

## Self-Connection and Psychological Distress: An Empirical Study on University Students

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Studies have revealed that psychological distress is widely prevalent among college and university students, which may lead to various mental health problems and may negatively affect their social functioning and academic performance. Scholars have examined its antecedents and consequences, but not much attention is given to how to protect people from its negative impact. This study examined the role of self-connection in reducing the perception of psychological distress. Espousing a cross-sectional design, the study was carried out on 275 college and university students. A self-report questionnaire consisting of the study's variables was used to gather data. Correlations and regression analysis were applied to the obtained data. The analysis revealed that self-connection is negatively and significantly associated with psychological distress and explained around 18 percent of the variance. The study showed the significance of self-connection in reducing psychological distress.

**Keywords:** Self-connection, Self-awareness, Self-acceptance, Self-alignment, psychological distress,

A growing body of research in India and abroad has shown that university students have higher levels of psychological distress vis-a-vis the general population (Jaisoorya et al., 2017; Bhat et al., 2018; James et al., 2017; Mboya et al., 2020). One Indian study found 28.5% (Bhat et al., 2018), while another revealed approximately 35% (Jaisoorya et al., 2017) prevalence rates of psychological distress in college and university students, with females suffering more than males. Several factors in their academic, social, and personal lives result in psychological distress (Dyrbye et al., 2006). Studies have shown that factors such as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2014), negative life events (Kidwai et al., 2014), issues related to financial self-sufficiency, careers, intimate relationships, preparing the ground for adult lives (Furnham, 2004; Miller, 2017), family dysfunction and social disadvantage (Dyrbye et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2013; Iqbal et al.,

2015) contribute in perception of psychological distress.

A survey of extant literature revealed that studies have primarily focused on examining the association of psychological distress with various physical and mental health outcomes. Not much attention has been given to exploring factors that may reduce psychological distress. Granieri et al. (2020) suggested the need to develop preventative and therapeutic interventions to deal with psychological distress. In recent years, there has been growing interest in understanding the role of self-connection in mitigating mental health issues and increasing well-being (Klussman, Curtin, Langer & Nicolas, 2022). However, studies are nascent, and there has been a call for more empirical investigation (Klussmann et al., 2022). Further, despite the pervasiveness of the problem and several negative correlates, studies on psychological distress in Indian university students are limited (Jaisoorya et al., 2017). Thus, these

factors necessitated this study. This research proposes that self-connection, as a distinct construct, could be an important means of reducing psychological distress. It is argued here that the more the students are self-connected, the less they are likely to experience psychological distress and vice versa. Understanding the relationship between the two variables of the study can help mental health professionals in their intervention programme.

Self-connection is defined as a subjective experience consisting of three components: 1) self-awareness 2) self-acceptance, and 3) self-alignment (Klussman et al., 2022). These three components together make a powerful concept of self-connection, producing positive psychological outcomes in person. Self-awareness is knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources, and sensitivities (Goleman, 2006). It enables the person to understand and know about himself, and his personality i.e., feelings, thoughts, values, etc. Though self-awareness is closely related to mindfulness, it is not the same. Mindfulness is the state of being aware of and exhibiting an accepting attitude toward the present moment (Bishop et al., 2004). Self-acceptance can be defined as a full acceptance of his internal states, preferences, and sensitivities (Klussmann et al., 2022). It is concerned with the willingness to admit own emotions, values, and other aspects of the self rather than evading and refuting (Klussmann et al., 2022). The self-alignment refers to behaving in ways consistent with one's internal states, resources, penchant, and insights (Klussmann et al., 2022). It involves acting in sync with self-awareness and self-acceptance.

Psychological distress denotes non-specific signs of stress, anxiety, and depression. It is an unpleasant subjective state and experience that creates uncomfortable feelings in the person without

specific signs of stress, anxiety, and depression. It creates emotional anguish with bodily and psychological symptoms that influence social functioning (Drapeau, Marchand, & Beaulieu-Prevost, 2012). A high level of psychological distress shows a reduced level of mental health (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Psychological distress negatively affects students' physical, mental, and academic well-being (Foster, Allen, Oprea, & McAllister, 2014) and increases substance abuse and suicidal thoughts (Sharp & Theiler, 2018).

The literature revealed that understanding and expressing the self is the key to psychological health (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009). Studies found that self-awareness and self-acceptance are connected to greater well-being (McNall, Tombari, & Brown, 2019; Sanjuán, 2011), implying that self-awareness and self-acceptance reduce psychological distress. Psychological distress and well-being are inversely related (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Winefield, Gill, Taylor & Pilkington, 2012). Self-awareness envisages self-actualization, active coping, and positive affect, promoting well-being (Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, 2012). Alternatively, low or lack of self-awareness may reduce coping capacities, and the person may experience negative emotions, which may result in psychological distress. Studies have shown that decreased levels of self-acceptance were related to depression and anxiety (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001; Flett et al., 2003). Drawing on the Self-Affirmation Theory (Steele, 1988), which states that if a person reflects on values that are personally relevant to the self, the person is less likely to experience distress, implying a negative association between self-alignment and psychological distress. In their research, Heppner and colleagues (2008) showed that the more the participants felt in touch with themselves, the less the perception of negative affect. The present

researcher could not find any study that explored the relationship between self-connection and psychological distress. However, drawing on the above-mentioned direct and indirect linkages of each component of the self-connection with psychological distress, it is conjectured, in this study, that self-connection will reduce psychological distress.

H: *Self-connection will have a significant negative influence on psychological distress*

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

Espousing a cross-sectional research design, survey research was conducted on college and university students of the capital city of a state. Data from a total of 275 participants were gathered by personally approaching them. Respondents comprised 57% males and 43% females, with an average age of approximately 22 years (SD = 3.21). Sixty-two percent of respondents were from urban areas and 38 percent were from rural areas. Regarding educational qualifications, 52 percent were studying undergraduate courses, 43 percent were studying postgraduate courses, and the remaining were enrolled in other courses. Participants were provided with all important information about the research, including the study's objectives, procedures for responding to the questionnaire, etc. Willingness and consent were obtained for their participation in the study. They were also assured of the secrecy of their responses.

### **Measures**

*Self-connection:* It is assessed by using Self-Connection Scale (SCS) developed by Klussman Nichols, Curtin, Langer, & Orehek (2022). The 12-item scale consisted of all three dimensions of self-connection, i.e., self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-alignment, each consisting of 4 items. Sample items of the scale were "I have a deep

understanding of myself" (self-awareness), "I try not to judge myself" (self-acceptance), and "I try to make sure that my actions are consistent with my values" (self-alignment). A 7-point scale anchored from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7) was used to collect responses from respondents. Higher scores indicated a higher level of self-connection. The scale has 0.78 reliability (Cronbach's alpha) on the study sample.

*Psychological distress:* The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale was used to assess the psychological distress of respondents (Kessler et al., 2002). The 10-item scale assessed symptoms experienced within the previous 4 weeks. Items were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale anchored from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). Higher scores showed a higher level of psychological distress. The scale's reliability was 0.81 (Cronbach's alpha) in the present sample.

In addition, respondents' socio-demographic information was also taken, which included their age, gender, place of residence, and educational qualification.

## **Results**

CMV is likely to occur as the study employed a survey research design. Several approaches as reported in the literature, were taken to minimize it (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2003). First, Harman's single-factor (EFA) analysis was conducted before probing the relations between the study variables. Harman's single-factor analysis showed 28.24 percent of the explained variance, which is within the threshold limit of 50 percent, thus signifying the absence of CMV in this study. Second, respondents were told that the questionnaire had no right or wrong answers. Third, the secrecy of their responses was assured. The normality assumption of the distribution of the variables was checked using Skewness and Kurtosis, and their values were found to be

below 1 and 2, respectively, thus satisfying the normality assumptions. The reliability and validity of the constructs are presented in Table 1 below. It is clear from the table that Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.73 to 0.82, indicating that the variables have good reliability. The validity of the constructs was assessed using CR and AVE. The values of CR ranged from 0.77 to 0.83, and of AVE from 0.51 to 0.57, which revealed that the constructs of the measures are valid (Hair et al., 2009; Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 1: Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's $\alpha$	CR	AVE
Self-awareness	.82	.82	.55
Self-acceptance	.78	.77	.51
Self-alignment	.73	.80	.53
Self-connection	.78	.79	.54
Psychological Distress	.81	.83	.57

CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted

Source: Author's own

Table 3: Summarized Regression Results Predicting Psychological Distress

Variables	B	SE	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$R^2$	Adj $R^2$	F	<i>p</i>
Self-awareness	-.515	.142	-.394	-3.626**				
Self-acceptance	-.130	.135	-.101	-0.964				
Self-alignment	-.279	.119	-.233	-2.349*				
Self-connection	-.270	.122	-.251	-2.220*				
					.175	.136	4.50	.002

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; B = Unstandardized regression coefficients;  $\beta$  = standardized regression coefficients

Source: Author's own.

Regression analysis was carried out to test the study's hypothesis, which is presented in Table 3 in a summarized form. The results revealed a significantly negative influence of self-connection on psychological distress. Self-connection explained around 18

Table 2: Means, SDs and Correlation Coefficients

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 Self-awareness	4.29	1.14	1				
2 Self-acceptance	3.54	0.80	.81**	1			
3 Self-alignment	4.21	1.56	.86**	.75**	1		
4 Self-connection	4.01	1.12	.71**	.73**	.64**	1	
5 Psy Distress	2.79	0.83	-.36*	-.07	-.25*	-.39*	1

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , Psy Distress = Psychological Distress

Source: Author's own

Descriptive statistics, i.e., mean, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients, presented in Table 2, showed that self-connection has a negative and significant association with psychological distress ( $r = -0.39$ ,  $p < .01$ ). All three dimensions of the self-connection are found to have a negative relationship with psychological distress. However, only two dimensions, i.e., self-awareness and self-alignment, are negatively and significantly related to self-connection.

percent variation in psychological distress ( $R^2 = .175$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The finding supported the study's hypothesis, which stated that self-connection will significantly negatively influence psychological distress. The regression results also revealed a significant negative relationship between self-awareness ( $\beta = -.394$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and self-alignment ( $\beta = -.233$ ,  $p < .05$ ) with

psychological distress. Thus, the study revealed that self-connection is an antidote and helps reduce psychological distress.

### **Discussion**

The present study proposes that self-connection, a relatively new concept, can be a powerful psychological resource that helps reduce psychological distress. The study's results revealed the significance of self-connection in reducing psychological distress among college and university students. Self-connection involves knowing and accepting the self and behaving following self-awareness and self-acceptance. This study indicated that if students are fully aware of their inner self, i.e., of their values, feelings, goals, strengths, and weaknesses, and accept and behave inconsistently with those values, thoughts, and goals, they are less likely to experience psychological distress. The finding is in line with the other studies, which highlighted the relationship between the alignment of one's inner self and outward behaviours with well-being (Schultheiss et al., 2008; Sheldon, 2014) and psychological health (Schlegel et al., 2009). Students with high levels of self-connection evaluate themselves objectively and truthfully accept themselves. They probably decide and engage in specific behaviours after proper thinking, helping them avoid mistakes and avert problems, which helps prevent them from experiencing psychological distress. Proper awareness and acceptance of self enables students to think they are fallible and imperfect human beings. Therefore, they are less likely to develop a wrong inference about themselves, their behaviours, and the external environment. As a result, they are less likely to experience psychological distress. Studies have reported that self-aware people are better decision maker (Schlegel & Hicks, 2011) and experience less rumination (Silvia & Phillips, 2011), which is described as maladaptive, commonly repeated thoughts that are driven by anxiety

about the self (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Self-connection helps students develop a sense of reality and honesty in their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours, which probably leads them towards the problem-oriented coping approach, to perceive, acknowledge, and act on the problem objectively, which helps lessen the perception of psychological distress. Studies revealed that people with higher levels of self-awareness are adaptive and problem-solving oriented, which helps them deal with difficulties (Kreibich et al., 2022). Self-awareness accelerates self-regulation and goal search behaviour (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Fenigstein, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

The study intended to understand the effect of self-connection on psychological distress. The study supported the assertion that self-connection, which consists of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-alignment synergistically, reduces the perception of psychological distress in the study sample. Students who understand themselves (thoughts, needs, abilities, goals, values, etc.) properly, accept them genuinely and honestly, and behave accordingly, protecting themselves from experiencing psychological distress. It can be concluded that self-connection works as a psychological resource that acts as a buffer against negative emotions, especially psychological distress.

The study is significant for professionals engaged in addressing the issue of mental health, specifically psychological distress. People in general and college and university students in particular are suffering from psychological distress. The professionals may recommend that people develop self-connection as one of the tools to deal with the nonspecific symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, as this study showed that it works as a shield against psychological distress. Self-connection is malleable

(McAdams & Pals, 2006), and scholars have suggested several methods for developing self-connection. According to Klussman et al. (2022), practicing mindfulness might help a person develop self-awareness and self-acceptance. Challenging over-generalized thinking patterns and becoming a master at learning from errors contribute to the development of self-acceptance (Ellis & Dryden, 1999). Other techniques include physical activity, building confidence, independence, etc (Kaufman, Glass, & Arnkoff, 2009). Journaling also facilitates self-connection development (Klussman et al., 2022).

This study has some limitations. The study is conducted on a specific group of people, i.e., university and college students, and in a particular region, which limits the generalizability of the results to diverse population groups and different cultural groups. The study did not control the covariates in establishing the association between self-connection and psychological distress, which could potentially adulterate the results. The study examined the direct relationship between the two study variables. It did not address the mechanism of the relationship between the two. Further, causality between the study variables cannot be ascertained as the study is correlational. Future research should address these limitations to gain a deeper understanding of the issue addressed in this study.

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