

11/11/2024, 11:29 AM

Self-Compassion and Psychological Flexibility Buffer Negative Mental Health Outcomes in Chronically Ill Students

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BACKGROUND

More than half of young adults report living with at least one chronic physical health condition (Watson et al., 2025). Yet, college students have remained an understudied population in research on chronic illness, despite facing significantly higher risks of delayed or incomplete college graduation compared to healthy peers (Maslow et al., 2011).

Individuals with chronic illnesses are two to three times more likely to develop mental health disorders, especially anxiety and depression (Naylor et al., 2012).

Studies exploring methods of coping with a chronic illness has shown that developing a sense of self-compassion (Baxter & Sirois, 2024) and acceptance (Selinheimo et al., 2025) with a chronic disease can significantly improve quality of life and mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression.

METHODS

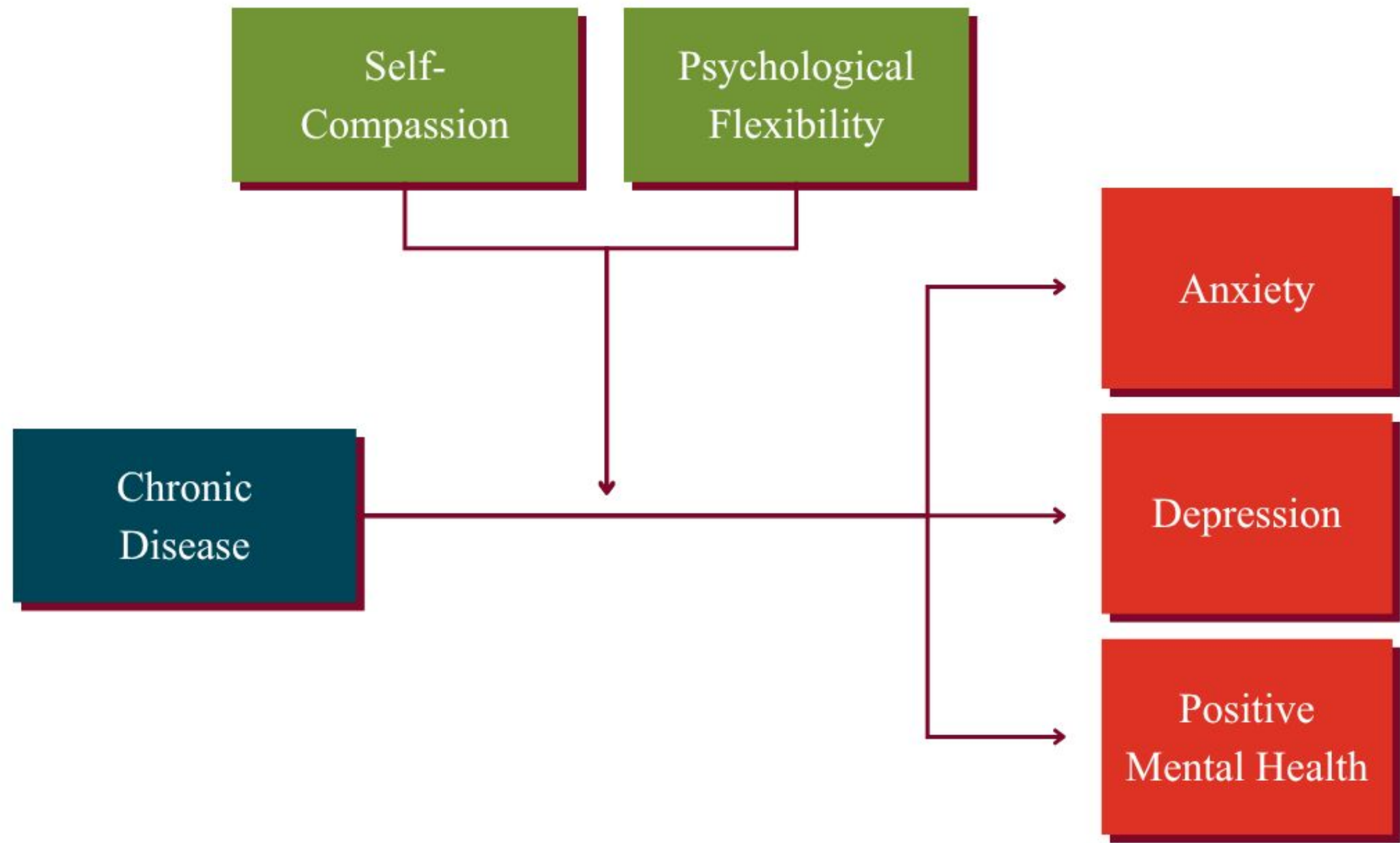
Participants

This study utilized the 2024–2025 Healthy Minds Study data. Participants used for this project were undergraduate and graduate students ($N = 21,959$) with a chronic health condition requiring ongoing treatment by a healthcare professional.

9971 reported having asthma, 3214 high blood pressure, 2929 high cholesterol, 2254 thyroid disease, 1943 gastrointestinal disease, 1704 arthritis, 1542 diabetes, 619 cancers, 593 seizure disorders, 187 sickle cell, 79 HIV/AIDS, 5739 autoimmune or other chronic diseases.

Measures

Self-Compassion Scale (Raes et al., 2011), Acceptance and Action Questionnaire–II (Bond et al., 2011), Generalized Anxiety Disorder–7 (Spitzer et al., 2006), Patient Health Questionnaire–9 (Kroenke et al., 1999), Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010).



College students with **chronic illnesses** experience greater emotional distress, but **self-compassion** and a **flexible mindset** can alleviate this stress.

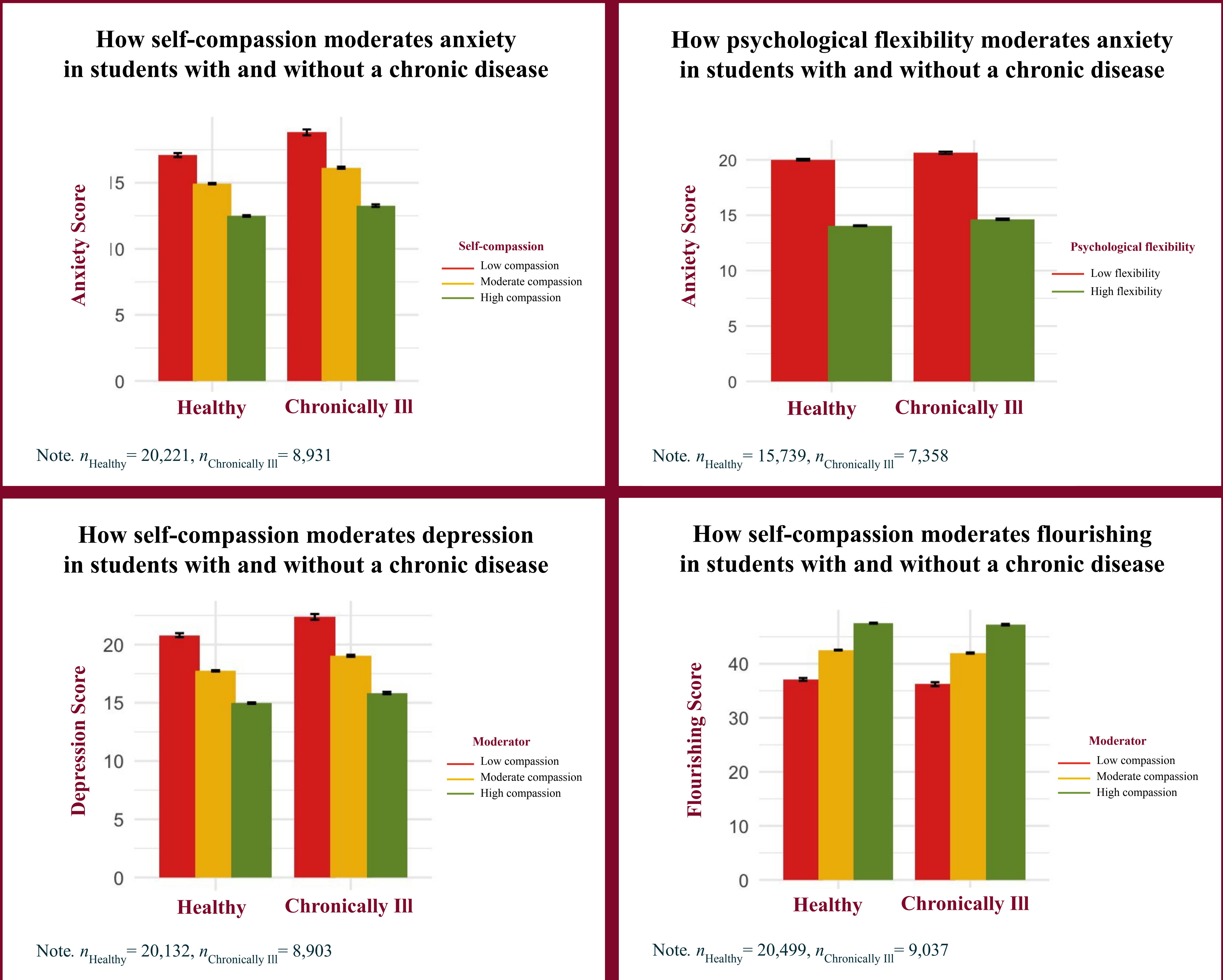


Table 1 Moderated regression results using mental health outcomes as criterion, self-compassion as the predictor, and disease as the moderator					Table 2 Moderated regression results using mental health outcomes as criterion, psychological flexibility as the predictor, and disease as the moderator				
Predictor	b	SE	t	p	Predictor	b	SE	t	p
Anxiety ¹					Anxiety ¹				
(Intercept)	20.83	0.17	125.15	< .001	(Intercept)	26.59	0.11	244.40	< .001
disease	2.42	0.30	7.96	< .001	disease	1.19	0.19	5.39	< .001
compassion	-0.33	0.01	-40.68	< .001	flexibility	-0.36	0.003	-118.40	< .001
disease:compassion	-0.07	0.02	-4.46	< .001 *	disease:flexibility	-0.02	0.005	-3.14	.002 *
Depression ²					Depression ²				
(Intercept)	24.96	0.18	140.31	< .001	(Intercept)	30.74	0.12	266.31	< .001
disease	2.60	0.33	7.99	< .001	disease	0.80	0.20	4.01	< .001
compassion	-0.40	0.01	-45.91	< .001	flexibility	-0.40	0.003	-124.08	< .001
disease:compassion	-0.07	0.02	-4.53	< .001 *	disease:flexibility	-0.01	0.01	-1.82	.069
Flourishing ³					Flourishing ³				
(Intercept)	29.44	0.25	118.59	< .001	(Intercept)	28.61	0.19	149.22	< .001
disease	-1.67	0.45	-3.68	< .001	disease	0.15	0.33	0.45	.656
compassion	0.73	0.01	59.70	< .001	flexibility	0.44	0.01	82.83	< .001
disease:compassion	0.06	0.02	2.71	.007 *	disease:flexibility	.005	0.01	0.51	.610

Note. 1. $n = 55583$, $R^2 = 0.091$, $F(3, 29148) = 974.1$, $p < .001$

2. $n = 55700$, $R^2 = 0.111$, $F(3, 29031) = 1203$, $p < .001$

3. $n = 55199$, $R^2 = 0.154$, $F(3, 29532) = 1786$, $p < .001$

Note. 1. $n = 55443$, $R^2 = 0.422$, $F(3, 29288) = 7137$, $p < .001$

2. $n = 55574$, $R^2 = 0.443$, $F(3, 29157) = 7734$, $p < .001$

3. $n = 55066$, $R^2 = 0.254$, $F(3, 29665) = 3359$, $p < .001$

RESULTS

Students with chronic physical health conditions reported higher anxiety and depression and lower positive mental health than their healthy peers, indicating poorer overall mental health among students with a chronic disease.

Self-compassion was associated with better mental health outcomes in all students.

- Self-compassion moderated the relationship between chronic disease on all three mental health outcomes, such that positive mental health was higher and depression and anxiety were lower at greater levels of compassion.

Psychological flexibility was also associated with better lower anxiety and depression and higher flourishing across all students.

- Psychological flexibility buffered the effect of chronic disease and anxiety, such that the associated between chronic disease and anxiety was weaker at higher levels of flexibility.
- However, flexibility did not significantly moderate the effects of chronic disease on depression or flourishing.

DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that self-compassion may provide a meaningful protective effect across multiple domains of mental health. Results support the value of targeted mental health interventions that cultivate self-compassion and psychological flexibility in college students with chronic health conditions.



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For the descriptive measures, participants, and references, please scan the QR code!