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Stressless: A pilot study to promote compassion and gratitude skills among university students

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INTRODUCTION

- The academic context is highly competitive and entails numerous challenges for students.
- A recent Portuguese study revealed that almost fifty percent of college students present significant burnout symptoms, which are consistently related to poor academic and psychological outcomes (Maroco & Assunção, 2020).
- Developing compassion and gratitude skills may be important to reduce students stress and burnout levels as these have been associated with well-being and decreased psychopathological symptoms (Boggis et al, 2020; Matos et al., 2017).
- Brief and low intensity interventions may be useful for college students, as they are economical, efficient and improve access, involvement and availability compared to more intensive approaches (Andersson, 2016) and are appropriate for the COVID-19 pandemic context.

STUDY'S AIM

Test the feasibility and efficacy of two brief online interventions (one focused on compassion and another focused on gratitude) in reducing stress, self-criticism and burnout and increasing compassion and gratitude in university students.

METHOD

Participants: 68 university students from Portugal, from both genders (83.82% females), aged between 18 and 28 years old were randomly allocated to one of the two interventions (Compassion focused intervention or Gratitude focused intervention) delivered through a website over the course of four weeks.

Instruments:

- Compassionate engagement and action scales (Gilbert et al., 2017);
- Gratitude Scale (McCulough et al., 2002)
- Perceived Stress Scale – 4 (Cohen et al, 1983);
- Shirom-Melamed Burnout Questionnaire (Melamed et al., 2006)
- Forms of Self Criticizing and Self Reassuring Scale (Gilbert et al., 2004)
- Mental Health Inventory (Veit & Ware, 1983).

References:

- Andersson, G. (2016). Internet-delivered psychological treatments. *Annual review of clinical psychology*, 12, 157-179.
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- Matos, M., Duarte, C., Duarte, J., Pinto-Gouveia, J., Petrocchi, N., Basran, J., & Gilbert, P. (2017). Psychological and physiological effects of compassionate mind training: A pilot randomised controlled study. *Mindfulness*, 8, 1699–1712. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0745-7>

INTERVENTIONS OVERVIEW

As can be seen on figures 1 and 2 both Interventions presented a similar structure. Psychoeducation covered stress and burnout and the importance of compassion/ gratitude (session 1). It was the only synchronous session delivered through zoom separately for each intervention. All the remaining sessions were available through the website platform that included the practices for each week.

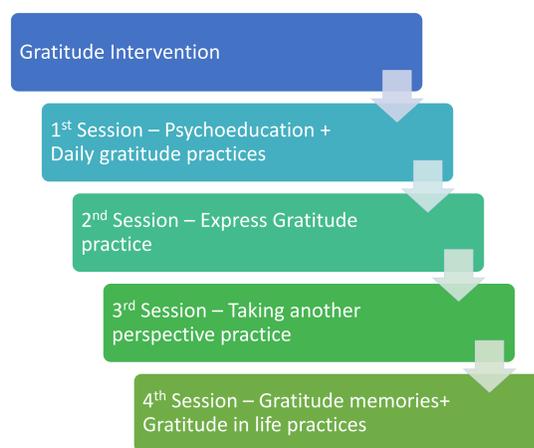


Figure 1. Gratitude Intervention overview

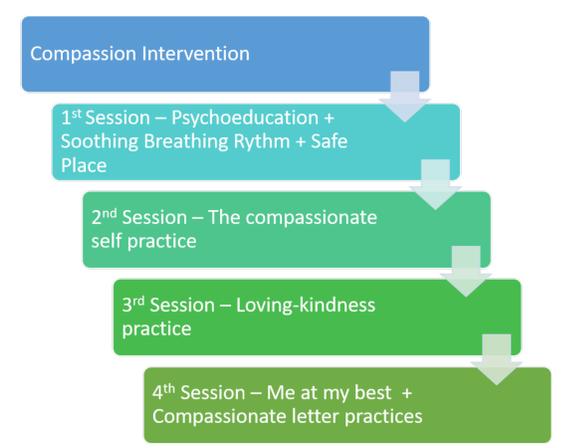


Figure 2. Compassion Intervention overview

RESULTS

- There was a significant dropout rate (29.4%) before the beginning of the interventions. There were no significant differences between intervention groups at baseline
- There was 30% dropout rate from each intervention. Overall participants from both interventions were motivated to practice the exercises and found them useful. Nevertheless, most participants from both interventions only practiced the exercises one or two times per week.
- Given the limited sample size non parametric tests were used to assess between and within group differences from baseline to post-intervention. Results from U-Man Whitney tests revealed no significant differences between intervention groups at post-intervention.
- Results from Wilcoxon Signed Rank test showed no significant differences between baseline and post-intervention for the compassion intervention group, whereas in the gratitude group a significant decrease of stress ($W = -2.124, p = .034$), and increase of self-compassion ($W = 2.197, p = .028$), and mental health ($W = -2.201, p = .028$) were found.

DISCUSSION

- Firstly, the high dropout rate from the study limits the conclusions that can be drawn regarding the interventions efficacy. In fact, recruited lasted for a month (January to February 2021) and during that time Portugal had its third lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic and university exams were postponed. Thus, it is likely that this may have affected our population motivation and availability to participate.
- Nonetheless, it may suggest that these low intensity website based interventions may not be the ideal format for this population and that university students may require a more direct contact with the therapists to maintain their commitment, particularly during lockdown restrictions.
- Additionally, although participants from both interventions appeared to be motivated and found the practices useful, the frequency of the practices was low which may account for the non significant findings.
- Interestingly, preliminary results from the gratitude intervention showed promising results with participants showing improvements in stress, mental health and increased abilities to be compassionate towards themselves.