

A Conceptual Review On Social Connectedness, Self-Compassion, and Emotional Expression Among Young Adults.

Ms. Sumaiya V¹, Ms. Yuvasri S²

¹Postgraduate Student in Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

Young adults increasingly face psychological challenges related to social isolation, limited self-compassion, and difficulties in emotional expression. These variables are recognized as central to healthy psychosocial development and overall well-being in this population, yet their combined influence remains underexplored in non-clinical samples. Conceptual reviews of existing literature highlight that social connectedness, self-compassion, and emotional expressivity function as distinct but interrelated constructs, each contributing to mental health in unique ways. Recent research has pointed out notable gaps, including a scarcity of studies focusing on healthy young adults and an absence of multi-dimensional frameworks assessing these variables together using standardized measures. Understanding these psychosocial factors, independent of intervention effects, offers new avenues for academic inquiry and supports the development of comprehensive models for mental wellness in young adults.

Keywords: Social Connectedness, Self- Compassion, Emotional Expression, Social Isolation, Young Adults.

1. Introduction

Young adulthood represents a crucial stage of development characterized by changes in roles, relationships, and self-identity. In this period, individuals encounter increased psychological challenges associated with social belonging, self-perception, and emotional regulation. Among the numerous factors that affect mental health and adaptation, social connectedness, self-compassion, and emotional expression are essential components. Gaining insight into how these interrelated constructs influence psychological well-being in young adults offers important perspectives for preventive mental health approaches and comprehensive wellness frameworks.

Social Connectedness:

Social connectedness is an essential human requirement that indicates the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as emotionally close, supported, and significantly linked to others in their social surroundings. It over comes simple social interaction and includes a

profound sense of belonging, acceptance, and identification with one's community, family, and peers. A well-established sense of social connectedness improves emotional well-being, fosters self-esteem, and encourages psychological resilience, enabling individuals to more effectively manage life's challenges and stressors. In the contemporary fast-paced and often individualistic society, social connectedness has become increasingly crucial yet contradictorily more challenging to maintain. With globalization, digital communication, and frequent transitions such as relocating for education, employment, or personal development young adults frequently face disruptions in their social networks. These alterations can result in feelings of loneliness and social isolation, which have been shown to adversely affect mental health. Research consistently indicates that individuals with greater social connectedness report lower levels of anxiety, depression, and perceived stress, along with enhanced life satisfaction and emotional stability.

Self Compassion:

Self-compassion involves a person's ability to show kindness, understanding, and acceptance toward themselves in moments of failure, distress, or feelings of inadequacy. Instead of resorting to severe self-criticism, self-compassion promotes a measured and attentive perspective on personal experiences, nurturing emotional resilience and psychological development. According to Neff's framework, self-compassion includes three connected elements: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, which together help individuals recognize challenges without excessively identifying with them. For young adults, self-compassion is especially important as it fosters self-acceptance, diminishes negative emotions like anxiety and depression, and improves overall psychological health

Emotional Expression:

Emotional expression refers to the capacity to identify our feelings, articulate them, and communicate them in ways that are both healthy and sincere. It encompasses more than merely displaying emotions; it involves comprehending our internal experiences and sharing them openly, enabling others to genuinely connect with us. When individuals express their emotions in a free yet considerate manner, they foster an environment conducive to honesty, empathy, and deeper relationships. This practice also aids in the effective regulation of emotions, preventing them from being suppressed or evolving into chronic stress. For young adults, mastering this skill is particularly crucial. This phase of life frequently entails navigating unfamiliar settings, responsibilities, and relationships, all of which can evoke intricate emotions. The ability to articulate one's feelings, rather than suppressing or denying them, facilitates emotional relief and promotes healthier interactions. Conversely, consistently concealing emotions may result in tension, misunderstandings, and a feeling of emotional disconnection. Promoting healthy emotional expression not only enhances mental well-being but also fosters self-awareness, authenticity, and compassion for oneself and others. When individuals acquire the ability to express their feelings with honesty and care, they cultivate stronger connections—both internally and with those around them

leading to a more emotionally balanced and fulfilling life.

Methodology:**Aim:**

To integrate and critically examine the existing literature on how social connectedness, self-compassion, and emotional expression influence psychological well-being in young adults, and highlighting conceptual gaps and future research directions.

Objectives:

- To review and summarize key theoretical perspectives on social connectedness, self-compassion, and emotional expression in young adulthood.
- To analyze current empirical findings regarding the role of these psychosocial qualities in promoting mental health among young adults.
- To identify gaps, limitations, and future needs in research addressing social connectedness, self-compassion, and emotional expression in this population.
- To propose conceptual frameworks that integrate these constructs for holistic well-being in young adults

Hypothesis:

Higher levels of Social Connectedness, Self-Compassion, and effective Emotional Expression are positively associated with greater psychological well-being among young adults.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed articles, theoretical papers, and empirical studies focusing on social connectedness, self-compassion, and emotional expression in young adults (ages 18–30).
2. Publications using validated scales or frame works related to these constructs.
3. Research addressing non-clinical or general young adult populations.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Studies focused exclusively on intervention programs or art-based therapeutic activities.
2. Research targeting clinical populations such as those with severe mental illness, ongoing therapy, or substance dependence.
3. Articles lacking standardized measures or conceptual clarity on selected psychosocial domains.

Procedure:

Relevant literature was identified through databases such as Google Scholar, Pub Med, Science Direct, Research Gate, and APA PsycNet using key terms like social connectedness, self-compassion, emotional expression, young adults, expressive art, *and* psychological well-being. Over 350 studies published between 2010 and 2025 were initially reviewed, and duplicates, non-empirical works, and irrelevant papers were excluded. The selected studies were chosen for their theoretical relevance and evidence-based contribution to understanding psycho-social well-being. Research grounded in Self-Compassion Theory (Neff, 2003), Social Connectedness Theory (Lee & Robbins, 1995), and Humanistic and Expressive Arts frameworks (Rogers, 1951; McNiff, 1992) was prioritized. The reviewed literature was synthesized thematically to explore how self-compassion, social connectedness, and emotional expression interrelate and contribute to mental health in young adults.

Conceptual Development:

Young adulthood is a period defined by profound emotional, social, and psychological transitions, and it is within this developmental space that the constructs of social connectedness, self-compassion, and emotional expression become especially significant. These constructs do not function independently; instead, they form a deeply intertwined system that shapes how young adults perceive themselves, relate to others, and manage the emotional challenges inherent in this stage of life. As young people navigate increasing responsibilities, shifting social networks, and the pressures of identity formation, their ability to feel supported by others, treat themselves with kindness, and express their emotions openly becomes central to their overall mental well-being.

At its core, social connectedness represents the felt sense of belonging, acceptance, and emotional closeness with others. However, in today's fast-changing and often fragmented social environment, young adults frequently experience disruptions in their relational networks due to academic pursuits, relocation, competitive atmospheres, and digital dependency. These disruptions contribute to feelings of loneliness, emotional withdrawal, and insecurity. When young adults do experience strong social bonds, these relationships provide a safe emotional space where they can share experiences, seek validation, and develop a sense of stability. Such relational warmth not only reduces psychological distress but also influences how openly they express their emotions and how kindly they treat themselves during difficult moments.

Self-compassion, meanwhile, operates as the inner psychological foundation upon which emotional stability is built. Guided by Neff's conceptualization, self-compassion invites individuals to acknowledge their imperfections with warmth rather than judgment, recognize that personal struggles are part of the universal human condition, and maintain mindful awareness of their emotions without suppressing or exaggerating them. This internal gentleness is especially vital during young adulthood, a period often dominated by academic pressure, comparison with peers, self-doubt, and fear of failure. When young adults respond to themselves with kindness rather than self-criticism, they create emotional security within themselves. This internal safety increases their willingness to confront, process, and express emotions honestly rather than avoiding or suppressing them.

Emotional expression acts as the bridge that connects inner experiences with the external world. It plays a vital role in transforming private emotional states into shared, relationally meaningful moments. When young adults articulate their emotions—through words, creative mediums, or non-verbal cues—they not only gain emotional clarity but also strengthen their social bonds. Expressive mechanisms rooted in humanistic and arts-based theories emphasize that the act of expressing emotions helps individuals release tension, feel understood, and develop a stronger sense of authenticity. When emotions are expressed openly, others can respond with empathy and support, reinforcing social connectedness. Conversely, emotional suppression creates barriers that isolate individuals from both their inner world and their relationships.

Taken together, the constructs operate in a cyclical and mutually reinforcing manner. Self-compassion provides the emotional safety needed to acknowledge and express feelings; emotional expression deepens interpersonal understanding and empathy; and social connectedness offers the external support that validates the individual's emotions and strengthens their sense of worth. These processes feed back into each other continuously. For instance, a young adult who feels socially connected is more likely to treat themselves kindly, and someone who practices self-compassion is more likely to express emotions honestly, which in turn enhances relational closeness. Thus, the interaction among these constructs creates a holistic framework for emotional well-being rather than a set of isolated psychological traits.

Despite their clear interdependence, existing literature often examines these constructs separately or in linear relationships, overlooking the deeper interactive patterns that shape real-life emotional functioning. Theoretical and empirical gaps remain, particularly in understanding how emotional expression might serve as a mediator between self-compassion and social connectedness, or how cultural norms around emotional openness influence these relationships. Additionally, limited exploration exists regarding creative forms of expression—such as art, journaling, or symbolic communication—which may play essential roles in bridging inner emotional experiences with outer relational contexts.

Conceptualizing these constructs together highlights the need for a more integrated psychosocial model for young adulthood. Such a model moves beyond traditional understandings of mental health by recognizing that young adults thrive not simply because they possess internal coping skills or healthy relationships, but because their internal world, expressive abilities, and relational environment work together in harmony. Understanding these constructs through this non-linear, interconnected lens offers new possibilities for research, intervention, and support systems that aim to enhance the emotional well-being of young adults.

Discussion:

The findings gathered from the reviewed literature highlight a compelling pattern: social connectedness, self-compassion, and emotional expression are not merely individual predictors of psychological well-being but interconnected elements that collectively shape the emotional lives of young adults. Each construct contributes uniquely, yet their combined influence forms a deeper, more holistic understanding of how young adults navigate stress, relationships, and emotional challenges during this formative

phase. As the literature suggests, young adulthood is a time when individuals grapple with evolving identities, academic and career pressures, fluctuating social groups, and emotional uncertainty, making these constructs particularly vital.

Across studies, self-compassion consistently emerges as a central internal resource that protects young adults from becoming overwhelmed by self-doubt, perceived failures, or emotional distress. When individuals treat themselves with kindness rather than criticism, they experience greater emotional balance and resilience. This internal warmth reduces feelings of inadequacy and promotes healthier coping strategies, allowing them to respond to challenges with clarity rather than emotional reactivity. The reviewed evidence suggests that young adults with higher levels of self-compassion tend to experience lower anxiety, reduced negative affect, and increased psychological stability. However, the influence of self-compassion does not end within the self; it extends outward, shaping how individuals approach relationships and express their emotions.

Similarly, social connectedness acts as an external stabilizer that provides the emotional security young adults need in times of uncertainty. Feeling valued, understood, and integrated into social groups significantly reduces feelings of loneliness, alienation, and emotional emptiness. The literature indicates that strong interpersonal bonds act as a psychological buffer, helping individuals navigate life's transitions with greater confidence. When young adults feel connected to others, they are more likely to communicate openly, seek help when needed, and interpret their emotional experiences with less fear of judgment. This sense of belonging not only fosters positive mental health but also reinforces the internal emotional safety necessary for self-compassion and expression.

Emotional expression functions as the bridge between these internal and external experiences. Studies rooted in expressive arts and humanistic perspectives demonstrate that the ability to articulate emotions—whether through conversation, creativity, or symbolic forms helps individuals process emotional experiences more effectively. When emotions are expressed instead of suppressed, psychological tension is reduced, and emotional clarity improves.

Emotional expression also strengthens relationships by inviting empathy, understanding, and closeness. Young adults who express their emotions more openly tend to form more meaningful connections and experience greater relational satisfaction. This reinforces social connectedness and, in turn, enhances self-compassion by creating supportive environments where individuals feel safe to be vulnerable.

Together, the literature suggests that these three constructs interact in a cyclical, mutually reinforcing manner. Self-compassion enables individuals to acknowledge emotions without shame, making expression easier. Emotional expression deepens relationships, increasing social connectedness. Social connectedness then strengthens an individual's sense of worth and reduces self-criticism, thereby enhancing self-compassion. This continuous cycle creates a powerful framework for emotional well-being, showing that young adults thrive not because of one psychological quality alone but because of the dynamic interplay among how they relate to themselves, how they express their inner world, and how they feel held by their relationships.

Despite these insights, the review also highlights important gaps within the existing research. Much of

the available literature relies on cross-sectional designs and homogenous student samples, limiting the ability to understand long-term developmental patterns or broader cultural differences. Emotional expression though shown to be essential is often understudied in relation to the other two constructs, especially as a potential mediator or moderator. There is also a notable lack of research exploring how cultural norms shape emotional openness, particularly in collectivist societies where emotional restraint is often encouraged. These gaps suggest that future studies would benefit from longitudinal designs, more diverse populations, and integrative models that examine all three constructs together rather than in isolation.

Conclusion:

This review concludes that self-compassion, social connectedness, and emotional expression collectively enhance the emotional well-being of young adults. Developing self-kindness and empathy fosters resilience, while meaningful connections and open emotional expression strengthen belonging and psychological balance. Grounded in Self-Compassion Theory, Social Connectedness Theory, and Humanistic frameworks, the review emphasizes that nurturing these qualities especially through creative and expressive practices—can promote holistic mental health. Future research should further explore their combined impact across diverse young adult populations to build more inclusive and integrative approaches to well-being.

Implications

- Enhancing self-compassion helps young adults develop emotional resilience, reduce self-criticism, and cope effectively with stress.
- Fostering social connectedness strengthens belonging, support, and psychological well-being during life transitions.
- Encouraging emotional expression through creative or reflective practices promotes empathy, self-awareness, and authentic communication.
- Integrating compassion-based and expressive approaches into educational and mental health programs can provide holistic support for young adults emotional growth.

Limitations:

- Most reviewed studies are cross-sectional and conducted within specific cultural or academic contexts, limiting the generalisation of findings.
- There is limited empirical evidence examining the combined relationship among self-compassion, social connectedness, and emotional expression in young adults.
- The review does not include experimental or longitudinal data, making it difficult to establish causal relationships among the variables.

References:

1. Aydın, A., Yüksel, R., & Ayaz, S. (2021). The effect of group art therapy on happiness and loneliness among university students. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 73, 101761. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2021.101761>
2. Bloch, J. H. (2018). Self-compassion, social connectedness, and interpersonal competence (Master's thesis, University of Montana). University of Montana ScholarWorks. <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11224>
3. Bosman, J., et al. (2020). Art-based interventions for emotional regulation: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 584763. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.584763>
4. Camic, P. M., & Chatterjee, H. J. (2016). The arts for health and wellbeing: An integrative review of the evidence. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, 27, 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2016.04.002>
5. Lee, R. M., & Robbins, S. B. (1995). Measuring belongingness: The social connectedness and the social assurance scales. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 42(2), 232–241. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.42.2.232>
6. McNiff, S. (1992). *Art as medicine: Creating a therapy of the imagination*. Shambhala Publications.
7. Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309032>
8. Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy: Its current practice, implications, and theory*. a. Houghton Mifflin.
9. Sane, A., & Kulkarni, P. (2024). The impact of expressive art therapy on emotional regulation and self-compassion among adolescents. *Indian Journal of Psychology and Education*, 14(1), 23–31.
10. Ying, K., & Mohd Hashim, I. H. (2016, November). Self-compassion, social connectedness and self-regulation of health behaviour: A preliminary study on local undergraduates in Malaysia. Paper presented at the 3rd KANITA Postgraduate International Conference on Gender Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia.
11. Zubala, A., MacIntyre, D. J., Gleeson, N., & Karkou, V. (2018). Description, characteristics, and impacts of art therapy and arts-based interventions for mental health in the general adult population: A systematic review. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 59, 34–64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2018.03.002>