# The extent that self-compassion and well-being predict burnout in online clinical psychology PhD students

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**Abstract:** Online clinical psychology doctoral students experience significant stress as they balance demanding academic workloads with personal responsibilities, often leading to burnout (Cornwall et al., 2019). While previous research (Kusurkar et al., 2021) has explored the roles of self-compassion and well-being in addressing burnout, the specific predictors of burnout in this unique population remain underexamined. Our research study investigates the impact of self-compassion and well-being on burnout among online clinical psychology doctoral students. Sixty- five online doctoral students participated in the study. Regression analyses were conducted and findings indicated a significant negative relationship between well-being and burnout, suggesting that students with higher well-being experience lower levels of burnout. Results emphasize the importance of promoting well-being as a key strategy to mitigate burnout in this population. Although self-compassion was not a significant predictor in this study, its potential indirect or contextual effects warrant further investigation. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions to enhance well-being, which could improve mental health, build resilience, and support positive outcomes for online clinical psychology doctoral students.

## 1. Introduction

Research has recently highlighted increased burnout among doctoral students in health fields (Kusurkar et al., 2021). This phenomenon, characterized by emotional exhaustion and stress, can significantly impact academic performance and well-being. Two critical factors contributing to the mental health of doctoral students are well-being and self-compassion. Well-being encompasses an individual's mental, physical, and emotional health, directly affecting academic success (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Syropoulos, Wu, Burrows, & Mercado, 2021). Self-compassion, the ability to extend compassion towards oneself and others, also plays a crucial role, often overlapping with well-being attributes (Richardson, Trusty, & George, 2020).

Doctoral students, particularly those in psychology programs, face numerous challenges that can exacerbate burnout, including intense academic pressures and personal responsibilities (Fang, McMahon, Miller, & Rosenthal, 2021; Swords & Ellis, 2017). Burnout among these students has been shown to negatively impact their academic experiences and overall mental health (Rico & Bunge, 2021; Swords & Ellis, 2017). Given these challenges, a pressing need exists to better understand burnout predictors, especially within online education, which is increasingly popular (Barratt & Duran, 2021).

This study explored the relationship between self-compassion and well-being in predicting burnout among online clinical psychology PhD students in the United States. As online learning environments differ significantly from traditional in-class settings, understanding how these factors interact in this context is essential.

Self-compassion has been extensively studied across various fields (Aquino, Lee, Spawn, & Bishop-Royse, 2018; Hotchkiss & Lesher, 2018). It influences how individuals manage stress and interact with others (Coaston & Lawrence, 2019; Mao, 2022; Poots & Cassidy, 2020). In educational settings, higher levels of self-compassion are associated with better well-being and reduced distress (Fong & Loi, 2016). Despite its benefits, its incorporation into academic curricula is still limited.

In the healthcare sector, self-compassion has been shown to alleviate burnout and improve care quality (Dev, Fernando III, Lim, & Consedine, 2018; Durkin, Beaumont, Martin, & Carson, 2016; Upton, 2018). Although much of the research focuses on healthcare professionals, the implications for students, particularly those in online doctoral programs, remain underexplored.

Student well-being can also significantly impact PhD students' experiences. High levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among these students contribute to decreased well-being and increased burnout (Cornwall et al., 2019; Marais, Shankland, Haag, Fiault, & Juniper, 2018; Moate, Gnilka, West, & Rice, 2019). Academic demands and financial pressures exacerbate these issues (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Supportive relationships and effective self-care strategies are critical for maintaining well-being and reducing emotional exhaustion (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018). However, further research is needed to focus specifically on the well-being of online clinical psychology doctoral students to develop targeted interventions.

Burnout affects many professions, including academia and healthcare (Dev et al., 2018; Hunter & Devine, 2016). In academic settings, inadequate supervision and support contribute to higher levels of burnout among doctoral students (Cornér, Löfström, & Pyhältö, 2017). This condition negatively impacts mental health, job satisfaction, and academic performance (Aquino et al., 2018; Nagy et al., 2019). While existing studies emphasize the need for supportive environments and coping strategies, research on burnout in online clinical psychology doctoral students is limited.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This quantitative study examined how self-compassion and well-being predict burnout levels among online clinical psychology PhD students in the United States. The study used a cross-sectional survey design conducted online and focused on current online doctoral students.

## 3. Participants

The target population comprises online clinical psychology PhD students across the United States. The sample size was 65 participants, who were selected through random sampling from various online clinical psychology programs and relevant social media groups. Inclusion criteria mandated that participants be enrolled in an online clinical psychology PhD program in the United States

## 4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred from April to November 2023 using an online survey administered through SurveyMonkey. Participants were recruited via social media platforms, including Facebook groups dedicated to doctoral students and an online university participant pool. The survey was accompanied by an informed consent form and included demographic questions along with the following validated instruments:

- Maslach Burnout Inventory Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS): This instrument measures burnout through three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. It consists of 22 items rated on a Likert scale, with reliability coefficients of 0.90 for emotional exhaustion, 0.79 for depersonalization, and 0.71 for personal accomplishment.
- Self-Compassion Scale Short Form (SCS-SF): The SCS-SF, a shortened version of the Self-Compassion Scale, includes 12 items divided into six subscales: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Participants rate items on a

Likert scale from 1 to 5. The instrument has demonstrated internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86.

- Well-Being Scale (WeBS): The WeBS assesses well-being across five subscales: financial, physical, social, eudaimonic, and hedonic. It consists of 29 items rated on a Likert scale. The scale's reliability and validity have been confirmed through psychometric testing.

## 5. Data Analysis Plan

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize sample characteristics and key measures. Simple linear regression and multiple regression analyses were employed to test hypotheses and explore relationships between self-compassion, well-being, and burnout levels. Power calculations were conducted using G*Power to ensure adequate sample size for the analyses. Data were screened and cleaned for accuracy, including handling missing data and checking for outliers. Only complete and valid responses were included in the final analysis.

## 6. Results and Discussion

### 6.1. Descriptive Analysis of Sample

The study included 65 participants aged 18 years and older. The majority were female (58, 89.2%), with 7 (10.8%) identifying as male. Regarding ethnicity, 26 participants (40%) identified as White non-Hispanic, 29 (44.6%) as African American, 2 (3%) as Asian/Pacific Islander, 10 (15.4%) as Hispanic/Latino, and 1 (1.5%) as Other. In terms of educational level, 4 participants (6.2%) held a bachelor's degree, 50 (76.9%) held a master's degree, and 10 (15.4%) held a doctoral degree. Work experience varied, with 19 participants (29.2%) having one year of experience, 4 (6.2%) with two years, 6 (9.2%) with three years, 9 (13.8%) with four years, and 23 (35.4%) having five or more years of experience.

**Table 1.**
Demographic Characteristics.

| Demographic variable | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Age | 18 years & up | 65 |
| Gender | Female | 58 |
|  | Male | 7 |
| Ethnicity/Race | White, non-Hispanic | 26 |
|  | African American | 29 |
|  | Asian/Pacific Islander | 2 |
|  | Hispanic/Latino | 10 |
|  | Other | 1 |
| Educational level | Bachelor's Degree | 4 |
|  | Master's Degree | 50 |
|  | Doctoral Degree | 10 |
| Work experience | 1 year | 19 |
|  | 2 years | 4 |
|  | 3 years | 6 |
|  | 4 years | 9 |
|  | 5 years or more | 23 |

### 6.2. Descriptive Statistics for Likert Scale Variables

The study's descriptive statistics revealed that self-compassion scores had a mean of 39.98 (SD = 3.43), ranging from 31 to 49, while well-being scores averaged 138.45 (SD = 18.53), ranging from 84 to 173. Burnout scores had a mean of 69.79 (SD = 16.53) and ranged from 24 to 117. Emotional exhaustion, a component of burnout, had a mean score of 23.97 (SD = 13.62), with scores ranging from 1 to 53. Depersonalization scores averaged 6.06 (SD = 6.26) and ranged from 0 to 28, whereas personal

accomplishment scores had a mean of 39.62 (SD = 7.23), ranging from 15 to 48. These results provide insight into the variability and levels of self-compassion, well-being, and burnout within the sample in Table 2.

**Table 2.**
Descriptive Statistics for Likert Scale Variables

| Variable | Mean | Standard deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-compassion | 39.98 | 3.428 | 31 | 49 |
| Well-being | 138.45 | 18.526 | 84 | 173 |
| Burnout | 69.79 | 16.531 | 24 | 117 |
| Emotional exhaustion | 23.97 | 13.620 | 1 | 53 |
| Depersonalization | 6.06 | 6.260 | 0 | 28 |
| Personal accomplishment | 39.62 | 7.225 | 15 | 48 |

### 6.3. Personal Accomplishment

The regression analysis examining whether self-compassion predicts personal accomplishment yielded no statistical significance ($p > .183$). This indicates that self-compassion does not predict personal accomplishment. See Figure 1 for the scatterplot.
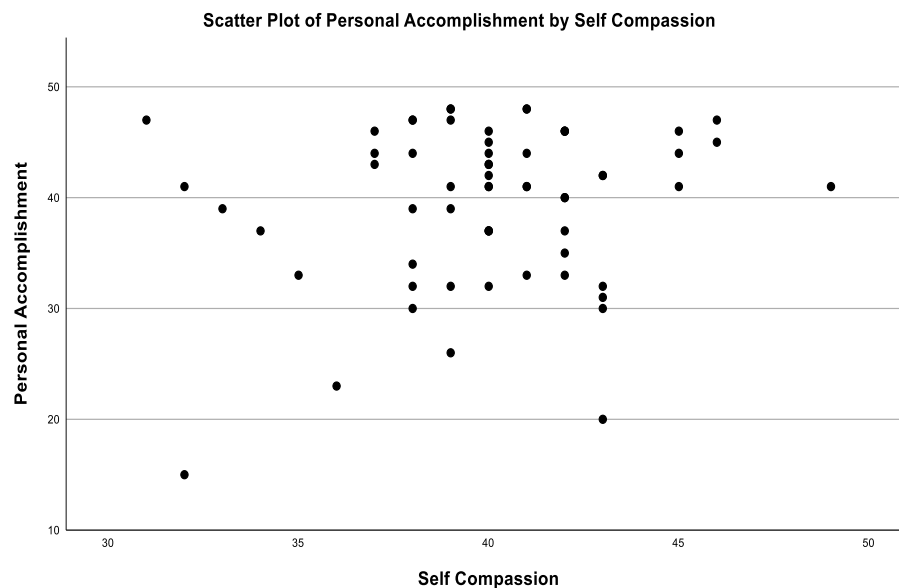


**Figure 1.**
Scatterplot of Self-Compassion and Personal Accomplishment.

### 6.4. Depersonalization

Analysis of the relationship between self-compassion and depersonalization also showed no statistical significance ($p > .986$), suggesting that self-compassion does not predict depersonalization. See Figure 2 for the scatterplot.
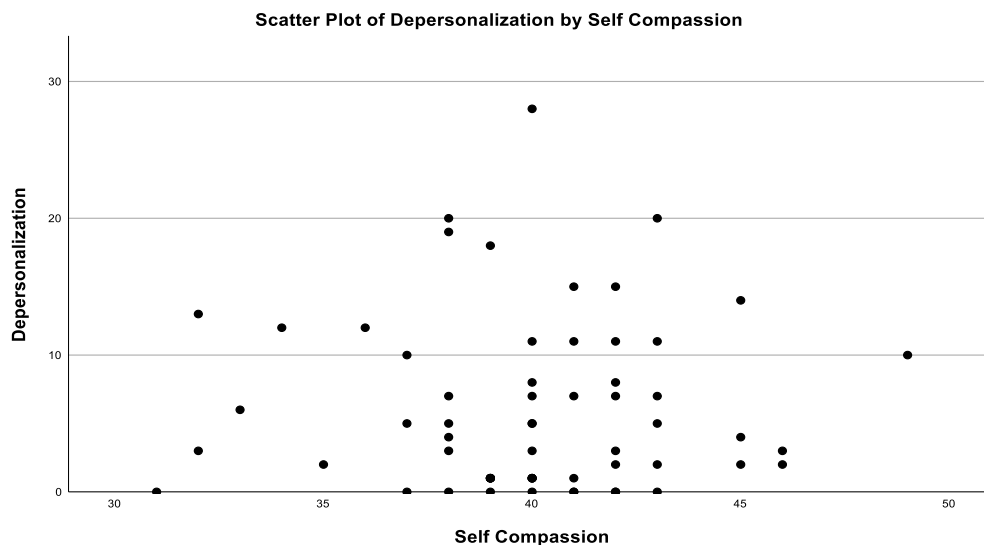
**Figure 2.**
Scatterplot of Self-Compassion and Depersonalization.

### 6.5. Emotional Exhaustion

The analysis regarding self-compassion's effect on emotional exhaustion indicated no statistical significance ($p > .151$), meaning that self-compassion does not predict emotional exhaustion. See Figure 3 for the scatterplot.
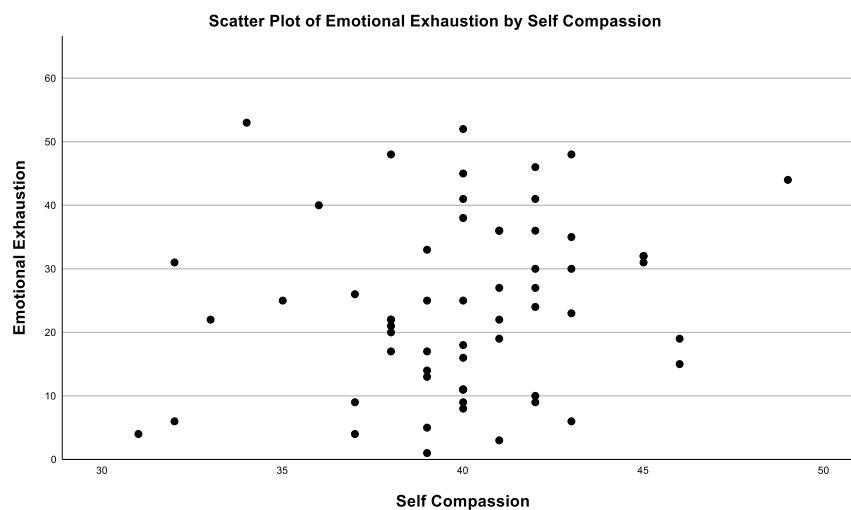


**Figure 3.**
Scatterplot of self-compassion and emotional exhaustion.

### 6.6. Personal Accomplishment

A significant positive relationship was found between well-being and personal accomplishment ($p < .001$), indicating that higher well-being predicts higher personal accomplishment. See Figure 4 for the scatterplot.

**Figure 4.**
Scatterplot of Regression of Well-Being and Personal Accomplishment.

## 6.7. Depersonalization

Well-being also significantly predicted lower depersonalization ($p < .001$). This suggests that increased well-being is associated with reduced depersonalization. See Figure 5 for the scatterplot.
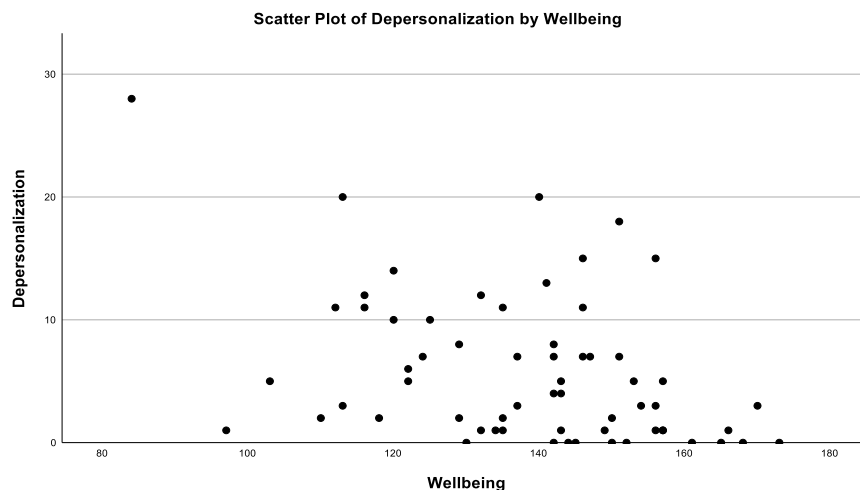


**Figure 5.**
Scatterplot of Regression of Well-Being and Depersonalization.

## 6.8. Emotional Exhaustion

The analysis revealed that well-being predicts lower emotional exhaustion ($p < .001$). Increased well-being was associated with reduced emotional exhaustion. See Figure 6 for the scatterplot.
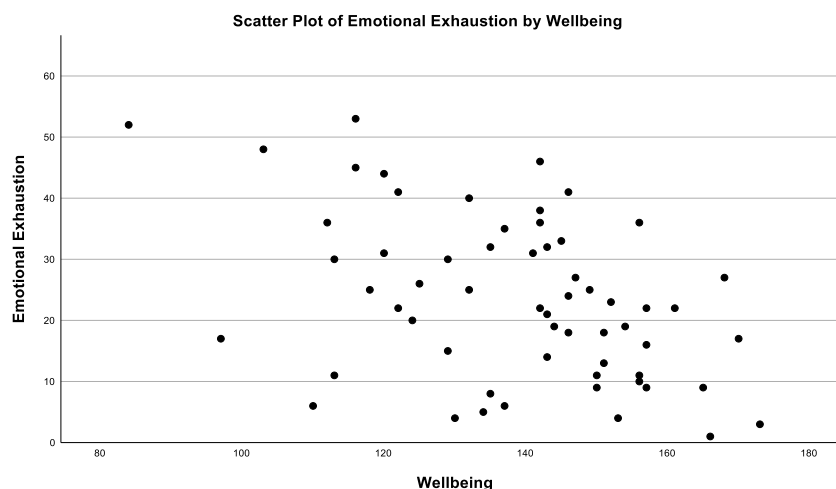
**Figure 6.**
Scatterplot of Regression of Well-Being and Emotional Exhaustion

## 7. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

*7.1. Emotional Exhaustion*

The multiple regression analysis revealed that while well-being was a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion ($p < .001$), self-compassion was not statistically significant ($p > .072$). Well-being accounted for 24% of the variance in emotional exhaustion.

*7.2. Personal Accomplishment*

For personal accomplishment, well-being was a significant predictor ($p < .001$), but self-compassion was not ($p > .176$). Well-being explained 20% of the variation in personal accomplishment.

*7.3. Depersonalization*

Well-being significantly predicted depersonalization ($p < .001$), whereas self-compassion did not ($p > .843$). Well-being accounted for 17% of the variance in depersonalization.

## 8. Conclusions

This study examined how self-compassion and well-being predict burnout among online clinical psychology doctoral students, revealing that while self-compassion did not significantly predict burnout or its subcomponents, well-being emerged as a critical predictor. This finding underscores the importance of focusing on enhancing well-being to mitigate burnout.

The lack of significant findings regarding self-compassion contrasts with previous research suggesting its role in buffering against burnout. This discrepancy may be attributed to the unique context of online doctoral programs or the limitations of the self-compassion measures used.

The authors believe that future studies should explore alternative measures for self-compassion or consider additional variables that capture the essence of self-compassion and its impact on burnout. Comparing online doctoral students with those in traditional settings might reveal differences in burnout experiences and coping mechanisms. Investigating specific aspects of well-being that are affected by burnout could help develop targeted interventions.

The findings emphasize the critical role of well-being in managing burnout, suggesting that students with higher well-being levels are better equipped to handle stress. This has significant implications for academic institutions, which should prioritize well-being through comprehensive support services, including counseling, self-care education, and stress management programs.

Educational institutions should implement programs that focus on well-being, such as resilience training, support groups, and mental health awareness campaigns. Fostering an environment that encourages open discussions about mental health and providing resources to address burnout can create a more supportive academic atmosphere.

## Transparency:
The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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