

Don't be so hard on yourself! Study on first-year student stress

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Stressed out university students, take note: self-compassion may be the key to making it through your first year, according to new research from the University of British Columbia.

Researchers from the faculty of education's school of kinesiology found [students](#) who reported higher levels of self-compassion felt more energetic, alive and optimistic during their first semester of university. When the students' sense of self-compassion levels rose, so too did their engagement and motivation with life.

"Our study suggests the psychological stress students may experience during the transition between [high school](#) and university can be mitigated with self-compassion because it enhances the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn, enriches well-being," said Katie Gunnell, the study's lead author and a junior research scientist at Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute in Ottawa. The study was part of Gunnell's PhD work at UBC.

Self-compassion interventions can involve exercises to avoid negative self-judgment or feelings of inadequacy. One example involves writing self-compassionately about a negative experience. Self-compassion emphasizes self-kindness, which means to not be overly critical of oneself; common humanity, which means to recognize failure is universal; and mindfulness, which means being present and calm in the moment.

"Research shows first-year university is stressful," said co-author and UBC kinesiology professor Peter Crocker. "Students who are used to getting high grades may be shocked to not do as well in university, feel challenged living away from home, and are often missing important social support they had in high school. Self-compassion appears to be an effective strategy or resource to cope with these types of issues."

Crocker said his research group has previously shown that self-compassion interventions lower self-criticism and negative ruminations in high performance female athletes.

The researchers said their findings highlight the potential for colleges and universities to enhance self-compassion for first-year students through the development of workshops or campaigns.

More information: Katie E. Gunnell et al, Don't be so hard on yourself! Changes in self-compassion during the first year of university are associated with changes in well-being, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.032](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.032)

Provided by University of British Columbia

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