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A New Hope?

Restoring Self-Compassion in Response to Abusive Supervision

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A New Hope? Restoring Self-Compassion in Response to Abusive Supervision

Abstract

Given the persistent financial and psychological costs of abusive supervision in organizations, a greater understanding of the mechanisms that employees can use to cope with abuse is warranted. In the present study, abusive supervision is expected to be negatively related to a key employee coping mechanism – self-compassion – and this hindered mechanism would lead to higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of hope. However, a written meditation targeting self-compassion could break the link between abuse and employee anxiety or hope. The hypotheses and the written self-compassion meditation were tested across two studies incorporating both a highly controlled laboratory setting and a field setting utilizing employees who had experienced abuse from a supervisor. Abusive supervision negatively impacted an employee’s self-compassion, which in turn predicted greater anxiety and lower feelings of hope among employees. A written meditation was also effective for protecting state self-compassion in a laboratory setting yet results did not replicate in the field study (unless the focus was only on employees who experienced the highest levels of abusive supervision). Future research is encouraged to explore employee strategies for coping with abusive supervision given organizational and leadership interventions may not always be effective.

Keywords: abusive supervision, self-compassion, well-being
Hostile and aggressive behavior in the workplace, such as abusive supervision, is estimated to impact as many as one in five employees (Nielsen et al., 2010) and cost organizations billions of dollars every year (Tepper et al., 2006). In addition, approximately six out of ten employees who leave their organization indicate their direct supervisor is the primary reason for quitting (Wilson, 2022). Abusive supervision is the “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000: 178). Meta-analytical evidence has demonstrated abusive supervision’s relation to a variety of important outcomes, such as reduced organizational citizenship behaviors, performance, lower perceptions of justice, as well as higher instances of workplace aggression and stress (e.g., Mackey et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2019).

Although supervisor interventions that address the source of the abuse have demonstrated successful results in past research (e.g., Gonzales-Morales et al., 2018), they unfortunately do not fully eliminate the occurrence of these behaviors in the workplace. For example, a recent supervisor-directed intervention indicated that over 20% of employees in the experimental group still reported experiencing occasional to weekly abusive supervision (down from ~35%; Gonzales-Morales et al., 2018). Therefore, employee strategies for coping with abusive supervisors are still critical to study (Tepper et al., 2017).

Past research on employee coping strategies has explored employees leaving the organization (Peng et al., 2019), retaliating (Burton and Hobbler, 2011), discussing the abuse with the supervisor (Tepper et al., 2017), or avoiding the supervisor (Whitman et al., 2014). Additionally, employees may attempt to cope with abuse by engaging in exemplification behaviors (i.e., self-sacrificing actions such as staying late at work; Kim et al., 2020), seeking support from others (Yagil et al., 2011), or engaging in ingratiation with the supervisor (Harvey...
et al., 2007). Although this research is encouraging, many of these strategies may not be feasible or tolerable for all employees given their current life situations. For example, what happens if the employee cannot afford to quit their job, does not want to retaliate, is afraid to confront their supervisor, or cannot avoid their supervisor? In this study, a unique “self-perception” coping strategy based on the positive psychology literature is examined that may help employees who face abusive supervision: self-compassion. This concept refers to how people feel about themselves when encountering difficult situations or other experiences that may cause suffering (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion interventions outside of the work context have many benefits for improving well-being (Neff, 2011; Neff and Vonk, 2009), do not require a significant life adjustment, and thus may also be relevant to coping with problems with mistreatment at work.

The present set of studies, in a controlled laboratory setting where participants can be provided with the same level of abusive supervision as well as a field setting utilizing employees who have experienced abuse, make three key contributions to the abusive supervision literature. First, the link between abusive supervision and self-compassion is explored. Rather than examining self-compassion as a stable, trait-like concept that changes reactions to abusive supervision, it is hypothesized that state self-compassion is directly influenced by abusive supervision. Specifically, abusive supervision is likely to reduce the momentary experience of self-compassion, much like it can also affect other self-perceptions like self-esteem (Burton and Hoobler, 2006). That is, state self-compassion may be an important yet understudied self-perception concept that also suffers from experiences with abusive supervision. Second, Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory (Semmer et al., 2007; Semmer et al., 2019) is extended by examining how self-compassion may be a mechanism linking abusive supervision and employee emotional well-being (i.e., hope and anxiety). Third, a practical intervention approach (i.e., a written
meditation) is explored to understand how employees may protect their self-compassion from abusive supervisors in organizational settings (see Figure I).

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**Self-Compassion, Abusive Supervision, and Emotional Well-Being in the Workplace**

Stress-as-Offense-to-Self (SOS) theory (Semmer et al., 2007; Semmer et al., 2019) is useful for understanding the role of state self-compassion in response to abusive supervision. The theory was originally developed to explain the central role of *perceptions of the self* in linking specific types of work stressors to well-being outcomes. SOS theory therefore provides a unique perspective on targeting coping mechanisms related to views of the self (rather than one’s environment or behaviors); it argues that maintaining a positive self-view is an important psychological need, and individuals experience strain when personal and social goals are undermined or disrupted in the workplace in a way that threatens a positive view of oneself. This means that employees can still effectively preserve their well-being by maintaining positive views of themselves, even if environmental circumstances do not change. Other coping theories focus on how people engage in *behaviors* to manage situations or negative emotional responses, including as well as how they *think* about others or aspects of the negative event itself (e.g., Edwards and Baglioni, 1993; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Comparatively, SOS theory suggests that altering perceptions of the *self* is a unique and effective strategy for improving well-being.

One key tenet of SOS theory is in relation to work experiences that threaten the social self – whether one feels appreciated and valued as opposed to insulted or excluded. This Stress as Disrespect (SAD) pathway argues that such work experiences threaten an employee’s feeling
of self-worth (often assessed as self-esteem), which heightens strain and lowers well-being outcomes because sustaining good self-perceptions is an important employee goal. Past research (Burton and Hoobler, 2006) has found that it is difficult to maintain positive feelings about the self (i.e., self-esteem) directly following abusive supervision incidents. Moreover, lower state perceptions of the self can increase negative emotional states and decrease positive emotional states, that is, lower employee well-being (Brown and Marshall, 2001).

Similarly, lower state self-compassion may be another key psychological state arising from abusive supervision. Moreover, given its more actionable and stable benefits, it may be more crucial to protect than self-esteem. In fact, self-compassion may be a more fruitful self-perception mechanism to study in the SOS model given it is theoretically closer to a true “healthy” experience of self-worth than self-esteem. Although self-compassion and self-esteem are closely related to each other (e.g., both involve positive emotions toward oneself), research suggests that building self-compassion has fewer drawbacks than boosting self-esteem (Neff, 2011). Self-compassion is an attitude directed toward the self, precluding potentially harmful judgment of self and others arising from self-esteem (Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2011). For example, self-compassion predicts well-being due to individuals feeling safe and secure, while self-esteem is related to well-being through feelings of superiority (Neff, 2011). Additionally, self-compassion predicts better emotional resilience in response to stressors and is associated with fewer social comparisons and evaluations that lead to heightened threat responses compared to self-esteem (Neff and Vonk, 2009). Therefore, research in coping with abusive supervision could be advanced by understanding how self-compassion is impacted by abuse and the steps an employee can take to protect their self-compassion in response to abuse.
Compassion refers to being moved by the suffering of others and the desire to ease that suffering (Dutton et al., 2006). Self-compassion takes this same compassionate view toward others and directs it inward toward one’s own self. Self-compassion can be viewed as both a stable personality trait and a temporary state (Neff et al., 2021). Neff (2003a) argues that self-compassion involves being touched by one’s own suffering and is comprised of three core dimensions: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness is essentially showing oneself understanding and support when experiencing psychological pain (Neff et al., 2021) rather than being critical or judgmental of one’s suffering, failure, or mistakes (Neff, 2003a). Common humanity refers to acknowledging that all humans experience suffering, fail, and make mistakes rather than seeing one’s experiences of suffering as unique and isolating (Neff, 2003a). Finally, mindfulness indicates that a person is open to and aware of their present experience of suffering without judgment rather than over-identifying with the suffering and losing perspective (Neff, 2003a). This aspect also acknowledges that suffering is temporary and not permanent.

Since Neff’s (2003a, 2003b) seminal work on self-compassion, research in this area has demonstrated the importance of self-compassion for a variety of important outcomes. For example, individuals with higher levels of self-compassion typically experience greater levels of happiness and optimism (Neff et al., 2007b), life satisfaction (Ferrari et al., 2019), and overall well-being (Zessin et al., 2015). In addition, self-compassion has been linked to lower levels of anxiety (Neff et al., 2007a), depression (Neff, 2003b), negative affect (Siros et al., 2015), and stress (Ferrari et al., 2019). Finally, higher levels of self-compassion are associated with positive physiological changes in the body, such as lower levels of cortisol (Przyrembel et al., 2019) and higher heart rate variability (Kirschner et al., 2019), both of which predict greater resiliency in
stressful situations (Inwood and Ferrari, 2018). Self-compassion helps people productively cope with many different experiences of suffering, failure, or feelings of inadequacy (Neff et al., 2021). This suggests that self-compassion may also be relevant to experiences of abusive supervision. In addition, the study of self-compassion is practically important in the context of abusive supervision because self-compassion can be learned (e.g., Ferrari et al., 2019). Given past research findings demonstrating the benefits of state self-compassion (Neff et al., 2021), the present study focused on an intervention (i.e., a written meditation) to protect and restore state self-compassion following instances of abuse.

**Self-Compassion as a Link Between Abusive Supervision and Well-Being**

Consistent with SOS Theory, it is hypothesized that state self-compassion operates as a mediator between supervisor abuse and employee well-being. Recall that self-compassion is comprised of high levels of self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness (Neff, 2003a). Abusive supervision is likely to directly impact each of these dimensions given its effect on self-regulatory processes related to evaluation, isolation, and attention (Terry and Leary, 2011). When experiencing an abusive supervisor, individuals are likely to experience more self-judgment (i.e., low self-kindness); that is, they may internalize supervisor criticisms and see themselves as a failure or inadequate in some way. In fact, research has demonstrated that workers often feel shame following abusive supervision (Kim et al., 2020). Second, individuals may also feel isolated and alone after experiences with an abusive supervisor (i.e., low common humanity). Abusive supervisor behaviors often involve public humiliation, which may leave employees feeling singled out and that their experience is unique compared to others. Indeed, employees often anticipate social exclusion following abusive supervision (Korman et al., 2021). Lastly, workers who experience abusive supervision may be more likely to fixate on negative
thoughts and emotions in a defensive way that heightens threat reactions (i.e., low mindfulness). Abusive supervision can lead to ruminative processes that can prolong negative emotional reactions and make employees more suspicious of other supervisor behaviors (Chan and McAllister, 2014).

These lowered states of self-compassion may then undermine an employee’s ability to successfully regulate emotional reactions (Parrish et al., 2018; Terry and Leary, 2011). Employees who report lower self-compassion are more emotionally reactive to negative events (Leary et al., 2007) and their emotional states are more contingent on external circumstances (Neff and Vonk, 2009). In the present study, anxiety is examined as the key emotional state representing a stress response to perceived environmental threats (Cheng and McCarthy, 2018). In addition, hope was included as a positive emotional response that prompts goal-directed actions due to expectancies of success (Snyder, 2002). In other words, lower state self-compassion arising from abusive supervision is likely to prompt higher anxiety and lower hope reactions, both of which are important goal-directed emotional states among employees.

There is also evidence to suggest that self-compassion is directly related to these key well-being outcomes. For example, past research has shown that self-compassion is related to anxiety (Neff, 2003b) and feelings of optimism (i.e., hope; Neff et al., 2007b). In addition, employees who experience abusive supervision report higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of hope (Ahmad et al., 2019). Taking this into account, along with arguments from SOS theory, it is hypothesized that abusive supervision is associated with lower levels of employee state self-compassion, which in turn negatively impacts employee emotional reactions (higher state anxiety, lower state hope).
Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision is negatively related to employee state self-compassion.

Hypothesis 2: State self-compassion mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional reactions (state anxiety and state hope).

A Written Meditation to Protect Self-Compassion

Recent research suggests that interventions focused on self-compassion can be a resource generator (Schabram and Heng, 2022). Therefore, an intervention intended to protect and restore lost self-compassion resources associated with abusive supervision could improve emotion regulation (Neff, 2003b). While there are a number of interventions that may be used to enhance self-compassion (Kirby et al., 2017), in this study, a written meditation is used as an intervention where participants are prompted to reflect on a difficult experience and then respond to the experience with feelings of mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness (Neff et al., 2021). Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that meditation improves well-being, especially if that meditation focuses on self-compassion (Lv et al., 2020). In addition, written meditations are superior to other methods of increasing a person’s self-compassion (Siegel and Kocovski, 2020) and have been frequently used in research and clinical settings to increase self-compassion (e.g., Koch, 2020). Therefore, this approach should be both effective and efficient to implement.

Neff (2016) argued that self-compassion influences an individual’s response to suffering (such as experiencing an abusive supervisor) via three ways: affective, cognitive, and attentional. The written meditation used in the present study encompasses all three domains. First, the affective domain involves how a person emotionally responds to suffering. Individuals with high self-compassion respond to suffering with more kindness and less judgment toward themselves. Individuals with high levels of self-kindness express acceptance (Zhang et al., 2020), forgiveness...
(Wu et al., 2019), resilience (Trompeter et al., 2017), and are less sensitive to negative emotional experiences (Parrish et al., 2018) during times of stress, thereby reducing resource loss associated with affective/emotional suffering in response to abusive supervision. Second, the cognitive domain involves how a person understands their suffering. Individuals with high self-compassion are more likely to understand their suffering through a lens of common humanity, that everyone experiences this type of suffering from time to time and that they are not alone. Research shows that individuals with high self-compassion can cognitively reappraise negative events (Allen and Leary, 2010) and are able to view negative events through a different perspective (Ewert et al., 2018). Finally, the attentional domain refers to how an individual pays attention to their suffering. Individuals with high self-compassion are more mindful of their suffering and do not get caught up with or lost in their suffering. They realize it is a temporary phenomenon rather than permanent. Those with high self-compassion can separate their sense of self from the negative event (DeLury and Poulin, 2018), subjectively distance themselves from negative events (Miyagawa and Taniguchi, 2020), and ruminate less on the negative event (Blackie and Kocovski, 2019), thereby reducing the resource loss associated with attentional suffering due to abusive supervision. Therefore, it is proposed that a written meditation intervention helps to reduce the negative effects of abusive supervision on state self-compassion. It is also expected that the indirect effects of abusive supervision on employee emotional reactions through state self-compassion are buffered by the intervention.

**Hypothesis 3:** A meditation intervention weakens the indirect effect of abusive supervision on (a) state anxiety and (b) state hope through state self-compassion.

Two studies are conducted in different research settings (laboratory and field) to test the hypotheses. In Study 1, a link between abusive supervision, state self-compassion, and state
anxiety/hope is established in an experimental setting where a consistent level of abusive supervision can be applied across subjects. In addition, the efficacy of a written meditation in mitigating the negative effects of abusive supervision on state self-compassion is tested. In Study 2, an attempt is made to replicate the findings in a sample of employees who experienced an abusive supervisor within the past six months.

**STUDY 1**

**Participants and Procedures**

Participants for Study 1 were junior and senior undergraduate students enrolled at a large midwestern United States university. For those who agreed to participate (for extra credit), they were told the study was interested in interactions between supervisors and subordinates and were randomly assigned to one of the conditions in a 2 (abuse/no abuse) x 2 (written meditation/no meditation) scenario study. These scenarios have been shown to influence perceptions of abusive supervision (e.g., Burton and Hoobler, 2006). Participants were told to take the viewpoint of the employee discussed in the scenario – a student employee at a local university coffee shop who made a recommendation for process improvements to their supervisor. Participants in the abusive supervision condition read a transcript of the supervisor’s response to their suggestion, where they were severely and publicly criticized and threatened. The participants also read that this was not the first time the supervisor had acted that way toward them. In the no abuse situation, the employee made the recommendation for process improvement. The supervisor thanks them and then implements their suggestion.

After reading the scenario, participants answered questions regarding the supervisor, and then half of the participants were randomly assigned a written meditation that has been shown to influence state self-compassion. The Self-Compassion Mindstate Meditation (Neff et al., 2021)
has participants reflect on an experience in their life that is painful or difficult at the present time. Participants then complete a brief written exercise that influences them to reflect on this suffering or difficulty with feelings of mindfulness (document thoughts and emotions regarding the experience with acceptance and non-judgment), common humanity (realize that all people face challenges), and self-kindness (express words of support, encouragement, and kindness to yourself). The other half of the participants simply answered the remaining questions on the survey without completing the written self-compassion meditation.

Not all participants who began the study ($N = 293$) finished all the procedures. Individuals who attempted the study more than once were removed because they may have been assigned to a different condition each time they began the study which could bias the experimental manipulation. To address concerns over careless responders, anyone who answered either of the two quality control items incorrectly or did not follow the instructions for the written meditation were removed (Huang et al., 2015). The final sample consisted of 178 individuals, of which 55.6% identified as male. The participants averaged 22.1 ($SD = 3.6$) years of age and 5.1 ($SD = 4.2$) years of work experience.

**Measures**

*Abusive Supervision.* Participants were asked to rate the supervisor they experienced in the scenario using six items (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) from Tepper (2000). The six items from the original scale were selected because they were relevant to the specific scenario in this study (e.g., “my supervisor expresses anger at me”). The six items were averaged to form a composite of abusive supervision ($M = 4.0$; $SD = 2.5$; $alpha = 0.98$).

*State Self-Compassion.* Neff et al.’s (2021) measure of state self-compassion was used to measure the participant’s current state of self-compassion. Participants were told to think about
the situation they read in the scenario, assume they were the employee discussed in the text, and 
then indicate how they were feeling toward themselves right now as they thought about the 
situation (e.g., “I’m giving myself the caring and tenderness I need”). The six items (1 = not at 
all true for me; 5 = very true for me) were averaged to form a measure of state self-compassion 
(M = 3.3; SD = 0.7; alpha = 0.70).

**State Anxiety.** Participants were asked six items (e.g., “I feel calm,” “I feel upset”) from 
Marteau and Bekker (1992) about how they felt right now, assuming they were the employee 
discussed in the scenario. The six items (1 = not at all; 4 = very much so) were averaged to create 
state anxiety (M = 2.6; SD = 1.0; alpha = 0.93).

**State Hope.** Six items (e.g., “I can think of many ways to reach my current goals”) from 
Snyder *et al.* (1996) were used to measure participants’ current feelings of hope, assuming they 
were the employee discussed in the scenario. The six items (1 = definitely false; 5 = definitely 
true) were averaged to create state hope (M = 3.6; SD = 0.9; alpha = 0.86).

**Results**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are reported in Table 1. Prior to hypothesis 
testing, a CFA using Mplus v7.0 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2012) was conducted to ensure 
survey items loaded on their expected measures. The four-factor model fit the data (CFI = 0.94, 
RMSEA = 0.07) and thus confirmed that composite scores could be used that aggregated items 
based on their respective measures. Participant perceptions of abusive supervision were higher in 
the abuse condition than the no abuse condition, *t*(176) = -28.51, *p* < 0.001. For participants who 
were exposed to the abusive supervisor condition, state self-compassion was higher in the 
intervention condition than in the no meditation condition, *t*(96) = -2.65, *p* < 0.01.
Hayes’ (2017) PROCESS macro (Model 7) was used to test the model. Consistent with expectations, the abusive supervision condition predicted state self-compassion only in the no intervention condition (Table 2). Specifically, a person’s state self-compassion was harmed by being exposed to an abusive supervisor, but the detrimental effect of abuse on state self-compassion was reduced for those who completed a written self-compassion intervention (Figure II). In addition, the mediating effect of state self-compassion on the relationship between abusive supervision and state anxiety (indirect effect = 0.43, CI = [0.27, 0.61]) and state hope (indirect effect = -0.44, CI = [-0.66, -0.27]) was supported only in the no intervention condition. In other words, participants’ state self-compassion and subsequent state anxiety or hope were not impacted by abusive supervision when they participated in a short, written meditation following abuse. Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported.

STUDY 2

The first study found that a written meditation intervention was effective for mitigating the negative effects of abusive supervision on state self-compassion, and the downstream effects on state anxiety and state hope. As expected, the relationship between abusive supervision and state self-compassion disappeared for participants who participated in a written meditation intervention. This suggests the intervention was effective in disrupting the negative influence that abusive supervision had on state self-compassion. However, this study was conducted in a
laboratory setting with students, which could limit the generalizability of the findings. Thus, a second study used a field study of employed adults reporting abusive supervision experiences.

**Participants and Procedures**

Participants were recruited from Amazon’s MTurk platform, which can be a reliable source of data on working adults (Cheung et al., 2017). In addition, using MTurk allowed a wide variety of working adults throughout the United States who had experienced abusive supervision to be sampled. Study 2 collected data over two separate time frames to help relieve concerns regarding common method bias concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2012). At time 1, 800 participants completed measures on their supervisor and demographic data in exchange for $0.50. At the end of the survey, they had the option to provide an email address to participate in a second survey (n = 573 provided an email).

To focus on the effects of abuse on self-compassion, anyone who did not rate their supervisor as abusive (i.e., abusive supervision had to be rated greater than 1) was eliminated. Prior to emailing the second survey at time 2, anyone who would not be able to answer the questions at time 2 was also eliminated. Specifically, anyone who was unemployed or self-employed (i.e., no supervisor to rate), was employed for less than 20 hours a week, or was employed with their supervisor for less than 6 months (the measures in this study asked about abuse over the past 6 months) was removed. In addition, anyone who answered any of the two quality check items incorrectly was removed to ensure data quality and reduce validity threats. These steps resulted in a final eligible time 1 sample of 209 employees.

At time 2 (approximately one week following time 1), half of the participants were randomly assigned to a modified version of the intervention used in Study 1. The only difference was that participants focused on negative experiences with their supervisor instead of a general
painful or difficult life experience. The other half of the participants did not participate in the written meditation and instead moved directly to answering questions regarding their state self-compassion, state anxiety, and state hope. All respondents were paid $3.00 for their participation. Anyone who answered the quality control items incorrectly or whose IP address was flagged as a potentially malicious host (Bernerth et al., 2021) was removed. The final sample consisted of 126 individuals who completed surveys across the two time periods. This sample was approximately 58% male and averaged 41.9 (SD = 10.5) years of age, 20.1 (SD = 9.8) years of work experience, 40.3 (SD = 6.7) hours worked per week, 7.4 (SD = 6.3) years tenure with their organization, and 4.8 (SD = 4.1) years working with their current supervisor. When comparing those who completed both surveys to those who did not, there were no differences in gender, tenure with the organization, or hours worked per week.

Measures

**Time 1.** Tepper’s (2000) measure of abusive supervision was used to measure the degree to which participants experienced abuse over the past six months. The fifteen items (1 = I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me; 5 = He/she uses this behavior very often with me) were averaged to form abusive supervision (M = 1.6; SD = 0.7; alpha = 0.94).

**Time 2.** State self-compassion (M = 3.7; SD = 0.8; alpha = 0.81), state anxiety (M = 1.8; SD = 0.8; alpha = 0.92), and state hope (M = 3.8; SD = 0.8; alpha = 0.88) were measured using the same items in Study 1.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for Study 2 are reported in Table 3. Prior to hypothesis testing, a CFA using Mplus v7.0 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2012) was conducted. Given the sample size, parcels were created by averaging the highest and lowest
items across the parcel (Landis et al., 2000). The four-factor model fit the data (CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.07). Abused employees in the written meditation condition had marginally higher levels of state self-compassion than individuals who experienced abusive supervision but did not participate in the written meditation (t(124) = -1.68, p = 0.09). Yet the written meditation intervention did not significantly affect state self-compassion in response to an abusive supervisor when testing the full model using Hayes’ (2017) PROCESS (Model 7) macro (Table 4). Although a significant effect of the intervention was not found, a supported indirect effect of abusive supervision through state self-compassion predicting state anxiety (indirect effect = 0.24, CI = [0.01, 0.58]) and state hope (indirect effect = -0.23, CI = [-0.57, -0.01]) only in the no intervention condition (consistent with Study 1) was observed. In other words, individuals in the sample who did not participate in a written meditation reported lower levels of state self-compassion following abuse from a supervisor as well as higher state anxiety and lower state hope. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported.

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**DISCUSSION**

Abusive supervision and its devastating impact on important employee resources including self-compassion warrants continued attention by scholars and practitioners alike. Guided by SOS theory (Semmer et al., 2007; Semmer et al., 2019), it was expected that abusive supervision experiences negatively affect employee state self-compassion, in turn heightening anxiety and decreasing hope among employees. Across two studies spanning laboratory and field settings, support for these relationships was found. In addition, a practical remedy based on
positive psychology interventions outside of work settings (Koch, 2020; Siegel and Kocovski, 2020) was proposed; a written meditation intervention to ameliorate the effects of abuse on employee state self-compassion.

In a laboratory setting, a written meditation protected self-compassion following abusive supervision. However, in a field setting, although reports of abusive supervision were negatively related to state self-compassion ($r = -0.21, p < 0.001$) and individuals who completed the written meditation reported higher state self-compassion, the written meditation intervention did not significantly protect state self-compassion in response to an abusive supervisor. This may have been due to a restriction of range in abusive supervision experiences for this sample. More than 44% of the sample rated their supervisor’s abuse as 1.07 to 1.20 on a five-point scale. Therefore, many of the respondents may have had a difficult time relating the written meditation to their current situation with their supervisor. In fact, individuals who rated their supervisor as more abusive who completed the written meditation intervention reported a much stronger impact on state self-compassion. For example, employees who rated their supervisor’s abuse as 1.20 or above and completed the written intervention reported significantly higher state self-compassion than those employees who did not complete the written intervention, $t(68) = -2.38, p < 0.05$.

Another possible explanation for this finding is that for the field setting, the self-compassion written meditation was modified to focus specifically on real experiences with abusive supervisors rather than a difficult experience or time in their life. It was anticipated that it would be helpful to have a more targeted intervention on supervisor behavior, but with limited abusive supervision experiences, this may have blunted potential effects as well. It may be that using a general state self-compassion meditation would be more beneficial to employees to maintain and improve their self-compassion. Nevertheless, the field study did reinforce findings
from the lab study suggesting that lower levels of state self-compassion can help explain the link between abusive supervision and emotional well-being (anxiety and hope). How these findings extend research and theory in several important ways is discussed below.

**Theoretical Implications**

By examining the impact of abusive supervision on state self-compassion across two studies that included controlled and field settings, this research contributes to the understanding of the emotional consequences of abusive supervision (Mackey *et al.*, 2017). The operationalization of SOS theory is extended by exploring self-compassion as a key “positive self” perception that links abusive supervision to negative emotional outcomes beyond the more commonly studied self-esteem threat mechanism. Given that positive self-views are a key psychological need that can be threatened by negative work events related to disrespect (Semmer *et al.*, 2007; Semmer *et al.*, 2019), it is proposed that state self-compassion among workers may be at risk after experiencing abusive supervision. The laboratory study manipulating abusive supervision indeed showed reductions in state self-compassion, which then predicted emotional experiences related to anxiety and hope. Additionally, a field study replicated this effect with real experiences of abusive supervision. Thus, the current study suggests that compassionate views towards the self can link emotional reactions to abusive supervision in the workplace.

In addition, the understanding of state self-compassion as an explanatory mechanism between abusive supervision and emotional reactions was also strengthened by testing the effect of a written meditation intervention focused on boosting self-compassion. This intervention reduced the negative effects of abusive supervision on state self-compassion in a controlled laboratory setting. However, these positive meditation intervention effects were not replicated in a field study among workers who reported abusive supervision. Considering the written
meditation among workers was modified to target specific instances of abusive supervision, future research should use the general intervention reported in the laboratory study.

**Organizational Implications**

Practically, the findings guide future researchers to consider including self-compassion in studying workplace mistreatment stressors. These studies highlight that self-compassion could be an important mechanism to target in response to abusive supervision. However, the results regarding the effectiveness of a written intervention (as a method for restoring self-compassion after abusive supervision) were more equivocal. The brief intervention was more effective in the controlled laboratory setting compared to a field setting. This might indicate that stronger self-compassion interventions are needed to protect against reactions to abusive supervision in applied organizational settings. For example, perhaps spreading writing prompts over multiple days (see Jennings et al., 2023) could be more effective than completing it once in a field setting given continued exposure to abusive supervision experiences.

**Study Limitations and Future Directions**

A key strength of this research is combining data in a field setting using multiple time points with an experimental design in a controlled setting to reduce common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Yet future research designs may help overcome survey limitations of the field study by using a longitudinal design with more time points to bolster the predictive validity of the model and study self-compassion intervention effects using a within-person design that alternates writing prompt days and control days (Jennings et al., 2023) or weeks within the same worker. This design approach may also inform researchers as to the lasting effects of abuse on self-compassion or the lasting effects of self-compassion in combatting abuse. Indeed, consistent with calls to understand the long-term effects of compassion towards others (Dutton et
al., 2014), there is likely much to uncover regarding the long-term effects of compassion towards the self. The preservation of self-compassion is a worthy goal in itself, as this state is linked to a variety of positive well-being outcomes outside of work (Ferrari et al., 2019; Zessin et al., 2015).

Finally, it may be that self-compassion operates most effectively as a coping mechanism for leaders, thereby reducing behaviors that are perceived as abusive by their employees. A recent study found that a self-compassion intervention among leaders was helpful in enhancing perceptions of civility among their followers (Lanaj et al., 2022). Therefore, a similar intervention may have the benefits of reducing abusive supervision experiences among followers in addition to protecting follower self-compassion. Although the present study aims included identifying ways employees could cope with abusive supervision, future research is encouraged to determine the most effective target of the self-compassion intervention in reducing the harmful effects of abusive supervision. Having leaders who are kinder to themselves may not only benefit their own behaviors toward followers but also serve as positive role models for self-compassion.

CONCLUSION

Abusive supervision adversely impacts employees’ ability to be kind and forgiving to themselves (self-compassion), resulting in higher levels of anxiety and reduced hope. A written meditation may bolster self-compassion following abusive supervision, although findings in these studies on the overall usefulness of this approach were mixed, suggesting it works, but may be most useful to those experiencing the highest levels of abusive supervision. Future research is encouraged to explore additional methods to aid employee strategies for coping with abusive supervision given organizational and leadership interventions may not always be effective.
References


Table 1  
Mean, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (Study 1)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(M)</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Abusive Supervision</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>(0.98)(^b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. State Self-Compassion</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>-0.40*</td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. State Anxiety</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.76*</td>
<td>-0.59*</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. State Hope</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>-0.53*</td>
<td>0.55*</td>
<td>-0.69*</td>
<td>(0.86)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Age</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Gender</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) \(n = 178\)  
\(^b\) Numbers in parentheses along diagonal are coefficient alpha  
* \(p < 0.05\)
Table 2
The Moderating Mediating Effect of a Written Self-Compassion Intervention (Study 1)\textsuperscript{a}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State Self-Compassion\textsuperscript{b}</th>
<th>State Anxiety</th>
<th>State Hope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abusive Supervision Condition\textsuperscript{c}</td>
<td>-1.58*</td>
<td>1.12*</td>
<td>-0.54*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Meditation Condition\textsuperscript{d}</td>
<td>-1.04*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction\textsuperscript{e}</td>
<td>0.69*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Self-Compassion</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.48*</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$</td>
<td>0.21*</td>
<td>0.63*</td>
<td>0.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.E. No Intervention\textsuperscript{f}</td>
<td>-0.89 (-1.15, -0.62)</td>
<td>0.43 (0.27, 0.61)</td>
<td>-0.44 (-0.66, -0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.E. Intervention</td>
<td>-0.19 (-0.49, 0.10)</td>
<td>0.09 (-0.06, 0.26)</td>
<td>-0.10 (-0.27, 0.06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a} $n = 178$
\textsuperscript{b} Direct effects are unstandardized coefficient estimates from the final regression equations.
\textsuperscript{c} Abusive Supervision Condition: 1 = no abuse, 2 = abusive supervision.
\textsuperscript{d} Written Meditation Condition: 1 = no written self-compassion intervention, 2 = written self-compassion intervention
\textsuperscript{e} Abusive Supervision x Meditation Interaction. Cell sizes for the interaction were 61 (no meditation/abuse), 40 (no meditation/no abuse), 37 (meditation/abuse), 40 (meditation/no abuse).
\textsuperscript{f} I.E. = Indirect effects. Indirect effects were tested for significance using 95% confidence intervals from 10,000 bootstrap estimates.

* $p < 0.05$
Table 3
Mean, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (Study 2)\textsuperscript{a}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Abusive Supervision (Time 1)</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.94)\textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. State Self-Compassion (Time 2)</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>(0.81)</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. State Anxiety (Time 2)</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>-0.76*</td>
<td>(0.92)</td>
<td>_</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. State Hope (Time 2)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>-0.23*</td>
<td>0.71*</td>
<td>-0.63*</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Age</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Gender</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a} n = 126

\textsuperscript{b} Numbers in parentheses along diagonal are coefficient alpha

\* p < 0.05
Table 4
The Moderating Mediating Effect of a Written Self-Compassion Intervention (Study 2)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State Self-Compassion(^b)</th>
<th>State Anxiety</th>
<th>State Hope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abusive Supervision</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Meditation Condition(^c)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction(^d)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Self-Compassion</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>-0.75*</td>
<td>0.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>0.57*</td>
<td>0.52*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.E. No Intervention(^e)</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>0.24 (0.01, 0.58)</td>
<td>-0.23 (-0.58, -0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.E. Intervention</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>0.13 (-0.03, 0.36)</td>
<td>-0.13 (-0.36, 0.03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) n = 126

\(^b\) Direct effects are unstandardized coefficient estimates from the final regression equations.

\(^c\) Written Meditation Condition: 1 = no written self-compassion intervention, 2 = written self-compassion intervention

\(^d\) Interaction: Abusive Supervision x Condition

\(^e\) I.E. = Indirect effects. Indirect effects were tested for significance using 95% confidence intervals from 10,000 bootstrap estimates.

* p < 0.05
Figure I
Model

Abusive Supervision → State Self-Compassion → [□ State Hope □ State Anxiety]

Written Meditation
Figure II
Relationship between Abusive Supervision and Self-Compassion (Study 1)

[Graph showing the relationship between Abusive Supervision and Self-Compassion across different conditions of meditation.]