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Understanding psychological distress and mental well-being in partners of cancer patients: the role of self-compassion

C. Drossaert¹, N. Kohle¹, M. Schroevers², E. Bohlmeijer¹

¹Center of eHealth & Well-being Research, University of Twente, Netherlands

²Department of Health Sciences, University Medical Center Groningen, Netherlands

Background: Self-compassion has been defined as comprising three components: mindfulness, self-kindness and common humanity. Recent studies have shown that self-compassion is an important factor in psychological health. Yet, its role in understanding the mental health of partners of cancer patients has not been studied thus far. In this study we examined to what extent self-compassion is related to psychological distress and mental well-being in partners of cancer patients, and whether self-compassion can add to the understanding of levels of distress/well-being after controlling for other psychological resources (post-traumatic growth, psychological flexibility, mastery and resilience).

Methods: In this cross-sectional study, 203 partners of cancer patients filled in a questionnaire, including demographics, cancer-related variables, psychological distress (HADS), mental well-being (MHC-SF) and self-compassion (SCS-SF). In addition, the following psychological resources were assessed: Posttraumatic growth (PTGI-SF), Resilience (BRS), Psychological flexibility (AAQ-II) and mastery (PMS).

Findings: Consistent with previous research, self-compassion was significantly negatively correlated to distress ($r=-.38$) and positively to well-being ($r=.35$). Self-compassion was associated with caregiver strain ($r=.19$, $p=.007$) but not with any of the demographics or the disease-related characteristics. Multiple regression analyses revealed that self-compassion could significantly improve the prediction of distress ($p=.05$) and nearly significantly ($p=.06$) the prediction of well-being, after controlling for posttraumatic growth, resilience, psychological flexibility, and mastery.

Discussion: Self-compassion appears to be a significant, unique factor in understanding levels of distress in partners of cancer patients and could serve as a clue for future supportive interventions.