

Mindfulness, Self-Compassion, and Psychological Flexibility As Predictors of Depression Among Students

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ABSTRACT

University students are often found to have symptoms of depression due to the new stressors in the journey of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Therefore, this study explores the predicting variables of depression which are mindfulness, self-compassion and psychological flexibility. This quantitative correlational research involved 226 university students from Management and Science University, Shah Alam (163 females and 63 males, aged 18 to 29). Mindfulness, self-compassion and psychological flexibility were significantly correlated with depression. Regression analyses revealed that psychological flexibility was the strongest predictor of depression. The finding of this research can help university management, students and youth in general to prepare the support system to help them face the challenges and ability to maintain a healthy mental state.

Keywords

Depression, mindfulness, self-compassion, psychological flexibility, students.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health issues are often taken lightly in contrast to physical health issues like diabetes or heart problems, especially among young generations (Raman et al., 2019). University students are often found to have symptoms of depression due to the new stressors in the journey of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood (Yusof et al., 2020). Therefore, this study explores the predicting variables of depression such as mindfulness, self-compassion and psychological flexibility. Based on Brown and Ryan (2003), mindfulness is described as “a neural and intentional focus on the current moment instead of focusing on the past or the future”. According to Kristin Neff (2003), the pioneer of self-compassion, it is defined as the ability to turn compassion inward and hold one’s feelings of suffering with a sense of warmth, connection and concern. Psychological flexibility is referred to as an important set of developments that help people manage stress and involve in adaptive behaviours that encourage actions that focuses on values (Gloster et al., 2017).

Depression is a serious mental health issue that has spread to become a common illness shared amongst today’s generation. In Malaysia alone, it has been reported that at least one in every five young adults are most likely to have symptoms of depression (Abdul Hamid, 2019). In the same study, it was also reported that at least one in ten young adults in Malaysia have thought about committing suicide (Abdul Hamid, 2019). The alarming rates of depression among young adults highlights the importance of protective psychological elements to better develop interventions that may help reduce depression.

Multiple studies have separately documented the unique result of mindfulness, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility with depression. There are limited number of Malaysian literatures that studies these variables. Woodruff et al. (2013) has found that psychological flexibility predicted more variance than self-compassion and mindfulness. However, in two more recent regression studies, self-compassion has reported to predict higher significant variance (Marshal & Brockman, 2016; Kotera & Ting, 2019). Due to limited literatures and contradictory findings on this topic, this study aims to investigate this topic even further among university students in Malaysia.

Various studies around the world have reported high rates of psychological problems among university students in order to find the best intervention that could help preventing this spread of depression (Kaswadi, Malik & Keat, 2018). This study may act as an awareness towards the importance of mental health issues for the university students. The findings for this study will also be beneficial to mental health professionals in implementing the related therapies such as Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Moreover, this study can be another source of gaining more knowledge in the field of “third-wave of cognitive behavioural therapy”. Given that there has been lack of studies that test the relationship of these variables together, this study might open a new area for discussion for the future researchers to further investigate the significance of these variables towards depression.

Therefore, in this study, we will explore the variables that might predict the level of depression. Mindfulness has shown to have beneficial effects on depression through both non-clinical studies (Cash & Whittingham, 2010) and clinical studies (Hofmann et al., 2010). Past studies on self-compassion and depression has also shown strong negative

correlation, in which indicates proven to be another benefit to mental health (Voci et al., 2018; Seligowski et al., 2014; Woodruff et al., 2013). Meanwhile, increasing evidence have shown that psychological flexibility has a significant effect on depression (Mendoza et al., 2016).

The present study aims to determine the relationship between mindfulness, self-compassion, psychological flexibility, and depression among students in MSU Shah Alam. This study also seeks to find the answer to the research questions that were addressed in this study: (1) what are the relationship between mindfulness, self-compassion, psychological flexibility, and depression among university students, and (2) what are the unique predictors of mindfulness, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility among university students.

METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study sought to conduct as a quantitative research study. Descriptive statistic was used to measure the respondents' levels of mindfulness, self-compassion, psychological flexibility and depression. Correlation analysis was used as the method to break down the results accordingly to the objective of this research. Besides that, regression analysis was used to find the unique predictors of depression.

The variables that has been carefully chosen for this study are namely mindfulness, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility. Mindfulness, self-compassion and psychological flexibility are variables that focuses on intrapsychic. On the other hand, depression is caused by intrapsychic conflict. Hence, this study was supported the psychodynamic theory. Psychodynamic approach focuses on introspective disciplines that aim to help individuals cope with psychological suffering by understanding one's inner self and bringing the unconscious mind to awareness. These conflicts are often result in psychological distress such as depression, anxiety and stress.

The targeted population of this study consists of undergraduate students aged 18 to 30 years in Management and Science University Shah Alam. The focus on undergraduate students were chosen for this study because it has been recently reported that mental health problems has become a growing public concern. Past studies have shown that the prevalence of Malaysian university students with moderate, severe or extremely severe depression were 9.7% (Shamsuddin et al., 2013) 32.15% (Mohammed et al., 2016), and 21% (Amir Hamzah et al., 2019). The samples were chosen through the use of convenience sampling method.

After the study has received approval to proceed with the data collection, the questionnaires are compiled together and a survey was created through an online platform. The completed online survey was then distributed to the students of Management and Science University through various different social media. Only students who were willing and available to answer the survey has given their response. Once the questions have been answered, the data were collected and classified accordingly before they were analyzed.

The data that has been collected are analysed by using the SPSS to transform the raw data into statements. Descriptive statistic was used to measure the average scores, frequency, standard deviation of the overall sample, as well as analysing the levels of the variables in this study. Pearson (r) correlation and multiple regression analysis were used as the inferential statistic of this study. Pearson Bivariate was used to identify the relationship between the four variables of this study: mindfulness, self-compassion, psychological flexibility, and depression. Meanwhile, the multivariate analysis was used to identify the unique predictor of the independent variables against the dependent variable, wherein which variable predicts depressive symptoms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics and correlation analyses are illustrated in Table 1. The mean score of mindfulness was 46.74 (SD = 6.771), self-compassion was 36.38 (SD = 7.343), psychological flexibility was 31.77 (SD = 9.714), and depression was 12.93 (SD = 7.036). As presented in Table 1, the results revealed that there was a significant negative correlation between mindfulness and depression ($r = -.449, p < .05$) and negative correlation between self-compassion and depression ($r = -.494, p < .05$). Moreover, the correlation between psychological flexibility and depression was also found to be significant negatively correlated ($r = -.494, p < .05$). Thus, the higher the level of mindfulness, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility, the lower is their level of depression.

The results of multiple regression revealed that the overall model was statistically significant ($F(3, 226) = 59.323, p < .05$). The model showed that (43.7%) ($R^2 = .445$) of the variance in depression is explained by mindfulness, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility. Specifically, two variables were significantly contributed to depression, which are mindfulness ($\beta = -.161, p < .05$) and psychological inflexibility ($\beta = .491, p < .05$). Remarkably, psychological inflexibility was found to be the strongest predictor to depression.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables (N=226)

Variables	Mean scores	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Mindfulness	46.74	6.771	-			
2. Self-Compassion	36.38	7.343		-		
3. Psychological Flexibility	31.77	9.714			-	
4. Depression	12.93	7.036				-
			.449*	.456*	.637*	

Note: SD = Standard deviation, * $p < .05$

Table 2 Regression Analysis Summary for Predictors of Depression (N=226)

Variables	B	SE.B	Beta, β
Mindfulness	-.161	.062	-.161***
Self-Compassion	-.116	.062	-.121
Psychological Inflexibility	.365	.046	.491***

Note: Adjusted $R^2 = .437$ (N=226, $p < .05$); $F(3, 226) = 58.323$

Mindfulness, self-compassion and psychological flexibility has shown significant relationship towards depression among university students. As indicated in these findings, it is essential that university students have awareness of this and increase their mindfulness, self-compassion and psychological flexibility in order to prevent being overwhelmed with depression symptoms. Besides that, the findings from this study also concluded that mindfulness and psychological flexibility have unique variance in depression.

Remarkably, psychological flexibility was found to be the strongest predictor for depression. This result contradicts with two recent past studies of a similar topic (Marshal & Brockman, 2016; Kotera & Ting; 2019) that reported self-compassion to be the strongest predicting variable for depression instead. Besides that, this finding is the first to reveal that mindfulness showed a unique contribution to depression whereas there are no previous studies that shows the same finding.

CONCLUSION

The inferential statistical analyses for bivariate analysis showed that there is a negatively significant relationship among mindfulness, self-compassion, psychological flexibility and depression. Hence, this indicate that students with high levels of mindfulness, self-compassion and psychological flexibility will less likely prone to have depressive symptoms.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the literature on students' mindfulness, self-compassion, and psychological flexibility as predictors of depression. The findings of this study revealed that mindfulness and psychological inflexibility can be the predicting factors of depression. This indicates that in order to reduce the level of depression or avoid feeling overwhelmed with its symptoms, one must have high levels of mindfulness and psychological flexibility.

Besides that, the findings of this study will also be beneficial to mental health professionals in implementing the related therapies such as Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Awareness of this information can be spread in helping university students and also youth in general to be able to manage and maintain a healthy mental health. This study might open a new area for discussion for the future researchers to further investigate the significance of these variables towards depression.

lthough the correlational analyses in this study showed consistency with multiple previous studies of a similar topic, the outcome of the regression analysis in this study provided a different and contradicting result compared to the recent studies. This can be seen as an opportunity for future research to delve further into this topic in order to be able to understand this issue even better. Larger number of samples could provide a more significant and accurate result that can be used as a representative to the whole university student's population in Malaysia. Besides that, it is also advisable to apply the probability sampling so the study could provide equal chances for the selected population by also taking gender, race, and socioeconomic status of the university students into considerations.

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