EMOTION-FOCUSED TRAINING FOR EMOTION COACHING – AN INTERVENTION TO REDUCE SELF-CRITICISM[1]

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Abstract: Emotion-Focused Training for Emotion Coaching (EFT-EC) is based on Emotion-focused Therapy findings and was developed to help participants deepen their emotional skills. The goal was to examine the efficacy of a 12-week EFT-EC group program the level of emotion intelligence, self-compassion and self-criticism in a student population. A quasi-experiment with no control group was conducted with pre- and post-measurements using The Self-compassion scale (SCS), the Forms of Self-Criticising/Attacking & Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS), and the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – short form (TEIQue-SF). The EFT-EC participants were128 students. The EFT-EC intervention had a significant effect on self-criticism and self-control latent scores as reported at post-measurement. The structural equation model with latent variables was not an adequate fit for the rest of the subscales. These results are promising and suggest that interventions intended to enhance emotion skills can also reduce self-criticism even when not directly addressing it.
Key words: Emotion-focused therapy; emotion coaching; self-criticism; self-compassion; quasi-experiment

Introduction

Self-criticism, according to Blatt and Homann (1992), is constant, harsh self-scrutiny and evaluation alongside feelings of unworthiness, inferiority, failure, and guilt. High levels of self-criticism and low levels of self-compassion play a central role in various kinds of psychopathology (e.g. Shahar et al., 2012). Moreover, self-criticism has a serious negative impact on nonclinical populations (e.g. Whelton & Henkleman, 2002). There are numerous approaches to reducing level of self-criticism (Kannan & Levitt, 2013). According to Gilbert and Irons (2004), it is essential to focus on self-criticism during an intervention and it can be treated by learning compassion and self-compassion. In addition, Kemeny et al. (2012) proposed that learning emotion skills can increase level of compassion. Therefore, we were interested in finding out whether cultivating emotion skills can influence the level of self-criticism.

DE GRUYTER

In recent years, the number of children and adolescents with mental health problems has increased to around 20%, and fewer than 15% of them receive help in the form of an intervention or treatment (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). In addition, when help is received, it is usually within a school setting (Burns et al., 1995). Even more worryingly, these mental health problems are often accompanied by comorbid disorders and deficits in educational, social, and adaptive functioning (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000), and tend to persevere during adulthood. Therefore, several school programs have been developed to prevent a further increase in mental health problems among children and adolescents (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Of these Social and Emotional Learning seems to be the most widespread. In Slovakia, there is no obligatory course on social and emotional intelligence in schools; however, there have been some attempts to implement it in alternative schools (Gajdošová & Herényiová, 2002). A meta-analysis documents how important social and emotional learning is for the future lives of children and adolescents in terms of developing skills, attitudes, and behaviours, and even in terms of academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). Currently, the most well-known therapeutic approach dealing primarily with emotions (Timulak, 2010) is Emotion-focused Therapy (EFT; Greenberg, 2011). For that reason, we decided to create a training course based on the findings and theory of Emotion-focused Therapy research called Emotion-Focused Training for Emotion Coaching (EFT-EC). The goal of this training course was to help participants to improve their skills (Greenberg, 2015) on emotion arriving (awareness, acceptance, description, and the distinction between primary and secondary emotions) and emotion leaving (distinction between adaptive and maladaptive emotions, facilitation of access to alternative adaptive emotions, and transformation of maladaptive emotions).

Aims

The goal of the study was to examine the efficacy of a 12-week EFT-EC group program on levels of emotional intelligence, self-compassion, self-criticism, and their dimensions in a student population.

Methods

Measures

Self-criticism/reassurance was assessed using the **Forms of Self-Criticising/Attacking & Self-Reassuring Scale** (FSCRS; Gilbert et al., 2004). The FSCRS is a 22-item measure requiring participants to rate statements on a 5-point Likert scale (from "Not at all like me" to "Extremely like me"). Positively formulated items reflect the ability to self-reassure (referred to as Reassured Self) and negatively worded items indicate self-critical thoughts and feelings (subscales of Inadequate Self and Hated Self). This scale has been validated in 13 different nonclinical samples across 12 countries (Halamová et al., 2018) and separately in the Slovak population (Halamová, Kanovský, & Pacúchová, 2017a) and shows very good psychometric properties in terms of reliability, validity, and factor structure.

Self-compassion was assessed using the **Self-Compassion Scale** (SCS; Neff, 2003). The SCS measures six components of self-compassion experienced during perceived

difficulty. The scale consists of 26 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = almost never; 5 = almost always). The scale consists of six subscales that measure the degree to which individuals display self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. A recent study validated the SCS with data collected from 11 international samples and demonstrated that the negative and positive subscales of the SCS should be calculated separately and should not be summed as a single score (Halamová et al., 2018). This finding was also supported by a factor analysis of the Slovak version of the SCS (Halamová, Kanovský, & Pacúchová, 2017b). Generally, the SCS has good psychometric properties in terms of reliability and validity. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the combined score of the positive constructs (Self-compassionate Responding: self-kindness, humanity, and mindfulness) and the combined score of the negative constructs (Self-uncompassionate Responding: self-judgement, isolation, and over-identification) are used.

Emotional intelligence was measured using the **Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form** (TEIQue-SF; Petrides, 2009), a quick measure with the following subscales: Emotionality, Sociability, Self-control, and Well-being. The TEIQue-SF is a 30-item measure requiring participants to rate statements on a 7-point Likert scale (from "Completely disagree" to "Completely agree"). This scale has been validated in many different countries (Kaliská & Nábělková, 2015) as well as in the Slovak population (Kaliská, Nábělková, & Salbot, 2015) and has acceptable psychometric properties in terms of reliability, validity, and factor structure.

Participants

Participants were recruited from among first-year psychology students at Comenius University. The 128 students completed the pre-intervention measures. However, because of the written form of the questionnaire and because a lot of missing data at both the pre-measurement and post-measurement stages, data concerning only 89 of the students was entered into the statistical analysis. The final group consisted of 76 women and 13 men with a mean age of 20.95 years (*SD* = 1.73).

Procedure

All participants completed an informed consent form, provided sociodemographic information, and performed the pre-intervention measures in pen and paper format. For the EFT-EC intervention, the participants met with a psychologist acting as facilitator once a week for 1.5 hours for 12 weeks. Right after each session, and on the same day, they were asked to write their reflections on the session and were instructed to use expressive writing (Pennebaker, 2017; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). This was because several meta-analyses have showed that expressive writing not only helps the participant to process the experience in terms of emotions and cognitions but also has a beneficial effect on a range of social, behavioural, psychological, and health outcomes (e.g. Frattaroli, 2006). In addition, they were asked to do daily homework exercises which were sent to them via email. Afterwards, they completed the post-intervention measures in pen and paper form.

The content of the sessions was developed by the first author of this study, using the theory of Emotion-focused Therapy (Greenberg, 2011), and based on new exercises created specifically or adaptations of previously published exercises (e.g. Berg, 2012; Greenberg & Warwar, 2006; Halamová, 2013). Each exercise was selected based on the criteria of whether it captured the core elements of emotion coaching from the EFT perspective, its expected impact on the participants, and their motivation to complete it. Each session followed this structure—evaluation of homework in small groups, whole-group reporting of homework evaluation, group exercises and debriefings, and instructions for the next week's homework. The homework could be accessed online on any computer or smartphone via a link or an attachment. The content of the sessions and the related exercises was:

Session 1: Introduction to Emotion Coaching. Firstly, get to know each other more by introducing titbits about your partner in pairs in front of the whole group; secondly, introduce your partner in pairs in front of the whole group by commenting on your own feelings, the nonverbal communication, impressions, and intuitions about your partner. At first, we concentrated on the content and then on the nature of the introductions. Their homework was to answer the list of questions relating to how they dealt with their emotions; complete the Examining my Emotional Closeness in Relationships exercise (inspired by Johnson, 2011; Gottman & Silver, 2015).

Session 2: Discussion of Examining my Emotional Closeness in Relationships exercise (inspired by Johnson, 2011; Gottman & Silver, 2015), Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) and Accessibility, Responsiveness, and Engagement Questionnaire (Johnson, 2011). Their homework was to practice Soothing via the Senses, an exercise which leads to various ways to soothe the self via stimulation of the senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, and movement (inspired by Linehan, 1993).

Session 3: Discussion of Soothing via the Senses exercise: what were the most relaxing and energizing images. Clearing Space (inspired by Friedman, 2013) and drawing the best images and sharing them with the group. Their homework was to practise Increasing Emotional Awareness (situations, triggers, thoughts, body sensations, desired behaviour, actual behaviour, and naming emotions) each day of the week (Halamová, 2013).

Session 4: Expressive Writing (Halamová, 2013; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011) and Emotional Doodling (Halamová, 2013; Mensing, 2012). Their homework was to continue performing the Increasing Emotional Awareness exercise and to do My Most Intense Emotions (whom I felt most towards, what theme I felt most about, and what my emotional patterns are) on the last day, as a means of summarizing the two weeks (Halamová, 2013).

Session 5: Distinguishing between Primary and Secondary Emotions, Distinguishing between Adaptive and Maladaptive Emotions, Identification of Needs from Primary Emotions (Greenberg, 2011; Halamová, 2013). These tasks included learning how to distinguish between different kinds of emotions and being able to understand the need behind a particular emotion. Their homework was to practise Emotional Schema (describing symbolic, conceptual, motivational, behavioural, perceptual, situational, expressive, and

physical elements of the felt emotion), each day of the week (inspired by Elliott, Watson, Goldman, & Greenberg, 2004).

Session 6: Focusing (Gendlin, 1996) and Focusing on Solving Problems (McGuire, 2007). These tasks involved creating a felt sense and using it to better understand inner experiences or to solve problems (Halamová, 2013). Their homework was to practise either of these two kinds of Focusing each day of the week.

Session 7: Identification of Anger, Identification of Sadness, and Identification of Joy (inspired by Ekman, 2012; Greenberg, 2015; Halamová, 2013). These exercises involved recalling a recent situation in which they had felt the emotion intensely, feeling the emotion, describing the verbal and nonverbal signs of the emotion, and naming the emotion. Their homework was to practice Increasing Awareness of Joy (situations, triggers, thoughts, body sensations, desired behaviour, actual behaviour, and naming emotions) each day of the week.

Session 8: Identification of Fear, Identification of Shame, and Identification of Surprise (inspired by Ekman, 2012; Greenberg, 2015; Halamová, 2013). These exercises involved recalling a recent situation in which they felt the emotion intensely, feeling the emotion, describing the verbal and nonverbal signs of the emotion, and naming the emotion. Their homework was to practice Increasing Awareness of Surprise (situations, triggers, thoughts, body sensations, desired behaviour, actual behaviour, and naming emotions) each day of the week.

Session 9: Compliments (Gottman & Silver, 2015; Praško & Prašková, 2015). This task involved firstly learning a structure for formulating compliments and then the group members practising the structure by complimenting each other. Afterwards, the participants prepared compliments for close friends and family in their everyday life. Their homework was to compliment a person of their choosing once a day each day of the week.

Session 10: Making Complaints (Gottman & Silver, 2015) and Sensitive Issues. These tasks involved first learning a structure for formulating complaints and then practicing the structure in a set of everyday sensitive situations (e.g. what to say if the toilet is dirty). Their homework was to complain to a person of their choosing once a day each day of the week.

Session 11: Apologizing for Another, Apology from Another, and Apologizing to Self (inspired by Dolhanty, 2018). During these tasks, participants were coached to produce three different apologies: one they would need to say to somebody else, one they would love to hear from somebody else although that is not possible, and one they would like to make to themselves. Their homework was to apologize to a person of their choosing each day of the week.

Session 12: Giving Feedback for EFT-EC Training in small groups (What did you like? What would you do differently and how specifically? What do you use in practice?) and the Self-care exercise (Halamová, 2013; inspired by Ellison & Greenberg, 2007). This task involved the participants listing their own specific signals of distress and of feeling uncomfortable, exploring ways of making them feel better on a physical, emotional, rational, social, and spiritual level and choosing a signal remind themselves to take care of themselves in difficult times.

Data analyses

To record the data, we used SPSS Statistics-20, program R (Version 3.5.1), for the data analysis, we used program R version 3.5.1. (R Core Team, 2018), and the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012). Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for the scales and their dimensions. Dynamic structural equations models were fitted for each dimension. These models have two latent constructs: pre-test and post-test, their indicators (the observed variables) being the items for their respective subscales. Measurement invariance across time was postulated to allow a comparison of the pre-test and post-test latent means: factor loadings and intercepts were constrained so they were the same for the pre-test and post-test. The pre-test latent mean was constrained to zero and the post-test latent mean was estimated freely. The difference in the significance of the pre-test/post-test latent means is reported together with R^2. The residual variances of the respective items across time were allowed to correlate to account for the fact that the same questions were asked in the pre-test and post-test. See Figure 1 for the FSCRS model of Hated Self.

Before the latent means could be compared, the fit of the model with the data had to be evaluated. We used standard fit indices (*CFI* – Comparative Fit Index, *TLI* – Tucker-Lewis Index, *RMSEA* – Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation, and *SRMR* – Standardized Root Mean Residuals). In the literature, the following recommended thresholds are commonly used for these: *CFI* and *TLI* > .90 acceptable fit (Bentler, 1992), > .95 excellent fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), *RMSEA* < .08 acceptable fit, < .05 excellent fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993), and *SRMR* < .08 acceptable fit, < .05 excellent fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). We used the maximum likelihood estimator (MLR) with the Yuan-Bentler correction for non-normality and the robust Huber-White estimation of standard errors.
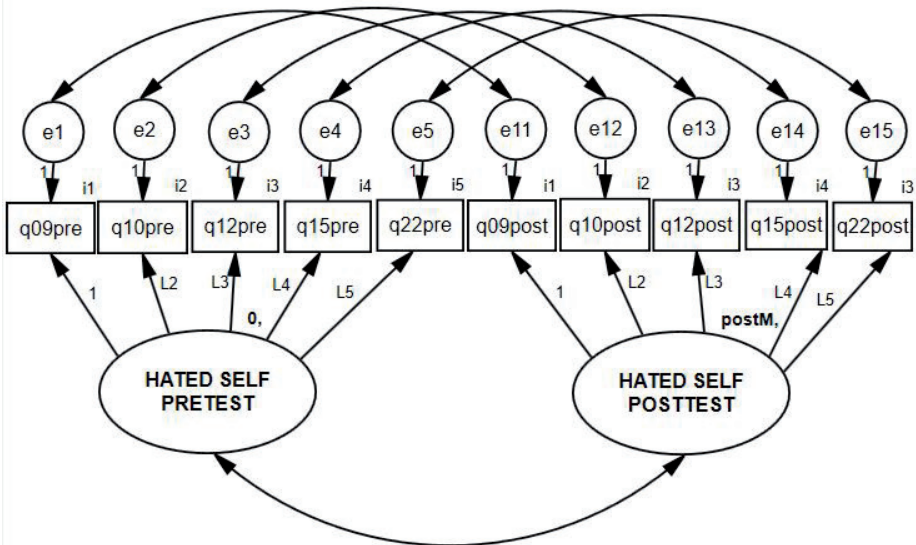

Figure 1. Dynamic structural equation model for Hated Self subscale (FSCRS)

Results

All the results showed good reliability coefficients: 0.83 Inadequate Self, 0.78 Reassured Self, and 0.72 Hated Self (FSCRS). For the SCS, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.85 for Self-compassionate Responding, 0.87 for Self-uncompassionate Responding. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the TEIQue-SF, were 0.82 for Well-being, 0.68 for Self-control, 0.67 for Emotionality, and 0.69 for Sociability.

In Table 1, we can see that only some of the models had at least an acceptable fit with the data: Inadequate Self (FSCRS), Hated Self (FSCRS), Self-uncompassionate Responding (SCS), Well-Being (TEIQue), and Sociability (TEIQue).

Table 1. Fit indices for structural models

	χ^2 (df), p-value	CFI/TLI	RMSEA (90 % CI)	SRMR
IS	175.02 (141), 0.027	0.94/0.94	0.053 (0.020-0.077)	0.079
RS	157.56 (109), 0.002	0.89/0.88	0.073 (0.047-0.097)	0.085
HS	36.97 (37), 0.471	1.00/1.00	0.000 (0.000-0.071)	0.067
SCSc	535.46 (309), 0.001	0.74/0.72	0.093 (0.082-0.105)	0.114
SCSu	401.82 (309), 0.001	0.91/0.90	0.059 (0.042-0.074)	0.075
TEIwb	233.03 (57), 0.001	0.72/0.68	0.186 (0.161-0.212)	0.139
TEIsc	76.27 (57), 0.045	0.91/0.90	0.062 (0.037-0.073)	0.079
TEIem	134.87 (109), 0.047	0.89/0.88	0.052 (0.016-0.076)	0.099
TEIsoc	75.86 (57), 0.048	0.94/0.93	0.041 (0.012-0.074)	0.071

Note. IS – Inadequate Self. RS – Reassured Self. HS – Hated Self. SCSc – Self-compassionate Responding. SCSu – Self-uncompassionate Responding. TEIwb – Well-being. TEIsc – Self-control. TEIem – Emotions. TEIsoc – Sociability. df – degrees of freedom. CFI – Comparative fit index. TLI – Tucker-Lewis index. RMSEA – Root mean squared error of approximation. CI – confidence intervals. SRMR – standardized root mean residuals.

Looking at Table 2 we can see that there are significant differences in the latent mean scores for the pre-test and the post-test, but not in relation to the Sociability subscale (TEIQue). Therefore we can say that the Inadequate Self scores decreased significantly after the intervention, as did the Self-uncompassionate Responding scores, while the Self-control scores increased significantly. The Sociability scores increased after the intervention, but not significantly. We can conclude that the EFT-EC intervention had a significant effect on the self-criticism and self-control latent scores as reported during post-measurement.

Table 2. Differences in latent mean scores

	M_{diff} (SE)	p-value	R^2
IS	-0.247 (0.073)	0.001	0.45
RS	N/A	N/A	N/A
HS	-0.151 (0.068)	0.027	0.29
SCSc	N/A	N/A	N/A
SCSu	-0.218 (0.052)	0.001	0.34
TEIwb	N/A	N/A	N/A
TEIsc	0.336 (0.146)	0.021	0.18
TEIem	N/A	N/A	N/A
TEIsoc	0.106 (0.076)	0.163	N/A

Note. IS – Inadequate Self. RS – Reassured Self. HS – Hated Self. SCSc – Self-compassionate Responding. SCSu – Self-uncompassionate Responding. TEIwb – Well-being. TEIsc – Self-control. TEIem – Emotions. TEIsoc – Sociability. M_{diff} – difference in latent means. SE – standard error.

Discussion

We investigated the efficacy of a 12-week EFT-EC group program on the level of emotion intelligence, self-compassion, self-criticism, and their dimensions in university students.

As TEIQue-SF measures emotional intelligence, our finding that the 12-session intervention can change Self-control is promising. According to Petrides (2009), people who score higher on self-control can control their impulses and regulate stress without being repressive or excessively expressive.

The EFT-EC is more effective in decreasing Inadequate Self than it is in decreasing Hated Self, which could be explained by the fact that Hated Self is a more pathological self-criticism and is harder to change (Shahar et al., 2012) because it is connected to hatred of the self and is accompanied by a desire to hurt oneself (Gilbert et al., 2004).

Although it is thought level of self-criticism can be decreased through learning self-compassion, in our research EFT-EC reduced self-criticism but did not increase self-compassion. This means there must be other ways of reducing self-criticism that do not involve self-compassion alone. This is also supported by research findings on the Cultivating Emotional Balance intervention (Kemeny et al., 2012). Previous research on the effectiveness of various interventions for reducing self-criticism and increasing self-compassion has shown that while some interventions can reduce self-criticism but may not improve self-compassion, other interventions can improve self-compassion but do not reduce self-criticism (Halamová, 2018). These findings reinforce the idea that self-compassion and self-criticism do not form a dichotomous construct and should not be used interchangeably.

Learning adaptive emotion skills may enable a person to control undesired emotions that could otherwise be hard to control (Berking, Ebert, Cuijpers, & Hofmann, 2013) and thereby lead to a higher level of self-control and consequently to a lower level of self-criticism. Our findings support previous research (Gilbert & Procter, 2006) that has found that self-critical individuals benefit from learning emotion skills. According to Gilbert and Procter (2006) self-critical people do not have sufficient memories of caregivers providing safeness and have difficulty feeling safe in their own emotions because they are overly sensitive to threats. Therefore, such people are less able to regulate their emotions. This seems to work the other way round as well: learning emotion skills can reduce levels of self-criticism.

Dickerson and Kemeny (2004) consider negative appraisal and criticism from other people to be one of the most prevalent causes of stress. Furthermore, Gilbert (2009) views self-criticism as an internal stimulus that reminds the person of external stimuli generating criticism from others. Therefore, learning emotion skills can help reduce stress as well as self-criticism.

In future, it would be interesting to explore whether EFT-EC also influences stress levels and whether some objective criteria for success, for example improving university grades, could be added.

As the EFT-EC intervention did not affect self-compassion, incorporating at least one session on directly cultivating self-compassion could be worthwhile. We think that if the intervention were improved in this way it could influence not only the level of self-compassion but also multiply the impact on self-criticism, as suggested by Gilbert and Irons (2004) who suggest that excessive self-criticism can be treated by learning compassion and self-compassion.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study is that there is no control group comparison. Therefore, we do not know for sure whether the results can be attributed to the intervention or to the passage of time. Also, as is usually the case with psychology students, there were far more women than men in our sample. As a result, we do not know whether the intervention works for both genders. In addition, the students were also attending different university courses; however, none of these was experiential so we assume that that they had little influence on the results.

Conclusion

Emotion-focused training for emotion coaching aimed at cultivating emotions lowered levels of self-criticism and self-uncompassionate responding. These results are promising and suggest that interventions aimed at emotions can be used to influence levels of self-criticism in the student population.

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