

# Positive Psychological Predictors of Psychological Health in Individuals with Parkinson's Disease

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## Introduction:

- While it is well-known that Parkinson's disease (PD) presents with motor and non-motor symptoms, it is the perception of the person with Parkinson's disease and one's psychological well-being that will largely guide the "interpretation" of quality of life and life satisfaction.
- PD is associated with high rates of psychological problems including depression, anxiety, and stress.
- Negative emotional well-being in PD is hypothesized to stem from, in part, negative thoughts related to changes in identity and feeling a lack of control (Garlovsky et al., 2016) and from negative illness representations (Evans & Norman, 2009).
  - Illness representations are a person's beliefs and expectations about PD.

## Purpose of the study:

- In addition to looking at how PD negatively affects psychological health, research should also examine how Parkinson's positively affects individuals and their health-related quality of life (Martinez-Martin, 2017; Suzukamo, Ohbu, Kondo, Kohmoto, & Fukuhara, 2006).
- Theoretically, if individuals think more positively about negative circumstances, it would enable them to cope better, which can produce better outcomes (Linley & Joseph, 2004).
- Minimal research has explored positive psychological factors in relation to psychological health in this particular population.
- The present study focuses on three areas of positive cognition (positive thinking) that could impact functioning: self-compassion, optimism, and posttraumatic growth.
  - These aspects of positive thinking were chosen because they are commonly explored in positive psychological research, but they have not been explored in individuals with PD, and there are practical implications for treatment.

## Defining Key Terms:

- Optimism: involves thinking positively about the future
  - Optimism has been found to predict a higher quality of life and lower emotional distress in individuals with PD (Gison, et al., 2014) and to improve overall sense of well-being in individuals with PD (Hurt, et al., 2014)
- Posttraumatic growth: is positive psychological change following a challenging experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth allows to examine the specific impact of PD on an individual's functioning.
  - Posttraumatic growth helps individuals find meaning and accept their illness (Adams, 2015)
  - Five categories of growth: appreciation of life, relating to others, personal strength, new possibilities, and spiritual change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).
- Self-compassion: a present-centered, emotion-management strategy that involves talking to oneself in a kind, non-judgmental way after a stressor or challenge (Neff, 2003)
  - Three key components (Neff, 2011)
    - Self-kindness (rather than self-judgment)
    - Common humanity (rather than isolation)

- Mindfulness (rather than over-identification)
      - Mindfulness – present-centered living with increased self-awareness, without judgment or criticism
  - Self-compassion is linked to lower stress and better coping outcomes

## **Methods:**

### Procedures and Participants:

- An on-line survey was used to collect information from individuals with PD.
- 140 individuals were included in the analyses. The average age was 68 years (range: 47-86). The mean age of being diagnosed with PD was 62 years (range: 38-85). The mean duration of PD was 7 years (range: 4 months to 23 years).

### Measures:

- The Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003)
- The Life Orientation Scale (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) to assess optimism
- The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996)
- The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)
- The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985)

## **Results:**

- On average, individuals reported having a moderate amount of posttraumatic growth, optimism, self-compassion, and life satisfaction.
- As it relates to posttraumatic growth and PD, individuals reported the most change in appreciation of life and relating to others.
  - Older age was associated with lower posttraumatic growth, lower optimism, higher depression.
  - The longer individuals had been diagnosed with PD, the more posttraumatic growth they experienced.
  - Posttraumatic growth was not a significant predictor of life satisfaction.
- For the subscales for self-compassion, the highest reported levels were common humanity (connection with others) and mindfulness.
  - Higher self-compassion was a significant predictor of lower depression, lower anxiety, and lower stress.
- For psychological health, almost half of the sample reported having at least mild depression and at least mild anxiety. A third of the sample reported having at least mild stress.
  - Higher optimism was a significant predictor of lower depression and higher life satisfaction.

## **Conclusions:**

- The majority of the sample had moderate levels of self-compassion, optimism, and posttraumatic growth.
- Higher self-compassion was a significant predictor of lower depression, anxiety, and stress.
- Higher optimism was a significant predictor of lower depression and higher life satisfaction.
  - Having hope would likely curb an individual's negative thinking about the future that often accompanies depression.
  - However, optimism was not a predictor of anxiety or stress and overall had a smaller relationship with those two variables. One reason could be that individuals can be

generally optimistic about the future, but they may still experience everyday stress and anxiety about their life.

- Posttraumatic growth was not a predictor of psychological health (e.g., depression, anxiety, or stress) and was only related to life satisfaction. One reason could be that posttraumatic growth is considered to be independent of other psychological constructs.
  - For example, an individual could be struggling with some of the cognitive and motor challenges associated with PD, yet simultaneously feel more appreciative of his/her personal relationships due to having PD.
- This study suggests that there is room for improvement in the psychological health in individuals with PD.
- Since self-compassion was the most consistent predictor of psychological health, self-compassion interventions could be explored for individuals with PD. Interventions targeting self-compassion have been shown to improve the psychological functioning of individuals with other medical diagnoses (e.g., cancer, Przedziecki & Sherman, 2016).