
The Influence of a Self-Compassion Training Program on Romantic Relationship Conflict: An Exploratory Multiple-Case Study

L'influence d'un programme de formation à l'autocompassion sur les relations amoureuses conflictuelles : une étude exploratoire de cas multiples

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ABSTRACT

Separation and divorce are common occurrences in the Western world. Given that a transition out of a marriage can increase psychological distress in the members of the couple as well as in their children, preventive interventions are crucial for avoiding serious ruptures and for increasing relationship strength and resilience. A potential option for clinicians is to use interventions designed to increase self-compassion. This multiple-case study explored the influence of a self-compassion intervention on conflict within romantic relationships. Three women completed a self-compassion training CD, six sets of online questions, and two semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to construct detailed accounts of each participant's experience. Participants perceived that self-compassion helped them to de-escalate conflict, increase self-awareness and self-acceptance, and facilitate perspective taking. This study may help inform future relationship interventions.

RÉSUMÉ

La séparation et le divorce sont des situations courantes en Occident. Étant donné que la transition vers la fin du couple peut accroître le stress psychologique, aussi bien chez les membres du couple que chez leurs enfants, il est essentiel de disposer d'interventions préventives permettant d'éviter de sérieuses ruptures et d'améliorer la force et la résilience de la relation. L'un des moyens qui s'offrent aux cliniciens consiste à recourir à des interventions conçues pour augmenter l'autocompassion. La présente étude de cas multiples a permis d'explorer l'influence d'une intervention d'autocompassion sur le conflit dans les relations amoureuses. Trois femmes ont suivi une formation d'autocompassion sur disque compact, ont répondu à six ensembles de questions en ligne, et ont participé à deux entrevues semi-structurées. On utilisait l'analyse thématique pour produire des comptes rendus détaillés de l'expérience de

chacune des participantes. Ces dernières ont indiqué avoir perçu que l'autocompassion les avait aidées à désamorcer les conflits, à accroître leur conscience de soi et leur acceptation de soi, et à faciliter la mise en perspective. Cette étude peut contribuer à éclairer les futures interventions sur les relations.

High rates of separation and divorce are prevalent throughout the Western world. In the United States, the probability of a first marriage ending in separation or divorce within 10 years has been estimated at 30%, with the rate increasing to more than 44% over a span of 20 years (Copen et al., 2012). Similarly, in Canada, an estimated 40% of marriages end within 30 years (Kelly, 2012). For the partners involved, the transition out of a marriage may take a serious toll on mental health. Relationship dissolution is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Chatav & Whisman, 2007). Furthermore, children of separation and divorce have an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and academic and behavioural problems (Arkes, 2015; Strohschein, 2005).

Although traditional couples therapy may be an effective strategy for improving relationship functioning (Stratton et al., 2015), many distressed couples do not seek professional help. Negative attitudes about help-seeking, partners' lack of agreement on the need for therapy, a preference for individual counselling, and limited financial resources are among the many reasons why couples may not seek marital therapy (Eubanks Fleming & Córdova, 2012; Parnell et al., 2018). Thus, researchers have called for non-traditional relationship approaches that are accessible to people who otherwise would not seek out counselling (Duncan et al., 2009). Furthermore, there is a need for alternative evidence-based strategies that promote relationship stability and help prevent the emergence of serious relationship ruptures.

Prevention approaches for reducing and coping effectively with interpersonal conflict may be particularly important given the role of relationship conflict as a major contributor to relationship dissolution. Negative conflict behaviours (e.g., hostility, name-calling, and blaming) are associated with relationship instability (Woodin, 2011), lower levels of subjective well-being (Siffert & Schwarz, 2010), and intimate partner violence (Bonache et al., 2019). Birditt et al. (2010) found a significant positive correlation between destructive conflict behaviours and divorce over and above other predictors, and McNulty and Russell (2010) found that when partners engaged in blame or criticism regarding minor relationship problems, problem severity increased and relationship satisfaction decreased.

Negative conflict behaviours may be indicative of heightened activation of threat-based emotions. In a study that measured emotional activation in couples while they were engaged in conflict discussions, future relationship dissolution was associated with increased vocal ranges in wives and elevated cortisol levels in husbands (Kliem et al., 2015). Research also indicates that the ability to regulate

one's emotions is associated with positive relationship outcomes. For example, in a 13-year longitudinal study, Bloch et al. (2014) found that wives' ability to regulate their emotions was related to greater relationship satisfaction and to increasing relationship satisfaction over time. Similarly, Mazzuca et al. (2019) found that successful emotion regulation was associated with marital satisfaction for couples in long-term relationships.

Although emotion regulation may be a crucial skill for long-term relationship satisfaction, many of the existing prevention strategies focus instead on helping couples develop behavioural skills in communication and conflict resolution (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012; Cicila et al., 2014). Yet, such skills may not necessarily improve relationship outcomes. It has been suggested that preventive approaches to relationship enrichment should move beyond communication skill development and target intrapersonal strengths (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012). As a result of each partner strengthening their own emotional capacities, it is possible that negative conflict patterns, and in turn major relationship ruptures, can be prevented.

One skill that might help in this regard is self-compassion. In the past two decades, self-compassion has received considerable attention as an approach for emotion regulation. Neff (2003, 2011) describes self-compassion as consisting of three distinct but related components. First is self-kindness, which promotes understanding and acceptance instead of self-judgment in relation to one's shortcomings. Second is mindfulness, which in the context of self-compassion promotes a balanced perspective on and awareness of one's thoughts and feelings. Third is common humanity, which is the recognition that all human beings go through moments of suffering and have inadequacies. The role of self-compassion in promoting emotion regulation is also central in Gilbert's (2009) compassion-focused theory, given that a major function of self-compassion is for a person to self-soothe in the face of threat. Sources of threat may be either internal (e.g., harsh self-criticism) or external (e.g., perception of being attacked by a key attachment figure).

Self-compassion is associated with multiple aspects of psychological functioning. In adults, self-compassion is related to lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Neff & Germer, 2013). Moreover, self-compassion may increase resilience in response to failure (Neff et al., 2005) and increase the motivation to improve personal areas of weakness (Breines & Chen, 2012). Individuals high in self-compassion are also more likely to experience greater life satisfaction and well-being (Zessin et al., 2015).

Although self-compassion is primarily an intrapersonal concept, cultivation of this quality has interpersonal benefits as well (Neff & Pommier, 2013). Self-compassionate romantic partners display increased perspective taking (Neff & Pommier, 2013) and are more likely to compromise when resolving disputes (Yarnell & Neff, 2013). Furthermore, self-compassion is associated with lower defensiveness, aggression, and dominating behaviours in interpersonal relationships

(Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Given these potential benefits, combined with the ability of self-compassion to deactivate negative affect in threatening situations (Gilbert, 2009), it is plausible that self-compassion may be particularly beneficial for reducing relationship conflict and for improving the quality the conflict-related conversations. The limited research in the area of self-compassion and relationship conflict is primarily quantitative in nature, however, and the participant perspective on the experience and impact of self-compassion on romantic relationships is absent from the literature. Developing a nuanced and contextualized understanding of participants' experiences is important for illuminating self-compassion's viability as a potential prevention strategy for relationship conflict.

In this article, we present findings from a qualitative study in which we explored the impact of self-compassion on relationship conflict. Based on the experiences and perspectives of adults who completed a guided self-help training program for strengthening self-compassion, our aim was to develop an in-depth understanding of self-compassion as a potential strategy for promoting romantic relationship stability in the face of conflict and for preventing severe relationship ruptures.

Method

Approach to Inquiry

This study was informed by a constructivist paradigm, which embraces a relativist ontological position in the realm of social phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to constructivism, truth and reality are not objectively discovered by the human mind but are created by it instead (Schwandt, 1994). This means that there are multiple realities, each belonging to individuals and groups based on social knowledge and life experiences (Merriam, 2009). Following the ontological belief that reality is relative, knowledge becomes subjective and research "findings" are created through interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994).

Participants

Participants were recruited through campus flyers and emails distributed at a large university in Western Canada. All participants were required to be 18 years of age or older and to be in a committed long-term relationship in which they were cohabiting with their partner. Because the study's purpose was to explore self-compassion as a maintenance and prevention strategy and not as a remediation tool, individuals who were currently in couples counselling or who demonstrated clinical levels of relationship distress as measured by the 7-item short form of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-7; Hunsley et al., 2001) were excluded. Given the length and time commitment of the program, some degree of attrition was expected. Of the 12 participants who began the program, three completed all six

lessons and the remaining eight completed between one and five lessons. Only data from the three participants who completed all six lessons are included in the analysis. All three of the participants were women between 26 and 47 years of age. The average relationship length was 7 years and 4 months. Two participants were students, whereas one worked full-time. All participants had obtained a post-secondary degree. Participant relationship statuses consisted of married, common-law, and cohabiting in a long-term relationship. All participants were Caucasian and self-identified as Canadian or as European Canadian, and the partners of all three participants were men.

Procedure

Participants were given a copy of Neff's (2013) audio guide, *Self-Compassion Step by Step: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, which covers material from Neff and Germer's (2013) Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) training program. This audio guide was well suited to the present study, given that it was accessible, was informed by research, and focused on skill enhancement rather than on pathology. Each of the six lessons in the audio guide was approximately 1 hour in length and focused on a specific topic: physiology of self-compassion, self-kindness, mindfulness, common humanity, dealing with strong emotions, and using self-compassion to live one's life fully. Lesson content included psychoeducation (e.g., the benefit of using self-compassion instead of self-criticism as a motivator) as well as guided strategies and exercises for cultivating self-compassion (e.g., loving-kindness meditation, compassionate body scan).

Participants who met the inclusion criteria were invited to an initial meeting, where the nature of the study was discussed and study materials were provided. The date of the initial meeting with each participant was designated Day 1. After the meeting, participants listened to the first audio recording. Participants were encouraged to incorporate what they had learned into their lives throughout the week and to make the practice fit their lifestyle. On Day 5, participants were emailed a link to a short Google forms questionnaire. Questions were based on each lesson and explored the participants' thoughts about the topic (e.g., "What was your first impression of this week's lesson?"). Participants were also asked to reflect on any perceived association between the lesson and their relationship (e.g., "What impact, if any, has it had on your relationship?"). Responses were recorded in a password-protected Google spreadsheet. If responses appeared vague or incomplete, participants were asked to clarify their comments. Participants were then emailed instructions to proceed to the following lesson and the above process was repeated until each of the six lessons was complete. The average length of time to complete the study was 20 weeks.

Each participant took part in one-on-one in-person interviews with the first author after the third lesson and the sixth lesson. Interviews were semi-structured and conversational in nature, with a focus on the participant's experiences and

perceptions of the self-compassion program and its influence on the participant's romantic relationship (e.g., "Can you tell me about what this experience was like for you, as a relationship partner?"; "What influence, if any, has this experience had on your romantic relationship?"). Both interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Potentially identifying information was changed or removed. We invited all participants to review their transcripts and lesson responses and to inform us if certain portions did not convey their intended meaning accurately.

Data Analysis

Given that the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives, a qualitative case study design was selected. Consistent with this methodology, generalization was not the goal; instead, we aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of a small number of unique cases. Data analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis methods and by Merriam's (1998) suggestions for analyzing qualitative case study data. Based on Merriam's approach, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. As each participant completed the study, thematic analysis was used to conduct within-case analysis, wherein each participant was "treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself" (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). Thematic analysis is a flexible research tool that involves full immersion in the data and the generation of codes and themes to capture participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Within each case, we coded both the online responses and in-person interview transcripts. Codes attempted to capture salient meaning in segments of data that described feelings, thoughts, and behaviours related to relationship conflict and self-compassion. We then grouped codes into higher-level themes within each case. As new data were collected, codes and themes were revised as needed. Upon completion of the thematic analysis, we reviewed each participant's case chronologically. This allowed us to observe shifts and developments in relationship perceptions and experiences over time (Thomson & Holland, 2003).

Although we also attended to commonalities across cases, our primary focus was an in-depth idiographic exploration of each case, prioritizing individual and unique experiences. This approach allowed us to develop and represent findings in a way that preserved the richness and context of each case and that avoided "stripping away" nuances in the data, a risk associated with comparing cases that had small sample sizes (Ayres et al., 2003). A similar approach has been utilized by other researchers studying multiple cases and interested in a rich understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences (e.g., Boyd et al., 2014).

Establishing Trustworthiness

Within the present study, participants were invited to review transcripts and provide clarifications and corrections. Detailed descriptions of participants'

experiences were included, along with quotations to describe and communicate fully the essence of each theme. Detailed memos were used throughout the study to record decisions and insights. Emerging codes and themes were initially developed by the first author and later reviewed by the second author, ensuring that the findings fit with the data and made sense.

Researcher Backgrounds

It is important to acknowledge that our perspectives throughout this research project were influenced by our cultural, personal, and professional backgrounds. Both of us are Caucasian women from Western cultures, are in long-term marriages, and have no personal histories of separation or divorce. We are situated within the field of counselling psychology, where a strengths-based developmental/wellness model is central to the discipline. Additionally, we both have used compassion-focused and mindfulness-based modalities in our clinical work.

Results

Thematic analysis yielded six main themes among the three participants: (a) freeing the relationship from pressure, (b) recognizing alternative perspectives, (c) self-acceptance, (d) increased self-awareness and reflection during conflict, (e) accepting imperfection within the relationship, and (f) increased calmness and equanimity. Two conflict-related themes were apparent for each participant, with the themes being distinct from one another. In order to convey the longitudinal nature of this study accurately, we present each theme in narrative form.

Lauren

Lauren had been with her husband for 15 years at the onset of the study. She described her relationship as being “fairly stable” and reported that she had always been “very satisfied” with it. In Lauren’s view, it was important to work on relationships, and she frequently took advantage of opportunities to enhance her marriage. As Lauren learned about self-compassion, she became more aware of her own internal processes and how they contributed to tension and friction within the relationship. She also came to recognize when arguments could be avoided by considering her partner’s point of view. These developments are represented by two themes: (a) freeing the relationship from pressure and (b) recognizing alternative perspectives.

Freeing the Relationship from Pressure

Lauren realized that there were times when she unknowingly created pressure within her relationship. This theme appeared after the third lesson, which focused

on mindfulness. Lauren commented that mindfulness would help her “recognize when I am putting demands on my relationship that are not necessary.” As she became mindful of frustration that she felt toward her partner, she became better able to recognize situations in which it was appropriate to resolve her feelings before they contributed to potential conflict. For example, in the first interview, Lauren explained that she would become frustrated and impatient with her partner when their home renovations were not progressing as she thought they should: “There’s some frustration around that, and so these exercises have been useful to try to think, ‘Yeah, well, it’s not going the way I wanted, but is it really the end of the world? No.’” Rather than become stressed and argue with her partner about the delays, Lauren was able to put the situation into perspective, which reduced tension in the marriage.

By the end of the study, Lauren recognized that she had previously internalized other people’s negative comments about her husband in relation to the renovations and how she then brought this frustration into her relationship, but self-compassion allowed her now to hear the comments, and let the remarks go:

It was interesting in that moment to reflect on how self-compassion gave me the ability to absorb their comments....They’re annoying and trivial and whatever, but they didn’t irk me as much as they might have in the past. And I didn’t transfer that urgency that they were imparting to me onto our project—it was like, “Yup, that’s the way you would do it, for sure—it’s not the way we’re doing it.”

Lauren realized that she “doesn’t need to push it” in trying to live up to the expectations of others. Instead, she focused on completing the renovations according to the plan that she and her husband had agreed upon, without creating additional relationship conflict.

Recognizing Alternative Perspectives

Over the course of the program, Lauren began consciously to take the perspective of her partner. Along with this shift came the insight that the presence of conflicting viewpoints does not need to result in arguments. In the initial interview, Lauren explained that taking her partner’s perspective helped her not to “rag” on him when they had different ideas about how to complete a task. Self-compassion acted as a reminder for Lauren to pause and reflect before reacting instead of instantly disagreeing with her partner:

“I think this way but you think that way and they’re both equally valid so we can do it your way—sure.” That’s what I’m finding more, that there is that reminder to do more reflectivity in my general processing.

By taking the time to reflect on the differences in how she and her partner made decisions, Lauren recognized that there are multiple pathways to reach an “equally valid” result.

During the second interview, it was evident that Lauren had developed further insight into perspective taking. She described how her increased reflectivity had lowered her defensiveness and “opened the opportunity to hear” what her partner was saying during conflict discussions, without her feeling blamed: “I’m able to put everything to one side and focus on what he’s saying without feeling defensive.” Being able to listen to her partner’s concerns helped Lauren convey to her husband that she was listening and understood what he was trying to say. Rather than let conflict come between them, she was now able to express to her partner that they are on the “same team.”

Jennifer

Jennifer had been in a relationship with her common-law partner for six years at the onset of the study. In her written responses and in interviews, Jennifer discussed how arguments with her partner would escalate quickly and become “hostile.” From Jennifer’s perspective, her previous actions and insecurities had resulted in damage to the relationship. This was a source of shame for her, and she described herself as “avoiding the guilt” associated with these relationship behaviours. Through learning about self-compassion, Jennifer began to accept her experiences of guilt and shame, especially as they arose during arguments with her partner. These developments are encompassed within two themes: (a) self-acceptance and (b) increased self-awareness and reflection during conflict.

Self-Acceptance

Over the course of the program, Jennifer experienced an increasing capacity for self-acceptance, which helped de-escalate conflict with her partner. Prior to the program, Jennifer frequently engaged in extensive self-criticism for “snapping” at her partner, but as early as the first lesson she was able to offer herself forgiveness: “I snapped at my partner for a stupid reason. However, I was able to not feel guilty and appreciate the context which triggered me to get quick-tempered.” As Jennifer replaced self-condemnation with a more accepting stance toward herself, she felt more positive about her relationship:

I believe that [self-kindness] has made me accept that I have done things that contributed to damage in our relationship in the past. Now I can better accept that I’ve done those damaging things, appreciate the circumstances, and move forward.

By the third lesson, a noticeable shift had occurred. Through learning about mindfulness, Jennifer developed insight into how avoiding feelings of shame

and guilt had fed into conflict within her relationship. In her interactions with her partner, she began to notice moments when she would become “very cold and closed off” and would “say something mean.” Rather than shut down, Jennifer now remained open and accepting of her feelings: “For instance, when my partner is bringing up the past mistakes I have made, I can acknowledge them and forgive myself in the moment.” After this point, Jennifer was able to see that it is “okay to have these powerful emotions” when experiencing frustration or anger with her partner. She reported that this attitude helped her appreciate herself more and “embrace [her] own negative emotions, as well as positive ones, in times of disagreement.”

Increased Self-Awareness and Reflection During Conflict

During the program, Jennifer learned that self-reflection helped as a way of preventing escalation during arguments and conflicts with her partner. This theme first appeared after Jennifer completed the third lesson, which covered mindfulness. When asked if she had experienced mindfulness during the past week, Jennifer wrote: “I believe I experienced mindfulness in the fights and argument[s] that I have with my partner. When we argue, I try and think about how my emotions are affecting me in the present moment.” Jennifer elaborated on this point during the first interview, explaining that mindfulness had helped to prevent her from escalating conflict with her partner:

Whenever we’re having an argument I think I’m more insightful *at the time* that we’re having the argument, rather than in hindsight. So I think while we’re arguing that I’m less reactive and more, just, realizing what I’m feeling in that moment and less likely to do something or say something I would regret.

This awareness also aided in conflict resolution. After completing the fifth lesson, which focuses on strong emotions such as anger, she wrote:

In one argument, I identified the emotion (anger) in the moment and told my partner, “Sorry—I’m not in a good space to talk right now,” and we were able to resolve the dispute. Historically, I would have continued on in a hostile conversation and things would escalate and get out of control.

Having a sense of control increased Jennifer’s confidence in being able to navigate interactions with her partner. At the end of the second interview, she stated, “I feel like I can use, like, my whole brain now.”

Melissa

Melissa had been dating her partner for 8 months at the start of the study. Initially, Melissa stated that she felt some “resistance” toward completing the

program. She realized that as a “giver” it was difficult to make time for herself outside of her relationship and to prioritize self-development activities that she believed would improve her relationship only indirectly. But as the program progressed and she experienced increased self-compassion, Melissa became able to let go of expectations of perfection within her relationship, which in turn reduced conflict with her partner. In addition, she was able to show herself kindness when processing feedback from her partner, which prevented her from responding in a defensive or retaliatory manner. These developments are encompassed within the following two themes: (a) accepting imperfection within the relationship and (b) increased calmness and equanimity.

Accepting Imperfection Within the Relationship

Over the course of the study, Melissa began to let go of expectations of perfection and accept that there would always be sources of annoyance and frustration in her environment that could not be changed. This mentality extended to her romantic relationship. By allowing such expectations to fade away, Melissa experienced less frustration within the relationship, which resulted in fewer arguments. This theme first appeared after the second lesson, which focuses on self-kindness. Melissa realized that resisting imperfection “makes the here-and-now harder to deal with.” In the first interview she elaborated on this point, explaining that by keeping the messages of “patience and softness” in her mind, she could accept that events will not always play out in the manner in which she had envisioned:

I kind of like that as the reminder of, in the moment, whatever the item is in the relationship that’s coming up, that we aren’t always going to get our way and I can’t always be that cranky baby who’s like, “This is so unpleasant! Let me tell you how unpleasant this is for me,” and that sometimes I can just relax into it not working out *exactly* how I’d pictured it, and then by doing that it automatically feels better.

After the fifth lesson, which focuses on how self-compassion can help people cope with strong emotions such as anger, Melissa reported that accepting imperfection had reduced frustration with her partner. As a result, Melissa was able to react to her partner with equanimity, which prevented disputes from occurring:

If I’m feeling frustrated that my partner isn’t doing exactly what I want, when I want it, in the exact right way I try to recognize that he is his own person, he isn’t a mind reader, and that it’s unfair to put undue pressure on him for small tasks or chores. By releasing my expectations on him or a situation I feel lighter, more adaptable to whatever may happen.

Increased Calmness and Equanimity

As Melissa progressed through the study, she noted that she had become better at calming herself when feeling agitated by stressful situations. Consequently, she became more receptive when speaking to her partner, rather than react in a defensive or combative manner. After the second lesson, which focused on self-kindness, Melissa recognized that due to work stress, she was being “cranky” and “unkind” to her partner. Not only did self-compassion allow Melissa to comfort herself, but also, it allowed her to accept her partner’s support: “By treating myself with kindness I would be able to deal with all of it with more self-respect, as well as with the support of my partner.”

During the first interview, Melissa explained that conflict with her boyfriend frequently stemmed from hurts that had occurred in previous relationships. She described how self-compassion helped her to cope with these moments as they arose, rather than take her pain out on her partner:

In those moments where I was able to choose compassion over judgment or lashing out or whatever, recognizing that I have chosen the negative versions before and how that makes me feel not just how it makes *him* feel, which is probably really shitty and bad and then defensive, but also the toxicity of the feelings that happen as a result of choosing the negative path is such an important reminder to keep ... choosing the positive path.

Similarly, Melissa explained that when her partner was feeling triggered by a past hurt, she could view this response objectively and understand that it was not necessarily about her. As a result, she was able to “offer him a lot more compassion.” After the final lesson, Melissa reflected on the process she had used to calm herself during an upsetting conversation with her partner:

I took a quick time out, locked myself in the bathroom and took three deep breaths, tried to locate the feeling I was having in my body in order to soften it, and then I told myself it was really icky that I was frustrated, that it was okay that I felt that way.

Acknowledging her feelings made Melissa feel “understood” and “heard.” This allowed her to provide support for her partner, rather than react negatively and start an argument.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the influence of a self-compassion program on conflict within romantic relationships, based on participants’ experiences and perspectives. Participants indicated that the self-guided training program had

helped increase their self-awareness and reflectivity, leading to greater insights during arguments. Pausing to reflect also allowed participants to consider their partner's perspective before responding, something that may have prevented conflict from escalating. In addition, when feeling emotionally activated, participants felt better able to regulate their emotions by offering themselves kindness and comfort. Once participants felt calm, they could re-engage with their partner in a more productive manner.

Our findings suggest that through an increase in self-awareness and reflectivity, self-compassion may promote an emotionally self-sufficient way of being, which in turn may prevent conflict escalation. The decreased reactivity and verbal hostility experienced by the three participants is consistent with previous research showing a negative correlation between mindfulness and verbal aggression in conflict (Barnes et al., 2007). In addition, Yarnell and Neff (2013) found that self-compassionate individuals experience less emotional turmoil when resolving conflict with a romantic partner. That said, the current study is novel in its nuanced demonstration of how these intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits may accrue over time, in the context of a guided self-help program for increasing self-compassion.

One way of thinking about this finding is to conceptualize it in terms of Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory. According to this theory, while negative emotions are evolutionarily designed to narrow one's focus (e.g., to pursue fight or flight), positive emotions have the ability to expand one's attention or "thought–action repertoires" (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 219). This allows individuals to solve problems more globally and creatively, facilitate greater resiliency, and increase personal resources in response to stress (Cohn et al., 2009; Fredrickson, 2001). Thus, in the current study, it is possible that participants' increased capacity to diffuse negative affect through eliciting calm, soothing states helped expand their coping repertoires in the face of relational conflict.

From participants' perspectives, self-compassion helped to facilitate perspective taking. Instead of becoming defensive during moments of conflict, participants could hear and understand more fully the messages communicated by their partners. In turn, participants were more open to compromise before conflict escalated. Rather than try to find one "right" solution to a particular problem, participants learned that both sets of perspectives and ideas were of equal merit. Perspective taking also reminded participants that they and their partners were on the "same team," promoting a collaborative effort to resolve disputes rather than defensive attempts to win an argument. In this way, self-compassion may have helped to unite couples and to prevent conflict from beginning in the first place.

The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature on self-compassion and on perspective taking within romantic relationships. For example, self-compassionate individuals show higher levels of perspective taking and of other-focused concern (Neff & Pommier, 2013), and perspective taking in

conflict narratives is associated with constructive relationship-focused beliefs and behaviours (Feiring et al., 2018). The act of perspective taking may have further benefits for the partner on the receiving end. In a 2015 study, Leong et al. had participants experience a pain-inducing task while in the presence of their romantic partner. Individuals whose partners were instructed to take their partner's perspective felt more validated and reported lower levels of pain. By bridging together self-compassion and perspective taking within the context of romantic relationships, this study helps to expand this important area of research.

In addition, our findings contribute to a fuller understanding of the connection between self-compassion, cognition, and relational conflict. The women in this study reported that conflict sometimes occurred as a result of their "perfectionistic" expectations and idealistic beliefs regarding both their partners and their relationships. When reality did not meet these expectations, increased relationship conflict or tension ensued. By accepting imperfection and by acknowledging small annoyances as a normal part of life, participants experienced less distress. Furthermore, the participants were better able to prioritize their relationships over small conflicts. These findings are consistent with research by Neff and Beretvas (2013), who found that self-compassionate individuals are more accepting of their partners' imperfections. The authors suggested that by promoting greater self-acceptance in the face of one's own flaws and limitations, self-compassion makes it more possible to extend the same acceptance toward one's partner. Acceptance is also considered an adaptive quality in psychotherapy. According to acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), psychological flexibility increases when difficult circumstances can be accepted mindfully (Hayes & Smith, 2005). As a result, the situation produces less emotional distress. There is some evidence that such acceptance processes may be beneficial for couples. For example, Peterson et al.'s (2009) case study revealed that using ACT as a couples intervention increased marital satisfaction, mindfulness, and acceptance. The authors suggested that as participants increased awareness of their cognitions and patterns, they were able to change their reactions during conflict.

Implications for Counselling

Findings from our study point to the potential merit of self-compassion training as a prevention strategy for individuals in committed relationships. Self-compassion skills might be introduced to clients as a potential means of reducing defensiveness and enhancing perspective taking in response to relationship conflict. This in turn might result in greater understanding, validation, and interconnectedness between partners. In addition, teaching clients about mindfulness as a core aspect of self-compassion may help partners pause and reflect on recurring patterns of conflict. For participants in the current study, conflict sometimes arose from external pressures and expectations of perfection. Helping clients gain insight

and become aware of these and other recurring processes may help to disrupt such patterns. Furthermore, introducing clients to the concept and practice of self-kindness may strengthen emotional independence and emotion regulation during conflict. For the participants in our study, kindness and understanding directed inwardly felt validating and soothing. This allowed participants to stay calm and reflective during arguments. Some clients may feel as though they are normally on automatic pilot when having a stressful conversation with their significant other. By learning to treat themselves with compassion, they may develop the capacity to choose intentionally how to respond during moments of conflict.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several limitations to this study that must be taken into account. First, due to the nature of case study research, the sample size was small, with only three participants. Although we attempted to construct a detailed and nuanced account of participants' experiences and perspectives, there are likely other potential themes that could not be captured due to the small sample size. The findings are not meant to be generalized to larger populations. This study also did not explore the experiences and perspectives of the participants' partners, resulting in one-sided accounts. As a result, we cannot ascertain whether partners would have agreed with the participants' perception of self-compassion's influence within the relationship. In addition, the participant sample in this study was relatively homogeneous, with all participants being well-educated Caucasian women from a Western background and in mixed-gender relationships, characteristics that were also shared by both researchers. As a result, perspectives and experiences that may differ based on gender, sexual orientation, ability, education, and background were not captured. Finally, the attrition rate for this study was quite high, and the reasons for withdrawing from the study were unclear. It is therefore possible that participants who did not find self-compassion beneficial were not motivated to finish the study.

Future research should include quantitative studies with larger sample sizes to aid in generalizability and theory generation. It might also be beneficial to add process outcome measures and follow-up meetings with participants. A mixed-methods approach would allow researchers to explore treatment effects and to determine if benefits are maintained over time. It might also be worth exploring the delivery of the self-compassion program in an individual versus group format. In addition, the influence of self-compassion within romantic relationships should be studied with both partners concurrently, whether as a guided self-help intervention or as part of couples counselling. It would be important to explore the perspectives of both partners as they develop a self-compassion practice and to determine how mutual self-compassion might influence any of the themes described in this study.

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