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The Effect of Self-Awareness Training on Self-Compassion of Girl Students in Ahvaz Gifted High Schools

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This study was designed to assess the effect of training self-awareness skills on the self-compassion of girl students in Ahvaz high schools for gifted students. This study was conducted using multi-step random sampling including 30 girl students in two groups of experimental (n=15) and control (n=15). The self-compassion questionnaire was the tool of the study. The one way ANCOVA test was used for the analysis of the data. Two groups filled the questionnaire at the pre-test and post-test stages. The experimental group underwent eight sessions of training about self-awareness skills during two months. The results of the study showed that self-awareness training had effects on self-compassion. After a month at the follow-up stage, the results were stable which indicated the stability of the effect of the self-awareness training on self-compassion.

Keywords: self-awareness, gifted students, self-compassion, high school

Compassion and self-esteem have close meanings; hence, some scientific resources consider them to be one (ShahrAray, 2012). However, according to a definition by Neff, compassion is a different concept from self-esteem. Compassion has three

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components including: kindness against judgment, common humanity against isolation, and mindfulness against excessive replication. The combination of these three components leads to the characteristics of someone who loves him/herself (Neff, Kirkpatrick, &Rude, 2007).

Self-kindness suggests that people act kindness with their failures, shortcomings, and weaknesses, instead of criticizing and rigid judgments. Human common sense refers to the point where one should confront his/her weakness and shortcomings and believe that other individuals also have such weaknesses and shortcomings that could result in problems and adverse outcomes. Mindfulness is being aware of one's shortcomings and weaknesses without mental rumination and self-absorption (Akin, 2014). In fact, such a person neither ignores his/her weaknesses nor deep engages. On the other hand, in the mindfulness, individuals have a little focus on weaknesses and their mental rumination; which is usually seen when they confront with weaknesses and failures in the context of self values. Knowing our emotions is a factor that helps us have a good and successful life and become satisfaction from our self.

Research showed an overall magnitude of the relationship between self-compassion and well-being. The relationship was stronger for cognitive and psychological well-being compared to affective well-being (Zessin, Dickhäuser, and Garbade, 2015), and another study showed the role of self-compassion as a predictor of social safeness. According to this study social safeness was predicted positively by mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity. Further, isolation predicted social safeness in a negative way (Akin, Akin, 2015). Increase in self-compassion predicted reductions in perceived stress, rumination, depressive symptoms, and negative affect, and conversely, increases in positive affect and life satisfaction (Brian, 2016). It

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seems that these factors can be useful in different life aspects of gifted students.

We should recognize our positive characteristics, capabilities and talents and be proud of them. We should understand our negative characteristics and weak points, accept them, and try to modify them. These are self-awareness skills which help us try to reach our goals (Raeisi & Salehi, 2008). Previous studies have shown that compassion has a direct correlation with positive characteristics such as optimism and welfare, and that it has inverse correlation with anxiety and depression. An intelligent person can recognize her/his emotions, strength and weak aspects, deep sensitivity to experiences, and understand the content of experience and individuality; but if such a person has a lower self-awareness level, he/she cannot accept the his/her self intelligent ability, and ignoring it (Rafat Panah & Seif, 2014).

Research has been demonstrated that despite the fact that intelligent individuals, make fewer mistakes compared to the others; they also have less assessment about their performance. Low and negative assessment about their performance by others, increases the anxiety which usually leads to not seeing their performance completely, and even if they act perfectly, they still hesitate at the start of the activity. On the other hand, these individuals have more understanding of environmental tensions. If their parents have high expectations then they feel the lack of the ability. This feeling may lead to less self-confidence, sleep disorders, and an increase in the risk of depression. This study was designed to assess the effects of training self-awareness skills on self-compassion of girls in high schools for gifted students.

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Method

This case control study was designed with the pre-test and post-test method. The statistical society was on girl students in the talented high schools of Ahvaz, Iran, in 2014-2015 (total 982 students). To obtain a sample size, we applied random multistage sampling. We had total three talented high schools for girls in our city. One high school was selected randomly from the three mentioned schools; and then from first, second, third and pre-university levels, the first and second levels were chosen randomly. Overall 170 students were recruited. After distributing the self-compassion questionnaire among students, 30 students who had lower scores in self-compassion were randomly chosen. These students were randomly divided into two groups of experimental (n=15) and control (n=15). The training period was eight sessions including self-awareness skills training. Experimental and control groups participated at post-test stage. After training they were followed-up a month later. The mean and standard deviation for age in the experimental and control groups were 14.8± .56 and 14.64 ±.49 years, respectively.

Instrument

Self-compassion Questionnaire (Neff, 2003). This tool contains 26 questions to assess the level of self-compassion that had been designed by Neff. It has six sections including self-kindness, self-judgment, human common sense, isolation, mindfulness, and magnification assessing the quality of relationship between person and their experiences. The response was 5 Likert scale choices, 1 indicates never and 5 implies always. The general reliability of the questionnaire was reported .92, and for subscales from .81 to .75 by Neff (2003). The

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validity of this questionnaire was .62 that was reported by Khosravi, Sadeghi, and Yabandeh (2014).

To conduct this study, permission was obtained from the Department of Education and National Organization for Talent Training in the province of Ahvaz, Khuzestan. The sessions were held once a week for eight weeks (two months) (Shahr Aray, 2013, Nouri 2010). The sessions of the training period are described in Table 1.

Results

The mean score for self-compassion was statistically significant between experimental and control at post-test at the follow-up. The analysis of one-way ANCOVA at post-test at follow-up stage showed significant differences between the experimental and control groups for the self-compassion score.

The normal distribution test for self-compassion was confirmed for both experimental and control groups. Table 3, 4 show the results for the Kolmogrov-Smirnov, Box and Leven tests for experimental and control groups.

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Table 1
The Description of Sessions of Training Period

Session	Description
First	The first session was dedicated to introduce the self-awareness concept (emotions, weaknesses and strengths, self-awareness requirements, realistic goals, valuable criteria, and identification processes), and orally expressing the properties and positive characteristics by the students.
Second	This session contains issues including understanding emotions, knowing special emotions such as depression, anxiety, the spectrum of emotions, harmful criticism issues, and training the skills to control them.
Third	This session comprises the issue of training cognitive distortions (more generalization, labeling, and emotional reasoning).
Forth	This was dedicated for training a three column table containing self-talk, the distortions and denials, and also training identity and its types. The goal of this training was weakening the damaging criticism.
Fifth	This contains training of self-confidence concept and human values which are the introduction of self-compassion.
Sixth	This contains training self-compassion and introducing its components, its relationship with damaging criticism, and the goal of self-compassion.
Seventh	The methods for increasing self-confidence (including identifying the disturbing emotions, imaginations, goal setting, planning, and self-hypnosis), kindness and self-compassion.
Eighth	Training issues, including the concept of empathy, applying empathy, disability in empathy, and the method of empathy.

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Table 2
The Mean Score of Self-Compassion in Pre-Test, Post- Test and Follow-Up for Two Groups

	Pre-test		Post-test		Post-test (follow-up)		P value
	Exper	Control	Exper	Control	Exper	Control	
Self-Compassion Score	68.13± 6.73	64.6± 8.12	71.2± 6.65	64.26± 7.33	71.13± 4.4	68.6± 7.61	**.026**

Table 3
Kolmogrov-Smirnov Test for Case and Control Groups

	Case		Control	
	Value	P value	Value	P value
Self-compassion	.94	.53	.63	.78

As shown in Table 3 the p value more than .05 indicates compatibility with normal distribution. Table 4 confirms the equality of variances.

Table 4
Box Test about Equal Variances Assumed

Box	F	df1	df2	P value
.673	.207	3	1.41	.89

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Table 5
Covariance Analysis for Self-Compassion between Groups at the End of Training Period

Variable	Sum of squares	DF	Mean of squares	F	P value	Squares	Sum squared Error	Statistical Power	DF error	Mean Squared Error
Self-compassion	214.33	1	214.33	5.59	.026	.177	996.05	.62	30	**38.31**

Table 5 shows the results of one-way ANCOVA which indicates statistical difference between the score of self-compassion among groups (P< .05, F= 5.59).

Table 6
Covariance Analysis of Self-Compassion in Groups of Experimental and Control at Follow-Up

Variable	Sum of squares	Df	Mean of squares	F	P value	Squares	Sum squared error	Statistical power	df error	Mean squared error
Self-compassion	315.31	1	315.31	12.71	.001	.328	644.98	.92	30	24.8

To assess the reliability of the training course, both groups were followed-up for four weeks. The results of this assessment are presented in Table 6. Table 6 indicates statistical differences between groups at follow-up (F= 12.71, P= .001).

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Discussion

Hypothesis testing showed that self-awareness training affects self-compassion in intelligent girl students. Our findings were consistent with those of previous studies by Breins & Chen (2012); Neff, Kirkpatrick, &Rude (2007); and Saeedi, Ghorbani, Sarafraz, &Sharifian (2011). Saeedi, Ghorbani, Sarafraz, &Sharifian (2012) in their study believed that those individuals who have high self-compassion in unpleasant experiences, especially experiences containing social evaluation and comparison, experience less negative feelings by normalizing those experiences. In addition, the mindfulness component of self-compassion prevents a person from forming pessimistic thoughts and obsessive ruminations; therefore, it can decrease negative emotions. Likewise, they showed that people with high self-compassion accept negative events more easily because they judge themselves less strictly; their evaluations and reactions are more precise and in the line with their real performance; self-judgment in these individuals neither tend to be an exaggerated criticism nor is it a inflation self-defense .In the present study, we tried to reinforce the components of self-compassion using self-awareness training.

Intelligent students have a high ability in learning skills. In addition, in this group the probability of understating others feelings are high; and this is a result of having a high capability of learning due to precision and care. Precision and care for environmental events is a skill which needs training starting from childhood. Indeed the self-awareness skill rarely is considered. With this knowledge intelligent people are no exception regarding self-awareness skills. This leads to weakening the components of self-compassion and can be again strengthened by self-awareness training.

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The first explanation for the findings of the current study is that self-awareness training could reinforce the fact in intelligent students that all people have strengths and weaknesses despite their intelligence level. By finding positive and negative characteristics, they admitted that these are common issues among people without worrying or feeling ashamed of expressing and acceptation them as part of their characteristics. On the other hand, intelligent individuals have almost established social expectations within themselves and there is a high probability to have rigorous self-evaluation, therefore they show higher self-criticism.

Self-compassion can be debilitating by acting as a shield against self-criticism. Other explanations for findings of our study regarding self-awareness training of intelligent students especially in the field of accepting weaknesses as a human aspect and preventing self–criticism, could increase self-compassion. According to a study done by Breines & Chen (2012) there is no need to highlight self-evaluation which may prevent or postpone self-improvement motivation (Breines& Chen, 2012). During training sessions, students were gradually trained to increase their positive aspects and decrease the negative ones to help their personal growth. If they were not successful in this, they were trained to accept them as life may decrease them through passing time. Hence, self-awareness practices reasonably improve self-evaluation skills. In the present study, self-awareness training also led to concentrating on capabilities and preventing negative and stressful thoughts. The students of our study received practices about concentrating on current situations such as successes and failures as the common phenomena of the life. According to these practices, gifted students could find a more realistic view weaknesses, problems and shortcomings. As a result, participants consciously

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discussed about weaknesses instead of suppressing or ignoring them which increases mental rumination. Thus, they found more compassion in behaving themselves.

Finally there were considerable limitations in this research. At first lack of control over some factors such as parents' education level and perfectionism of the students could affect the achieved results. Also this research was only done on girls who were gifted students which limits the generalize ability of the study.

It is necessary to do research on comparing the effects of self-awareness training on gifted students' self-compassion improvement in both genders. It is recommended to do similar research on other groups of society who have well-known achievements and to compare the effects of self-awareness training on these groups with them with those of gifted students.

It is recommended to do research to cognize the vulnerabilities of gifted students independently and it is better to compare the gifted groups with similar groups.

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