

Enhancing Psychological Well-Being Through Experiential Learning in Self-Compassion and Learned Optimism Among Malaysian Adults

Venisry a/p Periasamy Gnana Sambathar, Ameerah Abdul Azmil and Lihanna Borhan¹

International Islamic University, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

While mental health awareness has grown in recent years, many adults still lack the practical understanding needed to apply positive psychology principles, often undermining their emotional resilience through perfectionism, pessimism, and self-criticism. This study explores the awareness, understanding, and application of two key constructs: self-compassion and learned optimism, among Malaysian adults following a culturally sensitive intervention. The study involved 20 women aged 18 to 40 who participated in a two-part intervention: an in-person experiential workshop designed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and lived emotional experience. Using a pre-post design with a follow-up phase, researchers collected data through questionnaires and reflective responses to assess both practical and psychological shifts. Quantitative findings revealed significant improvements in participants' knowledge scores, alongside modest shifts in their underlying beliefs and attitudes. Qualitatively, participants reported successfully integrating practical coping tools, particularly the Self-Compassion Break and the ABCDE model, into their daily routines, leading to improved emotional regulation and heightened awareness of internal self-talk patterns. Furthermore, participants naturally incorporated cultural and spiritual elements, such as Tawakkul (reliance on Allah), reinforcing the importance of tailoring positive psychology interventions to specific cultural contexts. Although participants acknowledged challenges in sustaining these new habits long-term, they showed increased openness and a strong intention to continue applying the learned strategies. Ultimately, this study highlights the feasibility and relevance of brief, experiential workshops in fostering psychological well-being, emotional awareness, and self-reflective growth in adult populations.

Keywords: *self-compassion, learned optimism, experiential positive psychology workshop*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concerns about adults' mental health and emotional well-being have grown exponentially. Mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness (e.g., anxiety and depression), but also the presence of psychological thriving (e.g., gratitude, social connectedness, mindfulness). Psychological well-being, satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, gratitude, self-compassion, mindfulness, maladaptive coping, optimism, self-esteem, and social connectedness were all indicators of psychological thriving (Seppälä et al., 2020).

¹The corresponding author can be contacted at the Department of Psychology, AbdulHamidAbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University, Malaysia (lihanna@iiu.edu.my)

Although awareness of mental health and emotional well-being has grown in recent years, many adults still have limited practical understanding of how to apply positive psychology principles in their daily lives. In particular, tendencies towards self-criticism, perfectionism, and pessimistic thinking often undermine emotional resilience and psychological growth. This study is important because it introduces positive psychology concepts through experiential learning, a culturally relevant and accessible approach for adult learners that bridges the gap between theoretical understanding and everyday emotional skills.

Positive psychology offers several evidence-based constructs that support personal growth and psychological well-being. Two of the most promising are self-compassion and learned optimism. Self-compassion, according to Neff (2003), involves treating oneself with kindness in times of difficulty, recognising that suffering is part of the shared human experience, and approaching painful emotions with balanced awareness. Past research has shown that self-compassion strengthens emotion-regulation skills (Inwood & Ferrari, 2018), increases subjective distance from negative emotions (Miyagawa & Taniguchi, 2020), reduces automatic and negative thinking (Yip & Tong, 2021), and reduces avoidance of negative emotions (Yela et al., 2022). It has also been associated with increased happiness, positive affect, and life satisfaction (Zessin et al., 2015).

Self-compassion and learned optimism were selected as focal constructs because they address two complementary dimensions of psychological well-being, namely emotional acceptance and cognitive reframing. Self-compassion helps individuals respond to difficulties with kindness rather than harsh self-judgement, while learned optimism teaches constructive ways to interpret setbacks and sustain hope for positive outcomes (Neff, 2003; Seligman, 2006). Together, they promote adaptive coping, self-awareness, and motivation—qualities that are both teachable and applicable in brief, experiential learning settings (Macfarlane et al., 2017; Inwood & Ferrari, 2018).

There are two main types of optimism: dispositional optimism, a stable personality trait reflecting a general expectation that good things will happen (Scheier & Carver, 1985), and learned optimism, a cognitive style that can be developed over time by reframing negative thoughts and adopting more constructive explanatory patterns (Seligman, 2006). Optimism, particularly in its learned form as proposed by Seligman (1991), is the belief that one can overcome challenges and that setbacks are temporary, specific, and external rather than permanent, pervasive, and personal. Research has shown that optimism is strongly linked to better mental and physical health outcomes, greater resilience, and improved coping strategies (Carver et al., 2010). Optimistic individuals are more likely to engage in proactive behaviours, persist through adversity, and experience lower levels of depression and anxiety (Conversano et al., 2010). In addition, optimism has been shown to correlate with greater life satisfaction, higher motivation, and overall psychological well-being (Alarcon et al., 2013). Learned optimism is particularly pertinent to this study, as it focuses on an individual's ability to consciously shift their perspective through structured practice, whereas dispositional optimism is often seen as innate and stable. This makes learned optimism a promising tool for intervention-based learning.

However, both constructs pose distinct challenges in practice. In some collectivist cultures, self-compassion can be misconstrued as self-pity or selfishness, clashing with social norms that prioritise modesty and group harmony (Wang & Lou, 2022; Zhao et al., 2021). Similarly, while optimism is generally adaptive, unrealistic or excessive optimism may lead to risk-taking or disappointment when expectations are not met (Shepherd et al., 2013). Recognising these nuances enables a more culturally sensitive application of positive

psychology, emphasising balance, mindfulness, and realism in developing psychological strengths.

Despite the well-documented benefits of self-compassion and optimism, both remain underutilised by many individuals, often because of a lack of awareness, misconceptions, or difficulty in applying them to daily life. There is a growing need to translate these constructs into accessible, practical tools for everyday use.

A structured workshop format was chosen because experiential learning environments have been shown to enhance conceptual understanding and promote the real-world application of psychological skills (Lai et al., 2016). These workshops provide a safe, reflective space where participants can learn through direct experience, feedback, and guided self-reflection, making them particularly effective for teaching abstract constructs such as self-compassion and optimism.

This study explores adults' awareness and understanding of self-compassion and learned optimism before and after a structured workshop. Through a two-part in-person workshop that combined evidence-based principles with experiential and educational components, we collected quantitative and qualitative data to assess shifts in knowledge and attitudes. The findings contribute to our understanding of how intentional learning spaces can foster personal growth and promote positive mental health practices among adults.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants were 20 women aged 18 to 40 years who voluntarily registered for the "Grow Through What You Feel: Learn How to Thrive Not Just Survive" workshop, held in June 2025 at a community centre. The workshop was conducted in collaboration with a local women's organisation as part of an outreach effort to promote mental health awareness and emotional well-being among women in the community. Therefore, the sample's all-female composition was intentional, reflecting the programme's goal of providing a safe, supportive environment for women to explore self-compassion and optimism. The workshop was open to the public, and participants, recruited through social media, came from diverse educational and professional backgrounds. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the workshop and the accompanying research.

Design and Procedure

The study employed a pre-post design to examine changes in participants' awareness and beliefs about self-compassion and optimism following two structured, two-hour in-person sessions, one on each topic. The workshop was interactive and gently paced, with time for silent reflection, sharing, and personal writing. Participants completed a pre-test questionnaire at the start of the workshop and a post-test at the end of each session. Both questionnaires assessed their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes related to the constructs. Participants used anonymous ID codes (for example, P1, P3 and P4) to ensure confidentiality while allowing data matching. After two weeks, participants completed a follow-up questionnaire via Google Forms to assess whether they had continued engaging with the practices shared and how helpful they perceived them to be.

The self-compassion session consisted of six components: a reflective writing activity

(“Inner Critic vs. Inner Friend”), a short lecture (benefits and myths), a case study discussion, a guided experiential practice (Self-Compassion Break), a journaling exercise (“Letter to Yourself”) and a group reflection segment (focused on emotional backdraft). Each component was developed and adapted from Neff and Germer’s (2013) Mindful Self-Compassion program and other evidence-based interventions (Ferrari et al., 2019). Each segment lasted approximately 15–20 minutes, ensuring time for participant reflection and group sharing.

The learned optimism session was designed to introduce participants to the concept and support their personal application of its principles. It comprised six components: an experiential demonstration of learned helplessness, a debriefing and reflective discussion, a short lecture on explanatory styles and learned optimism, a case study discussion, a self-assessment using the Learned Optimism Scale (Seligman, 2006), and a cognitive restructuring exercise based on the ABCDE model (Adversity, Beliefs, Consequences, Disputation, and Energisation).

The session began with a brief demonstration illustrating learned helplessness, designed to evoke a mild sense of helplessness among participants. Ethical safeguards were observed, including an immediate debriefing and guided reflection to safeguard participants’ emotional well-being. This experiential approach served as an entry point for reflecting on how such patterns can manifest in everyday life and contribute to a pessimistic outlook.

Following this, participants were introduced to the concept of learned optimism, focusing on explanatory styles, which describe how individuals interpret the causes of events, particularly negative ones. A case study discussion then followed, using a real-life news article from a local online source. The case described a mother’s perseverance in ensuring her son with Treacher Collins syndrome could attend school. To ensure relevance and engagement, the case study was adapted into a concise narrative summary and presented with guided discussion prompts that encouraged participants to analyse the story through the lens of explanatory style, identifying how optimistic framing could influence resilience and behaviour.

Next, participants completed the 48-item Learned Optimism Scale (Seligman, 2006) to assess their explanatory style and determine whether they tended towards pessimistic or optimistic interpretations of events. This self-assessment was followed by the ABCDE exercise (Adversity, Beliefs, Consequences, Disputation, and Energisation), in which participants practised applying the model to provided scenarios and recent personal setbacks.

Materials

The primary materials were two researcher-developed instruments, a pre- and post-questionnaire assessing knowledge and beliefs about self-compassion and learned optimism. Items were developed from theoretical definitions and prior literature to ensure content relevance and conceptual clarity. A subject-matter expert in developmental and positive psychology reviewed both questionnaires for face and content validity. The self-compassion questionnaire had two sections: Section A on knowledge and Section B on beliefs and attitudes. Section A comprised ten true/false items, scored 1 point per correct response (range: 0–10). Section B comprised seven Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), three of which were reverse-scored. The learned optimism questionnaire consisted of 10 Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree), which assessed participants’ level of agreement with the concept of learned optimism.

Additionally, participants received guided worksheets and journaling prompts to use

after the workshop. A 12-item follow-up questionnaire, with both quantitative (e.g., frequency of practice) and qualitative components (e.g., open-ended reflections on application and challenges), was distributed two weeks after the workshop to assess the application of workshop tools and perceived shifts in mindset. The quantitative component included self-report items in which participants indicated how often they consciously practised self-compassion and learned optimism over the past two weeks, rated on a five-point frequency scale (1 = Not at all, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often, 5 = Almost daily).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was conducted under academic supervision and approved as a mini-research project in a postgraduate developmental psychology course. Participants were fully informed of the study's nature and aims. Participation was entirely voluntary, and data were collected anonymously for academic research purposes only.

RESULT

A total of 13 participants completed the pre- and post-workshop self-compassion assessments, while 15 completed the pre- and post-workshop learned optimism assessments. The slight discrepancy arose because two participants were absent from the second self-compassion session. Although this reduces the total matched dataset, it does not substantially affect validity, as the results are descriptive and exploratory. The results are presented below for both the self-compassion and learned optimism questionnaires. This was followed by the quantitative and qualitative results of the follow-up questionnaire after two weeks.

A. Pre-Post Workshop Changes

Tables 1 and 2 present pre- and post-scores for the self-compassion and learned optimism assessments. Participants' knowledge of self-compassion improved markedly after the workshop; the mean score rose from 7.23 to 9.23 out of 10. For attitudes and beliefs towards self-compassion, the mean score increased from 26.46 to 27.46 out of 35, indicating a modest shift towards more self-compassionate attitudes. These results suggest that even a brief, experiential workshop can significantly enhance participants' conceptual understanding of self-compassion, whereas shifts in personal attitudes may require more sustained practice and reinforcement.

Table 1: Self-compassion Pre-Post Test Scores

Measure	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Knowledge (max=10)	7.23	1.74	9.23	1.01
Beliefs and Attitudes (max=35)	26.46	3.91	27.46	5.85
Total (max=45)	33.69	4.92	36.69	6.34

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. Higher scores indicate greater knowledge or more positive beliefs and attitudes toward self-compassion principles.

Participants' knowledge of learned optimism also improved after the workshop. As shown in Table 2, the mean score rose from 28.80 to 30.27 out of 40, indicating a slight

improvement in participants' understanding of the core principles of learned optimism. This suggests the workshop effectively enhanced participants' conceptual grasp of optimism.

Table 2: Learned Optimism Pre-Post Test Scores

Measure	N	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Knowledge (max=40)	15	28.80	2.24	30.27	3.41

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. Higher scores indicate greater knowledge toward learned optimism principles.

Overall, these findings suggest that both sessions effectively enhanced participants' conceptual understanding of the constructs. Although belief and attitude shifts were smaller, the pattern indicates an emerging openness to self-kindness and optimistic thinking.

B. Follow-Up Outcomes

Frequency of Practice and Real-Life Experiences

At the two-week follow-up, 13 participants completed the reflection questionnaire. Table 3 presents the frequency distribution of participants' use of both self-compassion and learned optimism strategies after the workshop. Most participants reported using self-compassion strategies occasionally (61.5%), while they used optimism strategies occasionally (38.4%) or once or twice (30.8%). These findings suggest moderate uptake of the tools and strategies shared with participants.

Table 3: Frequency of Practice of Self-Compassion and Optimism Strategies at Follow-Up

Frequency	Self-Compassion		Optimism	
	Number of respondents (N)	Percentage (%)	Number of respondents (N)	Percentage (%)
Almost daily	1	7.7	2	15.4
Often (several times a week)	3	23.1	2	15.4
Occasionally (a few times)	8	61.5	5	38.4
Once or twice	1	7.7	4	30.8
Not at all	0	0	0	0

The qualitative findings reflected various real-life experiences of applying the tools. Participants described how they integrated the principles of self-compassion and learned optimism into their daily routines, particularly in managing stress, self-criticism, and emotional challenges. Participants also shared practising self-kindness in response to personal struggles, including compassionate self-talk and rest during moments of fatigue or self-doubt. For example, P7, who rated the everyday application of self-compassion and learned optimism as

almost constant, described juggling academic commitments. Instead of criticising herself for being unproductive, she paused to rest, reminding herself through prayer and gentle self-talk that doing her best was enough. This moment of kindness, she reflected, helped her regain clarity and motivation. Such experiences illustrate participants' growing awareness that being kind to oneself can strengthen resilience rather than weaken it. From the self-compassion she practised, she described,

"Normally, I would have pushed myself harshly and criticised myself for not being more productive. However, this time, I noticed the signs of mental exhaustion and chose to pause ... I spoke gently to myself, saying, "It's okay to feel tired. You're doing your best, and Allah sees your effort." That moment of kindness helped me return to my work with a clearer mind and a calmer heart. It reminded me that being kind to myself can actually make me stronger."

While practising learned optimism,

"I paused, took a deep breath, and reminded myself: "You've handled tough weeks before, and you always pulled through with Allah's help." Instead of panicking, I shifted my mindset to focus on progress, not perfection. I told myself to just do one step at a time and to trust the process."

Several participants described themselves reducing self-criticism and cultivating a learning mindset that reflected a shift from harsh self-judgment to constructive reflection. P1, P4, P6, P10, P17, and P18 described moments when they previously harshly criticised themselves but instead practised a kinder internal dialogue. P4, for instance, described her change in perspective,

"I used to be very hard on myself when I made mistakes. But ever since the workshop, instead of labelling myself stupid or slow, I've started to acknowledge the mistakes and taking notes of them, so I don't repeat them in the future."

This pattern suggests that participants were learning to accept imperfections as part of the human experience, consistent with the self-compassion principle of common humanity.

Participants also described resisting the tendency to people-please or overextend themselves. Several participants (P8, P9 and P12) described applying self-compassion by honouring their personal boundaries and resisting the urge to people-please. P9, for example, reflected on missing her self-imposed deadline but choosing self-acceptance over self-criticism, *"I missed my own deadline (I set for myself) to submit my assignment, but I'm not mad at myself, I told myself to keep going, and I even gave myself a break because I'm just a human after all."* Similarly, P8 and P12 discussed prioritising their well-being and learning to say no, with P8 noting that she had begun, *"learning to put my own interest first instead of prioritising making sure everyone is happy..."* and,

"When I'm feeling a little too (much) care for everyone else, when at the same time they don't do the same. Instead of feeling sad, I give myself a break and take care of my feelings more by rewarding and doing something that makes me happy." (P12)

The application of learned optimism was evident in participants' efforts to reframe negative experiences and regulate emotions more effectively. P7's account of managing academic stress illustrated how she reframed negative situations through optimistic thinking.

She described consciously shifting her focus from potential failure to progress and trust, saying, *“You’ve handled tough weeks before, and you always pulled through with Allah’s help.”* This cognitive reframing helped her remain calm and persistent, reflecting a more optimistic explanatory style. Similarly, P12 reframed social challenges by reminding herself that others’ behaviour was *“not all about me,”* which helped her reduce over-personalisation and emotional distress.

Likewise, P17 described her decision to stay calm when her plans were unexpectedly altered: *“I felt like getting angry... but I tried to be patient, rearranged my plan, and it still went well, alhamdulillah.”* These narratives reveal how optimistic thinking helped participants maintain emotional balance amid daily stressors.

Participants’ Reflections on the Use and Helpfulness of Workshop Tools

Based on participants’ feedback, several tools introduced during the workshop were used in their daily lives. The most frequently used tools or strategies were the Self-Compassion Break (38.5%), the ABCDE model for reframing negative thoughts (53.8%), and self-kindness phrases or affirmations (53.8%). These responses suggest that participants not only recalled the workshop content but also found it applicable to real-life challenges. Qualitative feedback supported this, as participants shared specific instances of applying these tools. The qualitative insights presented below are drawn from participants’ descriptive reflections on their experiences of applying these tools.

Participants who reported using the ABCDE model to reframe negative thoughts and/or the self-kindness phrases or affirmations described various reflections after applying these tools. Participants who practised self-kindness phrases or affirmations (P1, P6, P7, P9, P16, P18) reported greater calm, emotional grounding, and reduced internal pressure. P1 and P18 felt calm and collected, while P9 shared that accepting and embracing her flaws was the most useful. P6 wrote, *“I can do home chores without stress”*, illustrating how practising self-kindness allowed her to carry out daily responsibilities with less emotional burden and more mental ease.

Similarly, the participants (P3, P4, P9, P10, P14, P16 and P17) who applied the ABCDE model reported that practising the tool has helped them gain better control over their negative thoughts, feel calmer during distress, and respond to challenges with greater clarity and hope. For example, P3 described how it helped her reframe disruptive negative thought patterns from past experiences, while P10, P14, and P16 reflected that reframing negative thoughts felt most natural and useful.

In addition, participants described several difficulties and unfamiliarity when applying the tools. These challenges revealed deeply ingrained thought patterns and habits that required conscious effort to unlearn or reframe. A participant highlighted difficulty moving on from past experiences: *“My mind froze within the moment. I can’t help but think of the incident over and over again before I can really move on”* (P1). Several participants (P4, P7, P8, P9, P12, P17 and P18) noted that although it was helpful, it required effort to overcome negative beliefs and to be kind to themselves. For example, P4 and P12 stated, *“Avoiding myself from labelling myself. I still do that, despite trying to learn from mistakes”* and *“When the situation occurs, the first feeling is sad, uncomfortable, angry and how to remind yourself to be optimistic”*, respectively.

Perceived Shift in Attitudes and Understanding

Based on the difficulties and unfamiliarity described, participants also reported changes in the difficulty or discomfort they experienced when applying these strategies over the two weeks. Table 4 summarises participants' perceived changes in the difficulty of applying these strategies. Most participants reported some improvement in their comfort or fluency with the strategies over time. Ten participants (76.9%) reported that the practices became slightly easier but still required some effort, while one participant stated that the tools now felt more natural. However, three participants reported no significant change due to limited practice.

Table 4: Perceived Change in Difficulty or Ease of Practice Since Workshop

Response Options	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes, the practice feels more natural or automatic now	1	7.7
Yes, it's slightly easier, but it still takes effort	10	76.9
No, it still feels just as difficult	0	0
I haven't practised enough to notice a change	3	23.1

Note. Participants could provide more than one response.

Participants described how their attitudes and understanding changed over two weeks of practising the strategies. Several participants reported a meaningful internal shift in how they relate to themselves, particularly in difficult moments. P1 wrote,

It took a lot of self-reflection after the session to really digest what my mind has made myself today. I was brought up to be that 'perfect' daughter who could not stand failure. And I was really hard on myself because I want my parents to be proud of me. Though I thought I can achieve anything and make my parents proud, I was afraid. Afraid of losing. And I found myself doubting everything I do, losing my optimism bit by bit. Then I realise, it's not too late to uncover these problems. I was so focused on getting others' approval without knowing mine. I should have known better than to put myself last.

P7 reflected, "Being kind to myself during tough moments doesn't mean I'm being weak - it actually gives me the strength to keep going without burning out". P4 noted that practising self-compassion also improved her ability to show compassion to others, while P9 stated she is still adjusting to the practices, "I try to give myself words of kindness, still need some work, but getting there."

Furthermore, participants (P7, P10, P12 and P14) reported learning that optimism is not about denying problems but facing them with courage and constructive thinking. P7 stated, "Optimism isn't about ignoring challenges, but choosing to face them with hope and trust". While P14 noted,

When discussing on the half cup empty or half cup full, I love the fact that we can challenge it. Why not try to put action to it and try to fill in the cup? I found over the years that putting action is an effective way to challenge your mindset.

Participants were also asked to rate the workshop's perceived helpfulness in encouraging learned optimism and self-compassion in their lives on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating 'not helpful' and 5 indicating 'very helpful'. Table 5 presents these ratings. For self-compassion, 12 participants rated the workshop as either a 4 or 5, and the same distribution was observed for learned optimism. Only one participant rated each category a 3, and no

participants rated the workshop below 3. These findings suggest that the participants find the workshop helpful and effective in promoting self-compassion and optimism.

Table 5: Perceived Helpfulness of the Workshop in Promoting Self-Compassion and Optimism

Ratings	Self-Compassion (n)	Percentage (%)	Optimism (n)	Percentage (%)
5	5	38.5	4	30.8
4	7	53.8	8	61.5
3	1	7.7	1	7.7
1–2	0	0	0	0

Note. (1 = Not Helpful, 5 = Very Helpful)

Additionally, participants were also asked whether they would recommend the workshop to others. All respondents (100%) answered affirmatively.

DISCUSSION

This study examined Malaysian adults' awareness, understanding, and application of two constructs from positive psychology, self-compassion and learned optimism, after attending a structured workshop. Rather than aiming to change behaviour or mental health outcomes, the primary intention was to expose participants to these tools, encourage emotional reflection, and increase conceptual clarity around the constructs. Based on the findings, the brief workshop effectively enhanced participants' knowledge and shifted some of their beliefs about these concepts, while also promoting real-life application in the short term.

The pre- and post-workshop data showed improved knowledge of self-compassion and learned optimism. This demonstrates the potential for short-term learning. The format of the sessions, which combined brief teaching, relatable examples, experiential reflection, and gentle discussion, likely contributed to these gains. The findings align with past studies that have found brief, experiential positive psychology workshops to be effective, powerful teaching and learning tools (Lai et al., 2016; Macfarlane et al., 2017)

While changes in beliefs and attitudes were more modest than knowledge gains, this may be because beliefs and attitudes are generally more resistant to change. As Albarracín and Shavitt (2018) note, attitudes and beliefs are generally more resistant to change, especially when deeply ingrained through long-term socialisation and cultural norms. For example, in the case of self-compassion, attitudes and beliefs are shaped over many years by internalised expectations around performance, perfectionism, or cultural norms that discourage emotional vulnerability. Nevertheless, even small changes in attitudes and beliefs about self-compassion can be highly significant, as they can improve how individuals respond to emotional challenges (Chwyl et al., 2021).

Taken together, the pre-post results offer encouraging signs that short, thoughtfully designed workshops can support early understanding and openness toward positive psychological concepts. The follow-up data provided deeper insight into how adults experience and apply these concepts in their everyday lives. Beyond improved understanding, participants

began to integrate the tools of self-compassion and learned optimism into their thought processes, coping strategies, and decision-making patterns.

For many participants, self-compassion felt like responding to mistakes or distress with patience, kindness, and self-acceptance. Participants' reflections suggest that tools, such as self-kindness phrases or the "Self-Compassion Break," were effective in interrupting cycles of self-criticism and emotional reactivity. While emotional responses like guilt, sadness, or shame still surfaced, the tools provided a buffer that allowed participants to pause and reset. This supports prior findings that self-compassion can promote emotional regulation and psychological resilience (Neff, 2003; Inwood & Ferrari, 2018).

Similarly, the ABCDE model of learned optimism offered participants a structured cognitive strategy to reframe negative events. Several participants challenged automatic pessimistic thoughts and replaced them with more hopeful, empowering interpretations. This suggests that adults can begin to shift deeply rooted explanatory styles when guided through experiential methods. The narratives illustrate how optimism, when consciously practised, becomes a cognitive habit of hope, not a dismissal of real challenges but a constructive way of engaging with them. Seligman (1991) emphasised that optimism involves active engagement, not blind positivity.

Additionally, some participants reported integrating elements of faith, particularly Tawakkul, in their application of learned optimism. For example, participants described how dua and reliance to God coexisted with goal-directed efforts, creating a balanced approach to personal struggles. This points to the importance of culturally relevant framing when introducing psychological interventions in diverse communities (Lomas, 2015).

However, the follow-up responses also revealed challenges in internalising these practices. Some participants found it difficult to sustain the tools in high-stress moments or noted persistent self-critical habits. These struggles suggest that while conceptual understanding may come quickly, emotional habits require longer-term practice to change. This resistance to change aligns with the idea that attitudes formed through repeated life experiences are harder to shift (Albarracín & Shavitt, 2018). Nevertheless, many participants acknowledged this tension while simultaneously reporting a gradual increase in their ability to pause, reflect, and apply the tools.

These findings reinforce the importance of follow-up reinforcement and structured reflection in sustaining practice-related motivation. Hwang et al. (2017) assert that participants' prior knowledge, practice-related experiences, and motivation significantly impact the successful implementation of positive psychology interventions. Without time for reinforcement and space for reflection, participants may revert to default habits even after gaining conceptual clarity.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights that conceptual clarity, experiential practice, and cultural relevance are key to helping adults meaningfully experience and apply self-compassion and learned optimism in daily life. While short-term interventions can spark awareness and shift mindsets, sustained application requires ongoing reflection, reinforcement, and personal relevance. Future workshops may benefit from booster sessions, peer-sharing platforms, or reflective journaling prompts over time to deepen and maintain practice. Finally, while the results are promising, several limitations remain. The small sample size ($n = 13-15$) and the gender-homogeneous group limit generalisability. The difference in sample size between the self-compassion and optimism groups resulted from absences during the second

session, which may slightly affect internal validity. Additionally, while participants' integration of faith was an important cultural strength, it may not represent all Malaysian adults. Future research could use larger, mixed-gender samples and longer-term follow-ups or mixed-methods designs to assess behavioural outcomes more robustly.

CONCLUSION

This study offers valuable insight into the early impact of a brief, structured workshop on Malaysian adults' awareness of and practical engagement with self-compassion and learned optimism. While the quantitative findings show knowledge gains, the qualitative data deepen our understanding of how participants engaged emotionally and cognitively with the concepts beyond the workshop setting. Participants described shifts in internal dialogue, greater emotional regulation, and improved mindset flexibility when responding to daily stressors.

The findings highlight that while psychological tools can be introduced quickly, meaningful application relies on continued self-reflection and context-sensitive reinforcement. Emotional habits, particularly those shaped by cultural norms and personal histories, are not easily unlearned, but with the right support, participants begin to build healthier internal patterns. To maximise long-term benefits, future interventions should consider follow-up mechanisms such as community-based support, digital reminders, or extended learning modules. Moreover, integrating cultural and spiritual values can enhance the relevance and sustainability of such programs in diverse communities. Nevertheless, the generalisability of spiritually integrated approaches may be limited across differing cultural or secular contexts.

Overall, this study reinforces the potential of positive psychology not only as a theoretical discipline but as a lived practice. With the right conditions, even a modest workshop can be a starting point for deeper self-awareness, emotional resilience, and meaningful personal growth.

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