

IMPERFECTIONS ARE JUST THE BEGINNING: THE ROLE OF SELF-COMPASSION CREATIVE MEDITATION ON RECONVERTING THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF PERFECTIONISM

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Abstract

The present study explores the dynamic interactions between the three dimensions of perfectionism (rigid perfectionism, self-critical perfectionism and narcissistic perfectionism) and the components of self-compassion (self-kindness, self-judgement, common humanity, mindfulness, overidentification and isolation). The main objective was to identify the most significant correlations between perfectionism and self-compassion. Results indicated significant negative correlations between each of the three types of perfectionism and self-kindness. These results were further applied in a quasi-experiment focused on highlighting the effectiveness of a humanistic-experiential exercise that combined multiple expressive-creative techniques (loving-kindness and self-compassion creative meditation, mindfulness and drawing) in diminishing the negative aspects of perfectionism. Paired Samples T test analyses showed significant differences regarding self-critical perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism and general perfectionism score after the experiment. Being able to self-center in a gentle, supportive and understanding manner gave the participants the context to access the personal resources of warmth and compassion and to enhance the capacity of self-acceptance.

Key words: creative-meditation, perfectionism, self-development, self-compassion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Perfectionism is a personality/relational characterological style (Hewitt, 2020) that has been extensively studied in psychology over the past 25 years. The aim of these studies has been to describe this concept as thoroughly as possible to develop psychological instruments that allow for an adequate measurement of the multiple facets of perfectionism, as well as a clearer distinction between maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism. Maslow emphasized the danger posed by perfectionism and highlighted the contradiction between the fear of failure and not living up to expectations, and the process of self-actualization and fulfilling one's own potential. The pursuit of perfection leads to experiencing feelings of extreme hostility towards normative hopes (Flett, Hewitt, 2024) and can be associated with severe psychological suffering. This discrepancy between standards and personal performance has been identified as a central element in the case of maladaptive perfectionism (Benedetto et al, 2024) as well as other forms of psychopathology

(Mason et al, 2019). The greater this discrepancy, the more the persons tend to excessively criticize themselves and their own performance, to believe that significant others have high expectations from them and to experience strong negative feelings related to the inability to achieve true perfection. This experience is based on a fear of failure and can over time lead to negative effects on psychological functioning in the form of procrastination, indecision, anxiety, psychological distress, depression, avoidant coping, low self-esteem, low academic self-efficacy, eating disorders, and even an increased risk of suicide, both in adolescents and adults (Benedetto et al., 2024; Sotardi, Thompson, 2025; Xiong et al., 2024). Understanding perfectionism from a person-centered approach as a „core vulnerability factor” (Hewitt et al, 2020, p.105) and describing the experience of people who consider themselves perfectionists become much more useful, alongside studying the construct of perfectionism. This approach may prove beneficial to improve the quality of life for these individuals as well as for those around them. Assuming all these objectives, Hewitt et al., (2020, 2024) developed a complex and dynamic operationalization of perfectionism with three interacting components: the trait level, the intrapersonal (or self-relational) level and the interpersonal (or other-relational) level. Each of these dimensions includes a series of facets, providing the possibility to describe the unique individual experience.

The trait level emphasizes the extent to which a person focuses on demanding perfection from others and shows attention and vigilance toward others' evaluations of themselves. The second level reflects the inner world and the internal experience of perfectionism in the form of self-dialogue that mirrors the need to be perfect and the tendency to excessively ruminate on this theme (there may be constant and harsh reminders of one's own imperfection, severe and harsh self-accusations, as well as a reduced ability to generate warmer self-statements and to express self-care). The third level describes the interpersonal style focused on how a person's perfectionism is seen by others or on how the person believes they are seen by others and reflects the connection between the self and psychological interpersonal needs of belonging and self-esteem. Other authors (Kaçar-Başaran et al, 2020; Smith et al., 2016) describe three global factors of perfectionism: rigid perfectionism, self-critical perfectionism, and narcissistic perfectionism, along with ten other facets to facilitate a clearer understanding and measurement of multidimensional perfectionism. It is also important to emphasize the need to analyze perfectionism in the context of key developmental tasks during childhood and adolescence to increase resilience and general coping capacity.

The development of psychological interventions that facilitate both the prevention and reduction of various negative aspects of perfectionism is extremely useful. Developing self-compassion in individuals with perfectionist tendencies is associated with increased well-being, a reduction in the effects of maladaptive perfectionism, and decreased anxiety and depression. (Benedetto et al., 2024; Koutra et al., 2023). Perfectionist individuals are extremely self-critical and use self-criticism as a form of motivation to achieve goals, often ignoring the potential risk of burnout. (Flett and Hewitt, 2024). Precisely because of the multiple dimensions of perfectionism, interventions aimed at developing self-compassion need to target both self-compassion in general and the development of the ability to forgive oneself and be kind to oneself after mistakes and failures. Self-forgiveness after failure or disappointments related to achieving performance is another dimension of these interventions. It is also important to address the interpersonal side of perfectionism to encourage compassion and self-forgiveness as valuable resources, especially after painful interpersonal experiences (rejection, humiliation, criticism). The development of self-compassion and its

dimensions (self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness) is especially supported through loving-kindness and compassion meditation interventions (Deng et al, 2025; Hofmann et al, 2011). Studies highlight the important role that meditation interventions play in increasing attachment security (Gazder et al, 2025), an important aspect connected with the interpersonal level of perfectionism.

Based on this theoretical framework, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between perfectionism and self-compassion. The first purpose was to identify the most significant correlations between perfectionism and self-compassion. The first purpose was to design and to implement a humanistic-experiential exercise that combined multiple expressive-creative techniques (loving-kindness and self-compassion creative meditation, mindfulness and drawing) to lower the negative aspects of perfectionism and to increase the participants ability of self-acceptance.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Experimental design, psychometrical methods, expressive-creative methods, observation, and statistical methods (Correlation and Paired-Samples T Test) were applied in the present study.

Variables: The main dependent variables were perfectionism (self-critical perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism and general perfectionism) and solitude.

The independent variable was participation in humanistic-experiential exercise (The loving-kindness and self-compassion creative meditation, mindfulness and drawing).

Psychometrical instruments: *Self-compassion Scale (SCS)* and *Big Three Perfectionism Scale (BTPS)*.

The variable self-compassion was measured using Self-compassion Scale (SCS) (Neff, 2003). The scale has 26 items and allows an assessment of the level of self-compassion across 6 scales (self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and overidentification). SCS has high psychometrical properties, good reliability and validity and has proven its effectiveness in various cultural contexts (Arimitsu, 2014).

The variable perfectionism was measured using Big Three Perfectionism Scale (BTPS). The scale was specially developed (Smith et al., 2016) to measure multidimensional perfectionism and consists of 45 items that assess three global factors of perfectionism along with 10 facets. The scale has good reliability and provides precision in assessment, being applied in various cultural contexts (Kaçar-Başaran et al, 2020).

Participants: 71 Psychology Students participated in this study, with an average age of 41. They all completed the two online questionnaires in Google forms. 14 students participated in the experiment (the experimental group) during a psychotherapy seminar. Assessments of the variables were made before and after the experimental situation.

Procedure: At the beginning, participants were invited to sit in the most comfortable position, to focus their attention on their breathing (inhale/exhale) and to try to clear their minds of worries. Then they were gradually guided to picture first someone they love or who naturally makes them smile and a moment when that person was in suffering, then themselves (and a moment when they themselves suffered), then someone they neither like nor dislike and who is part of their daily life (and a situation in which this person suffered), and finally a person with whom they have difficulties (and a situation in which they might have suffered). They were asked to be aware of what they experience (the emotions, thoughts, sensations they explore) and, based on their present

experience, to identify their needs in relation to these people, the needs those people might have, what they tend to do or say, and what words they would say to kindly and gently support those people or themselves. After the meditation exercise, the participants were invited to express their experience through drawing. The drawings were then shared with the rest of the group, and various themes and meanings were explored and connected to their personal experience of self-compassion and perfectionism.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Statistical results (Pearson Correlations) suggest negative significant correlations between perfectionism (all the three dimensions of perfectionism and some of the facets) and self-kindness.

Table 1: Perfectionism and self-kindness

	Self-kindness
Rigid perfectionism	$r=-.437, p<0.01$
Self-oriented	$r=-.420, p<0.01$
Self-worth contingencies	$r=-.413, p<0.01$
Concern over mistakes	$r=-.449, p<0.01$
Self-critical perfectionism	$r=-.405, p<0.01$
Self-criticism	$r=-.531, p<0.01$
Narcissistic perfectionism	$r=-.346, p<0.01$

Significant positive correlations were found between:

- self-judgement and: concern over mistakes ($r=0.712, p<0.01$), self-criticism ($r=0.783, p<0.01$), socially prescribed perfectionism ($r=0.537, p<0.01$), and other-oriented perfectionism ($r=0.513, p<0.01$).

- isolation and: doubts about actions ($r=0.719, p<0.01$), self-criticism ($r=0.635, p<0.01$) and socially prescribed perfectionism ($r=0.639, p<0.01$).

There were no significant correlations between perfectionism and common humanity or perfectionism and mindfulness.

In line with other research, these statistical results emphasize, once again, the tendency of perfectionist individuals to relate to themselves and their personal performance in a critical, harsh, and rigid manner, where self-compassion and a gentle, supportive attitude seem to be greatly diminished. Especially in situations of failure, rejection, or interpersonal humiliation, perfectionist individuals criticize themselves even more, focus excessively on their own imperfections, which they feel ashamed of, gradually distancing themselves from their own experience of suffering as well as from recognizing the negative effects that this hypercritical judgement develops. Moreover, turning inward in situations of failure with warmth and acceptance can be interpreted as a sign of weakness or vulnerability, since throughout various periods of development, in relationships with significant people, there was this pressure to meet high performance standards regardless of what one feels or experiences (and in some situations even despite a physical or emotional suffering).

Statistical results (Paired samples T test) showed significant decrease in perfectionism (self-critical perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism) after participation in creative meditation.

Table 2: Statistical results after the meditation exercise

Perfectionism	Paired Samples t Test	
	t values	p values
Self-critical	t=3.165	p=0.009
Socially prescribed	t=4.096	p=0.002
Other-oriented	t=4.051	p=0.002
general	t=4.250	p=0.001

Considering these results, in the second part of the present research, we applied a creative meditation exercise aimed at developing self-compassion and self-kindness. The design of the meditation exercise (inspired by Weng and al., 2013) facilitated the experience of self-awareness, exploring the emotions the participants felt in contact with their own suffering and that of others, the way they cognitively understand their experience, and the way they pay attention to their own suffering as well as that of other people or beings around them. Exercise encourages the experience of feelings of acceptance and kindness toward self and other beings, the development of appreciation for one's own experience as part of the human experience, as well as a mindful paying attention to suffering. The participants began to develop their ability to be kind to themselves and others in situations that involve failure or suffering; to judge themselves in a less critical and harsh manner and rather one filled with acceptance and gentleness. This is a first step towards developing a general attitude of positive, unconditional compassion and kindness, which can then serve as an important resource for increasing resilience and reducing the negative effects of maladaptive perfectionism.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Creative meditation became a path leading to greater awareness and it created a psychological context oriented toward enhancing unconditional, positive emotional state of kindness and self-compassion. Rather than harshly and rigid judging themselves and other people for imperfect performance, uncertainties or perceived failures, the participants offered themselves warmth and acceptance and they perceived other people's expectations as less demanding and more realistic and appropriate.

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