



## Investigation of the Relationship between University Students' Perception of Coping with Trauma and Self-Compassion and Life Stress by Mixed Method

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between university students' perception of coping with trauma and their self-compassion and life stress levels. In the quantitative part of the study, data obtained from 754 students studying at different universities and departments in Turkey at undergraduate, graduate and Phd levels were used. The Perception of Coping with Trauma Scale, the Self-Compassion Scale, and the Updated Student Life Stress Inventory were used as data collection tools. Descriptive statistics, t-test, Pearson correlation analysis, stepwise regression analysis were used in data analysis. In the qualitative part of the study, the phenomenology method was used. The qualitative study group consists of 11 university students. A semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher was used. Qualitative research data were analyzed by content analysis. In this study, a positive significant relationship was found between the perception of coping with trauma and self-compassion scale scores, a negative significant relationship between the perception of coping with trauma and life stress scores, and a negative significant relationship between self-compassion and life stress scores. In this study, Perceived Ability to Cope with Trauma (PACT) and Self-Compassion do not differ according to gender. Life Stress is significantly higher in female students than male students. Consciousness sub-dimension of self compassion significantly predicted perception of coping with trauma. In this research, 2 themes were determined, namely passive coping and active coping, among the views on post-traumatic self-judgment. Passive coping consists of 2 categories. These are: "Getting Out of Focus" and "Leaving it to Time". Active coping theme also consists of 2 categories. These are: "New Decisions" and "Rational Thinking".

The geography we live in, and especially our country, is one of the places where the diversity and intensity of potential trauma events is perhaps the highest. As Canan (2015) states, in ecology, border and side regions located where different living regions meet have much richer characteristics in terms of diversity. This is also true for psychology and educational sciences. In our country, earthquake, flood, avalanche, fire, death, disease, abuse, losses etc. Many types, and perhaps even many, of traumatic events can occur at the same time. This diversity also increases the ways to deal with them. The country we live in is becoming a place where exposure to trauma is increasing day by day. Although it is undesirable to experience trauma, it is not possible to avoid it. The reactions of people exposed to trauma and the perceptions of coping with a possible trauma vary in different dimensions. The degree of this change may differ depending on some variables related to the person

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and the traumatic life event (Kardaş, 2013). Therefore, it is thought that understanding the concept of "perception of coping with trauma" for this phenomenon, which may become inevitable, and understanding the relationship between life stress and self-compassion will guide preventive services and psychotherapy studies. Coping shapes emotions, just like psychological stress, by affecting the person-environment relationship and how it is evaluated (Lazarus, 1993, p:16). Coping is closely related to the concept of cognitive assessment and person-environment processes related to stress (Krohne, 2002). In the literature, coping has been studied as coping with stress. The concept of coping with trauma is still new. In addition, studies investigating the relationship between trauma phenomenon and positive psychology concepts are limited. Self-compassion is a protective feature that reduces the negative effects of trauma and is also a factor that can prevent individuals from developing psychopathology and provides a positive approach to painful and distressing situations (Karaoğlu & Erzi, 2019). Self-compassion and its sub-dimensions such as self-kindness, common humanity and conscious awareness can provide the opportunity to look at the psychological trauma experienced by people from different perspectives. It is important that which of the factors that cause life stress in university students has a significant effect on the perception of coping with trauma, and also how much self-compassion levels predict the perception of coping with trauma. Revealing this relationship and examining the subject in terms of various socio-demographic variables will provide a holistic view of the factors contributing to the process of coping with trauma, and guide preventive studies and therapy studies in the field of psychological counseling and guidance under the guidance of the findings obtained. The findings to be obtained as a result of the research; It will help teachers and counselors to understand students' experiences, attitudes and behaviors. It will help educators and counselors understand why some of their students show high levels of stress and what orientation they have in coping with trauma. It will help us to obtain information about how self-compassion, which can be developed, can contribute to the perception of coping with trauma.

### **Method**

In this study, a mixed model, in which quantitative and qualitative research models are used together, was preferred. Mixed research is a research in which the qualitative research approach is used in one phase of the research and the quantitative research approach is used in the other phase (Johnson & Christensen, 2007).

#### **Ethical Statement**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Necmettin Erbakan University before the study. In addition, an informed consent form was presented to the participants. It was stated that they could leave at any stage of the research if they wanted to.

#### **Participants**

The research group consists of undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students living in Turkey between the years 2021-2022 and volunteering to participate in the research. For quantitative research, 754 university students studying at different universities and departments were reached through Google Forms. The qualitative study group of the research consists of 3 undergraduate, 6 graduate and 2 Phd students living in Turkey in 2022 and volunteering to participate in the research. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 11 university students studying at different universities and departments through Google Meeting. For the validity study, a qualitative form was created by taking the opinions of the field experts before the experiment application. After the interviews, the results of the research were examined by 2 participants, who were interviewed for internal validity. Participants confirmed the results.

#### **Data Collection Tools**

The data of the study were obtained by using Informed Consent Form, Personal Information Form, Perceived Ability to Cope with Trauma (PACT), Self-Compassion Scale, Student Life Stress Inventory and semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher.

### Analysis of Data

For the quantitative research, which constitutes the first part of the research, firstly, normality analysis was performed on the data. Then, frequency analysis, t test, Pearson Correlation Test, Stepwise Regression Analysis were used. Cases with a p value of <.05 were considered significant. SPSS 26 package program was used in the analysis of the data.

In the second part of the research, which is the qualitative part, the content analysis method was used. Content analysis is a systematic and repeatable technique in which some words of a text are expressed with smaller content categories, with coding based on a set of rules, most frequently used in social sciences (Büyüköztürk et al., 2019).

The Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient for PACT was found to be .74. This value shows that the scale is quite reliable in the study group (Uzunsakal & Yıldız, 2018). The Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient of the self-sensitivity scale was found to be .94. This result shows that the scale has high reliability in the study group (Uzunsakal & Yıldız, 2018). Student life stress scale Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be .92. This value shows that the scale has high reliability in the study group (Uzunsakal & Yıldız, 2018). The skewness values in all scales ranged from -.440 to .414, and the kurtosis values ranged from -.790 to .115. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), skewness and kurtosis values between -1.5 and +1.5 indicate that the scores are normally distributed. Since the results obtained are also in the range of -1.5 to +1.5, the distribution of the data set was accepted as normal and parametric tests were used in the subsequent statistical analysis. In order to provide the assumptions of the regression analysis; First, the Durbin-Watson value should be between 1 and 3 to avoid auto-correlation. In addition, the closer this value is to 2, the less likely it is to be autocorrelated (Field, 2013; Bahar, 2019). In this study, the Durbin-Watson value was found to be 2,093. Another condition for regression analysis is; In order to avoid the multicollinearity problem, the VIF value should be below 2.5 (Allison, 1999) and the Tolerance value should be greater than .20 (Cleophas & Zwinderman, 2015). VIF and Tolerance values of all variables in this study comply with these conditions. Another condition for regression analysis; In order to avoid significant outliers, Cook's distance values should be less than 1 (Cook et al., 1982). In this study, Cook's distance value was found to be .026. As a result, the assumptions required for the regression analysis were provided.

### Results

**Table 1.** PACT, self-compassion, life stress scales t-test results of university students by gender

| Variables       | Gender | N   | $\bar{x}$ | Ss     | T      | p     |
|-----------------|--------|-----|-----------|--------|--------|-------|
| PACT            | Female | 574 | 93,59     | 13,422 | -1,504 | ,133  |
|                 | Male   | 180 | 95,32     | 13,461 |        |       |
| Self-Compassion | Female | 574 | 79,87     | 20,041 | -,696  | ,487  |
|                 | Male   | 180 | 81,04     | 19,018 |        |       |
| Life Stress     | Female | 574 | 155,64    | 30,406 | 4,452  | ,000* |
|                 | Male   | 180 | 143,94    | 31,935 |        |       |

When the table is examined, the "life stress" scores are at different levels in female ( $\bar{x}$ =155.64 SD=30.40) and male ( $\bar{x}$ = 143.94 SD=31.93) university students. Since  $P=.000<.05$ , this difference is statistically significant in favor of women.

**Table 2.** Correlations between variables

| Variables       | PACT    | Self-Compassion | Life Stress |
|-----------------|---------|-----------------|-------------|
| PACT            | 1       | ,292**          | -0,97**     |
| Self-Compassion | ,292*** | 1               | -,648**     |
| Life-Stress     | -0,97** | -,648**         | 1           |

\*\*p<.01

When Table-2 is examined, there is a positive significant relationship between PACT and self-compassion scale scores ( $r=.292$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and a negative significant relationship between PACT and life stress scores ( $r= -$

0.97,  $p < .01$ ). A negative significant relationship was found between self-compassion and life stress scores ( $r = -.648$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 3.** Stepwise regression for the prediction of PACT

| Model                 |               | B      | SE    | $\beta$ | t      | p    | Tolerans | VIF   |
|-----------------------|---------------|--------|-------|---------|--------|------|----------|-------|
| 1                     | Constant      | 71,020 | 1,813 |         | 39,182 | ,000 |          |       |
|                       | Consciousness | 1,718  | ,131  | ,430    | 13,075 | ,000 | 1,000    | 1,000 |
| Model 1: $R^2 = ,185$ |               |        |       |         |        |      |          |       |
| 2                     | Constant      | 60,056 | 3,260 |         | 18,423 | ,000 |          |       |
|                       | Consciousness | 2,065  | ,156  | ,517    | 13,234 | ,000 | ,695     | 1,439 |
|                       | Self-judgment | ,419   | ,104  | ,157    | 4,028  | ,000 | ,695     | 1,439 |
| Model 2: $R^2 = ,202$ |               |        |       |         |        |      |          |       |

Note: Durbin-Watson: 2,093

When Table 3 is examined, it is seen that the multiple regression analysis was performed in two stages. As a result of the analysis, the perception of coping with trauma was significantly predicted in the second model ( $R = .450$   $R^2 = .202$   $\Delta R^2 = .200$   $F(2-751) = 170.95$   $p < .001$ ). Considering the relevant beta values, the strongest predictor variable is the consciousness sub-dimension of self-compassion ( $\beta = .517$   $p < .001$ ), followed by the self-judgment sub-dimension ( $\beta = .157$   $p < .001$ ). Approximately 20% of the total variance of the dependent variable is explained.

**Table 4.** Self-judgment and criticism after the traumatic event

| Theme         | Category             | f | Sample Answer   |
|---------------|----------------------|---|---|
| Self-judgment | Regret and blame     | 9 | <i>K7: ... back then, we blame ourselves for everything. I mean, I could have been elsewhere at that hour. I could be doing something else. I could have taken precautions, I could have been more prepared. I could have been more conscious. I always say this.</i> |
|               |                      |   | <i>K1: Why did this happen, if I could hold myself a little longer, if I could recover. Or maybe I criticized myself for being a little late in treatment. That criticism forced me to pull myself together for several months.</i>                                   |
| Acceptance    | Be solution oriented | 5 | <i>K10: There was no criticism either to myself or to my environment, because because the possibilities required it, that is, I lived in a struggle to find a solution to the problem rather than being accusatory.</i>   |

When Table 4 is examined, two themes, "Self-judgment" and "Acceptance", were determined from the opinions about the existence of self-blame and criticism after the traumatizing event. The theme of self-judgment consists of 1 category. These are: "Regret and Blame". The theme of acceptance consists of 1 category, "Be solution oriented".

**Table 5.** Coping with post-traumatic self-judgment

| Theme          | Category             | f | Sample Answer   |
|----------------|----------------------|---|---|
| Passive Coping | Getting Out of Focus | 3 | <i>K5: "...Sometimes I cope with by not thinking about , by dealing with something else."</i>   |
|                | Leaving it to time   | 2 | <i>K6: "And I'm still in that shocking, traumatizing effect of the event. So it took me a long time, I still think about it sometimes and feel sorry for those times. I think I left it for some time, I left it to the process."</i> |
| Active Coping  | New Decisions        | 3 | <i>K2: "...to cope with this, I started preparing for the language test afterwards."</i>  |
|                | Rational Thinking    | 3 | <i>K1: "After I looked at other people, I researched the disease a little bit to see why it might be like this, and when I got down to the reasons, I said myself it can happen to everyone."</i>                                     |

When Table 5 is examined, two themes emerged in coping with post-traumatic self-judgment. These are "Active Coping" and "Passive Coping".

Passive Coping consists of 2 categories. These are: "Getting Out of Focus" and "Leaving it to Time". Active Coping theme also consists of 2 categories. These are: "New Decisions" and "Rational Thinking".

**Table 6.** Advice for traumatized individuals.

| Theme               | Category             | f | Sample Answer  |
|---------------------|----------------------|---|--|
| Individual centered | Spirituality         | 5 | <i>K6: "I will say this as a believer. hold on to God. Whatever you believe in the existence of the Creator, I believe in the existence of Allah because I believe in Islam. First of all, hold on to it. It is God who sent us to this world. Stand somewhere spiritually."</i>   |
|                     | Self Compassion      | 4 | <i>K4: "If they blame themselves, I suggest that they should not blame themselves."</i>  |
|                     | Professional Support | 4 | <i>K8: "Better results are achieved with the help of a professional person. It is best to consult a professional person and move forward with him on this path."</i>   |
|                     | Socialization        | 2 | <i>K1: "Let him not look at that negativity, let him participate in social life a little more. Because I coped a little by participating in social life. He was impressed, too."</i>   |
| Life centered       | Common Humanity      | 4 | <i>K2: "We need to find such common things. I would like to tell them not to upset themselves, that everyone experiences these things."</i>  |
|                     | Leaving it to time   | 2 | <i>K5: "Like me, don't rush yourself to experience things. You know, I have to experience this feeling, I have to accept it, I need to get over this situation immediately, I have to deal with it immediately, not as if I have to live and finish it, but by letting it flow; If we have to experience an emotion at that moment, maybe by letting it go, if you shouldn't, maybe by not experiencing it if you're not ready. But you know, they should live by not rushing things."</i> |
|                     | Helping              | 1 | <i>K6: "Not all people are bad, and there are others who need our mercy. And the injured understand the injured much better. It has to be an ointment. Maybe this wound will not go away inside us. That wound has crusted over there, but we can be a balm with that wound. Our wound may be a wound for us, but it may be a balm for someone else. I think we should not let this go. I think the pain of that wound will ease."</i>   |

When Table 6 is examined, 2 themes have been identified, namely, "Individual Centered" and "Life Centered", regarding the opinions regarding the recommendations for individuals who have experienced trauma. The theme for individual centered consists of 4 categories: "Spirituality", "Self Compassion", "Professional Support" and "Socialization". The theme for the life centered consists of 3 themes: "Common Humanity", "Leaving it to Time" and "Helping".

### Discussion

There was no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female university students from the PACT scale. Likewise, in the study of Arı and Cesur Soysal (2019) in which they adapted the PACT scale, no significant difference was found between males and females in terms of PACT total scores and subscales. In the original study of the PACT scale, only a low correlation was found between the future focus of the scale and gender (Bonanno, Horenczyk, & Noll, 2011).

Trauma-focused coping and future-focused coping are sub-dimensions of dealing with trauma. In the qualitative part of the research, the expression of both trauma-focused and future-oriented coping types as active and passive coping supports the quantitative part.

A positive significant relationship between PACT and Self-compassion scale scores; Negative significant relationship between PACT and Life Stress scores; There is a negative significant relationship between Self-Compassion and Life Stress scores. The variable that predicts the PACT level is the consciousness sub-dimension of self-compassion. The perception of coping with trauma reveals the focus of trauma and future-oriented coping skills, while at the same time it is an important criterion for demonstrating positive adaptation to life-threatening trauma situations. According to the research conducted by Saita et al. (2017) on the Italian study group, it confirms that the perception of coping with trauma can be examined on two factor structures. These are the trauma focus and the future focus. According to the research results of Uzel (2020), problem-focused and emotion-focused coping are used together during distressing situations, but problem-focused coping is used more.

Cognitions such as self-evaluation, blame, and self-criticism after trauma are common post-traumatic changes (Lee, Scragg, & Turner, 2001). The qualitative part of the study also supports this result. After trauma, individuals can blame themselves and make intense criticism. The perception of coping with trauma increases and decreases with self-compassion. Low self-compassion is observed in traumatized individuals. After trauma, many negative self-assessments may occur. In many ways, these negative beliefs are the opposite of self-compassion (Scoglio et al., 2015). Self-compassion has been associated with many situations such as anxiety, avoidance, and self-judgment. The data on self-judgment in the qualitative part of the research confirm this. Since self-compassion does not evaluate oneself and others in a result-oriented manner, it can alleviate unbearable feelings of shame and guilt and can help transform these feelings (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejjitterat, 2005). Adopting a self-compassionate stance is associated with less shame (Woods & Proeve, 2014) and less self-criticism (Hiraoka et al., 2015); (Winders et al., 2020). Self-compassion is an important resilience factor for those who have been traumatized as children. Self-compassion closely parallels the benefits of social support (Winders et al., 2020). For this reason, it can be thought that self-compassion-oriented studies will contribute to coping with important negative changes that may occur after trauma.

The first study investigating the link between post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and self-compassion found that higher levels of self-compassion were significantly associated with fewer avoidance symptoms (Thompson & Waltz, 2008), and the findings suggest that individuals with higher self-compassion may be more willing to face problems (Winders et al.). Similarly, self-compassion may protect against the development of PTSD by reducing avoidance of emotional distress and facilitating desensitization. (Germer & Neff, 2015). In addition, self-compassion can increase awareness that challenges are a normal part of life (Bensimon, 2017; Winders et al., 2020). The qualitative part of the research also supports this.

According to the research findings, there is a negative significant relationship between PACT and Life Stress. As life stress decreases, PACT increases. Doğan's (2021) study with university students supports this finding: students with low stress use problem-focused coping, while students with moderate stress use avoidance-focused coping. Therefore, as stress increases, the use of active coping methods decreases. According to the research result of Seven Gürçen (2022); perceived stress significantly predicts the perception of coping with trauma. Knowles and O'Connor (2015) examined the perception of coping with trauma in the grieving process: The future focus dimension of the perception of coping with trauma predicts lower grief severity, as well as lower longing, loneliness, and perceived stress. In this study, a negative significant correlation was found between PACT and life stress scores ( $r = -0.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, in the study of Knowles and O'Connor (2015), a negative relationship was found between PACT and perceived stress. According to the study of Bartholomew et al. (2017) with war veterans in the USA, PACT; PTSD correlates negatively with depression, anxiety and alexithymia. Therefore, PACT has a significant relationship with negative mood states, supporting the findings of this study.

In the study, a negative significant relationship was found between life stress and self-compassion. Increases in self-compassion predicted fewer psychiatric symptoms and interpersonal problems. Since self-compassion relies on connecting with difficult emotions without self-judgment, it seems to lead to healthier psychological



functions (Schanche et al., 2011; Germer & Neff, 2015). Self-compassion can increase tolerance for negative emotions. Awareness can reduce anxiety and negative affect by reducing the tendency to insist on negative inner experiences (Valdez & Lilly, 2016).

In the qualitative part of the study, it is seen that university students generally use both problem-focused and future-oriented coping methods in coping with trauma. These findings are in parallel with the findings of a qualitative study conducted by Okay (2017) on university students. Accordingly, university students try to cope with the trauma, sometimes by targeting the distressing emotion, and sometimes by focusing on the future. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) revealed that people update their future plans after traumatic events. When asked what they did to cope with the trauma they experienced, K2 said: "I tried to cope by preparing for the exams and starting my master's degree. In other words, I started my master's degree to say I have a job, to relieve myself psychologically."

As seen in the "Common Humanity " category, which emerges when information is received from the participants about what advice they will give to individuals who have experienced trauma like themselves, the cognition that similar events not only happen to them but also to others plays an active role in coping. K7: "People who have experienced the most similar thing, that is, my classmates. Because in the end, like me, they lost all their friendships, schools, relatives, the city they lived in in fifty seconds within thirty seconds. I remember that we supported each other the most." K3: "...things happen to human beings in some way. This both comes from God and it happens to others as well." Based on these statements of the participants, "common humanity" is important in coping with post-traumatic injuries. Similar results were obtained in another study conducted with university students. Being with like-minded or feeling people reduces negative emotions and helps normalize reactions (Okay, 2017). Similarly, Parkes (2014) stated that people suffering from the same problem get closer to each other by creating social cohesion. Common humanity is also a sub-dimension of self-compassion. Common humanity is people's ability to use these emotions in a meaningful and positive way for their own benefit, instead of avoiding the negative emotions they experience when they are in a challenging event (Özyeşil, 2011). In this context, common humanity, which is a dimension of self-compassion, is seen as a meaningful variable for those who cope with trauma.

Guided by the research results, recommendations to researchers and practitioners are as follows:

- In this study, the prediction of the PACT variable by self-compassion was examined. In future studies, different independent variables (hope, resilience, self-efficacy, gratitude) that appear in the field of PACT and positive psychology can be used.
- Mixed method was used in this study. In future studies, experimental studies can be conducted on the effects of self-compassion on PACT and Life stress.
- In this study, PACT was found to have a positive and significant relationship with self compassion. Life stress, on the other hand, was found to have a negative significant relationship with self-compassion. Self-compassion can be delivered to more students through psychoeducational programs and its effect on challenging life events can be investigated with different variables.
- Psychological support units at universities can work on self-compassion to support students' PACT and contribute to reducing life stress.

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