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SELF-COMPASSION, SELF-ESTEEM, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG ADOLESCENTS

A narrative review relevant to the study of adolescents in Kozhikode District, Kerala, India

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ABSTRACT :



Adolescence is a developmental period marked by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. How young people evaluate themselves and respond to personal difficulties may influence their psychological well-being during this stage. Self-esteem refers broadly to an individual's evaluation of personal worth, whereas self-compassion involves responding to personal shortcomings and distress with kindness, a sense of common humanity, and balanced awareness. Psychological well-being concerns positive psychological functioning, including purpose, autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance. This narrative review discusses the conceptual foundations of these three constructs, explains why they may be related during adolescence, and considers their relevance in the Indian and Kerala context. Existing theory and research suggest that self-esteem and self-compassion may each be associated with better well-being, while self-compassion may offer a less contingent way of maintaining a healthy relationship with oneself during setbacks. The review also identifies the value of examining these variables together among adolescents in Kozhikode District. It does not report original empirical findings; the proposed relationships require systematic investigation using appropriate measures and a clearly defined adolescent sample.

KEYWORDS: *adolescence, self-compassion, self-esteem, psychological well-being, Kerala, Kozhikode.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is an important phase of human development, commonly associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood. During this period, young people experience changes in identity, relationships, emotional regulation, academic responsibilities, and expectations from family and society. These changes can create opportunities for learning and personal growth, but they may also increase vulnerability to stress, self-doubt, and emotional difficulties. Positive psychological development therefore requires attention not only to the absence of psychological problems but also to the resources that help adolescents function effectively and develop a healthy sense of self.

Three relevant concepts are self-esteem, self-compassion, and psychological well-being. Although they are related, they are not interchangeable. Self-esteem concerns how positively or negatively people evaluate themselves. Self-compassion concerns how they treat themselves when they experience failure, inadequacy, or suffering. Psychological well-being is a broader description of positive functioning and meaningful engagement with life. Studying these constructs together may help

clarify how adolescents' self-evaluations and self-directed responses are associated with their wider psychological functioning.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN ADOLESCENCE

Psychological well-being is often understood as more than temporary happiness or the absence of distress. Ryff's model describes six dimensions of eudaimonic well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989). These dimensions provide a framework for considering whether adolescents are developing a sense of direction, maintaining supportive relationships, accepting themselves, and responding constructively to everyday demands.

For adolescents, well-being is shaped by interacting influences. Family relationships, peer acceptance, school climate, academic pressure, socioeconomic circumstances, community expectations, and access to supportive adults may all be relevant. Developmental tasks such as forming an identity, gaining independence, and negotiating peer relationships can influence how young people understand themselves. A supportive environment can strengthen well-being, while persistent criticism, exclusion, or excessive pressure may undermine it.

An important implication is that adolescent well-being should be examined in context. Findings from one region or social group should not automatically be assumed to apply to all adolescents. Research in Kozhikode District can contribute locally relevant evidence while taking account of the diversity of adolescents' family, educational, and community experiences.

3. SELF-ESTEEM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Self-esteem generally refers to a person's overall evaluation of their own worth or value. Rosenberg's work established a widely used approach to measuring global self-esteem, treating it as a relatively broad attitude towards the self (Rosenberg, 1965). Adolescents with healthier self-esteem may be more likely to feel capable, accept personal strengths and limitations, and approach developmental challenges with confidence.

Self-esteem is not necessarily stable or unconditional. For some individuals, feelings of worth may depend heavily on academic achievement, appearance, peer approval, or meeting others' expectations. When self-worth becomes contingent on external success or approval, ordinary setbacks may produce disproportionate self-criticism. Thus, the quality and stability of self-esteem may matter alongside its overall level.

Healthy self-esteem may support psychological well-being by strengthening self-acceptance and confidence in managing everyday tasks. Nevertheless, a positive self-evaluation alone may not ensure a compassionate response to mistakes or disappointment. This distinction makes it useful to examine self-esteem alongside self-compassion.

4. SELF-COMPASSION: MEANING AND COMPONENTS

Self-compassion refers to responding to oneself with care and understanding during experiences of pain, failure, or perceived inadequacy. Neff (2003) conceptualised self-compassion through three interacting components: self-kindness rather than harsh self-judgment; common humanity rather than isolation; and mindfulness rather than over-identification with difficult thoughts and emotions.

Self-kindness involves using a supportive rather than punitive inner response when something goes wrong. Common humanity recognises that imperfection, struggle, and failure are part of shared human experience. Mindfulness involves noticing painful feelings and thoughts without suppressing them or becoming completely absorbed by them. Together, these components may help individuals acknowledge difficulties while maintaining emotional balance.

Self-compassion is distinct from self-pity, self-indulgence, or avoiding responsibility. A compassionate response does not mean denying mistakes or refusing to improve. Instead, it may help a

person recognise a problem without defining the whole self by that problem. For adolescents facing examinations, peer comparison, family expectations, or uncertainty about identity, this approach may provide a constructive way to manage setbacks.

Research has associated self-compassion with a range of indicators of psychological health. Neff (2003) reported associations between self-compassion and positive psychological characteristics, while subsequent research has examined its links with emotional resilience and well-being. These findings support further investigation, but they do not establish that self-compassion alone causes improved well-being in every adolescent or context.

5. POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE THREE CONSTRUCTS

Self-esteem and psychological well-being may be positively related because a generally favourable view of oneself can support self-acceptance, confidence, and engagement with life. Individuals who feel worthy may find it easier to pursue goals and maintain relationships. However, the relationship may be influenced by the basis on which self-esteem is formed. Self-worth that depends excessively on comparison or achievement may be more vulnerable to fluctuations.

Self-compassion may be associated with well-being through a somewhat different process. Rather than requiring a person to see themselves as better than others, self-compassion encourages a balanced and caring response to personal difficulty. It may help reduce harsh self-judgment and feelings of isolation, allowing adolescents to recover more constructively from setbacks. This potentially complements self-esteem: one concerns evaluation of the self, while the other concerns the manner in which the self is treated.

Self-compassion and self-esteem may also be positively associated. Both involve a healthy relationship with oneself, but they are conceptually distinct. Research by Neff and Vonk (2009) suggests that self-compassion may provide a more stable form of self-regard that is less dependent on social comparison. Examining both constructs together may therefore offer a fuller account of adolescents' self-related resources.

These relationships should be treated as empirical questions rather than assumed conclusions. The strength and direction of associations may vary with age, gender, educational setting, family environment, culture, and measurement approach. A correlational study can identify patterns of association, but it cannot by itself establish causal direction.

6. RELEVANCE TO THE INDIAN AND KERALA CONTEXT

Adolescents in India grow and develop within diverse cultural, linguistic, educational, and family settings. Expectations relating to academic performance, family responsibilities, social behaviour, and future careers may shape their self-evaluations and experiences of well-being. At the same time, family support, friendships, school connectedness, and community participation may serve as important protective resources.

Kerala has its own social and educational context, and adolescents within Kozhikode District are not a uniform group. Their experiences may differ according to urban or rural residence, type of school, family circumstances, and other social factors. Research situated in this district can help generate evidence that is relevant to local educational and psychosocial settings. Care should be taken not to generalise findings beyond the population actually sampled.

7. NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Although self-esteem, self-compassion, and psychological well-being have each received research attention, examining their relationships together in a clearly defined local adolescent population may provide useful information. Such a study can help identify whether adolescents who report higher self-esteem or self-compassion also tend to report higher psychological well-being. It may also clarify whether the two self-related constructs show different patterns of association with well-being.

The findings may be relevant to psychologists, school counsellors, teachers, parents, and professionals involved in adolescent development. If meaningful associations are identified, they may inform the design of age-appropriate programmes that encourage healthy self-evaluation, self-kindness, emotional awareness, and supportive relationships. Any intervention recommendations, however, should be based on the study's actual findings and evaluated rather than assumed to be effective.

8. CONCLUSION

Self-esteem, self-compassion, and psychological well-being represent related but distinct aspects of adolescent psychological development. Self-esteem concerns the evaluation of personal worth; self-compassion concerns the response to personal difficulty; and psychological well-being reflects broader positive functioning. Theory and existing research provide reasons to expect meaningful associations among these constructs, but the nature of those associations should be tested in specific populations.

Investigating these variables among adolescents in Kozhikode District may add context-sensitive evidence to the broader literature on adolescent well-being. A carefully designed study, using valid measures and appropriate sampling and analysis, can help clarify how self-esteem and self-compassion relate to psychological well-being in this population.

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