

NATURE CONTEMPLATION: SELF-COMPASSION, AWARENESS, AND CONGRUENCE

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Abstract

Nature contemplation has been shown to have many benefits for well-being, from the restorative effects on the nervous systems, to the support for self-regulation. The objective was to explore the details of the effects of nature contemplation on the awareness and acceptance of the here-and-now experience, the way of turning towards oneself, in a caring or critical manner, and the feeling of self-fulfillment resulting from meeting personal needs. To accomplish the objectives, we conducted a quasi-experimental study, exploring the effects of watching a film from nature compared to a creative exercise and a non-treatment condition, and a correlational study, investigating the associations of some facets of self-compassion, congruence, and mindfulness. When compared to the non-treatment condition, watching the film from nature, resulted in higher scores on the self-disparagement scale of self-compassion, and, when compared to a creative exercise, it resulted in lower feelings of internal congruence. The self-care dimension of self-compassion was positively associated with the awareness in general, and awareness of personal incongruences in particular, and negatively with the acceptance of the here-and-now experience, while the self-disparagement was positively associated with self-care and the awareness of personal incongruence, and negatively with the acceptance of present experience.

Keywords: acceptance, authenticity, creative exercise, self-awareness, self-care.

1. INTRODUCTION

Self-compassion is a concept that has received a lot of attention from the researchers during recent years, as it is considered that to take care of oneself involves a compassionate attitude towards oneself, in order to fulfill the needs and to take the proper action if different disorders or traumatic experiences occur. The contribution of the natural environment to a person's well-being has been largely studied from a biological and psychological point of view (e.g. Mostajeran, 2021, Yamashita, 2021), mentioning the facilitation of the restoration of the nervous system (Menzel and Reese. 2022), a better focus on the personal motivation and resources (Răban-Motounu, 2014), interruption of the negative automatic thinking involved in anxiety (Vitalia, 2013, 2014) or depression (Djernis *et al.*, 2023), but also in relation with deeper aspects of well-being, like the awareness of ecological threats and ecological guilt (Nielsen, Gamborg, & Lund, 2024). Less has been studied about the effects of nature contemplation on the more specific human experiences like self-reflective awareness capacity, while the positive effects of nature engagement seem to involve decentering, besides perceptual sensitivity and non-reactivity (Macaulay *et al.*, 2022). Richardson and Sheffield (2015) found reflective self-attention to be a better predictor of the connection with nature than mindful attention, anxious self-attention being borderline negatively associated with it.

Kirby (2025) summarizes the evidence supporting the idea that compassion may be a transdiagnostic target for programs aiming to reduce clinical symptoms of different mental disorders, but also in promoting well-being in general and its ability to buffer stress negative influence. He formulated suggestions about how to integrate self-compassion in the existing mental health treatments, highlighting the importance of further identifying the mechanisms of change involving it. Balki and colleagues (2025) found a negative association between self-compassion and compassion fatigue in physicians. They reported high levels of anxiety and especially depression, recommending training for the personnel insisting on awareness based self-compassion methods. A self-compassion program administered online significantly improved emotional recovery, the ability to bounce back from an adversity in healthcare workers (Adair, Powell, & Sexton, 2025). Lower self-compassion was associated with envy, passivity, and self-criticism, especially when comparing oneself to other people considered superior, while higher self-compassion was related positively with balanced optimism, an orientation towards problem solving, and flexible responses (Okano & Nomura, 2025). When integrated into acceptance and commitment therapy in a three-wave longitudinal study, increasing self-compassion enhanced psychological flexibility and reduced self-criticism, the one oriented towards others and self-criticism when compared to others, which resulted in enhanced mental health (Wong *et al.*, 2025).

Less studies take into consideration that the basis of self-compassion is self-awareness, involving the ability to be aware of one's own experience in the present and to accept this experience, as one may say that personal development begins with a loving acceptance of what is in the present. Self-awareness is a complex ability that develops in time, conditioned by the somatic development (maturation of the neurological mechanisms and not only) supporting it and the practice of awareness. Also, it is linked with the healthy functioning of a person (less awareness of the here-and-now experience being associated with pathology in different degrees, Khalsa *et al.*, 2017), and, in the other extreme, with hallucinations, especially observing, non-judging, and acting with awareness (Tagami & Imaizumi, 2023). Herms and Wiesner (2025) recommend a multisensory integrated perspective when investigating the relationship between different disorders and the awareness capacity.

The relationship between mindfulness and self-forgiveness is mediated by self-compassion, as it helps to reduce self-criticism and to consolidate emotional resilience (Skalski-Bednarz *et al.*, 2025), suggesting integrating both mindfulness and self-compassion in training programs to increase self-forgiveness, which may alleviate feelings of guilt. Non-judgmental attention of the here-and-now experience combined with a positive attitude towards oneself lay the basis for well-being in general. Productive engagement enhances mindfulness in older adults, but also potentially increasing the feeling of isolation, as components of self-compassion (Hu *et al.*, 2025). Vitalia (2025) found out that a creative meditation exercise centered on self-compassion and self-kindness, significantly reduced the self-critical attitude and the socially prescribed and other oriented perfectionism, highlighting self-oriented and narcissistic perfectionism.

The humanistic concept of congruence proposed by Rogers (1951) refers to a congruence between the different levels of experience of the person into the environment, the ability to become aware of it and to express it freely, e.g. a person is aware that she is hungry, she feels it and she says that she feels hungry. Congruent, self-compassionate action involves eating and, thus, gratifying the need. A self-compassionate attitude may involve the ability to become aware and to express not only a person's positive experiences in the environment, but also her negative experiences, her needs or her vulnerabilities. On the other hand, incongruence, largely associated by Rogers with pathology,

appears when the person either is aware of her experience but refuses to express it, or the person is not aware of her experience and does not integrate it in the concept of Self, not even at a symbolic level. In either case, she does not act to fulfil the need and to maintain well-being, nor gives the others the possibility to help her. In the present study, we compared the effects of watching a film with natural scenes for an hour with those of a non-treatment condition and with those of participating in a self-expression creative exercise. We anticipated that watching a film presenting life in the natural environment would have a significant effect on the dimensions of self-compassion, on the internal congruence, and on the dimensions of awareness and acceptance of the here-and-now experience. Also, we anticipated that watching the video from nature would have different effects than voluntarily participating in a creative exercise of self-expression and that there are significant associations between the dimensions of self-care, congruence/incongruence and mindfulness.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The design integrated a quasi-experimental study with three experimental conditions and a single, posttest assessment, and a correlational one, integrating psychometric and statistical methods.

Participants and procedure. The study involved students from the first year in the *Clinical Psychology: Assessment and Intervention* master program as part of the *Health Psychology and Psychosomatics* course, during a practical lesson dedicated to elements of lifestyle contributing to overall wellbeing (N=18, mean age 30 years, SD=7.53), students participating in a practical lesson of personal development focused on creative expression (N=29, mean age 42.50, SD=11.05) and other students in *Psychology* and teachers involved in a *Psychology* course (N=48, mean age 42.5, SD=6.76). All the students participating in the practical lessons received points for their activity, their participation in the study (the completion of the questionnaires) was voluntarily and the responses were anonymous.

The psychometric instruments were: *The Philadelphia Mindfulness Scale*, *The Incongruence Questionnaire*, and *The Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form*

The Philadelphia Mindfulness Scale (PHLMS, Cardaciotto et al. 2008) is a short instrument with very good psychometric properties, assessing the awareness of the here-and-now experience, including the subtle changes, and its acceptance. The two scores may be used independently in research, *Awareness* (the attention paid in the present to personal experience in the environment) and *Acceptance* (the extent to which the person accepts what she is aware of). The items are formulated as self-descriptive affirmations, with five answer variants from “never” to “very often”.

The Incongruence Questionnaire (INK, Holtforth & Grawe, 2003) assesses the orientation towards achieving personal needs gratification according to Maslow's pyramid of needs reflected in its effect and the avoidance of meeting personal needs in two different scales. The first one, assessing the tendency to act according to personal needs and to obtain personal satisfaction contains items formulated as affirmations, with five answer variants, from “far too little” to “completely sufficient”. The second one refers to a lack of gratification, containing negative items, with answers on a five points Likert scale, from “does not apply at all” to “very much”. The instrument has good psychometric properties.

The Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form was initially proposed by Raes and colleagues (2011), but we did the scoring according to Hayes et al. (2016) study on the construct validity of the scale. So, we computed two scores, according to the two main factors of the scale: one for self-care (six items)

and another for self-disparagement (six items). The items are formulated as affirmations about oneself, and the respondent has the option to answer from five variants, from “almost never” to “almost always”. We chose this form of scoring for its construct validity on a large sample of college students.

For the experimental conditions, the film from nature was presented on a video projector in the amphitheater where the practical lesson took place, also using a computer, and for the creative exercise we used diverse artistic instruments for drawing and painting. The creative self-expression exercise lasted also one hour, as watching the video with natural scenes from wildlife. Both exercises were conducted by the researcher, also a certified psychotherapist. All the questionnaires were completed after finishing the activities, anonymously.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To compare the scores received by the participants in all three groups we used Student's *t* test for independent samples. When comparing the scores obtained on the three questionnaires by the participants watching the wildlife film with those of the participants in the creative exercise, the only dimension showing significant differences was the internal congruence ($t=-2.428$, $p=.022$), the participants watching the film for nature having a lower congruence ($M=49.22$, $SD=7.75$) than the ones involved in self-expression by drawing and painting ($M=54.31$, $SD=5.51$). All the other dimensions showed no significant differences. Compared to non-treatment, watching the video from nature resulted in higher scores on the self-disparagement scale of self-compassion ($t=2.186$, $p=.032$) ($M=19.22$, $SD=2.73$ compared to $M=17.54$, $SD=2.79$ in the non-treatment condition).

We used the scores from all the participants to further analyze the associations between the dimensions of self-compassion, mindfulness, and congruence. The self-care dimension of self-compassion had positive correlations with the overall awareness of the here-and-now experience ($r=.241$, $p=.018$) and especially with the awareness of the personal incongruences ($r=.478$, $p=.000$) and a negative correlation with the acceptance of the here-and-now experience ($r=-.229$, $p=.026$). On the other hand, the self-disparagement scores of all the participants had a positive correlation with the awareness of personal incongruences ($r=.460$, $p=.000$) and a surprising one with the self-care dimension ($r=.614$, $p=.000$), but also a negative association with the acceptance of the present experience ($r=-.214$, $p=.037$).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Watching the video from nature increased self-disparaging tendencies, and, when compared to the creative expressive exercise, led to a lower feeling of congruence. This leads to the conclusion that creative self-expression allows a higher congruence, while focusing on nature may increase self-criticalness (the images did not include human beings). The explanation may come either from increasing awareness of personal distancing from the natural functioning (the experiment took place in an urban environment) or from an increased awareness of the ecological threats created by human beings. This does not necessarily mean that self-expressive creative exercises should replace the experience of nature contemplation, but may suggest a more precise order of introducing the tasks, when adding the results obtained in a previous study (Răban-Motounu, 2014), that showed that watching a video from wildlife increases awareness of personal needs and resources to satisfy them: first, nature contemplation to access the more profound needs, then, the creative self-expression exercise which enhances the awareness of needs and personal resources preparing for their organization in an integrated, doable perspective, followed by a preparation for future real

actions of gratifying the needs in the form of experiential analysis. Creative self-expression may give access to specific human needs, while watching wildlife films may allow the awareness of needs connected to somatic needs, connecting human beings to the other forms of life. Also, self-expression implies a more active stance than contemplation, where the person is more passive, the processual perspective favoring compassionate self-care. Metaphorically speaking, nature contemplation gives the lens, which allows the awareness of more primal aspects of human functioning, usually happening in a more automatized, subconscious or unconscious manner, and creative self-expression tailors it to the specific characteristic of the functioning of the person in a certain moment in time and sets in motion the primary tools to achieve well-being and express higher human potential. It is interesting to note that both aspects of self-compassion, although opposites had a positive correlation, but self-care indeed correlated with awareness, and especially awareness of personal incongruences, confirming, as hypothesized, that self-care begins with becoming aware of personal unmet needs, but not accepting the situation, suggesting a general orientation towards action and not passive acceptance. The positive correlation between self-disparagement and self-care needs further investigation, to find a proper explanation, possibly involving other variables, like narcissism or health state.

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