

Research Paper

Impact of Empathy on Emotional Exhaustion: The Mediating Role of Self-Compassion among Psychology Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored whether self-compassion explains the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion among psychology students. Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 39 participants through standardized self-report measures. Empathy was assessed using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), emotional exhaustion using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-EE subscale), and self-compassion using the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS-SF). Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, correlation, and mediation analysis via regression. Findings indicated that empathy was not significantly associated with either emotional exhaustion ($r=-0.11$) or self-compassion ($r=0.09$). In contrast, self-compassion showed a strong negative association with emotional exhaustion ($r=-0.58$, $p<0.001$) and emerged as a significant predictor. Mediation analysis did not support the hypothesized mediating role of self-compassion.

Keywords: *Empathy, Emotional Exhaustion, Self-Compassion, Burnout, Students*

Empathy plays a crucial role in interpersonal relationships and professional helping roles. It refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings and perspectives of others. Empathy involves both cognitive processes, such as perspective-taking, and affective responses, such as empathic concern. In professions related to mental health and caregiving, empathy is considered an essential skill because it enables individuals to connect with others and provide emotional support. Although empathy is generally regarded as a positive and desirable trait, excessive emotional involvement with others' suffering may lead to psychological strain. Continuous exposure to others' emotional difficulties can contribute to emotional fatigue and stress.

This may result in emotional exhaustion, which is considered one of the primary components of burnout. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of emotional resources due to prolonged exposure to stress or emotionally demanding situations. Students in psychology and related helping professions may be particularly vulnerable to emotional exhaustion. During their academic training, psychology students frequently engage with emotionally intense topics such as mental illness, trauma, and human suffering. While empathy can enhance interpersonal

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understanding, it may also increase susceptibility to emotional fatigue if individuals lack adequate coping strategies.

One psychological factor that may help individuals cope with emotional stress is self-compassion. Self-compassion refers to treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and acceptance during times of difficulty or failure. Individuals with higher levels of self-compassion tend to respond to personal difficulties with greater emotional balance and resilience.

Theoretical basis: Conservation of Resources (COR) theory explains empathy depletes emotional reserves unless replenished (Hobfoll, 2011). **Self-compassion** (Neff, 2003)—selfkindness during suffering---replenishes via mindfulness, common humanity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Empathy, emotional exhaustion, and self-compassion have been widely studied within the context of mental health and helping professions. Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is considered a crucial component of effective interpersonal functioning. However, its relationship with emotional exhaustion remains complex and somewhat inconsistent across studies.

Several empirical studies have reported a positive association between empathy and emotional exhaustion, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of empathic engagement may be more vulnerable to burnout. For instance, **Zhao et al. (2025)**, in a large-scale meta-analysis involving healthcare workers, found a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.31$) between empathy and emotional exhaustion, with stronger effects observed among trainees. Similarly, **Sharma and Nasa (2020)**, in their study on nursing students, reported that empathy significantly predicted emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.34$), indicating that emotionally engaging with others' distress may contribute to increased psychological strain. However, findings across studies are not entirely consistent. Some research suggests that empathy does not necessarily lead to emotional exhaustion unless combined with additional stressors such as workload or lack of coping mechanisms. This inconsistency highlights the need to examine other psychological variables that may influence or buffer this relationship. For example, **García-Campayo et al. (2023)**, in a study on medical students, found that individuals with higher levels of self-compassion reported significantly lower emotional exhaustion, with reductions of up to 42% compared to those with low self-compassion. These findings reinforce the role of self-compassion as a resilience factor that promotes emotional well-being.

In addition, some studies have explored the relationship between empathy and self-compassion. **Varma (2014)** reported a negative association between these variables ($r = -0.36$), suggesting that individuals with high empathic concern may sometimes neglect self-care, thereby reducing self-compassion. This indicates a potential imbalance where focusing excessively on others' emotions may come at the cost of one's own emotional well-being.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined the relationships between empathy, self-compassion, and emotional exhaustion, findings regarding the role of empathy in predicting burnout remain inconsistent. While self-compassion has been identified as a protective factor, its role as a mediating variable in the relationship between empathy and emotional

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exhaustion has received limited empirical attention. Furthermore, there is a lack of research focusing specifically on psychology students, highlighting the need for the present study.

METHODOLOGY

Hypotheses

- **H0:** There will be no significant relationship between empathy, self-compassion, and emotional exhaustion, and self-compassion will not mediate the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion among psychology students.
- **H1:** Empathy will significantly predict emotional exhaustion among psychology students.
- **H2:** Empathy will significantly predict self-compassion among psychology students.
- **H3:** Self-Compassion will significantly and negatively predict emotional exhaustion among psychology students.
- **H4:** Self-Compassion will mediate the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion among psychology students.

Objectives

1. To assess the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion among psychology students.
2. To examine the relationship between empathy and self-compassion.
3. To investigate the relationship between self-compassion and emotional exhaustion.
4. To determine whether self-compassion mediates the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion.

Sample

The study included 39 students enrolled in psychology programs. The age range of the participants was 19 to 30 years. Participants were selected through a non-probability sampling technique, specifically convenience sampling supplemented by snowball sampling method. Participation was voluntary, and individuals chose to take part after being informed about the study.

Research design

Quantitative research and comparative cross - sectional design was used to conduct the study. The study focused on examining associations among variables and testing a mediation model to understand underlying relationships.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics, correlation, and mediation analysis were conducted.

Variables

- **Independent Variables:** Empathy
- **Dependent variable:** Emotional exhaustion
- **Mediator:** Self-Compassion

Instruments

Three measures were used in this study,

1. **Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF) (Raes et al., 2011):** 12 items, 5-point Likert; $\alpha=0.86$; total score used.

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2. **Interpersonal Reactivity Index subscales (IRI) (Davis, 1983):** Empathic concern (7 items), Perspective taking (7 items); 0-4 Likert scale; $\alpha > 0.70$.
3. **Maslach Burnout Inventory-Emotional Exhaustion (MBI-EE) (Maslach et al., 1996):** 9 items, 0-6 Likert; $\alpha = 0.90$.

Procedure

Data collection was carried out through an online questionnaire developed using Google Forms. The survey link was shared with psychology students through academic networks and digital platforms. Before responding, participants were provided with a brief explanation of the study and instructions for completing the questionnaire. They were encouraged to respond honestly based on their experiences. Only complete and consistent responses were retained for further analysis. Participants completed the questionnaires and their responses were collected for analysis. 95% response rate (39/40). Ethical approval obtained.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited online through academic networks and digital platforms. Data were collected online with informed consent and confidentiality maintained.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Descriptive and Correlations (n=39)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1.Empathy	41.82	6.86	---		
2.Self-compassion	27.74	7.78	0.09	---	
3.Emotional exhaustion	22.21	10.47	-0.11	-0.58*	---

* $p < .001$,

The descriptive statistics indicated that participants reported moderate levels of empathy ($M = 41.82$, $SD = 6.86$), self-compassion ($M = 27.74$, $SD = 7.78$), and emotional exhaustion ($M = 22.21$, $SD = 10.47$). Correlation analysis revealed that empathy was weakly and non-significantly related to self-compassion ($r = 0.09$) and emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.11$). In contrast Self-compassion demonstrated a significant negative correlation with emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.58$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher self-compassion was associated with lower emotional exhaustion.

Table No. 2 Regression Coefficients for Mediation Model

Path	β	p-value	Interpretation
Empathy→ Emotional exhaustion (c)	-0.17	.50	Not significant
Empathy→ Self-compassion (a)	0.10	.58	Not significant
Self-compassion→ Emotional exhaustion (b)	-0.77	<.001	Significant
Empathy→ Emotional exhaustion ($\hat{c}$)	-0.09	.67	Not significant

The mediation analysis indicated that self-compassion does not mediate the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion. Although self-compassion is a strong predictor of lower emotional exhaustion, empathy does not significantly influence self-compassion or emotional exhaustion in this sample.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that empathy does not significantly influence emotional exhaustion among psychology students. This suggests that empathy alone may not lead to burnout unless combined with other psychological factors.

Correlation analysis revealed that empathy was not significantly related to emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.11$) or self-compassion ($r = 0.09$). However, self-compassion showed a significant negative correlation with emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.58, p < .001$).

Regression analysis indicated that self-compassion significantly predicted emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.77, p < .001$), whereas empathy did not significantly predict emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.17, p > .05$) or self-compassion ($\beta = 0.10, p > .05$).

Mediation analysis revealed that self-compassion did not significantly mediate the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion, as the indirect effect was not significant.

Self-compassion, however, was found to be a strong predictor of emotional exhaustion. Students with higher self-compassion experienced lower levels of emotional exhaustion, highlighting its protective role.

The absence of mediation suggests that self-compassion functions independently rather than as a mechanism linking empathy and emotional exhaustion. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of self-compassion in emotional regulation.

The findings challenge assumptions that empathy directly contributes to emotional exhaustion among students. Instead, self-compassion emerged as a critical determinant of emotional well-being. This suggests that the ability to respond to one's own distress with kindness may be more important than empathic engagement in preventing burnout. The absence of mediation indicates that self-compassion operates independently rather than as a linking mechanism. These results align with literature emphasizing self-compassion as a resilience factor.

CONCLUSION

Self-compassion significantly reduces emotional exhaustion, whereas empathy does not show a direct effect in this study. Enhancing self-compassion may therefore be a valuable strategy for promoting student well-being. Overall, the findings suggest that self-compassion plays a crucial protective role against emotional exhaustion, whereas empathy does not significantly to emotional exhaustion either directly or indirectly. The absence of a mediation effect indicates that the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion is not explained through self-compassion in the present study.

Limitations

1. Small sample size of the study was relatively small ($N=39$), which limits the generalizability of the findings to a larger population.
2. The study followed a cross-sectional research design, which restricts the ability to establish casual relationships among empathy, self-compassion, and emotional exhaustion.

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3. The sampling technique used (convenience and snowball sampling) may have introduced sampling bias, reducing the representativeness of the sample.
4. Many participants were undergraduate psychology students who may have limited exposure to real world psychological or clinical environments, which could have influenced their levels of empathy and emotional exhaustion.
5. Data collection was conducted online, which limited control over the testing environment and participants' understanding of the questionnaire.
6. The study did not account for other variables such as stress levels, coping strategies, personality traits, and academic workload, which may also affect emotional exhaustion.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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