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SELF-COMPASSION, SELF-ESTEEM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG ADOLESCENTS: UNDERSTANDING THEIR INTERRELATIONSHIP AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT



Adolescence is a significant developmental period characterised by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes. During this stage, individuals begin to develop a clearer understanding of their identity, personal abilities, social relationships and future aspirations. However, increasing academic expectations, peer pressure, social comparisons, family expectations and emotional challenges may influence adolescents' self-perception and psychological well-being. In this context, self-compassion and self-esteem are considered important psychological resources that contribute to positive mental health and adaptive functioning. Self-compassion refers to the ability to respond to personal difficulties, failures and inadequacies with kindness, understanding and emotional balance rather than harsh self-criticism. Self-esteem represents an individual's overall evaluation of personal worth and value. Psychological well-being, on the other hand, encompasses positive psychological functioning, including self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. The present article explores the conceptual foundations of self-compassion, self-esteem and psychological well-being and examines their possible interrelationships among adolescents. Drawing upon relevant psychological theories and previous empirical research, the article highlights the importance of developing a compassionate attitude towards oneself and maintaining a positive sense of self-worth during adolescence. It also discusses the implications of these psychological constructs for adolescent mental health, educational settings, family relationships and counselling interventions. Particular attention is given to the Indian sociocultural context, with relevance to adolescents in Kozhikode District, Kerala. Understanding these relationships may contribute to the development of effective psychological interventions and preventive mental health programmes for adolescents.

KEYWORDS: *Adolescence; Self-Compassion; Self-Esteem; Psychological Well-Being; Positive Psychology; Mental Health.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is one of the most important stages of human development. It represents a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, generally associated with individuals between 10 and 19 years of age. This stage involves substantial changes in physical development, cognitive abilities, emotional experiences and social relationships. Adolescents gradually develop their personal identity, independence, values, beliefs and understanding of themselves and the surrounding environment.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2025), approximately one in seven adolescents experiences a mental health condition. Anxiety, depression and behavioural difficulties are among the major concerns affecting this developmental period. These challenges highlight the importance of promoting psychological well-being rather than focusing exclusively on the prevention and treatment of psychological disorders.

Adolescents frequently encounter situations that influence their perceptions of themselves. Academic competition, examination results, parental expectations, peer relationships, physical appearance and social media comparisons may contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Some adolescents develop negative self-evaluations when they experience failure or criticism, whereas others demonstrate the ability to accept their limitations and respond constructively to challenging situations.

Three important psychological constructs that may explain these differences are self-compassion, self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Self-compassion enables adolescents to treat themselves with understanding and kindness during difficult situations. Self-esteem helps them recognise their personal worth and develop confidence in their abilities. Psychological well-being reflects their capacity to experience positive psychological functioning, maintain meaningful relationships, establish life goals and develop personal potential.

Although these constructs represent different psychological dimensions, they may operate together in shaping adolescents' emotional experiences and overall development. Understanding the relationship among self-compassion, self-esteem and psychological well-being is particularly relevant in the contemporary educational and social environment, where adolescents experience increasing academic, interpersonal and emotional demands.

2. UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Adolescence is a developmental period characterised by significant psychological transformation. During this stage, individuals become increasingly concerned about their identity, social acceptance, personal achievements and future responsibilities.

Erikson's psychosocial theory identifies identity versus role confusion as a central developmental conflict during adolescence. According to Erikson (1968), adolescents attempt to establish a stable sense of identity by exploring their interests, abilities, beliefs and social roles.

The successful resolution of this developmental challenge contributes to a stronger sense of identity and personal direction. However, difficulties in identity formation may result in confusion, insecurity and uncertainty about personal worth.

Peer acceptance becomes increasingly important during adolescence. Relationships with friends and classmates can influence self-perception, emotional adjustment and social confidence. Negative peer experiences, rejection, bullying and excessive social comparison may negatively affect adolescents' psychological functioning.

Family relationships also play an important role. Supportive parenting, emotional availability, acceptance and appropriate encouragement can help adolescents develop positive self-perceptions. Therefore, adolescence should be understood not merely as a period of biological maturation but also as a critical phase for developing psychological resources that support long-term well-being.

3. CONCEPT OF SELF-COMPASSION

Self-compassion is an important construct in positive psychology that describes the way individuals relate to themselves during experiences of failure, suffering, disappointment and personal inadequacy.

Neff (2003) conceptualised self-compassion through three major components:

3.1 Self-Kindness versus Self-Judgment

Self-kindness involves treating oneself with understanding, patience and emotional warmth during difficult situations. Adolescents who demonstrate self-kindness are more likely to recognise that making mistakes is a normal part of learning and development. Instead of engaging in excessive self-criticism after poor academic performance, they may identify areas for improvement while maintaining respect for themselves.

In contrast, self-judgment involves harshly evaluating oneself and interpreting personal mistakes as evidence of inadequacy.

For example, an adolescent who performs poorly in an examination may think, "I am not capable of achieving anything." A self-compassionate response would involve recognising the disappointment while understanding that one examination does not determine personal worth or future potential.

3.2 Common Humanity versus Isolation

Common humanity refers to recognising that difficulties, failures and emotional struggles are universal human experiences. Adolescents sometimes believe that they are the only individuals experiencing academic pressure, rejection or personal difficulties. Such beliefs may increase feelings of isolation.

Understanding common humanity helps adolescents recognise that other individuals also experience similar challenges. This awareness may reduce feelings of loneliness and encourage emotional connectedness.

3.3 Mindfulness versus Over-Identification

Mindfulness involves maintaining balanced awareness of present emotional experiences without suppressing, exaggerating or becoming overwhelmed by them. Over-identification occurs when individuals become excessively absorbed in negative thoughts and emotions.

For instance, an adolescent experiencing rejection from friends may repeatedly think about the incident and interpret it as proof that nobody likes them. Mindfulness allows the individual to acknowledge the emotional experience without allowing it to dominate their entire self-perception.

3.4 Importance of Self-Compassion during Adolescence

Self-compassion may help adolescents manage academic failures and disappointments, develop emotional resilience, reduce excessive self-criticism, respond constructively to negative feedback, improve emotional regulation, develop healthier interpersonal relationships, cope with social comparison and peer pressure, and develop a more balanced understanding of personal strengths and limitations.

Marsh et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis involving 19 studies and 7,049 adolescents. Their findings indicated a substantial negative association between self-compassion and psychological distress, suggesting that greater self-compassion is associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression and stress.

4 CONCEPT OF SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is an individual's overall evaluation of their personal worth, value and capabilities. It reflects the extent to which individuals perceive themselves positively or negatively. Rosenberg (1965) described self-esteem as a person's overall positive or negative attitude towards the self.

Self-esteem plays an important role in psychological development because it influences how adolescents perceive their abilities, respond to challenges and establish relationships with others.

4.1 Positive Self-Esteem

Adolescents with positive self-esteem generally demonstrate confidence in their personal abilities, acceptance of personal strengths and weaknesses, a sense of personal worth, greater willingness to face challenges, healthy interpersonal boundaries, greater confidence in decision-making and positive self-perception.

Positive self-esteem does not mean believing that one is superior to others. Rather, it involves recognising one's value while respecting the worth of other individuals.

4.2 Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem refers to a negative evaluation of one's personal worth and abilities. Adolescents with low self-esteem may experience feelings of inferiority, fear of failure, excessive dependence on external approval, negative body image, social insecurity, difficulty accepting criticism, self-doubt and negative self-evaluation.

For example, adolescents who repeatedly compare their academic achievements, appearance or social popularity with others may develop dissatisfaction with themselves.

4.3 Factors Influencing Self-Esteem among Adolescents

Several individual and environmental factors may influence the development of self-esteem:

Family environment: Parental acceptance, encouragement, emotional support and communication may contribute to healthy self-esteem.

Peer relationships: Acceptance, friendship, social inclusion and positive interactions may strengthen adolescents' feelings of personal worth.

Academic experiences: Academic achievements and failures may influence adolescents' perceptions of their abilities.

Body image: Physical changes during adolescence may influence satisfaction with appearance and personal confidence.

Social media: Exposure to unrealistic representations of beauty, success and lifestyle may increase social comparison and dissatisfaction.

Individual characteristics: Personality, emotional regulation, coping strategies and personal experiences may also contribute to differences in self-esteem.

5. CONCEPT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional concept that describes positive psychological functioning and the ability to develop and maintain a meaningful and satisfying life. Ryff (1989) proposed a multidimensional model of psychological well-being consisting of six major dimensions.

5.1 Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance refers to having a positive attitude towards oneself and accepting both personal strengths and limitations. Adolescents with self-acceptance are more likely to recognise their individuality without constantly comparing themselves with others.

5.2 Positive Relations with Others

This dimension refers to the ability to establish warm, trusting and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Supportive friendships, healthy family relationships and positive interactions with teachers contribute to adolescents' social and emotional development.

5.3 Autonomy

Autonomy involves independence, self-determination and the ability to make personal decisions. During adolescence, individuals gradually develop the capacity to make choices based on their own values and beliefs while considering appropriate guidance from adults.

5.4 Environmental Mastery

Environmental mastery refers to the ability to manage everyday situations and utilise available resources effectively. Adolescents who develop this capacity may demonstrate greater confidence in managing academic responsibilities, social relationships and personal challenges.

5.5 Purpose in Life

Purpose in life involves having meaningful goals, aspirations and a sense of direction. Adolescents who identify personal goals may develop greater motivation and commitment towards their educational and personal development.

5.6 Personal Growth

Personal growth refers to the continuous development of abilities, knowledge, skills and personal potential. It involves remaining open to new experiences, learning from difficulties and recognising opportunities for improvement.

Ryff's model is particularly relevant to adolescent development because it emphasises positive psychological functioning rather than simply the absence of mental health problems.

6.RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-COMPASSION AND SELF-ESTEEM

Self-compassion and self-esteem are closely related psychological constructs, although they are not identical. Self-esteem involves evaluating one's personal worth, whereas self-compassion involves responding to oneself with kindness and understanding, particularly during difficult experiences.

An adolescent with high self-esteem may feel confident when achieving academic success. However, when experiencing failure, their positive self-evaluation may become vulnerable. A self-compassionate adolescent, on the other hand, may maintain a supportive attitude towards themselves even when they experience disappointment.

Self-compassion does not depend entirely on achievement, social acceptance or external validation.

Muris and Otgaar (2023), through a narrative review and meta-analysis involving 76 studies and 35,537 participants, identified a substantial relationship between self-esteem and self-compassion. Their findings also indicated that the two constructs have both overlapping and distinct associations with psychological well-being and psychological problems.

This suggests that self-compassion and self-esteem may provide complementary psychological resources for adolescents.

7. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-COMPASSION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Self-compassion may contribute to psychological well-being by helping adolescents develop healthier responses to emotional difficulties. Adolescents who respond to personal failures with kindness rather than harsh criticism may be better able to maintain emotional balance.

Self-compassion may also support psychological well-being through several pathways:

Emotional regulation: Recognising and accepting emotions may help adolescents respond to stressful situations more constructively.

Self-acceptance: Self-kindness may encourage adolescents to accept their strengths and limitations.

Reduced isolation: Common humanity may help adolescents understand that personal struggles are shared human experiences.

Resilience: Self-compassion may help individuals recover from disappointment and adapt to difficult circumstances.

Personal growth: Treating mistakes as opportunities for learning may encourage continuous development.

Marsh et al. (2018) reported a strong inverse relationship between self-compassion and psychological distress among adolescents. These findings provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for considering self-compassion as an important psychological resource.

8. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Self-esteem is also considered an important factor associated with psychological well-being. Adolescents who have a positive sense of personal worth may be more likely to demonstrate confidence, self-acceptance and positive interpersonal functioning.

Positive self-esteem may contribute to psychological well-being through greater confidence in personal abilities, positive self-evaluation, improved interpersonal relationships, better adjustment to academic challenges, greater independence in decision-making, reduced dependence on external approval and greater willingness to pursue meaningful goals.

However, the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being may be influenced by family support, socioeconomic conditions, personality characteristics and social experiences. It is therefore important to examine self-esteem as part of a broader psychological framework rather than considering it in isolation.

9. INTERRELATIONSHIP AMONG SELF-COMPASSION, SELF-ESTEEM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

The three constructs may be understood as interconnected dimensions of positive psychological functioning. Self-compassion influences how adolescents respond to themselves during difficult experiences. Self-esteem reflects their overall sense of personal worth, while psychological well-being represents their broader positive psychological functioning.

An adolescent who develops self-compassion may become less dependent on external approval and more accepting of personal imperfections. This may support a healthier sense of self-worth. Similarly, positive self-esteem may encourage adolescents to participate in meaningful activities, establish positive relationships and pursue personal goals.

Both self-compassion and self-esteem may therefore contribute to different dimensions of psychological well-being.

Conceptual sequence:

Self-Compassion — kindness, common humanity and mindfulness
↓

Self-Esteem — positive self-evaluation, self-worth and confidence

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Psychological Well-Being — self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth

This sequence represents a possible conceptual explanation rather than an established causal pathway. The three variables may influence one another through complex and potentially reciprocal relationships.

10.ADOLESCENTS IN THE INDIAN SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

The Indian sociocultural environment provides an important context for understanding adolescent psychological development. Indian adolescents experience multiple influences arising from family expectations, educational competition, cultural values, peer relationships and changing social environments.

Academic achievement is often considered an important indicator of success. Consequently, adolescents may experience pressure to perform well in examinations and meet family expectations. In some circumstances, academic difficulties may negatively influence self-esteem and increase self-critical thinking.

Similarly, expectations concerning behaviour, appearance, social relationships and career choices may influence adolescents' identity development. The increasing use of digital technology and social media has also introduced new forms of social comparison.

In Kerala, adolescents experience these influences within diverse family, educational, socioeconomic and cultural environments. Kozhikode District provides a meaningful geographical context for examining these psychological variables among adolescents.

A study conducted in Delhi involving 815 adolescents examined the psychometric properties and demographic variations of self-compassion among Indian adolescents (Chopra et al., 2025). The findings highlight the importance of considering developmental and demographic differences when studying self-compassion in the Indian population.

Further research in different regional and cultural settings is necessary to understand how self-compassion, self-esteem and psychological well-being operate among adolescents.

11. ROLE OF FAMILY, SCHOOL AND SOCIETY IN PROMOTING PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

The development of positive psychological functioning is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by environmental support.

11.1 Role of Parents

Parents can promote self-compassion and self-esteem by providing unconditional emotional support, avoiding excessive criticism and comparison, appreciating individual strengths, encouraging independent decision-making, listening to adolescents' emotional concerns and supporting adolescents during academic failures.

11.2 Role of Educational Institutions

Schools and colleges play an important role in promoting adolescent mental health. Educational institutions can introduce life-skills education, emotional intelligence programmes, self-compassion activities, positive self-esteem development programmes, mindfulness-based activities, peer-support programmes and school counselling services.

11.3Role of Mental Health Professionals

Psychologists and counsellors can help adolescents develop healthier self-perceptions through evidence-informed psychological interventions. Cognitive behavioural approaches, self-compassion exercises, mindfulness practices and positive psychology interventions may be useful depending on individual needs. Counselling can also help adolescents identify negative self-beliefs, develop constructive coping strategies and strengthen interpersonal relationships.

12. IMPLICATIONS FOR ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

Understanding the interrelationship between self-compassion, self-esteem and psychological well-being has several practical implications.

First, it highlights the importance of promoting positive psychological resources during adolescence rather than focusing exclusively on psychological difficulties.

Second, it suggests that mental health programmes should address both the way adolescents evaluate themselves and the way they respond to personal failures.

Third, it emphasises the importance of supportive family and educational environments.

Finally, understanding these constructs may assist psychologists, teachers, parents and policymakers in developing preventive mental health programmes.

Interventions that encourage self-kindness, realistic self-evaluation, emotional awareness and positive relationships may contribute to healthier psychological development.

13.RESEARCH GAP AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Previous research has examined self-compassion, self-esteem and psychological well-being individually and in different combinations. Existing literature provides evidence that these constructs are relevant to positive psychological functioning.

For example, Marsh et al. (2018) examined the association between self-compassion and psychological distress among adolescents, while Muris and Otgaar (2023) explored the relationship between self-compassion and self-esteem and their associations with psychological outcomes. Indian research has also begun examining self-compassion among adolescents, including the recent study by Chopra et al. (2025).

However, there remains a need for further empirical investigation into the combined relationship among self-compassion, self-esteem and psychological well-being within specific regional and cultural populations.

In particular, examining these variables among adolescents in Kozhikode District may contribute to a better understanding of their psychological development within the local sociocultural environment.

The present research is significant because it focuses on three interconnected psychological constructs that may contribute to adolescents' positive mental health. It may also provide useful information for designing counselling programmes, school-based mental health initiatives and psychological interventions aimed at strengthening adolescent well-being.

14.CONCLUSION

Adolescence is a critical developmental period during which individuals establish their identity, develop self-perceptions and acquire psychological resources that influence their future well-being.

Self-compassion, self-esteem and psychological well-being represent important dimensions of positive psychological development. Self-compassion enables adolescents to respond to personal difficulties with kindness and understanding. Self-esteem contributes to a positive sense of personal worth, while psychological well-being reflects the ability to function positively across different areas of life.

Although these constructs are conceptually distinct, they may interact in meaningful ways. Self-compassion may support healthier self-evaluation, while positive self-esteem may encourage self-acceptance, autonomy and personal growth.

Therefore, understanding their interrelationship is important for promoting adolescent mental health. The present article highlights the need for further empirical research into these variables, particularly among adolescents in Kozhikode District, Kerala. Such research may contribute to the development of culturally relevant psychological interventions and preventive programmes that encourage healthier self-perceptions, emotional resilience and positive psychological functioning.

Ultimately, supporting adolescents in developing both a compassionate attitude towards themselves and a healthy sense of personal worth may be an important step towards promoting psychological well-being throughout life.

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