analayo, 2019). From this place of clarity, one is given the opportunity to consciously discern what the present moment requires and respond in a proper and practiced way (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Thus, mindfulness can both reduce maladaptive and habitual cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns and also mitigate the impact of these patterns on distress and well-being (Verplanken & Fisher, 2014). Although research has demonstrated the myriad benefits of mindfulness (Grossman et al., 2010; Leyland et al., 2019), the recent interest has often led to its oversimplification and overcommodification. As a result, mindfulness bears the danger of becoming a buzz word of modern society with the intent of monetizing wellness and offering mindfulness training without context or nuanced content. This watered-down, amorphous version of mindfulness limits its full potential and can lead to discouragement and, worse, iatrogenic effects.

Self-compassion, at its most basic level, is the ability to show yourself kindness in the face of suffering. Mindfulness is considered foundational to self-compassion: we cannot be kind to ourselves unless we first have the awareness and acknowledge we are in pain. Mindfulness helps us see suffering clearly. Self-compassion adds: "Be kind to yourself in the midst of suffering" (Germer & Neff, 2013, p. 861). Accordingly, self-compassion also has the potential to facilitate and deepen mindfulness, by supporting us to stay present with difficult experiences. Indeed, many scholars and practitioners emphasize that self-compassion is inherent within mindfulness practice. In this way, mindfulness and self-compassion are distinct constructs that mutually engender each other.

This chapter closely examines the relationship between mindfulness and self-compassion, illustrating both the overlap and fundamental differences. We aim to provide a comprehensive and clear understanding of mindfulness, explicitly highlighting its three components: intention, attention, and attitude. As mindfulness and self-compassion are inextricably linked, the purpose of this chapter is to unravel their integral aspects,

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examine how they interact, and help to articulate the utility of both mindfulness and self-compassion to support health and well-being on an individual and collective level. Throughout this exploration, questions arise: What are the constructs of mindfulness and self-compassion and how are they defined? What are the fundamental components and practices of each? Where are they similar and where do they differ? How can mindfulness and self-compassion be integrated in order to bring about the greatest health and healing, and which populations would this integration be most effective?

Distinguishing Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Practices

To begin, we need to understand mindfulness and self-compassion as separate practices. While mindful awareness is a state of being, mindful practice is the mechanism through which consistent mindfulness is achieved (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Just as patterns of cognitive distortion such as worry and rumination can become a "default" through repeated use (McEvoy et al., 2013), mindfulness too can become an integral habit, becoming both a way of being and a formal practice. Focused-attention meditation is one mindfulness practice that specifically aims to cultivate selective attention on a specific object (e.g., the breath). To do so, one must also simultaneously monitor one's attention to identify when it has wandered away from the chosen object, disengage one's attention from any distractions, and return one's attention to the attentional object accordingly (Lutz et al., 2008). Open monitoring meditation builds on focused attention, with the aim of remaining in a state of monitoring anything that occurs in one's present-moment experience, *without* focusing on an attentional object (Lutz et al., 2008).

Traditionally, self-compassion was incorporated in compassion and lovingkindness practices of Buddhism and has been implicitly taught through the practice of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs; Rudaz et al., 2019). However, with the pioneering work of Neff and Germer (2013), self-compassion practice and the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program were developed to cultivate self-compassion more explicitly. Current research shows the benefits of a direct approach of training in MSC (Neff & Germer, 2013). This program utilizes compassion and lovingkindness meditations, as well as integrating dyadic, group, and individual activities designed to cultivate these constructs. In addition to the focus on one's cognitive, sensory, and affective experience that is characteristic of mindfulness meditation, loving-kindness and compassion practices focus specifically on intra- and interpersonal experiences. In lovingkindness mediation, for example, one practices sending compassion to oneself, loved ones, and all beings who suffer (Hofmann et al., 2011). In compassion meditation, through the awareness of our own suffering or the suffering of others, one can cultivate the inherent compassion that naturally arises. While compassion meditation facilitates recognizing and alleviating suffering, loving-kindness mediation focuses on wishing others unconditional well-being (Hofmann et al., 2011).

In Neff and Shapiro's theoretical framework of general state mindfulness, four distinct elements of mindfulness are identified (Neff & Shapiro, 2019): (1) paying attention to present-moment experiences, (2) how we relate to experiences, (3) how we relate to the experiencer, and (4) the wisdom to see both the experience and experiencer with clarity. Self-compassion predominantly focuses on the third element, how we relate to the experiencer. Additionally, while general state mindfulness can be applied to all life's experiences, mindfulness within self-compassion focuses primarily on how we relate to the experiencer (ourselves) in moments of suffering. When suffering arises, we utilize the practice of mindfulness to become aware of our pain and identify the experience as suffering. When suffering has been identified, we include the explicit practice of self-compassion to actively soothe and support ourselves. The practice of self-compassion is a crucial ancillary to mindfulness in times of suffering; it directly responds to the emotional need that is present with support and comfort.

The Three Pillars of Mindfulness Practice

Whether through focused attention or open monitoring, the practice of mindfulness is made up of three essential pillars: intention, attention, and attitude (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Intention underpins *why* we pay attention. It helps to establish the purpose of our practice and keeps our focus on what we wish to achieve through mindfulness, thereby guiding the practice in a deliberate and purposeful direction. Attention helps us train and stabilize our focus in the present moment. Attention permits us to discern *when* and *what* to practice. Since the only constant is change, attention allows us to perceive the current moment with clarity. By utilizing attention, it is possible to become aware of what practice the present moment necessitates. This awareness provides the ability to select the most beneficial practice. Attitude guides *how* we pay attention—specifically, with kindness and curiosity.

This third pillar of mindfulness—attitude—is perhaps the most important and often overlooked. Too often, we practice mindfulness with an attitude of judgment—judging ourselves when our mind wanders, judging ourselves for not doing it right. This "judging" attitude, however, limits the ability to fully benefit from mindful practice. Researchers Heatherton and Wagner (2011) have studied the brain's response to an attitude of self-judgment. Using fMRI scanning, their research purports that shame diminishes the activity of the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and the communication between the amygdala and the PFC, thereby limiting the ability to self-regulate, make informed decisions, and adaptively learn from experience (Heatherton & Wagner, 2011). Further research conducted by Pulcu et al. (2014) found that shame not only dampens activation of the PFC but also increases amygdala activity, which elicits a fear response. Thus, judgment and shame initiate a fear response, which then subsequently reduces the activity in the PFC responsible for acquiring new insights and learning.

Intention: *Why* We Pay Attention Intentions establish an objective and keep the practice of mindfulness active rather than passive. They connect us with our personal visions, aspirations, and motivations. Our intentions keep us on course, reminding us again and again of what is most important. Research on the role of intention in mindfulness is limited; however, an early study found that intentions underpinning meditation practice shift over time and are associated with outcomes of practice (Shapiro, 1992). In their classification framework of mindfulness practices, Levit-Binnun et al. (2021) outline four distinct intentions: (1) to gain insight into the way in which how we relate to our experience influences our well-being or distress; (2) to gain insight into the changing nature of our internal and external world; (3) to gain insight into how our sense of self influences our distress and well-being; and (4) to gain insight into how positive and prosocial mental states influence well-being. Intentions 1–3 are based on the characteristics of experience considered fundamental to understanding and alleviating mental distress in the Buddhist tradition, while the fourth intention reflects the Brahmaviharas (i.e., "loving kindness," "compassion," "sympathetic joy," and "equanimity"). In practice, intentions can take the form of mantras, phrases, or even a single guiding word, such as "see clearly," "respond with kindness," or simply "peace."

Attention: Training and Stabilizing Our Focus in the Present One of the core tenets of mindfulness practice is that we pay attention to our present-moment experiences to truly experience the essence of life. Mindfulness supports the ability to be attentive and aware in the present moment. As mindfulness practice trains and stabilizes attention, we begin to see that which is unfolding before us more clearly. Indeed, research supports the assertion that present-moment attention is associated with more adaptive stress responses over time (Donald et al., 2016), whereas less awareness of the present moment is associated with lower psychological well-being (Stawarczyk et al., 2012). Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) found that, on average, our minds wander 47% of the time. This

means that our attention to the present moment is only fully engaged for approximately half our lives. The phenomenon of the wandering mind has been colloquially termed "monkey mind" because our mind behaves like a monkey, constantly swinging from thought to thought. Swept into future fears or lost in ruminations of the past, we miss the present moment. When our minds wander, we often miss important details of the present moment and construct inaccurate narratives about what is happening, often based on our previous conditioning instead of the reality of the present. Thus, the monkey mind may cling to inaccurate stories which can cause an incorrect forecasting and subsequent behavioral responses in the future.

In support of the assertion that mindfulness is associated with more adaptive attentional outcomes, numerous studies have demonstrated improved attentional processing and differences in associated brain structures related to both trait mindfulness and mindfulness practice (Yordanova et al., 2021; Malinowski, 2013; Allen et al., 2012). In a recent series of meta-analyses, Verhaeghen (2021) examined (a) the effects of mindfulness training, relative to control conditions, on attention outcomes; (b) attentional capacities in long-term meditators compared to those who have never meditated; and (c) the relationship between trait mindfulness and attention. The first meta-analysis demonstrated that mindfulness training had significant, small to medium effects on several components of attention, including inhibition, working memory, attention shifting, and sustained attention, with more training sessions associated with greater effects. The second meta-analysis found that across studies, long-term meditators reported significantly better performance on attention tests than those who have never meditated, again with small to medium effects. Finally, the third meta-analysis documented a small but significant association between trait mindfulness and attention across studies (Verhaeghen, 2021).

Some studies provide insights into the differential impacts of mindfulness- and compassion-based practices on brain structure and function related to attention. For example, Carter et al. (2005) found that Tibetan Buddhist monks performed significantly better on a task of sustained attention following focused-attention meditation, but not following compassion meditation. In a series of studies, Yordanova and colleagues (2020, 2021) found that among experienced meditators, focused attention, open monitoring, and lovingkindness meditation had both shared and distinct neural patterns. Specifically, focused-attention meditation was associated with increased beta connectivity in the right hemisphere of the brain, whereas open monitoring was associated with beta connectivity in the left hemisphere. The authors proposed that these patterns represented differences in the type of attention (i.e., narrow versus wide) or the amount of information attended to (i.e., small versus large).

Attitude: ***How*** **We Pay Attention** Of the three pillars of mindfulness, attitude is perhaps the one most often overlooked and the most relevant for this discussion. While intention reminds us *what* is most important and attention stabilizes our mind in the present, our attitude affects *how* we pay attention. *How* we pay attention determines our ability to see clearly, to learn effectively, and to respond wisely and compassionately. To benefit from mindfulness, an attitude of kindness and curiosity is essential (Shapiro et al., 2006). If intention and attention are met with a cold and critical attitude, the practice may have contradictory consequences (Shapiro et al., 2006; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This could result in a practice that is condemning or judgmental of inner experience, further cultivating neuronal pathways of judgment and shame instead of compassion and acceptance. An attitude of kindness and curiosity enables the learning and information processing areas of the brain to function more effectively, resulting in being able to more objectively evaluate our situation so that we can effectively respond. In fact, the bringing together of these two elements—kindness and presence—is reflected in the Japanese character for mindfulness which is comprised of two interactive figures: one is presence; the other is heart or mind (Santorelli, 1999). Therefore, an equally accurate

translation of mindfulness is *heartfulness* (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2000). This underscores the importance of cultivating and including open-hearted qualities during the practice of mindfulness. It is important to note that this "attitude" of kindness is central to the practice of MSC.

One misconception in the current mindfulness "revolution" is that it often neglects this important pillar of attitude (Shapiro, 2020). People often think of "kindness" as a side note, or, worse, they mistakenly believe it will make them soft and cause them to lose their edge. However, the opposite is true; an attitude of kindness and curiosity is directly linked to performance and well-being (Hanson et al., 2021). In support of this assertion, research has found that an attitude of kindness may elicit and strengthen positive well-being. Symeonidou et al. (2019) examined the effects of participant kindness on their subjective well-being. Participants were asked to keep a daily record of their kind actions for a week, while those in the control condition were asked to simply record their typical daily actions. Measurements of subjective well-being were administered pre, post, and at 1- and 2-month follow-ups. A significant small-to-medium positive correlation was found between the number of kind actions undertaken and participant well-being (Symeonidou et al., 2019). What is more, those in the kindness intervention showed increases in well-being during follow-up measurements. This suggests that well-being is not static and can be positively infused through self-recognition of one's kindness.

Additionally, research has found similarly promising results for those who also practice self-kindness. Rowland and Curry (2019) conducted a randomized and blind study to determine the effect of numerous kindness interventions. Participants were split into four kindness groups as well as a control group. Each group directed kindness to a different receiver (family and friends, strangers, self, or observational), except for those in the control who were not directly instructed to engage in acts of kindness. After pre and post measurements for happiness and well-being were analyzed, two important findings emerged. Firstly, each kindness group demonstrated a significant increase in happiness and well-being compared to the control, and the number of kind acts was positively correlated with happiness. This further substantiates the benefits of kindness found by previous research. Secondly, no significant difference was identified between kindness groups. In other words, directing kindness toward oneself was just as beneficial as directing kindness toward others (Rowland & Curry, 2019).

An attitude of kindness and self-kindness has also been found to support personal performance and motivation levels. In one report, researchers conducted two studies to measure the effectiveness of a lovingkindness meditation (LKM) training program on motivational states (Masters-Waage et al., 2021). Using a randomized controlled trial, the first study split participants into three groups (LKM, general mindfulness, and waitlist control). After completion of the program, analysis revealed longitudinal increases in affect and motivation for those in the LKM intervention when compared to general mindfulness and the control condition. Further, the second study reported on a weeklong study to identify the effects of LKM on workplace motivation. Participants were split into three groups (LKM, formal meditation practice, and informal mindfulness practice). Each of these groups was instructed to actively practice mindfulness, but the LKM group was explicitly directed to practice kindness toward themselves and others. Researchers found that those in the LKM condition reported increased daily motivation levels after meditation practice. While workplace performance was not significantly different between groups, this research provides evidence for the efficacy of multiple meditation practices, both formal and informal (Masters-Waage et al., 2021).

Establishing an attitude of kindness and curiosity toward our inner experience is not sugar-coating our emotions or trying to suppress or change them, but rather allowing us to experience our emotions in a safe and courageous way. An attitude of kindness and curiosity activates the relaxation response in the brain, which releases

neurotransmitters such as acetylcholine, endorphins, and oxytocin which activate the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic system (Uvnäs-Moberg et al., 2014; Gerritsen & Band, 2018). Rigoni et al. (2015) found that enacting an attitude of kindness during a meditation practice initiates a release of dopamine—one of the brain's neurotransmitters responsible for learning and rewards and associated with feelings of pleasure and motivation.

Mindfulness is the awareness that arises when all three elements—intention, attention, and attitude—synergistically arise to meet the present moment. This mindful awareness allows us to see the present moment clearly and respond productively. By bringing an attitude of kindness and curiosity, we can practice genuine heart-mindfulness. This is where self-compassion and mindfulness overlap, and the two practices work together to improve overall well-being.

Defining Self-Compassion

The formal definition of self-compassion is articulated by Kristin Neff as a dynamic interplay of compassionate self-responding components of mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity and uncompassionate self-responding components of overidentification, self-judgment, and isolation (Neff, 2003). By clearly defining the construct of self-compassion, we can more fully understand the need for the explicit practice of self-compassion. The components of self-compassion as defined by Neff (2003) are mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity.

Mindfulness Mindfulness is the foundation for self-compassion. We must have the awareness that we are in pain before we can soothe the pain. Within the construct of self-compassion, mindfulness is defined as having a balanced perspective *specifically* when faced with challenges, without exaggerating or evading difficult emotions or potential negative consequences (Neff, 2003). This is contrasted with the more general definition of mindful awareness, which focuses on awareness of *all* experience, both pleasant and unpleasant.

Self-Kindness Kindness is the mechanism used to actively comfort and support when we are suffering. It is important to note that we are not soothing ourselves to make the pain go away or as an act of avoiding the pain. Rather, we are soothing ourselves *because* we are suffering due to pain. The existence of pain, and the resultant experience of suffering, is the reason we call upon the practice of self-compassion. Mindfulness without kindness can lead to the resistance of pain and inadvertently increase suffering. It is necessary here to distinguish the difference between pain and suffering. Pain is a part of life; it exists regardless of our reaction to it. Suffering, however, is optional and is dependent on how strongly we resist the pain. This can be explained by the equation, suffering = pain × resistance (S. Young, personal communication, 2000). Pain is inevitable, and suffering increases depending on the degree to which we resist pain.

In this way, mindfulness, or being aware of pain, does not actively alleviate suffering, but rather it makes the experiencer acutely aware of what they are feeling in relation to the pain. At times, the experiencer may realize that, in fact, pain is not as persistent or intense as previously thought, and therefore there may be some moments of alleviation of the pain. Alternatively, being aware of pain with openness and curiosity may make the experiencer more overwhelmed by the pain when the pain is great. In either case, adding self-kindness *because one is in pain* begins the process of soothing suffering. Mindfulness facilitates awareness of the pain, while self-compassion provides the experiencer with the opportunity to alleviate the pain. When practiced in this manner, self-kindness allows the experiencer to be more intimate with the pain rather than detach from it (Shapiro et al., 2006).

Self-compassion offers an alternative coping mechanism to avoidance. While it may seem intuitive to distance ourselves from pain, research

has found that acknowledging pain with an attitude of kindness offers more benefit (Costa & Pinto-Gouveia, 2013). In a study of over 100 patients with chronic pain, Costa and Pinto-Gouveia (2013) analyzed the relationship between experiential avoidance, self-compassion, and psychological distress. Hierarchical regressions were conducted after self-report measures were completed, and the results speak to the benefits of self-compassion in times of suffering. A significant positive correlation was identified between patients who practiced avoidance and psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress). Alternatively, those who engaged in self-compassion and approached their pain with kindness showed significantly less psychological distress (Costa & Pinto-Gouveia, 2013). Despite seeming contradictory, when an attitude of self-kindness is present, being with physical pain decreases overall suffering, while detachment from pain may lead to increased psychological suffering.

Of course, being kind to oneself in the face of suffering can be challenging, and it may even feel contradictory to our nature. When things go wrong, we often try to suppress the pain, berate ourselves, or leap into problem-solving mode. Whether through reliance on primitive survival instincts, or cultural influences, this is how we often treat ourselves (Lu et al., 2021). Interestingly, we do not treat others this way; when friends are facing challenges, we readily respond with kindness and compassion. Why would we so readily offer a friend this benevolence yet are so hesitant to extend the same compassion to ourselves? Further, given the aforementioned research and the pitfalls of shame, why would we not cultivate an inner environment that is best able to promote productive growth and meaningful change?

The concept of self-kindness, particularly within the practice of self-compassion, is largely misunderstood in Western culture. Self-kindness is often perceived as indulgent, selfish, or permissive. The misconception asserts that directing kindness to the self is an overall weakness. Primarily, the concern is that self-kindness may result in laziness or could diminish the quantity of kindness we have available for others (Gilbert et al., 2012, 2011). However, as was previously discussed, self-kindness has been shown to increase personal motivation (Masters-Waage et al., 2022). Additionally, those who practice self-kindness have been found to be more emotionally available to offer kindness to others (Waytz & Hofmann, 2020; Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020).

Waytz and Hofmann (2020) examined the prosocial benefits of self-kindness in comparison with kindness shown toward others. In a randomized study, participants were separated into three distinct groups to perform one of three kindness-related activities. The first group was tasked with acting out kindness, such as donating to charity or helping a coworker. The second group was asked to think moral thoughts, such as hoping for someone's success or thinking kindly about a friend. The final group was tasked with engaging in acts of self-kindness, for example, taking time to relax, making a nice meal, or speaking to themselves with nonjudgment. All groups demonstrated an increase in well-being, gratitude, and elevation (feeling inspired to spread kindness). Interestingly, however, the researchers found that those who practiced self-kindness experienced significantly less burnout (Waytz & Hofmann, 2020). People who took the time to bring kindness to themselves were less emotionally exhausted and therefore more available for others. While all forms of kindness were shown to lead to increased kindness toward others, self-kindness demonstrated the unique benefit of protecting against burnout.

These results have been replicated, with researchers finding that healthcare workers who practice self-kindness tend to experience less emotional exhaustion (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020). While burnout was highly prevalent in the sample, those who measured high in self-kindness demonstrated adaptive coping in times of stress and were readily able to help and offer kindness to patients. Thus, self-kindness has the potential to increase one's desire and availability to be kind to others, making it an important complement to other-focused kindness and compassion.

Common Humanity Common humanity is the understanding that we are not alone in our suffering. When we struggle, we often feel that this is "my" personal problem and that we are the "only one" suffering. This way of perceiving leads to the conclusion that we are alone in our pain, making us feel isolated and separate. Understanding that suffering is part of the human experience allows us to not feel isolated from others, and we may experience an easing of a sense of despair. By reframing our relationship to suffering in terms of a common human experience, we are more able to be in touch with the pain of the present moment. We are able to see suffering not as a result of something that we have done wrong, for example, but as a fundamental and shared aspect of life. It is important to note that although common humanity and interdependence are foundational themes in mindfulness practice, they are not explicitly included in the instructions of mindfulness practice, another important distinction between self-compassion and mindfulness practice.

Unique and Overlapping Benefits of Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

Decades of research demonstrate the link between mindfulness practice and better mental health and overall well-being, including psychological, cognitive, and physical domains (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003), for both clinical and nonclinical populations (Donald et al., 2019; Fjorback et al., 2011; Ni et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2018). For example, mindfulness has been shown to increase a sense of meaning and life satisfaction (LeBlanc et al., 2021; Aşık & Albayrak, 2021), aid in creativity and problem solving (Henriksen et al., 2020), and improve sleep and chronic pain (Doorley et al., 2021).

Benefits of Mindfulness Training In healthcare, mindfulness interventions have shown a decrease in healthcare worker stress as well as an overall increase in well-being and positive patient evaluations (Lomas et al., 2018; Irving et al., 2009). Likewise, research has exemplified the use of mindfulness in other workplaces to increase employee health and overall performance (Good et al., 2016). For example, mindfulness programs have been utilized in the military, and findings have demonstrated that mindfulness programs help soldiers make wiser choices during high-stress situations (Jha et al., 2015). In another example, mindfulness programs have been shown to result in a decrease of post-traumatic stress symptoms while increasing resiliency among veterans (Davis et al., 2019).

Benefits of Self-Compassion Training The practice of self-compassion—cultivated and taught through various inductions, short programs, as well as eight-session established training programs such as Mindful Self-Compassion developed by Neff and Germer (2013)—has demonstrated positive outcomes in a vast array of domains, including depression, eating behavior, anxiety, stress, and self-criticism (Ferrari et al., 2019). Current research has found comparable benefits to mindfulness practice, with an additional focus on benefits that are specifically targeted by self-compassion practice, such as increased self-worth and psychological well-being (Neff et al., 2005; Baer et al., 2012; Dundas et al., 2017).

Research shows that self-compassion interventions are beneficial, leading to significant improvements in rumination, stress, self-criticism, and anxiety (Ferrari et al., 2019) and there are certain populations for whom this consideration could be especially important. Researchers have found that a lack of self-compassion may be a factor of vulnerability for developing symptoms of depression (Krieger et al., 2016) and could possibly predict psychopathology, such as anxiety and depression (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Self-compassion has been shown to elicit adaptive coping skills (emotion regulation, acceptance, and self-soothing) and could act as both a preventative defense to psychopathology and a mediator to recovery (Finlay-Jones, 2017). Regarding the latter, populations that lack self-compassion may

considerably benefit from direct self-compassion training. For example, individuals who are overly harsh and critical toward themselves seem to benefit more from explicit self-compassion training (Rudaz et al., 2019). Due to intense feelings of shame, guilt, and unworthiness that individuals with anxiety, depression, and PTSD face, mindfulness practice may be difficult, and beginning practice with self-compassion may be more accessible (Van Dam et al., 2010). In people who are highly self-critical, mindfulness practice may inadvertently deepen the pathways of self-criticism, and explicitly beginning with self-compassion may be a more effective way to intervene (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Smeets et al., 2014).

Mechanisms of Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

One fundamental factor that relates to how both mindfulness and self-compassion practice achieve positive outcomes is that both these practices depend on neuroplasticity, that is, that our brain structure can be modified through repeated practice. Neuroplasticity refers to the way that the brain and other aspects of the nervous system can change in structure and function in response to internal and external stimuli (Cramer et al., 2011). Contrary to previously held beliefs in neuroscience, brain development does not stop at a certain age with recent findings demonstrating that the brain can change both structurally and functionally across the entire lifespan (Toricelli et al., 2021). Neuroplasticity affirms this capacity for the brain to continue to adapt and grow (Grafman, 2000; Voss et al., 2017).

When Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Meet

Available evidence suggests that self-compassion and mindfulness are overlapping constructs which complement each other (Bluth & Blanton, 2013). At the most basic level, mindfulness supports the present-moment awareness that we are suffering and is therefore the foundation of self-compassion. Self-compassion entails the ability to be aware of suffering (mindfulness), be kind to yourself in the face of this suffering (self-kindness), and recognize that you're not alone in your suffering (common humanity). Without the awareness that mindfulness brings, it is difficult to clearly discern one's emotional needs and is therefore impossible to engage in self-compassion, as self-compassion practice responds to the question "What do I need?" Mindfulness provides the nonjudgmental "witness state" of consciousness that helps us see our suffering clearly. This provides the opportunity to *choose* to comfort and meet suffering with kindness instead of succumbing to habitual reactions of shame or avoidance.

Similarly, self-compassion is integral to the nonjudgmental component of mindfulness. Mindfulness allows us to discern the present moment with clarity, while self-compassion provides us with the resources to respond with kindness. When suffering arises, the need for explicit self-compassion practice is discerned through our mindful awareness. In this way, mindfulness and self-compassion can work synergistically to strength and inform each practice. In summary, while mindfulness and self-compassion overlap, they are two distinct constructs that work together to support the experiencer during times of suffering. Mindfulness provides the clarity of mind to recognize the experience of suffering and approach it with an attitude of nonjudgment. Self-compassion focuses explicitly on the experiencer's reaction to themselves, promoting an active role of kindness and ameliorating feelings of isolation due to an understanding of common humanity.

Research also suggests that self-compassion is an integral component of mindfulness, and great success has been observed by implementing explicit self-compassion practice with a foundation of mindfulness (Neff & Germer, 2013). Although it is a distinct practice, self-compassion builds the quality of kindness, which is essential to the attitude component of mindfulness practice. In fact, some studies suggest that self-compassion is the key mechanism through which

mindfulness interventions achieve outcomes (Kuyken et al., 2010; Rowe et al., 2016; Galla, 2016, 2017). Two studies conducted with adolescent participants during weeklong mindfulness meditation retreats reported that while both mindfulness and self-compassion increased well-being, within-person changes in self-compassion predicted beneficial outcomes more constantly than within-person changes in mindfulness (Galla, 2016, 2017). These findings indicate the importance of self-compassion as a potential way in which mindfulness achieves beneficial outcomes.

While mindfulness training teaches the importance of observing nonjudgmentally, it does not explicitly provide an active way to provide comfort to oneself when pain is encountered. It assumes that when observing painful experiences, thoughts, or emotions nonjudgmentally, compassion for the self will naturally emerge, and does so for many practitioners. However, perhaps due to the extensive messaging that we get from our culture about not being "good enough," many are challenged with accessing compassion for the self, and explicit self-compassion practice can be enormously helpful. Teaching self-compassion explicitly provides participants with tools so that they can learn to be kind to themselves in a more direct way. As the behavior of supporting oneself is practiced, neuronal pathways are established and being self-compassionate becomes more of a habit.

Conclusion

While the body of mindfulness and self-compassion research is growing, comparatively little research has been devoted to understanding their unique and overlapping dimensions. Continued exploration is needed with the goal to determine how we can more effectively integrate both in our personal and professional lives. There are many unanswered questions and a substantial amount of work that needs to be done in order to facilitate the growth of a meaningful and illuminative understanding of the relationship between mindfulness and self-compassion.

Methodologically, there is a need for much greater care in the design of studies. This includes such elements as grounding research in theory to guide the development of research expectations; selecting participants in a way that ensures sufficient power and generalizability of findings and/or allows for detailed examination of theoretically relevant mechanisms, processes, and outcomes; utilizing study designs that permit the examination of changes and effects both cross-sectionally and longitudinally; and resisting the tendency of over-relying on a single methodology (e.g., self-report measures, translational imaging technologies).

Rigorously designed RCTs with large sample sizes and diverse populations are needed to elucidate the potential of combining mindfulness and self-compassion practices. In particular, there is very little research on young kids, and future work needs to be done in both clinical and non-clinical youth. Finally, future research needs to determine how to best integrate these practices into complimentary interventions, to produce positive synergistic benefits. The collaboration of mindfulness and self-compassion intervention is still in its infancy, yet it seems clear that if handled skillfully, this integration may prove enriching for both, enabling them to become partners in the understanding, healing, and enhancement of the human mind and heart.

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