Positive psychology for mental health in UK social work students: Self-compassion as predictor of better mental health

Yasuhiro Kotera

University of Derby, UK

Abstract

Statement of the Problem: Mental health is high on the higher education agenda in the United Kingdom. More than a quarter of UK students suffer from a mental health problem. Social work is one of the most popular subjects in the country, receiving more than 12,000 applicants annually, however students in this subject also suffer from mental distress. More than one third of them have high levels of depressive symptoms and 4% report recent occurrence of suicidal thoughts. The majority of students progress towards employment in the social work field, which is known to be a rewarding yet high-stress profession. Addressing mental health difficulties is of great importance to students, educators and employers. This presenting study explored the impacts of positive psychological constructs on mental health in social work students, in order to bypass their strong mental health shame (identified in our previous study).

Methodology: One hundred sixteen UK social work students responded to measures regarding mental health, resilience, self-compassion, motivation and engagement. Correlation and regression analyses were performed. Results: Mental health problems were negatively associated with resilience, self-compassion, and engagement. Self-compassion was a negative predictor, and intrinsic motivation was a positive predictor of mental health problems. Resilience did not predict mental health problems.

Conclusion & Significance: While resilience is emphasised in social work, it was self-compassion that predicted the level of mental health problems. Teaching students how to practice self-compassion, being kind towards themselves, may be an alternative means to protect their mental health. Also, our findings may imply the overuse and misunderstanding of 'resilience'. Lastly, contrary to previous motivation studies, intrinsic motivation was a positive predictor of mental health problems, suggesting that their passion may backfire on their mental health. Future research should explore mechanisms behind these relationships.

Biography:

Yasuhiro Kotera is Academic Lead for Counselling, Psychotherapy and Psychology and Chair of Research Ethics at the University of Derby Online Learning. As an Accredited Psychotherapist and NLP Trainer, he has worked with people with diverse mental health problems in various countries including Japan, US, and UK. His research focuses on psychopathologies relating to mental health shame and positive psychological constructs such as resilience, self-compassion, and intrinsic motivation. Currently his team is undertaking studies to evaluate the effects of kindness and passion in clinical settings.

Speaker publications:

1. Kotera, Y., Green, P. & Sheffield, D. (2019). Mental health of therapeutic students: Relationships with attitudes, self-criticism, self-compassion, and caregiver identity. British Journal of Guidance and Counselling.

2. Kotera, Y. & Ting, S.H. (2019). Positive psychology of Malaysian students: Impacts of engagement, motivation, self-compassion and wellbeing on mental health. International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction

3. Kotera, Y., Green, P. & Sheffield, D. (2019). Roles of positive psychology for mental health in UK social work students: Self-compassion as a predictor of better mental health. British Journal of Social Work.

4. Fido, D., Kotera, Y. & Asano, K. (2019). English translation and validation of the Ikigai-9 in a UK sample. International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00150-w

5. Lazzari, C., Kotera, Y. & Thomas, H. (2019). Social network analysis of dementia wards in psychiatric hospitals to explore the advancement of personhood in patients with Alzheimer's disease. Current Alzheimer Research. doi: 10.2174/1567205016666190612160955

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