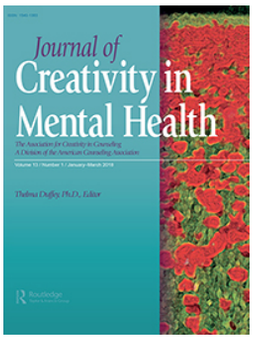

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Self–Compassion as Self-Care: A Simple and Effective Tool for Counselor Educators and Counseling Students

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ABSTRACT
This article explores teaching self-compassion as a means of self-care for counseling graduate students. Self-care is vital to helping professionals, but few students learn specific self-care skills to integrate into their own self-care practice. Self-compassion is a simple practice used in the immediate moment or as an activity at home. The authors describe Kristen Neff's model of self-compassion. The authors discuss the benefits of self-compassion as self-care and explain its practice as an effective avenue to increase compassion and relationship building with clients. In addition, they clarify how self-compassion practices strengthen relational connection. The writers describe three examples of self-care practices, and share suggestions for counselor educators to integrate self-care into graduate counselor training.

KEYWORDS
Compassion; counselor education; creativity in counseling; mindfulness; relational-cultural theory; self-care; self-compassion

Having a general disposition of care and concern for clients is an essential characteristic of counselors. An essential practice that counselors must learn is to turn that care and concern toward themselves, or in other words have a practice of self-care. If counselors do not learn to care for themselves, they may experience stress in their personal and professional lives, leading to burnout. It has recently come to the attention of researchers, professionals, and educators that individuals in the counseling profession, and those training to become counselors, are not engaged in self-care. In fact, very few educational and clinical training programs are actually teaching students and new counselors about self-care strategies such as mindfulness (Christopher & Maris, 2010; Dorian & Killebrew, 2014). Researchers suggest that the time-consuming demands of a graduate program and academic pressures often do not allow time for stress-reduction activities (Rosenzweig, Reibel, Greeson, Brainard, & Hojat, 2003). Instead, it is passed off to the student counselor as a recommendation to incorporate self-care into his or her life. Training counseling students on the deleterious effects of stress in their jobs is not

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only important, but necessary, and educators are beginning to realize this (Christopher & Maris, 2010).

Without specific guidance and direction in their professional development, counselors and counseling graduate students face many barriers to the actual practice of self-care. In addition to gaining the skills and knowledge that a practicing counselor must possess, the notion of adopting self-care strategies or creating personal wellness plans may be overwhelming. In institutions of higher education, academic faculty have a large impact on the attitudes and behaviors of graduate students (Norcross, Bike, Evans, & Schatz, 2008). Faculty are expected to serve as role models to counseling graduate students, and if faculty are not teaching, advocating, or practicing self-care, students likely will not engage in strategies to alleviate their own stress. In counselor education programs, there may be stress management courses offered as electives, but if self-care is not a required part of the curriculum students will not have sufficient training in these valuable and necessary skills. If self-care skills are not required or integrated into the program for every student, the message sent is self-care is optional. Faculty in counselor education programs have the ability to conceptualize and integrate key aspects of self-care into their curricular and clinical training on a regular, on-going basis.

We propose that teaching self-compassion practice is a simple and effective way to model and practice self-care. Having compassion for oneself allows counselors to develop the emotional capabilities and skills needed to show compassion towards others. Engaging in a practice of self-compassion is a simple and effective tool for personal and professional enhancement, growth, insight, and an overall better quality of life. It adds to our humanness, enriches our experience of ourselves and our experience of others, and adds a level of connection and depth. Therefore, it makes sense to include self-compassion practices into counselor education preparation and training. In the pages to come, we define self-compassion and outline its benefits; we also describe simple exercises and suggestions for implementing the practice into a counselor training program.

Compassion and self-compassion

Compassion is defined and demonstrated in a variety of ways. Lazarus (1991, p. 289) suggested that compassion requires "being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help." In Buddhist psychology, the belief is that compassion for self is just as essential as compassion for others (Neff, 2003a). The Dalai Lama (2003) stated, "For someone to develop genuine compassion towards others, first he or she must have a basis upon which to cultivate compassion, and that basis is the ability to connect to one's own feelings and to care for one's own welfare … Caring for others requires caring for oneself" (p. 125).

In counselor education, students engage in experiential training that teaches students to be compassionate through gaining awareness of how others feel,

offering support and kindness, and providing a caring atmosphere that reduces and limits the suffering in others (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). Although the concept of compassion for others is an integral part of counselor training, compassion for self, or self-compassion, is an undervalued aspect of counselor education. Emerging contemporary approaches in counselor education such as relational cultural theory (RCT) emphasize compassionate caring in practice (Lenz, 2016). When counselor educators teach and model self-compassion strategies, they help students to build their emotional accessibility. Jordan (2010) identified as emotional accessibility as a necessary characteristic to form relational connections with clients.

In this article, the authors explore the relevance of self-compassion as an important component of and creative approach to teaching self-care for counselors-in-training. Using Neff's (2003a) concept of self-compassion, the writers share the benefits of integrating self-compassion into counselor education, its relationship to self-care, ways to fit it into the curriculum and field experiences such as practicum, and examples of self-compassion in counseling practice.

Elements of self-compassion

Three interacting components of self-compassion are described here as separate components, but they are intertwined and often practiced and experienced together. These components are self-kindness instead of self-judgment and criticism, common humanity instead of isolation, and mindfulness instead of over-identification with painful thoughts and emotions (Germer & Neff, 2013; Neff, 2011). In the following paragraphs, the writers clarify each component further and provide examples of how they interact.

Self-kindness

Ask yourself this question: Do you speak to yourself like you would speak to a friend? If not, you may need to practice the first element of self-compassion: self-kindness. Self-kindness is the ability to be gentle and understanding with ourselves especially when we are experiencing some sort of turmoil. It is establishing the desire to heal ourselves with kindness in the midst ofsuffering (Neff, 2003a). In Western culture we are taught to be kind and compassionate to others, especially others (Neff & Pommier, 2013). When our friends are experiencing suffering, it is natural to reach out to them, offer comforting words, or perhaps a hug (Goetz et al., 2010). Sadly, we often do not treat ourselves with the same compassion. When we practice self-kindness, we speak to ourselves the way we would to a friend. We acknowledge that we are experiencing a difficulty or stress and soothe ourselves through comforting words or maybe a calming touch. We resist being harsh. Even when our distress is because of

something we did or said, when we practice self-kindness we acknowledge the hurt we are feeling without judging our words or actions that led us to this feeling of suffering. It isn't deciding if what we did was right or wrong or trying to convince ourselves that "it's not that bad." Practicing self-kindness is simply acknowledging that we are in pain and offering comfort for that pain.

Common humanity

A second component of Neff's (2003b) definition of self-compassion is common humanity, or recognizing our failings and sufferings as part of the human experience. At times we take our own suffering as a sign that something is wrong with us, or that we are different from other people. The principle of common humanity acknowledges that we suffer because we are human. We also understand that there is no suffering we have undergone that others have not also experienced. When we are practicing the principle of common humanity, we see that our pain, inadequacies, and failures are part of the human experience, not a sign that something is wrong with us or that we are alone in our experiences (Neff, 2003a). We know that there is no emotion we experience that has not been experienced by many others. We also begin to see the suffering of others around us as part of their human experience and not disconnect from them, label them or judge them. Practicing this skill helps us to be less judgmental of others' experiences, which is critical for an open and accepting counseling practice.

Mindfulness

The third component of Neff's (2003a) self-compassion is mindfulness, or the ability to have an awareness of feelings you are experiencing without avoiding them or over-identifying with them. When we are mindful, we observe our thoughts and experience our feelings without judgment or applying meaning; we hold our painful feelings as part of our experience; we do not cling to them or run away from them. We see things for what they are, and in some ways we give ourselves a reality check (Neff, 2011). Many of us engage in behaviors that temporarily numb the feelings we are having. For example, when we start feeling anxious we grab our phone and zone out for an hour, or when we feel sad we run to food to make us feel better. If instead of such actions, when we practice mindfulness, we hold that anxiety or sadness and acknowledge it. We would feel it and not attach meaning or judgment to it; we would not try to hide from it, and we would not over-identify with the feelings either. Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental state where we simply observe what is going on inside of us.

The following is an example of how mindfulness works in conjunction with common humanity and self-kindness: You do not get the promotion you applied

for and thought you deserved. If you are practicing self-compassion based mindfulness you slow down, get quiet, and notice what it is you are feeling about the lost promotion. You notice that it is disappointment and sadness you are feeling. You do not push away or try to fix the feelings, you just notice them and feel them. As you are experiencing these emotions, you remind yourself that you are not the only person to have experienced this disappointment and that this is a part of life as a human. You do not jump to negative self-talk or isolate yourself from others. When you add a practice of self-kindness to this, you would tell yourself that it is hard to feel disappointed and sad; you might even give yourself a soothing touch like placing your hand on your heart or holding your own hand, you would not jump into judging whether or not you did everything right in your interview, or whether or not the person making the decision is unfair. You would slow down and acknowledge your suffering and treat it with kindness.

Understanding what the three components are and how they interact with each other is a good foundation for a practice of self-compassion. The components are easy to explain to students and faculty can model them in their work as instructors, supervisors, and advisors. To illuminate the three major aspects of self-compassion, the authors present several creative exercise and activities that enhance and enliven a consistent practice among counseling students and faculty.

The benefits of self-compassion as self-care

There are several advantages of using self-compassion as a self-care strategy. We believe that teaching counselors self-compassion while they are in training is an excellent way to increase the practice of self-care in graduate school and beyond. Research on self-compassion has correlated its practice with numerous beneficial outcomes. Self-compassion is positively correlated with initiative, wisdom, life satisfaction, emotional intelligence, social connection, optimism, positive affect, and happiness and negatively correlated with self-criticism, thought suppression, perfectionism, anxiety, and rumination (Neff, 2011). Self-compassionate individuals have lower anxiety and depression levels and employ more adaptive coping strategies than their less self-compassionate peers (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). This research suggests that self-compassionate individuals have overall increased well-being both psychologically and physically.

Self-compassion and relational connection

Self-compassion and relational connection share similar constructs and are closely aligned with RCT. RCT has, at its core, the notion that individuals not only have a natural capacity for compassion, they have a basic need for connection. The developers of RCT suggest that all individuals strive to have relationships that are authentic, emotionally responsive, and mutually

empathic (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Miller (1986) proposed that being in relationships that are positively connected in the ways listed above result in "five good things" (Miller, 1986, p.2). These outcomes are:

(1) Each person feels a greater sense of zest (vitality, energy).
(2) Each person feels more capable to act and does act in the world.
(3) Each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s).
(4) Each person feels a greater sense of worth.
(5) Each person feels more connected to other persons and exhibits a greater motivation to connect with other people beyond those in one's primary relationships.

Mutually empathic relationships are those in which there is nonjudgment, openness, and a willingness on each person's part to show vulnerability share how they are affected and influenced by others. In this respect, when students are able to engage in mindfulness and self-kindness they are more effective helping their clients to do the same. When counselors model awareness of feelings and self-acceptance, they enhance the therapeutic connection with their clients.

Judith Jordan (2010) suggested that there is strong link between empathy for others and self -empathy. Connections with others are enhanced when individuals are able to show the same acceptance and openness for self, as they are for others. Jordan (2010) proposed that self-empathy is a process where individuals recognize and positively change negatively viewed or ignored aspects of themselves. They can reconnect with themselves in a way that will foster well-being and help them be present and connected with others. In counselor education, instructors teach students to develop and foster relationships with their clients; however, most counselor educators spend little time and effort on helping students to address and foster their own relational needs. Recent work in the area of relational neuroscience indicates the correlation between positive connections with others and the ability to achieve one's professional and personal potential (Banks, 2015). Neural pathways suffer when individuals are not connected to others; the consequences are chronic stress, anger, and even illness. Counseling students who are struggling with feelings of distrust, vulnerability, shame, or have feelings of powerlessness or low sense of self will be less able to form and maintain positive therapeutic alliances necessary for effectively counseling their clients. By incorporating self-care training and practices in counselor education, faculty help students wire their brains for connection, and in turn, strengthen their ability to be effective, professional helpers. These strategies are particularly helpful when students are in clinical-based experiences where they are assessing themselves directly in relationships with clients and supervisors.

Self-compassion and well-being

Practicing self-compassion should consequently allow one to engage in activities that promote one's sense of wellbeing. In fact, Neff (2003a) noted that self-compassion may give rise to enhanced stress coping by appropriately identifying emotions, and expressing them in a healthy manner. Instilling this skillset in counseling students at the beginning of their careers, could be life-changing. Recently researchers are studying the linkage between self-compassion and health-promoting behaviors. Health-promoting activities such as a healthy diet, adequate exercise and sleep, and stress management been found to be highly correlated with self- compassion in individuals. Furthermore, higher levels of positive affect combined with lower levels of negative affect may have an influence on the relationship between self-compassion and one's practice of healthy behaviors (Sirois, Kitner, & Hirsch, 2015). This indicates that individuals with more self-compassion may take better care of themselves on a more frequent basis. It also points to healthy emotions leading to more kindness towards oneself. The argument can be made that self-compassion not only leads to better self-care practices, but recent studies support that self-compassion is actually a strategy of engaging in emotional self-care through mindful awareness and affective regulation. Promoting wellness in students, faculty, and others is something prized by the counseling profession.

Self-compassion as an alternative to self-esteem

Self-compassion is habitually associated with self-esteem in the literature, however the two are notably differences in construction and outcome. Self-compassion is a positive emotional attitude toward oneself that includes feelings of kindness towards self and others. In contrast self-esteem is an evaluation of one's own worthiness, a judgment that individuals are good, valuable people (Neff, 2003a). By its very construct, to bolster self-esteem an individual must make comparisons and rely on a particular outcome (e.g., satisfactory grades). There are limited amounts of self-esteem to be achieved based on the successful endeavors one engages in. To raise self-esteem, one needs to raise his or her skills in the areas of comparison. Self-compassion makes no such stipulations. Self-compassion focuses on accepting ourselves for the skills, abilities, and traits that we already possess and not allowing failures to define our worth.

Self-compassion and self-esteem produce dramatically different outcomes. Neither construct is without its advantages, but self-compassion appears to have fewer downsides than self-esteem (Neff, 2003a). Self-esteem is decreased by negative outcomes and feedback. Self-compassion is more stable because individuals are not judging their own self-worth on an outcome, rather it is about accepting that their own worthiness just by being a human being. Self-esteem

relies on the ego which is delicate and needs protecting in the face of rejection, failure and mistakes. Research has shown that self-compassionate individuals are less likely to engage in defensive or other ego-protective behavior (Neff, 2011). Self-compassion moves our filter away from the shaky lens of the ego and shifts it to what we want most: to be accepted as we are (Neff, 2011).

Self-compassion creates an environment that is focused less on outcome achievement as a means of maintaining or elevating self-esteem. The learning environment becomes a place of caring and communion rather than competition and comparison (Neff & Vonk, 2009). A learning environment that lacks with anxiety, comparison, and social striving is an ideal place for learning and growth. Neff et al. (2005) studied students with high and low levels of self-compassion. The study showed that students with high self-compassion were more focused on mastering tasks than their less self-compassionate peers. The less self-compassionate students were focused on performance evaluation. Their self-esteem and confidence as students and future professionals affected the outcome of their coursework. The self-compassionate individuals were intrinsically motivated by the desire for mastery and it increased their ability to remain interested and involved in the classroom. Mistakes and failure are an inevitable part of the learning process. Self-compassionate individuals are more likely than their less self-compassionate peers to see academic failure as an opportunity for growth.

These self-compassionate individuals are also less likely to engage in over-identification with failure (Neff et al., 2005). Because self-compassion is resilient to failure, these individuals maintain a higher level of perceived confidence. This is critical for beginning counselors and students who will inevitably make a mistake. Rather than follow a mistake with a malicious cycle of self- criticism cognitions, self-compassion can free these individuals from the debilitating consequences of self-criticism, isolation, and over identification in the face of failure (Neff et al., 2005).

Role of self-compassion in counselor education

Compassion and empathy are required traits for those who choose careers in counseling and other helping professions. The intense energy that goes into helping others to heal, and teaching them to heal themselves, can lead to exhaustion, stress, empathy fatigue, and burnout for the helping professional. It is common for individuals to exhibit kindness and compassion towards others, while at the same time beating themselves up with self-criticism. Women, in particular, are guilty of engaging in self-critical talk and behaviors (Germer & Neff, 2013). This affects trained clinicians and students alike and can negatively impact training and education. Impaired counselors who are not taking care of themselves and attending to their own emotional needs can even cause harm to the clients that they serve, impinge on boundaries,

engage in ethical violations, or lead to a premature exit from counseling. Those new to counseling, such as interns and entry-level professionals, have been observed to be at higher risk for such burnout (Merriman, 2015). It is widely reported that the use of regular self-care strategies help to prevent negative side effects associated with job-related stress (Christopher & Maris, 2010; Newsome, Waldo, & Gruszka, 2012). Furthermore, showing self-compassion and engaging in regular practices that restore a sense of calm, balance, and acceptance of oneself and can actually reverse the deleterious effects of burnout that many therapists and counselors face (Dorian & Killebrew, 2014).

Self-compassion can fill this gap in self-care. Unlike other self-care activities, it is possible to engage in self-compassion practices anywhere, at any point. They require no specific supplies or ostensible rituals. There are times during which we experience emotional distress, but common self-care practices are not practical. For instance, a student who has received a poor grade on a class assignment cannot meditate during lecture or leave class to go on a contemplative walk. Self-compassion as self-care can be as simple as acknowledging the emotional pain in that moment (e.g., "this is hard for me right now"), reminding ourselves that it is part of human nature to struggle (e.g., "everyone struggles") and offering ourselves kindness in that moment (e.g., "I will love myself in this moment").

Integrating self-compassion training components into counselor education

It is possible to incorporate activities, approaches, and techniques that focus on self-compassion into a counselor education program as immediate self-care strategies. Kristin Neff developed numerous self-compassion activities, three are described here. The innovative activities below could easily be implemented into a class. Self-compassion activities that are described are a self-compassion break, soothing touch, and a compassionate letter to yourself.

The self-compassion break is an activity individuals participate in to remind themselves of the three aspects of self-compassion as defined by Kristin Neff (n.d.). If students are experiencing suffering that moment, they are asked to recount a time within recent memory that provoked stress. Individuals take time to truly embrace their experience from that situation in a way that would elicit the same or similar emotions. Now that the participants are in the moment with those emotions, they revisit the three aspects of self-compassion. Each participant would acknowledge and say to herself the following three phrases which correspond with the elements of self-compassion. "This is a moment of suffering" (Neff, n.d.). This phrase conjures the element of mindfulness. "Suffering is a part of life" (self-

compassion exercises, Exercise 2). This phrase is associated with the element of common humanity. And finally, "May I be kind to myself" (Neff, n.d.), which is practicing the element of self-kindness. One may substitute other phrases that better describe the experience while maintaining the practice of reminding oneself of the three elements of self-compassion. For example, "This is painful. I am not alone in feeling pain like this. May I be gentle with myself during this struggle?" There are several benefits of this practice. A major one is that an individual can engage in it even if there is not much time available. It can be used in only a few minutes. In addition, one can practice it when others are present; in class or in a client session. It is an effective strategy for counselors in-training who find themselves in distress.

A second simple exercise is called *hugging practice* or *soothing touch* (Neff, n.d., 2011). The soothing touch activity is an intervention that can be easily taught and practiced. The efficacy of this approach comes from the human desire for connection through a warm physical gesture such has placing one's hand over the heart. This physical touch releases oxytocin within the body and soothes negative emotions such as anxiety (Neff, 2011). This practice is simply giving yourself some soothing physical touch. Common ways to do this are taking deep breaths, placing your hand over your heart, holding your own hand, giving yourself a hug, or stroking your own arms in a gesture of comfort. Find where it is your body feels the benefit of a soothing touch. A regular practice of this exercise provides the most benefit and conditions the body to appreciate this touch. This works well when combined with the self-compassion break listed above. This is a practice that is easily adaptable to class-room settings. It is especially helpful when faculty model and practice it openly while encouraging others to do the same. For instance, the instructor asks the students in class to stand-up, wrap their arms around themselves.

Compassionate letter writing (Neff, 2011) is an exercise designed to help experience self-compassion as well as an exercise that can be used when individuals are judging themselves harshly. The first step in this process is to sit quietly and think about something that triggers feelings of inadequacy, or something about you or your situation that makes you feel badly about yourself. As honestly as possible, individuals notice what emotions emerge when thinking about this aspect of self. It is important not to judge the emotions or to try to fix them. The focus is on awareness and experience of the feelings. In the next step, participants are asked to think about an imaginary friend who is kind, loving, accepting, and compassionate to you. This friend knows all about you, even the piece of you that makes you feel bad. How would this friend respond about giving yourself such harsh self-criticism and judgment? Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this compassionate friend. Not only are those practicing this activity thinking about this conversation, they are asked to write a letter to themselves from the perspective of this compassionate friend. It involves

asking questions such as What would they say to you? How would they remind you that you are only human and humans are not perfect? Would they suggest you do anything differently? Once the letter is finished, the authors put it away for a while. When they are ready, they can retrieve the letter and read it again. This exercise would be beneficial to practice at times when students are particularly vulnerable to self-judgement, such as when they are first beginning the program and as they move through milestones (e.g., practicum and internship). An advantage of having a written letter is that students can read it several times, especially when they feel the need for compassion.

Integrating self-compassion into a counseling program

The strategies of self-compassion support the work of counselor educators and enhance the relational practices of their students. Self-compassion activities bring to life the notion of self-care; a topic associated with clinical work but not one that students actively practice while they are in counseling training. Because of the variety and easily implemented practices, faculty easily can work them into their classes as they see fit. Doing this would give everyone in the program a self-care base from which they can build their own set of self-care strategies. Self-compassion could easily fit into several courses, including ethics, techniques, practicum, and theories. Self-compassion practices are excellent support strategies during certain critical times throughout a counselor training program, including after the students show videos of their counseling techniques to their peers and faculty or when students are applying for internship sites. These are times students tend to elicit feelings of vulnerability, shame, and insecurity. Self-compassion strategies incorporated into the classroom is a way to facilitate self-care for the students and contribute to an environment conducive to learning. Self-compassion increases one's ability to engage in self- care and can help to develop the necessary skills to become a better student and practitioner. The benefits are multitudinous. Counselors engaging in their own self-compassion strategies can in turn teach these concepts to clients, having a positive impact on therapeutic outcomes.

Merriman (2015) discussed the supervisory relationship as a great time to provide clinical supervision and education on the concept of compassion fatigue or burnout and the importance of implementing self-care strategies for new counselors entering the profession. This relationship is a foundation for skill development and professional and personal insight and growth. New counselors and interns are frequently the most at risk to incurring the exhaustion and burnout associated with the role of providing intense mental health services and empathy to others. Thus, the supervisory period, during both internship and early clinical licensure periods,

is a perfect time to provide necessary education on the risks associated with caring for others, and strategies to show care and compassion for oneself. Normalizing the experience through frequent discussions during supervisory sessions can help increase insight, instill protective factors, and remove any stigma associated with asking for help and receiving help. Incorporating self-compassion education into counselor training programs is a feasible possibility for many institutions that not only makes sense but can produce counselors that are capable of a more enriched level of connection with themselves and others.

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