

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Burnout and Self-Compassion Experiences of Non-Governmental Organization Employees

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore in-depth the experiences of burnout and self-compassion among individuals working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The study was conducted between November 2024 and December 2024 using a qualitative research method. A phenomenological design was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and online with 10 volunteer participants. The data obtained from these interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in the identification of four main themes. These themes are: the factors leading to compassion fatigue, the manifestation of burnout, self-compassion, and the visible aspect of self-compassion. NGO workers are at risk of burnout due to heavy workloads, emotional labor, and resource shortages. Self-compassion is considered an important psychological resource in coping with such challenging work conditions. Furthermore, it was identified as an effective strategy for alleviating emotional burdens, managing stress, and maintaining psychological well-being. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of individual and organizational intervention programs aimed at supporting the well-being of professionals working in the NGOs.

**Keywords:** Compassion fatigue, burnout, self-compassion, non-governmental organizations, thematic analysis

## Öz

Bu araştırmanın amacı, sivil toplum kuruluşlarında çalışan bireylerin tükenmişlik ve öz şefkat deneyimlerini derinlemesine incelemektir. Çalışma Kasım 2024- Aralık 2024 tarihleri arasında gerçekleştirilerek nitel araştırma yöntemiyle yürütülmüştür. Fenomenolojik desende yürütülen bu çalışmada 10 gönüllü katılımcıyla yüz yüze ve çevrimiçi yolla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Görüşmeler sonucunda elde edilen veriler, tematik analiz yöntemiyle incelenmiş ve sonucunda 4 ana tema açığa çıkmıştır. Bu temalar; şefkat yorgunluğuna neden olan konular, tükenmişliğin yansıması, öz şefkat ve öz şefkatin görünür yüzü olarak adlandırılmıştır. Sivil toplum çalışanları, yoğun iş yükü, duygusal emek ve kaynak yetersizlikleri nedeniyle tükenmişlik riskiyle karşı karşıyadır. Öz şefkat, bu tür zorlayıcı iş koşullarıyla başa çıkmada önemli bir psikolojik kaynak olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Öte yandan, öz şefkatin bireylerin duygusal yüklerini hafifletmede, stresle başa çıkmada ve psikolojik iyilik hallerini sürdürmede etkili bir strateji olarak kullanıldığı belirlenmiştir. Elde edilen bulguların, sivil toplum alanında çalışan profesyonellerin iyi oluşunu desteklemeye yönelik bireysel ve kurumsal müdahale programlarının geliştirilmesine katkı sağlayacağı düşünülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Şefkat yorgunluğu, tükenmişlik, öz şefkat, sivil toplum kuruluşu, tematik analiz

## Introduction

Non-governmental Organization workers face the danger of burnout due to factors such as intense work tempo, psychological burdens, lack of resources and the difficulties of working with the group they serve. Despite this situation having negatively effects on both their job performance and individual well-being, the possible role of self-compassion in coping with burnout has not been sufficiently researched.

NGOs operate in various fields for the welfare of the society such as: education, health care, disaster relief and human rights (Şahin & Öztürk, 2008). Furthermore, NGO organizations play an important role in communicating the needs arising in the society to the state, finding solutions to social problems and raising awareness throughout the society (Bedük, Usta, & Hocaoğlu, 2006).

Although these organizations work as professional employees, they work on a voluntary basis and do not seek profit (Akıncı, 2014). It has been revealed that the nature of the work and the systematization of these organizations can increase the workload and stress levels of their employees.

With the increasing number of professionals working in the civilian field, the workplace practices of organizations are also changing. It has been observed that practices such as long working hours and uncertain job expectations can lead to problems such as burnout and depression in employees (Akyüz, 2010). This situation makes it necessary to examine the necessary mechanisms such as self-compassion, which is a method of coping with situations such as burnout, in order to maintain the functionality of NGO employees.

Burnout is explained by factors such as the prolonged time spent with the people the individual works and serves in the work environment, frequent interaction, increasing the number of people he/she serves and the disadvantageous situations of these people (Torun, 1995). Burnout at work is also defined as a decrease in energy and a negative attitude towards oneself, colleagues and beneficiaries (Cieslak et al., 2008). The extent of burnout is not independent from factors such as role ambiguity, conflicts and increased workload in the work environment (Sürgevil, 2006). As a result of these factors, it is seen that the burnout experience

manifests itself with negative behaviors such as low motivation and loss of tolerance (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In addition, it has been observed that psychological symptoms such as loss of attention and focus, disengagement from work and intolerance accompany this experience (Maslach & Jackson, 1996). It has been observed that NGO workers, especially those working with disadvantaged groups, experience these symptoms more frequently (Şahin, 2019). Therefore, it is of great importance to examine the burnout levels of NGO workers. The role of self-compassion, which acts as a buffer in coping with burnout, in these processes, will also be discussed. Self-compassion is the state of accepting one's own negativity and pain with an uncritical approach (Neff, 2016). Self-compassion means that individuals are compassionate and understanding towards themselves in difficult times. There are 3 elements that point to self-compassion: self-kindness, mindfulness, and a sense of common humanity (Neff, 2003a). Individuals coping through self-compassion recognize and accept their mistakes, failures and imperfections (Neff, 2003b). It has been observed that individuals' coping with stress and burnout is facilitated by self-compassion and symptoms are reduced (Özpeynirci & Kırmızı, 2020). It has been observed that self-compassion contributes to the individual's psychological well-being (Neff et al., 2007). At the same time, self-compassion has been found to facilitate individuals to cope with difficult situations, to regulate emotions and to play a protective role (Dev et al., 2018; Gilbert, 2009). It is thought that the protective effect of self-compassion will have a positive effect on the burnout experienced by individuals working in NGO organizations.

This qualitative study aims to understand the burnout and self-compassion experiences of professionals working in NGO organizations in depth. The main purpose of the research is to reveal the perceptions, feelings and experiences of NGO employees on this issue and to provide suggestions for the field in the light of these findings. For this purpose, the research question was determined as follows:

*"What kind of experiences do NGO workers have when coping with burnout and self-compassion?"*

Although there is an increasing number of studies on the relationship between these two concepts in the literature, there is limited research on the subjective experiences of individuals working in the NGO sector. By focusing on the burnout and self-compassion experiences of NGO workers in Turkey, this study aims to raise awareness by drawing attention to the challenges and burnout faced by NGO workers. The potential of the concept of self-compassion in combating burnout will be examined and practical recommendations will be developed. Finally, it is anticipated that it will provide strategies to help NGO organizations and relevant stakeholders support their employees' psychological well-being and reduce the risk of burnout.

The World Health Organization (2019) included the concept of occupational burnout in the International Classification of Diseases and defined it as a syndrome that develops as a result of long-term and ineffective management of work stress (World Health Organization, 2019). The concept of burnout first emerged in the 1970s. Over time, it has been understood that this concept has many effects and has begun to be considered as a multidimensional psychological structure. In the absence of intervention, burnout negatively affects mental and physical health, causing the stress factors encountered in the professional life of the individual to disrupt daily functionality (Brenninkmeijer & Van Yperen, 2003; McCormack et al., 2018). Burnout is a condition that negatively affects not only the individual himself/herself but also his/her interpersonal relationships and self-perception (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burnout experienced at work is generally explained by work-related environmental and psychological factors (Schaufeli & DeWitte, 2017). In general, burnout shows a unified structure; however, it is explained through four basic dimensions that directly affect professional performance (Schaufeli et al., 2023). The first one is characterized by physical fatigue and mental emotion regulation difficulties. This may also negatively affect the individual's work performance due to attention and memory problems. Emotional disorder is characterized by intense and involuntary experience of emotions such as anger and sadness in the work environment. Mental distancing, which is an effort

to reduce burnout, is manifested by an emotional distance between the individual and the job, not taking the job seriously or indifferent behavior (Schaufeli et al., 2023). Although individuals working in different sectors are vulnerable to burnout, this situation can be more challenging especially for professional groups aiming to provide services to people (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Especially therapists and mental health professionals have been found to have higher rates of burnout (Yang & Hayes, 2020). Similarly, employees working in NGO organizations that provide services to disadvantaged individuals and groups are also thought to be more vulnerable to burnout. This may be caused not only by emotional burden but also by factors such as unrealistic workload (Reed et al., 2020), stressful working environments (World Health Organization, 2019), and inconsistent job expectations. Individual factors or challenges that are not directly related to work can be effective in the occurrence of burnout; however, the literature suggests that the main causes of burnout are the imbalance between high job demands and insufficient resources (Taris, Ybema, & Van Beek, 2017). The effects of burnout are especially alarming in professions that provide direct assistance to people, such as health care. An individual's ability to show compassion to others without experiencing emotional burnout is an important factor in service delivery. This is directly related to the meaning of work, especially for individuals working in NGO organizations (Shoji et al., 2016; Scanlan & Still, 2019).

### **Self-Compassion**

Self-compassion is defined as an introverted state of compassion that involves taking care of oneself and helping oneself when faced with the experience of suffering by reducing the effects of burnout (Neff, 2003a). Accordingly, self-compassion involves not avoiding pain, being kind to oneself and acting with the desire to heal. Although self-compassion is directed towards oneself, it also includes a kind and non-judgmental understanding of the suffering of others. In this way, one can see one's own experience as the common experience of humanity (Neff, 2003a). Research shows that high

levels of self-compassion contribute to an individual's well-being, and that there is a lower tendency to think and ruminate about negative life events (Johnson & O'Brien, 2013). Therefore, it is thought that increasing the self-compassion levels of individuals may contribute to less psychological distress by supporting psychological well-being.

### **Burnout and Self-Compassion**

Self-compassion, which is one of the important topics of positive psychology, is considered as an effective approach in preventing and reducing burnout symptoms, especially in professional groups that constantly interact with people such as healthcare professionals (Atkinson, et al., 2017). In a cross-sectional study conducted by Lathren et al. (2019), high levels of self-compassion were found to be associated with low levels of perceived stress in a sample of US adolescents. Similarly, a study conducted with a sample of nurses in a hospital in New Zealand showed that high self-compassion was associated with low job stress (Dev et al., 2020). In a study conducted with nurses in Iran, it was concluded that self-compassion has a reducing effect on perceived stress and burnout levels (Abdollahi, 2021)

Individuals working in non-governmental organizations spend high levels of emotional labor due to their direct contact with social problems and this increases the risk of burnout. This burnout observed in individuals working in the helping professions can negatively affect not only individual well-being but also the quality of service delivery. In recent years, self-compassion has emerged as a protective psychological resource for coping with such stress-related negativity (McCade et al., 2021).

Studies conducted in various professional groups show that individuals with high levels of self-compassion have significantly lower burnout levels (Atkinson et al., 2017); (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020). However, some studies also suggest that the effect of self-compassion on burnout may vary indirectly or contextually. For example, it is suggested that self-compassion may have indirect effects through positive psychological functioning rather than directly reducing burnout (Shaheen et al., 2020).

Moreover, varying levels of relationships have been found between different sub-dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, low personal accomplishment) and different components of self-compassion (self-kindness, perception of common humanity, mindfulness, etc.) (Liu et al., 2024). This suggests that this relationship is not a unidirectional and direct relationship, but a dynamic that is sensitive to context and individual differences.

However, research on the effect of self-compassion on burnout in the Turkish context, especially among civil society employees, is quite limited. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap and contribute to a better understanding of the related protective mechanisms by examining the relationship between self-compassion and burnout more closely in the civil society sector.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

This study was conducted with a phenomenological design within the framework of qualitative research method in order to understand the burnout experiences of individuals working in NGO and their strategies to cope with this situation through self-compassion. Phenomenology is an approach that aims to explore the phenomena experienced by individuals, the meaning and effects of these phenomena in their lives (Groenewald, 2004). In the study, the participants' subjective perceptions and experiences of self-compassion and burnout processes were examined. The data collection process was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The thematic qualitative analysis method was used in the study, which aimed to reveal the implicit thoughts and perceptions of the participants within the framework of the research questions. Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a flexible method that enables the systematic identification, analysis and reporting of patterns or themes within data sets. This method is recognized as an effective tool for understanding complex data sets in social sciences. The data collected during the research process were meticulously analyzed and a detailed coding process was

carried out in order to create meaningful themes. In the coding phase, open codes were first created, and then the relationships between these codes were evaluated and broader categories and themes were developed. To minimize the effects of their subjectivity on the analysis, the researchers took care to act with a reflexive approach (Creswell, 2013).

### Sample

In this study, 10 participants were involved. Since the aim of qualitative research is to deeply understand a phenomenon, it does not require large sample sizes as in quantitative studies. What matters is reaching meaningful and recurring themes from the data. Data saturation was achieved as the flow of new information decreased and existing themes began to repeat during the interviews. This point of saturation, frequently emphasized in qualitative research, indicates that adding more participants would not make a meaningful contribution to the study (Guest et al., 2006). Additionally, the number of participants recommended in similar studies in the qualitative research literature typically ranges between 6 and 12 (Guest et al., 2006); (Vasileiou et al., 2018). In this study, 10 participants were deemed sufficient both theoretically and practically, as the study group had experience on the specific topic and shared similar characteristics. In conclusion, the amount of data required for in-depth analysis was achieved, and thus limiting the study to 10 participants was found to be both meaningful and sufficient.

### Participants

Civil society workers in Turkey have to strike a complex balance between societal expectations and institutional limitations. Especially the psychological pressure of working in the field after disasters, inadequacy of support mechanisms and social resistance encountered from time to time can negatively affect the psychological health of employees. In this context, the study included 10 volunteer participants between the ages of 25-60, working in non-governmental organizations in Turkey and working in this field for at least one

year. The participants were selected through purposive stratified sampling to increase the diversity of burnout and self-compassion experiences. The general purpose of the study, confidentiality principles and voluntariness principles during the data collection process were explained in detail to the individuals participating in the study, and their written consent was obtained within the framework of ethical rules. This approach both ensures the protection of participants' rights and increases the reliability of the research. In conclusion, this study aims to make a unique and important contribution to the literature in this field by shedding light on the burnout and self-compassion experiences of NGO workers working in the field after the earthquake in Turkey. The demographic and professional profiles of the participants provide a comprehensive basis for interpreting the findings and developing practical recommendations.

### Data Collection

The ethics committee permission required before data collection was obtained from Hasan Kalyoncu University. Data were collected through semi-structured, online and face-to-face interviews, between November-December 2024. 4 participants preferred face-to-face interviews, and 6 participants preferred online interviews. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and uninterrupted room. The interview duration varied between 20-30 minutes. The semi-structured questions for the interview were prepared within the framework of the literature and expert opinions. The questions asked were focused on the following themes:

"How does the stress you experience in the work environment affect you?"

"What challenges contribute to your burnout when working with beneficiaries?"

"How do you cope with burnout through self-compassion?"

Prior to the study, 2 pilot interviews were conducted and the interview process and questions were updated based on these interviews.

### Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis were conducted simultaneously. The audio recordings obtained

from the interviews were directly transcribed. The reliability and verifiability of the results were ensured by recording and reporting the stages of the study and the process in detail. The transcripts were anonymized and analyzed using MAXQDA software. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed by thematic analysis method. In the analysis, the thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. Firstly, the audio recordings were transcribed, then all data were re-read and coded. During the coding process, emerging themes related to self-compassion and burnout were identified. As a result of the analysis, self-compassion levels of NGO workers, their experiences of burnout and the role of self-compassion in preventing burnout were identified as the main themes. An inductive approach was adopted in the data analysis process. This means that codes derived directly from the data aim to preserve the authenticity of the thoughts and perceptions expressed by the participants (Patton, 2002). Inductive coding allows the researcher to explore the internal dynamics of the data and uncover unexpected themes (Thomas, 2006). The coding process involves uncovering both surface and deeper layers of meaning through careful reading and revision of the data. In this process, implicit meanings, contextual clues and social dynamics in participant statements were also considered. Subsequently, the relationships between these codes were identified and transformed into themes by grouping them in a meaningful way within the framework of the main questions of the research. Thematic analysis ensures that the research accurately reflects the participants' unique experiences and perceptions (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

## Findings

### Participant Profile

Some demographic information about the participants constituting the data set of the study is given in the table below. The names of the participants were kept confidential, and the abbreviation "K" was used for participant confidentiality.

**Table 1. Distribution of participants according to age, gender and marital status**

| Participant | Age | Gender | Marital Status |
|-------------|-----|--------|----------------|
| K1          | 26  | Woman  | Single         |
| K2          | 33  | Woman  | Single         |
| K3          | 29  | Woman  | Married        |
| K4          | 35  | Woman  | Married        |
| K5          | 29  | Woman  | Married        |
| K6          | 31  | Woman  | Single         |
| K7          | 32  | Woman  | Single         |
| K8          | 27  | Male   | Single         |
| K9          | 26  | Woman  | Married        |
| K10         | 26  | Woman  | Single         |

Table 1 presents the distribution of age, gender and marital status of the individuals who participated in the study. A total of 10 people participated in the study. The ages of the participants ranged between 26 and 35. The youngest participants were 26 years old (P1, P9, P10), while the oldest participant was 35 years old (P4). When the gender distribution is analyzed, it is seen that most of the participants were female (n=9) and only one participant was male (n=1). This shows that the study was conducted with a sample of predominantly female participants. In terms of marital status, 5 of the 10 participants were single and 5 were married. The age range of the single participants was between 26-33, while for the married participants it was between 26-35. This finding shows that the sample has a balanced distribution in terms of marital status.

### Discovered Themes and Categories

The codes discovered during the analysis phase were grouped under four main themes. These themes are "Issues Causing Compassion Fatigue", "Reflection of Burnout", "Self-Compassion" and "The Visible Face of Self-Compassion".

#### *Theme "Issues Causing Compassion Fatigue"*

Two sub-themes were identified under the theme of "Issues Causing Compassion Fatigue".

The codes discovered under the first sub-theme "Difficulties Experienced While Working with Beneficiaries" are:

"Combating Peer Bullying", "Limited Domain", "Working with Children with Insufficient Self-Care Skills", "Reaching Parents", "Theoretical

knowledge that does not work in practice", "Working with children who are reluctant to participate", "Working with children who lack cognitive flexibility", "Finding creative practices", "Coping with difficulties in the process", "Setting limits in the relationship with children".

- (...) and when she relates a difficult experience, the feeling that there is nothing she can do and that feeling of helplessness and hopelessness can be a bit challenging. (P9, Limitation of Sphere of Influence)
- We encounter children who are out of school, but unfortunately we cannot do anything. I have difficulty in this area (P5, Reaching Parents)

The codes discovered under the other sub-theme "Organizational Burnout Factors" are:

"Difficulties of Teamwork", "Unfair Workload Distribution", "Managerial Change", "Difficulty of Work Group", "Crisis Management", "Change Process", "Lack of Preventive Techniques", "Lack of Clarity in Decisions", "Difficulties caused by Teammates", "Role Confusion", "Disadvantageous Physical Working Environment and Deficiencies", "Communication with Managers", "Managing and Job Responsibilities".

- But how does it affect me when it is sudden? For example, I have a session in an hour, I need to be ready for it, I need to be ready, but normally I don't have anything on my calendar. I get an e-mail, come on, we have a meeting. There will be this training, everything is gone. I mean, it turned upside down, my order was disrupted, it happens like this. I mean, I have such stress. (P8, Crisis Management)
- I mean, I can say the same thing with my coworkers in terms of governance skills, I have difficulty in managing these two together since I am also a manager somewhere in the title of coworker. (P1, Role Confusion in the Work Environment)

## 2. "Reflection of Burnout" Theme

Under the theme "Reflection of Burnout", there are three sub-themes: "Psychological Reflections of Burnout", "Reflection of Burnout on Work Environment" and "Reflection of Burnout on Daily Life".

In the sub-theme of "Reflection of Burnout on Work Environment", there are the codes:

"Concern of Decrease in Work Efficiency", "Efforts not to Reflect Negative Emotions to Beneficiaries", "Sharing Feelings with Children", "Excessive Focus on Work in Case of Burnout", "Teammates' Support for Burnout Management", "Reflection of Burnout on Work Environment" and "Involuntary Reflection of Burnout on Work Environment".

The sub-theme "Reflection of Burnout on Daily Life" includes the codes "Inability to Allocate Time for Daily Life due to Burnout", "Efforts not to Reflect Burnout on Social Life", "Reluctance in Communication" and "Reflection of Burnout at Home".

The codes in the sub-theme "Psychological Reflections of Burnout" are "Feelings of Sadness and Anger", "Anger due to Not Being Understood", "General Burnout Expressions", "Somatic Symptoms of Anxiety", "Frustration", "Need to Stop", "Feeling of Isolation", "Feeling of Tiredness", "Feeling of Physical and Psychological Fatigue", "Restlessness", "Feeling of Professional Inadequacy", "Negative Emotional Fullness", "Decreased Motivation", "Stuck", "Insensitivity", "Embarrassment" and "Emotional Collapse".

- I think not, I always have a different approach towards children. I try not to reflect my mood to my friends around me in general. (P7, Reflection of Burnout on Work Environment\Non-Reflection of Burnout on Work Environment)
- (...) but unfortunately we cannot do that here. We have to control and regulate this. Sometimes I notice this in myself, I realize that I become harsh when I express an expectation from the other party. (P3, Reflection of Burnout on Work Environment\Involuntary Reflection of Burnout on Work Environment)
- Even though I try not to move home, I always move him home in the evening because we spend more time at work than at home during the day (...) (P1, Reflection of Burnout on Daily Life\Reflection of Burnout at Home)
- (...) and even though I am at home late at night, I get very tired during the day. Actually, instead of saying that I get very tired, it would be more accurate to say that I get mentally tired because

*it is very stressful.* (P7, Feeling of Physical and Psychological Fatigue)

- *When I feel personally unsuccessful, I see it that way when I lack knowledge.* (P9, Feeling of Professional Inadequacy)

### 3. The theme of "Self-Compassion"

Under the theme of "self-compassion", the sub-themes of "Kindness to Self", "Awareness" and "Common Experience of Humanity" were found.

Under the sub-theme of "Being Kind to oneself", the codes are:

"Self-rewarding", "Self-criticism", "Awareness of Needs", "Positive Self-suggestion", "Self-justice and Self-kindness", "Inadequate Self-compassion Efforts", "Feelings of Unworthiness", "Feelings of Inadequacy" and "Feelings of Failure".

Codes under the sub-theme "Awareness": "Being Aware of the Domain", "Not Making Negativity an Agenda", "Being Aware of Strengths", "Common Experience of Humanity", "Not Making Comparisons Due to Working in Different Conditions", "Seeking Justice for Injustice within the Organization", "Workload Differences with Other Organizations", "Not Being Aware of Differences in Theory and Practice", "Differences in Experience", "High Job Satisfaction", "Better Working Conditions than Other Organizations", "Contempt due to Experience Differences", "Inconsistency of CSO Organizations in Action", "Inconsistency of CSO Employees in Action", "Deficiencies of General CSO Organizations", "Sharing Common Feelings", "Exchange of Ideas among Employees", "Organization Development" and "Volunteer Based Working Environment".

- *The place where I work now is a difficult place, but there are places that are more difficult* (P4, Better Working Conditions than Other Organizations)
- *I mean, I have problems just like everyone else.* (P8, Sharing Common Feelings)
- *I don't compare the problems or fields in the province where I work with a friend working in another province.* (P7, Not Making Comparisons Due to the Existence of Different Conditions)

- *If I am part of the issue, I criticize myself* (P3, Self-criticism)
- *(...) so I do things that are good for me* (P4, Being Aware of Needs)
- *I mean, when it doesn't turn out the way I want, I console myself by saying that it's good health.* (P8, Positive Self-Suggestion)

### 4. Theme "The Visible Face of Self-Compassion"

The codes discovered under the theme of "The Visible Face of Self-Compassion" are "Painting Activities", "Leaving it to Time", "Looking for a Suitable Time for Solution", "Waiting for Sudden Negative Emotions to Fade", "Watching TV Series", "Communication within the Framework of Hierarchical Structure", "Planned Work", "Playing Games", "Coping with Stress by Connecting to the Work", "Open Communication with the Team", "Suppressing Emotions", "Harmful Habits", "Getting Professional Support", "Spending Time with the Children", "Listening to Music", "Breathing Exercises", "Individual Psychotherapy Practices", "Harmonious Approach to People with Different Temperaments", "Altruism", "Getting Away from the Environment", "Diction Lesson", "Playing Tennis", "Knitting", "Aroma Therapy Practices", "Facial Yoga", "Emotional Eater", "Evaluating Possibilities", "Spending Time with oneself", "Walking", "Reading", "Colleague Support" and "Social Support".

- *There is nothing that I have experienced so far, but if there is, I prefer to talk about it. Probably, I mean, I prefer to be in open communication again.* (P4, Open Communication with the Team)
- *If there are situations where I don't feel very good, I try to go out, get clean and come back.* (P6, Distancing from the Environment)
- *I mean, if it is not something very special, I share it directly with my friends in my social circle.* (P8, Social Support)
- *(...) I also have a very close friend who works in a different NGO, who works in the area of the container, but in a different place, and I tell him about it, I usually get ideas from him.* (P2, Colleague Support)

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the burnout and self-compassion experiences of NGO workers were examined using a qualitative method. The results show that burnout experiences are multidimensional, affecting psychological, daily and professional life. Particularly, themes such as "compassion fatigue" and "organizational burnout factors" revealed the challenges faced by workers. However, self-compassion was found to be prominent as a coping mechanism and individuals were able to reduce the effects of burnout through self-compassion practices. Self-compassion strategies such as self-rewarding, positive suggestion, breathing exercises, and seeking social support were found to be the most prominent self-compassion strategies. These results suggest that self-compassion is an important tool for coping with workload and emotional strain.

According to the codes revealed under the theme of "Reflection of Burnout", it was found that burnout is reflected in different ways in psychological, daily and professional life. For example, one participant stated that the feeling of burnout was not only limited to the work environment but also carried this situation to the home environment. This observation aligns with previous research emphasizing that burnout symptoms often extend beyond the workplace and contribute to impaired overall life satisfaction and mental health (Hashem & Zeinoun, 2020; McCade, et al., 2021). Thus, it is understood that the effects of burnout are not limited to professional life but also reflect on personal relationships and daily routines.

In addition, it was observed that employees reflected their burnout experiences in the work environment either voluntarily or involuntarily. Another theme, "Issues Causing Compassion Fatigue", revealed that NGO workers may face various challenges in their work and that these challenges may contribute to burnout symptoms. Among these challenges, under the sub-theme of difficulties with beneficiaries, other factors were mentioned in addition to the difficulties caused by organizational factors of burnout. Some of them being: difficulties in reaching parents, inability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, working with children who are reluctant to participate, and working with difficult children. In parallel with

this finding, it has been observed that NGO organizations may contribute to the increased risk of burnout by making it difficult for employees to do their jobs effectively because they usually work with limited resources (Ardahan, 2010). Similarly, the existing literature confirms that limited access to organizational resources and unclear role expectations increase emotional burnout in such professional groups (Arı & Erdoğan, 2022; Slatten, et al., 2020). The alignment between the findings and existing research indicates the need for organizational improvements in NGOs to reduce burnout risks.

NGO workers and teachers are occupational groups that require intense emotional labor and human interaction. Therefore, the likelihood of experiencing burnout is high in both groups (Seferoğlu et al., 2014). The literature indicates that burnout causes employees to experience reluctance toward their work and loss of energy (Solak, 2020).

Additionally, it has been observed that the experience of burnout can cause individuals to distance themselves from themselves and their work and to have negative feelings toward the individuals they benefit from (Leiter & Maslach, 1988). These findings support the findings of the study.

As indicated in the themes of "Self-Compassion" and "Coping Techniques with Self-Compassion" in the light of the findings obtained from the participants, self-compassion emerged as a coping tool for NGO workers to cope with the challenges they face at work and prevent burnout. Strategies such as positive self-talk, breathing exercises, and seeking social support have been particularly effective. Additionally, self-compassion has been found to play a mediating role in reducing burnout levels, linking to improvements in various positive psychological traits such as optimism, curiosity, and personal growth (Shaheen et al., 2020). Furthermore, recent studies have consistently shown that self-compassion contributes to reducing emotional burnout and desensitization while also increasing job satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment (Nazari et al., 2024; Gerber & Anaki, 2020; Román-Calderón et al., 2022). It is noted that self-compassion can positively influence team relation-

ships by enabling employees to be more understanding toward themselves and others, thereby providing greater benefits for beneficiaries.

Coaston (2017) emphasizes the importance of self-compassion for counselors to combat burnout and offers important insights that may also apply to NGO workers. Like counselors, NGO workers may perceive burnout as a personal failure. However, the underlying causes of burnout often go beyond individual factors. As seen in the findings, systemic factors such as busy work schedules, uncertain expectations, emotional burden and lack of resources were found to be significant contributors to burnout. In a study conducted by Atkinson et al. (2017) with healthcare professionals working with veterans, they concluded that employees with high self-compassion have a lower risk of experiencing burnout and when they do, their burnout symptoms decrease. In addition, according to another study, it was observed that the effects of compassion fatigue and burnout in child protection workers in Colorado were reduced through self-compassion (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). In a similar study, it was found that positive self-compassion contributed to the reduction of burnout by increasing job satisfaction in emergency service workers (Jang et al., 2022). Nazari et al. (2024) concluded that people with high self-compassion help to cope with burnout by helping them to maintain a balanced mood. According to the findings obtained from the literature, it has been observed that self-compassion has similarly protective reflections in professional groups that aim to benefit people such as health professionals, social workers, teachers, psychotherapists, as well as NGO workers.

In another study, it was found that self-compassion contributed positively to the job performance of nurses and healthcare professionals and reduced burnout (Dev, et al., 2018). Coaston (2017) defines self-compassion as "an individual's displaying an understanding, kind and supportive attitude towards their own pain and failures". Self-compassion is seen as an important resource for coping with difficulties and stress and a protective factor against burnout.

As a finding that supports the sub-theme of adaptive approach to people with different temperaments in the theme of the visible face of self-compassion; it was observed that individuals with high levels of self-compassion behaved more understanding, kind and calm instead of reacting to negative situations. They were also found to be better at dissipating their dysfunctional, demotivating thoughts and accepting their own and others' shortcomings without judgment (Abdollahi et al., 2020; Ferrari et al., 2018). It is thought that individuals with this mindset will be less likely to experience burnout at work. On the other hand, it is thought that individuals with low levels of self-compassion may experience self-blame, judgment, less empathy, and a greater tendency toward introversion rather than sociability (Montero-Marín et al., 2020). An individual with such a mindset appears to have a high likelihood of experiencing burnout.

Coaston (2017) suggests various practices for mind, body and spirit to develop self-compassion. Following this, silencing internal criticism and treating oneself like a supportive friend during difficult times will help strengthen self-compassion. In addition to individual practices, organizational interventions such as self-compassion training and mindfulness programs have been found to significantly reduce burnout rates across various occupational groups (Lyon & Galbraith, 2023; Begin et al., 2024). In this context, encouraging NGO management to integrate such programs is considered necessary for creating a work environment that supports employee well-being. Finally, he said that recognizing that pain and failure are part of the universal human experience can reduce feelings of isolation and shame. The definition of self-compassion, as well as methods such as positive thinking, spending time in nature, and engaging in creative activities, also supported the use of self-compassion as a tool for coping with burnout. In line with all these findings, it is observed that participants' coping resources with self-compassion resemble Coaston's (2017) findings.

Looking at the limitations of this study, the fact that the study was conducted only with NGO workers limits the sample group. In addition, the insufficient number of qualitative studies on this

subject made it difficult to conduct this study. The lack of both national and global resources that fully address the burnout and self-compassion experiences of NGO workers is also considered among the limitations of this study. Despite all these limitations, the fact that the study was conducted with a limited sample group and a qualitative method provides important findings as it will contribute to the literature and the visibility of the NGO field.

As a result, it is thought that self-compassion can reduce the negative effects of burnout by strengthening individuals' coping with stress. Furthermore, it can help stress. Furthermore, it can help employees develop a more positive attitude towards their jobs and increase job satisfaction. Since the sample sizes were not equal between male and female participants in this study, a gender-based comparison could not be made. Therefore, it is recommended to pay attention to equal distribution of sample groups in future studies.

In addition, this study is research examining the experiences of self-compassion and burnout among NGO employees. Based on the findings, it is thought that self-compassion plays an important role in preventing burnout and increasing well-being, especially among NGO employees. In a study conducted with social service professionals, it was clearly emphasized that the prevention of burnout and compassion fatigue is the responsibility of employer institutions, as compassion fatigue can also affect clients or beneficiaries (Hick-Pass, 2022). Therefore, organizations should develop self-compassion-themed programs to prevent or reduce burnout. These programs can include mindfulness training, self-compassion meditation, stress management techniques and support groups. Looking at organizational measures to cope with burnout through self-compassion, it was concluded that equal workload distribution and practicing self-compassion practices significantly reduced employees' burnout experiences (Cocker & Joss, 2016). Another study found that providing employees with self-compassion practices as part of training also reduced burnout symptoms (Slocum-Gori et al., 2013; Hicks-Pass, 2022). In line with the findings of this study, it is also recommended that managers create an open communication and understanding work environment in the workplace

to help employees showing signs of burnout. Current evidence supports the critical importance of transparent management practices and equitable working conditions in preventing burnout (Slatten et al., 2020; Slocum-Gori et al., 2013).

Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between self-compassion and burnout. In particular, more studies should be conducted to determine how effective self-compassion is in reducing burnout among NGO employees in Turkey. In addition to the relationship between self-compassion and burnout, future studies may also examine other variables such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance. These studies could help NGOs improve the well-being of their employees and organizational effectiveness.

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