

## Investigating the Relationship between Attitude towards Aging and Self-Compassion in Middle-Aged People

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### Abstract

Self-compassion is one of the variables that promote well-being and life satisfaction in the elderly. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the attitude towards old age and self-compassion in middle-aged people. This research was a descriptive-correlation cross-sectional study. The number of 113 participants who were selected by stratified sampling method with allocation proportional to the number of clients to the respective centers. The data collection tool was a 3-part questionnaire including demographic characteristics, an aging attitude questionnaire, and a self-compassion questionnaire. The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and through SPSS23 software. The findings of this research indicated that the highest percentage of the researched units had a moderate level of self-compassion. Regarding the dimensions of self-compassion, the highest average score was obtained for the subscale of feeling human commonality, and the lowest average score was obtained for the subscale of self-judgment. Regarding the relationship between self-compassion and attitude toward old age, the findings showed a statistically significant relationship between the two variables ( $P < 0.05$ ). According to the findings of the current research, there is a statistically significant relationship between self-compassion and attitude towards old age in middle-aged people, it is possible to use the results of this study in the field of teaching self-compassion to middle-aged people to adapt to the challenges and needs of old age.

**Keywords:** Self-compassion, Aging, Life satisfaction, Elderly, Well-being

### Introduction

Since aging is a personal and unique experience, a person's attitude towards the aging process is considered to be one of the important determinants of health in old age and affects the sense of well-being, quality of life, and long-term health outcomes in post-middle age. In other words, it can be said that a negative attitude towards old age can cause a decrease in self-confidence, a feeling of despair, a decrease in performance, and a decrease in life expectancy in old age [1-4]. In recent years, the number of people reaching old age is increasing due to the improvement in health and life expectancy [5]. According to the United Nations report in 1950, 9.2% of the world's population was at least 60 years old, and this population reached 11.7% in 2013, and it is expected to reach 21.1% in 2050 [6].

Middle age is one of the important developmental stages of a person, which occupies the largest part of adulthood. Since this stage of growth is associated with many transitional changes, we are usually faced with various physical and psychological changes and reactions of people during this period [7, 8]. Considering that after middle age, the efficiency of a person's physical and mental performance decreases by an average of 1.1% per year [9], this

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period is the best time to identify and strengthen the available resources to control the shortcomings of old age and prepare for a higher level of health in the mentioned period [7]. Today, many studies have been conducted on aging. Most of these studies have been related to how people adapt to the changes of old age and their active approach to enjoying well-being and health. Meanwhile, examining the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional mechanisms of these people are very important dimensions in going through the process of healthy aging [10, 11]. Social support, perceived control, and self-confidence are among the factors that are mentioned as protective factors in having a good old age [10, 12, 13], one of the variables that promote well-being and life satisfaction in the elderly, and behavioral and cognitive adaptation. And their feeling is self-compassion [12].

Self-compassion means having a non-judgmental attitude toward one's shortcomings, shortcomings, failures, and pain. In this definition, a person has an open attitude towards his shortcomings and pain and suffering and instead of avoiding them, he tries to face them gently and heal his pain and suffering [14]. Self-compassion is a concept consisting of three interrelated dimensions including self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-compassion means the desire to care and pay attention to oneself in response to perceived personal inadequacies and inadequacies in difficult situations, while at its opposite point, i.e. self-judgment dimension, a person usually has a severe critical behavior towards himself [12]. Common humanity implies that suffering and weakness are a part of common human experiences, and in difficult life conditions, humans always maintain a sense of connection and connection with other humans, and the feeling of loneliness does not overcome them, on the opposite point, it means isolation, the person considers all the existing failures and conflicts as the result of personal mistakes and shortcomings. In the meantime, the consciousness dimension, it is emphasized maintaining an open and accepting point of view in facing difficult situations, which itself leads to the creation of clear and balanced cognition about individual tensions, while on the opposite point, it means the extreme assimilation of the individual's mind. He is frequently busy with painful experiences and negative perceptions towards himself [14, 15].

Perhaps it can be said that old age is a multifaceted matter of the simultaneous occurrence of loss and gain [16]. The relationship between attitude and health outcomes is bidirectional. According to the results of existing studies in the field of psychological factors related to people's attitude towards old age, few researches have been done [15]. In this regard, the study of Miche *et al.* [17] showed that the attitude towards old age is more focused on changes in middle age than old age, so identifying modifiable factors can be beneficial in forming a positive attitude towards old age in middle age. Accordingly, self-compassion, which is an acquired and teachable skill, can affect the attitude towards old age [12, 15]. There is evidence that self-compassion may be related to age-related issues in the second half of life. Phillips and Ferguson's study [18] showed that self-compassion is a good predictor of emotional health in people aged 65 and older.

Considering the basic role of the nurse to improve the level of health, independence, quality of life, and generally increase the level of satisfaction with the aging process, the nurse's knowledge and understanding of the type of attitude of a person towards aging in the middle age and identifying effective resources and individual characteristics to create a positive attitude towards aging can be effective in improving the quality of community-based nursing care and the health level of the elderly [12, 19]. In other words, by developing functional programs regarding the preparation of middle-aged people for positive and compassionate reactions towards themselves and creating a positive attitude towards the aging process, they can benefit as much as possible from the resulting health-oriented results and start a period of positive aging helped. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the attitude towards old age and self-compassion in middle-aged people.

## Materials and Methods

This research was a descriptive-correlational cross-sectional study that was conducted to determine the relationship between self-compassion and attitude towards old age in middle-aged people. In this study, 113 people were selected by stratified sampling with allocation proportional to the number of clients to the respective centers. The criteria for entering the research included the age of 30 to 59 years, having minimal literacy at the level of reading and writing, and the absence of cognitive, mental, and chronic diseases.

The data of this research was collected by self-report method and questionnaire. The said questionnaire consists of three parts: demographic characteristics, attitude towards aging questionnaire (Attitudes to Aging Questionnaire), and self-compassion scale (Self-Compassion Scale). The demographic profile questionnaire included information related to age, marital status, gender, employment status, and education level. The self-compassion questionnaire includes 26 questions and the answers are scored based on a 5-point Likert scale. The overall self-compassion score is obtained by calculating the mean scores of the six subscales (self-kindness, self-judgment, shared humanity, conscientious isolation, and extreme identification). A higher score indicates a higher level of self-compassion. The range of questionnaire scores varies between 26 and 130. The questionnaire on attitude towards aging was designed by Laidlaw *et al.* [20]. This questionnaire examines the subjective understanding of old age and focuses on three areas of old age (psychosocial deficits, physical changes, and psychological growth). This questionnaire contains 24 items that measure each dimension with 8 questions. In this questionnaire, each question is scored on a Likert scale from one to five. High scores in the dimension of

physical changes and the dimension of mental growth mean a more positive attitude, while higher scores in the dimension of lack of psychosocial means a negative attitude towards aging. To calculate the total attitude score, the psychosocial lack dimension was scored in reverse, and then the average score of the three dimensions was calculated as the total score. The range of questionnaire scores varied between 24 and 120. To determine the reliability of this study, the questionnaire was given to 20 people from the research samples, and the reliability was done with a time interval of 2 weeks between the first and second tests, and its reliability was found to be 0.84.

In the next step, after collecting the information, the obtained data were analyzed through SPSS 23 software.

## Results and Discussion

According to the findings presented in **Table 1**, the highest percentage of research units (52.2%) are female, in the age range of 30-45 years (77.8%), married (91.2%), and have bachelor's education (52.2%).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of research units.

	Variable	N	%
Gender	Female	59	52.2%
	Male	54	47.8%
Age (Years)	30-45	88	77.8%
	46-59	25	22.2%
Marital status	Single	9	8%
	Married	103	91.2%
	Divorced	1	0.8%
Education level	Diploma	35	31%
	Associate degree	7	6.2%
	BSc	59	52.2%
	MSc and PhD	12	10.6%

The research findings showed that the majority of research units had moderate self-compassion. The average score of self-compassion in the middle-aged was reported ( $3.23 \pm 0.44$ ) (**Table 2**). The investigation on the dimensions of self-compassion showed that the highest average score was obtained for the subscale of feeling human commonality ( $3.58 \pm 0.58$ ) and the lowest average score was obtained for the subscale of self-judgment ( $2.83 \pm 0.68$ ) (**Table 3**).

**Table 2.** Frequency distribution of mean and standard deviation of self-compassion in the research units.

Self-compassion	N	%
Low (1-2.5)	4	3.6%
Medium (2.5-3.5)	78	69%
High (3.5-5)	31	27.4%
Total	113	100%
Mean $\pm$ Standard deviation	$3.23 \pm 0.44$	
Minimum - Maximum	2.23 – 4.77	

**Table 3.** Numerical indicators of self-compassion and its dimensions in the research units.

Subscale	Minimum - Maximum	Mean $\pm$ Standard deviation	First quarter	Median	Third quarter
Kindness to yourself	2.0 – 5.0	$3.54 \pm 0.64$	3.0	3.6	4.0
Judging yourself	1.20 – 5.0	$2.83 \pm 0.68$	2.40	2.80	3.20
A sense of human commonality	1.75 – 5.0	$3.58 \pm 0.58$	3.25	3.50	4.0
Isolation	1.25 – 5.0	$3.08 \pm 0.80$	2.50	3.0	3.75

Mindfulness	2.0 – 4.75	3.44 ± 0.58	3.0	3.50	3.75
Extreme assimilation	1.0 - 5.0	2.90 ± 0.91	2.25	2.75	3.50
Total score	2.23 – 4.77	3.23 ± 0.44	2.92	3.23	3.54

Regarding the attitude towards aging, the findings of the research showed that the highest average score of attitude towards aging was obtained for the subscale of physical changes ( $28.85 \pm 4.89$ ) and the lowest average score for the subscale of psychosocial problems ( $24.66 \pm 5.88$ ) was obtained (**Table 4**).

**Table 4.** Numerical indices of dimensions of attitudes towards old age in the research units.

Subscale	Minimum - Maximum	Mean ± Standard deviation	First quarter	Median	Third quarter
Physical changes	17.0 – 40.0	28.85 ± 4.89	25.0	29.0	32.0
Spiritual development	17.0 – 40.0	28.15 ± 4.65	24.2	28.0	31.7
Psychosocial problems	11.0 – 40.0	24.66 ± 5.88	21.0	24.0	30.0

Regarding the relationship between self-compassion and attitude towards old age, the findings showed that there is a significant direct relationship between the total score of attitude towards old age and all its three dimensions with the total score of self-compassion ( $P < 0.05$ ). Psychosocial problems subscale of attitude towards aging with all subscales of self-compassion have a significant direct relationship, psychosocial growth subscale of attitude towards aging with self-kindness subscales, sense of human commonality and mindfulness of self-compassion have a direct relationship Significant and subscale of problems of physical changes, attitude towards aging had a significant direct relationship with all subscales of self-compassion, except self-judgment and extreme identification (**Table 5**).

**Table 5.** Correlation between self-compassion score and attitude towards old age in research units.

Self-compassion	Attitude to Ageing	Physical changes	Spiritual development	Psychosocial problems	Total score
Kindness to yourself		P = 0.018 r = 0.223	P = 0.003 r = 0.276	P = 0.003 r = 0.278	P < 0.001 r = 0.339
Judging yourself		P = 0.163 r = 0.133	P = 0.451 r = 0.072	P < 0.001 r = 0.400	P = 0.003 r = 0.282
A sense of human commonality		P = 0.001 r = 0.298	P = 0.001 r = 0.320	P = 0.005 r = 0.266	P < 0.001 r = 0.381
Isolation		P = 0.030 r = 0.206	P = 0.231 r = 0.114	P < 0.001 r = 0.476	P < 0.001 r = 0.366
Mindfulness		P = 0.299 r = 0.001	P = 0.009 r = 0.245	P = 0.020 r = 0.219	P < 0.001 r = 0.328
Extreme assimilation		P = 0.583 r = 0.052	P = 0.175 r = 0.066	P < 0.001 r = 0.380	P = 0.003 r = 0.278
Total score		P = 0.002 r = 0.289	P = 0.001 r = 0.310	P < 0.001 r = 0.540	P < 0.001 r = 0.509

This study was conducted to determine the relationship between self-compassion and attitude towards old age in middle-aged people. The findings of the research showed that the research samples had an average level of self-compassion. Regarding the dimensions of self-compassion, according to the findings, the highest average score was obtained for the subscale of feeling human commonality, and the lowest average score was obtained for the subscale of self-judgment. The average level of self-compassion of the research units in this study was consistent with the results of many studies [21-23]. In this regard, the findings of a study conducted by Duarte *et al.* [24] in Portugal to determine the relationship between empathy and self-sufficiency with the quality of professional life of nurses, indicated that the majority of the research units were similar to the present study. They had moderate self-compassion. In their study, they emphasized the importance of focusing on the feeling of human commonality and self-kindness as effective factors in the quality of professional life. In the current study, the dimension of human commonality had the highest average score. It seems that people who have found the link between themselves and others in the face of difficult events and challenges in life, and by establishing this common link, believe that shortcomings, mistakes, and negative feelings are inevitable for others as well. They will have higher self-compassion and have more ability to face life's challenges. Studies show that having relative self-compassion is essential to living a better life and being more satisfied with life. Also, compared to people with higher self-

compassion, people who have a lower level of self-compassion experience more unpleasant life events such as failure, rejection, adverse interactions, and living with memories of past stressful events [10, 21].

In the present study, regarding the attitude towards old age, the highest mean score was obtained for the psychosocial problems subscale, and the lowest mean score was obtained for the physical changes subscale. It is very important to measure the attitude of people in society towards old age because people's understanding of old age is a criterion for evaluating the satisfaction of each person with his old age. Understanding of aging refers to each person's understanding of the aging process in the socio-cultural context in which it is located. In this regard, studies show that a person's health status, the absence of multiple underlying diseases before old age, and his functional capacity in middle age affect a person's perception of old age. Understanding old age is one of the indicators of determining the attitude towards old age. The understanding of old age is the awareness of each person about the attitude of other people towards him and also the view that he has about himself as a member of the social group he belongs to. The importance of measuring a person's attitude towards old age in middle age can be justified by the fact that the first step that a person goes through in the process of understanding himself as an adult is to internalize the stereotypes related to old age that existed before the person reached old age. Meanwhile, paying attention to and internalizing negative or positive stereotypes associated with old age determines a person's attitude [12, 25].

Regarding the relationship between self-compassion and attitude towards old age, the findings of the research showed that there is a significant direct relationship between the total score of attitude towards old age and the total score of self-compassion. In a study conducted by Brown *et al.* [12] to determine the relationship between self-compassion, attitude towards aging, and feeling good in middle-aged women; the findings indicated that the female participants had moderate self-compassion. Also, their mental health was indirectly predicted by positive and negative self-compassion. Negative self-compassion was the strongest predictor of depressive symptoms followed by aging attitudes about physical changes. Their study, in line with the current study, showed that self-compassion has a direct relationship with the attitude toward aging, and a positive attitude towards aging was reported to be the main factor of healthy aging [9]. The mutual relationship between physical health, mental well-being, and the level of self-compassion has been emphasized in various studies [10, 18, 21]. Also, self-compassion can be a factor in motivating the use of assistive devices (hearing aids, mobility, etc.) and the use of more support resources, which is of great importance in old age [18]. In another study, Allen *et al.* [10] investigated the relationship between self-compassion, living conditions, and psychological well-being in elderly people. The findings of their study indicated that there is a significant relationship between self-compassion, life satisfaction, experiencing fewer emotional problems, and general well-being. Also, according to the results of their study, self-compassion is considered a supportive factor in creating mental well-being and better quality of life in people with conditions of disability and disability such as physical pain and poor health status [10].

Since nurses are key members of the health care system and play a valuable role in promoting the health of society, the results of this research can be used to improve clinical services in the field of public health.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the study indicated that the level of self-compassion in the middle-aged was moderate and this variable had a direct and meaningful relationship with the attitude towards old age in middle-aged people, except for self-judgment and extreme assimilation. According to the results of this study, if middle-aged people have high self-compassion, they can have a more positive attitude towards old age and experience a healthier old age mentally and even physically. Considering the increase in the growth of the elderly population and the importance of enjoying a healthy old age, nurses can teach self-compassion skills in middle age to adapt to the changing challenges and needs of old age and improve the mental health and quality of life of the elderly.

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