Under pressure: How self-compassion-based group work can address performance anxiety concerns among college students

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What is Performance Anxiety?

- Performance anxiety is fear about one’s ability to perform a specific task (Good Therapy, 2019).
  - It is also the apprehension and fear of the consequences of being unable to perform a task or of performing it at a level that will raise expectations of even better task achievement. (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.)

- Common symptoms of performance anxiety may include:
  - Excessive sweating, heart palpitations, chills, and elevated blood pressure
  - A feeling that there is a knot in the stomach
  - Increased errors during the performance
  - Shaking and nausea
  - Backing out of the performance (Good Therapy, 2019).

- For college students performance anxiety may emerge academically or in the form of some extracurricular activities.
  - Academically: test anxiety, participation in classes, presentations
  - Extracurriculars: athletics, performing arts, such as theater or marching band

- Because of these mounting pressures, it is no wonder that anxiety and stress are the top presenting mental health concerns among college students (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021).
Brainstorm: What is Compassion?

Compassion
Brainstorm: What is Self-Compassion?
Dr. Kristin Neff is the leading researcher on self-compassion and she defines it in 3 dual aspects:

- Self-Kindness vs. Self-Criticism
- Mindfulness vs. Over-Identification
- Common Humanity vs. Isolation

An assessment has been created to help clinicians better assess each of these aspects.

- State Self Compassion Scale (SSCS)
Why Self-Compassion?

- Self-compassion is a teachable skill (Ferrari et al., 2019)
- Previous research based mostly in university settings, indicating it is appropriate for this population (Neff 2020).
- There is significant evidence of self-compassion as a moderator for self criticism (Wakelin et al., 2021)
- Reduction in psychopathology including depression, anxiety, stress, rumination, worry and negative affect (Neff, 2018)
- Self-compassion interventions can be of particular benefit to college athletes (Mosewich et al., 2019). Athletes with higher self-compassion tend to have more self-determined motivation and more positive perceptions of performance (Barczak & Eklund, 2020)
- Self-compassion was found to be a strong predictor of successful emotional transition into college (Kroshus et al., 2020).
Groups and Self-Compassion

- Self-compassion interventions effects were stronger in group settings (Ferrari et al., 2019)
- As academic pressure mounts, college students can isolate (Mayo Clinic, 2021)
- Isolation and other symptoms of depression and anxiety are linked to burn-out (Barnett & Flores, 2016)
  - Burnout is one of a few factors associated with the college dropout rate (Bask & Salmela-Aro 2013)
  - The U.S.’s dropout rate is 40%, and results in $3.8 Billion in lost earning every year (Education Data, 2021)
- Self compassion group interventions led to an increase in college students’ feeling of connectedness (Smeets et al., 2014)
  - Increased levels of self compassion were correlated with increased levels of social safeness (Akin & Akin, 2014)
- Furthermore, ample evidence exists indicating the positive relationship between group and connectedness, belonging, decreases in loneliness, and decreased drop out rates. (Ferrari et al., 2019; Gold et al., 2019; Smeets et al., 2014; Pryce et al., 2019)
Group Work with the Counselor in Mind

- Over the last decade demand in college counseling has increased steadily (CCMH, 2021)
  - Average utilization of college counseling centers was 10% in 2021
    - Max 15%, Minimum 6.6% (AUCCCD, 2021)
  - Prior to the pandemic counseling centers averaged 13% and is expected to return to this level or more (CCMH, 2021)
- Average Clinical Capacity for Universities is 194.8 (AUCCCD, 2021)
  - Clinical Full Time Equivalent average is 8.12, 65% of colleges have less than 8
  - Average caseload reported is 83.5 for FTEs and is in the mid range of CLI
    - 50% of colleges and universities were in the Mid to High Range of the CLI
- Utilizing group can allow for the increase CLI while limiting the burden on college counselors.
Interventions

● Psychoeducation

● Specific Interventions
  ○ Talking to a Friend
    ■ Writing Prompt or Role Play
  ○ Self-Compassion Break
    ■ Writing Prompt or Meditation
  ○ Loving-Kindness Meditation
  ○ Supportive Touch

● Homework
  ○ Mindful Bracelet Swap (Smeets et al., 2014)
  ○ Self-Compassion Journalling
  ○ Personalized Self-Compassion Phrases


References


