

# Researchers explore the relationship between self-compassion and health

April 4 2014, by Leah Burrows

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

(Medical Xpress)—We all have stress in our lives, whether it's a daily commute, workplace pressures or relationship troubles. But how we deal with that stress could impact our health and longevity.

In a recently published paper in *Brain, Behavior and Immunity*, Brandeis

University researchers report they found a connection between a self-compassionate attitude and lower levels of stress-induced inflammation. The discovery could lead to new techniques to lower stress and improve health.

The paper was authored by psychology professor Nicolas Rohleder, with postdoctoral fellows Juliana Breines and Myriam Thoma, and graduate students Danielle Gianferante, Luke Hanlin and Xuejie Chen.

It's long known that [psychological stress](#) can trigger biological responses similar to the effects of illness or injury, including inflammation. While regulated inflammation can help stave off infection or promote healing, unregulated inflammation can lead to cardiovascular disease, cancer and Alzheimer's.

Self-compassion describes behaviors such as self-forgiveness or, more colloquially, cutting yourself some slack. A person with high levels of self-compassion may not blame themselves for stress beyond their control or may be more willing to move on from an argument, rather than dwelling on it for days.

To understand the connection between self-compassion and inflammatory responses to stress, Rohleder and his team asked 41 participants to rank their levels of self-compassion. The participants ranked their agreement to statements such as, "I try to be understanding and patient toward aspects of my personality I do not like" and "I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies."

Then, the participants took one [stress test](#) a day for two days and their levels of interleukin-6 (IL-6), an inflammatory agent linked to stress, were recorded before and after each test. After the first stress test, participants with higher self-compassion had significantly lower levels of IL-6.

On the second day, Rohleder and his team found something unexpected. Those with low self-compassion had higher base levels of IL-6 before the test, suggesting that they may have been carrying the stress they experienced the day before.

"The high responses of IL-6 on the first day and the higher baseline levels on the second day suggest that people with low self-compassion are especially vulnerable to the adverse effects of this kind of stress," Rohleder says.

The research illustrates how easy it is for stress to build over time and how a seemingly small daily stressor, such as traffic, can impact a person's health if they don't have the right strategies to deal with it.

"Hopefully, this research can provide more effective ways to cope with [stress](#) and reduce disease, not only by relieving negative emotions but by fostering positive ideas of self compassion," Rohleder says.

Provided by Brandeis University

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