

“Being kind to ourselves means that we can be a better parent”: Reflections on a brief online self-compassion intervention for parents of Autistic children



Ru Ying Cai, James Kirby, Abigail Love, Chris Edwards, Gail A. Alvares, Vicki Gibbs

Introduction

- Parenting an Autistic child can be both deeply rewarding and uniquely demanding, often placing parents at elevated risk for stress and poor mental health. These challenges are compounded by societal stigma and systemic barriers. Self-compassion has emerged as a protective factor against stress and poor mental health.
- Compassion Focused Therapy** offers a structured framework for cultivating self-compassion and building emotional resilience, making it particularly relevant for parents facing chronic stress. Research consistently shows that **higher self-compassion** is linked to reduced stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in parents of Autistic children and may buffer the negative consequences of stigma. Evidence also suggests that self-compassion interventions can effectively improve parental well-being; yet little is known about parents' lived experiences with such programs.

Objectives

- To address this gap, the present study explored Australian parents' perspectives on a 2-hour online self-compassion intervention designed to be accessible and practical for time-poor caregivers. The workshop was grounded in principles and practices from Compassion Focused Therapy and aimed to introduce foundational concepts. This qualitative study was part of a larger RCT, pre-registered with ANZCTR.

Method

- Four workshops were conducted over Zoom (participants attended one workshop), facilitated by the second author, who is also a clinical trainer for Compassion Focused Therapy.
- 17 parents of Autistic children (15 mothers), aged 4 to 17 (M=9.56; SD=3.79), were interviewed two weeks post-workshop. Most reported low levels of self-compassion.
- All semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone (Mduration= 24 minutes), except for one parental interview, which was completed via email at the participant's preference. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to examine the interview transcripts. Our analysis was informed by team members' lived experiences and training in psychology and education.



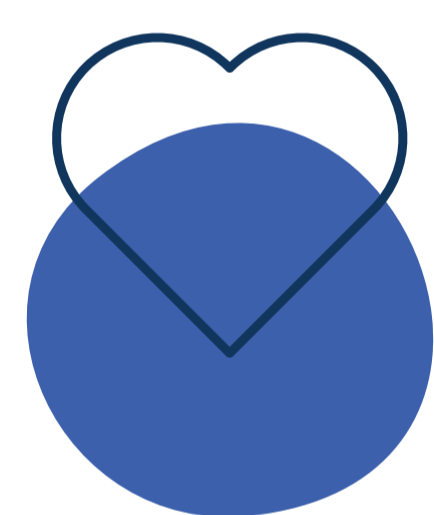
Results



Creating an intentional space for connection and inclusion is paramount

Theme 1: The workshop fostered a rare sense of connection and inclusion, where parents felt understood and supported by others who shared similar experiences.

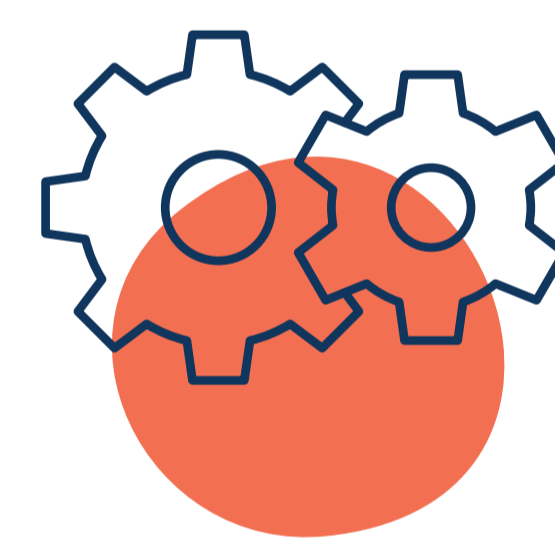
“When you can see how other people are coping, you can almost imagine yourself into being like that as well...the tenacity and resilience of people”



Parents starting to open the door to self-compassion

Theme 2: Parents began to explore self-compassion from a place of limited prior knowledge, acknowledging habitual self-criticism and recognizing the need for greater self-kindness.

Self-compassion is “one of those things that it's like, you get told, don't be so hard on yourself and all that, but actually doing it is a whole other thing”



Self-compassion practices are not just helpful, they're also practical

Theme 3: The practical nature of the guided exercises made the strategies easy to remember and apply in daily life, even in brief moments of stress.

“The tone of voice was like groundbreaking, because I think my tone of voice to myself sometimes is not really always friendly”



Self-compassion is not only beneficial for the parent, but also beneficial for the child

Theme 4: Being self-compassionate had flow-on benefits for their interactions with their children, improving patience, tone, and emotional responsiveness.

Being “aware that I'm tired and I'm trying to do too much, and just going slower and being more compassionate to them and myself”

Conclusion

This study extends the growing literature on compassion-based interventions by showing how a brief, online self-compassion workshop can begin to shift self-critical patterns, foster social connection, and cultivate practical tools for compassion. Self-compassion holds promise not only as an individual protective resource but also as a relational one, with potential benefits for family systems.

For clinicians and researchers, the challenge moving forward is to continue developing accessible, flexible, and culturally attuned interventions that support parents of Autistic children in cultivating compassion for themselves and those they care for. We developed a **tipsheet** for helping parents cultivate self-compassion. Scan the QR code to download it now.

