Accepted Manuscript

De-stigmatising self-care: Impact of self-care webinar during COVID-19

Yasuhiro Kotera

Abstract

To protect wellbeing of healthcare and caregiving workers during COVID-19, the University of Derby has initiated to offer a webinar focusing on self-care. This one-hour webinar has been well-taken by many healthcare and caregiving workers, and has been requested to be offered at various organisations such as the National Health Service trusts, the British Association of Social Workers, and the Derbyshire Voluntary Action. This commentary reports the outline of the webinar including how the participated healthcare and caregiving workers perceived self-care, and suggests that the current situation may help de-stigmatise self-care among these crucial workforces.

Mental Health Difficulties during COVID-19

Since the first positive case was identified in Wuhan, China, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread through the world rapidly. To limit the spread and to minimise its diverse impact, many countries have implemented several national-level countermeasures including physical distancing and working from home (Anderson, Heesterbeek, Klinkenberg, & Hollingsworth, 2020; Mahase, 2020). While these unprecedented changes have shown effects for stopping the spread of the virus as seen in countries such as New Zealand, Japan and Taiwan (Chang, Hong & Varley, 2020; Summers et al., 2020), globally, people have reported increasing incidences of mental health problems (The Lancet Infectious Diseases, 2020). For example, in our recent studies conducted in Japan, the number of people who experienced mental health problems was way larger than those who experienced physical health problems (Bhandari et al., 2021): COVID-19 and its associated changes affected mental health for almost all people. Specific mental health difficulties due to COVID-19 include depression, anxiety, loneliness and hopelessness (Mental Health Foundation, 2020). A Canadian research group noted that these mental health difficulties will be reported more in the coming months, and will last for several years (Mental Health Research Canada, 2020). While the vaccines against COVID-19 have been rapidly developed, care for mental health has not been established to date.

Self-Care Webinar for Wellbeing during COVID-19

As part of the University of Derby's wellbeing initiatives during COVID-19, a self-care webinar was offered for free to help public wellness. My colleague, Dr Pauline Green and I have been offering this webinar since the UK's first lockdown in March. Because of positive feedback from the participants, since then, we have been invited to offer this webinar to other participant groups including the Derbyshire Voluntary Action, the British Association for

Social Workers, and several NHS trusts. This webinar introduces our research findings about self-care, particularly in relation to self-compassion (i.e., kindness towards yourself including your weaknesses and shame), and some helpful self-care exercises that they can do at home or their workplace (Kotera & Green, 2020).

In our research, we have consistently found that self-compassion was strongly associated with, and could predict a great variance of good mental health in diverse populations including university students and workers in the UK, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia and the Netherlands (Kotera, Green & Sheffield, 2019a, b; Kotera et al., 2018; Kotera, Van Laethem & Ohshima, 2020; Kotera & Maughan, 2020; Kotera, Ting & Neary, 2020). Individuals, who are understanding and kind towards themselves, tend to have good mental health. These findings highlight the importance of how we treat ourselves in relation to our wellbeing.

Self-compassion is essential for good self-care because self-compassion leads to more connection and understanding to oneself, personal enhancement, growth, and a better quality of life (Nelson et al., 2018). Although the definition for self-care remains to be debated, commonly it is regarded as a multidimensional process of engagement in behaviours to improve healthy functioning and wellbeing (Dorociak, Rupert, Bryant & Zahniser, 2017). Empirical research identified that stronger self-compassion predicts stronger self-care: those who are kind towards themselves tend to care for themselves well too (Miller et al., 2019). Self-care is especially important to those who give care to others, namely healthcare workers (Kotera, Cockerill, Chircop & Forman, 2020). Watson's (2008) Theory of Human Caring describes that caregivers' care for self and others is interdependent: one needs to care for themselves in order to offer others care (Dalai Lama, 2003; Lloyd, Muers, Patterson & Marczak, 2019). Self-care has already begun to be taught in healthcare programmes in the UK higher education (Nelson et al., 2018). However, there is still a stigma attached to self-

care in the healthcare sectors (Glass & Rose, 2008). This was consistent with our webinar participants reporting that self-care is about taking time for, and looking after yourself but at the same time, they would feel a sense of guilt to do so (Figure 1).

Figure 1. How healthcare workers perceive self-care (one-word response).

This exercise was done as an icebreaker, so the question was rather abstract to allow participants' free-style responses, but still, those words help to capture what healthcare workers think, know, and feel about self-care.

Breathing and Cognitive Reappraisal

Towards the end of our webinar, we introduce practical skills to enhance self-care, which healthcare workers can do in their busy workplaces. Among various self-care skills we have been teaching, most popular ones are breathing and reframing. The positive wellbeing effects of breathing have been reported including enhanced confidence and anxiety/stress reduction (Decker, Brown, Ashley & Lipscomb, 2019; Sagaram & Hughes, 2020). By slowly and deeply breathing, while paying attention to your senses, you will be able to ground yourself and focus on the here and now, which often clears your imagination and distorted thinking

(Masuno, 2009). Slow and deep breathing is an easy-to-do and effective skill for self-care. Moreover, before the pandemic, when we taught breathing to our students in a classroom, students experienced group cohesion and safety in the room. Though robust empirical evidence of group breathing has not been reported, these experiential accounts suggest some utility for workplace application.

Cognitive re-appraisal was regarded most popular in my workplace research, interviewing senior managers in Japan, looking at the same thing from a different perspective or putting it in a different context (Kotera & Van Gordon, 2019). Part of self-compassion is understanding and kindness towards what you do not appreciate about yourself, your shadow or shame. Cognitive re-appraisal helps you to create a different relationship with these aspects of yourself, leading to better self-compassion and self-care. My favourite example is the song 'Rudolph the red nose reindeer'. Rudolph was ashamed of his red shiny nose, but Santa Claus reframed it as helpful in the dark. If you feel comfortable, you could do this cognitive re-appraisal exercise with your colleagues or family members. They may view what you perceive as a weakness very differently. What is important in this exercise is to notice that there are other ways to see or other contexts to use your 'weakness'. By re-appraising it, you can be kinder towards yourself, thus becoming more self-compassionate and self-caring.

Conclusion

Our wellbeing has clearly been compromised during COVID-19, yet effective measures to protect people's wellbeing have not been identified. As the number of the COVID-19 patients increases, the wellbeing of caregivers has become more crucial. However, self-care has been stigmatised in healthcare, as seen in our webinar. At the same time, the need for self-care has begun to be increasingly recognised. Now may be a good time to de-stigmatise self-care, so that people, especially caregivers, can give themselves enough care, leading to better, long-

lasting care for care-receivers. Self-care is not selfish nor even 'would be great to have'; self-care is essential.

References

Anderson, R. M., Heesterbeek, H., Klinkenberg, D., & Hollingsworth, T. D. (2020). How will country-based mitigation measures influence the course of the COVID-19 epidemic? In *The Lancet* (Vol. 395, Issue 10228, pp. 931–934). https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30567-5

Bhandari, D., Kotera, Y., Ozaki, A., Abeysinghe, S., Kosaka, M. & Tanimoto, T. (2021). COVID-19: Challenges faced by Nepalese migrants living in Japan. *BMC Public Health [acceptance with revisions]*.

Chang, R., Hong, J., & Varley, K. (2020, November 24). *Coronavirus Pandemic: Ranking The Best, Worst Places to Be*. Bloomberg. https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-resilience-ranking/

Dalai Lama. (2003). *Transforming the mind: Teachings on generating compassion*. Thorsons.

Decker, J. T., Brown, J. L. C., Ashley, W., & Lipscomb, A. E. (2019). Mindfulness, meditation, and breathing exercises: reduced anxiety for clients and self-care for social work interns. *Social Work with Groups*, *42*(4), 308–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2019.1571763

Dorociak, K. E., Rupert, P. A., Bryant, F. B., & Zahniser, E. (2017). Development of a Self-Care Assessment for Psychologists. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *64*(3), 325–334. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000206

Glass, N., & Rose, J. (2008). Enhancing emotional well-being through self-care: The experiences of community health nurses in Australia. *Holistic Nursing Practice*, *22*(6), 336–347. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.HNP.0000339345.26500.62

Kotera, Y., Green, P., & Sheffield, D. (2019). Mental Health Attitudes, Self-Criticism, Compassion and Role Identity among UK Social Work Students. *British Journal of Social Work*, *49*(2). https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy072

Kotera, Y., Cockerill, V., Chircop, J. G. E., & Forman, D. (2020). Mental health shame, self-compassion and sleep in UK nursing students: Complete mediation of self-compassion in sleep and mental health. *Nursing Open*, nop2.749. https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.749

Kotera, Y., Gilbert, P., Asano, K., Ishimura, I., & Sheffield, D. (2018). Self-criticism and self-reassurance as mediators between mental health attitudes and symptoms: Attitudes toward mental health problems in Japanese workers. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, ajsp.12355. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12355

Kotera, Y. & Green, P. (2020). *Self-care for workers: Webinar*. University of Derby, May 2020. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.20521.83041

Kotera, Y., Green, P., & Sheffield, D. (2019). Mental health shame of UK construction workers: Relationship with masculinity, work motivation, and self-compassion. *Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *35*(2), 135–143. https://doi.org/10.5093/jwop2019a15

Kotera, Y. & Maughan, G. (2020). Mental health of Irish students: Self-criticism as a complete mediator in mental health attitudes and caregiver identity. *Journal of Concurrent Disorders*.

Kotera, Y., Ting, S.H. & Neary, S. (2020). Mental health of Malaysian university students: UK comparison, and relationship between negative mental health attitudes, self-compassion, and resilience. *Higher Education*. doi: 10.1007/s10734-020-00547-w

Kotera, Y., & Van Gordon, W. (2019). Japanese managers' experiences of neuro-linguistic programming: a qualitative investigation. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice*, *14*(3), 174–185. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMHTEP-06-2018-0033

Kotera, Y., Van Laethem, M., & Ohshima, R. (2020). Cross-cultural comparison of mental health between Japanese and Dutch workers: relationships with mental health shame,

self-compassion, work engagement and motivation. *Cross Cultural and Strategic Management*. https://doi.org/10.1108/CCSM-02-2020-0055

Lloyd, J., Muers, J., Patterson, T. G., & Marczak, M. (2019). Self-Compassion, Coping Strategies, and Caregiver Burden in Caregivers of People with Dementia. *Clinical Gerontologist*, *42*(1), 47–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/07317115.2018.1461162

Mahase, E. (2020). Coronavirus covid-19 has killed more people than SARS and MERS combined, despite lower case fatality rate. *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)*, *368*, m641. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m641

Martin, L., & Cooper, M. (2020). *Mental Health During COVID-19 Outbreak Wave 1*.

Masuno, T. (2009). *Zen: Recommendation for a simple life*. Tokyo: Mikasa.

Mental Health Foundation. (2020). *Mental health in the COVID-19 pandemic Recommendations for prevention*.

Miller, J. J., Lee, J., Niu, C., Grise-Owens, E., & Bode, M. (2019). Self-compassion as a predictor of self-care: A study of social work clinicians. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *1*, 3. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-019-00710-6

Nelson, J. R., Hall, B. S., Anderson, J. L., Birtles, C., & Hemming, L. (2018). Self–Compassion as Self-Care: A Simple and Effective Tool for Counselor Educators and Counseling Students. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, *13*(1), 121–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2017.1328292

Sagaram, D., & Hughes, F. (2020). Physician burnout and self-care. *Contemporary OB/GYN Journal*, *65*(9). https://doi.org/10.17226/25521

Summers, D. J., Cheng, D. H.-Y., Lin, P. H.-H., Barnard, D. L. T., Kvalsvig, D. A., Wilson, P. N., & Baker, P. M. G. (2020). Potential lessons from the Taiwan and New Zealand health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific*, *4*, 100044. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanwpc.2020.100044

The Lancet Infectious Diseases. (2020). The intersection of COVID-19 and mental health.

The Lancet Infectious Diseases, *20*(11), 1217. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-

3099(20)30797-0

Watson, J. (2008). *Nursing : The philosophy and science of caring*. University Press of

Colorado.