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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE ROLE OF SURRENDER THROUGH SELF-COMPASSION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the role of surrender through self-compassion among young adults in long-term relationships and is primarily based on the premise that attempting to meticulously control certain aspects of life such as romantic relationships may hinder rather than help relationships to flourish. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on the sample found to possess high levels of self-compassion, and thematic content analysis was employed. The findings indicate that an individual's positive outlook towards himself/herself (Attitude towards Self) appears to positively influence his/her outlook towards his/her romantic partner (Attitude toward Partner). The practice of self-compassion thus appears to enable individuals to cease controlling behaviour towards their partner, expanding the likelihood of surrender, which has been observed to have multiple benefits especially in terms of harmonious interpersonal relationships and a higher sense of inner well-being.

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### INTRODUCTION

The significance of the study of surrender through self-compassion can be better understood in the face of its alternative – control – which has been observed to cause a hindrance to individuals' inner well-being and is accompanied by stress, anxiety and other negative states of being. Surrender refers to letting go, not of the responsibility of one's actions, but of the consequences of outcomes that are not under one's control. The importance of the practice of self-compassion in this process was based on the proposition that when an individual accepts and extends kindness and consideration to himself/herself, the need to control situations or other people ceases, consequently enabling surrender, enhancing inner well-being and promoting harmonious interpersonal relationships. A study that provides evidence regarding the ill-effects of control and consequently emphasizing the need for surrender and self-compassion was conducted by Brooke A. Mistler in 2010, which deals with perfectionism (a construct that is based on control), forgiveness, and self-compassion as a way to prevent an individual's perfectionism from hindering one's well-being. It was observed that adults most likely to express forgiveness-related attitudes were also the least likely to be perfectionists in approach, and self-compassion was found to play a role in mediating the relationship of forgiveness and perfectionism (Mistler, 2010). Yet another study that provides support for the current study was written by Michael D. Murphy in 2011, which deals with the chosen constructs

primarily in terms of the paradox containing the premise that well-being is achieved by letting go, whereas hard work, spurred on by control, at acquiring material success may in fact prove counter-productive to achieving inner well-being. The effects of mindfulness, an element common to both surrender and self-compassion, were also studied, providing a framework for the role that interpersonal dynamics (in couples and groups) play in the individual search for happiness (Murphy, 2011). This research intends to understand the chosen concepts as concrete and largely conscious processes rather than simply internal abstraction, thus asserting that an individual's inner well-being will have some manifestation in his or her behaviour, relationships and approach towards life.

### METHODS

The sample was obtained from the city of Bengaluru with the use of purposive sampling. The sample consisted of 6 individuals, 4 females and 2 males, belonging in the age range of 18 – 25 years, currently residing in Bengaluru, proficient in the English language, who possessed high levels of self-compassion and were presently engaged in a long-term relationship (that has lasted longer than 1 year). The tools used included an informed consent form, a socio-demographic sheet, the Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (Raes *et al.*, 2011) and a semi-structured interview schedule that was framed keeping the relevant constructs in mind. The Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (Raes *et al.*, 2011) was conducted as a screening tool on 20 individuals who fulfilled prior inclusion criteria. The individuals who obtained a high score on the scale qualified for the semi-structured interview, which

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consisted of 7 to 12 questions that were framed keeping the relevant constructs in mind and face-validated by experts in the field. The aptness of the questions, the comfort level of the interviewee, length of the interview and other factors pertaining to the relevance of the interview were assessed by conducting a pilot study. The final sample constituting 6 individuals were interviewed and audio-recorded with consent. The data obtained from the sample was transcribed from the audio-recordings and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis.

## RESULTS

The sample consisted of 6 individuals, both male and female, ranging from the ages of 20 to 25 years, and all involved currently in long-term romantic relationships that are of duration longer than 1 year. 4 females and 2 males constituted the sample. A 20-year old Indian female in her final year of pursuing her B.A. degree had been in a long-term relationship for 2 years, as had a 21-year old female sharing similar demographics. A 21-year old Korean female who was also pursuing her bachelor's degree (B.A.) and a 22-year old Indian male in his third year of pursuing his bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering (B.E.) had been committed to their respective relationships for 3 years. A 20-year old Indian female in her third year of her B.A. degree had been involved in her relationship for over 4 years. Finally, a 25-year old Indian male in his final year of C.P.A (Accounting) had been in a relationship for 10 years.

All research participants were individuals currently residing in the city of Bangalore, proficient in the English language and involved in committed relationships that have not as of yet culminated in marriage. The participants obtained a high score of above 3.3 out of 5 (as determined by the researcher by computing a median split), thus fulfilling the final criterion for inclusion in the study. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. During the process of thematic analysis using the transcribed data, two global themes were identified: Attitude toward Self and Attitude towards Partner. Attitude toward Self refers to a dimension which broadly encapsulates positive components regarding one's overall outlook or approach towards oneself while in a committed relationship. The sub-themes that emerge from this global theme include Self-Awareness (as how aware an individual is of himself/herself), Security (the sense of security an individual feels as a person) and Balanced Approach (the kind of balanced approach with which an individual views and treats oneself). These three sub-themes are constituted of basic themes including respect, understanding, self-reliance, acceptance, positive outlook, openness to perspectives/change and calm/relaxed demeanour.

The general trend observed for the first global theme, Attitude toward Self, was that during the interviews, participants appeared to pay most emphasis to the basic themes of understanding (that falls under the category of Self-Awareness), acceptance (that belongs to the category of Security) and a positive outlook (that comes under Balanced Approach) with respect to overall attitude towards oneself. They were considered the most reliable indicators of the level of one's self-compassion, and subsequently a higher level of inner well-being and better interpersonal relationships. However, a negative case was identified, wherein

the participant claims that his high level of self-compassion in fact often hindered the well-being of his relationship with his long-term partner of 3 years. It appears that apart from an individual's level of self-compassion not going hand in hand with the possible lack in taking initiative to solve issues, it is possible that his/her long-term partner may misunderstand his/her high level of self-compassion to mean shunning responsibility for issues, resignation or even a desire for non-involvement. More clarity is required in this regard to make further inferences. In any case, the aforementioned negative case goes on to show that it is the exception that proves the rule; the general trend that prevails highlight the significance of a positive overall attitude towards oneself in order to maintain a harmonious relationship with his/her partner.

The second global theme identified was Attitude towards Partner, a dimension which covers beneficial aspects of one's overall outlook or approach towards one's romantic partner. The sub-themes that are found to have surfaced from this global theme include Communication (the effectiveness with which an individual is able to communicate with his/her partner), Positive Sentiment (the amount of positive sentiment that is experienced and expressed by an individual towards his/her partner) and Mutuality/Sharing (the level of mutuality and sharing displayed by an individual and his/her partner). Basic themes such as honesty, space-giving, kindness, trust, forgiveness, comfort, compromise, perseverance and teamwork constitute these sub-themes. The general trend observed in the second dimension or global theme, Attitude towards Partner, revealed that with regard to one's overall attitude or approach towards one's partner, participants paid more importance to the qualities of giving adequate space to and openness with one's partner (that falls in the category of Communication), trust and faith in one's partner and in the relationship (that falls under Positive Sentiment), and the notion of compromise and support between long-term partners (that falls under the category of Mutuality/Sharing).

## DISCUSSION

Broadly speaking, it can be inferred from analysis of data that the dimension of Attitude toward Self on the whole corresponds to the construct of self-compassion, whereas that of Attitude towards Partner broadly corresponds to the process of surrender, positing the premise that an individual's attitude of self-compassion is capable of greatly influencing his/her attitude toward his/her partner positively, and consequently enabling the process of surrender. The global theme or dimension of Attitude toward Self in this study is observed to share a common link with the components or "Faces" of self-compassion which include self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. Elements of the self-kindness component of self-compassion can be observed in the sub-theme of self-awareness including understanding and respect. The common humanity component is broadly reflected by the sub-theme of security enabled by acceptance, self-reliance and confidence. The mindfulness component is characterized by the sub-theme entailing a balanced approach that involves openness to perspectives/change, a positive outlook and a calm or relaxed demeanour. Findings in a variety of other studies regarding self-compassion also illustrate significant co-relations between self-compassion and positive psychological

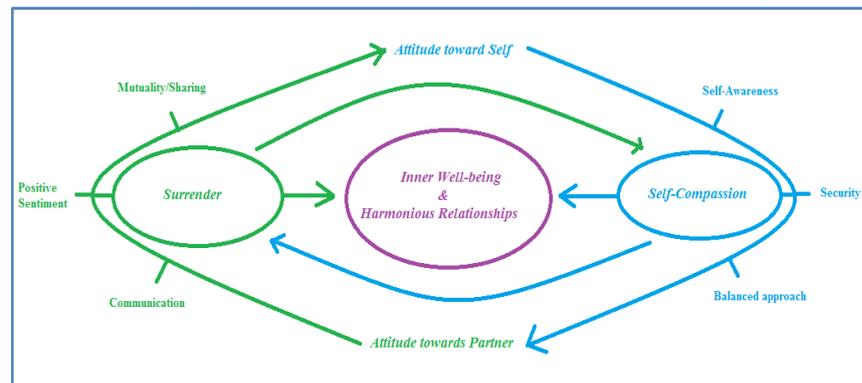


Figure 1. Figure illustrating the conceptual map

factors such as happiness and emotional resilience, while acting as a protective factor against negative mood states such as depression and anxiety. There is substantive evidence from a variety of studies that suggest that the process of surrender leads to higher levels of well-being and consequently more harmonious interpersonal relationships. The present study's Attitude towards Partner dimension is observed to encapsulate a variety of qualities such as better communication skills via space-giving, comfort, honesty and openness; positive sentiments such as trust, kindness and forgiveness. A sense of mutuality and sharing including components of compromise and support, perseverance, willingness, dedication and teamwork has also been found to be important qualities that surrender appears to help foster among young adults in long-term relationships. Several factors that may play a role in enabling surrender constitute several elements of self-compassion as can be inferred from the Attitude toward Self and Attitude towards Partner dimensions of the present study. These include trust, courage, honesty, hope, openness to experience, confidence, creativity, care, commitment and no expectations (Moze, 2009). Faith, whether understood from a spiritual perspective or not, shows up most notably in the lived experience of love for another (May, 1982). Thus another important key is acceptance, because surrender takes place in the present moment without any focus on the past or the future. Surrender is the present moment acceptance of is-ness, when one takes in the truth of self and Other without the falsities erected by defenses (Ghent, 1990).

According to a thorough review of literature, the benefits of surrender are found to be widespread, including an increased sense of self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-reliance, and it is further associated with inner peace and relief. There is also a reduced sense of hostility and resistance and an increase in the qualities of trust, receptivity, wisdom, patience, tolerance, gratitude and adaptability. Surrender allows for the cultivation of intimacy and relatedness with others (corresponding to the Attitude towards Partner dimension) and enhances healthy autonomy (corresponding to the Attitude toward Self dimension). The findings of the present study in corroboration with various relevant studies hence substantiate the premise that self-compassion plays a large role in enabling young adults in long-term relationships to engage in the process of surrender.

### Conclusion

From thorough analysis, it can be observed that the construct of Attitude toward Self, whereas the process of surrender involves the

dimension labelled Attitude towards Partner, asserting the premise that an individual's attitude of self-compassion is capable of greatly influencing his/her attitude toward his/her partner positively, and consequently enabling the process of surrender. The components or "Faces" of self-compassion which include self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness are found to share a connection with the dimension of Attitude toward Self in this study. Elements of the self-kindness component of self-compassion can be observed in the sub-theme of self-awareness including understanding and respect. The common humanity component is broadly reflected by the sub-theme of security enabled by acceptance, self-reliance and confidence. The mindfulness component is characterized by the sub-theme entailing a balanced approach that involves openness to perspectives/change, a positive outlook and a calm or relaxed demeanour. A variety of qualities such as better communication skills via space-giving, comfort, honesty and openness; positive sentiments such as trust, kindness and forgiveness appear to encapsulate the study's Attitude towards Partner dimension. Compromise and support, perseverance, willingness, dedication and teamwork are components that have been observed to display a sense of mutuality and sharing, which are important qualities that surrender appears to help foster among young adults in long-term relationships.

### Implications of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore certain concepts that contribute to promoting harmonious interpersonal relationships which may be put into practice, in turn instilling among individuals the confidence and hope to cultivate the kind of well-being that at first sight appears elusive. The research intended to understand seemingly abstract concepts in a practical setting, thus asserting that an individual's inner well-being would have some manifestation in his or her behaviour, relationships and approach towards life. The findings of the study illustrate that an individual's attitude towards himself/herself plays a large role in determining his/her attitude towards his/her partner while engaged in a long-term romantic relationship. This indicates that an individual in a long-term relationship who possesses a high level of self-compassion (thus displaying a positive attitude towards him-self/her-self) is more likely to engage in the process of surrender and less likely to engage in controlling behaviour, thus displaying a more positive attitude towards his or her partner, especially during times of distress. This in turn results in a healthier relationship and subsequently higher levels of inner well-being. It is

important to note that in the given context, inner well-being is not a constant state of mind that one achieves and dwells in, but rather involves a flexible approach and practices that one must engage in at a conscious level to maintain and evolve during the course of the relationship.

#### Limitations of the Study

- The findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond the sample.
- Being a qualitative paper based on the interpretivist paradigm, a level of subjectivity could not be avoided.
- Every effort was made to secure honest responses from research participants during the interview. However, as the topic under study was of a personal and sensitive nature, the possibility of interviewees having responded in a socially desirable manner rather than with entire honesty remains, making the reliability of obtained data questionable.

#### Scope for Future Research

Future researchers may utilize the current study as a starting point from which to delve deeper and attempt to further concretize the constructs of surrender and self-compassion which are still viewed more as internal abstractions rather than concrete processes. A larger and more representative sample on one hand and expert interviewers on the other hand would assist a great deal in gathering accurate and reliable data. The current study thus provides the basis for further research on surrender, self-compassion and other related concepts which help expanding the sub-disciplines of Positive Psychology, Transpersonal Psychology and Humanistic Psychology, which are concentrated on ordinary and relatable phenomena that contribute to inner well-being as opposed to merely focusing on pathological phenomena as has been predominantly investigated in the field of psychological research.

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