

# Self-compassion and mental health of Autistic adults



## Research team

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## Working in partnership

This study reflected a co-produced model where Autistic and non-Autistic researchers collaborated across the life of the project, from design to write-up.

## About this report

This report summarises ARCAP's two self-compassion research studies:

- Study one - *Self-compassion experiences of Autistic and non-Autistic adults and its relationship with mental health and psychological wellbeing*
- Study two - *Acceptability and feasibility of the Aspect Self-compassion Program for Autistic Adults*

## Background

Self-compassion is a healthy way of relating to ourselves. Self-compassion involves being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or being too self-critical.

Research consistently shows that building self-compassion can help non-Autistic adults become more resilient. Self-compassion is a skill that can be learned and has various mental health benefits, like increased happiness and wellbeing, and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Many Autistic adults struggle with their mental health. ARCAP's research in the area of self-compassion was sparked by the initial hypothesis that self-compassion may play a significant role in the mental health of Autistic individuals. At the time, no empirical study had been conducted to explore self-compassion of Autistic people. We wrote a [commentary paper](#) which suggested that self-compassion may improve the mental health of Autistic adults.

To address the research gap, we conducted a study that used a global online survey to investigate the associations between self-compassion, emotion regulation and mental health among Autistic adults. As predicted, the results of this study indicated there was a relationship between self-compassion and mental wellbeing among Autistic adults.

This finding led to a second study in which we explored the potential benefits of an online self-compassion program for improving self-compassion levels and enhancing mental health outcomes, including emotion regulation, in Autistic adults.

# Study one

## Self-compassion experiences of Autistic and non-Autistic adults and its relationship with mental health and psychological wellbeing



### What did we want to know?

We wanted to understand whether Autistic adults' capacity to be self-compassionate and ability to regulate emotions impacted their mental health and psychological wellbeing.

This study used a 15-minute online survey to explore the experiences of self-compassion among Autistic adults and determine the relationships of self-compassion levels with emotion regulation and mental health.

In addition, 11 Autistic adults who completed the online survey also participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences around self-compassion.

Survey respondents:

**153**

**Autistic adults**

- ★ 63% females
- ★ 27% males
- ★ 9% non-binary
- ★ 1% other

**93**

**non-Autistic adults**

- ★ 82% females
- ★ 18% males

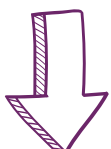
**Self-compassion** is when we:

- ★ are friendly toward ourselves
- ★ are aware of our feelings and thoughts
- ★ realise that everyone feels pain and makes mistakes

### Survey findings

**How do self-compassion and mental health of Autistic and non-Autistic adults compare?**

*Autistic adults as a group scored:*



- lower than non-Autistic adults on self-compassion and positive wellbeing



- higher than non-Autistic adults on anxiety and depression



People with higher levels of self-compassion:

- ★ were younger in age
- ★ had lower autism traits
- ★ had lower symptoms of anxiety and depression
- ★ had higher levels of wellbeing



### What is associated with self-compassion levels among Autistic adults?

An association was found between self-compassion and mental health of Autistic adults. When we looked at the inter-relationship between self-compassion, emotion regulation, and anxiety/depression symptoms, we found that in Autistic adults:

- ★ those with higher self-compassion levels had less difficulties in emotion regulation
- ★ higher levels of self-compassion related to lower anxiety and depression symptoms through better emotion regulation.



### Interview findings

From the interviews we learnt that Autistic adults:

Saw the value of being self-compassionate

“Being kinder to myself helps me move through things better.”

Found it hard to be self-compassionate and easy to be self-critical

“I tend to be very hard on myself when I make mistakes or fail at something. I tend to beat myself up a bit.”

Talked about how the ability to be self-compassionate developed over time

“It’s getting easier because I’m working on it, but it’s certainly not really a natural thing.”

### Implications of the study

This is the first research study to explore whether or not Autistic adults’ capacity to be self-compassionate and ability to regulate emotions impact their mental health and psychological wellbeing.

Since self-compassion levels can be improved through practise, developing self-compassion skills may improve the mental health of Autistic people.

Two research papers have been published about this study: [“Self-compassion changed my life”: The self-compassion experiences of autistic and non-autistic adults and its relationship with mental health and psychological wellbeing](#) and [The Inter-Relationship of Emotion Regulation, Self-Compassion, and Mental Health in Autistic Adults](#).

The next step of this self-compassion research was to investigate if it is possible to improve Autistic people’s mental health through self-compassion-based supports, described in Study two.

# Study two

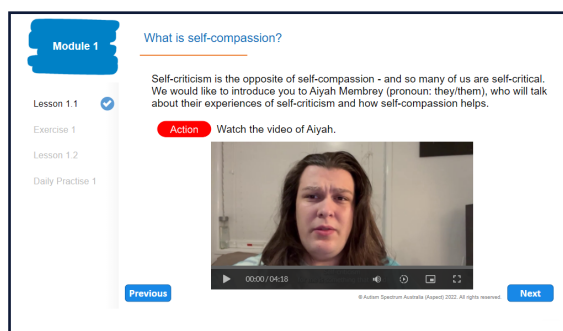
## Acceptability and feasibility of the Aspect Self-compassion Program for Autistic Adults



### What did we want to know?

We wanted to find out whether a self-guided online training program can build the self-compassion skills of Autistic adults.

The Aspect Self-compassion Program for Autistic Adults (ASPAA) is a five-week self-guided online training program designed by Autistic and non-Autistic researchers from the Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice. An Autistic advisory group provided feedback on all program modules.



ASPAA is based on concepts from the [Mindful Self-Compassion program](#) (Neff & Germer, 2018).

ASPAA modules:

1. Understanding self-compassion
2. Benefits of self-compassion
3. Mindfulness
4. Finding your compassionate voice
5. Accepting our experiences

In this study, Autistic adults were introduced to self-compassion concepts and skills using the ASPAA.

This study investigated whether the program could build participants' self-compassion skills.

### 39 Autistic adults

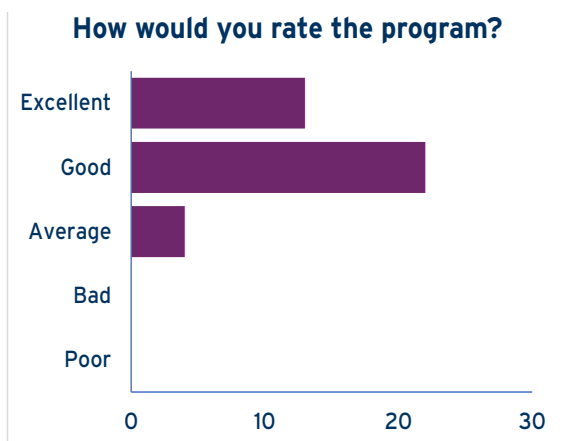
- ★ 28 females
  - ★ 5 males
  - ★ 5 non-binary
  - ★ 1 agender
- Self-reported mental health diagnoses:
- ★ Anxiety = 28 (72%)
  - ★ Depression = 26 (67%)

### What did we find?

We found that after completing the program, participants' overall self-compassion levels increased.



## What did participants think about the program?



During weekly catch-ups with researchers, the participants provided feedback on the program and their experiences when practising self-compassion skills. Based on this feedback we identified four themes.

### Theme 1

Learning about self-compassion has benefits



### Theme 2

Practising self-compassion can be difficult and emotional



### Theme 3

Self-compassion is a journey that improves over time and with practice



### Theme 4

Adaptations for Autistic people are highly valued

"I now feel more comfortable with completing this practice as I can acknowledge that it is essential for my daily ability to cope with stressors, and is beneficial in managing sensory overload."

## Implications of the study

This is the first research study to explore whether Autistic adults can learn self-compassion skills through a self-guided online self-compassion training program.

Improving Autistic adults' knowledge and understanding of self-compassion and helping them practise self-compassion skills can improve not only their self-compassion levels but also their emotion regulation and mental health.

Feedback from the Autistic participants will be used to make further refinements to the program. The program will then be made freely available for use by clinicians and therapists to support their Autistic clients.

In the second half of 2023 we will run a professional workshop for clinicians and therapists on how to use ASPAA with their Autistic clients.

Two research papers about Study two are currently being prepared. Contact [Dr Ru Ying Cai](#) to obtain a copy once they are published or to find out more about this study.



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strengths, interests & aspirations  
of people on the autism spectrum

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