

Early Memories of Positive Emotions and its Relationships to Attachment Styles, Self-Compassion and Psychopathology in Adolescence

Marina Cunha¹, Maria Inês Martinho, Ana Xavier, & Helena Espírito Santo

Miguel Torga Superior Institute, Coimbra, Portugal

Cognitive-Behavioural Research Centre, University of Coimbra, Portugal



Introduction

Literature has shown that early childhood experiences, especially those related to feelings of warmth or safeness play a key role in emotional and social subsequent development. These early experiences of safeness and soothing may lead to the ability for self-reassurance and self-soothing, especially in face of setbacks or failures (Gilbert, 2005; Richter, Gilbert, & McEwan, 2009). Research has shown that self-compassion is associated with psychological well-being and lower levels of depression and anxiety (Neff, 2003; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Given the developmental tasks in adolescence, it may be beneficial to help adolescents develop self-compassion skills (Neff & McGehee, 2010).

Objectives

- (1) Examine the impact of early memories of warmth and safeness on quality of attachment in adolescents;
- (2) Explore the relationship between early positive memories, self-compassion and psychopathology (depressive, anxiety and stress symptoms);
- (3) Explore the relative contribution of emotional memories and self-compassion in the prediction of depressive and anxiety symptoms.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The sample is composed by 651 adolescents, which 330 are boys (50.7%) and 321 are girls (49.3%), from 7th to 12th grader (years of education mean = 9.89, SD = 1.64). The mean age was 15.89 (SD = 1.99) years old, ranging from 12 to 19. No gender differences were found concerning age, $t_{(649)} = 1.19, p = .236$, and years of education, $t_{(649)} = -1.37, p = .171$.

This adolescents sample was collected from public schools in the district of Castelo Branco, Portugal. Ethics approval was granted by the Head Teacher of the school and parents were informed about the goals of the research and gave their consent. Adolescents were informed about the purpose of the study, aspects of confidentiality and consent.

Measures

Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale for Adolescents (EMWSS-A); Richter, Gilbert, & McEwan, 2009; Portuguese version by Cunha, Xavier, Martinho, & Matos, 2013) is a self-report questionnaire that measures recall of feeling warm, safe and cared for in childhood, i.e., early positive memories of warmth and affect. This is a 21-item scale and is rated on a 5-point scale. On the original version, Richter and colleagues (2009) found a high Cronbach's alpha of .97. In this study the Cronbach's alpha was .95.

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS); Neff, 2003; Portuguese version for adolescents by Pinto-Gouveia, Cunha, Xavier, & Castilho, 2011) is composed by 26 items which assess six dimensions of self-compassion: Self-Kindness; Self-Judgment; Common Humanity; Isolation; Mindfulness; and Over-Identification. Responses on the SCS are given on a 5-point scale, with higher scores representing greater self-compassion. In this study only total of self-compassion was used. The Cronbach's alpha was .87 for total scale.

Attachment Questionnaire for Children (AQ-C); Sharpe et al., 1998; Portuguese version by Cunha, Pinto-Gouveia, & Xavier, 2011) is a simplified version of Hazen and Shaver's (1987) attachment measure. This questionnaire is composed by three statements describing characteristic behaviours and affects in relationships. Each description represents one of the three attachment styles (secure, avoidant and ambivalent). Children were instructed to choose the description that applied best to them.

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21); Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Pais-Ribeiro, Honrado, & Leal, 2004) is a self-report measure composed of 21 items and designed to assess three dimensions of psychopathological symptoms: depression, anxiety and stress. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for subscales were .90 for depression, .86 for anxiety and .88 for stress.

Results

1. Study of Early Positive Memories and Attachment Styles

In this study we used the categorical choice of attachment style in the AQ-C and we obtained three groups of attachment style, namely **secure** ($n = 394$), **avoidant insecure** ($n = 155$) and **ambivalent insecure** ($n = 102$). We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare these three groups in terms of early positive memories. This analysis yielded significant differences in early positive memories (EMWSS) of securely, avoidantly and ambivalently attached adolescents (Table 1). The groups of insecure attachment did not differ between themselves.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and F-values for EMWSS and symptoms measure (DASS-21) with attachment styles as grouping variable

	AQ-C						ANOVAs (F values)		Post-hoc comparisons
	Secure (n = 394)		Avoidant (n = 155)		Ambivalent (n = 102)		F	p	
EMWSS -A	70.25	11.25	62.08	15.45	60.39	16.29	35.27	.000	Sec > Avlns; Sec > Amns

Note. AQ-C = Attachment Questionnaire for Children; EMWSS-A = Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale; Sec = Secure Attachment style; Avlns = Avoidant Insecure; Amns = Ambivalent Insecure.

2. Correlations between early memories of warmth and safeness, self-compassion and psychopathology

As expected, results show significant positive correlations between early memories of warmth and safeness and self-compassion. There are significant negative correlations between positive emotional memories and psychopathological symptoms (depression, anxiety and stress symptoms).

Table 2. Correlations (two-tailed Pearson's r) between Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale for Adolescents (EMWSS-A), Self-compassion (SCS) and depression, anxiety and stress subscales (DASS-21) (N = 651)

Variables	EMWSS-A	SCS Total	Depression	Anxiety
SCS Total	.41***			
Depression	-.37***	-.46***		
Anxiety	-.26***	-.33***	.77***	
Stress	-.29***	-.45***	.77***	.78***

Note. *** $p < .001$. EMWSS-A = Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale for Adolescents; SCS = Self-Compassion Total; DASS-21 = Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales.

3. Predictors of depression and anxiety symptoms

Two linear regression analysis were performed, using positive emotional memories (measured by EMWSS-A) and self-compassion (measured by SCS) to predict depression and anxiety symptoms (measured by DASS-21) (Table 3).

In the first analysis, positive emotional memories and self-compassion variables produced a significant model in the prediction of depression symptoms, $F_{(2,648)} = 109.385, p \leq .001$, and accounted for 25.2% of the variance in depression. Self-compassion emerged as the best global predictor ($\beta = -.38, p \leq .001$), followed by positive emotional memories ($\beta = -.22, p \leq .001$).

In the second regression analysis a statistically significant model was produced, $F_{(2,648)} = 47.802, p \leq .001$, in the prediction of anxiety symptoms and accounted for 12.9% of anxiety variance. The best predictors are self-compassion ($\beta = -.27, p \leq .001$) and positive emotional memories ($\beta = -.15, p \leq .001$).

Table 3. Regression Linear Analysis Summary for Depression and Anxiety (DASS-21) as dependent variables (N = 651)

Model	Depression			Anxiety		
	R ²	β	p	R ²	β	p
EMWSS-A	.252	-.215	.000	.129	-.151	.000
SCS		-.375	.000		-.269	.000

Note. EMWSS-A = Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale for Adolescents; SCS = Self-Compassion Scale (Total)

Discussion

Adolescents classified with a secure attachment style showed significantly more early memories of warmth and safeness than those teenagers with insecure attachment (ambivalent or avoidance).

Additionally, positive emotional memories in childhood revealed adequate discriminant validity for attachment style.

Early memories of warmth and safeness showed significant negative and moderate correlations with anxiety, depressive and stress symptoms, and positive moderate association with self-compassion.

Early positive memories and self-compassion have a significant and an independent contribution on the prediction of anxiety and depressive symptoms in adolescent community.

Conclusions

The present study shows that the recall of emotional memories in childhood (e.g., feelings of warmth and safeness) is associated with self-compassion, as an **emotion regulation process**. So, these two variables may function as **protective factors** in the development of depressive and anxiety symptoms in adolescence.

References

- Lovibond, P., & Lovibond, H. (1995). The structure of negative emotional states: Comparison of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) with Beck Depressive and Anxiety Inventories. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 33, 335-343. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967\(94\)00075-U](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967(94)00075-U)
- Neff, K. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223-250.
- Neff, K., & McGehee, P. (2010). Self-compassion and psychological resilience among adolescents and young adults. *Self and Identity*, 9(3), 225-240. doi: 10.1080/15298860902979307
- Neff, K., Kirkpatrick, K.L., & Rude, S.S. (2007). Self-compassion and adaptive psychological functioning. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 41, 139-154.
- Richter, A., Gilbert, P., & McEwan, K. (2009). Development of an early memories of warmth and safeness scale and its relationship to psychopathology. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 82, 171-184. doi: 10.1348/147608308X395213
- Sharpe, T. M., Killen, J. D., Bryson, S. W., Shisslak, C. M., Estes, L. S., Gray, N., Crago, M., & Taylor, C. B. (1998). Attachment style and weight concerns in preadolescent and adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 23, 39-44.
- ¹Correspondence to: Marina Cunha, Instituto Superior Miguel Torga, Largo da Cruz de Celas, 1, 3000-132 Coimbra, Portugal
Email: marina_cunha@ismt.pt