

# THE ROLE OF LONELINESS AND SELF-COMPASSION AS PREDICTORS OF DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## Abstract

High prevalence of depressive symptoms was found in college students. Loneliness, as one common problem in college students, is assumed to have a role in the development of depressive symptoms. Earlier research found self-compassion to be associated with better mental health. It is necessary to examine how loneliness and self-compassion play a role in the presence of depressive symptoms in college students. A total of 401 college students in the Jabodetabek area were involved in this research by completing online measurement instruments consisting of demographic questionnaire, 6-Item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form, and Patient Health Questionnaire - 9. Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. Results showed that loneliness had a significant role in predicting the increase in depressive symptoms,  $b = .374$ ;  $t(392) = 7.68$ ,  $p < .01$ , while self-compassion was able to predict the reduction of depressive symptoms in college students,  $b = -.353$ ;  $t(392) = -7.15$ ,  $p < .01$ . This study illustrates the importance of considering the quality of relationships and developing self-compassion as an effort to reduce depression symptoms in college students.

**Keywords:** loneliness; self-compassion; depressive symptoms; college students

## INTRODUCTION

The role of a college student brings various unique changes and demands. Changes and demands came from the individual, interpersonal, and also institutional level (Byrd & McKinney, 2012). These changes and demands are related to various mental health problems in students. Depression is a mental health problem with high prevalence in college students, even higher than the general population (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Previous findings have found that depressive symptoms could take a toll on students' quality of life especially when depression comorbid with other mental health issues (Jenkins et al., 2020). This mental health problem is an essential issue since they also play a role in inhibiting the fulfillment of social and academic life roles (Alonso et al., 2018). In the college student population, symptoms of depression can appear as difficulty meeting academic demands to carry out various risky and violent behaviors (Acharya et al., 2018). This study specifically targeted college students from the Jabodetabek area which

consisted of big urban cities in Indonesia. The student populations of urban universities are often made up of a large population of commuter students and often have bigger gaps in their demographic such as economic status and family educational background (Bono et al., 2020). Commuter students are often exposed to higher rate of psychological distress and social disadvantages which lead to severe depressive symptoms such as suicidal ideation (Meng et al., 2013). Therefore, studying depression issues in college students located in the Jabodetabek area is promising due to students' diverse backgrounds and higher challenges for the students themselves.

Loneliness needs extra attention considering how social relationships are really meaningful for college students. On the other hand, the college student population experienced the highest level of loneliness and was exposed to various negative impacts of loneliness (Victor & Yang, 2012; Danneel et al., 2018). This research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic condition brought

various life changes, especially in the relationship area. Changes in the relationship can trigger both social loneliness related to the quantity of the relationship and emotional loneliness related to the quality of the relationship (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Recent research in Indonesia found that approximately 80% of college students are experiencing loneliness at low and moderate levels during the pandemic period (Rinaldi, 2021). College students are in the age range of emerging adulthood. One of the main developmental tasks is establishing a supportive relationship with a peer (Arnett, 2014). Prior to the pandemic period, college students had numerous chances to develop connections through college activities and organizations (Diehl et al., 2018). With various restrictions during the pandemic, of course, this opportunity will decrease. Being forced to stay home may give college students a sense of losing connections with peers. Forced proximity between family members with tenuous relationships can also be a source of discomfort (Bavel, 2020; Stark et al., 2020). Jabodetabek area has become an epicenter of Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia where restrictions for social distancing were really strict (Tan et al., 2021). Stay at home order also reduces students' physical activity which leads to higher risk of depressive symptoms (Coughenour et al., 2020).

In addition, to gain a whole perspective of depressive symptoms, researchers also need to look at psychological aspects that can protect college students from developing depressive symptoms, especially during pandemic. Several studies have found that self-compassion can protect individuals from various mental health problems, including depressive symptoms. Self-compassion is a person's ability to cope with feelings of suffering with warmth, connectedness, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003a; 2003b). Each component of self-compassion takes the role of an inhibition agent, which lowers the stress level and decreases depression symptoms (Ford et al., 2017). During college, students will experience both pleasant and unpleasant

events, especially in academic and interpersonal relationships (Saeed & Sonnentag, 2018). Previous research has found that students who display self-compassion can demonstrate more adaptive coping strategies by implementing three components of self-compassion, namely mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness (Neff et al., 2005; Sun et al., 2020). Earlier studies also demonstrated that practicing self-compassion could help students reduce ruminations (Smeets et al., 2014) and depressive symptoms for students with maladaptive perfectionism (Mehr & Adams, 2016).

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that mental health issues among students were important, especially related to depressive symptoms, which were prone to appear in the college student population. Issues related to loneliness can also be a risk factor for developing depressive symptoms, especially during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Previous studies also found that self-compassion can be a protective factor for individuals with various mental health problems. Taking a closer look at depressive symptoms, both risk factors and protective factors need to be taken into account. This research was conducted in the early phase of Covid-19 pandemic when many aspects of college students' lives abruptly changed. Those changes had never been predicted before. Meanwhile, researchers assumed those changes would take a toll on students' mental health. For this reason, researchers aim to see how loneliness and self-compassion play a role in the emergence of depressive symptoms in student groups.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Information about this study was posted on several social media platforms. Interested participants can access the submission link. Participants were then directed to a Google Form containing information about the study, informed consent, demographic data, and

questionnaires to obtain the main data. All the risks which can occur while participating in this study were informed within the informed consent. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were given the researcher's contact in case of any disturbing effects afterward. Participants in this study were 401 undergraduate students from several universities located in the Jabodetabek area.

## Measures

### *6-Item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale*

De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale consists of two subscales that measure emotional loneliness and social loneliness (Gierveld & Tilburg, 2006). It can be used both as a unidimensional and multidimensional scale. Each item was measured by a Likert scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (5). The example statement is "I miss having people around" while in Bahasa it is "*Saya merindukan kehadiran orang-orang di sekitar saya*". In this study, researchers adapted the scale into Bahasa using forward-backward translation technique, expert judgment, followed by psychometric testing. Using 54 participants as the sample, researchers found that this scale has proper internal consistency (.756). Proper internal consistency was also found in the actual data obtaining process with 401 participants for this study which is .767.

### *Self-Compassion Scale - Short Form*

Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (SCS – SF) is modified by Raes, Pommier, Neff, and Van Gucht from the original Self Compassion Scale developed by Neff (Raes et al., 2011). SCS – SF consists of 12 items measured using the Likert scale ranging from 1 (rarely) to 5 (almost always). One of the items is "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition" and translated into Bahasa as "*Saya mencoba melihat bahwa kegagalan saya adalah bagian dari kehidupan manusia*". For this study, researchers adapted the scale into Bahasa using forward-backward translation technique, expert judgment and followed by psychometric testing. Using data

obtained from 54 sample participants, researchers found this scale has proper internal consistency, which is .750. The exact degree was also observed during the actual data obtaining process with 401 participants.

### *Patient Health Questionnaire*

The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) was constructed based on the diagnostic criteria for depressive disorders in the DSM-IV. Each statement in PHQ-9 has four answer options: never, several days, more than the intended time (two weeks), and almost every day. Van Der Linden has adapted PHQ-9 into Indonesian in his study for leprosy survivors and found proper internal consistency (.718) with strong positive correlation with BDI-II (Van Der Linden, 2019). One of the items is "Little interest or pleasure in doing things" or "*Kurang tertarik atau bergairah dalam melakukan apapun*" in Bahasa. A proper internal consistency (.77) was also observed in this study with 401 data obtained.

## Procedures

This is a quantitative study using cross-sectional design. Information related to this study was uploaded on various social media platforms to recruit participants. Interested participants then accessed the online questionnaire which is contained in several sections. First section aimed to ask consent from each participant followed by the demographic identity section and continued with *6-Item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale*, SCS-SF, and PHQ-9. After submitting the completed online questionnaire, participants were given a link to download a digital book containing information about mental health as a reward.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis to test the research hypothesis. Descriptive analysis is also used to analyze demographic data, loneliness, self-compassion, and depressive symptoms data. Analysis processes for this study were

conducted using IBM SPSS version 25 for windows.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As seen in table 1, the mean age of the participants is 19.74 ( $SD = 1.42$ ) consisting of 83% female and 17% male students. Large number of participants are from Universitas Indonesia (40.9%) while 59.1% participants are students from several universities in the Jabodetabek Area. More than half of the participants are currently in their third semester. Almost half the number of participants (41.4%) perceived their mental health conditions to be slightly worse in the pandemic period.

Descriptive analysis was used to see how loneliness, self-compassion, and depressive symptoms were experienced by college students in this study. As can be seen in Table 2, more than half of the participants experienced moderate loneliness (53.1%).

More participants were also observed to have moderate (66.8%) and high levels of self-compassion (20.9%). A significant finding from this study is the high number of

participants who were observed to have depressive disorder tendencies (63.3%).

**Table 1.**  
Demographic Data

Aspect	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Sex</i>		
Female	333	83%
Male	68	17%
<i>University</i>		
UI	164	40.9%
Non - UI	237	59.1%
<i>Semester</i>		
3	241	60.1%
5	35	8.7%
7	89	21.4%
9	27	6.8%
Above 9	12	3%
<i>Perceived mental health condition</i>		
Much Worse	39	9.7%
Slightly worse	166	41.4%
Much the same	122	30.4%
Slightly better	51	12.7%
Much Better	23	5.7%
<i>Age</i>		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	19.74	1.42

Note. UI = Universitas Indonesia.

**Table 2.**  
Descriptive Analysis for Loneliness, Self-Compassion, and Depressive Symptoms

Aspect	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Loneliness</i>		
High	65	16.2%
Moderate	213	53.1%
Low	123	30.7%
<i>Self - Compassion</i>		
High	84	20.9%
Moderate	268	66.8%
Low	49	12.2%
<i>Depressive symptoms</i>		
No depressive disorder tendency	147	36.7%
With depressive disorder tendency	254	63.3%

Main result of this study is observed at Table 3. The multiple regression analysis found that loneliness and self-compassion significantly predicted depressive symptoms with  $F(2,$

$392) = 155.65, p < .01$ . As much as 47.2% variance of depressive symptoms is predicted by loneliness and self-compassion. Loneliness was significantly increasing depressive

symptoms,  $b = .374$ ;  $t(392) = 7.68$ ,  $p < .01$ , while self-compassion was significantly decreasing depressive symptoms,  $b = -.353$ ;  $t(392) = -7.15$ ,  $p < .01$ . This study also found that gender was significantly predicting

depressive symptoms,  $b = -.124$ ;  $t(394) = 3.07$ ,  $p < .01$ . Female students observed having higher depressive symptoms than male student

**Table 3.**  
Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i> *	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Loneliness	.492	4.56	.374	7.68	< .01
Self-compassion	-.280	.064	-.353	-7.15	< .01
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.482		
Standardized <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.472		
<i>F</i>			155.56**		

*Note.* Dependent variable = depressive symptoms.

\*\* $p < .01$

This study found that students' loneliness experiences hold a significant role in depressive symptoms. In their research, Victor and Yang (2012) also found that loneliness has a significant relationship with depression. Specifically in the college student population, Richardson et al. (2016) observed that students' loneliness experience was associated with depression in both cross-sectional and longitudinal measurements. The experience of loneliness can form negative cognitive schemas that will increase depression symptoms. Experiencing loneliness, individuals can develop a negative view of others' intention and behavior then lead them to withdraw from the relationship (Anderson et al., 1983; Yavuzer et al., 2019). Students who are experiencing loneliness will perceive that they have no connectedness with their surroundings and see their existences as insignificant (Chang et al., 2017). The main finding of this study supports the previous research. students with higher levels of loneliness are predicted to develop more severe depressive symptoms.

College students with higher self-compassion were found to have lower symptoms of depression in this study. Previous research found that mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness, as three main components of self-compassion can act as inhibiting factors that relieve stress and then reduce the

risk of depressive symptoms development (Ford et al., 2017). Self-compassion facilitates people's reaction toward negative life events to be more resilient (Smeets et al., 2014). Specifically in the college student population, increasing self-compassion is also accompanied by increased overall psychological well-being (Gunnell et al., 2017). Furthermore, students who develop self-compassion will avoid rumination behavior and are not overly fixated on unpleasant events related to the low level of self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification (Smeets et al., 2014). In this case, self-compassion took an important role since college students are being exposed to various difficulties in several areas of their lives.

Another finding in this study was that more than half of the participants (62.8%) had a risk of experiencing depressive disorders. The high prevalence of depression in college students compared to the general population that has been found in this study is in line with the previous study (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Particularly in the context of this ongoing pandemic, issues related to mental health problems, especially depression among college students is one serious concern. Recent study found that sudden changes in student life and the remote learning system is significantly increasing stress, depression,

and anxiety symptoms (Fawaz & Samaha, 2020). Complaints related to sleep difficulty are the most reported symptoms by college students in this study. This complaint is assumed to be related to rapid changes in activity patterns that put students in a difficult position in order to adjust. In this study, 41.8% of students also perceived and reported that their mental health conditions were slightly worse, and 9.5% of students felt that their mental health conditions were much worse during the pandemic period.

This study gave practical implications for psychologists to consider loneliness and self-compassion in dealing with depression in students. College students are encouraged to develop established relationships and conduct various self-compassion exercises in order to increase psychological well-being. For the University, this research can be a reference to formulate both preventive strategies and intervention regarding depressive issues in this college student population. Raising awareness about mental health through active promotion is needed considering the high risk of depression among the college student population (Ramón-Arбуéset al., 2020). Recent research also found that despite the higher rate of psychological disturbance among college students, the use of mental health service is still low (Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, universities have to take an active approach to handle this issue. Future researchers can take a qualitative approach to get a more in-depth picture of clinical depression in college students. Research related to self-compassion-based interventions can also be developed.

In this study, changing patterns of relationship experienced by college students has not been measured. Data related to behavior changes and transitions need to be obtained since loneliness is closely related to transitional periods (Diehl et al., 2018). Another limitation of this study is related to the SCS-SF instrument. There is still an ongoing debate whether to include harmful components (self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification)

or focus only on the main components (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness). Research conducted by López et al. (2018) found that the harmful component of self-compassion has stronger relationships than the positive component. Hall et al. (2013) also found that each component of self-compassion has a unique contribution toward psychological well-being. Hence for future studies, using the Self Compassion Full Scale will be more useful in order to obtain self-compassion data.

## CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that both loneliness and self-compassion are significant predictors of depressive symptoms in college students. The loneliness experienced by college students will predict the increase in depression symptoms. Meanwhile, college students with self-compassion were predicted to have fewer depressive symptoms.

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