

## Original Article

# The effectiveness of compassionate mind training on the academic well-being of students with separation anxiety

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### Abstract

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) on the academic well-being of students with separation anxiety in boarding education centers. A quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test design with a control group was employed. The population consisted of 95 students with separation anxiety in boarding schools under the Ministry of Education in Mehraban City, East Azerbaijan Province, during the 2023–2024 academic year. A total of 30 individuals were selected using purposive sampling and were assigned into two groups of 15 (experimental and control). At the outset, both groups completed the Academic Well-being Scale by Tuominen-Soini et al. The experimental group received eight sessions of CMT, each lasting 90 minutes, while the control group received no intervention. After the intervention, a post-test was administered to both groups. Data was analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The results showed a significant improvement in academic well-being scores among the experimental group compared to the control group in the post-test ( $p < 0.05$ ). These findings indicate that CMT enhances students' emotional regulation and self-compassion, contributing to improved academic well-being. Students with higher academic well-being experience more positive emotions, while those with lower well-being are more prone to anxiety, depression, and negative perceptions of academic experiences. CMT helps develop emotional resilience by encouraging adaptive behavior and acceptance of distress. Based on these results, it is recommended that CMT be integrated into school curricula to support students' academic and emotional adjustment.

### Keywords

Academic well-being  
Compassionate mind  
Separation anxiety

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### Introduction

Anxiety disorders, which impact 10 to 30% of children and adolescents, are the most common mental disorders among youth (Vossoughi et al., 2024). Students in boarding schools face numerous stressors, including the anxiety they experience, such as separation anxiety (Dastan et al., 2014). A systematic review highlights that separation anxiety often contributes to school refusal, accompanied by negative emotions (sadness, anger), disrupted behavior, sleep problems, and trouble focusing in classroom settings (Ulaş & Seçer, 2024). Some researchers believe that attending boarding schools can significantly reduce the interaction between parents and children, potentially hindering the development of certain cognitive and social skills in students compared to their peers in regular schools (Reynolds et al., 2013). argue that academic well-being is one of the key indicators in

the educational process. " David et al. (2022) define academic well-being as "a positive emotional state resulting from the harmony between individual needs and the expectations of the academic environment." Tuominen-Soini et al. (2012) believe that the construct of academic well-being includes four dimensions: school value, academic burnout, satisfaction, and academic engagement, with the first component being school value. Wigfield & Eccles (1992) define school value as the perceived meaning of attending school in general. This perception encompasses the student's views on the attractiveness, importance, utility of educational outcomes, and the act of attending school itself. According to Expectancy-Value Theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992), motivation depends on two main factors: expectations of success and task value. Expectations involve beliefs about one's ability to succeed, while task value includes four components attainment, intrinsic

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interest, utility, and cost which influence academic behavior such as effort and persistence.

Academic burnout, defined as exhaustion, detachment from school, and feelings of inadequacy, results from prolonged academic stress (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). Exhaustion and cynicism are primary predictors of academic inefficacy (Parker & Salmela-Aro, 2011). The Demand-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) explains burnout as the result of sustained imbalance between academic demands and available personal resources, especially when students perceive themselves as unable to meet rising expectations. Academic satisfaction refers to a personal sense of satisfaction with the choice of educational path and option to achieve personal goals (Tuominen-Soini et al. 2012). Finally, the fourth dimension involves participation and interaction with the school. This dimension refers to the extent of a student's involvement in school activities and their interaction with the educational staff, known as "academic engagement."

Based on a review of the literature, studies such as Borjali et al. (2014) examined the effect of encouragement training based on the Adlerian approach on improving the emotional and social well-being of boarding school students with separation anxiety. Similarly, Khodapanah & Reza (2024) conducted a study predicting differential academic well-being based on self-compassion, happiness, and academic self-efficacy. Additionally, Nemati et al. (2021) compared self-compassion and academic well-being in students with specific learning disabilities and typical students. These studies reveal that a wide range of educational and therapeutic interventions targeting academic well-being in boarding school students with separation anxiety have not been extensively explored; only rarely have studies focused on the academic well-being of these students. Gaining attention in recent years is Compassionate Mind Training (Salimi et al., 2018), which is rooted in cognitive-behavioral therapy (Ahmadi et al., 2021), this therapeutic method teaches individuals how to cope with and reduce the intensity of negative emotions rather than suppressing them. It is designed to alleviate emotional pain such as anxiety, worry, and suffering (Leaviss & Uttley, 2015). Compassionate Mind consists of three core elements:

- 1) Self-kindness without judgment or self-criticism,
- 2) Recognition of common humanity, understanding that human experiences are shared,
- 3) A balanced perspective toward personal experiences, avoiding their exaggeration. These three elements, together, create an empathetic approach toward oneself and others (Neff, 2019).

In this therapeutic approach, instead of focusing on changing external conditions, the emphasis is on transforming internal attitudes and fostering a compassionate relationship with oneself (Gilbert, 2014). Additionally, in compassion-focused therapy, rather than suppressing or avoiding painful emotions, individuals learn to accept them as part of the human experience. By cultivating awareness and self-compassion, individuals can respond to their emotions with kindness and empathy

instead of judgment and self-criticism (Andersen & Rasmussen, 2017). From this perspective, compassion-focused therapy offers significant advantages over other psychotherapeutic methods (Akbari Klor et al., 2019). Studies have shown that Students with high academic well-being experience positive emotions, while those with low academic well-being perceive their academic events and experiences as unfavorable and are more likely to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and anger (Meneghel et al., 2019).

The role of emotions and the teaching of compassion in interpersonal relationships is inevitable, as students who receive compassionate mind training are more likely to use constructive methods to resolve conflicts. These students, with their high levels of emotional intelligence and awareness of the impact of different conflict management styles on relationships, can improve and benefit from their interpersonal relationships (Neff, 2019). On the other hand, students with low academic well-being experience negative emotions and academic burnout, which manifests in significant objective consequences (such as lost opportunities, income, and time) and emotional consequences (such as disinterest, increased stress, and anxiety, fear, anger, and reduced motivation) (Rosenzweig et al., 2019).

Therefore, educational authorities must prioritize improving educational environments and strengthening social relationships, taking into account the importance of students' academic well-being (Hashemi et al., 2023). Therefore, paying attention to students' academic well-being through compassionate mind training is of great importance and necessity, as this training helps control the level of burnout among students in school and increases their engagement in school tasks, satisfaction with school, and the value they place on school (Veiskarami et al., 2019).

The present study was conducted to clarify the aforementioned relationships and expand the existing evidence and knowledge in this field. Given that most research in this area has been conducted in Western societies and limited studies have been carried out in Iran on this topic, this research seeks to provide new insights. Additionally, the results of this study can also be useful in clinical applications. These findings offer specific objectives and noteworthy points for parents, educators, and counselors, contributing to the generalizability of previous research results. Considering the review of the literature, the gap in the current research lies in the fact that no study has been conducted in this specific area. Consequently, the present study seeks to answer the question: Is compassionate mind training effective on the academic well-being of students with separation anxiety in boarding schools under the Ministry of Education?

## Method

### Participants

The present study is applied in terms of its objective and employs a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a control group. It consists of one independent variable (compassionate mind training) and one dependent

variable (academic well-being). The population of this study includes all male Azerbaijani boarding school students at the middle school level in the Mehraban region during the academic year of 2023-2024. According to the Mehraban Regional Department of Education in East Azerbaijan Province, the total number of these students is 95. In this study, students who achieved higher scores compared to others on the test were considered anxious.

In this study, the Separation Anxiety Disorder Diagnostic Questionnaire (ASD-27) was first distributed and completed among all male Azerbaijani boarding school students. Students who scored above 60 were identified as having separation anxiety disorder. The sampling method for this study was purposive and voluntary, and 30 students with separation anxiety were selected. From these 30 students, 15 were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 15 to the control group (considering that the minimum sample size for each group in experimental research is 15).

## Instrument

### *Separation Anxiety Diagnostic Questionnaire (ASA-27):*

The Separation Anxiety Questionnaire was developed in 2003 by Manicavasagar V, Silove D, Wagner R, and Drobny J.A to assess symptoms of separation anxiety. This tool consists of 27 questions, and its main components include: separation anxiety, worry about relationships, excessive talking, and sleep disturbances. Each item in the questionnaire is scored on a four-point Likert scale (never=0, always=3). In this questionnaire, a score of 0 means the item has never occurred, and a score of 3 means the item has always occurred. The minimum score for this questionnaire is 0, and the maximum score is 81. Principal component analysis indicates a homogeneous structure of separation anxiety with high internal consistency. The reliability of this questionnaire, measured using Cronbach's alpha, was found to be 0.95, indicating acceptable reliability (Manicavasagar et al., 2003). In this questionnaire, students who scored above 60 (the 75th percentile cutoff point) were identified as having separation anxiety disorder.

### *Academic Well-Being Questionnaire:*

Tuominen-Soini et al. (2012) developed a questionnaire to measure academic well-being. This self-report questionnaire consists of 31 items that assess the respondent's level of agreement or disagreement with their beliefs using a Likert scale. The tool comprises four dimensions:

1. Academic Value (9 items) with responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5),
2. Academic Burnout (9 items) with responses on a five-point Likert scale,
3. Academic Satisfaction (4 items),
4. Academic Engagement (9 items) with the same response scale.

Tuominen-Soini et al. (2012) evaluated the validity of this questionnaire as satisfactory and reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the four dimensions as follows: academic value (0.64), academic burnout (0.77), academic satisfaction (0.91), and academic engagement (0.94). Additionally, in a study by Moradi et al. (2017), the face and content validity of this tool were confirmed by university professors. The reliability of the scale was examined using Cronbach's alpha, and coefficients above 0.71 were reported for all dimensions.

### *Procedure*

Inclusion criteria for participation included: (1) obtaining a score significantly higher than the average on the ASD-27, indicating elevated levels of separation anxiety; (2) male gender; (3) enrollment in a boarding school in Mehraban; (4) voluntary participation and willingness to cooperate throughout the study; (5) informed consent from a parent. The research exclusion criteria include: withdrawal from the study, unpreparedness and full consent to participate in Intervention sessions and absenteeism was more than 2 sessions.

Data analysis was conducted at both descriptive and inferential levels using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) in SPSS-21 software.

**Table 1.** Self-Compassionate Training Therapy Protocol

Session	Session Description
Session1	The session began with introductions, building rapport and therapeutic alliance, explaining group rules, setting goals, and formulating the clients' problems. Members shared experiences through storytelling and empathy training. Explanations were provided about self-compassion, its elements, shyness, and self-handicapping. Homework: Practice calming breathing exercises.
Session2	examining how members treat themselves (critically or compassionately), defining self-criticism, its causes and consequences, and defining self-compassion. Homework: Assess the level of self-compassion.
Session3	defining "self-compassion," introducing the three emotional regulation systems and how to interact with them. Homework: Identify self-critical thoughts and behaviors.
Session4	introducing mental imagery, practicing imagery (color, place, and compassionate characteristics). Homework: Practice mental imagery.
Session5	cultivating self-compassion, introducing concepts of wisdom, strength, warmth, and responsibility, and teaching mental imagery for self-compassion. Homework: Practice mental imagery for self-compassion.
Session6	teaching compassionate letter writing. Homework: Imagine your compassionate inner self writing you a letter, visualize the conversation, and write it down.

Session7	identifying fears and thoughts that hinder the development of self-compassion, focusing on these barriers. Homework: Practice compassion toward barriers to developing self-compassion.
Session8	Summarizing the concepts discussed in the sessions, asking members to explain their achievements from the group. Homework: Continue practicing imagery exercises.

### Results

The table below shows the demographic characteristics of the studied experimental and control groups. The mean age of the determined sample is 13.87, with a standard deviation of 0.72. The sample consists of 10 students

from the 7th grade, 14 students from the 8th grade, and 6 students from the 9th grade. Therefore, our statistical sample comprises 33.33% from the 7th grade, 46.67% from the 8th grade, and 20% from the 9th grade.

**Table 2.** Mean age, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage of each grade level in the experimental and control groups

Grade Level	Age (Years)	Frequency	Percentage	Mean Age	Age Standard Deviation
7th Grade	13	10 students	33.33%	13.87 years	0.72 years
8th Grade	14	14 students	46.67%		
9th Grade	15	6 students	20.00%		

The table below would display the mean and standard deviation values for the research variables, such as academic well-being, self-compassion, and other relevant

measures, in both the pre-test and post-test phases for the experimental and control groups.

**Table 2.** Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Variables in Pre-test and Post-test Phases for Experimental (Compassionate Mind Training) and Control Groups

Variable	Step	Experimental group							Control group					
		Mean	SD	Min	Max	ks	uk	Mean	SD	Min	Max	ks	uk	
School values	Pre test	23/93	2/73	18	28	-0.12	-0.42	22/40	4/61	11	28	0.27	-0.13	
	Post test	26/33	3/82	20	35	0.52	0.56	23/20	4/63	12	28	0.88	-1	
Academic burnout	Pre test	29/80	4/94	21	39	0.28	0.39	29/13	6/67	17	42	-0.35	0.14	
	Post test	26/86	5/05	18	38	0.49	0.28	29/13	6/67	17	42	-0.35	0.14	
Academic satisfaction	Pre test	12/53	4/95	5	20	-0.39	-0.17	12/73	3/01	8	18	-0.53	0.33	
	Post test	15/26	4/90	7	20	-0.44	-0.57	13	2/80	9	18	-0.62	0.49	
Academic engagement	Pre test	29/73	7/34	17	43	-0.26	-0.01	30/80	4/57	23	40	-0.12	0.14	
	Post-test	33/20	6/50	22	45	-0.64	0.23	30/86	4/34	23	38	-0.65	-0.28	

The results of Table 3 indicate a significant change in the mean scores of the experimental group in the post-test phase compared to the pre-test phase, demonstrating the effectiveness of the intervention (compassionate mind training) in this group.

The standard deviations in this group show that the dispersion of scores remained relatively consistent between the pre-test and post-test. The decrease in scores for the variable academic burnout and the increase in scores for the variables school value, academic satisfaction, and academic engagement indicate an improvement in academic well-being in this group. To examine the effectiveness of compassionate mind training on the academic well-being of students with separation anxiety, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used, given that the components of academic well-being (school value, academic burnout, academic satisfaction, and academic engagement) are theoretically and empirically interrelated. Before conducting the MANCOVA, the assumptions of this method were examined. These assumptions included:

1. Normality of data distribution,
2. Homogeneity of error variances,
3. Homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices of the dependent variables across groups,
4. Homogeneity of interaction effects between the pre-test and the independent variable,

#### 5. Homogeneity of regression slopes.

The skewness and kurtosis values of the research variables' components, with absolute values less than 1, indicate a symmetric distribution of the data. The results of Levene's test for homogeneity of variances for the components of school value (0.76), academic burnout (0.38), academic satisfaction (2.08), and academic engagement (0.16) were not significant at the level of  $p > 0.05$ . Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variances for the academic well-being variable was met.

The results of M-Box's test, with the F statistic for the components of academic well-being ( $F = 1.61$ ,  $M\text{-Box} = 19.11$ ), showed that the covariance matrices of the dependent variables were equal across the studied groups. The results of the test for homogeneity of interaction effects between the pre-test and the independent variable indicated that the F values for the components of academic well-being (school value (1.27), academic burnout (0.96), academic satisfaction (0.27), and academic engagement (0.07) were not significant at the level of ( $p > 0.05$ ). The assumption of homogeneity of interaction effects between the experimental and control groups for academic well-being was satisfied. Additionally, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was satisfied, as the slopes were increasing and the regression lines were parallel.

**Table 4.** Results of multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) for variable academic well-being in the experimental and control groups

Test	Variables	Value	F	DF between	DF within	Sig
Wilks Lambda	academic well-being	0.11	39.51	4	21	0.001

The results of Table 4 indicate that the obtained F-ratio for the variable academic well-being ( $F = 39.51$ ) is significant at the level of  $p < 0.05$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of academic well-being. In other words, there is a significant difference between the control and experimental groups in at least one of the subscales of academic well-being.

This finding suggests that the compassionate mind training intervention had a statistically significant effect on improving academic well-being in the experimental group compared to the control group. Further analysis of the subscales (school value, academic burnout, academic satisfaction, and academic engagement) would provide more detailed insights into which specific aspects of academic well-being were most impacted by the intervention.

**Table 5.** Multivariate Analysis of Covariance table for individual components Academic well-being in experimental and control groups

Source	Variables	Ss	Df	Ms	F	Sig	Eta
Group	School values	16.82	1	16.82	7.94	0.009	0.24
	Academic burnout	68.96	1	68.96	28.16	0.001	0.55
	Academic satisfaction	38.12	1	38.12	28.22	0.001	0.54
	Academic engagement	65.81	1	65.81	12.13	0.002	0.33
Error	School values	50.80	24	2.11			
	Academic burnout	58.77	24	2.44			
	Academic satisfaction	32.42	24	1.35			
	Academic engagement	130.12	24	5.42			
Total	School values	18981	30				
	Academic burnout	24540	30				
	Academic satisfaction	6478	30				
	Academic engagement	31681	30				

Based on the findings in Table 5, it is observed that after controlling for the pre-test effects, the F-values obtained for the experimental group in the components of school value ( $F = 16.82$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ), academic burnout ( $F = 68.96$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), academic satisfaction ( $F = 38.12$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), and academic engagement ( $F = 65.81$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) are significant. This indicates that the compassionate mind training intervention led to significant changes in the academic well-being of students with separation anxiety. Furthermore, based on the eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ) values obtained, it can be concluded that:

- 24% of the variance in school value is attributed to the compassionate mind training intervention,
- 55% of the variance in academic burnout is attributed to the intervention,
- 54% of the variance in academic satisfaction is attributed to the intervention,
- 33% of the variance in academic engagement is attributed to the intervention.

## Discussion

This study examined the impact of compassionate mind training (CMT) on the academic well-being of Male middle school students with separation anxiety at a boys' boarding school in Mehraban, East Azerbaijan.

The results indicated that compassionate mind training had a significant impact on improving the academic well-being of students exhibiting symptoms of separation anxiety, which is consistent with findings from previous studies such as those by Babadi et al. (2024), Haydari & Barzegar Bafrooei (2020), and Nazeri et al. (2019).

Compassionate mind training (CMT) benefits boarding school students with separation anxiety by activating the soothing system, tied to parasympathetic nervous system

activity, which promotes safety and calm, while reducing the threat system's anxiety responses, linked to sympathetic arousal (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). This intervention promotes psychological flexibility, enabling students to adapt their thoughts and behaviors to situational demands, and enhances resilience, the ability to recover from adversity. Psychological flexibility is bolstered through the development of self-compassion, which encourages students to approach anxiety with kindness rather than judgment, thereby reducing distress and fostering emotional adaptability (Mikaeili et al., 2023). Resilience is further strengthened as the soothing system equips students to manage separation-related stress, mitigating fear-based responses. Together, these enhance students' ability to manage emotional challenges. Flexibility and resilience also boost self-compassion. Flexibility enables a nonjudgmental stance toward emotions, viewing them as shared human experiences, while resilience builds confidence in coping, reducing self-criticism. Thus, CMT fosters a dynamic interplay: it enhances flexibility and resilience, which reinforce self-compassion, underscoring its efficacy as an intervention for separation anxiety (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). These students are better equipped to cope with distressing events because they possess a higher capacity for acceptance compared to their peers.

Compassionate mind training (CMT) may offer significant academic benefits for boarding school students experiencing separation anxiety, particularly by fostering intrinsic motivation and resilience in academic settings (Salmani et al., 2024). Preliminary findings suggest that CMT enhances students' engagement with learning, encouraging them to pursue knowledge expansion with greater enthusiasm (Neff & Germer, 2013). Theoretically,

students with elevated self-compassion are less likely to experience discouragement following academic setbacks. Instead, such challenges may act as a catalyst for increased effort and mastery-oriented behaviors, as self-compassion mitigates self-blame and reduces sensitivity to external judgments (Neff, 2003). This hypothesis aligns with prior research indicating that self-compassionate individuals exhibit adaptive responses to failure, focusing on constructive effort rather than negative self-evaluation (Neff & Germer, 2013).

Furthermore, students trained in CMT may demonstrate heightened academic motivation and a positive attitude toward their educational environment. This is particularly evident in their ability to maintain self-regulation and persistence when faced with academic challenges. For instance, qualitative observations suggest that students with a strong sense of self-compassion are more likely to exert additional effort to overcome obstacles, maintaining a constructive outlook despite adversity (Gilbert, 2009). While these findings are consistent with theoretical models of self-compassion, further empirical research is needed to quantify the impact of CMT on academic outcomes in boarding school contexts, particularly through longitudinal studies or controlled trials to establish causal relationships (Neff & Germer, 2013).

Compassionate mind training, especially for boarding school students with separation anxiety, helps them develop the ability to adapt and maintain their mental health when faced with negative emotions. This training enables them to achieve high levels of success despite social, cultural, and economic challenges, while experiencing less fatigue related to school and its associated activities. Additionally, during difficult times, they regulate their emotions and, instead of avoiding challenges or difficult situations, confront them and strive to cultivate positive feelings within themselves. This is because, when motivated, they overcome challenges and take steps toward success and self-balancing. In this context, researchers believe that awareness of emotions and the willingness to cope with negative feelings are associated with the use of emotion-focused strategies (Mikaeili et al., 2025). When students utilize the positive components of self-compassion in situations of failure and disappointment, processes such as denial, regression, and avoidance of emotions do not arise (Neff, 2011).

Compassionate mind training in these students reveals limitations and identifies unhealthy behaviors, preparing individuals for transformation and encouraging change to enhance well-being. Therefore, high levels of self-compassion are associated with psychological well-being and academic well-being, protecting students from stress and anxiety (Neff & Beretvas, 2013).

## Conclusion

Among the most significant limitations of this study is the lack of control over certain influential variables on the research variables, such as personality traits, resilience, and developmental experiences of individuals. It is suggested that future research control for the effects of these intervening variables and examine them as mediators. Given the limitations in generalizing the results

due to the small sample size and its restriction to male middle school students, it is recommended that similar research be conducted in other educational levels and female boarding schools, with the results compared to those of this study. Based on the study's findings on compassionate mind training (CMT) for male middle school students with separation anxiety in a boarding school, three evidence-based suggestions are proposed. First, integrating CMT into monthly parent-teacher meetings can enhance students' academic well-being by fostering psychological flexibility and resilience, as CMT activates the soothing system and reduces anxiety-driven responses (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff & Germer, 2013). Second, psychologists should use CMT in adolescent and family counseling to promote emotional regulation and intrinsic motivation, helping students confront challenges without maladaptive behaviors (Neff, 2003; Neff, 2011). Third, schools should develop CMT-based programs to support emotional and academic resilience across student populations. However, the study's small sample size, focus on male students, and lack of control over variables like personality traits limit generalizability. Future research should include diverse populations, control for intervening variables, and conduct longitudinal studies to validate CMT's efficacy in varied educational and counseling contexts.

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The authors have stated no conflicts of interest.

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