



Cure for Fear During the COVID-19 Pandemic Process: Self-Compassion

COVID-19 Pandemi Sürecinde Yaşanan Korkunun Merhemi: Öz-Şefkat

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 not only creates vital physiological effects on human health, but also creates serious mental effects. Increasing death numbers, emerging new variants and uncertainties about the pandemic process cause people to fear. Increasing the individual protective factors during this period will prevent the emergence of fear even in a negative process such as a pandemic. Accordingly, one of the potential concepts that can help protect individuals from the negative effects of COVID-19 is thought to be self-compassion. The self-compassion that an individual will show to himself while going through these difficult times can be the salve for the fear of COVID-19 and the mental problems it causes during this period. In this direction; In this review, it is aimed to reveal the relationship between the fear of COVID-19 and the concepts of self-compassion. PubMed, PubMed Central (PMC), Google Scholar databases were searched and six studies were found that examined the fear of COVID-19 and the concept of self-compassion together. When studies are examined, it is reported that individuals with high self-compassion levels experience less fear of COVID-19 and reduce mental problems such as depression and anxiety disorder due to fear of COVID-19. The results of this review will raise awareness of mental health professionals that intervention studies focusing on self-compassion should be applied both to patients in clinical settings and to society in terms of preventive mental health.

Keywords: COVID-19, fear, self-compassion, mental health

ÖZ

COVID-19, insan sağlığı üzerinde hayati fizyolojik etkiler oluşturmasının yanı sıra ciddi ruhsal etkiler de ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Artan ölüm sayıları, ortaya çıkan yeni varyantlar ve hala pandemi süreci ile ilgili olan belirsizlikler insanların korku duymasına sebep olmaktadır. Bu dönemde bireysel koruyucu faktörlerinin artırılması pandemi gibi olumsuz bir süreçte dahi korkunun ortaya çıkmasına engel olacaktır. Buna bağlı olarak, COVID-19'un olumsuz etkilerinden toplumu korumada yardımcı olabilecek potansiyel kavramlardan birinin öz-şefkat olduğu düşünülmektedir. Bu zorlu zamanlardan geçerken bireyin kendisine göstereceği öz-şefkat bu dönemde yaşadığı COVID-19 korkusunun ve yol açtığı ruhsal sorunların merhemi olabilir. Bu doğrultuda; bu derlemede COVID-19 korkusu ile öz-şefkat kavramları arasındaki ilişkiyi ortaya koymak amaçlanmıştır. PubMed, PubMed Central (PMC), Google Scholar veri tabanları taranmış ve COVID-19 korkusu ile öz-şefkat kavramını birlikte inceleyen altı çalışmaya ulaşılmıştır. Yapılan çalışmalar incelendiğinde, öz-şefkat düzeyi yüksek olan bireylerin COVID-19 korkusunu daha az yaşadıkları ve COVID-19 korkusuna bağlı ortaya çıkan stres, anksiyete ve depresyon, bozukluğu gibi ruhsal sorunları da azalttığı bildirilmektedir. Bu derlemenin sonuçları, öz-şefkati odak alan müdahale çalışmalarının hem klinik ortamda hastalara hem de koruyucu ruh sağlığı açısından topluma uygulanması gerektiği konusunda ruh sağlığı profesyonellerine farkındalık kazandıracaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: COVID-19, korku, öz-şefkat, ruh sağlığı.

Introduction

The increase in the cases of pneumonia in the last days of 2019 in Wuhan, China, has come to healthcare professionals' notice. As a result of the examinations performed on the patients, they found that the disease in question was not pneumonia but a different version of the coronavirus not seen before (Goyal et al. 2020, Zoralioğlu 2020). On January 7, 2020, the World Health

Organization (WHO) reported that the causative agent of the disease is a new version of coronavirus. This virus, spreading rapidly from person to person and becoming an epidemic in a short time, was named "COVID-19 Virus" and was declared a "Pandemic" by WHO on March 10, 2020 (Zoralioğlu 2020). Our country announced the first case on March 11, 2020, and is still under the influence of the virus, as in other countries (Alpago and Oduncu Alpago 2020). While more than 318 million people

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have become sick because of the COVID-19 virus in the world population up to the present, approximately six million people have died (World Health Organization (WHO) 2021).

Many pandemics have been experienced from past to present. Due to SARS in 2002, MERS in 2012, and now the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the world has had to cope not only with health problems but also with mental and economic problems (Khan et al. 2020). In these outbreaks, the virus catches countries unawares, changes healthcare systems, economies, and social lives of societies, forces established systems to reshape and change (Khan et al. 2020, Malay 2020). Many areas of life such as the imposing the curfews, lack of physical contact with other family members and friends, the closure of schools and the transition to distance learning, the suspension of activities in closed spaces (cafe, restaurant, cinema, theater, etc.), and being unemployed have been affected by the pandemic (Alpago et al. Oduncu Alpago 2020). Such radical changes in daily life are considered to be risk factors that can significantly affect mental health.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health

Human beings, who encountered a severe infectious threat, is under huge psychological pressure during this period. People's sense of control over their own lives has decreased, and their sense of trust has been lost (Choi et al. 2020). Drastic changes in daily life have also negatively affected the mental health of individuals. Countries have started to impose curfews and suspend social and economic life due to the COVID-19 virus (Choi et al. 2020, Talevi et al. 2020). While the social isolation measures taken are significant interventions to protect physical health, such interventions have also socially, mentally, and economically destructive aspects on individuals (Talevi et al. 2020). In many studies with different segments and age groups during this period, it is stated that confusion, anger, fear, anxiety, disappointment, helplessness, loneliness, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depression, sleep problems, and substance use disorders are frequently seen in the society (Pablo. et al. 2020, Ren et al. 2020, Wu et al. 2020, Hao et al. 2021, Sun et al. 2021, Şimşir et al. 2021). In the study performed by Wang et al. (2020) with 1210 participants in China during the initial stage of the outbreak, they found that 53.8% of the participants were negatively affected at moderate and high levels, and reported that the participants mostly experience anxiety, depression, and stress, respectively. They also stated that the factors that negatively affect the psychological state of the participants are isolation and the anxiety of infecting their family members. In the study performed by Göksu and Kumcağiz (2020) in our country, they reported that 84% of the participants experienced anxiety, and their stress levels were found to be moderate.

There have been radical changes experienced in the lives of children and adolescents during this period, and children and adolescents could not live what their psychosocial development required (Lee et al. 2020, TPD 2020). It is

known that the long-term of a stressful situation such as a pandemic has adverse effects on the physical, emotional, social, and mental development of children (İlbasmış et al. 2021). Some situations, such as closing schools, imposing curfews, and staying away from their friends and teachers caused regression in children's behavior and skills, anger problems, changes in their appetite, introversion, sadness, panic attacks, sleep problems, and psychosomatic symptoms (Lee et al. 2020, TPD 2020, İlbasmış et al. 2021). It was also determined that depression, anxiety disorders, and internet addiction increased in children and adolescents in this period (Aktaş and Daştan 2021). It's also reported that the frequency of alcohol-substance abuse increases mainly in adolescents (Kardaş 2020, TPD 2020).

It was started to take precautions in the early period of the pandemic for the elderly population, known to be more susceptible to COVID-19 and to face more adverse outcomes (Gold 2020). In our country, curfews were imposed on people over the age of 65 and with chronic diseases on March 21, 2020, and the bans for this group of individuals have not been lifted for a long time (Alpago and Oduncu Alpago 2020). In this process, elderly individuals were more exposed to the adverse effects of the pandemic, and their physical, social and mental health was threatened (Altın 2020). This group of individuals, who stayed at home for a long time, experienced loneliness, helplessness, stigma, and sleep problems. In studies performed during this period, it was reported that the elderly population experienced high levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, while dementia cases increased or individuals with dementia were found to experience faster cognitive declines (Altın 2020, Armitage et al. 2020, Banerjee 2020).

While individuals protect themselves and their families at home during this period, the workload of healthcare professionals has increased oppositely, and the safety of themselves and their families was on the danger list. Healthcare professionals are struggling with COVID-19 face to face and under severe conditions (Karadem 2020). Healthcare professionals have a higher risk of infection than others in the community. Depending on such disadvantages, fear, anxiety, depression, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, somatization disorders, and sleep problems are more common in healthcare professionals (Karadem 2020, Pablo et al. 2020, Hao et al. 2021, Sun et al. 2021). In the light of this information, it is seen that the COVID-19 pandemic causes several mental problems, especially fear, stress, anxiety, and depression in all parts of society. Therefore, it is considered that studies should be carried out to strengthen the mental health of the community in order to prevent mental problems.

Fear of COVID-19

Fear is reported as an unpleasant, emotional, and sudden reaction in response to a dangerous event from the external environment (Doğan and Düzal 2020). On the other hand, The Turkish Language Society (TDK 2021) defines fear as a state of

anxiety and sadness experienced against danger. In the history of the world, there have been many outbreaks that resulted in great losses. It is known that outbreaks such as plagues, SARS-CoV, MERS, EBOLA have caused pandemics in history. Humanity has experienced fear, anxiety, and distress in different dimensions against such unexpected and sudden situations throughout history.

Outbreaks can also be defined as a crisis or disaster due to their nature that disrupts and changes the daily life of individuals and increases the number of people in need of medical care and treatment (Doğan and Düzel 2020). In this context, the COVID-19 outbreak can be characterized as a crisis that reduces individuals' sense of control over their own lives, damages their feeling of confidence, creates a perception of threat by creating an atmosphere of uncertainty, and increases fear and anxiety (Doğan and Düzel 2020, Karadem 2020). Physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions may occur with the increased threat perception in crisis situations. It is known that among the emotional reactions, fear, anxiety, feeling of being unable to cope, worrying about harming oneself and loved ones, and uneasiness are common (Doğan and Düzel 2020, Karadem 2020, Sun et al. 2021).

Although a long time has passed since the pandemic process, factors such as the increasing number of cases and deaths in countries, new variants emerged, faster infection, uncertainties related to the pandemic process, and the inability to spread effective immunity cause people to be afraid. Since the virus has been the subject of news, explanations, and conversations in all media and communication tools and is constantly spoken among people, this may increase fear and anxiety about the disease (Doğan and Düzel 2020, Karadem 2020, Satıcı et al. 2021). It is reported in the literature that during the epidemic period, people no longer feel safe and experience intense fear and anxiety (Karadem 2020). In the study performed by Doğan and Düzel (2020) with 1500 participants in our country, they found that the fear and anxiety levels of all participants increased together with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the study conducted by Warren et al. (2021) with 5023 participants in the USA, they found that the average score of the participants from the COVID-19 fear scale was moderate, while it was determined that 44% of the participants experienced fear above the average score. In the study of Reznik et al. (2021) with 850 participants in Eastern European countries, they found that all participants experienced fear of COVID-19.

It is also reported that the fear experienced by individuals at such high levels causes severe physical and mental illnesses in the future. Tsamakidis et al. (2020) found in their study that there has been an increase in the level of fear during the pandemic process and that psychosomatic symptoms and panic attacks reemerged in individuals with mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, and patients with a history of cardiovascular disease experienced more angina and heart failure symptoms. In the meta-analysis study performed by Şimşir et al. (2022), they were found that fear of COVID-19 results in depression, anxiety,

stress, sleep disorders, PTSD, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. In the study performed by Mamun and Griffiths (2020), they reported that the fear of COVID-19 increased the risk of suicidal behavior in individuals.

Healthcare professionals experience severe fear and anxiety due to changing working conditions, increased workload, separation from their families, and decreased social support during the pandemic period (Hao et al. 2021, Sun et al., 2021). In the study performed by Aksoy and Koçak (2020), they found that nurses and midwives experience the fear of COVID-19 intensely and have difficulties in coping with uncertain situations caused by the outbreak. Sakib et al. (2021) determined in their study that healthcare professionals experienced more fear of COVID-19 than the general population. Studies have reported that healthcare professionals working in intensive care units and emergency services are more likely to experience the fear of COVID-19 due to the high risk of exposure to the disease (Saraçoğlu et al. 2020, Sun et al. 2021). It is seen that all humanity has experienced the fear of COVID-19, especially risky groups such as healthcare professionals

Self-Compassion

In the period of unfavourable situations such as a pandemic, it is considered that it is important to increase the protective factors of individuals in order to avoid mental problems that may occur in society (Pablo et al. 2020). In this context, the concept of self-compassion comes to mind, which can help individuals in coping with the fear of COVID-19. Self-compassion is being emotionally supportive and understanding towards himself when going through tough times, difficulties, or weak moments. It is the ability of the individual to show love, interest, and kindness to others, as well as to himself (Strauss et al. 2016, Atalay 2019).

Since the concept of self-compassion has been included in the literature in recent years, it is not yet exactly known and can be confused with other concepts such as selfishness, self-pity, self-indulgence, and passivity. However, self-compassion is wholly different from these concepts (Neff 2011). In the literature, it is stated that self-compassion is the key to mental health and is closely related to being open and feeling empathy towards others (Strauss et al. 2016., Atalay 2019).

Self-compassion grounds on Buddhism. Buddhism says that one should be able to show compassion to himself as well as to others (Neff 2003). There are also experiences such as failure, inadequacy, and pain in human life in addition to experiences such as success and happiness. One must have self-compassion to avoid these negative experiences and feel better. When the individual feels incompetent and unsuccessful, he must remind himself that other individuals feel like this from time to time. Self-compassion states that everyone can be imperfect, and people should accept their mistakes (Neff 2011, Strauss et al. 2016, Atalay 2019). Having self-compassion does not mean ignoring aspects of our personality that we dislike or do not satisfy. It is not to be aware of these aspects and humiliate, scold, or feel incompetent when thinking about them, but to accept and

embrace those aspects of ourselves. Indeed, self-compassion is making peace with ourselves and self-acceptance (Atalay 2019).

Human beings are creatures that deserve to be psychologically sound and feel good. Self-compassion helps the individual at this point. An individual who tolerantly notices his own mistakes and weaknesses and accepts these adverse aspects can develop positive emotions with the compassion he shows himself (Neff 2003, Atalay 2019). In the literature, it is reported that self-compassion is associated with psychological well-being, happiness, emotional intelligence, forgiveness, optimism, curiosity, social responsibility, life satisfaction, and healthy life behaviors (Ferreira et al. 2013, Gerber et al. 2015, Liss and Erchull 2015, Sirois 2015). A study by Neff (2009) revealed that self-compassion reduces anxiety, depression, and rumination (ruminating thought). In a similar study, it is stated that self-compassion is a protective factor against mental disorders (Deniz and Sümer 2010). Thus, it is seen that self-compassion is a significant concept in protecting people's mental health during the pandemic process.

The number of therapy schools that focus on the concept of self-compassion and aim for the individual to experience it has been increasing in recent years. In particular, many of the third wave therapies that have emerged focus on the concepts of mindfulness and self-compassion. Mindfulness is one of the most important therapy schools that focuses on the concept of self-compassion. Mindfulness-Based Compassionate Living (MBCL), Compassion-Focused Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Positive psychotherapy can be given as examples of other schools that focus on the concept of self-compassion (Atalay 2019). Mental health professionals may increase the self-compassion level of society and thus prevent mental problems by using these therapy schools.

Fear of COVID-19 and Self-Compassion

While going through these difficult times, the self-compassion that the individual will have for himself can be a cure for the fear of COVID-19 and other mental problems during this period. It will be more advantageous to understand the effect of self-compassion mentioned in the literature in recent years on the mental state, especially when going through a hard period such as a pandemic. However, when examining the literature, it is seen that there is a limited number of studies on this subject. Therefore, studies performed to understand the relationship between the concepts of fear of COVID-19 and self-compassion better were examined in this review.

Within the scope of the study, the studies published during the pandemic were discussed by scanning PubMed, Pubmed Central (PMC), Google Scholar databases. The keywords "COVID-19 korkusu and öz-şefkat" were used when searching the databases in Turkish, and "Fear of COVID-19 and self-compassion" when searching in English (the last scanning was on January 10, 2022). A total of 1947 studies were accessed in the databases and six studies related to the subject were evaluated among these studies. The countries where the studies were performed were Germany

(2), Iran (1), Turkey (1), Israel (1), and Vietnam (1). The studies were English and it was found that they were descriptive studies conducted with the general population.

The results of the study are given in Table 1. In the study conducted by Mohammadpour et al. (2020) with 403 participants from the general population, the relationship between the fear of COVID-19 and self-compassion and anxiety was examined. It has been determined that fear of COVID-19 causes anxiety, while self-compassion reduces fear of COVID-19. In the study by Taubman Ben-Ari et al. (2021) with 403 pregnant women, while determining the anxiety levels related to the fear of COVID-19 and the pregnancy and childbirth-related to the pandemic process, the relationships between these mental problems and the levels of self-compassion and social support were examined. While a negative relationship was found between self-compassion levels and fear of COVID-19 and childbirth-related anxiety levels, it was found that social support and self-compassion were positively related. In a study conducted by Engin Deniz (2021) with a total of 667 participants from 75 provinces in our country, they examined the relationship between self-compassion and fear of COVID-19, intolerance to uncertainty, and psychological well-being. While there was a negative relationship between self-compassion and fear of COVID-19 and intolerance to uncertainty, a positive relationship was found between psychological well-being levels.

In the study conducted by Jansen (2021) with 55 participants, the relationship between self-compassion and depression, rumination, and future fear related to COVID-19 was evaluated. It was found that self-compassion is negatively related to depression, ruminating thoughts, and future fear related to COVID-19. Nevertheless, in the study by Jansen et al. (2021), which included 2765 participants from six countries, they evaluated the relationship between self-compassion and anxiety, rumination, and future fear related to COVID-19. It was found that self-compassion is negatively related to anxiety, ruminating thoughts, and future fear related to COVID-19. In a study conducted by Nguyen and Le (2021) with the 509 participants from the general population, they evaluated the relationship between self-compassion and fear of COVID-19, stress, anxiety, and psychological well-being. While there was a negative relationship between self-compassion and fear of COVID-19, stress, and anxiety levels, a positive relationship was found between psychological well-being levels.

In view of this information, it was found in studies that there was a negative relationship between fear of COVID-19 and self-compassion. Individuals with high self-compassion experience less fear of COVID-19. It is seen that mental problems that may arise due to fear of COVID-19 can also be prevented thanks to self-compassion and support for the psychological well-being of individuals.

Conclusion

It is seen in this review that self-compassion reduces the fear of COVID-19 and also prevents the development of mental disorders

Table 1. Characteristics of the studies examined

Source	Sample	Data collection tools	Conclusion
Mohammadpour et al. (2020), Iran	403 participants	- Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 Item Scale (GAD-7) -Self-compassion Scale - Fear Scale of COVID-19	While it was found that the fear of COVID-19 caused anxiety disorders in the participants, it was determined that the participants with high self-compassion levels experienced lower levels of fear of COVID-19.
Taubman Ben-Ari et al. (2021), Israel	403 participants	-Pregnancy-Related Anxiety Scale - Self-compassion Scale -Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support - Fear Scale of COVID-19 - COVID-19-Related Childbirth Anxiety Scale	It was found that pregnant women having low self-compassion levels experience high levels of fear and anxiety of COVID-19. Women with high social support were found to have higher levels of self-compassion and less anxiety associated with COVID-19.
Engin Deniz (2021), Turkey	667 participants	- Fear Scale of COVID-19 -Self-compassion Scale --Subjective Happiness Scale -Intolerance to Uncertainty Scale	While it was determined that the participants with high self-compassion levels had lower levels of fear of COVID-19 and intolerance of uncertainty, psychological well-being levels were found to be higher
Jansen (2021), Germany	55 participants	-Rumination- Reflection Scale -Depressive mood questions -Self-compassion Scale -Future fear related to COVID-19 (prepared by the researcher)	While it was found that participants with high self-compassion levels had lower levels of the future fear and depression due to COVID-19, they had lower levels of rumination and reflection.
Jansen et al. (2021), Germany	2765 participants	- Self-compassion Scale - Rumination- Reflection Questionnaire -Penn-State Worry Questionnaire -Future fear related to COVID-19 (prepared by the researcher)	Participants with high self-compassion levels were found to have lower future fear and anxiety levels due to COVID-19, while their rumination levels were found to be lower. The rumination levels of the participants who had fear of COVID-19 were found to be higher.
Nguyen and Le (2021), Vietnam	509 participants	- Psychological Problems in the COVID-19 Pandemic - Self-compassion Scale -Psychological Well-Being Scale	It was determined that participants with high self-compassion experienced less fear of COVID-19, stress, and anxiety, while their psychological well-being levels were found to be higher.

such as depression and anxiety to be caused by fear. It is important to increase the self-compassion levels of individuals and support them emotionally at this time when there is a great risk factor for mental well-being like COVID-19. While it was found that there are a limited number of studies in the international and national literature on this subject, it is seen that there are no intervention studies on this subject. When considering the positive effects of self-compassion on mental health, it is understood that intervention studies should be done. Mental health professionals might be recommended to do interventional studies focusing on self-compassion both to patients in the clinical setting and society in terms of preventive mental health. Nurses who spend the most time with the patient, in particular, can be advised to focus on the concept of self-compassion in nursing care, to teach and experience their patients. Moreover, teaching the concept of self-compassion to the healthcare professionals who are most negatively affected by the pandemic and conducting self-compassion intervention studies with them will have a positive effect on their mental health. Thus, it is thought that healthcare professionals with high self-compassion shall have positive effects on patient care and treatment quality. While going through these difficult times, the self-compassion that the individual will have for himself can be a cure for the fear of COVID-19 and other mental problems during this period.

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