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Original Article

The Mediating Role of Self-Compassion in the Relationship Between Hope and Anxiety Among College Students

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Abstract. This study investigated the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between hope and anxiety among college students. A total of 304 students from Manila City completed three standardized survey instruments. Mediation analysis using statistical software indicated that self-compassion significantly mediated the relationship between hope and anxiety. The results demonstrate that hope indirectly reduces anxiety by enhancing self-compassion. These findings underscore the importance of integrating self-compassion into interventions and programs designed to reduce anxiety among college students. The study provides insights for mental health professionals and educators, supporting the adoption of self-compassion-based approaches in therapeutic and educational settings. Additionally, the findings advocate implementing mental health strategies in higher education to ensure adequate academic and emotional support for students.

Keywords: *Anxiety; College students; Hope; Mediation analysis; Self-compassion.*

College life is a key period for students' growth, with more maturity, freedom, and harder studies. Students deal with classes, activities, meeting new people, and new surroundings. Many mental health issues begin in young adulthood (Pedrelli et al., 2015). Schoolwork can cause anxiety, therefore harming grades (Pacific Teen Treatment, 2021). In the Philippines, Alibudbud (2021) said that 47.2% of college students, mainly in Metro Manila, have anxiety and depression. Recent data also show that 32.96% of Filipino students have moderate anxiety, and 30.74% have high academic anxiety (Cebu & Pantalita, 2023). This situation has been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the mental health crisis, with global rates of anxiety and depression increasing by 25% in the first year (World Health Organization, 2022). During the Philippines' strict lockdown, nearly 25% of college students reported moderate-to-severe anxiety and 17% reported moderate-to-severe depression (Tee et al., 2020). Given these heightened concerns, student welfare in higher education has

received increased attention from educational stakeholders (Cleofas, 2019).

Given the high prevalence of anxiety in the college population, hope emerges as a critical psychological resource. Conceptually, hope is defined as a cognitive set involving the perceived ability to set goals, generate pathways to achieve those goals, and maintain the necessary motivation (agency) to pursue them (Snyder et al., 2002). It is a resource that facilitates coping with challenges (Fredrickson, 2009; Nipa & Barman, 2024; Rehman et al., 2014) and enables individuals to identify pathways to their goals and to accept failure as a universal experience (Booker & Perlin, 2020). This resource is empirically associated with well-being, persistence, and overall health (Snyder et al., 2002). Importantly, among college students, individuals consistently employ adaptive strategies and maintain motivation in the face of adversity, thereby fostering resilience (Gallagher & Lopez, 2018). In contrast, anxiety is characterized by frequent worry, tension, and apprehension (American Psychological Association). Research consistently demonstrates an inverse relationship between these constructs, such that higher levels of hope are associated with lower anxiety (Carretta et al., 2014; DiPierro et al., 2018). Specifically, individuals who experience difficulty reaching their goals or possess low levels of hope tend to report increased anxiety (DiPierro et al., 2018). This lack of perceived certainty in goal attainment can increase worries about future opportunities and task completion (DiPierro et al., 2018). This pattern underscores the importance of examining the interplay between hope and anxiety in this student cohort.

To better understand the relationship between hope and anxiety, it is essential to explore potential mediating factors. Previous research has shown that self-compassion can effectively mitigate psychological distress, including anxiety (Gunnell et al., 2017; Neff et al., 2018; Smeets et al., 2014). However, despite the established link between hope and anxiety, there is a lack of research examining self-compassion as a possible mediator in this specific connection. This study aimed to address that gap. Self-compassion is defined as extending kindness and understanding toward oneself during times of suffering, failure, or perceived inadequacy (Neff, 2023). This capacity comprises three core components: self-kindness (versus self-judgment), a sense of shared humanity (versus isolation), and mindfulness (versus over-identification with negative emotions) (Neff, 2012). Individuals who highly practice this trait tend to report greater happiness, optimism, and personal responsibility (Manusov, 2011). Empirical studies consistently support the protective role of this construct, finding that young people who engage in self-compassionate practices generally report lower levels of anxiety and depression (Bergen-Cico & Cheon, 2013; Egan et al., 2022; Etemadi Shamsababdi & Dehshiri, 2024). Its presence is consistently linked to fewer negative emotions (Lee et al., 2021; Stutts et al., 2018) and improved mood (Barnard & Curry, 2011). Furthermore, self-compassion is theorized to cultivate a sense of ability, confidence, and connectedness, which, in turn, fosters greater hope (Gunnell et al., 2017). Conversely, hopeful individuals tend to exhibit greater self-kindness and reduced self-criticism during difficult periods (Umphrey & Sherblom, 2014). Research also suggests that self-compassion serves as a psychological link between various factors. For instance, Rodriguez-Carvajal et al. (2016) demonstrated that greater mindfulness is associated with higher self-compassion, which, in turn, contributes to healthier mental states. Furthermore, Mehr and Adam (2016) found that self-compassion partially explains the relationship between negative perfectionism and depression. These results underscore the need to study how self-compassion mediates the relationship between hope and anxiety in college students.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a non-experimental quantitative design, specifically a predictive correlational design. According to Johnson (2001), correlational studies aim to identify associations between variables and predict outcomes. This design was utilized to determine the mediating role of self-compassion in the association between hope and anxiety among college students.

Sample

This study included undergraduate students from public and private universities in the City of Manila. Initially, 319 respondents participated; after data cleaning, 304 participants (N = 304) were retained for analysis. The study's target sample size was determined based on recommendations in the literature that a minimum of 300 participants is required for quantitative studies. The sample comprised 223 female students (73%) and 81 male students (27%), all aged 18 to 35 years (mean = 21.34, SD = 2.85). The distribution by year level was as follows: 43 first-year, 73 second-year, 129 third-year, and 59 fourth-year students. Convenience sampling was employed to recruit currently enrolled undergraduate students from colleges and universities in Manila. The sample was normally distributed and included representation from each year level.

Instruments
The study used English versions of all instruments, as all participants were proficient in the language of instruction at their universities.

Hope. Hope was assessed using the Adult Hope Scale (AHS). This 12-item instrument measures an individual's level of hope, reflecting Snyder's (1991) cognitive model, which is divided into two subscales: agency (purposeful energy to accomplish goals) and pathways (the development of plans and strategies to achieve objectives). Participants evaluated each item on an 8-point scale, ranging from 1 (definitely false) to 8 (definitely true). Some of the sample items from the instruments are *"I can think of many ways to get out of a jam"* and "*I met the goals that I set for myself*". The AHS is appropriate for this population, given that goal-setting challenges align with the constructs of agency and pathways thinking, for which prior studies have successfully used the scale with undergraduate participants (Ciarrochi et al., 2007; Shireen & Luke, 2023). The scale's internal consistency in this study was Cronbach's alpha = .75.

Self-Compassion. The Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF), developed by Raes et al. (2011), was used to assess participants' self-compassion. The scale comprised 12 items assessing three subscales of self-compassion: self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity. The items were rated on a scale from 1 *(almost never)* to 5 *(almost always)*. Some of the sample items from the instruments are "*When I fail at something important to me, I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy"* and "*When I am going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need"*. Furthermore, Neff and Tóth-Király (2022) recommended the more extended version for a more thorough examination of the subscales. In contrast, the shorter version is more effective for assessing the overall self-compassion score. The Cronbach's alpha for the SCS-SF instrument in this study is .72.

Anxiety. As for the anxiety, it was measured using the Zung Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS). The SAS is a 20-item questionnaire that has been a valuable tool for analyzing anxiety levels across various demographic groups worldwide (Zung, 1971). This instrument used a four-point Likert scale, with 1 representing *(none or a little of the time)* and 4 representing *(most or all of the time)*. Some sample items in the instrument are *"I feel afraid for no reason at all"*, and *I am bothered by stomach aches or indigestion"*. The scale's psychometric properties, specifically internal consistency, showed a reliability coefficient of .79.

Procedure
This study was conducted online via Google Forms, using self-administered questions to assess college students' self-compassion, anxiety, and hope. The researcher disseminated the Google Forms by posting them on social media platforms, including Facebook, X, and Instagram. The researcher also obtained informed consent from all respondents before completing the survey questionnaire, which was included in the first section of the Google Forms. Furthermore, to prevent multiple responses, the researcher allowed participants to submit only one response per email address. Answering the survey questionnaire took approximately 15-20 minutes of the respondents' time.

Data Analysis
All data were analyzed using JASP version 0.18.3.0 (JASP Team, 2024). The researcher first observed the descriptive statistics of the variables. Subsequently, a mediation regression analysis was conducted. This approach was used to test the hypothesis that self-compassion mediates the association between hope and anxiety. Mediation analysis was used to assess the indirect effect of the independent variable on the outcome, with the third variable as the mediator. Before the mediation analysis, the researcher also checked the necessary assumptions of normality using histograms, linearity via residual plots, and the absence of multicollinearity, thereby confirming the appropriateness of the regression model.

Ethical Consideration
The researcher adhered to Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012. This is to protect and treat all participants' information with strict confidentiality, for educational purposes only. The researcher also ensured that all of the participants' responses were limited and visible only to her. Additionally, the researcher has received approval and review from the university's Research Ethics Committee (REC) under the REC Code 2024-148, thereby allowing the researcher to proceed with data collection.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for hope, self-compassion, and anxiety. The mean and standard deviation for hope indicate an average level among participants. Self-compassion scores similarly reflect moderate levels. In contrast, anxiety scores exhibited a high mean and considerable variability within the sample. The correlation between hope and self-compassion was moderately positive, indicating that students with higher levels of hope also reported greater self-compassion. A weak negative association was observed between hope and anxiety. In contrast, self-compassion demonstrated a significant negative association with anxiety, suggesting that students with higher self-compassion are more likely to experience lower anxiety levels.

Table 1. *Correlation Matrix for Hope, Self-Compassion, and Anxiety*

Variables	Range	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Hope	12-96	45.770	8.571	-	0.414***	-0.144*
2. Self-Compassion	12-60	37.763	6.212			-0.440***
3. Anxiety	20-80	49.931	13.252			–

*p < 0.05, ***p < 0.001

Hope as a Predictor of Self-Compassion in Agency and Pathway Thinking

Table 2 summarizes the association between hope, specifically the agency thinking, and anxiety, emphasizing the mediating role of self-compassion. The results indicate that agency thinking alone does not significantly affect anxiety. However, agency thinking has a significant positive effect on self-compassion, and self-compassion, in turn, mediates the relationship between hope and anxiety. The indirect effect of hope on anxiety through self-compassion was statistically significant, as confirmed by bootstrapping with 1,000 samples. These findings suggest that higher levels of agency thinking in hope are associated with increased self-compassion, which subsequently contributes to lower anxiety levels.

Table 2. *Mediation Analysis of Self-Compassion in the Association Between Hope (Agency Thinking) and Anxiety*

					95% C.I.	
	b	SE b	β	p	Lower	Upper
Direct Effect						
Hope (Agency) → Anxiety	0.101	0.151	0.038	0.488	-0.184	0.385
Hope (Agency) → Self-Compassion	0.479	0.064	0.394	<.001	0.354	0.605
Indirect Effect						
Hope (Agency) → Self-Compassion → Anxiety	-0.465	0.085	-0.046	<.001	-0.631	-0.299
Total Effect						
Hope (Agency) → Anxiety	-0.364	0.147	-0.140	0.013	-0.653	-0.076

Table 3 presents the association between hope's pathway thinking and anxiety, with a focus on the mediating effect of self-compassion. Pathway thinking alone did not have a significant direct effect on anxiety. However, self-compassion significantly mediated the relationship, yielding a statistically substantial adverse indirect effect, as validated by bootstrapping with 1,000 samples. These results indicate that higher levels of hope, whether through agency or pathway thinking, are associated with greater self-compassion, which in turn is associated with reduced anxiety. One key finding of this study relates to the role of hope in predicting anxiety. While it was hypothesized that hope would negatively predict anxiety, the results did not support the first hypothesis. Specifically, the direct effect of hope (agency and pathways thinking) alone on anxiety was not statistically significant (Table 2: β = 0.038, p = 0.488; Table 3: β = 0.040, p = 0.457). This non-significant direct effect contradicts earlier correlational studies that found a negative association between hope and anxiety (DiPierro et al., 2018).

Table 3. *Mediation Analysis of Self-Compassion in the Association Between Hope (Pathway Thinking) and Anxiety*

					95% C.I.	
	b	SE b	β	p	Lower	Upper
Direct Effect						0.385
Hope (Pathway) → Anxiety	0.123	0.166	0.040	0.457	-0.184	0.644
Hope (Pathway) → Self-Compassion	0.495	0.076	0.349	<.001	0.346	
Indirect Effect						
Hope (Pathway) → Self-Compassion → Anxiety	-0.479	0.094	-0.158	<.001	-0.663	-0.296
Total Effect						
Hope (Pathway) → Anxiety	-0.356	0.172	-0.117	0.038	-0.693	-0.019

However, the analysis revealed an essential condition. The negative association between hope and anxiety became significant only when self-compassion was included as a mediator. The Total Effect of hope on anxiety was substantial (Table 2: β = -0.140, p = 0.013; Table 3: β = -0.117, p = 0.038), suggesting that hope's protective quality is complex and indirect. Previous studies, such as Carretta et al. (2014), have indicated that hope promotes a goal-oriented mindset that can reduce anxiety risk, which emphasizes the importance of the hope-anxiety association. This implies that more hopeful students may experience lower levels of anxiety. Additionally, students with a hopeful mindset are more likely to take proactive steps to ensure a positive future (Snyder & Lopez, 2002), which is essential for reducing anxiety.

Furthermore, the study's findings indicate that the relationship provides critical support for Kristin Neff's Self-Compassion Theory. The finding showed that the direct effect of hope on anxiety diminished when self-compassion mediated the association (complete mediation), suggesting that hope alone is not sufficient to reduce anxiety. Instead, self-compassion serves as a necessary regulatory mechanism, allowing students to acknowledge their goal-related suffering without the typical emotional fallout associated with self-criticism. This was also supported by Leary et al. (2007), who found that higher levels of self-compassion were associated with less extreme reactions, less negative emotions, and more accepting thoughts, as well as a tendency to put problems in perspective while acknowledging personal responsibility. The findings further demonstrated that, although hope alone may not directly predict lower anxiety, its association becomes more evident when self-compassion is considered a mediating factor.

The mediation model also showed that hope (both agency and pathways thinking) positively and significantly predicted self-compassion, confirming the second hypothesis. This is evidenced by the strong, significant path from hope to self-compassion in the mediation analysis (Table 2: β = 0.394, p < 0.001; Table 3: β = 0.349, p < 0.001). The initial correlation matrix also showed a moderately positive association between hope and self-compassion (r = 0.414, p < 0.001). Studies have demonstrated that hope serves as a driving force that initiates and sustains efforts toward long-term goals, including the flexible management of challenges that may impede them (Ciarrochi et al., 2015). This makes hope a positive factor in maintaining a healthy well-being. Sirois and Hirsch (2019) further supported these findings by showing that the three dimensions of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, enhance self-regulatory strengths necessary for engaging in self-care activities, such as monitoring and evaluating ongoing behavior and regulating emotional states. Most therapists also believed that compassion is an essential aspect of psychotherapy in alleviating anxiety or their negative future outlook. (Germer and Neff, 2013).

Moreover, research by Booker and Perlin (2020) mentioned that individuals who practice mindfulness, a key dimension of self-compassion, can concentrate on their achievements without becoming emotionally entangled in personal setbacks. This indicates that self-compassionate students are less likely to indulge in self-criticism, self-pity, or possible overthinking during difficult situations, which could heighten their anxiety. Further studies have identified mindfulness as the primary component of body practices, such as yoga, which is associated with optimal mental health outcomes (Salmon et al., 2009). The results of the current study not only show that hope significantly predicts self-compassion, confirming the second hypothesis; moreover, the results indicate that college students with higher hope tend to have greater self-compassion, which is associated with positive and healthy well-being. It also emphasized the positive association between hope and self-compassion, highlighting the importance of this association in the indirect effect of hope on anxiety.

Self-Compassion as Mediator Between Hope and Anxiety

The most significant finding of this study is the complete mediation of self-compassion in the association between hope and anxiety for both dimensions of hope. The Indirect Effect of hope on anxiety through self-compassion was statistically significant (Table 2: β = -0.465, p < 0.001; Table 3: β = -0.479, p < 0.001). This effect underscores the pivotal role of self-compassion in translating goal-oriented thinking into lower psychological distress. Hope, according to Snyder (2001), cultivates a forward-looking perspective that promotes goal formation and solution development. However, without self-compassion, the easing effects of hope on anxiety are weakened by self-criticism and worry. Self-compassion helps college students effectively manage unpleasant emotions and reduce anxiety by fostering emotional resilience and adaptive coping strategies (Neff, 2003). College students who practice self-compassion tend to have a substantial positive impact on the association between hope and anxiety (Neff, 2023). These findings are consistent with emerging research highlighting the significance of self-compassion for psychological well-being. The study strengthened the claim that self-compassion, as a mediator among

different constructs, leads to positive outcomes for individuals' well-being, such as reducing negative states (Mehr & Adam, 2016) and improving mental health (Rodriguez-Carvajal et al., 2016). It also addressed the research gap regarding the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between hope and anxiety among higher education students.

Conclusion

This study revealed that self-compassion fully mediates the relationship between hope and anxiety among college students in Manila. The analysis showed that while hope alone was insufficient to reduce anxiety significantly, its protective effect became evident only when channeled through enhanced self-compassion. This finding underscores the importance of the internal mechanism of self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness in translating hopeful thinking (agency and pathways) into lower psychological distress. Cultivating self-compassion and hope in academic settings may serve as a protective framework for student mental health.

Educational Implications

The results emphasize the need for higher education institutions to foster self-compassion within student support services and academic life actively. Schools and universities should integrate practices like mindfulness workshops, resilience training, and self-kindness programs to promote student well-being.

Psychological Practice Implications

The findings also revealed that the relationship between hope and anxiety is fully mediated by self-compassion, providing a more holistic framework for mental health practitioners. Counselors and other mental health professionals should employ therapeutic approaches that integrate both self-compassion training and hope-based strategies.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While providing valuable insights, the scope of this study was limited to college students in Manila and relied on self-report measures. Future research should examine more diverse populations and geographic contexts to test the generalizability of the mediation model. Additionally, exploring additional mediators and considering broader contextual factors can yield a more comprehensive understanding of the associations among hope, self-compassion, and anxiety, thereby informing more effective mental health interventions.

Contributions of Authors

Author 1: Held the overall responsibility for the study's execution, which extended from the proposal stage through to the final manuscript completion. Handled the data collection and analysis, ensuring strict adherence to all university research guidelines and protocols throughout the process.
Author 2: Contributed by addressing the study's technical aspects. Oversaw potential challenges and collaborated closely with author 1 to ensure that the final paper met all ethical guidelines.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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