

# Does self-compassion moderate the relationships between loneliness and depressive symptoms in a global sample of Autistic and non-autistic adults?

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## Background

Self-compassion is a powerful tool for emotional resilience, allowing individuals to meet life's challenges with kindness, understanding, and support rather than self-criticism. Neff (2003) conceptualized self-compassion as comprising three essential domains:



Mindfulness



Self-kindness



Common Humanity

Decades of research show that cultivating self-compassion significantly enhances mental health, psychological well-being, and emotional regulation—particularly in non-autistic populations. But what about Autistic adults? **Emerging evidence suggests that self-compassion can be a transformative tool for Autistic individuals, too.**

One critical area of exploration is how self-compassion interacts with other mental health factors—such as loneliness. Studies show that loneliness is strongly linked to depressive symptoms in Autistic adults.

Research in non-autistic samples suggests self-compassion serves as a buffer, helping people navigate loneliness with a more supportive internal dialogue. Given that Autistic adults report significantly higher levels of loneliness, investigating the potential of self-compassion to reduce its impact on depression is not just relevant—it's urgent.

Poster



## Current Study

The study aimed to examine the moderating effect of self-compassion on the relationship between loneliness and depressive symptoms in a global sample of Autistic and non-autistic adults.

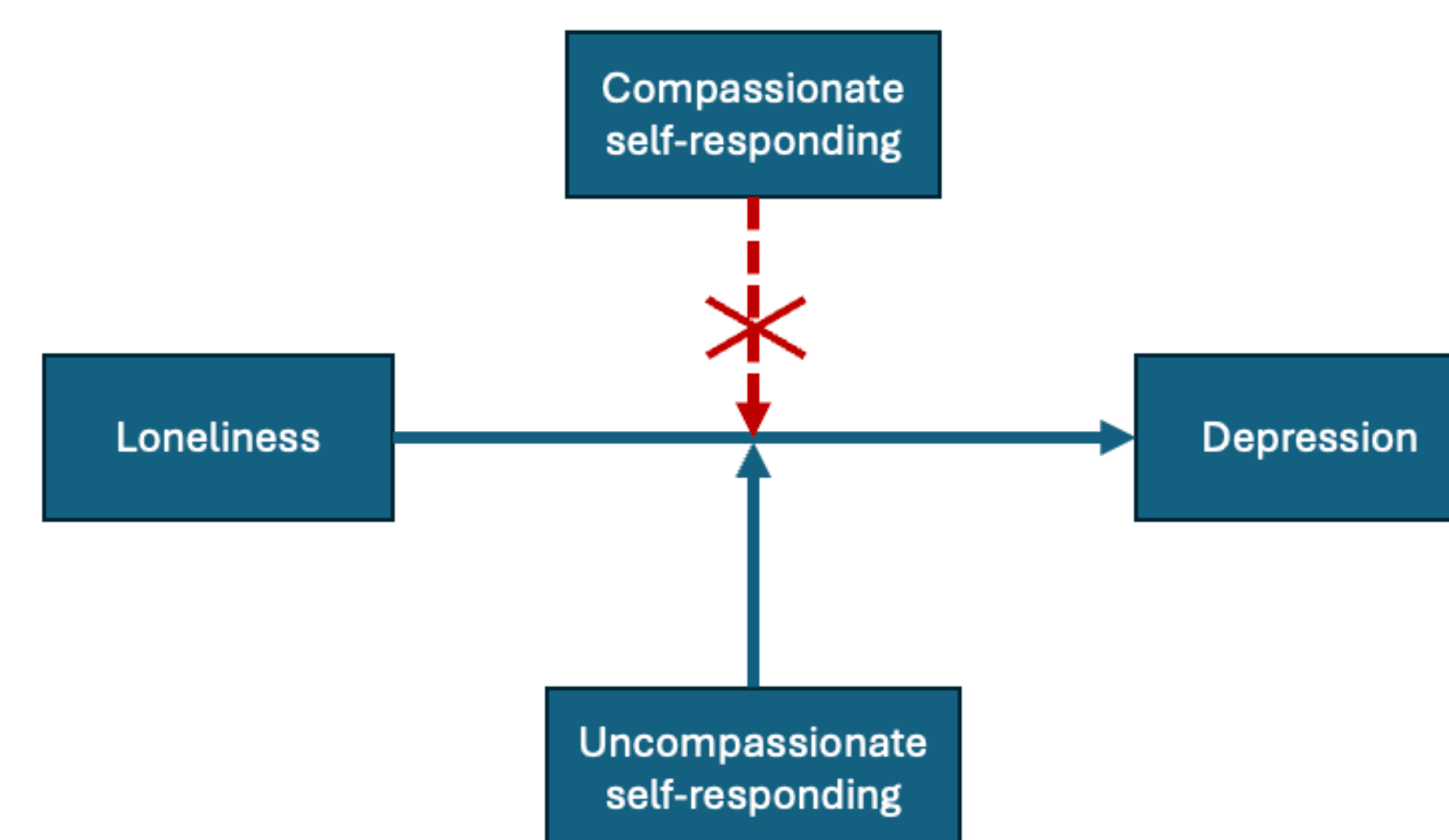
**Our hypothesis:** Both compassionate self-responding (CSR; mindfulness, self-kindness, common humanity) and uncompassionate self-responding (USR over-identification, self-judgment, isolation) would moderate the associations between loneliness and depressive symptoms in both Autistic and non-autistic adults.

## Method

- Ethics approval obtained through Griffith University
- Recruited Autistic adults worldwide via social media, autism support networks, mailing lists, etc.
- 416 Autistic adults ( $M_{age} = 41.14$  years,  $SD_{age} = 13.30$ ) and 212 non-autistic adults ( $M_{age} = 41.39$  years,  $SD_{age} = 12.27$ ) completed a REDCap survey
- Measures: Self-Compassion Scale, UCLA Loneliness Scale – Modified (UCLA-m), Patient Health Questionnaire - 9 (PHQ-9).

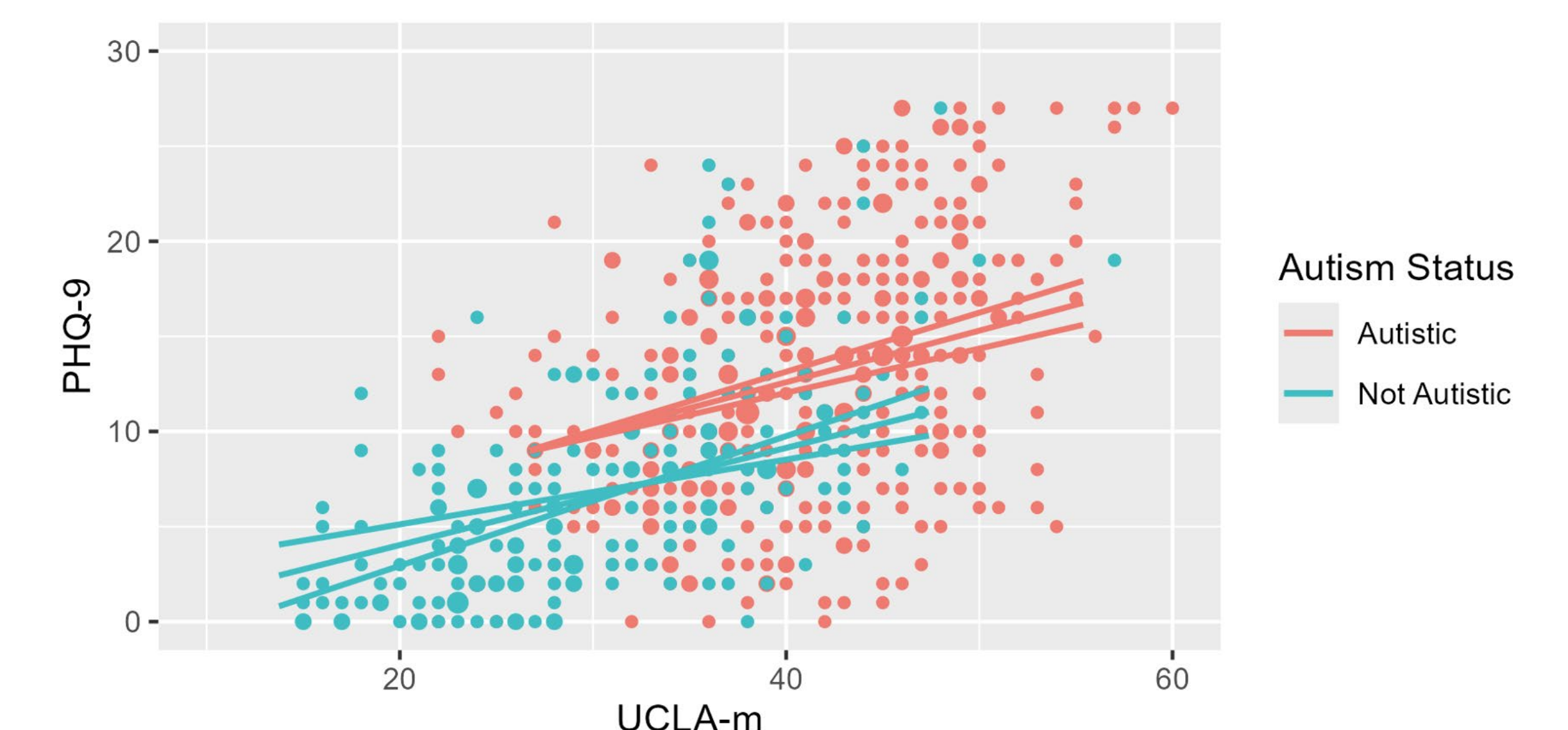
## Results

**Figure 1.** Conceptual representation of moderation results for both groups



**Only USR moderated the associations between loneliness and depression (Fig. 1).** After controlling for demographic factors, USR had a statistically significant main effect on depression (i.e., at the mean level of USR within group) in both Autistic ( $\beta = .295$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and non-autistic adults ( $\beta = .373$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For participants with low USR ( $-1$  SD), loneliness had a small effect on depression for both Autistic ( $\beta = .253$ ) and non-autistic ( $\beta = .253$ ) adults. For participants with high USR ( $+1$  SD), loneliness had a small effect on depression for Autistic adults ( $\beta = .338$ ) and a moderate effect for the non-autistic group ( $\beta = .497$ ; Fig. 2).

**Figure 2.** Associations between depression (PHQ-9) and loneliness (UCLA-m) at different uncompassionate self-responding levels for both groups



## Conclusion

- Our findings show that uncompassionate self-responding moderates the relationship between loneliness and depressive symptoms in both Autistic and non-autistic adults, with the effect being more prominent in the non-autistic group.
- With the growing interest in understanding the loneliness experiences of Autistic individuals, these findings have critical implications for the development of loneliness interventions to support Autistic adults.
- Specifically, **self-compassion may play a small moderating role in mitigating the deleterious mental health effects of loneliness in Autistic adults.**

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