

Effect of Self-Compassion on Preventing Academic Burnout Among Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

The higher the level of education, the greater the number of responsibilities students encounter, and those who cannot cope effectively have a higher risk of developing academic burnout. This study aims to determine the effectiveness of a self-compassion approach in reducing academic burnout among postgraduate students. The research design used was a pre-experimental one-group pre-test post-test. This research used convenience sampling, and 13 participants who met the requirements consented to be part of the sample. This research instrument uses the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS) to measure the level of academic burnout. The data analysis technique used in the study was a paired sample *t*-test with a significance value of .042 ($< .05$), a *t* value of 2.272, and degrees of freedom (*df*) of 12. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the self-compassion approach can significantly reduce academic burnout among postgraduate students.

Abstrak

Semakin tinggi tingkat pendidikan, semakin besar jumlah tanggung jawab yang dihadapi siswa, dan mereka yang tidak dapat mengatasinya secara efektif memiliki risiko lebih tinggi mengalami kelelahan akademis. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menentukan efektivitas pendekatan welas asih diri dalam mengurangi kelelahan akademis di kalangan mahasiswa pascasarjana. Desain penelitian yang digunakan adalah pra-eksperimental satu kelompok pra-tes pasca-tes. Penelitian ini menggunakan pengambilan sampel praktis, dan 13 peserta yang memenuhi persyaratan setuju untuk menjadi bagian dari sampel. Instrumen penelitian ini menggunakan Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS) untuk mengukur tingkat kelelahan akademis. Teknik analisis data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah uji-*t* sampel berpasangan dengan nilai signifikansi 0,042 ($< 0,05$), nilai *t* 2,272, dan derajat kebebasan (*df*) 12. Berdasarkan hasil ini, dapat disimpulkan bahwa pendekatan welas asih diri dapat secara signifikan mengurangi kelelahan akademis di kalangan mahasiswa pascasarjana.



INTRODUCTION

University students face various demands in their academic environment. They are expected to meet numerous requirements, such as attending lectures, completing assignments, navigating the complexities of course materials, adapting to new environments, and fulfilling graduation criteria

(Arlinkasari & Akmal, 2017). Students who are unable to manage these demands effectively are prone to burnout. The higher the level of education pursued, the greater the risk of burnout (Susanto & Suminar, 2022). Burnout arises from excessive pressure within the educational system (Yang & Farn, 2005), as higher levels of education often entail greater responsibilities and workloads.

Burnout or exhaustion is a psychological condition characterized by emotional fatigue, depersonalization, and diminished personal achievement. It occurs in individuals engaged in specific activities, such as work or education (Maslach et al., 1997). Initially, burnout was limited to the workplace. However, it has since expanded to include other domains, such as education, as students' tasks often resemble work-related responsibilities (Klerks et al., 2024). Academic burnout, as experienced by students, refers to emotional exhaustion caused by academic pressures and workload, leading to decreased academic performance (Yang, 2004). McCarthy et al. (1990) describe academic burnout as stemming from academic demands, a sense of incompetence as a student, and the development of cynical, indifferent, and apathetic attitudes toward academic tasks.

Salanova et al. (2005) identified three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and negative self-evaluation. Emotional exhaustion arises from the psychological strain of work, which impairs an individual's ability to adapt to their environment and manage emotional burdens. Cynicism, the second dimension, involves distancing oneself from interpersonal relationships as a response to feeling indifferent toward how one's work is perceived or valued. Finally, negative self-evaluation refers to doubts about one's ability to perform optimally, marked by reduced productivity and problem-solving skills.

Students experiencing burnout are vulnerable to physical, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Pressures such as heavy academic workloads, insufficient support from close relationships, limited academic resources, and personality factors, such as low self-confidence, significantly impact their ability to complete their studies effectively. Symptoms include fatigue, decreased motivation, and passive responses to change (Lin & Huang, 2014). Hakanen et al. (2006) found that untreated burnout symptoms may evolve into depression over time, highlighting the importance of early intervention to prevent this progression (K. J. Lee & Lee, 2022).

Interventions to prevent academic burnout have become increasingly necessary as students experience rising levels of stress and psychological distress across educational contexts. To effectively address this condition, a combination of psychological, social, and mindfulness interventions has been identified as promising. Research has shown that mindfulness can significantly reduce symptoms of academic burnout by fostering a sense of present moment awareness and enhancing emotional regulation (Ding et al., 2019). Studies indicate that positive interactions and a supportive community significantly lower burnout rates among students (Afshar et al., 2025; Bouhaba et al., 2024). For instance, training programs that foster social support and peer collaboration can help create an environment conducive to emotional well-being and academic engagement (Bouhaba et al., 2024). These social connections alleviate feelings of isolation that commonly accompany academic stress and burnout, promoting a sense of belonging among students (Afshar et al., 2025).

Additionally, structured psychological counseling has been proposed as a key method for reducing academic burnout, contributing holistically by providing adequate social support, increasing mindfulness of the present moment, fostering a sense of belonging, alleviating feelings of isolation, and reducing burnout. One preventive measure against burnout is self-compassion (K. J. Lee & Lee, 2022). By cultivating an environment where individuals can share their experiences, express empathy, and support one another, organizations can develop a sustainable culture of well-being that mitigates the risks of burnout. High levels of self-compassion are associated with lower levels of negative

emotions, such as anxiety and sadness, and greater coping abilities (Leary et al., 2007). In education, self-compassion has been linked to better self-competence in learning and more adaptive academic achievement (Neff et al., 2005). MacBeth and Gumley (2012) found significant effects of self-compassion in reducing depression, anxiety, and stress. Additionally, self-compassion is associated with psychological strengths such as happiness, optimism, and life satisfaction, as well as improved motivation, health behaviors, body image, and resilience (Albertson et al., 2015; Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011).

Self-compassion is the ability to extend kindness and understanding to oneself in the face of suffering, much like one would toward others. This includes acknowledging one's difficulties without avoidance and cultivating a desire for self-healing. Embracing challenges as a natural part of life helps individuals navigate their hardships more effectively (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion is considered an emotion-focused strategy (Lee & Lee, 2022). Self-compassion offers an alternative model of self-awareness that fosters resilience (Neff & McGehee, 2010). Lee (2013) demonstrated that self-compassion moderates the relationship between emotional well-being and burnout. The key is to remain open to pain, connect with others, and provide self-support during difficult times (Neff, 2022). Individuals with self-compassion understand that suffering and failure are part of the human experience (mindfulness) and respond with kindness toward themselves (self-kindness), recognizing these experiences as shared among all people (common humanity), thereby enabling them to address challenges effectively (Farisandy et al., 2023). This perspective helps individuals understand that everyone faces difficulties, reducing feelings of isolation and detachment from the world. Lastly, mindfulness is an effort to consciously acknowledge the pain experienced, as compassion for oneself cannot be achieved without recognizing one's suffering. Without conscious awareness of pain and distress, individuals may become engulfed in their suffering, fixating on it and finding it difficult to break free from painful experiences (Neff, 2003).

Research by Neff et al. (2005) among college students experiencing academic failure indicates that students with high levels of self-compassion tend to adopt emotion-focused coping strategies, such as perceiving failure as an opportunity for growth. In contrast, students with low self-compassion tend to focus more on their negative emotions. College students are often burdened with substantial academic pressures, yet self-compassion enables them to manage these demands more effectively. It can be concluded that self-compassion moderates the relationship between burnout and the risk of depressive symptoms stemming from academic stress. This suggests that similar dynamics may apply to postgraduate students, who often encounter academic pressures and performance-related stressors. By promoting self-compassion, educational institutions can help counteract the high levels of burnout commonly reported in these high-stakes roles. This is particularly pressing given the ongoing mental health crisis exacerbated by the pressures of education, underscoring the need for immediate action in researching and implementing effective self-compassion strategies (Crego et al., 2022). There remains a need for more extensive longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of self-compassion interventions, as many existing studies focus only on short-term outcomes (Butz & Stahlberg, 2020).

Students who display kindness and gentleness toward themselves (self-kindness) during challenging times are likely to experience lower levels of academic burnout and are better able to maintain their capacity to interact with others (Dev et al., 2018). Individuals who demonstrate kindness, mindfulness, and non-judgmental attitudes toward themselves and others tend to experience greater life satisfaction and reduced academic burnout. A significant issue related to self-judgment is the tendency to feel isolated and withdraw from others (Ling et al., 2021). Self-compassion helps

individuals recognize that life challenges and failures are part of the common human experience. Cultivating self-compassion requires individuals to mindfully address their pain, transforming it into a more focused and attentive state. This approach can help students reduce academic burnout. Mindfulness directs attention toward goals and away from factors beyond one's control. Mindfulness training has been shown to reduce the likelihood of academic burnout effectively (Gitara et al., 2023).

Previous studies have extensively examined the impact of self-compassion on burnout. As noted earlier, research by Lee & Lee (2022) found that self-compassion can mitigate burnout progression, which may lead to depression. Similarly, Neff et al. (2005) demonstrated that self-compassion is associated with adaptive strategies for addressing academic challenges. Farisandy et al. (2023), in their research conducted in the Jabodetabek region with student respondents, found a significant association between high levels of self-compassion and reduced burnout. A study by Aydin (2023) among students also found that higher levels of self-compassion correlate with lower burnout, and that implementing self-compassion enhances resilience and emotional balance in addressing academic challenges. Previously, mindfulness-based self-compassion training conducted by Eriksson et al. (2018) demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing self-compassion, reducing self-criticism, and alleviating stress and burnout symptoms.

Hasyiyati & Widayari (2023) confirmed a correlation between self-compassion and burnout. However, this was a correlational study, highlighting the need for further research to establish causality between the two variables. The distinction of this study lies in its focus on examining the extent to which self-compassion intervention reduces academic burnout through experimental research. The study subjects are postgraduate students at the university. This subject selection was based on findings that higher educational levels are associated with increased burnout, as observed among many students in the targeted cohort. To date, no studies have applied a self-compassion intervention specifically to postgraduate students, who face higher educational demands. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of self-compassion intervention in reducing academic burnout among postgraduate students. Based on this explanation, the study's hypothesis is that the self-compassion approach can reduce academic burnout among postgraduate students.

METHODS

This research uses a quantitative approach with experimental research methods. The research design used was a pre-experimental one-group pre-test post-test. A pre-test was held before the treatment, and a post-test was given after the treatment. The treatment in this study is the adaptation of a self-compassion intervention, delivered in three sessions. The reasons for adaptation were the researcher's approach in this study, which is based on positive psychology and aims to prevent or minimize the risk of burnout in postgraduate students, not for clinical purposes, and focuses on the three dimensions of self-compassion. In the first session, with the aim of understanding self-compassion, researchers fostered self-kindness through slow breathing exercises and meditation to cultivate awareness of the present moment. Then, in the second session, researchers used compassionate imagery to develop compassionate attitudes and mindsets, using imaginative images to stimulate self-compassion. In the final session, the researcher recalls slow breathing and meditation, then provides a worksheet to practice a compassionate thought diary as a medium to alleviate feelings by pouring thoughts and feelings into writing.

The subjects in this research were selected using a convenience sampling technique, which involves including individuals who happen to encounter the researcher, meet the subject criteria, and are willing to participate in the research activity. The criteria for research include being a postgraduate student, an Indonesian citizen, over 18 years old, in at least their second semester, and about to begin

compiling a thesis. The population of this study comprises postgraduate students studying in Yogyakarta. The sample size for this study was determined using the G*Power application, which calculates the required sample size. Based on a standard error norm of .05, an effect size of 0.8, and a power of 0.8, the required total sample size was calculated to be 13 individuals. All participants in this study were female, with an average age of 26 years (range: 22–43), and had given consent to participate in the experimental process. To protect their confidentiality and privacy, participants' names are not disclosed.

The data were collected via a questionnaire in Google Forms. The data were subsequently analyzed by testing for normality, followed by a paired-samples *t*-test in IBM SPSS Statistics 20. The research instruments used were the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS) by Schaufeli et al. (2002), which was adapted into Bahasa. This instrument was used to measure academic burnout in both the pre-test and post-test phases. Validity and reliability tests were conducted by the researcher using Jamovi 2.6.16. The instrument has been shown to have construct validity and indicates that the model is good ($\chi^2 = 363.53$; $df = 87$; TLI = .90; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .06). Reliability tests have also been conducted with a Cronbach's alpha (α) score of .906, and the results show that the scale is reliable.

RESULTS

The treatment was conducted in three sessions. Before and after the self-compassion intervention, participants were given pre- and post-tests on 13 research subjects. Prior to treatment, the research subjects completed the MBI-SS pre- and post-tests. The statistics for the experimental group are shown in Table 1. The highest burnout score in the pre-test (56) decreased to 49 in the post-test, despite the minimum score not showing a significant difference. The average score on the two tests also shows a decrease in burnout in the experimental group from 38.5 to 32. The standard deviation also shows good results, as it is smaller than the average score across the two tests and indicates low variation in the data.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistic	Pre-test	Post-test
Minimum	16	17
Maximum	56	49
Mean	38.5	32
Median	39	31
Mode	33	31
Standard Deviation	10.9	9.24

Categorization was based on these scores and divided into three categories. The three categories are low ($X \leq 30$), moderate ($30 \leq X \leq 45$), and high ($45 \geq X$). In the pretest, two participants were categorized as having low burnout, eight as moderate, and three as high. In the posttest, the number of participants with low burnout increased to three, those in the moderate category rose to nine, and only one participant remained in the high category. It can be seen that burnout decreases because the number of high categories decreases, while the moderate to low categories increase. A more detailed breakdown of the pre-test and post-test categories is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Pre-test and Post-test Categories

Categories	Pre-test	Post-test
Low ($X \leq 30$)	2	3
Moderate ($30 \leq X \leq 45$)	8	9
High ($45 \geq X$)	3	1

The collected data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20, and several statistical tests were conducted. In addition to the descriptive statistics test, these tests included a normality test and a paired-samples *t*-test. A normality test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results following the treatment and to assess the treatment's effectiveness on the experimental subjects. Based on Table 3, the data from both the pre-test and post-test phases demonstrated normal distributions, as the *p*-values for both were greater than .05. This fulfills the normality assumption ($p > .05$), indicating that the data are normally distributed. After satisfying the normality assumption, a paired-samples *t*-test was conducted.

Table 3.
Normality Test

Experiment Group	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	<i>df</i>	Sig.
Pre-Test	.974	13	.940
Post-Test	.922	13	.270

The paired-samples *t*-test is used to determine whether there is a difference in the means of two paired samples. Based on Table 4, which presents the results of the paired sample *t*-test, a significant difference was observed between the pre-test and post-test scores. The pre-test mean score was 38.5, while the post-test mean score decreased to 32.00, indicating a decrease in the average level of academic burnout, as previously discussed in the descriptive statistics test. The standard error also decreased from 3.012 in the pre-test to 2.562 in the post-test. Furthermore, with a significance value of .042 ($< .05$), a *t* value of 2.272, and 12 degrees of freedom (*df*), the hypothesis in this study is accepted.

Table 4.
Paired Sample *T*-Test

Experiment Group	Mean	Std. Error Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-Test	38.5	3.012	2.272	12	.042
Post-Test	32	2.562			

The results of the paired-samples *t*-test indicate that the hypothesis is accepted. Based on the categories discussed earlier, the experiments also show that they have succeeded in reducing the number of participants with high levels of burnout. It can be concluded that the self-compassion approach significantly reduced academic burnout among postgraduate students.

DISCUSSION

Based on the study's results, the Self-Compassion Intervention effectively reduces academic burnout among postgraduate students in the Spring 2023 intake of the Master of Psychology Program at

Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. Previous research on self-compassion has indicated that it functions as a strategy negatively associated with burnout, depression, and anxiety (Hughes et al., 2024). These findings align with this study's results, as the Self-Compassion Intervention successfully reduced participants' academic burnout.

The reduction in burnout begins with an individual's mindful awareness of their current challenges, fostering self-compassion (Neff & Germer, 2017). This awareness is cultivated through mindfulness, the core component of the Self-Compassion Intervention, which is introduced through breathing exercises and meditation. During the intervention, several participants reported feeling deeply connected to themselves and introspective. They came to understand their imperfections better and acknowledged their shortcomings (Neff, 2003).

An experimental study by Aldbyani & Al-Abyadh (2023) found that mindfulness meditation reduces all dimensions of academic burnout. Similarly, in this study, participants engaged in slow breathing exercises using the 4-2-6 technique, and their responses varied. Some participants achieved a relaxed state, felt their bodies lighten, and experienced reduced fatigue. Others recognized their exhaustion during the sessions, with some even crying. These reactions align with Turk et al. (2023), who described how meditation can help individuals become more attuned to sensations within and outside their bodies, allowing them to process emotions and thoughts.

The following intervention phase involved compassion imagery, in which participants performed slow breathing and imagined seeing themselves in a mirror, expressing kind, positive words to their reflection. Some participants reported feeling drowsy during this process, consistent with findings from Kiley et al. (2018), who noted improved sleep quality in studies utilizing guided imagery. Following this, participants were asked to create a freehand drawing reflecting their feelings and provide a brief description of their artwork. This step facilitated self-expression and insight into their experiences.

Self-compassion interventions stem from the concept of compassion, defined as being moved by one's suffering, maintaining self-awareness, allowing positive feelings to emerge, and cultivating the desire to alleviate personal distress (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion acts as a protective factor, enabling individuals to respond to their suffering with warmth and to avoid being consumed by negative thoughts or emotions (Neff, 2023).

The final session involved compassionate writing, a potent intervention due to its mental and physical health benefits (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Warren et al. (2010) emphasized that writing provides a medium for self-expression, emotional validation, and the articulation of painful experiences. In this study, a modified compassionate diary worksheet was used. Participants wrote about their feelings and experiences, reflecting on specific events and processing their thoughts and emotions. This process helped participants gain awareness and derive meaning from their experiences. Lent et al. (2009) highlighted that journaling fosters self-reflection and enhances self-awareness.

This research had several limitations. The small sample size and use of non-probability sampling increase the risk of bias. The experimental session consisted of only three sessions, suggesting the need for future research with longer, more in-depth interventions to understand causal relationships better. Including control variables or a control group could provide a more robust comparison for analyzing differences in outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Implementing a self-compassion approach effectively reduces academic burnout among postgraduate students. These findings provide a foundation for incorporating self-compassion within

higher education settings. Postgraduate students experiencing symptoms of, or at risk of, academic burnout are encouraged to apply self-compassion techniques to reduce their burnout. Based on the results of this study, future researchers need to examine the self-compassion approach over a long-term, in-depth period to determine its further effects. In addition, it is necessary to add a comparison group to strengthen the finding that self-compassion is the only variable influencing the treatment. Additionally, lecturers teaching at the postgraduate level could consider integrating self-compassion procedures into their teaching models to help students manage and reduce academic burnout. Higher education institutions could also develop self-compassion intervention programs as part of their academic initiatives, offering them as structured activities to help students reduce academic burnout.

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