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Self-compassion and social functioning of people – research review

Abstract: *Self-compassion is considered to be a healthy and adaptive attitude towards oneself, occurring both as a feature, as well as a state. Self-compassionate attitude towards oneself is composed of: a) kindness and understanding given to oneself b) mindfulness of one's own experiences and c) a sense of community of experiences with humanity. Compassion towards oneself is structurally and functionally distinct from the self-commiseration and self-pity that lead to worse adaptation. Research shows that self-compassion is associated with better regulation of negative emotions. Neff (2003 a) in her theoretical assumption states that due to more effective emotion regulation, people with a higher level of self-compassion can generally cope better with reality. Therefore a question arises as to what the relationship is between a compassionate attitude towards oneself and social functioning of people. This article is a review of research that has been conducted so far regarding relations between self-compassion and the various dimensions of social functioning.*

Key words: *self-compassion, social functioning*

In the world of Western psychology a trend towards searching for a healthy attitude regarding oneself and a good relationship with oneself has become apparent. The search for an alternative attitude was associated with more and more frequent voices emerging in the world of science criticising theories of positive adaptive connotations of high self-esteem (Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996; Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003; Damon, 1995; McMillan, Singh & Somonetta, 1994; Seligman, 1995; Swann, 1996; Neff, 2003a,b; Leary et al., 2007; Dzwonkowska, Lachowicz-Tabaczek & Łaguna, 2008; Dzwonkowska, 2011, 2013, 2014). As a component of alternative exploration some interesting conceptualizations have emerged, such as *self-respect* (Seligman, 1995), *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1990), *true self-esteem* (Deci & Ryan, 1995), and *personal character* (Damon, 1995; see: Neff, 2003 a). A useful concept associated with compassion towards oneself (*self-compassion*) may be found in Buddhist philosophy (Bennett-Goleman, 2001; Brown, 1999; Hanh, 1997; Kornfield, 1993; Rosenberg, 2000; Rutledge, 1997; Salzberg, 1997; Wallace, 1999; see: Neff, 2003 a). The definition of self-compassion is analogous to

the general definition of compassion. The compassion of a person towards others exists when he or she encounters situations related to the suffering of people, and he or she does not ignore it or avoid people who are going through such difficult situation but rather experiences the feeling of kindness and concern, nonjudgmental attitude and the understanding that such situations are common within the universal human experience (Neff, 2003 a). In Buddhism, the concept of compassion towards people and compassion towards oneself has been featured for hundreds of years; however, it is a relatively new construct in the Western psychology. The concept of compassion towards oneself (self-compassion), was proposed in the American literature by Neff (2003a, b), and in Poland it was discussed by Dzwonkowska (2008, 2011, 2013, 2014). Neff (2003a, s.224) understands self-compassion as being open and responsive to one's own suffering, while experiencing feelings of concern and kindness towards oneself, adopting understanding and nonjudgmental attitudes towards one's own imperfections and failures, becoming aware of the fact that one's own experience is a part of the universal human experience. Self-compassion is a different approach

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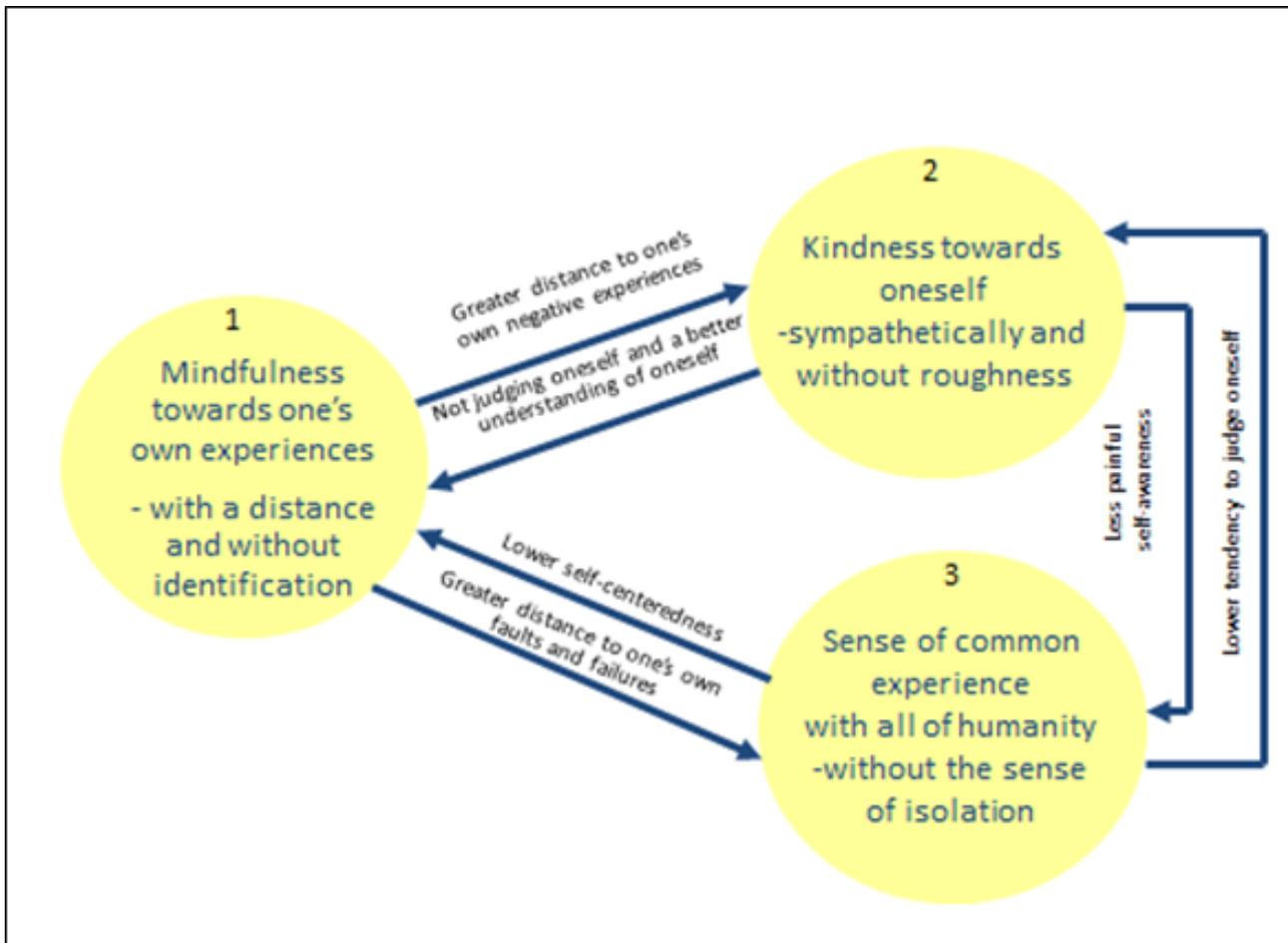
to oneself than pity or feeling sorry for oneself (self-pity) and the feeling of sadness and grief towards oneself in a situation of physical or mental suffering (Stöber, 2003). People feeling sorry for themselves, unlike those who are compassionate towards themselves, feel alienated from other people and are immersed in their own problems. They do not see that other people have similar problems, but they think that only they encounter misfortune. On the other hand, when other people experience unpleasant situations, self-pitying people enjoy that it is someone else who encountered something unpleasant. Pity towards oneself is the result of self-centeredness and a sense of isolation from others, and it causes even more intense personal suffering. Self-compassion allows a person to see the similarity between one's own and someone else's experiences without a sense of detachment from the rest of humanity and without feeling unpleasant tension. And this may be the way to truly reduce one's suffering (Neff, 2003 a).

Compassion towards oneself is characterized by a lack of need for comparisons with other people and since it is a less evaluative and less critical approach to oneself it can lead to a greater tolerance and involve making smarter attributions to one's own behaviour and the behaviour of others (Neff, 2003a,b; Neff, Hsieh & Dejjterat, 2005; Leary et al., 2007). This approach involves focusing on consciously focusing on one's own difficult and painful

feelings and not rejecting the emotions, but attempting to understand in order to approach them rationally and control them. Moreover, self-compassion requires the mindfulness, understood as a thought-out look at one's situation, oneself, and one's emotional state without undue rumination (Neff, 2003a, b, 2004).

Compassion towards oneself can be either a feature or a condition (Neff 2003a, b; Neff, Hsieh & Dejjterat, 2005; Leary et al., 2007). Neff (2003a, b) indicates three components of self-compassion: 1) understanding and kindness for oneself in a situation of pain or suffering (self-kindness), 2) seeing one's own experience as a part of experience of all the people (common humanity), and 3) awareness of one's own experiences, thoughts and feelings instead of over-identification with them (mindfulness). The first dimension - kindness and forbearance (self-kindness) is the attitude to 'I', which is based on the understanding of one's own weaknesses and mistakes. It manifests itself in experiencing kindness, care and goodness towards oneself in difficult times without judging and evaluating oneself. Awareness of the fact that it is not always possible to be able to fulfil one's own expectations and ideals allows to avoid frustration, stress, and exaggerated self-criticism. The opposite of this is judging oneself and excessive self-criticism. The second dimension of shared experience (common humanity) is the interpretation of one's own

Figure 1. Theoretical model of self-compassion (Dzwonkowska, 2013, p. 304)



experience as part of the overall experience of humanity, a sense of common fate with people in the context of one's own experiences. Such understanding of one's position prevents the formation of frustration and irritation in the event of failure; it is to prevent the global perception of isolation, loneliness, and belief that one is the only person in the world who makes mistakes and suffers. The opposite of this is the perception of one's position with a sense of isolation from the world- as a separated, isolated state of the unit. The third dimension is a mindful consciousness (mindfulness), that is a patient awareness of one's own feelings and experiences, without attempts to criticize, control, suppress and repress them. This is a mindful perception of one's feelings, due to which a person can gain distance from oneself. The opposite to this is an exaggerated identification with one's own experiences, especially negative ones, with one's own flaws, weaknesses and mistakes. According to Neff (2003a, b), the above described dimensions of self-compassion, despite the fact that they are separate concepts by definition and in theory, affect each other and interact with each other to create one common variable. A graphical model of the construct developed on the basis of Neff's conceptualization (2003a, b) is shown in Figure 1 (Dzwonkowska, 2013, p. 304).

In theory, mindfulness towards one's own experiences allows a greater distance from one's own negative experiences, which is associated with greater kindness towards oneself and a sense of community in the context of one's own experiences with all of humanity. Less frequent tendency to judge oneself leads to a reduction in self-criticism, an increase in the likelihood of understanding oneself (cf. Jopling, 2000; see: Neff, 2003a), which contributes to greater kindness towards oneself (Dzwonkowska, 2013). In addition, mindfulness prevents self-centeredness that causes a sense of isolation from the rest of humanity, and therefore increased mindfulness of a unit contributes to the sense of common connection in one's experiences with others (cf. Elkind, 1969; see: Neff, 2003a). Mindfulness increases through a greater kindness towards oneself and a stronger sense of community; also the distance from one's own experiences increases. The level of negative emotional states is reduced by a greater sense of kindness towards oneself, and thus a tendency to judge or criticise oneself is less frequent. This allows a person to focus more on the mindfulness towards oneself (Fredrickson, 2001; see: Neff, 2003a). A distant and mindful attitude towards one's own emotions and thoughts is associated with the increasing awareness of the broader context of one's own experiences (Dzwonkowska, 2013). What strengthens the sense of isolation from others is a rigorous evaluation of oneself by increasing self-awareness and highlighting the sense of "I" (cf. Brown, 1999; see: Neff 2003a). Painful self-consciousness is weakened by kindness towards oneself, which enhances the sense of community with others (cf. Fromm, 1963; see: Neff, 2003a). The tendency to judge oneself and others decreases with the realization that suffering and mistakes making happen to all people (cf. Rubin, 1975; see: Neff, 2003a).

Neff (2003b) has developed a tool to measure compassionate attitude towards oneself as a feature. Scale SCS consists of 26 claims and six subscales: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, over-identification. The subjects respond to these claims on 5-point scales, determining the frequency of appearance of specific symptoms. It is a tool with a high reliability and, as such, is often used in the studies. Research on the role of self-compassion consistently show that it is related to a better functioning of people in different areas of psychology (see review: Dzwonkowska, 2011, 2013, 2014). More self-compassionate persons show higher levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and optimism, and less neuroticism, avoidance and self-criticism. These individuals have a lower tendency to experience painful states of public self-consciousness, have higher overall self-esteem, and at the same time are more stable and independent than people with a low level of compassion towards themselves. Self-compassionate people are therefore more sympathetic towards themselves, and at the same time more mindful towards their own thoughts and feelings. They are also willing to understand their experiences as part of human existence, and have more optimal and adaptive emotional responses. Self-Compassionate individuals have a higher level of emotional intelligence, better control over their emotions and a higher ability to regulate their moods. They are more attentive and usually display better mood, experience more positive affective states, and feel higher life satisfaction and better mental and spiritual well-being. In general, they are happier than people with low rates of self-compassion. Studies also show lower rates of negative affectivity in case of individuals with a higher level of compassion towards themselves. These individuals have fewer symptoms of depression, experience fewer negative affective states, and are accompanied by the fear of failure to a lesser extent. They are also less likely to feel the fear of intimacy with people and to avoid such close proximity. Moreover, what is observed in such cases is a lower tendency to suppress thoughts, ruminations, to feel the symptoms of stress, loneliness and emotional deregulation, as well as a weaker tendency to feel anger and to respond with aggression (review: Dzwonkowska, 2011, 2013, 2014).

The question arises as to what the relationship is between the social functioning of a person and his or her kindness and mindfulness towards oneself, along with a sense of overall community of human experiences. Compassion towards oneself is different from harshness towards oneself, auto-criticism, tendency towards self-centeredness, selfishness, or narcissism, while the evidence shows that the SC is associated with adaptive emotional functioning. Researchers therefore speculate that people with higher indices of SC function much better and more adaptively in different contexts of relationships with other people. Since 2003, that is from the emergence of the construct of self-compassion in Western psychology and Neff's (2003b) development of a reliable measuring tool, researchers have conducted a series of studies on the relationship between SCS and the social functioning of people. Up until that time, mainly studies on the nature

of the correlation were carried out. The general patterns of social functioning of self-compassionate individuals, as well as the functioning of the various types of interpersonal relationships were discussed. A synthetic review of research on the correlates of compassion towards oneself and social functioning is shown in Table 1.

The research conducted so far has shown that self-compassion is in fact associated with a more optimal and adaptive social functioning of people. More self-compassionate persons obtained significantly higher rates on the social functioning scale, which is a subscale of the MOS Short-Form Health Survey tool (SF-36) created by Ware & Sherbourne (1992, see: Allen, Goldwasser & Leary, 2012). Studies with the use of the Short Version of the Compassionate Love Scale for Humanity (CLS), otherwise known as the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (Hwang, Plante, & Lackey, 2008; see: Neff & Pommier, 2013), has shown that more self-compassionate people (both women and men) have a greater propensity for compassion towards others. A higher self-compassion is also linked to a higher propensity for altruism measured in Rushton Altruism Scale (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981; see: Neff & Pommier, 2013) and a greater willingness to forgive other people's mistakes, which was measured using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005; see: Neff, & Pommier, 2013). In general, self-compassionate individuals feel more satisfaction with interpersonal relationships, which was measured using the RAS scale (the commonly used Relationship Assessment Scale by Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998; see: Neff & Beretvas, 2013), as well as the Relational Well-Being Scale (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998; see: Neff & Beretvas, 2013). The subjects indicated a sense of well-being experienced in contacts with other people. Self-compassionate people are less shy, as was demonstrated by the studies conducted using Shyness Scale (Cheek & Buss, 1981; see: Dzwonkowska, 2014); they are also less bashful, which in turn was indicated by research carried out with the Internalized Shame Scale (ISS) (Cook, 1987; see Reilly, Rochlen & Awad, 2014). Individuals with higher compassion towards themselves are less angry in dealing with people (Neff & Vonk, 2009), and also seem less prone to encounter violent reactions from interaction partners. Higher levels of self-compassion is associated with a lower propensity towards submissive behaviour in contacts with others. This variable was measured using the Submissive Acts Scale (SAS Gilbert & Allan, 1994; see: Akin, 2009). In this study, relations of the six SCS scales with a tendency towards submissiveness were analysed separately and it was found that people with higher rates of self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness are less submissive in dealing with others. On the other hand, people with higher rates of self-judgment, isolation and over-identification are more submissive. Other studies have similarly shown lower submissiveness in interpersonal relations among more self-compassionate individuals, because it turned out that they have a greater ability to refuse others in circumstances uncomfortable for them (Bernard & Curry, 2011). Measurement with the use of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1980;

see: Neff, & Pommier, 2013) showed a higher interpersonal reactivity in those with higher rates of SCS. Both women and men have a greater tendency to empathic reactions and accepting the perspective of other people, and less prone to experience personal distress when they see a suffering person. In close relationships more self-compassionate persons evaluate their partners higher in terms of emotions, warmth and mindfulness that such partners express in a relationship. On the other hand, they are more sceptical about the tendency of their partners to dominate and criticise. The studies have been carried out using Intimate Bond Measure (IBM) (Wilhelm & Parker, 1988; see: Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Other research has shown that the more self-compassionate the examined people are, the more they were inclined to believe that their partners exhibit more positive behaviours in their relationships. In the case of examined individuals, studies have shown that rating colleagues in terms of their competence is also influenced by the level of self-compassion. More self-compassionate subjects tend to express more positive social assessment, because the higher the SCS rate of a subject, the more he or she believes his or her colleagues to be competent.

Summary

Self-compassion, or kindness and understanding given to mindfulness of one's own experiences and a sense of community of experience with the humanity, is a response to oneself, the role of which was brought to attention by Kristin Neff, who in 2003 published the first paper on the subject (Neff, 2003 a). Compassion towards oneself is structurally and functionally distinct from the self-commiseration and self-pity that lead to worse adaptation and it is also a different construct from self-assessment. Self-esteem and compassion towards oneself are correlated, but different in terms theoretical meaning, which is confirmed by empirical data (see: Neff, 2003, a, b, Bernard & Curry, 2011; Leary et al., 2007; Dzwonkowska, 2011). Neff (2003 a) in her theoretical assumption states that due to more effective regulation of emotions, people with a higher level of self-compassion can generally cope better with reality. Studies consistently confirm these theoretical predictions and show that compassion for oneself is associated with those dimensions of personality and emotional functioning, which determine better psychological adjustment. Self-compassionate persons are in fact extroverted, conciliatory, diligent and optimistic to a higher degree, and less neurotic, anxious, self-critical, and less prone to experience public self-awareness. Compassion towards oneself is positively correlated with positive dimensions of affective functioning, and negatively with those that are negative. People who are more self-compassionate have higher emotional intelligence, they cope better with their own emotions and better recognize their own feelings, experience more positive emotions and moods, and also feel greater satisfaction with life. Higher compassion towards oneself correlates with lower rates of negative emotionality. More self-compassionate persons generally feel less negative emotional states,

Table1. Correlations between self-compassion and variables of social functioning

	Tools and sources	Variables	r
1.	Social functioning subscale of the MOS Short-Form Health Survey (SF-36) (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992; see: Allen, Goldwasser & Leary, 2012)	<i>Social functioning</i>	0,28**
2.	<i>Short Version of the Compassionate Love Scale for Humanity</i> (CLS) otherwise known as the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (Hwang, Plante, & Lackey, 2008; see: Neff & Pommier, 2013).	<i>Compassion for humanity</i> • <i>Males</i> • <i>Females</i>	0,29* 0,18*
3.	<i>Rushton Altruism Scale</i> (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981; see: Neff, & Pommier, 2013).	<i>Altruism</i> • <i>Males</i> • <i>Females</i>	0,22* 0,25*
4.	<i>Heartland Forgiveness Scale</i> (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005; see: Neff, & Pommier, 2013).	<i>Forgiveness</i> • <i>Males</i> • <i>Females</i>	0,42* 0,43*
5.	<i>The commonly used Relationship Assessment Scale</i> (RAS) (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998; see: Neff & Beretvas, 2013)	<i>Relationship satisfaction</i>	0,24*
6.	<i>The Relational Well-Being Scale</i> (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998; see: Neff & Beretvas, 2013)	<i>Relational well-being</i>	0,15*
7.	<i>Shyness Scale</i> (Cheek & Buss, 198; see: Dzwonkowska, 2014)	<i>Trait shyness</i>	-0,44*
8.	<i>The Internalized Shame Scale</i> (ISS) (Cook, 1987; see: Reilly, Rochlen & Awad, 2014)	<i>Trait shame - global negative evaluations of the self, and the frequency with which respondents experience particular thoughts or feelings related to shame.</i>	-0,58*
9.	<i>Anger Response Inventory</i> (Tangney et al., 1996; see: Neff & Vonk, 2009)	<i>Anger</i>	-0,31**
10.	<i>Conflict Tactics Scale</i> (Straus & Gelles, 1990; see: Neff & Beretvas, 2013)	<i>Verbal aggression - the degree to which partners were perceived to be verbally aggressive in the relationship</i>	-0,46*
11.	<i>Submissive Acts Scale SAS</i> (Gilbert & Allan, 1994; see: Akin, 2009) <i>SAS was adapted to the Turkish population by Şahin and Şahin (1992; see: Akin, 2009)</i>	<i>Submissive acts correlate with SCS as following:</i> • <i>Self-kindness</i> • <i>Self-judgment</i> • <i>Common humanity</i> • <i>Isolation</i> • <i>Mindfulness</i> • <i>Over-identification</i>	-0,28** 0,67** -0,29** 0,73** -0,26** 0,70**
12.	Barnard & Curry (2011)	<i>Ability to say no to requests</i>	0,21**
13.	<i>The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)</i> (Davis, 1980; see: Neff, & Pommier, 2013).	<i>The Interpersonal Reactivity</i> • <i>Empathetic concern</i> <i>Males</i> <i>Females</i> • <i>Perspective Taking</i> <i>Males</i> <i>Females</i> • <i>Personal distress</i> <i>Males</i> <i>Females</i>	0,31* 0,17* 0,42* 0,39* -0,44* -0,35*
14.	<i>Intimate Bond Measure (IBM)</i> (Wilhelm & Parker, 1988; see: Neff & Beretvas, 2013)	<i>Intimate bond in relationship</i> • <i>Reports of partners' behavior toward the self, affection, warmth, and consideration</i> • <i>Control dimension reflects partners' dominance and criticism</i>	0,19* -0,26*
15.	<i>Autonomy and Relatedness Inventory (ARI)</i> (Hall & Kiernan, 1992; Schaefer & Edgerton, 1982; see: Neff & Beretvas, 2013)	<i>Extent to which partners are perceived to display positive relationship behaviors</i> • <i>Acceptance</i> • <i>Autonomy</i> • <i>Detachment</i> • <i>Dominance</i>	0,24* 0,20* 0,34* -0,23* -0,38*
16.	<i>The Perceived Competence for Learning Scale</i> (Williams & Deci, 1996; see: Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005)	<i>Perceived competence of others</i>	0,35**

Note. * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$

fewer depressive symptoms, less stress symptoms, and in general less fear, including less fear from close relations with people and are less likely to avoid others (see review: Dzwonkowska, 2013).

An overview of research findings on personality and emotional correlates of SCS published to date leads to the conclusion that, as assumed in the theoretical assumptions, self-compassion is actually a healthy and adaptive response to oneself. This is an important regulator of emotional functioning, which leads to proactive strategies focused on emotions to deal with difficulties. A self-compassionate person does not need to avoid painful experiences, on the contrary, he or she can mindfully observe and deal with them. It seems likely that, as stated by Neff (2003 a), a compassionate attitude enables the transformation of negative emotions into more positive feelings, which facilitates a better understanding of own situation and contributes to more adequate and effective behaviour.

Therefore, researchers discuss the problem of how people with higher self-compassion function socially and deal with interpersonal relations. An overview of research presented in this paper consistently shows that compassion towards oneself plays an important and adaptive role in social life as well. Correlational studies have shown that self-compassionate people obtain significantly higher scores in terms of overall social functioning. Such persons are more prone to compassion towards other people, altruism and forgiveness of misconduct by others. Persons who are more sympathetic towards themselves, more mindful and with a greater sense of community of experience with humanity, in general feel more satisfaction with interpersonal relationships and significantly higher levels of well-being, the sources of which are the relationships with other people. In relationships with others, a compassionate person is less shy and less bashful, probably due to the fact that they less frequently experience painful public self-awareness. They are less focused on the fact that others may misjudge and discard them because they experience lower levels of social anxiety. People who have more compassion towards oneself, on the one hand, are less angry and less prone to exhibit aggressive behaviour towards other people, but on the other hand, they are less submissive in interpersonal contacts and have a greater ability to refuse others in circumstances uncomfortable for them. Such individuals are also more empathetic in dealing with people and have a more positive attitude towards interaction partners, seeing more of their positive qualities and behaviours less of their negative ones.

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