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The Effect of Self-Compassion on Job Burnout and Hours Worked in Employees' Working from Home

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Abstract. Working from home (WFH) has been associated with increased levels of job burnout; a psycho-physiological outcome of experiencing intense or extended periods of work-related stress. Individuals with higher levels of self-compassion have been shown to mitigate the effects of stress by reducing the negative affect associated with stressful situations. The objective of this study was to analyse the effect of self-compassion on job burnout and number of working hours in full time employees WFH. Fifty-eight full time WFH participants (37 females, 21 males; age $M = 34$, $SD = 8$ years) completed online self-report questionnaires. Multivariate regression analysis revealed that SC did not predict job burnout and number of working hours for this sample of WFH employees. The obtained evidence suggests that self-compassion was not enough to mitigate job burnout or number of working hours, therefore employers should not rely on employees to manage workloads and hours effectively but assist in developing schedules to reduce the negative impact of job burnout on their mental health.

Keywords: Self-compassion; Job Burnout; Working From Home; Work Mental Health; COVID-19

Background

Job burnout is a mental health issue characterised by negative emotional and physical symptoms during periods of acute or chronic workplace stress due to factors such as excessive workloads and lack of quality social engagement (Maslach et al., 2001). Job burnout has been shown to have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, in part due to changes in individuals' working environment such as working from home (WFH; Kotera et al., 2021). WFH has typically provided a variety of benefits for employee wellbeing, including increased productivity, more flexible working hours, and reduced financial costs and stress of commuting (Tremblay & Thomsin, 2012). However, WFH has also been shown to potentially exacerbate job burnout by removing typical time constraints inherent in the traditional work-day (Crosbie & Moore, 2004; Kotera & Vione, 2020). Indeed, prior to the pandemic, WFH often lead to excessive work hours due to increased employer expectation, and decreased positive social interactions with friends and colleagues from work (Crosbie & Moore, 2004). Due to the pandemic response, estimates show the number of people working from home globally will have increased from 3.6% to between 25 and 30% by the end of 2021 (Global Work-Place Analytics, 2020). As such, consideration must be given to WFH conditions to reduce a potential negative impact on individuals' mental health which may be further compounded by the stress of the pandemic lockdown initiatives (Global Work-Place Analytics, 2020).

Self-compassion (kindness to oneself) is a psychological construct that has been shown to reduce the impact of negative affect (Neff, 2003), including that associated with job burnout in healthcare, education and finance professionals (Eriksson et al., 2018; Nicklin et al., 2019). However, evidence is scant regarding the impact of self-compassion on employee mental wellbeing when working from home. Therefore, this study aimed to examine whether self-compassion could predict job burnout and number of working hours in individuals WFH full-time. The hypothesis was that self-compassion would significantly predict job burnout and number of working hours, with higher self-compassion scores predicting lower job burnout and number of working hours scores, which could be a mitigating factor for the negative side effects of WFH.

Method

Online survey links were distributed over open access Facebook communities, WhatsApp communities, and through the personal networks of the authors across the UK, Ireland and the United Arab Emirates, to ensure a wide variety of professions. A convenience sample of 79 participants engaged. Participants had to be (i) between 18 and 64 years old, (ii) working full time from home for a minimum of 28 days preceding participation, and (iii) not currently undergoing any treatment for physical or psychological illness. The Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form ($\alpha = 0.87$; Raes et al., 2011) was used to ascertain levels of self-compassion

among the participants. The scale uses five-point Likert scales (1 = ‘almost never’, 5 = ‘almost always’) to rate statements such as ‘I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don’t like’, with higher scores indicating stronger self-compassion.

Job burnout was measured using the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory ($\alpha = 0.85$; Halbesleben, 2005), which yields total job burnout scores as well as subscale scores for ‘exhaustion’ and ‘disengagement’ subscale scores using four-point Likert scales (1 = ‘strongly agree’ and 4 = ‘strongly disagree’) to rate statements such as, ‘I always find new and interesting aspects in my work’, with higher scores indicating that more job burnout.

Of the 79 initial participants, 58 (37 females, 21 males; age $M = 34$, $SD = 8$ years, 73% response rate) completed the surveys and were included for analysis. Normality and outlier checks were used to screen data before conducting a multivariate regression analysis. Ethical approval was obtained by the university research ethics committee.

Results

The hypothesis of the study was that higher SC scores would predict lower job burnout scores and number of working hours. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of self-compassion (predictor variable), age and the dependent variables, number of working hours and job burnout (including disengagement and exhaustion subscales).

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	34.91	8.36
Self-Compassion	3.39	.39
Total Job Burnout	2.36	.17
Disengagement Sub-Scale	2.50	.23
Exhaustion Sub-Scale	2.21	.24
Number of Hours Worked	209	80

Note: n = 58. Number of Hours Worked refers to total hours worked over 1 month.

Multivariate regression analysis showed that self-compassion did not significantly predict total job burnout scores or subscale scores and did not significantly predict number of working hours (Table 2) when controlling for age and sex.

Table 2

Multivariate regression scores of self-compassion (predictor) on total job burnout, disengagement, exhaustion and number of working hours (outcome variables).

	R^2	R^2_{adj}	F statistic	p value
(df1, df2)				
Total Job Burnout	.12	-.00	0.86	.35
			(1,56)	
Disengagement	.03	-.02	0.05	.82
			(1,56)	
Exhaustion	.02	.02	1.28	.26
			(1,56)	
No. Working Hours	.02	.00	1.14	.29
			(1,56)	

Note: n = 58, alpha level set at p = .05.

Discussion

This analysis identified no predictive effect of self-compassion on job burnout or number of working hours in the sample of full-time WFH participants. This evidence is contrary to much of the literature pertaining to the benefits of self-compassion for job burnout, despite the present study's participants showing comparable levels of self-compassion with that of previous occupational cohorts (Eriksson et al., 2018; Nicklin et al., 2019). Indeed, the mean disengagement and exhaustion scores were high despite self-compassion scores. Perhaps the most obvious reason for this discrepancy is that the present study took place during the COVID-19 lockdown initiatives, forcing participants to WFH rather than through choice (Hale et al., 2021). Moreover, the nationwide lockdowns exacerbate lack of social interaction, a causal factor of job burnout, by extending it from the office to include family and friends (Nicola et al., 2020). Furthermore, due to the economic pressures placed on employers, many industries have been faced with the need to reduce staff (Nicola et al., 2020). Thus, while many participants demonstrated high levels of self-compassion, the necessity of keeping their jobs in this unique situation may have forced them to commit to long hours and increased workloads regardless (Nicola

et al., 2020). A follow-up study with the same participants during and after COVID-19 may help elucidate the impact of the pandemic on those variables.

While this study offers some insights, the small sample size of this study ($n = 58$ completed all surveys) and its reliance on self-report measures, which are often susceptible to response bias, are limitations (Kotera et al., 2020). Future research should also offer more in-depth analysis on these relationships regarding specific job types and professions. Nonetheless, the presented evidence highlights an important need to address the high job burnout experienced by employees who work from home, given the unique prevalence of working from home since the onset of the pandemic. Indeed, self-compassion did not protect individuals against job burnout in this sample during the period of the pandemic. The findings may inform occupational researchers and practitioners on how to design and target effective interventions to reduce job burnout.

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Availability of data and material

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author's contributions

Study concept, design, preparation of the dataset, statistical analysis, interpretation of the data and drafting of the manuscript: lead author. Critical revision of the manuscript: All authors. The lead author had full access to all the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. All authors saw and agreed on the final manuscript as well as the decision to submit for publication.

Conflict of Interest

Matthew Cotterill, Yasuhiro Kotera and Gulcan Garip declare that they have no conflict of interest and no funding to disclose.

Informed Consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

Ethics Approval

University of Derby research ethics committee has approved this study. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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