

Finding Light in the Darkness: The Impact of Self-Compassion on Doctoral Students' Emotional Well-being

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Abstract

A significant attrition rate among doctoral students has increased attention in the past two decades. Different researchers have identified factors contributing to doctoral programs' attrition rate. Although exploring these external factors contributes to the retention of doctoral students, only a few studies have explored the internal factors that contribute to the retention of doctoral students. This study aimed to explore the internal factor, self-compassion, in reducing distress, anxiety and depression that causes higher attrition rates among doctoral students. The study was descriptive, while correlational research was used to establish the relationship between self-compassion and emotional well-being. For this study, a sample of 80 doctoral students, through multistage sampling, from 3 selected universities were selected for the study. Two questionnaires, i.e. Self-Compassion Scale and DASS-21, were used to collect data. The finding revealed a higher association between self-compassion and emotional well-being. It was observed that a greater level of self-compassion resulted in a lower level of emotional well-being. It indicated a significant negative relationship between self-compassion and the emotional well-being of doctoral students. Interventions for improving the level of self-compassion may enhance overall well-being. This will ultimately be supportive in reducing depression, anxiety and stress among doctoral students, which will result in better retention among doctoral students in Punjab.

Keywords: Self-Compassion, Emotional Well-being, Self-judgment, Common Humanity, Mindfulness, Distress, Anxiety.

Introduction

Research plays a significant role in the development, prosperity, and progress of any country. In the academic setting, research is responsible for developing more profound learning, interest exploration, and enhanced problem-solving skills (Siraj et al., 2016). In this regard, well-experienced academics play a crucial role in doctoral research's successful and significant outcomes. Thus, postgraduate students become novices and independent researchers (Garwe & Mugari, 2015). Smooth research is considered an essential component in the development of any

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country. Different factors affect research; the most critical and prominent factor among these is the compromised emotional well-being of doctoral students.

Distress, anxiety and anger among doctoral students have been determined as critical factors in increasing attrition rates among postgraduate students throughout the world. The academic world is facing an almost 50% attrition rate at the doctoral level (Sidhu et al., 2016). Different studies have identified several factors causing higher attrition rates among doctoral students, i.e., poor institution-provided facilities, compromised supervisor-support, supervisee incompetencies, cultural constraints, and less peer support (Devos et al., 2017). These factors are critical to destroying the oral students' emotional well-being, leading to a higher attendance rate in postgraduate programs (Carlson et al., 2011; Wheeler et al., 2013).

In Pakistan, where numerous universities have been established in the last 20 years, the situation is more complex due to limited resources and minimal faculty members for doctoral programs. In 1947, two universities (Siddiqui, 2019), Punjab University Lahore and Dacca University, existed; the number increased to 195 in 2019 and 257 in 2023 (HEC, 2023). This situation has challenged all tertiary levels of education, including doctoral programs.

Self-compassion is the ability to handle oneself with kindness, accept one's mistakes as standard in humanity, and focus on the phenomena before oneself rather than judge (Zhang et al., 2019; Źmuda, 2024). This constitutes an awareness of feelings, being kind to others, and the understanding that everyone has to face challenges and pain throughout their life (Cai et al., 2024). It is evident in the research that self-compassion has a significant influence as a coping strategy in compromised mental well-being while coping with challenges, difficulties, and pain (Źmuda, 2024). Different studies indicated self-compassion in improving individuals' mental health and overall well-being. It has the potential to cope with challenges, depression, anxiety and depression to support a distressful doctoral journey, which will, in turn, result in better and improved output for postgraduate students (Cai et al., 2024). Besides that, studies also indicate that self-compassion is positively correlated with complex brain structures. It suggests that neural originated basis for different aspects of self-compassion on multiple coping strategies (Hwang et al., 2023).

Self-compassion comprises three key components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003). These three constructs holistically play a role in developing the emotional well-being of doctoral students. Self-kindness deals with understanding oneself during a period of suffering of any kind or any personal issues. It is responsible for promoting affirmative emotional behaviour (Hwang et al., 2023). Struggles, hardships, and failures are part of human experience, is the slogan of "Common Humanity". It promotes attachment and declines the isolation of oneself (Fauziah & Rofiqoh, 2023; Hwang et al., 2023). Mindfulness encourages individuals to approach their feelings and reflect without judging. This helps enhance self-awareness and emotions (Hwang et al., 2023). It is evident from the literature that comparatively high levels of self-compassion are associated positively with social safety and better emotional well-being in those individuals who have eating disorders (Fauziah & Rofiqoh, 2023; Hwang et al., 2023; Katan et al., 2024). It will be interesting to explore the self-compassion level and the emotional well-being of doctoral students affected by the distressful journey of doctoral research. The positive role of self-compassion in developing and enhancing emotional well-being in different populations is evident from existing research. Literature shows that self-compassion is positively associated with mental health outcomes (Katan et al., 2024). Besides that, it is also evident that self-compassion is crucial for the parents of students who face difficulties and challenges concerning their relationship with their children (Źmuda, 2024). Several interventions which focused on self-compassion showed a significantly improved level of self-compassion and

consequent improved overall well-being of individuals (Cai et al., 2024). In other disciplines like health, it is evident that self-compassion decreased depression, where resilience and emotion regulation partly mediated this relationship. It indicates the importance and significant effect of self-compassion on overall well-being, particularly the emotional well-being of an individual (Ozonder et al., 2023). Self-compassion is considered a mediator between materialism, health and the overall well-being of individuals (Cassidy & Santos, 2024).

Self-compassion can mitigate stress, anxiety, and anger among doctoral students, which may enhance their emotional well-being and ultimately result in better and improved outcomes in postgraduate programs. So, it will be interesting to explore the relationship between self-compassion and the emotional well-being of doctoral students. This study will also contribute to reducing attrition among students and provide the basics for interventions to improve emotional well-being through self-compassion.

Furthermore, comprehensive studies in the literature are evident to cope with doctoral students' lack or compromised emotional well-being (Ali et al., 2019; Devos et al., 2017; Shahnawaz & Siddiqi, 2023). These studies have addressed the external factors that influence emotional well-being and directly impact the doctoral student's overall success. There is a need to explore internal factors, i.e., self-compassion, to cope with the adverse effects of obstacles that cause frustration, anxiety, and distress among doctoral students. There is a need to establish how the student copes with situations where they are stressed due to several factors that are responsible for producing such a situation.

In Pakistan, where numerous universities have been established in the last 20 years, the situation is more complex due to limited resources and minimal faculty members for doctoral programs. As in 1947, 2 universities (Siddiqui, 2019), i.e. Punjab University Lahore and Dacca University, were existing; the number increased to 195 in 2019 and 257 in 2023 (HEC, 2023). This situation has challenged all tertiary education levels, including doctoral programs. The university expansion has been made, but the pool of supervisors must be increased accordingly. The level of frustration, anxiety and depression among postgraduate students is rising, which is an alarming sign. It indicates the significance of such a way to cope with the prevailing situation among doctoral students in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

The objective of the study was to:

1. Assess the self-compassion level among doctoral students in the universities of Punjab.
2. Assess the emotional well-being level of postgraduate students among postgraduate students.
3. Determine the relationship between self-compassion and emotional well-being among doctoral students.

Methodology

This study was descriptive, using a correlational research design.

Population, sampling and sample: All the enrolled students in doctoral programs at public and private universities in Punjab were the target population of this study. A multistage sampling technique was used to select an appropriate sample. Out of 82 universities in Punjab, 52 universities were excluded from the study due to several factors, i.e. no PhD program offered and universities of other disciplines (engineering, medical and agriculture). Out of the remaining 32 universities, three (public =02, private = 1) were selected randomly at the first sampling stage. In contrast, in the 2nd stage, one department from each discipline, i.e., the education department, was

chosen randomly. In the 3rd stage, out of 243 enrolled students, 80 doctoral students were selected for this study randomly.

Research Instruments

1. Self-Compassion Scale (SCS): This scale assesses overall self-compassion with subscales for self-kindness, mindfulness, and self-judgment. It is a validated scale to measure the level of self-compassion, which is appropriate for individuals aged 14 and older (at least those at the 8th-grade level) (Neff, 2003).
2. Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21): The depression, anxiety and stress scale - 21 Items, which is a three self-report scale. The scale is designed to measure emotional states of anxiety, depression and stress. Every sub-scale consists of 7 items (Beaufort et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

The details of the analysis and interpretation of data are presented below:

Figure 1: Gender Description of Doctoral Students

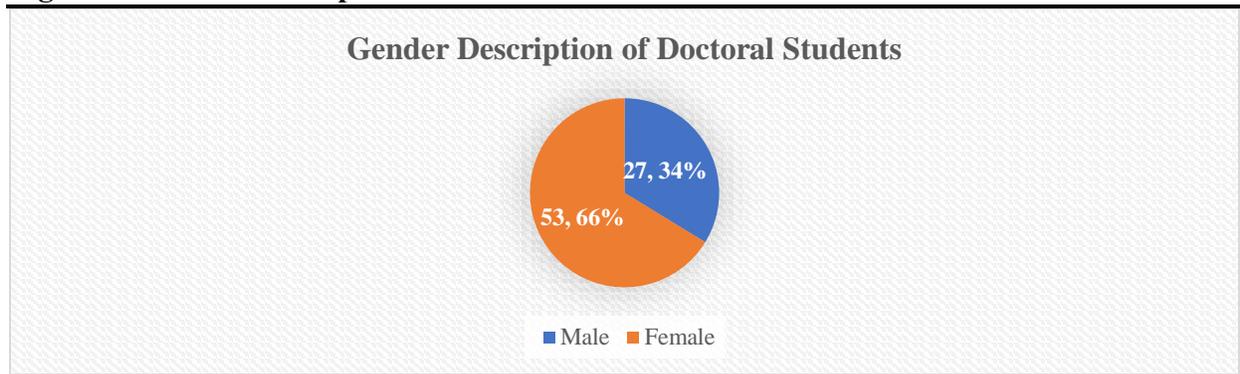


Figure 1 represents the gender of doctoral students. It revealed that the male participants in the study were 27 (34%) while female were 53 (66%). The total sample size consisted of 80 doctoral students.

Figure 2: Gender of Supervisors of selected Doctoral Students

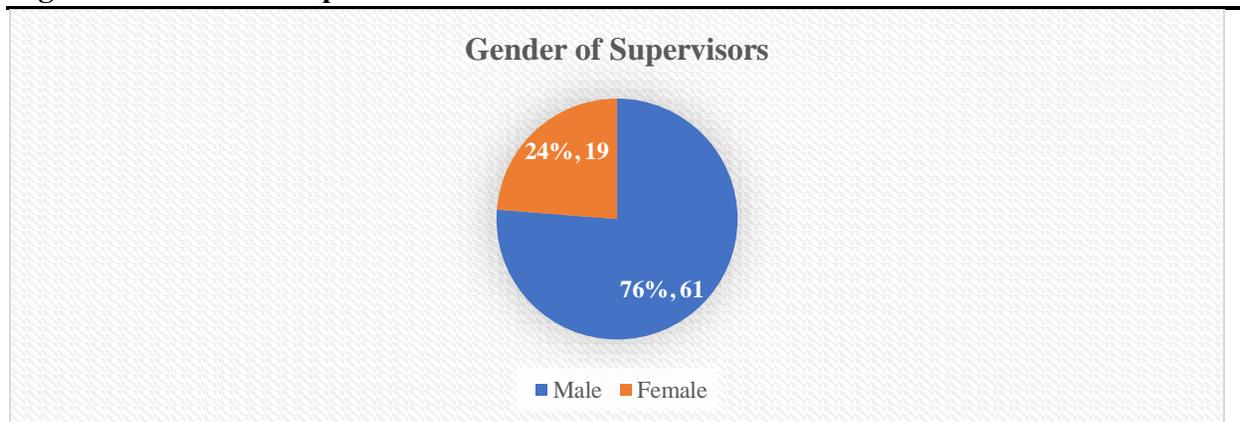


Figure 2 describes the gender of supervisors of doctoral students. It indicates that the male supervisors of doctoral students were 61 (76%) whereas the female supervisors were 19 (24%).

Table 1: Reliability indices of both scales i.e. Self-Compassion and Emotional Well-being

Serial No.	Construct/Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	S.D.	No. of Items
01	Self-Compassion Scale	.895	91.65	21.288	26
02	Emotional Well-Being Scale (DASS-21)	.888	6.85	3.7666	21

Table 1 is evident the Cronbach Alpha value of both scales. The first scale, self-compassion scale has the reliability of .895 while DASS-21 has the reliability of .888.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Doctoral Students Gender on Self-Compassion

Gender		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	Gender	27	0	0	.00	.000
	Self-Compassion	27	49.00	120.00	94.1852	19.40467
	Valid N (listwise)	27				
Female	Gender	53	1	1	1.00	.000
	Self-Compassion	53	30.00	117.00	90.3585	22.25300
	Valid N (listwise)	53				

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for self-compassion. It indicates that 27 males and 53 females were included in this analysis. Males average score (94.19) was a little bit higher than females 90.36.

Table 3: Description of group statistics for self-compassion and well-being

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Self-Compassion	Male	27	94.1852	19.4047	3.73443
	Female	53	90.3585	22.253	3.05668
Emotional Well-being	Male	27	7	3.44182	0.66238
	Female	53	6.7736	3.94989	0.54256

Table 3 presents group statistics for self-compassion and emotional well-being scores by gender. The table shows that male doctoral students (n=27) had a slightly higher mean self-compassion score (M = 94.19) than female doctoral students (n=53; M = 90.36). However, the standard deviation for males (SD = 19.40) was lower than that of females (SD = 22.25), indicating that self-compassion scores were more variable among females.

Similarly, males reported slightly higher emotional well-being scores (M = 7.00) compared to females (M = 6.77). The standard deviation for emotional well-being scores was also lower among males (SD = 2.58) than females (SD = 3.95).

Table 4: Mean Score of Gender of Doctoral Students on Self-Compassion & Emotional Well-Being

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Self-Compassion	Equal variances assumed	0.183	0.67	0.758	78	0.451	3.82669	5.04706
	Equal variances not assumed			0.793	59.218	0.431	3.82669	4.8259
Emotional Well-being	Equal variances assumed	0.042	0.837	0.253	78	0.801	0.22642	0.89567
	Equal variances not assumed			0.264	59.256	0.792	0.22642	0.85622

Table 4 shows the result of the Levene's test for equality of variance along with the independent samples t-test for the equality of mean between gender of doctoral student on both variables. The test revealed that variance in self-compassion scores were almost equal between males ($M = 94.19$) and females ($F = 0.183$, $p = 0.670$). It indicates no significance difference between males and females on self-compassion ($t = 0.758$, $df = 78$, $p = 0.451$). no significant difference ($p=0.837$) in variance of emotional well-being score between male ($M = 7.00$) and female ($M = 6.77$) was recorded. An equal variance is indicated as no significant difference between male and female on emotional well-being was recorded ($p=.801$). It indicates that there are no statistically significant differences in self-compassion as well as in emotional well-being scores between gender of doctoral students.

Table 5: Group statistics for self-compassion and emotional well-being scores by gender of supervisor

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Self- Compassion	Male	61	92.1148	19.8285	2.53878
	Female	19	90.1579	25.9877	5.962
Emotional Well-being	Male	61	6.6393	3.5404	0.4533
	Female	19	7.5263	4.45182	1.02132

Table 5 indicates a larger sample size for male supervisor than female supervisor. The male doctoral students supervised by male have a slightly higher mean ($M = 92.11$) on self-compassion than those males who were supervised by female supervisor ($M = 90.16$). Besides that, the standard deviation is also greater for the male supervisor group ($SD = 19.83$) compared to the female supervisor group ($SD = 25.99$). it indicates larger variability in self-compassion score in doctoral students with male supervisors. A similar pattern for emotional well-being was observed.

Table 6: Results of an independent samples t-test to compare self-compassion and emotional well-being scores between two groups (Male and Female Supervisors)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Self-Compassion	Equal variances assumed	4.245	0.043	0.348	78	0.729	1.95686	5.62437
	Equal variances not assumed			0.302	24.874	0.765	1.95686	6.48003
Emotional Well-being	Equal variances assumed	3.513	0.065	-0.895	78	0.373	-0.887	0.99057
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.794	25.494	0.435	-0.887	1.1174

This table revealed a significant variance which indicates difference in both variables on self-compassion score. While not significant on emotional well-being. No significant difference was seen in emotional well-being scores between two groups ($p = 0.373$). all the analysis in this table concludes that there is not significant difference in either self-compassion or emotional well-being between the two groups i.e. male and female supervisors.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics Correlation between Self Compassion and Emotional Well being

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Self-Compassion	91.65	21.2883	80
Emotional Well-being	6.85	3.7656	80

Table 7 revealed the mean of self-compassion score is 91.65, SD 21.29 among all 80 participants. The mean score on emotional well-being was observed as 6.85, SD of 3.77 for the same sample size.

Table 8: Correlations between self-compassion and emotional well-being

		Self-Compassion	Emotional Well-being
Self-Compassion	Pearson Correlation	1	-.820**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0
	N	80	80
Emotional Well-being	Pearson Correlation	-.820**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	
	N	80	80

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 8 revealed a strong negative correlation between self-compassion and emotional well-being. This indicates that as self-compassion increases, emotional well-being decreases, and vice versa. It indicates that individuals who scored higher on self-compassion tend to report lower emotional well-being. In contrast, lower levels of self-compassion tend to report higher levels of emotional well-being.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Doctoral students often experience significant distress, a primary factor contributing to high attrition rates and low retention in doctoral programs. While external support networks, such as peer relationships, can help manage emotional challenges, this study focuses on an internal factor: self-compassion. By examining the role of self-compassion, the research aims to understand how individuals cope with emotional difficulties from within, possibly leading to improved outcomes for doctoral students. A significant relationship between distress, anxiety and depression with self-compassion indicates the importance of self-compassion in the flourishing emotional well-being of doctoral students. The negative correlation of $-.820$ shows a significant association between self-compassion and emotional well-being. These findings are consistent with Rao (2023) and Thomas and Thenmozhi (2019). It shows the crucial role of self-compassion in the development of emotional well-being. Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness appear to be inversely related to distress, anxiety and depression. These findings align with Katan et al. (2024) and Presantoro and Kembaren (2023).

Those individuals who possess higher self-compassion are better equipped with everyday challenges. Similarly, doctoral students who have more self-compassion cope with distress, anxiety, and depression in a more settled way than a person who is lower on self-compassion. The persons who have lower self-compassion feel isolated and have negative self-evaluation. Self-compassion is a healthier coping mechanism that ultimately promotes an individual's emotional well-being. It is also essential to know that correlation does not imply causation. The study indicates a strong correlation between self-compassion and emotional well-being. A causal relationship between both variable self-compassion and emotional well exists. Other variables, i.e., personality traits, social support and life events, may also be identified as affecting emotional well-being and may also be assessed to determine the emotional well-being that may establish the complex relationship.

This study provides compelling, significant evidence of a correlation between self-compassion and emotional well-being. This robust association indicates the crucial role of self-compassion and emotional well-being. Self-compassion is critical in order to influence the emotional well-being of doctoral students. The negative correlation indicates that the higher self-compassion level lowers distress, anxiety and depression in doctoral students. In comparison, a lower self-compassion level determines a higher level of distress, anxiety and depression. Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness may be cultivated among doctoral students, reducing emotional distress and enhancing their overall well-being.

This study provides significant implications for mental health research and will also improve practice. Preventive measures, in the form of interventions aimed at fostering and cultivating self-compassion, may have the potential to positively impact one's emotional life. In this regard, Future researchers exploring mechanisms associated with self-compassion and emotional well-being will be significant in identifying targeted interventions.

In order to unveil the complex association between self-compassion and emotional well-being, emphasis may be given to self-compassion in mental health practices. Interventions on self-compassion may be developed for diverse populations. In educational settings, self-compassion may be integrated. In order to maximize the effect of self-compassion interventions, it is essential to disseminate research findings to the public and foster multidisciplinary collaboration.

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