

Nostalgia and Compassion Fatigue Among Physiotherapy Students: A Correlational Study

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Abstract

The current research set out to test the association between the sense of nostalgia and compassion fatigue in physiotherapy learners who had frequently encountered emotionally challenging clinical environments. The quantitative research design was chosen, and 150 students were included in the study by means of convenience sampling. Nostalgia and compassion fatigue were measured using standardized instruments, which were the Southampton Nostalgia Scale created by Constantine Sedikides and colleagues, and the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL-5) created by Beth Hudnall Stamm. Pearson product-moment correlation was used on the data with SPSS. These findings showed that the relationship between nostalgia and compassion fatigue was negative and significantly ($p = 0.01$) statistically significant ($r = -0.226$). These results implied that nostalgia acted as a shield psychological variable that served to alleviate emotional burnout and stress in care giving situations. The paper highlighted the need to include coping skills and emotional support networks in physiotherapy education to improve student health and strength.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Compassion Fatigue, Physiotherapy students, Mental health.

1. Introduction

Students taking health related courses are under high emotional and academic demands. Rapid changes in the field of medicine, expectations of how patients should be treated, academic pressure and responsibilities in the workplace have an impact on the way they study and train (Smith, 2015). Compared to other university students, they are not only under academic stress but also under emotional stress of working with patients and becoming skilled professionals during their early years of education. Research conducted shows that physiotherapy students experience stress, which is caused by heavy workloads, strict expectations during clinical courses, fear of making mistakes, and also emotional involvement with patients (George, 2017; Martin, 2019). Constant exposure to pain, slow recovery and disability can result in emotional exhaustion, lack of empathy and mental withdrawal. Over time, this can result in compassion fatigue, which is commonly defined as "the cost of caring" (Figley, 1995).

Compassion fatigue is an emotional response that occurs as a result of being exposed to the ongoing suffering of others after prolonged exposure and emotional work of caregiving. It has particular application to physiotherapy training where the balance of academic, clinical and emotional involvement is important for study. Stamm (2010) explains compassion fatigue in two components: burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Burnout is the result of constant workload and pressure that leads to exhaustion and a

lack of motivation. Secondary traumatic stress develops in response to the patient suffering and trauma. Physiotherapy students, who work long hours (and by shared physical and emotional contact with patients) are particularly at risk. This can result in irritation, detachment and loss of compassion, which will impact not only their well-being but their care of the patient as well.

While a lot of research is aimed at stress and burnout, recent approaches in psychology emphasise the importance of positive emotions in the protection of mental health. One such emotion is nostalgia, which is defined as a reflective and often comforting attachment to meaningful past experiences (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2008). Although nostalgia involves a mixture of feelings, manifested as happiness and sadness, it is now considered as a psychological resource rather than a negative or escapist tendency. Studies indicate that nostalgia can be used to a benefit in order to improve mood, strengthen identity, increase social connectedness, and buy a sense of meaning (Wildschut et al., 2010). Reflecting on positive memories such as a sense of personal achievement, whose associated claims or supportive relationships can help people cope with stress and regain emotional balance (Routledge et al., 2011). In demanding situations, nostalgia could play a role in the source of comfort, motivation and resilience.

For physiotherapy trainees, nostalgia may work as a buffer against emotional strain. While compassion fatigue is a response built on the demands of the present situation of caregiving, nostalgia is an appeal to past positive experiences. This particular contrast might hint at the relationship between the two in that nostalgic reflection may lessen the consequences of emotional exhaustion. Recent research has supported such an idea. Zhou et al (2020) found that age-old memory of good times can boost resilience and decrease the symptoms of stress. Such memories can include encouragement from their family, successful experiences in school or meaningful experiences with patients. These reflections can help the individuals to restore the connection with the purpose and also to keep the emotions in check. Despite the interest that has recently emerged about both compassion fatigue and nostalgia, little research has been carried out on the relationship between these two aspects, particularly among physiotherapy students in India. Understanding this connection is important as it may open up new ways to support student well-being.

Theoretical Perspectives of Compassion Fatigue: Compassion fatigue is defined as emotional, mental and physical exhaustion resulting from constant exposure to others suffering (Figley, 1995). It is different from just your general stress since this comes as a direct result of that empathic engagement. Symptoms include emotional numbness, intensely being irritable, being less empathetic and being detached. Figley's Compassion Stress and Fatigue Model, is about empathy by which caregivers can connect with patients but by the same token can leave them vulnerable to absorbing emotional pain. Without proper coping mechanisms, without recovery time, this can result in fatigue. Stamm's Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) model goes further and breaks down compassion fatigue into two parts: burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Burnout is a gradual onset of symptoms because of workload and pressure; while secondary traumatic stress causes to trauma indirectly. In the case of physiotherapy students, the patient interaction and physical care are frequently, hence the likelihood for both.

Theoretical Approaches to Nostalgia: Nostalgia is a feeling that entails the reflection on significant events that occurred in the past. It is a combination of positive emotions like warmth and connection with mild sadness (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2008). The present study views nostalgia as beneficial for mental well-being. According to the Nostalgia as a Psychological Resource Model, reflecting on the past increases emotional strength and strengthens connections with others, while also adding depth to personal experience. Memories often centre on meaningful moments with people, along with milestones one has reached. From another angle, Self-Continuity Theory explains how such reflection supports consistent

self-perception during difficult phases. When earlier experiences are revisited, a person may feel more grounded, linking prior stages of life with current challenges in a coherent way. Such a role is supported by empirical studies. Nostalgia has been proven to enhance hope, optimism, and perceived social support, particularly in situations of stress (Routledge et al., 2011). For healthcare students, it may be an internal coping mechanism against emotional exhaustion to regain motivation.

Integrative Relevance in the Present Study: In relation to the educational discipline of physiotherapy, compassion fatigue, as opposed to nostalgia constitute opposite but perhaps related process. Now and then, deep tiredness creeps in when someone gives too much care. Nostalgia might step in quietly, offering a way back to strength. This link deserves attention - particularly across India, where studies barely touch it. Peering into how old memories shape emotional strain opens paths. Ways to support student well-being may grow from such insights, reshaping learning environments slowly.

2. Literature review

Abeyta, Routledge, and Juhl (2020) tested the importance of nostalgia towards enhancing meaning in life and emotional well-being among university students in a series of experimental studies ($N > 200$). The results revealed that the participants in the nostalgia group reported much higher meaning of life in comparison with control conditions ($p < .05$). The research shows that nostalgia improves such psychological resources as purpose and emotional stability. This is an indication that nostalgic reflections can be used to assist people to manage stress and emotional problems at school.

Van Tilburg, Sedikides, and Wildschut (2018) explored the topic of nostalgia as a reaction to negative affective states of loneliness and boredom among adult participants ($N = 152$). Correlation analysis revealed that loneliness had a positive correlation with nostalgia ($r = .35, p < .01$), and the results of the experiment revealed that nostalgia had a negative impact on negative affect and positive influence on positive mood ($p < .05$). These findings indicate that nostalgia is an emotion regulation process. This is more so to students who are exposed to stressful clinical settings.

Hunsaker, Chen, Maughan, and Heaston (2015) assessed the compassion fatigue in healthcare professionals such as nurses ($N = 310$) by using Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL). The findings indicated moderate compassion fatigue with a substantial relationship existing between burnout and secondary traumatic stress ($p < .01$). The research paper notes that emotional burnout is a result of being constantly exposed to patient suffering. It applies well to physiotherapy students who have been put on clinical training.

In their study, Zhang, Han, Qin, Yin, Zhang, and Kong (2018) investigated compassion fatigue and psychological variables in the sample of nurses ($N = 512$), in the cross-sectional study. Pearson correlation analysis revealed that compassion fatigue was associated with resilience ($r = -0.45, p < .01$) and job stress ($r = 0.52, p < .01$) negatively and positively respectively. The results show that emotional strength decreases fatigue, whereas stress makes one more vulnerable. This justifies the necessity to investigate the protective emotional aspects such as nostalgia.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research question

The study was conducted to investigate the relationship between Nostalgia and Compassion fatigue among physiotherapy students.

3.2 Objectives

- To determine the degree of nostalgia in physiotherapy students
- To determine the rates of compassion fatigue among the students of physiotherapy
- To determine whether there is a relationship between nostalgia and compassion fatigue among physiotherapy students.

3.3 Hypothesis

H₁: There is a significant relationship between nostalgia and compassion fatigue among physiotherapy students.

4. Research Design

The research design adopted in the study is the quantitative type of research design to analyze the study variables in the physiotherapy students. The participants were used to collect data using self-report questionnaires that were standardized. Validated instruments were used in data gathering, which creates consistency and objectivity in its measurement of data across the subjects. Standardized tools brought the option of reliable quantification of psychological constructs and statistical analysis. This design allowed the use of descriptive and inferential statistics in order to establish patterns, associations, and relationships among the variables.

4.1 Sampling Technique

The method of convenience sampling was applied because the participants were selected depending on their availability and willingness to take part. The group was comprised of 150 physiotherapy students who were in academic and clinical training. This approach was widely applied in the research of education and healthcare because it is feasible and practically relevant.

4.2 Data Collection

Standardized self-report questionnaires were used to collect the data by giving them to the participants. The respondents were asked to give demographic information before they gave responses to the chosen psychological scales. The statistical analysis of the data collected was conducted to test the relationships between the study variables.

4.3 Tool description

- **Southampton Nostalgia Scale (SNS)** created by Constantine Sedikides and his colleagues was used to measure nostalgia. The SNS is a popular tool that is aimed at the measurement of individual variations in nostalgic tendency. The scale showed high psychometric attributes in different cultural and population samples. In the past studies, the internal consistency reliability was found to be satisfactory with the values of Cronbach alpha in the range of 0.80-0.90, which is very high. Test-retest reliability was also good in the scale indicating stability of nostalgic tendency with time. Regarding the validity, the SNS developed a large construct validity since it positively related with other psychological constructs including autobiographical memory, emotional warmth, social connectedness, and meaning in life. Convergent validity was achieved on significant correlations with other measures of nostalgia and emotional reflection. Moreover, the scale had discriminant validity because the scale was different to unrelated constructs like general negative affect. The Southampton Nostalgia Scale comprised 7-item scale that determined their frequency and intensity of the nostalgic experiences. The ratings were based on the 7-point Likert scale (1- "not at all" to 7- very much). A sum of the responses to all the items gave the total score which has a potential range between 7 and 49 where a higher number points to greater nostalgia. There was no reverse scoring that was needed.

Along with the total scores, mean scores were calculated by taking the total score divided by the items. According to the interpretation of mean score, a low nostalgia was a score ranging between 1.0-2.9, a moderate nostalgia was a score of 3.0-4.9 and a high nostalgia was a score of 5.0-7.0.

- **The Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL-5)** created by Beth Hudnall Stamm was used to measure compassion fatigue. This tool addressed the negative and positive professional quality of life in three subscales: Compassion Satisfaction, Burnout, and Secondary Traumatic Stress, although the current study involved Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress to determine compassion fatigue. The ProQOL-5 had a high internal consistency reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of about 0.88 of Compassion Satisfaction, 0.75 of Burnout and 0.81 of Secondary Traumatic Stress which are acceptable to high reliability. There was also sufficient test-retest reliability on the scale which supported the stability of the scores over time. The ProQOL had strong construct validity in terms of validity in that the subscales represented hypothetically different but related dimensions. Convergent validity was confirmed with the help of significant correlations with stress, emotional exhaustion, and psychological well-being measurements. Discriminating validity was also established because Compassion Satisfaction had negative correlation with Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress. The scale contained 30 items divided into three items which are the subscales. The responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1- never 5- very often). It was reverse scored and before the analysis, negatively worded items were reversed. The results of sum of the pertinent items were used to get subscale scores with a range of between 10 and 50 scores of each domain. An increase in scores was equivalent to an increase in respective constructs. According to the manual, low scores of 22 or less, 23-41 moderate levels and 42 or more high levels respectively, are the scores that represent the respective domains.

4.4 Statistical analysis

The analysis took place through IBM SPSS Statistics, specifically Version 26.0. To assess how closely nostalgia is linked with compassion fatigue – alongside whether that connection showed a positive or negative trend – the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient came into use.

4.5 Inclusion criteria

- Physiotherapy students currently enrolled in undergraduate.
- Students with clinical exposure.
- Students willing to provide informed consent.

4.6 Exclusion criteria

- Students diagnosed with severe psychiatric conditions.
- Students currently undergoing psychological treatment for trauma-related disorders.
- Students unwilling to participate in this study.

5. Results

The result and interpretation of data collected from physiotherapy students is discussed in the present chapter to examine the relationship between nostalgia and compassion fatigue.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics regarding the mean and standard deviation of nostalgia and compassion fatigue in physiotherapy students

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Nostalgia	35.05	8.438	150
Compassion Fatigue	88.32	11.076	150

The following descriptive statistics of nostalgia and compassion fatigue among physiotherapy students are shown in Table 1. With a group size of 150, the average on the Southampton Nostalgia measure reached 35.05, its spread shown by a standard deviation of 8.44. A total of 150 responses also shaped the results for the Professional Quality of Life index, where values centred around 88.32, varying on average by 11.076 points across individuals.

Table 2: Correlational study of the relationship between nostalgia and compassion fatigue for physiotherapy students

Variables	Pearson’s Correlation (r)	r value	Decision
Nostalgia	1	-.226**	Reject H ₀
Compassion fatigue			

****Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

A look at Table 2 reveals outcomes drawn from a Pearson’s Product-Moment Correlation analysis. This particular examination focused on links between nostalgia and compassion fatigue. The group studied consisted of students preparing for careers in physiotherapy. Patterns emerged showing how these emotional states might relate. Data reflect statistical relationships observed within this specific cohort. With r standing at -0.226 , the link reached significance at the .01 threshold (p less than .01). Notably, the value points to an inverse pattern: as one trait rises, the other tends to fall. Where nostalgia grows stronger, compassion fatigue appears weaker. Evidence here aligns with the idea that greater nostalgic inclination may accompany reduced emotional strain. Despite the faintness of the association, its presence under statistical scrutiny suggests it did not occur randomly. It may be that looking back serves a purpose - supporting mental balance when life feels unstable.

The hypothesis is accepted which showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between nostalgia and compassion fatigue among physiotherapy students. The findings thus support this research hypothesis presented in this study that nostalgia is significantly related to the fatigue of compassion, at the .01 level.

6. Discussion

Despite its bittersweet nature, nostalgia appears linked to lower levels of compassion fatigue among physiotherapy students. A moderate inverse relationship emerged in the data, with Pearson’s r registering -0.226 at a significance level below 0.01. Participants’ nostalgic tendencies were captured via the Southampton Nostalgia Scale, yielding an average score of 35.05 and a standard deviation of 8.438. Meanwhile, compassion fatigue scores came from the ProQOL-5 instrument, averaging 88.32 with dispersion around 11.076. Earlier work aligns with these outcomes, indicating that looking back can strengthen resilience through uplifted mood, deeper bonds with others, and improved strategies for managing stress - findings previously noted by Sedikides and colleagues in 2008, along with Wildschut’s

team in 2006. Facing distress regularly during training, learners in clinical environments risk gradual depletion of emotional energy and diminished capacity to empathise. Looking back with warmth can redirect attention to moments that mattered, people who stood by, accomplishments that counted - easing inner pressure while building strength. Without that lens, constant caregiving might wear down energy, stir frustration, pull someone inward, slowly feeding compassion fatigue. Evidence points to integrating tools for handling stress, space for introspection, and networks offering emotional backing into education for therapists. When defences against burnout grow stronger and mental health gains priority, exhaustion loses ground, performance rises, and life feels more balanced. What lies ahead could examine how traits like grit, kindness toward oneself, and connections with others shape outcomes across varied health care settings.

7. Summary

The main goal here was to examine how nostalgia relates to compassion fatigue. Working closely with people who hurt, struggle physically, or face ongoing illness marks daily life in physiotherapy education - this kind of contact wears down emotions over time. Facing tough stories again and again might wear some thin; others hold up better depending on inner strength. Rather than draining energy, warm memories could act like ballast when pressure builds. That soft pull toward the past sometimes grounds someone, offering quiet support through feelings of belonging and meaning. This research explores how two factors connect. Notably, as feelings of nostalgia rise, signs of compassion fatigue tend to fall in physiotherapy learners. The link appears clearly negative, suggesting an inverse pattern between these experiences. Everyone took part knowing full well what the research involved, confidentiality promised throughout, and withdrawal possible whenever desired. Two established instruments gathered the data: specifically, the Southampton Nostalgia Scale alongside the ProQOL-5. Analysis of how nostalgia links to compassion fatigue relied on Pearson's correlation, processed through SPSS software.

8. Conclusion

Looking back may help ease emotional strain for students in physical therapy programs. The study wanted to see how longing for the past connects with burnout from caring too much. What stood out is that those who feel more nostalgic tend to report lower levels of exhaustion from empathy. Even if the link isn't strong, there's a hint that warm recollections could offer some protection. When learners recall positive moments often, they seem less worn down by feelings. It turns out moods might shape how well someone handles stress in school. Not every memory fades equally under pressure. A hint too faint to trust completely, still holds weight when seen close. Good memories might count for more than old thinking allowed. Warm flashes from before can soften today's pressure a little. This kind of noticing turns attention inward, somehow. Quiet as it is, the pattern won't vanish on its own.

Pain often shows up when learning physiotherapy. Slowly, feelings wear down, layer by layer. When things get rough, old memories drift in without warning. Those glimpses from before can anchor the mind more firmly. Ease slips in when they show up, building strength through quiet presence. Connection grows, even without reaching out. Calm settles like dust after the wind. Stress shifts weight, moves more slowly, and feels less sharp. What if missing the good old days actually helps med students feel more grounded? Noticing their own emotional shifts seems to matter just as much during study routines. Staying curious over time might uncover deeper patterns. Looking closely at grit, self-compassion, how they relate to peers - these pieces together could explain coping in tough moments.

9. Limitations

- Finding applicability could differ elsewhere, given that participants came only from one regional group of physiotherapy learners.
- A handful of participants took part, though far fewer than the total number of physiotherapy learners overall.
- Responses came from written surveys filled out by participants themselves, these answers could lean one way if feelings get involved. How someone sees their own actions might colour what they report, shifting results without intent.
- Few key factors like how people bounce back, handle stress, or lean on others were left out of the analysis.

10. Recommendations

- Studies ahead might involve people across varied locations, helping results apply more widely.
- Using a bigger group may lead to findings that are both steadier and closer to reality.
- Adding factors such as resilience might help researchers deepen their analysis.
- Self-compassion could also play a role in shaping outcomes. Coping strategies sometimes offer further insight when included. Each of these elements contributes in distinct ways.

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