

UNC-CH School of Social Work Clinical Lecture Series

Self-Compassion: A Heartfelt Response to our Own Suffering



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Where we are going ...

- ▶ What is self-compassion and how does it differ from self-esteem?
- ▶ Physiology of self-compassion
- ▶ Misgivings of self-compassion
- ▶ Caring for the caregiver
- ▶ Experiential exercises



Why is this relevant for social workers?

- ▶ Own self-care
- ▶ Helping clients promote own emotional well-being



How Would I Treat a Friend?



Definitions

Self-Compassion – In challenging times, treating yourself as you would treat a good friend (Neff, 2003).



Self-compassion

- Self-kindness vs. self-judgment
- Common humanity vs. isolation
- Mindfulness vs. over-identification

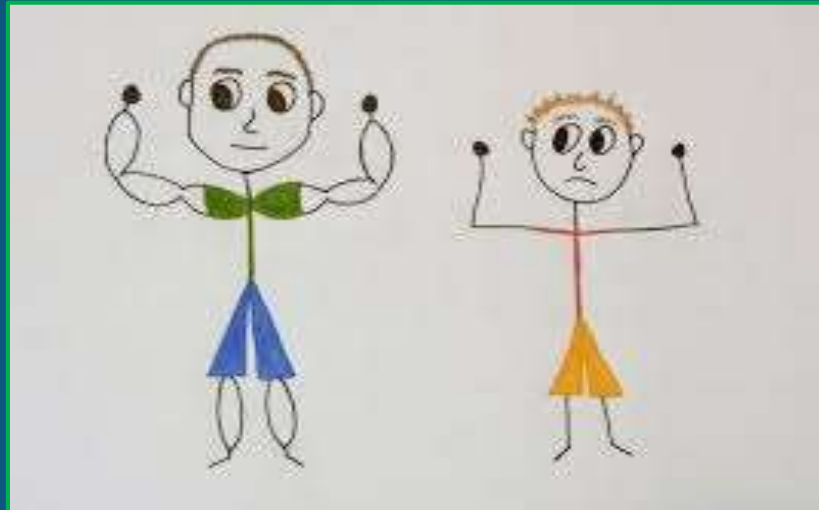


(Neff, 2003)

Self-esteem

“Global evaluation of self-worth”

- ▶ Pitfall #1: Comparing ourselves with others



What happens when we compare ourselves with others?



“Comparison is the thief of joy” - Roosevelt

Pitfall #2: Dependent on performance

- ▶ What happens when we fail?



Self-compassion

- ▶ An alternative way of relating to oneself
- ▶ Positives of self-esteem without the pitfalls



Self-compassion vs. Self-esteem

▶ Self-compassion:

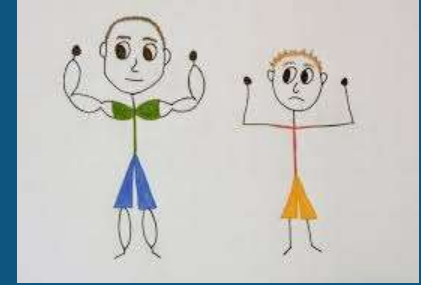
- ▶ Is there when you need it most
- ▶ Is not conditional

Safe and Secure



▶ Self-esteem:

- ▶ Entails comparing oneself with others
- ▶ Is dependent on performance



Superior and confident

Lovingkindness

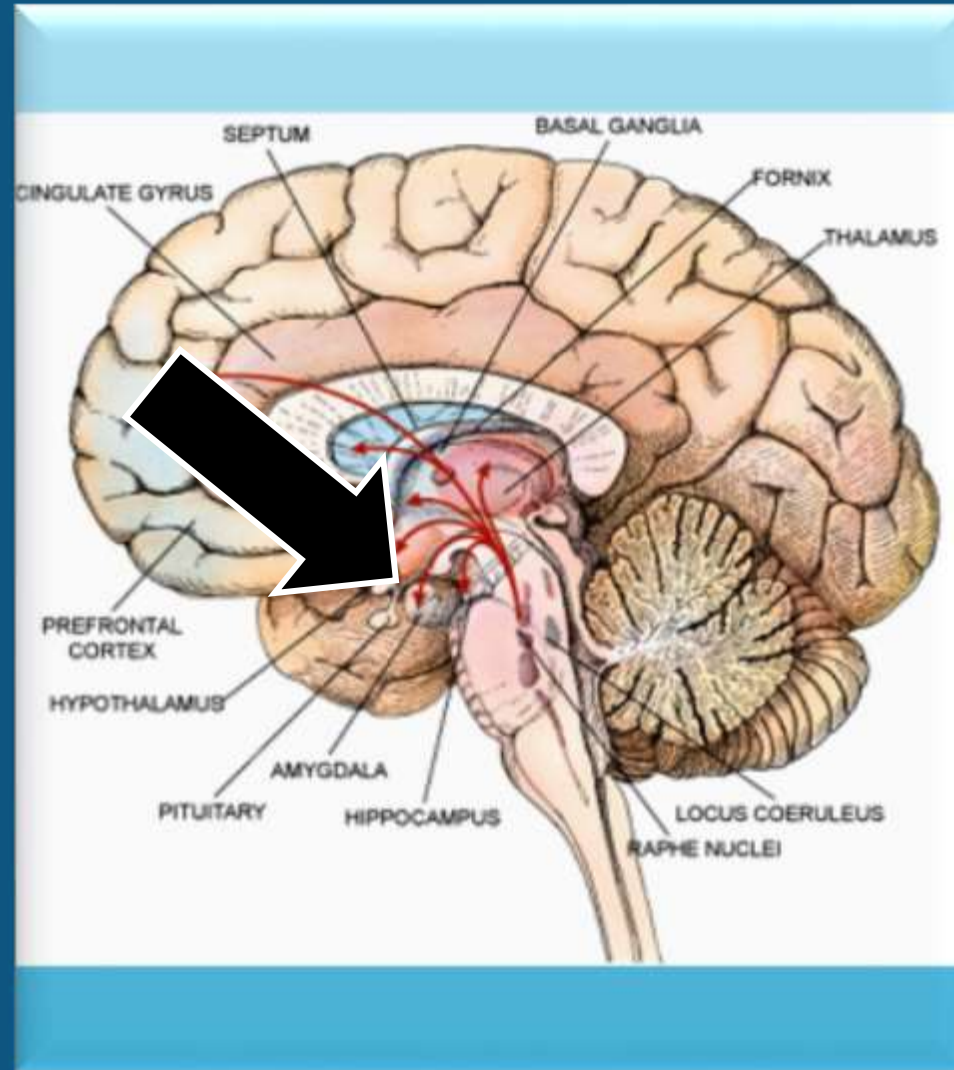


Physiology of Self-Compassion: Threat Defense System

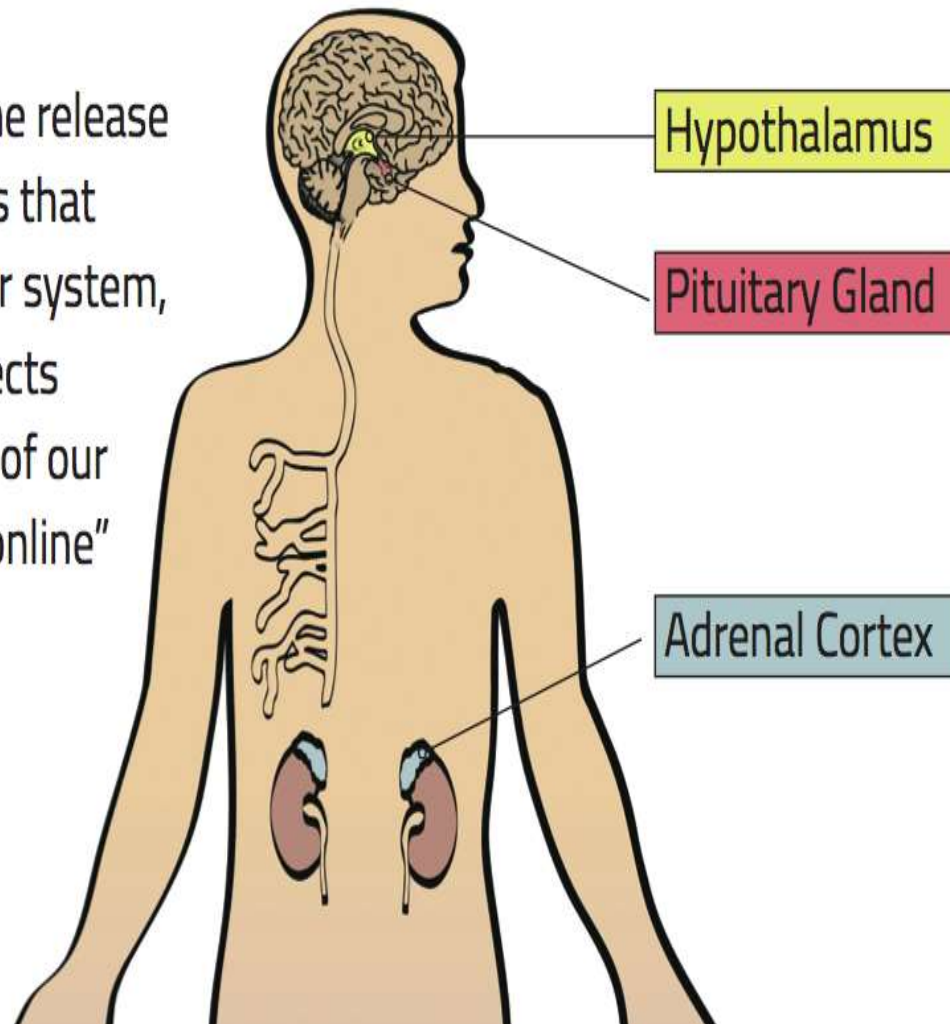
- ▶ Self-criticism → stress → fight/flight/freeze response



Stress is perceived in the brain



Results in the release of hormones that activates our system, but also affects which parts of our brains are "online"

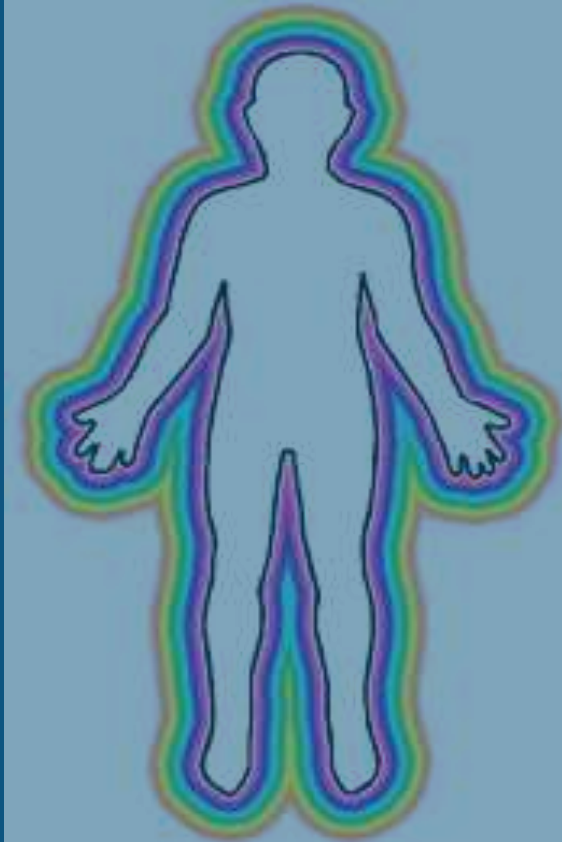


Hypothalamus

Pituitary Gland

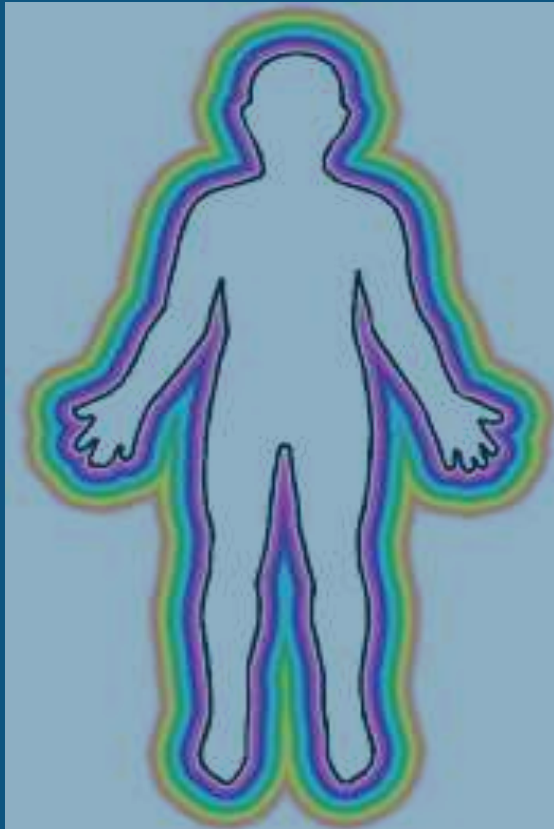
Adrenal Cortex

Stress is Experienced in the Body: Noticeable Effects



Pupils dilate
Mouth dryness
Neck/shoulder
tension
Rapid heartbeat
Rapid, shallow
breathing
Sweating

Stress is Experienced in the Body: Hidden Effects



Brain gets body
ready for action

Adrenaline
produced

Liver produces
glucose

Blood pressure rises

Mammalian Caregiving System

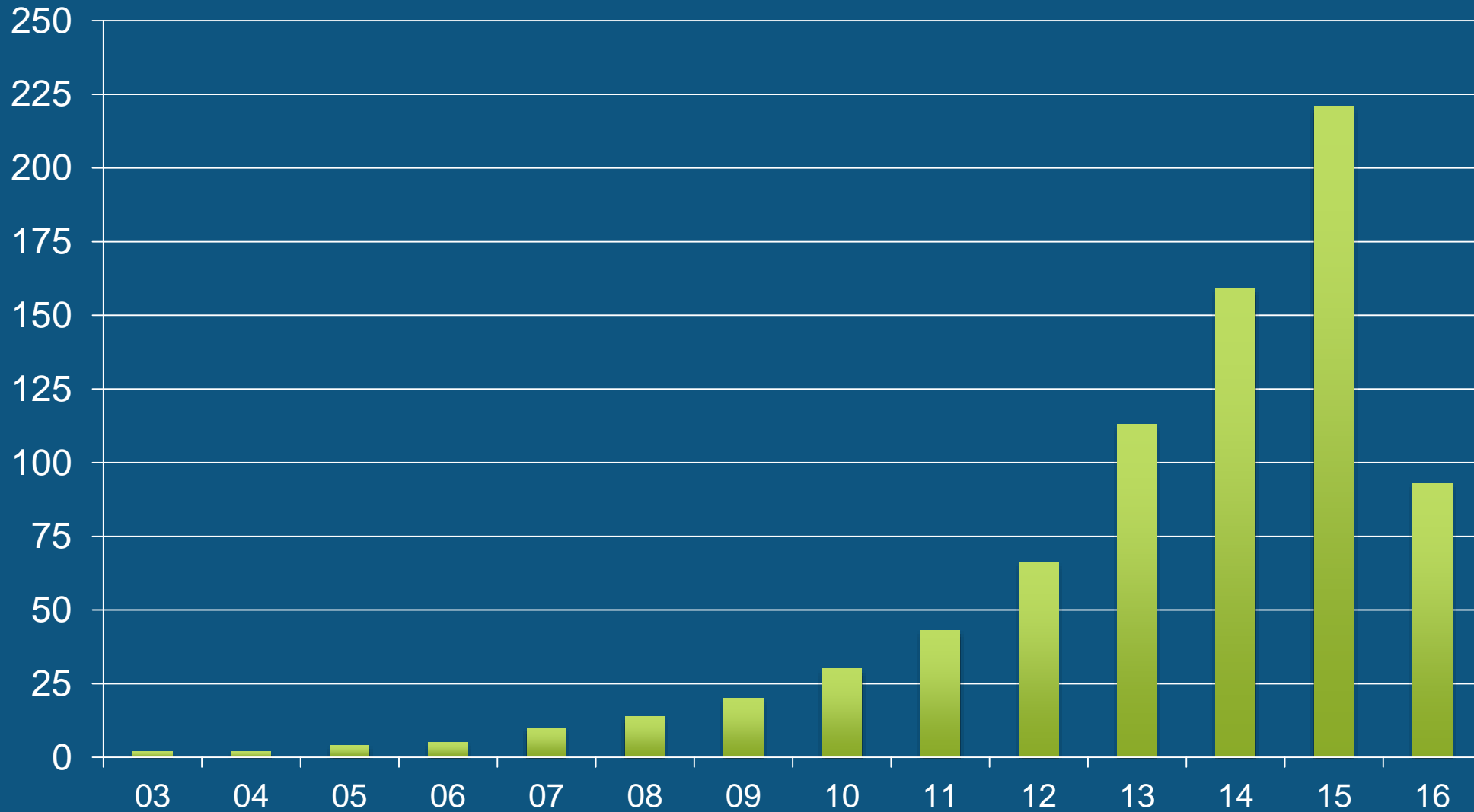
- ▶ Production of oxytocin and opiates – “feel good” hormones





**Soothing Touch &
Self-Compassion
Break**

Journal articles, chapters and dissertations examining self-compassion (N=866)



Misgivings of Self-Compassion

Won't I lose my motivation?

- ▶ Those with greater self-compassion:
 - ▶ More motivated to improve personal weaknesses, moral transgressions, and test performance (Breines & Chen, 2012)
 - ▶ Are more proactive (Akin, 2014)
 - ▶ Procrastinate less (Sirois, 2013)



Isn't this like self-pity? Or being selfish?

- ▶ Those high in self-compassion are more likely to:
 - ▶ Have greater perspective, empathic concern, altruism, compassion for humanity, readiness to forgive (Neff & Pommier, 2012)
 - ▶ Be more caring and supportive in romantic relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013)
 - ▶ Be more compassionate to others (Gustin & Wagner, 2012; Neff & Pommier, 2012)



Sounds like self-indulgence
to me ...



- ▶ Those high in self-compassion are more likely to:
 - ▶ Stick to one's diet (Adams & Leary, 2007)
 - ▶ Reduce smoking (Kelly, Zuroff, Foa, & Gilbert, 2009)
 - ▶ Seek medical health when needed (Terry & Leary, 2011)
 - ▶ Exercise (Magnus, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2010)

Self-compassion is weak.

- ▶ Those higher in self-compassion are better able to cope with:
 - ▶ trauma (Hiraoka et al., 2015; Zeller et al., 2014)
 - ▶ divorce (Sbarra, Smith, & Mehl, 2012)
 - ▶ chronic pain (Costa & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010)
 - ▶ academic failure (Neff, Hseih, & Dejitthirat, 2005)
 - ▶ child maltreatment (Játiva & Cerezo, 2014; Vettese et al., 2011)



Self-compassion & psychopathology

- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Stress



(Macbeth & Gumley, 2012)

Self-compassion and wellbeing

- ▶ Cognitive wellbeing
- ▶ Positive affect
- ▶ Negative affect
- ▶ Psychological wellbeing



(Zessin, Dickhauser, & Garbade, 2015)

Self-compassion predicts wellbeing

- ▶ State self-compassion → less negative affect
- ▶ Trait self-compassion → better overall wellbeing



(Zessin, Dickhauser, & Garbade, 2015)

Can self-compassion be cultivated?



Mindful Self-Compassion

- ▶ 8 week course
- ▶ Meets 1x/ week for 2.5 hours
- ▶ One 4 hour retreat
- ▶ Contains mindfulness, but focus is on self-compassion
- ▶ Guided meditations, experiential exercises



Center for
Mindful Self-Compassion

Hypotheses

1. Increases in:

- ▶ Mindfulness
- ▶ Self-compassion
- ▶ Compassion for others
- ▶ Social connectedness
- ▶ Happiness
- ▶ Life satisfaction

Decreases in:

- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Stress
- ▶ Avoidance

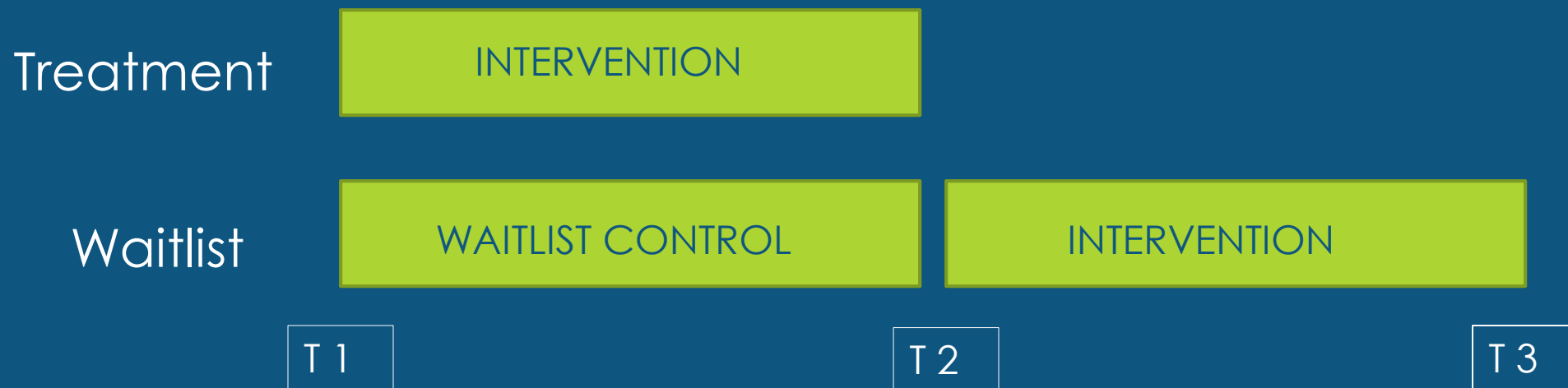


2. Increases in self-compassion would predict changes

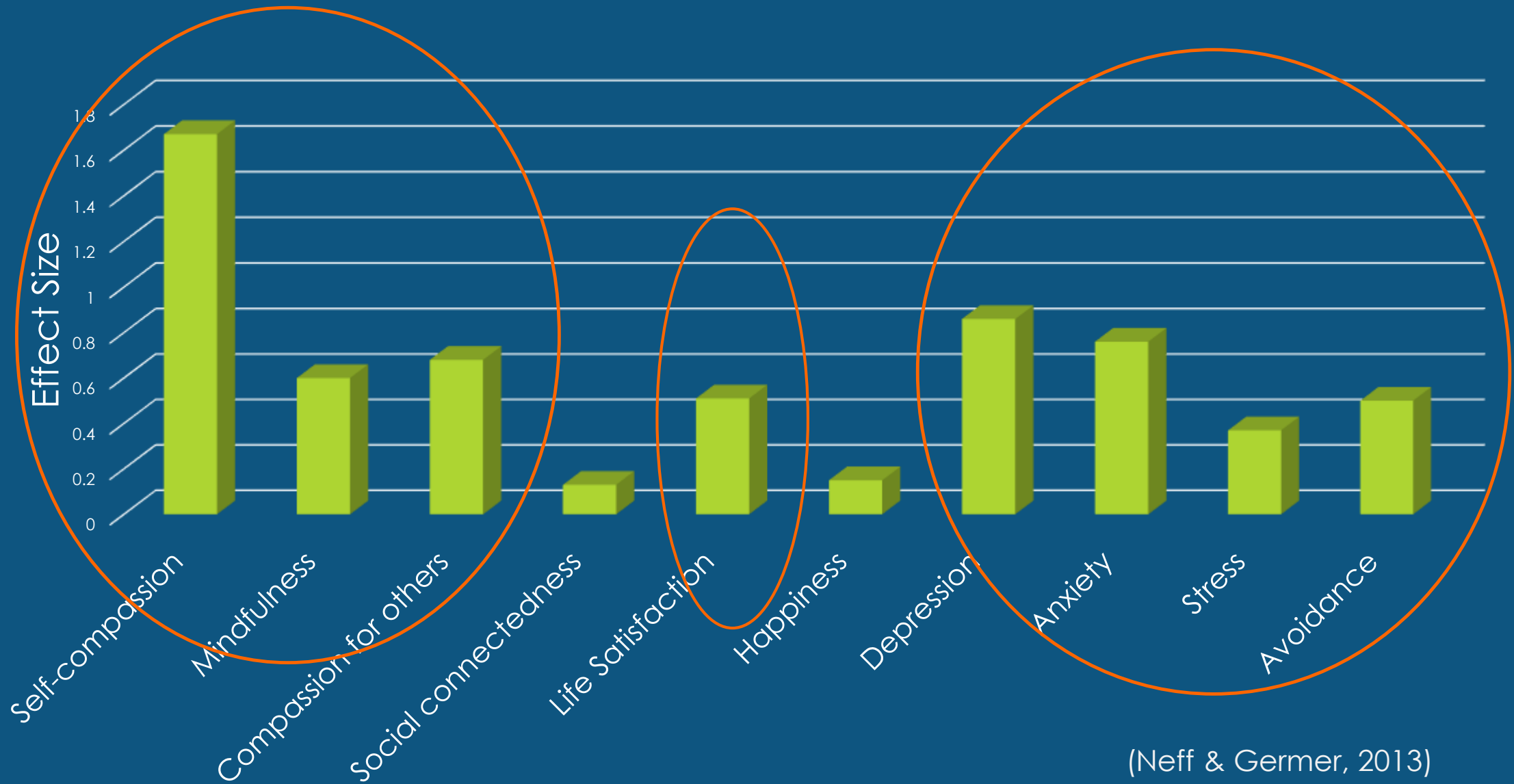
3. Amount of practice is associated with amount of change

Research Design

- ▶ Waitlist Control
- ▶ Intervention



Results: Differences between MSC & Control



(Neff & Germer, 2013)

Conclusion: Self-compassion can be taught!



Course is now taught internationally & has been translated into 7 languages

Making Friends with Yourself: A Mindful Self-Compassion Program for Adolescents

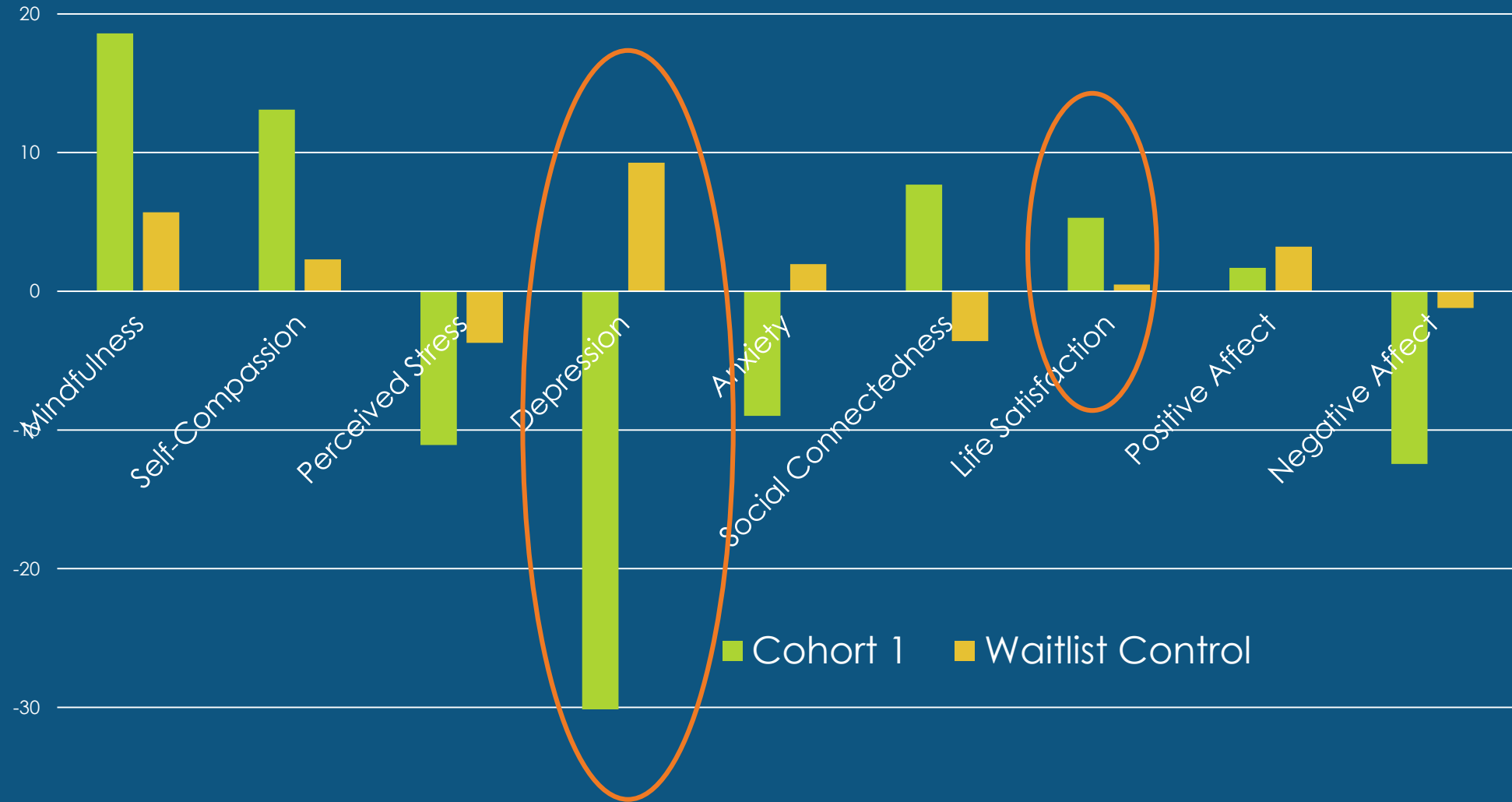


(Bluth et al., 2016)

- ▶ Adapted from Neff & Germer adult Mindful Self-Compassion program
- ▶ Classes met weekly for 6 weeks, 1.5 hours per week
- ▶ Each week included thematic discussion, mindful and self-compassion activities and practices

Percent Change from Pre- to Post-Intervention

(Cohort 1 n = 16, Waitlist control n = 18)



Qualitative Findings

- ▶ *I always feel that I have to have someone else to prove that I can do things. But I have myself, and that is someone!*
- ▶ *What I got most out of this class was reinstating the common humanity. Like whatever you're feeling, you're not alone in it. Somebody else will feel the same way, will know where you're coming from, even if you think that no one understands, there will be somebody who does.*

Soothing touch:

I felt like having my hands across my chest was very anchoring... I really liked it; it was something different for me. It was nice. Very relaxing and comforting.

Self-compassion break:

I've tried the self-compassion break a few times like when I'm really stressed out about something. I just take a break and put it into perspective and say it's not really that big a deal.

Main Findings

- ▶ MFY is feasible and acceptable
- ▶ MFY may be effective for promoting emotional well-being
- ▶ Changes in mindfulness and self-compassion predicted changes in well-being

MFY is endorsed by Kristin Neff and Chris Germer as the adolescent adaptation of their Mindful Self-Compassion program.

We just received an NIH grant to study MFY with teens with depressive symptoms.

Compassionate Friend



Caring for the Caregiver



Mirror Neurons → Empathic resonance

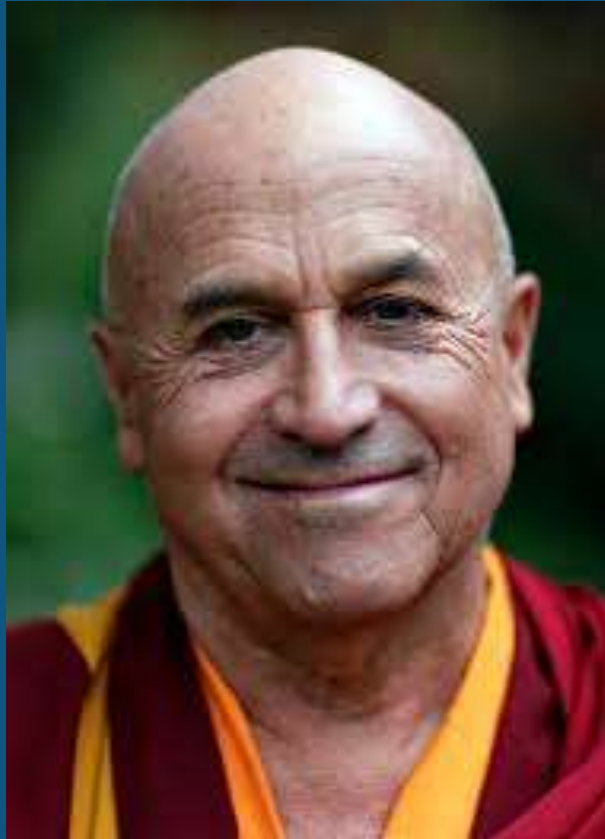


Empathic resonance

- ▶ Feeling what others feel, including their pain
- ▶ Can lead to vicarious traumatization and burnout



Empathy Fatigue



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khjPsVG-6QA>

Through our own self-care ...
we can be more present for others.



Self-compassion provides:



- ▶ Less burnout and compassion fatigue
- ▶ More satisfaction with caregiving role

Compassion for Self and Others



For someone to develop genuine compassion towards others, first he or she must have a basis upon which to cultivate compassion, and that basis is the ability to connect to one's own feelings and to care for one's own welfare ... Caring for others requires caring for oneself. ~ Dalai Lama (2000)



The intimacy that arises in listening and speaking truth is only possible if we can open to the vulnerability of our own hearts. Breathing in, contacting the life that is right here, is our first step. Once we have held ourselves with kindness, we can touch others in a vital and healing way.

~ Tara Brach, psychologist and meditation teacher



*The curious paradox
is that only when I
accept myself just
as I am, then I can
change.*

~Carl Rogers



We do not have to improve ourselves; we just have to let go of what blocks our heart.

~ Jack Kornfield



Wild Geese

by Mary Oliver



Learn more about self-compassion:

▶ Courses at UNC:

<http://www.med.unc.edu/phyrehab/pim/mindfulness-program/msc>

▶ Self-compassion in general:

www.selfcompassion.org

▶ Self-compassion for teens:

www.mindfulselfcompassionforteens.com