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# The Role of Self-Compassion in Goal Pursuit and Well-Being Among University Freshmen

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We examined the role of self-compassion in freshmen students' goal pursuit and well-being across the first year of university. Multilevel analyses of 1 week of daily diary assessment revealed that individuals high in self-compassion appeared to be less vulnerable to the affective consequences of thwarted goal progress. We also found that trait self-compassion moderated the relation of autonomous goal motivation to negative affect, such that autonomous motivation was especially related to low negative affect for students high in self-compassion. Longitudinally, we found that self-compassion was associated with positive changes in life satisfaction, identity development, and decreases in negative affectivity over the academic year. In summary, we suggest that self-compassion is an adaptive trait for new college students.

**Keywords:** Self-compassion; Human motivation; Subjective well-being; Self-determination theory.

## Self-Compassion in Goal Progress and Well-Being Among University Freshmen

The start of college is an important time, engrained in the North American conscious as a pivotal period for identity, growth, and exploration. In film and television portrayals, the freshmen year is often glorified as the best time of one's life, or an opportunity for independence and new experiences in a carefree environment. For example, in the iconic film *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), two university freshmen are gleefully swept up by a whirlwind of toga parties, pranks, and love interests, rather than academic readings, assignments, or anxieties about developing a new social niche. However, what is often excluded from media portrayals of this time is that it can also be a psychologically and academically strenuous period for youth.

In a 2010 survey of the mental health of more than 200,000 US freshmen (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, & Tran, 2010), it was found that the proportion of students who had rated their emotional health as "below average" compared to peers had risen to the highest point in 25 years. While students reported lower emotional health, students also reported significantly higher expectations for academic achievement than ever before in the survey. This level of expectation and pressure raises the question of whether certain personality traits may serve as resiliency factors for students entering

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college. The ability to self-soothe, such as reacting to disappointment, failure, or thwarted goal achievement with self-kindness and patience rather than frustration or shame, is likely a crucial protective factor during this period. As Paul Gilbert asserts

[d]eveloping compassion for self and others can help with many challenges of life, with learning how to cope with strong emotions that emerge within us and conflicts with other people, and even how to think about world problems. (2009, p. 20)

Yet, self-compassion has not yet been investigated in the transition to college, nor has the role of self-compassion relative to goal self-regulation been examined.

## Self-Compassion and Adaptive Outcomes

Self-compassion is a personality construct drawn from Buddhist philosophy that entails

being open to and moved by one's own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude toward one's inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one's own experience is part of the common human experience. (Neff, 2003a, p. 224)

There are three crucial facets to self-compassion: self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindful awareness (Neff, 2003a). Self-kindness refers to treating disliked aspects of one's personality and behavior with kindness, warmth, and a nonjudgmental attitude. A sense of common humanity involves viewing one's experiences of defeat or suffering as connected to the human condition, as opposed to feeling alienated or selectively victimized in one's suffering. Finally, mindful awareness involves holding a balanced view of subjective emotions and cognitions, rather than being overwhelmed by wavering emotions and thoughts.

In previous research, self-compassion has been related to a number of beneficial mental health outcomes. Trait self-compassion is negatively associated with symptoms of depression, and anxiety, while it is positively associated with life satisfaction and relatedness (Neff, 2003a), optimism, positive affect, curiosity, and exploration (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). Furthermore, self-compassion accounts for significant variance in positive functioning, beyond the big five personality traits (Neff et al., 2007). Van Dam, Sheppard, Forsyth, and Earleywine (2011) compared the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) and the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale for the predictive utility of depression and anxiety in a community sample, and found that self-compassion was a significantly more robust predictor of clinical symptoms and quality of life. In a longitudinal study of the effects of a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, trait self-compassion was found to moderate the effect of the training, with participants high in trait self-compassion experiencing a greater reduction in stress following the training (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). Moreover, research has demonstrated that individuals high in trait self-compassion tend to form more accurate appraisals and self-evaluations, without unrealistically enhancing or deprecating the self, following negative events (Leary, Tate, Adams, & Allen, 2007). While this research has established the positive benefits of self-compassion, it is still unknown whether self-compassion can prospectively help students cope with the transition to college, in adjustment, well-being, and goal pursuit.

## Self-Compassion, Goal Pursuit, and Academic Experience

In a set of two cross-sectional studies, Neff, Hsieh, and Dejitterat (2005) found that self-compassion was positively associated with a mastery orientation to academic goals, rather

than a performance orientation. Furthermore, among students who were dissatisfied with their received grade on a midterm exam, trait self-compassion was associated with emotion-focused coping, rather than avoidance-oriented coping that was associated with low trait self-compassion. Neely, Schallet, Mohammed, Roberts, and Chen (2009) cross-sectionally investigated the differential contribution of self-compassion and goal regulation to well-being among students, and found that self-compassion contributed additional variance in well-being, beyond the ability to disengage and re-engage in goals. The authors suggested that self-compassion may be particularly important in preserving well-being when faced with defeat or disappointment in goal pursuit. Although these studies provide a first attempt to document the role of self-compassion in goal pursuit, their cross-sectional nature makes it impossible to draw any conclusions regarding directionality. The present study represents the first attempt to examine students' reactions to both thwarted and successful goal pursuit. Additionally, we consider how motivation for one's goals may be influenced by and interact with trait self-compassion during the first year of university.

While most researchers studying goal pursuit have focused on processes that contribute to goal progress (e.g., self-efficacy, obstacles), others have argued the differentiating the types of motives for pursuing a goal is critical in determining psychological health and well-being outcomes (e.g., Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). Specifically, Self-determination Theory distinguished between autonomous reasons for goal pursuit (e.g., doing well in school because of enjoyment and personal importance) and controlled reasons (e.g., doing well in school to please parents, or to avoid feelings of guilt and shame). Numerous studies have shown that autonomous (relative to controlled) motivation leads to increased effort and goal attainment, and that attainment of autonomous goals predicts increased well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999). Empirical investigations suggest that autonomous motivation is more reliably associated with adaptive outcomes, such as goal progress and subjective well-being, than is controlled motivation (Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, & Gagnon, 2008).

To date, few studies have investigated why some people set more autonomous goals than others. Given that self-compassion involves mindful attention to one's inner states, as well as loving kindness towards the self (e.g., Neff, 2003b), it may be likely that people who are more self-compassionate are more likely to strive for goals for which they feel volitional and that are personally meaningful, rather than pursuing goals due to external pressures such as the avoidance of shame and guilt, or to obtain rewards. Additionally, while autonomous motivation has been generally found to result in positive outcomes, it may be particularly beneficial for some people. Specifically, it may be the case that autonomous motivation, which reflects self-expression and the pursuit of personally meaningful actions, will play an especially important role for individuals high in trait self-compassion. For freshmen high in self-compassion, we expect that autonomous motivation will have a more significant impact on well-being, as compared to peers lower in self-compassion. Furthermore, we think that for those high in self-compassion, autonomous motivation for goal pursuit will be more important to affect regulation than goal progress. In other words, we think that for self-compassionate individuals, it is not whether they are making progress on their goals that counts, it is acting in a self-concordant manner as they pursue their goals. We focus on the relationship between self-compassion and autonomous motivation in predicting changes in well-being, rather than controlled motivation, due to the equivocal relationship between controlled motivation and adaptive outcomes (e.g., Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, & Gagnon, 2008).

In addition to examining the relationships between self-compassion, goal-pursuit, and well-being, we have also chosen to investigate the role of self-compassion in freshmen's

development on the psychosocial stages of identity and intimacy, posited by Erikson (1968) to be critical challenges to resolve for successful adaptation, in order to capture students' adjustment more broadly. Due to their ability to self-soothe, direct mindful awareness to emotions, and feel a sense of common humanity during times of suffering, we expect freshmen high in self-compassion to experience greater identity and intimacy maturation over the course of an academic year.

## The Present Study

The aim of the present study was to bridge personality research on self-compassion with research on human motivation in a novel investigation of the role of self-compassion in students' goal pursuit and adjustment to university. Specifically, we prospectively investigated the relations between new college students' trait self-compassion, goal progress, motivation, well-being, and psychosocial adjustment, with five time points of comprehensive data collection from the beginning to the end of their first year of university. Positive and negative affect and subjective life satisfaction were used as indicators of well-being. To assess psychosocial adjustment, we looked at students' development on the psychosocial stages of identity and intimacy, posited by Erikson (1968) to be critical challenges to resolve for successful adaptation.

In addition to examining general prospective consequences, we were able to examine the impact of self-compassion on a day-to-day basis through a week of daily diary assessment, collecting information on freshmen's goal progress and affective state each day for a week. The two tiers of data assessment allowed us to evaluate the role of self-compassion in adjustment over time, and in daily processes, testing the following hypotheses: first, we hypothesized that trait self-compassion would differentially relate to the type of goals students set, such that students high in self-compassion would pursue goals for which they report higher level of autonomous motivation, compared to students low in self-compassion. Second, while we did not expect self-compassion to be directly related to goal progress over time, at the daily level we expected that self-compassion would serve as a protective factor against thwarted goal progress. For students high in self-compassion, we hypothesized that daily positive and negative affect would be less contingent on daily goal progress than for students low in self-compassion. Third, we also hypothesized that individuals high in trait self-compassion would benefit more on a daily basis from the pursuit of autonomous goals, and thus we expected an interaction between trait self-compassion and autonomous motivation to predict daily positive and negative affect over the week of daily diary assessment. Finally, we expected that trait self-compassion would be positively associated with freshmen's changes in well-being. Specifically, we hypothesized that students high in self-compassion would experience less negative affect, greater positive affect, and more satisfaction with life at the end of their freshman year (controlling for baseline levels), compared to their peers lower in self-compassion. We also expected trait self-compassion to predict increased adjustment, operationalized in this study as identity and intimacy resolution over time.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

A total of 159 (72% females) freshmen were recruited for a study on goal progress and personality factors from McGill University classes, university residences, and classified ads in September. The mean age of participants was 18 ( $SD = 1.04$ ), with a range from 17 to 27

years old. Thirty-three percent of participants were born in Canada, 23% in the USA, 16% in China, 8% in Korea, and 20% in other countries outside of North America. Participants attended an initial laboratory session in September (pre-test, PT), in which participants were introduced to the requirements of the study, completed baseline measures, and provided informed consent for participation. Following the laboratory session, participants completed four fifteen to thirty minute surveys, disseminated online in October, December, February, and April (T1, T2, T3, and T4), as well as one week of daily diary assessment in October.

## Longitudinal Measures

### *Self-Compassion*

In order to measure trait self-compassion, we administered the 26-item SCS (Neff, 2003a). Participants were instructed to rate 26 items related to “how I act towards myself in difficult times” on a 5-point Likert scale, from *almost never* to *almost always*. For each participant, a score for mean self-compassion was calculated by averaging the mean of three positive facets of the scale, self-kindness (sample item: “When I’m going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need”), common humanity, and mindfulness, and the reverse scores of the three negative facets, self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification (e.g., as recommended by Neff & Beretvas, 2013). In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha between the items was .80. The SCS was administered at T1.

### *Personal Goals*

In the initial baseline questionnaire in September (PT), participants were asked to generate four personal goals they planned on pursuing that semester. We employed instructions from previous studies (Koestner et al., 2008) in order to help students generate their goals. Examples participants reported include “Write a new play,” “Become less shy. Let my guard down especially when meeting new people in school,” and “Earn a grade point average of 3.6 or higher.”

### *Goal Motivation*

Self-determined goal motivation was measured using Sheldon and Kasser’s (1998) reasons for personal goal pursuit. For all four goals, participants rated five possible reasons for goal pursuit on a 7-point Likert scale, from *not at all for this reason* to *completely for this reason*. The five types of reasons for goal pursuit, from most to least autonomous, were intrinsic (“Because of the fun and enjoyment which the goal will provide you—the primary reason is simply your interest in the experience itself”), integrated (“Because you really believe that it is an important goal to have—you endorse it freely and value it wholeheartedly”), identified (“Because it represents who you are and reflects what you value most in life”), introjected (“Because you would feel ashamed, guilty, or anxious if you didn’t—you feel you ought to strive for this”), and external (“Because somebody else wants you to, or because you’ll get something from somebody if you do it”). In line with previous research, a scale of autonomous motivation was calculated as the mean of intrinsic, integrated, and identified scores, whereas controlled motivation was calculated as the mean of external and introjected scores across the four goals (Koestner et al., 2008). Goal motivation was measured at T1 and T3.

### *Goal Progress*

At each follow-up, participants were reminded of the personal goals they had chosen, and for each goal they were asked to rate three statements related to goal progress on a 7-point Likert

scale, from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The three statements were “I have made a lot of progress toward this goal,” “I feel like I am on track with my goal plan,” and “I feel like I have achieved this goal.” A mean score was computed for progress on each of the four goals at each time point, and a total goal progress score was computed for each time point by taking the mean of these four scores. Goal progress was measured at T1, T2, T3, and T4.

#### *Positive and Negative Affect*

Positive and negative affect was measured using Diener and Emmon’s Mood Report (1984), a 9-item measure comprised of four words describing positive emotional states, such as “joyful” and “calm,” and five words describing negative emotional states each of which is rated on a 7-point Likert scale to indicate the extent to which the participant felt that way over the past two weeks. The Cronbach’s alpha for positive affect was .86, while it was .77 for negative affect. The measure was administered at T1 and T4.

#### *Satisfaction with Life*

Subjective satisfaction with life was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). The scale consists of five statements, such as “The conditions of my life are excellent,” which participants rate on a 7-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The Cronbach’s alpha between the items at baseline was .83. The Satisfaction with Life Scale was administered at T1 and T4.

#### *Psychosocial Adjustment*

In order to assess psychosocial adjustment, we used two subscales of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI; Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981) relevant to late adolescence and young adulthood, one designed to measure identity resolution and one designed to measure intimacy resolution. Each subscale consists of 12 statements rated on a 7-point scale, from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. For example, two statements from the intimacy subscale are “I care deeply for others” and “being alone with other people makes me feel uncomfortable” (r), while a statement from the identity subscale is “the important things in life are clear to me.” The Cronbach’s alpha for the items measuring identity resolution was .84, while it was .80 for the items measuring intimacy resolution at baseline. The EPSI was administered at the PT in September and T3.

## **Daily Diary Data Collection**

For seven consecutive days in October, participants completed nightly measures reporting on that day’s goal progress, positive affect, and negative affect. The questionnaires were disseminated to participants nightly at 10:15 pm. One hundred and nine participants completed at least four of the nightly measures from the week of daily diary collection, and the measure of trait self-compassion at T1. Among these 109 participants, over 90% of daily surveys sent were completed.

#### *Daily Measures*

To assess daily goal progress, participants were reminded of each of their four goals, and asked to rate how much progress they felt they had made towards achieving each of their goals on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). We calculated daily goal progress as the

mean of reported progress across the four goals. To assess negative and positive affect, participants were administered the 9-item Diener and Emmon's Mood Report (1984), and asked to rate the extent to which they experienced each emotion during that day.

## Results

### *Analytic Strategy*

As we were interested in both longitudinal and daily diary outcomes, we used two types of analyses. To examine our longitudinal questions of the effects of self-compassion on motivation, well-being, and adjustment, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses. Preliminary data screening showed that the data were normally distributed and there were no outliers, making it suitable for conducting regressions. To examine the impact of trait self-compassion on daily affect, and test for interaction with autonomous motivation for goals and daily fluctuations in goal progress, we performed two-level multilevel modeling (MLM) in SPSS 20. In the two-level MLM analyses, days were nested within subjects, with daily variables (e.g., goal progress, negative affect, positive affect) representing level-1 and trait variables (e.g., self-compassion, autonomous motivation) representing level-2. These analyses were restricted to the 109 participants who completed the measure of trait self-compassion at T1, and responded to at least four of the daily surveys from the seven days of daily diary collection.

### *Daily Fluctuations in Goal Progress and Self-Compassion Predicting Affect*

First, we tested our hypothesis that trait self-compassion would interact with daily fluctuations in goal progress to predict daily positive and negative affect. As recommended by Nezlak (2012), prior to conducting the analyses, we centered the predictor daily goal progress around each person's mean reported daily goal progress across the week. This enabled us to examine the impact of daily person-centered fluctuations in goal progress, rather than daily reported goal progress on negative and positive affect, which could be biased by response tendencies. In all analyses, we also included day of the week the responses were recorded and participant gender as predictors, to control for the impact of both variables on affect regulation.

With daily negative affect as the dependent variable in the model, we entered gender, day of the week, daily fluctuations in goal progress, trait self-compassion, and the interaction between trait self-compassion and daily fluctuations in goal progress as fixed predictors in the two-level mixed model. Gender and day of the week were unrelated to daily negative affect. Trait self-compassion was significantly negatively associated with daily negative affect ( $\beta = -.68$ ,  $SE = .134$ ,  $t = -5.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Daily fluctuations in goal progress were also significantly negatively associated with daily negative affect ( $\beta = -.58$ ,  $SE = .224$ ,  $t = -2.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, the interaction between self-compassion and daily fluctuations in goal progress significantly positively predicted nightly negative affect ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = 2.5$ ,  $p < .05$ ) (Aiken & West, 1991).

We employed Preacher, Curran, and Bauer's (2006) computational tools for examining 2-way interactions in multi-level models, in order to test the simple slope for significance at high ( $M + 1SD$ ) and low ( $M - 1SD$ ) trait self-compassion (Aiken & West, 1991). *T*-tests for simple slope revealed that the simple slope of the association between daily fluctuations in goal progress and nightly negative affect was significant at low self-compassion ( $b = -.16(.08)$ ,  $t = -2.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while it was insignificant for individuals high in self-compassion ( $b = .08(.07)$ ,  $t = 1.14$ , ns). Examining the interaction



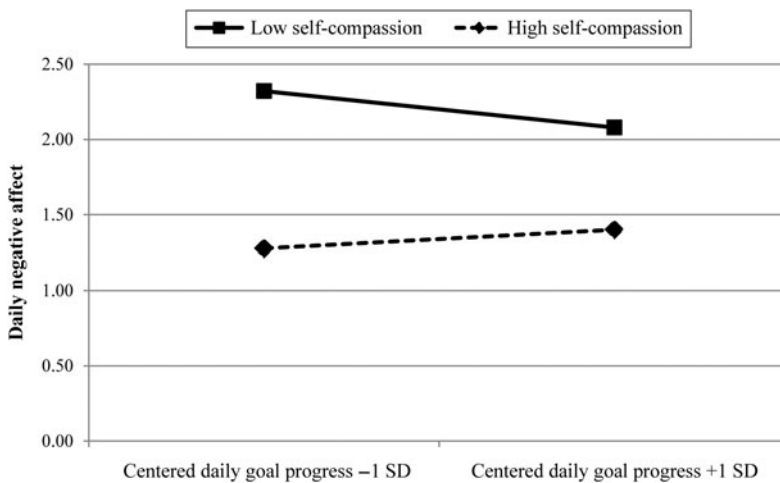
(see Figure 1), it can be observed that for people low in self-compassion, negative affect tends to increase on days that they make less goal progress. However, for people high in self-compassion, negative affect does not increase on days for which goal progress is thwarted. These results support our hypothesis that trait self-compassion may buffer against the detrimental effects of deflated goal progress on daily affect.

Next, we examined whether self-compassion and daily fluctuations in goal progress also impacted daily positive affect, as predicted. As with the analyses for negative affect, we entered gender, day of the week, daily fluctuations in goal progress, trait self-compassion, and the interaction between daily fluctuations in goal progress and trait self-compassion as predictors of daily positive affect in the two-level model, nested within subject. Gender and day of the week were unrelated to daily positive affect, while daily fluctuations in goal progress ( $\beta = .61$ ,  $SE = .24$ ,  $t = 2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and trait self-compassion ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $t = 2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were significantly positively related to positive affect. There was a marginally significant effect for the interaction between trait self-compassion and daily fluctuations in goal progress negatively predicting daily positive affect ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = -1.65$ ,  $p < .10$ ). It seems that while self-compassion moderates the effect of goal progress on negative affect, it does not significantly moderate the effect of goal progress on positive affect (see Figure 2).

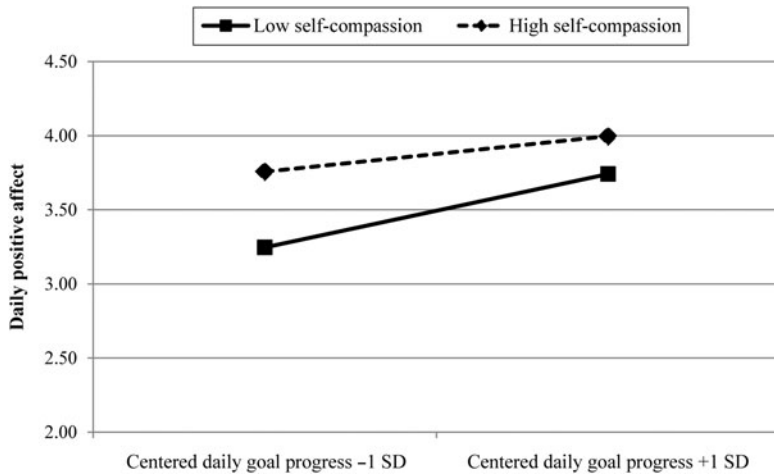
*T*-tests for simple slopes revealed that the slope of the association between daily fluctuations in goal progress and nightly positive affect was significant at both low self-compassion,  $M - 1SD$ , ( $b = .325$  (.08),  $t = 4.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and high self-compassion,  $M + 1SD$ , ( $b = .15$ (.07),  $t = 2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

#### *Trait Self-Compassion and Autonomous Motivation for Goals*

Next, we examined whether trait self-compassion and autonomous motivation measured at the T1 survey (temporally, the closest measurement of autonomous motivation to the week of daily diary assessment) interacted to predict daily negative and positive affect. Once again, we performed MLM analyses, with daily recordings of affect and trait variables nested within subject. First, examining daily negative affect as the dependent variable, we entered gender, day of the week, trait self-compassion, mean autonomous motivation, and



**FIGURE 1** Interaction between trait self-compassion and daily fluctuations in goal progress predicting daily negative affect.



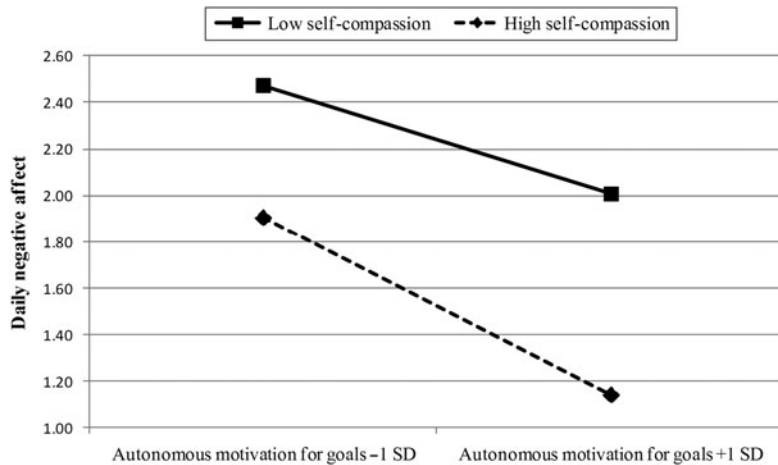
**FIGURE 2** Trend effect for interaction between trait self-compassion and daily fluctuations in goal progress predicting daily positive affect.

the interaction between self-compassion and autonomous motivation as fixed predictors in the model. Results revealed that gender, day of the week, self-compassion, and autonomous motivation were unrelated to nightly negative affect; however, the interaction between self-compassion and autonomous motivation was significantly related to nightly negative affect ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -3.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ). We repeated the analyses with daily positive affect as the dependent variable, and did not find a significant interaction between self-compassion and autonomous motivation predicting daily positive affect ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = 1.52$ , ns).

Graphing the interaction between self-compassion and autonomous motivation in predicting negative affect (see Figure 3), it can be seen that individuals high in trait self-compassion tend to report lower levels of negative affect (NA) than those low in self-compassion. However, individuals high in self-compassion seem to be more affected day to day (in terms of daily reported negative affect), by the degree to which the goals they are pursuing are endorsed as autonomous. It appears that for individuals high in self-compassion, it is particularly important to be pursuing goals towards which they feel autonomous.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Self-Compassion and Affective Variability Across the Week*

Finally, we examined whether trait self-compassion was related to greater affective stability across the week of daily diary assessment. In order to examine this question, we conducted two hierarchical regressions, the first to examine the association between self-compassion and variability in NA, and the second to examine the association between self-compassion and variability in positive affect (PA). As the dependent variables, we calculated the standard deviation across each person's daily reported NA and PA. By calculating the standard deviation for reported NA and PA, we had an individual variance score that represented fluctuations in affect across the week. For example, a high standard deviation in NA across the week would represent a wider range in reported experience of negative feelings, such as anger and sadness, whereas a low standard deviation would represent greater stability in reported NA.



**FIGURE 3** Interaction between trait self-compassion and autonomous motivation for personal goals predicting daily negative affect.

In the first regression, participants' standard deviation in NA across the week was entered as the dependent variable, while mean NA was entered in the first block of the regression and trait self-compassion was entered in the second block of the regression. At the first step of the regression, mean NA was marginally negatively related to participants' standard deviation of NA across the week ( $\beta = -.18, t = -1.86, p < .1$ ). At the second step of the regression, trait self-compassion was significantly negatively related to standard deviation of NA across the week ( $\beta = -.26, t = -2.433, p < .05$ ), supporting our hypothesis that self-compassion would be associated with less fluctuation in NA across the week.

In the regression predicting variability in reported PA, at the first step of the regression, mean PA was marginally negatively related to participants' standard deviation of PA across the week ( $\beta = -.18, t = -1.86, p < .1$ ). Once again, at the second step of the regression, trait self-compassion was significantly negatively related to standard deviation of PA across the week ( $\beta = -.40, t = -4.47, p < .001$ ).

## Longitudinal Results

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Correlational analyses revealed that students' level of self-compassion in October (T1) was significantly positively associated with autonomous motivation for goals at T1 ( $r = .22, p < .05$ ) and T3 ( $r = .25, p < .05$ ), and negatively associated with controlled motivation at T1 ( $r = -.21, p < .05$ ), but unrelated to controlled motivation at T3 ( $r = -.17, ns$ ). While we predicted that self-compassion would be unrelated to goal progress, self-compassion was marginally positively related to goal progress at T1 ( $r = .20, p < .10$ ), but unrelated at T2 and T3 ( $r = .08$  and  $.00$ , respectively).

## Self-Compassion and Adaptation Over the Year

In order to test our hypotheses that higher levels of self-compassion would predict more successful adaptation to the first year of college, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses to examine whether trait self-compassion measured in October would predict changes in negative affect, positive affect, life satisfaction, identity resolution, and

intimacy resolution over the academic year. In the present study, NA, PA, and life satisfaction were measured in October and April, while identity and intimacy resolution were measured in September and February.

#### *Changes in NA, PA, and Life Satisfaction from October to April*

We performed a series of three hierarchical regressions, examining NA as the dependent variable in the first regression, PA in the second regression, and life satisfaction in the third regression. In the first step of each regression, the measure of the dependant variable at T1 (e.g., T1 NA) and gender were entered in order to control for the effects of both, while self-compassion (measured at T1) was entered in the second block. Entering the baseline scores for the DVs in the first block allows us to use self-compassion to predict residual change in the dependent variable.

Regarding changes in NA, at the first step of the regression, T1 NA was significantly positively related to T4 NA, while gender was unrelated. At the second step, self-compassion accounted for an additional 7% of the variance in later NA (see Table 1), and was significantly negatively related to T4 NA (see Table 1). At the first step of the regression for PA, T1 PA and gender accounted for 25% of the variance in later PA. T1 PA was significantly positively associated with T4 PA, while gender was unrelated to T4 PA. At the second step, a marginally significant effect emerged for self-compassion positively predicting T4 PA. At the first step of the regression for life satisfaction, T1 life satisfaction was significantly positively related to T4 life satisfaction, while gender was unrelated. At the second step, self-compassion was significantly positively associated with T4 life satisfaction.

#### *Changes in Psychosocial Adjustment, from September to February*

We performed two hierarchical regressions to examine whether self-compassion predicted changes in identity or intimacy resolution from September (PT) to February (T3). In both regressions, stage resolution at T3 was entered as the dependent variable, while PT stage resolution and gender were entered as predictors in the first block of the regression, and trait self-compassion was entered in the second block.

At the first step of the regression predicting changes in identity resolution, PT identity resolution was significantly related to T3 identity resolution, while gender was unrelated. At the second step, self-compassion was significantly positively associated with T3 identity resolution (see Table 1). Regarding the results for changes in intimacy resolution, at the first step, PT intimacy resolution was significantly positively related to T3 intimacy resolution, while gender was unrelated. At the second step, self-compassion was unrelated to T3 intimacy resolution and did not account for additional variance in the model.

**TABLE 1** Results of Two-Step Hierarchical Regressions

Dependent variable	<i>n</i>	Change in <i>R</i> square	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	Significance level
T4 negative affect	85	.07	-.29	-2.90	<i>p</i> < .01
T4 positive affect	85	.03	.18	1.71	<i>p</i> < .10
T4 life satisfaction	85	.02	.17	1.99	<i>p</i> < .05
T3 identity resolution	90	.03	.19	2.33	<i>p</i> < .05
T3 intimacy resolution	90	.01	.08	.92	ns

*Note:* The relationship between self-compassion and change in adaptive variables across the year. In all regressions, gender and baseline measures (e.g., NA at T1) of the dependent variable are entered at the first step, and trait self-compassion entered at the second step.

In summary, trait self-compassion was significantly related to higher levels of life satisfaction and identity development, lower levels of negative affect, and somewhat higher levels of positive affect over the course of the school year. Self-compassion was unrelated to changes in intimacy development.

### *Discussion*

In the present study, we found evidence for self-compassion as both a protective and adaptive factor for students entering University. In the daily diary data collection, MLM analyses revealed that trait self-compassion interacted with daily fluctuations in goal progress to predict nightly negative affect. As hypothesized, we found that holding high levels of trait self-compassion was protective against the tendency to experience heightened negative affect on days in which less goal progress was made. Individuals low in self-compassion experienced significantly greater negative affect on days in which they attained less goal progress, while individuals high in trait self-compassion did not tend to fluctuate in negative affect as a function of goal progress. Neff and Vonk (2009) found that trait self-compassion was related to greater stability in self-worth over time compared to trait self-esteem. Similarly, we found that individuals high in self-compassion vacillated significantly less in terms of negative affect, and marginally less in terms of positive affect, in response to daily changes in goal progress. We also found that trait self-compassion was negatively related to individual variability in NA and PA across the week, when controlling for baseline affect.

While individuals high in self-compassion were less affected by daily fluctuations in goal progress than their peers, we found that they were more affected by the motivation behind their goal pursuit. In line with our hypothesis, individuals high in trait self-compassion benefited more from pursuing goals for which they felt autonomous, compared to individuals low in trait self-compassion. Autonomy refers to a sense of acting in a volitional and authentic manner, and it is captured by reports of pursuing behaviors because they are connected to one's interests and values. Specifically, those high in self-compassion tend to experience a greater drop in daily negative affect when they were pursuing goals towards which they held more autonomous motivation, whereas for those low in self-compassion variations in negative affect were less tied to autonomous motivation.

Interestingly, the moderator effects for self-compassion obtained with the daily reports suggest that highly self-compassionate individuals are less emotionally affected by the amount of goal progress they are making, but more affected by whether the goals they are pursuing are self-expressive and personally meaningful. This pattern hints at the possibility that highly self-compassionate people are more attuned to the process and meaning of their goal pursuits rather than to the success of such pursuits. These data suggest that for the highly self-compassionate, the key to feeling good is to be pursuing the right goals rather than to be achieving success at these goals.

Results from the 5-month prospective study demonstrated that self-compassion predicted increased NA, PA, and life satisfaction over time. Thus, not only do freshmen high in self-compassion seem to experience greater PA and significantly less NA on a daily basis, as seen in the daily diary data, but they tend to continue to grow happier than their peers over the school year. Furthermore, freshmen high in trait self-compassion tend to experience increased maturation in terms of identity resolution.

While we found an association between self-compassion and increased identity resolution from September to February, we did not find an association between self-compassion and increased intimacy resolution. Erikson theorized eight psychosocial

stages across the lifespan, at which a different challenge relevant to the particular developmental period would be faced, and competencies gained if successfully overcome (1982). According to Erikson, resolution of the identity and intimacy stages is critical to well-being and psychological health in adulthood (1968). While Erikson situated the identity stage as primarily unfolding in adolescence, more contemporary personality researchers (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Côté & Levine, 1989) have argued this period has become increasingly delayed in modern North American society, with prolonged periods of education, delayed marital commitments, and delayed entry into the workforce. Given this increasingly common experience of *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000) between adolescence and adulthood for North American youth, it is likely that identity development is a more central concern than intimacy development for college freshman.

## Future Directions and Limitations

While the present study suggested that self-compassion serves as a protective factor, causality cannot be inferred from our data. It would be necessary to design randomized controlled experiments to confirm causal relationships. Furthermore, the present study exclusively relied on self-report measurement, limiting the validity and interpretability of the findings. Finally, while our longitudinal results were statistically significant, the effect sizes were modest. Future research can examine what other contextual factors may strengthen the effects.

In the present study, we found prospective associations between trait self-compassion and adaptive changes in affect, life satisfaction, and identity resolution. This raises the question of whether young people trained to execute self-compassionate behaviors and cognitions in response to experiences of disappointment or suffering would (a) significantly increase in trait self-compassion compared to a control group, and (b) significantly increase in subjective well-being overtime. Currently, there is limited evidence of the efficacy of self-compassion based interventions for clinical populations (e.g., Gilbert & Proctor, 2006; Kelly, Zuroff, & Shapira, 2009) and community adults (Neff & Germer, 2013). Based on the results of the present study, an examination of the effects of a brief self-compassion based intervention on well-being and adaptive functioning of new college entrants is warranted. In a 2009 study, Kelly and colleagues found that a self-compassion intervention for chronic acne sufferers, in which participants were trained to reduce self-attacks, significantly decreased symptoms of depression, skin complaints, and feelings of shame compared to the control group. In a subsequent study, Kelly, Zuroff, Foa, and Gilbert (2010) found that a self-compassion imagery and self-talk intervention on a group of smokers looking to quit reduced daily smoking more rapidly than a baseline self-monitoring condition. There is also evidence supporting Gilbert's Compassionate Mind Training (CMT; Gilbert & Irons, 2005) among clinical populations, demonstrating that CMT may be an effective treatment for lessening feels of shame and self-criticism that often play a prominent role in the manifestation of disorders such as major depression (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006; Mayhew & Gilbert, 2008).

While much of the focus on self-compassion interventions has been on clinical utility of self-compassion interventions, the results of the present study, along with previous studies (e.g., Neff et al., 2005; Neely et al., 2009), suggest that fostering trait self-compassion may be useful for everyone. Recently, Neff and Germer (2013) have evaluated the effects of a mindful self-compassion program on community adults in both a pilot study and randomized controlled trial (RCT). In the RCT, participants in the intervention group showed greater increases in self-compassion, other-compassion, mindfulness, and life satisfaction, as well as greater decreases in symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to the control group. Given the significant benefits of self-compassion on adaptation to

university that we have found as well as the findings of Neff and Germer's RCT, administering a brief self-compassion intervention to incoming freshmen could have long-term adaptive consequences.

## Conclusion

Given the recent upsurge in emotional health difficulties for college freshmen (e.g., Pryor et al., 2010), the present study used a five-wave prospective design and daily experiences sampling to explore the potential moderating role of self-compassion. It seems that self-compassion protected students from liability to negative affect on days when they failed at their goals. Self-compassion also seems to have promoted successful adaptation over the school year in terms of well-being and psychosocial outcomes. We encourage more research on the development of self-compassion and the effects of enhancing self-compassion in young adult populations. Exploring ways of promoting self-compassion could be a valuable avenue for researchers and improve long-term adaptive functioning for recipients of such training programs.

## Note

1. We also probed for a three-way interaction between self-compassion, autonomous motivation, and goal progress, in order to examine whether self-compassion, autonomous motivation, and goal progress interacted to predict PA and NA. However, no significant three-way interaction was uncovered.

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