

Self-Compassion and Attitude towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help among Men

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The stigma associated with seeking psychological help is prominent in India. This stigma is higher among men, reducing their tendency to seek psychological help. Self-compassion is having an understanding, non-judgmental attitude toward one's inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one's experience is part of the common human experience. Being self-compassionate helps individuals be more open towards their suffering and encourages them to seek professional help. The objectives of the study were to assess and examine the relationship between self-compassion and attitude towards seeking professional psychological help among men in Kerala. The study used a correlational design with a convenient sample of 200 men belonging to the developmental phase of early adulthood from various districts of Kerala, India. Pearson's correlation showed a significant positive relationship between self-compassion and men's attitude towards seeking psychological help, suggesting that higher self-compassion fosters more positive help-seeking attitudes. Among the six subscales, only isolation had significant positive correlation with attitude towards seeking professional psychological help, indicating that greater isolation had an increased positive attitude toward seeking psychological help. The implications of the study have also been discussed.

Keywords: Attitudes, seeking professional psychological help, self-compassion, early adulthood, men's mental health, isolation

Nearly 15% of India's population needs mental health care, yet 83.4% do not receive any professional intervention or treatment (Kaur et al., 2023). Kerala accounts for about 4% of India's population and hosts nearly one-third of the nation's institutions dedicated to mental health and related disorders across both public and private sectors (Joseph et al., 2021). Even though facilities are offered, it is believed that many individuals who need formal services for their psychological wellness tend not to avail them, for a variety of reasons (Aloud & Rathur, 2009). Mental health services in India are underutilised, it can be attributed to several factors like limited awareness about mental well-being and available treatment options, societal stigma and discrimination, and high costs of seeking mentalhealth care (Kaur et al., 2023). Attitude

barriers namely preferring to be self-reliant in addressing one's own problems (Chong et al., 2012) and holding the belief that a problem will be resolved by itself without any specific attention (Sareen, 2007; Thompson, 2004) also play a major role. The survey initiated by NMH i.e., National Mental Health, conducted during the years 2015 and 2016 highlighted several barriers to accessing mental health services, including a reluctance to seek help, an inadequate recognition of the need for care, limited knowledge on availing resources, cultural and societal belief systems, and shame associated with seeking help while supply-related barriers mainly consisted of insufficient, irregularly distributed, and inefficiently used resources (Gururaj et al., 2016).

Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help

The most important element in predicting behaviour, according to social psychologists, is attitudes (Fishbein, 1963; Kiesler et al., 1969). An individual's attitude when seeking help can sometimes be acknowledged as one's inclination to avail or reject formal mental health care (Fischer & Turner, 1970). In framework of psychological wellness, seeking help refers to attempting to take assistance from other individuals to tackle any concerns on their mental wellness (Rickwood et al., 2012). Appropriate help-seeking helps enhance mental health and lessens psychological distress (Wilson et al., 2005). It entails communicating with various help-seeking resources, including professionals, to understand, obtain guidance, educate, treat, and support one's distressing life situations (Batten & Dutton, 2011). Cramer's model states that willingness to avail resources is influenced by one's attitudes toward counseling besides that social support, amount of distress, and the propensity to hide personally upsetting details are also some of the factors (Cramer, 1999).

Gender could impact an individual's perception towards pursuing formal psychological support and even seeking informal guidance regarding general life aspects. Men are generally less inclined to seek assistance for common concerns of psychological well-being when compared to their female counterparts (Oliver et al., 2005). This presents a significant challenge for professionals in the field of mental health because men tend to be underrepresented. Intrapersonal factors, including self-stigma, self-worth, and compassion towards self, had positive influence on likelihood of seeking professional psychological assistance (Topkaya, 2021). By fostering a kind and understanding relationship with oneself, individuals may become more open to

reaching out for support when facing psychological challenges.

Self-compassion

Being self-compassionate is acceptance of suffering as a human experience, caring and being kind towards oneself, and not being judgemental over personal failures and inadequacies (Neff, 2003). Being self-compassionate influenced relationship between perceived stigma and internalized stigma when looking specifically at stigma associated with seeking psychological aid (Heath et al., 2016) and reduced the detrimental effect of masculinity on men's internalized stigma regarding seeking psychological support (Heath et al., 2017). Showing kindness towards self, and being mindful along with common humanity are the elements that generate a self-compassionate state of mind (Neff, 2003).

Among scientific investigations conducted on help-seeking behaviour around the world, a higher incidence and huge treatment gap for commonly prevalent mental health problems (Jorm et al., 2017), as well as unfavourable attitudes and a limited willingness to pursue professional support have been documented. Acculturation and attitudes toward obtaining mental health treatment were revealed to be significantly mediated by stigma. Furthermore, not all types of stigmas were significant predictors; public and personal stigmas were both significant predictors, whereas self-stigma was not (Pasupuleti, 2013). Self-esteem and attitudes regarding mental illness were found to be important determinants of seeking help (O'Brien, 2016). When individuals of Asian culture, adhere to traditional norms, they are less likely to have a positive inclination towards formal psychological support and are hesitant and unwilling to visit a psychologist (Kim & Omizo, 2003). When examining the influence of emotional intelligence, collective self-esteem and intergroup anxiety on help-

seeking behaviour among Indians, women held stronger favourable views toward accessing mental health care compared to men and were shown to have greater emotional intelligence and a liking for therapists who shared their religious beliefs (Beck, 2014). A study on Indian university students showed that gender was a determinant of attitudes toward seeking counselling. Female students displayed a positive mindset towards pursuing professional psychological support (Arshad, 2010).

In investigating the role of age differences and gender in pursuing professional mental health support, results have shown that females exhibited more favourable attitudes toward utilizing professional support (Mackenzie, 2006). Similar results were also found in a study in which men tend to be less likely than women to exhibit positive attitudes toward seeking help (Wendt & Shafer, 2015). In comparison to males, females were shown to have favourable general perception towards obtaining professional support and are more likely to recognise an individual necessity for professional intervention (Ang, et.al, 2004). Metanalysis identified gender as a key predictor of an individual's attitude toward pursuing formal psychological support (Nam et al., 2010).

Men's Mental Health

Men's inclination to receive assistance for mental health challenges is constrained by their adherence to traditional masculine societal expectations. Stereotypical expectations of masculinity, traditional gender role distress, stigma, mental health awareness, dysfunctional coping mechanisms, and men's inability to trust the capacity of the health system are the key obstacles (Mahalik et al., 2007). A qualitative investigation of actual experiences of help-seeking in males revealed a complex emotional discourse around getting help and

dealing with mental health difficulties. It also highlights the stress and complicated interplay that young men face as a result of the masculine stereotype, difficulty category, stigma, available resources for help, and significant societal pressures of competency (Bolland, 2010). "Approval from peer group," "personal struggles," "environmental and cultural influences," "using alcohol as a form of self-medication," "viewpoints about looking for professional support," "worrying about homophobic reactions," and "traditional masculine beliefs" were identified as major obstacles to seeking professional support among men, while "customized promotion of mental health services," "incorporating mental health curriculum into formal education programs," "education via informal support services," and "available psychological care," were important strategies to overcome these barriers (Lynch & Long, 2018). Men showed not as much of a positive inclination for obtaining professional psychological aid and had more positive attitudes toward conventional masculine norms. The scores of men's masculine role norms predicted their stance towards accessing psychological support (Yousaf et al., 2015).

Seeking Professional Psychological Help and Self-Compassion

Self-compassion and pursuing formal psychological services have been found to differ by age group. There is evidence that older people exhibit greater levels of self-compassion which can be attributed to their diverse life experiences, which provided them with an opportunity to use compassion approaches (Mackenzie et al., 2006). A meta-analysis found that self-compassion has a stronger impact on well-being in older adults (Zessin et al., 2015).

Self-compassion mitigated linkage between masculine norm compliance and both self-stigma and help-seeking, in a group

of 284 undergraduate men (Heath et al., 2017). Self-compassion and low adherence to masculinity indicated more favourable perceptions of seeking professional help (Wasyliw & Clairo, 2016). A study on college students belonging to Asian American heritage, investigating influences of perfectionistic self-presentation and compassion towards oneself on help-seeking, found that unfavourable attitudes towards pursuing help were highly connected with a tendency to hide imperfections and maintain emotional self-control (Bau, 2020). Being compassionate towards oneself, perceived benefits of mental healthcare, awareness of mental health conditions, perceived demand for mental health services, and seeking psychological health care in previous year increased the likelihood of intention to seek support, meanwhile self-concealment, self-coldness, personal shame associated with seeking support, and identifying as male gender decreased the likelihood of intending to seek help (Dschaak et al., 2019). High self-compassion levels are linked to more favourable personal views regarding mental health, implying that compassion-based therapy is a valuable and promising approach to reducing stigma and its consequences (Jones, 2017).

Given this context, the present study aims at examining association between self-compassion and attitude held towards pursuing formal psychological support among men belonging to Kerala, to understand how being compassionate towards self, influences attitudes towards pursuing formal psychological support thereby informing targeted interventions to reduce stigma, particularly for men. With this objective, it was hypothesized, that a significant association between self-compassion and attitudes held towards accessing professional mental support among men in Kerala exists. The study could empower men by showing that reaching out for help is a vital part of self-

care rather than a sign of weakness. Additionally, the findings can foster a more positive outlook on seeking formal psychological support, thereby promoting greater utilization of mental health care resources.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 200 men belonging to the developmental phase of early adulthood, aged from 18 to 40 years, from various districts of Kerala, India. Using a convenient sampling method, only males aged 18 to 40 years were included. Only individuals able to comprehend English were considered for inclusion. Females and individuals identifying as the third gender, individuals with any physical or mental disability were excluded. Persons below the age of 18 and above 40 years, those who were not able to comprehend the English language were excluded.

Instruments

A socio-demographic questionnaire was employed to gather background details of the participants such as age, educational qualification, marital status, and location of residence.

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), designed by Neff in 2003. This measure consists of 26 items and is self-reported. It comprises six factors namely common humanity, self-judgment, self-kindness, isolation, over-identification and mindfulness. It uses a 5-point rating system, with 1 corresponding to 'almost never', 2 corresponding to 'occasionally', 3 corresponding to 'about half of the time', 4 corresponding to 'fairly often', 5 corresponding to 'almost always'. Out of 26 items, 13 are negative items which have to be reverse scored. Self-compassion scale exhibits high reliability with an internal consistency score of 0.92 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.93 over a period of three-week intervals (Neff, 2003).

Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help- Short Form (ATSPPH-SF) measure with 10 items, was designed by Fischer and colleague Farina in 1995. Participants rate items from 0 to 3, with 0 meaning “disagree,” 1 meaning “somewhat disagree,” 2 meaning “somewhat agree,” and 3 meaning “agree” respectively (Fischer and Farina, 1995). The items 2, 4, 8, 9, and 10 are reverse scored. High scores point to a favourable i.e., positive attitudes held towards pursuing professional care. Correlation between longer version and the short version was 0.87. Value of 0.80 is the test-retest reliability coefficient.

Procedure

Tools along with socio-demographic questionnaire and consent form were converted into a Google form. After stating the study’s purpose, objectives, benefits, and risks, informed consent was obtained for voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured to the participants and that data would be used only for academic purposes. Individuals were informed, they could withdraw at anytime from the study. IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used for analysing data. Using the Pearson’s correlation the relationship among the variables was examined.

Results

Table 1. Correlation between Self-Compassion and Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help (ATSPPH)

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>ATSPPH</i>
Self-Compassion	200	3.30	0.43	.19**
ATSPPH	200	15.91	4.51	-

***p* < .01, ATSPPH= Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help

Table 1 shows significant positive correlation between self-compassion and attitudes toward seeking professional

psychological help at 0.01 level of significance. Although the strength of the correlation is weak the results indicate that as self-compassion levels increase positive attitudes held towards professional mental help-seeking will also increase.

Table 2. Correlation between Subscales of Self-Compassion and Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help (ATSPPH)

Domains of Self-compassion	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	ATSPPH
Self-Kindness	200	3.18	.89	.13
Self-Judgment	200	3.42	.72	.06
Common Humanity	200	3.23	.92	.10
Isolation	200	3.45	.89	.15*
Mindfulness	200	3.23	.65	.05
Over- Identification	200	3.28	.60	.09

**p* < .05, ATSPPH= Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help

Table 2 shows correlation between subscales of self-compassion and attitudes held towards formal psychological help-seeking. Isolation was the only subscale, found to have a significant correlation with attitudes held toward professional psychological help-seeking. While the correlation strength is weak, the results indicate that as isolation increases positive attitudes held toward availing formal psychological support will also increase.

Discussion

Present study aimed at examining the association between self-compassion and the attitudes held toward availing professional mentalhealth support among men in Kerala. The analysis has shown positive correlation which was significant. A weak association between self-compassion and attitudes held towards availing formal psychological help can be explained grounded on the

collectivistic culture from which samples are derived. Studies found that people in collectivistic cultures are more self-critical than those in individualistic cultures (Kitayama et al., 1997; Kitayama & Markus, 2000). Self-criticism is a major characteristic of people with low self-compassion. Thus, self-criticism might be a factor that weakens the correlation between being self-compassionate and attitudes held toward availing professional psychological aid. Factors like hierarchy within one's family, safeguarding the family pride, avoidance of any situations that may bring shame to the family are some of the concepts that Indian culture values the most. Looking for interventions outside the family such as seeking professional psychological help is mostly regarded as disgraceful, bringing dishonour to the family, and resorting to an intervention outside the family indicates insufficiency in the ability to solve issues by the family members (Zane & Yeh, 2002). Therefore, individuals choosing psychological help and interventions tend to face stigma from mainstream society.

Emotional expression especially among men is curtailed as the social norms categorize men as emotionally stronger, restricted in expression of negative emotions, and rigid. So, it is unlikely that men will seek support even when experiencing mental distress or challenges as it may be seen as compromising one's pride, and looking weak and powerless before others (Delgado, 2017). To meet social expectations, men tend to engage in self-criticism rather than treating themselves kindly (Reis, 2019).

The correlation between subscales of self-compassion showed that only the dimension of isolation was significantly and positively correlated with attitudes held towards availing of professional mentalhealth care. Although the correlation is significant it was found to be weak which may be attributed to the tendency of individuals in collectivistic

cultures to feel connected to their social groups even if they are not in immediate or constant contact and therefore are less likely to seek assistance outside their social circles (Frias et al., 2014). Thus, men who are part of collectivistic culture, when experiencing isolation, prefer to seek support from close friends, family, and relatives as they are more inclined to turn to their social circle instead of mental health practitioners.

In general, emotional expression is often repressed by men, leading them to feel lonelier than women. The gender role expectations of men created by society restrict the expression of loneliness. The restrictions put on men's expressions can also be an added reason behind the weak association between isolation and attitudes held towards availing professional psychological aid. It can be challenging for men to openly admit feeling negative emotions and experiencing emotional pain. Other subscales were not significantly related with professional help-seeking from mentalhealth practitioners. The non-significant results are assumed to stem from the sample's cultural characteristics like familism, the stigma surrounding mental health concerns, societal judgment, and the challenges of self-disclosure.

Implications and Future Directions

Men are generally found to be more reluctant to pursue mental health services. Therefore, self-compassion-focused interventions can be recommended as an effective strategy to enhance self-compassion among men and reduce stigma, fostering a more favourable view of seeking professional mental health support. In clinical settings, tailored interventions and strategies that incorporate self-compassion training for men could effectively address barriers to help-seeking, such as self-criticism and self-stigma. Educational institutions and corporate sectors can be instrumental in

addressing the mental health challenges and needs concerning young men by incorporating interventions that facilitate easier access to psychological support. These environments provide ideal platforms for promoting mental wellness, reducing the shame surrounding mental health challenges, and integrating mental health resources into everyday life. Furthermore, researchers in the future could investigate the mental health challenges of men belonging to the sandwich generation, i.e. middle-aged men who balance caregiving responsibilities and professional demands, could offer valuable insights into the unique stressors, including financial strain, emotional fatigue, and time management challenges, which are some of the pressures this group faces. By doing so, interventions can be more targeted and refined to align with their distinct needs and circumstances.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present research findings indicate a positive association between being self-compassionate and attitudes held towards formal psychological help-seeking, suggesting that as compassion towards oneself increases, individuals tend to have a more inclined attitude towards help-seeking. Among the subscales of self-compassion, only isolation had significant positive relationship with attitudes held toward availing formal psychological support. Even though the correlation is weak, it implies that increased feelings of isolation may lead to more openness toward seeking professional support. This weak relationship in part, reflects the broader cultural context in which self-compassion is less emphasized. As India has a patriarchal society with a collectivistic culture, individuals, i.e. both men and women, tend to have traditional masculine expectations like self-reliance and independence from men in general. This factor aids in understanding why men are often more inclined to be self-critical than

self-compassionate and feel the need to rely only on themselves. Furthermore, the persistent stigma surrounding psychological help-seeking remains a significant barrier. The ingrained belief that one should be able to cope alone may contribute to the relatively weak link between self-compassion and the readiness to pursue professional mental health support.

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