

# Results of a Teacher Burnout Intervention with Self-compassion and Self-Concordant Goals

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## Abstract

This research aimed to help decrease the level of burnout among Primary School teachers in Hungary. We conducted a 7 week-long "Renewal programme" intervention, which was based on self-compassion theory and the self-concordance model. Self-compassion practices advocate the adoption of an accepting mindset regarding one's own mistakes, and further assume that by setting self-concordant goals, one can create the conditions for long-term intrinsic motivation. Our results showed that the Renewal programme decreased participants' burnout levels. It also turned out that the programme was more effective for those participants who were doing their homework regularly. Self-compassion was a relatively new concept for teachers who participated in the intervention, but 6 months after the programme ended, the levels of it had increased further beyond what was recorded in the post-measurement. Our results show that social support is an important characteristic of the programme, as burnout subsequently decreased, while self-compassion increased, possibly due to the decreasing support of the former group members. As an enhancement, we recommend creating a private social media group for participants, something which would enable future participants to stay in touch after a programme like this has ended.

## Keywords

self-compassion, motivation, burnout, intervention

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In the present study we will introduce a burnout intervention programme, which helped teachers in Hungary to decrease the extent of their burnout syndrome. We based our programme – in line with previous studies – on the concept of self-compassion and self-concordant goals. Since the root cause of burnout is often chronic stress that coincides with a fear of being unable to cope with challenges at work, we initially encouraged the programme participants to befriend each other and to become more accepting of their mistakes, so that their stress levels could decrease. After that, we got them to create self-concordant goals, according to the self-concordance model of Sheldon (Sheldon, 2014).

The concept of self-concordance is rooted in the self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci (2000). In this theory, they introduce intrinsic and extrinsic goal-motivation. Sheldon (2014) explains why intrinsically motivated

goals are so easy to follow autonomously: they are congruent with the implicit self, i.e., with the individual's inner values (they are self-concordant), and thus individuals find these goals meaningful.

With the help of the intervention programme, teachers' burnout level decreased, and levels of self-compassion increased, along with their levels of self-esteem. From qualitative text-analysis, we could draw the conclusion that highly engaged participants experienced a greater decrease in their burnout levels by the end of the programme. In the follow-up measurements, which we conducted 6 months after the intervention, self-compassion levels were found to have increased compared to the post-measurement – indicating that participants had managed to deepen their self-compassion practice. Besides, from the follow-up measurement it turned out that the changes caused by the Renewal programme had more than endured 6 months after the programme concluded.

## 2 Introduction

Maslach and Leiter (1997 in Maslach et al., 2001:p.416) defined burnout syndrome as *"an erosion of engagement with the job. What started out as important, meaningful, and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless. Energy turns into exhaustion, involvement turns into cynicism, and efficacy turns into ineffectiveness."* The pioneers in burnout research, Freudenberger and North (1992) explained the process of burnout development in a 12-step model. The course of burnout development can be different spans of time (according to Freudenberger, burnout usually occurs after one year of employment (Freudenberger, 1974). The 12 steps of burnout syndrome according to Freudenberger and North (1992) are:

1. The compulsion to prove oneself;
2. Working harder;
3. Neglecting their needs;
4. Displacement of conflicts;
5. Revision of values;
6. Denial of emerging problems;
7. Withdrawal;
8. Odd behavioural changes;
9. Depersonalisation;
10. Inner emptiness;
11. Depression
12. Burnout syndrome.

In the beginning of burnout, one compulsively wants to prove oneself, which is usually true to employees who are motivated at first, and happily taking responsibility. Then, they start to neglect the problems and conflicts that occur in their lives, they also neglect their own needs. Then comes withdrawal from the social environment, and finally, disconnection from others and from the self in the form of depersonalisation. At the end, depression and burnout syndrome occurs, which can be healed only with medical and/or psychological help.

Maslach and Jackson (1981) in their burnout model gather the burnout process around three main dimensions, namely: emotional exhaustion, when one feels drained and no energy regarding their job (this occurs after experiencing chronic stress for a longer period of time); depersonalisation, when one is disconnected from others and themselves; and decrease of personal accomplishment, when one is not able to perform on the level one could before. From Maslach and Jackson's model it is revealed that burnout starts with chronic stress.

Demerouti et al. (2001) explain why chronic stress rises in burnout in the so called "job demands and job resources model". This model explains that burnout occurs when job resources (such as feedback, rewards, job control, supervisor support), are not balanced with job demands (such as recipient contact, shift work, time pressure).

When it comes to stress, it is all about perception: how individuals perceive their available resources and how big they consider the challenge that is given to them. Chronic stress, and in the long run burnout syndrome, only occurs when the amount of considered stressors are bigger than available coping resources (according to the individual's consideration). Interestingly, it has turned out to be the case that a sense of meaningfulness can change such perceptions and empower individuals to accomplish a work task that they previously considered to be beyond their abilities.

This was proven by Bracha and Bocos (2015), who measured Sense of Coherence (SOC) in the reflection of burnout development in teaching interns. Strong work-related SOC may help to create engagement, as it constructs from the sense of manageability, comprehensibility, and meaningfulness (Antonovsky, 1987). The research revealed that meaningfulness had the strongest negative relationship with burnout, i.e., teaching interns who experienced the highest meaningfulness regarding teaching, had the lowest scores on burnout and vice versa.

This implies that it might be helpful to redirect individuals' attention away from what they perceive to be a lack of coping resources towards instead how they could change their work to make it more meaningful. Burnout might then be reduced by changing individuals' attitudes and there would be no need to change the working conditions. This would be useful, since burnout was first noticed and most prominent in jobs of the human service sector (e.g., nurses, doctors) (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Those who work with other human beings can experience heavy workload as they must deal with their own as well as with others' emotions while doing their job. In such cases, daily workload cannot be easily reduced.

### 2.1 Why teachers in Hungary are exposed to burnout syndrome?

Teachers are one of the most at-risk occupational groups regarding burnout syndrome. According to N. Kollár and Szabó (2017), teachers rarely have the time to relax during a school-day. Every deed they do is observed by several students, hence they involuntarily influence students at all

times by being either a good or a bad behaviour-model. They must model the behaviour of a warm, kind and understanding person. This – according to Hochschild (1983) – is called emotional labour, when there is an expected emotional state for a certain job (e.g., stewardesses have to radiate calmness and kindness on planes). It is a hard job to do. Consequently, many teachers get self-conscious, especially those with low self-esteem, and only those who can stay confident under such circumstances can recognise that they need to approach others for support regarding their mental health. Others, who are too self-conscious about behaving in the right way, may not even notice when there is a problem, they are so busy keeping up appearances.

Moreover, schoolteachers nowadays must deal with children whose family circumstances are bad, where the parents are both busy and children get little parental attention. Thus, teachers must act as a substitute-parent in a lot of cases.

Teachers in Hungary are often judged harshly by the rest of society in relation to their working hours, given that they get a 2-months summer holiday every year. Only a few people see that teachers sacrifice many hours from their free time during the school year, either to correct the tests of the students or to plan their classes. This means that teachers' working life and private life often come into conflict, and they may work as much as 50 hours/week (N. Kollár and Szabó, 2017).

In their research, N. Kollár & Szabó also found (2017), that among teachers, protecting their knowledge is usually the norm instead of sharing it: they do not like when their colleagues make opinions about their teaching style, neither they like to give ideas and help their colleagues to improve their work. In contrast to this, in burnout research many previous studies showed how important the role of emotional and professional social support is as a protection from burnout syndrome (e.g., Burke and Greenglass, 1995; Ju et al., 2015; Laugaa et al., 2008).

It is hard to reach out to teachers and to inspire them to participate in a burnout intervention programme due to the aforementioned problems, but for those who were ready to open up and acknowledge the potential value in making use of professional help, we conducted a programme in the Spring of 2019, called the Renewal programme. We named it thus because we wanted to convey our intention to bring about mental and emotional renewal for teachers who undertake it. Self-compassion and self-concordant goals – both as previously introduced – were the two "pillar" concepts upon which the Renewal programme was based.

## 2.2 Elements of an effective burnout intervention program

The intervention programme devised by the authors of this study, and used in the presented research, was based on Freudenberger's process theory of burnout (Freudenberger and North, 1992). When developing burnout, one suppresses one's problems and needs. Hence the first step of an effective intervention programme had to be to enrich one's self-awareness, and turn to oneself, to get back in touch with one's emotions and state of mind. The next step was to work on one's personal goals, which were previously suppressed in the burnout process, to awaken those goals, and figure out how the attainment of one's goals connects to oneself.

Increasing self-awareness was realised by the practice of self-compassion, as advocated by Kristin Neff (Neff, 2014). Meanwhile, self-connected goals were realised in line with Sheldon's Self-concordance model (Sheldon, 2014). The synthesis of these two elements comprised the basis of the so-called 'Renewal programme'. In Sections 2.2.1 to 2.2.2, these two components will be introduced in detail.

### 2.2.1 Self-compassion

Kristin Neff (2014) developed several exercises whereby one can change one's attitude towards oneself. Since these techniques offer an understanding and accepting attitude toward the self, Neff called this concept self-compassion. There are three components of self-compassion, namely: *kindness to self, our common humanity, and mindfulness*. Kindness to self takes a new approach when one fails or makes a mistake: instead of criticising oneself and resolving to avoid such experiences, one embraces them, as one would empathise with and comfort a friend who made a mistake and is in a low mood. Accepting that every individual, including oneself makes mistakes from time to time, also helps the second component of self-compassion, remembering our common humanity. This component says that it is inevitable to be imperfect and to make mistakes every now and then, since we all share the same condition, i.e., 'to err is human'. The third component of self-compassion, mindfulness helps to draw a distinction between the mind's content (considerations, opinions) and what is the objective reality, so real work can be done with emotions. When practised regularly, mindfulness also may change the attitude, from identifying with failure to see failure as a natural and inevitable part of learning a new skill.

### 2.2.2 Self-concordance model

In burnout intervention, after changing one's attitude toward oneself with an approach such as self-compassion, it makes sense that a plan should be developed so the changes remain going forward. To realise this, one can start to create goals that are challenging, that offer an opportunity to develop skills and to grow. Once an individual has an open attitude toward challenges (and making mistakes), he/she is ready to take goals that are beyond his/her current skills, and to stay motivated in them. Sheldon approached the concept of meaningfulness in his self-concordance model (SCM) (Sheldon, 2014). He developed further the theory of self-determination (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000), which introduces the continuum of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The SDT connects types of motivation (i.e., extrinsic/intrinsic) to types of reason, why the individual is following them: while extrinsic goals are controlled by the environment (if there is no motivator in the environment, e.g., a reward, then the behaviour does not occur), intrinsic goals are autonomous, i.e., they determined by the individual him/herself. Sheldon added to this in the SCM, that intrinsic goals are in harmony not just with the explicit, but also with the implicit personality. Implicit personality is the place of unspoken values and norms about life, and activities connected to it are meaningful to the self. Sometimes, when one aspires to a goal, it is not in connection with one's implicit self, and thus the goal will be non-concordant. Non-concordant goals are the extrinsic (controlled reason) goals in the SDT model. According to Sheldon, non-concordant goals occur because one reacts instinctively to the environment, and one is not investigating the goal to ascertain if it is truly worthwhile. The reason for this is that the mind is usually too occupied, hence there is no room to investigate such questions. In the case of burnout, for example, when one is occupied with anxiety and stress, it is hard to be openly willing to embrace challenges and true excitement, and avoidance behaviour will prevail, which is a more instinctive (and according to Sheldon, faster) response.

The second part of burnout intervention can be done with the help of the SCM-approach. By taking time to discover and reconnect with one's true values, one can formulate goals that are in alignment with one's implicit personality and are truly meaningful.

### 3 The present study, hypotheses

We conducted the Renewal programme in the Spring of 2019, with 16 teachers, who teach in Primary Schools of Budapest. The main aim of the programme was to decrease

participants' burnout level with the help of self-compassion techniques and self-concordant goals. We did not have a control group in the research setting. We conducted a pre-and post-measurement with a test battery, and to validate the results, we conducted a qualitative test-analysis based on the contents of the contact-meetings, further comparing the results of the qualitative analysis to the measurement results. In Sections 3.1 to 3.2 the Renewal programme will be introduced – both in terms of its structure and its content.

#### 3.1 Hypotheses

We measured participants' burnout level before and after the intervention, from this, our first hypothesis is:

*H1: Participants' burnout level will decrease after the Renewal program.*

We assumed, that according to Neff (2014), not just participants' self-compassion will increase by practising self-compassion exercises, but it will implicitly raise their self-esteem as well. Neff explains, that by mastering self-compassion, individuals' self-esteem changes from an egoistic self-esteem, which is gained by the assumption that the individual is better than others, to a self-esteem which is not threatened by others' success, in fact, it is strengthened by it. Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

*H2: Participants' level of self-compassion and self-esteem will increase after the Renewal programme.*

In the pre- and post-measurement, we measured coping strategies based on the theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which considers emotion- and problem-focused forms of coping, making the working assumption that self-compassion exercises would function effectively as adaptive emotion-focused coping strategies. In addition, we were curious to see if participants' well-being would be improved after the Renewal programme, so we included a survey for measuring that in the pre- and post-measurement. Based on this, our third hypothesis was:

*H3: There will be an increased frequency of applying adaptive coping strategies an increased well-being by the end of the Renewal program.*

In the text analysis, based on the contact sessions of the Renewal program, we were able to measure participants' engagement by registering how regularly they did their homework. Therefore our 4<sup>th</sup> hypothesis was:

*H4: Participants who are more engaged in the Renewal program according to the text analysis, will have significantly bigger decrease in burnout than less engaged participants.*

In the text analysis we were also able to record the stress-related risk factors and protecting factors that participants had in their lives. Regarding risk factors and protecting factors, we assumed the following in our 5<sup>th</sup> hypothesis:

*H5: Participants who have more stress-related risk factors than stress-related protecting factors in their lives according to the text-analysis, will have less decrease in their burnout level by the end of the Renewal program.*

The entire test battery that was used in the pre- and post-measurement was sent out to participants 6 months after the programme, so as to measure the long-term effects of the Renewal programme. Our 6<sup>th</sup> hypothesis was as follows:

*H6: The changes in each of the surveys' results will remain the same as in the post-measurement 6 months after the intervention.*

### 3.2 Research questions

We had two more research questions concerning other qualitative data we collected during the Renewal programme. On the one hand, we asked participants to name a programme goal, which applied to an area in their lives that they would like to improve over the course of the intervention. The other qualitative measures were the so-called 'Blob-trees' (by Pip Wilson and Ian Long (Blobtree, online), which are drawn trees with drawn figures, expressing different emotions and moods. Participants had to pick a figure at the beginning of each weekly contact session, that best reflected their current emotional state. Our research questions to investigate were:

- Q1: How many of the participants will attain the programme goals they set out in the beginning of the Renewal programme?
- Q2: How will participants' emotional state develop over the course of the Renewal programme?

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Participants

The Renewal programme was tested in spring 2019, between March and May, under the guidance of the corresponding author of this study. For practical reasons and since in-person participation was necessary, the invitation to take part was sent out to teachers who work in schools in districts in relative proximity to the study location. The programme was undertaken by five small-sized teacher-groups, and altogether 16 teachers participated in the programme: one group of two, two groups of three and two groups of four took part. The participants were aged between 30 and 60 years, and in terms of gender, one man and 15 women participated in the intervention.

## 4.2 The Renewal programme

### 4.2.1 Programme structure

The Renewal programme consisted of 7 contact sessions, one session per week throughout 7 consecutive weeks, where in the first part self-compassion techniques were introduced to participants, and in the second part they created self-concordant goals regarding their workplace – as well as their personal-life. On the contact sessions, theoretical background was introduced to participants both for self-compassion, and the self-determination theory, along with the self-concordance model. Participants also got their first experiences of the programme's exercises so that they could practice them confidently at home, between the contact sessions.

### 4.2.2 Programme content

#### *Practices of Self-compassion*

Practicing self-compassion took time from week 1 to week 4 in the Renewal program. Each of the three components of self-compassion (kindness to self, common humanity, and mindfulness) were introduced separately to participants. Participants wrote a self-compassionate letter and took time to care for themselves as practices of kindness to self. They explored our common humanity with an exercise called "letting go of definitions", where they discovered, how a certain attribute with which they identify themselves, really is malleable. They practiced compassion with other beings by doing loving kindness meditation. For the third component of self-compassion, mindfulness, participants practiced "noting emotions" meditation, in which they noted their environment (impressions, sounds), and then their inner impressions (sensations, emotions). Participants also learned a meditation called "self-compassionate break", which helped them to investigate their experiences regarding all three components of self-compassion simultaneously, when needed. All meditations were drawn from the website of Kristin Neff (Self-compassion, online) and were interpreted into Hungarian. As a sign of self-compassion, and to have a better outlook on life in general, participants also kept a gratitude journal where they wrote down 5 things daily which they feel grateful for. They did this, beginning with the first day and ending with the last day of the Renewal programme.

#### *Creating self-concordant goals*

We worked with personal and professional goals on the 5–7 weeks of the Renewal programme. First, the definition of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and the self-concordance model was introduced to the participants, then they



filled out a questionnaire, the Personal Goals and Plans inventory by Sheldon (Martos, 2009), where they named 3 personal or professional goals that are currently followed by them. Then, they evaluated each goal whether they evoke positive or negative emotions for them, if they receive any social support regarding their goal, and finally, whether they follow their goals either because of inner motivation or outer reasons. This meant that they could have a perspective about the nature of their motivation at the moment. Then we asked them to fill out the A Values Inventory (AVI) by Colins and Chippendale (1995) at home, which revealed the most important values in life that the participants held. On the next contact session, we discussed the results of the values for each of them, and their meaning in their life. Then, we tried to find alterations together in the participants' currently followed goals, by including one or more of the values. Moreover, participants created completely new personal and workplace goals in alignment with their values.

#### 4.3 Measures: test battery of the pre-, post- and follow-up measurements

To track the changes caused by the Renewal programme, participants filled out a test battery a few days before the programme started, and a few days after it finished. In addition, to measure the programme's long-term effect, we included a follow-up measurement 6 months after the programme. The Renewal programme's most important aim was to decrease participants' burnout level and to increase their self-compassion simultaneously.

##### 4.3.1 Self-compassion Scale (SCS)

The Scale was developed by Kristin Neff (Neff, 2003). It consists of 26 items which are divided into 6 subscales: kindness to self, self-criticism, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, over-identification. Participants must indicate on a 7-point Likert scale the extent that the items are true for them. The SCS was adopted to Hungarian by Sági et al. (2013), where the following consistency quotients were found for the subscales:  $\alpha$  (kindness to self) = 0.74;  $\alpha$  (common humanity) = 0.72;  $\alpha$  (mindfulness) = 0.70;  $\alpha$  (self-criticism) = 0.77;  $\alpha$  (isolation) = 0.77;  $\alpha$  (over-identification) = 0.72.

##### 4.3.2 Maslach burnout inventory, educators survey

The inventory was created by Maslach and Jackson (1981). It consists of 3 dimensions that measure burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and (decreased) personal

accomplishment. The last dimension, personal accomplishment is interpreted with reversed scores. The MBI-ES consists 23 items for the 3 dimensions. Participants must answer on a 7-point Likert-scale (0-never, 6- always), of how frequently they experience the characteristics of burnout symptoms. The Inventory was validated by (Szigeti et al., 2017) into Hungarian, and the Cronbach-alpha value were:  $\alpha$  (emotional exhaustion) = 0.86;  $\alpha$  (depersonalisation) = 0.64;  $\alpha$  (personal accomplishment) = 0.76.

##### 4.3.3 WHO-5 Well-being index

The Index was developed by WHO (Topp et al., 2015). This is a short, 5 item questionnaire to indicate the level of well-being. Participants must answer on a 4-point Likert scale, to which extent they feel true about the items for well-being. The consistency-quotient of the Hungarian version of the scale was  $\alpha = 0.85$  (Susánszky et al., 2006).

##### 4.3.4 Coping questionnaire

This inventory, developed by Hungarian psychologist Attila Oláh (Oláh, 2005), is based on the coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and measures emotion- and problem-focused coping strategies. The emotion-focused strategies are the following: distraction, resignation, emotion focus, self-punishment, emotion evacuation, seeking support; the problem-focused strategies are problem focus, and stress control. There are five adaptive (problem focus, stress control, emotion focus, distraction, seeking support) and three maladaptive (self-punishment, resignation, emotion-evacuation) strategies. The questionnaire consists of 51 items, and participants must indicate on a 4-point Likert-scale, to extent to which they behave in a certain way in a stressful situation. The consistency quotients for the scales are:  $\alpha$  (problem focus) = 0.88;  $\alpha$  (stress control) = 0.86;  $\alpha$  (distraction) = 0.74;  $\alpha$  (resignation) = 0.70;  $\alpha$  (emotion focus) = 0.69;  $\alpha$  (self-punishment) = 0.37;  $\alpha$  (emotion evacuation) = 0.79;  $\alpha$  (seeking support) = 0.72.

##### 4.3.5 Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale-Hungarian (RSES-H)

The questionnaire was adapted from Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 2015) to the Hungarian conditions by Sallay et al. (2014). It consists of 10 items, 5 for positive self-esteem and 5 for negative self-esteem. Participants must indicate on a 4-point Likert-scale, to the extent to which they agree with the items. The Scale's Cronbach's alpha coefficient was high, 0.87.

### 4.3.6 Additional questions of the follow-up measurement

In the follow-up measurement, which was conducted 6 months after the Renewal programme, we asked participants whether they had participated in any self-development programme since the Renewal programme ended. We also asked participants how regularly they had used the Renewal programme's exercises in the past 6 months.

### 4.4 Qualitative text analysis

Every contact session of the Renewal program was audio recorded, to obtain qualitative data on the content of the sessions. The audio files were transcribed into text files, then qualitative analysis was made to organise the data. The coding categories were formed according to the pre- and post-measurement variables, as comments regarding participants' burnout experience, and well-being were detectable. The coding process was done by two psychologists, of which one originally did the coding, and the other supervised the coding process by checking the codes and the connected text content. Microsoft Excel 2016 was used to register the codes.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Survey results

We were able to evaluate the pre- and post-measurement of the surveys in the case of 14 out of 16 participants, because one participant did not fill out the post-measurement test battery, and one participant's results distorted the group's results, presumably because of social compliance, so that result had to be excluded from the analysis.

Participants' burnout level decreased in every burnout dimension after the Renewal programme. Emotional exhaustion decreased by 14.5%, depersonalisation decreased by 9.2%, and personal accomplishment increased by 5.9% according to the scales (see Fig. 1).

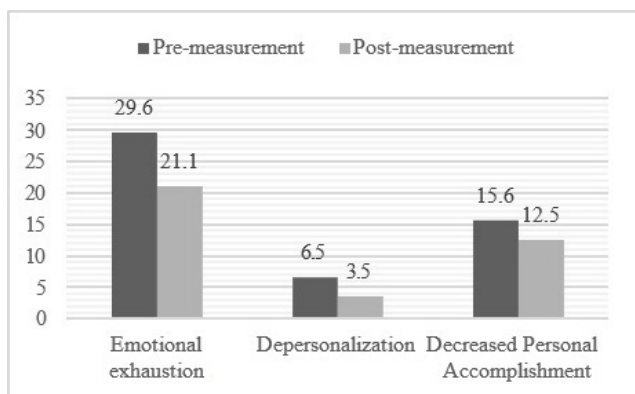


Fig. 1 Average points on the dimensions of the MBI-ES before and after the Renewal program (N = 14)

At the beginning of the programme, emotional exhaustion was the most serious issue among the participants, eight of whom felt that they had it to a high degree. After the intervention, only four participants scored high on emotional exhaustion. Regarding the general burnout scores, the level of burnout was considered high in cases where a respondent had high levels in two of the dimensions or a high level according to one dimension and a medium level according to another. Meanwhile, the burnout level was considered to be medium in cases where one or two of the dimensions were at a medium level, and the other low. By that yardstick, before the Renewal programme took place, five teachers had a high level of general burnout, four teachers had a medium level, and five teachers had low burnout levels. After the programme, two teachers still had a high level of burnout, two teachers had a medium level and ten teachers had low burnout levels. H1 was thus confirmed: burnout scores improved following the Renewal programme.

In the case of Self-compassion, smaller changes were observable (see Fig. 2). All the positive subscales (kindness to self, common humanity, mindfulness) increased and every negative subscale (self-criticism, isolation, over-identification) decreased. The biggest change can be seen in the case of self-kindness and self-criticism. When seeing the results individually, the biggest increase was 16% in general scores of the Self-compassion Scale, and the lowest increase – in fact, it was a decrease – was -2%. These not-so-striking scores probably arose because the idea of self-compassion was relatively new to the teachers who participated in the Renewal programme, hence they were not been able to operationalise this concept in their lives deeply at the point where the programme concluded and the measurement was taken.

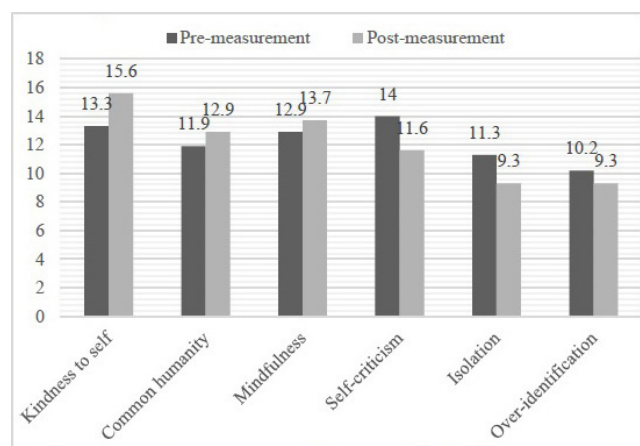


Fig. 2 Average points of the participants on the Self-compassion Scale's subscales before and after the Renewal program (N = 14)

As for self-esteem (see Fig. 3), an increase can be seen, the average point of the group increased with 1.2 points, simultaneously with the self-compassion changes. This validates the idea of Neff (2014), who predicted an increase in the level of self-esteem when practising self-compassion.

According to the results, H2 is partly confirmed, because both inventories (self-esteem and self-compassion) showed change in the expected direction in the scores after the Renewal programme. However, these changes were minor at the group-level in the case of the common humanity, mindfulness, isolation, and over-identification subscales of self-compassion.

As for the coping inventory, adaptive coping strategies increased with 1 point and maladaptive coping strategies decreased with 0.3 points after the Renewal program regarding the group's average points. In one of our hypotheses, we assumed that the practices of self-compassion can be viewed as adaptive, emotion-focused coping strategies. When we compared the changes in the coping inventory to the changes in self-compassion subscales in each individual case, we noticed that self-compassion subscales connected to the use of adaptive strategies. However, these strategies appeared to be problem-focused (e.g., problem focus and stress control) rather than emotion-focused.

As for participants' well-being, it increased by 1.3 points after the Renewal programme. We investigated if well-being was related to the MBI-ES burnout dimensions. When we compared the two results, we found that the decreased personal accomplishment dimension of burnout showed similarities in the answer variance to the changes in well-being, and it was a negative correlation. We consider H3 partly confirmed, as scales of coping and well-being changed in the expected direction after the Renewal

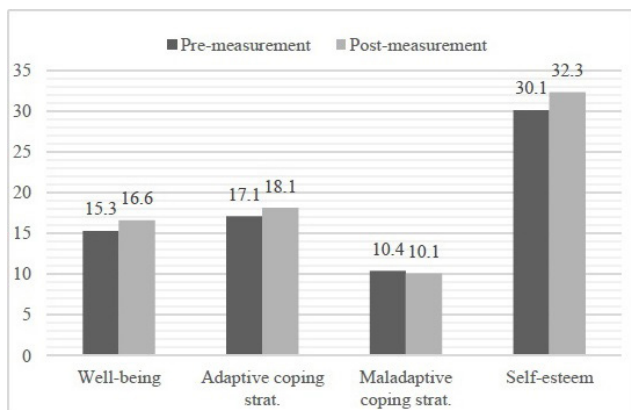
programme, although the changes were small in every case, and the presumed connections between the variables (coping with self-compassion, and burnout with well-being) were only partly confirmed in our study.

### 5.2 Coded transcripts

From the transcripts of the contact sessions, we were able to extract two useful pieces of information: initially, how regularly participants did their homework – meaning we were able to see their level of commitment toward the Renewal programme – but also, by means of text analysis we could find and categorise the most prominent stress-related risk factors as well as protecting factors in their lives. The codes were divided into 10 categories, and 65 subcategories. Altogether 2767 text parts were coded with the 65 different codes (see in Table 1).

Regarding homework, out of the 16 participants, 5 participants did it regularly, and 11 of them did not do it regularly. This is a low engagement rate. We compared the frequency of doing homework (regular vs. non-regular) to the difference of general burnout scores (we withdrawn the post-measurement burnout points from the pre-measurement burnout points) in each individual case, and we found that the engagement of regularly doing homework was related with greater difference in the general burnout score. Hence, our 4<sup>th</sup> Hypothesis is confirmed.

As for the risk- and protecting factors, by qualitative text analysis we created 13 separate codes for risk factors, such as conflict with partner, poor conditions at home, poor conditions at work, conflict with a colleague, work overload. Every idea, thought or experience that participants expressed regarding any of the codes meant one point, and if it referred to the past (e.g., a past conflict with parents), that worth 0.5 point because it is not



**Fig. 3** Average points of the participants on the WHO 5 Well-being Index, the Coping Inventory, and the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale before and after the Renewal program ( $N = 14$ )

Code category name	Number of codes
Risk factors for burnout	17 codes
Protecting factors for burnout	13 codes
Symptoms of burnout	8 codes
Indications of well-being	5 codes
Self-evaluation	2 codes
Self-compassion	6 codes
Coping	2 codes
Motivation	6 codes
Program content remarks	2 codes
Program effectiveness remarks	2 codes
Homework	2 codes



present in the participant's life at the moment, but might have a long-term effect on it. Altogether 472.5 points were counted as risk factors, the most typical risk factors were poor work conditions (116.5 points) and conflicts with work colleagues (116 points) among the participants. As for protecting factors, we created 17 codes, such as social support from partner, religious activity, doing sports, time spent in nature, social support from a friend. Altogether we counted 659 mentions regarding protecting factors, and the most typical factors were social support from colleagues (155 points) and leisure activity (101.5 points). As can be seen, participants of the Renewal programme reported more protecting factors than risk factors, and the average ratio of risk vs. protecting factors was 0.72 in the group. In two cases although, risk factors were higher than protecting factors, in one case the ratio was 1.09 and in the other, 1.21. Regarding our 5<sup>th</sup> Hypothesis, we could only rely on our qualitative observation, since there were only two participants in the group who had a high risk-ratio. One of them did homework regularly, and the other did not. In other words, one of them was engaged by the Renewal programme, and the other was not engaged. In the case of the participant who was doing the homework, the general burnout score decreased with 20 points (emotional exhaustion dimension alone decreased with 12 points), in the other case, for the participant who did not do homework, general burnout decreased by 1 point altogether. This example shows that even though someone had lot of stressors in their life, their level of engagement determined, whether they would be successful on the Renewal programme or not. Thus, we discard our 5<sup>th</sup> Hypothesis.

### 5.3 Follow-up measurement

Nine of the 16 participants completed the test-battery in the follow-up measurement. No one has participated in any self-development course in the past six months according to the participants' own declaration. Two of them practised the exercises several times a week, two once a week, two several times a month, two once per month and one participant did not practise the exercises after the Renewal programme ended. The average group points of the MBI-ES dimensions are showed in Fig. 4. The points of emotional exhaustion remained the same as in the post-measurement. However, depersonalisation and decreased personal accomplishment started to increase. As for the Self-compassion Scale (see Fig. 5), the points on the positive scales were higher in the follow-up measurement than in the post-measurement, which means that participants

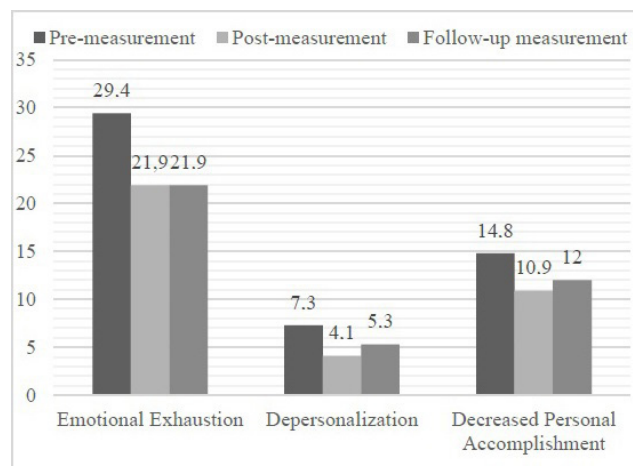


Fig. 4 Average points of the participants on the dimensions of the MBI-ES in the pre-, post- and follow-up measurement of the Renewal program (N = 9)

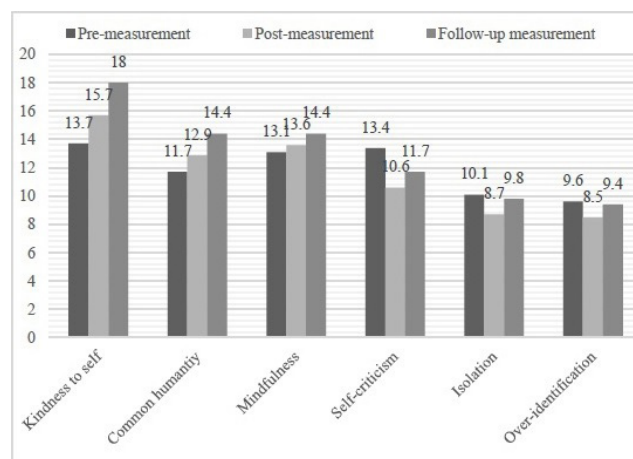


Fig. 5 Average points of the participants on the subscales of the Self-compassion Scale in the pre-, post- and follow-up measurement of the Renewal program (N = 9)

managed to deepen the practices of self-compassion in their lives. On the other hand, negative subscales were also higher compared to the post-measurement.

Regarding the other inventories (well-being, coping strategies, and self-esteem), scores did not change in the follow-up measurement compared to the post-measurement. Our 6<sup>th</sup> Hypothesis is thus only partly confirmed, as only one burnout dimension and the positive self-compassion subscales met our expectations.

Two other qualitative methods were used in the Renewal programme to draw conclusions about the success of the intervention. Our first research question (Q1) was about participants realising their programme goals: we asked participants to define a goal that they would like to reach by the end of the Renewal programme. As for the theme of the programme goals, they related to the improvement of

relationships with work colleagues, and to improving the participants' well-being. Out of the 16 participants, seven reached their goals fully, five partly, two felt they had begun to change, and one participant did not set a goal.

The second qualitative method was the 'Blob trees', which helped participants to identify their emotional state week by week as the Renewal programme proceeded. Regarding our second research question (Q2), we noticed a general improvement in all 16 participants' mood from the start of the programme by the end of the seventh week, by comparing the chosen blob figures from week 1 and week 7. However, for some participants, there were occasional setbacks during the program, due to stressful life events they experienced in their everyday lives over the course of the intervention. It could be also observed that in two out of the five groups, teachers chose those figures from the Blob tree, who were in groups, and their fellow group mates chose the same group of figures, symbolising a bond that was forming between the group members during the Renewal programme.

## 6 Discussion

According to the results, the Renewal programme was effective, as it fulfilled its primary purpose, to reduce teachers' burnout level. As for self-compassion, this proved to be a relatively new concept for the participants, but over time – regarding the follow-up measurement – it could deepen in participants' lives, and the practices had a long-term pay-off. According to Germer (2009), there are four stages that an individual is going through when first encountering the practices of self-compassion. First, when confronting one's negative experiences, aversion tends to be the initial reaction. When someone first tries out the approach of self-compassion, they often find themselves altogether closer to their intense negative emotions. Then comes the phase of curiosity, when – despite their sense of discomfort – individuals start to look at the emotion, and ask questions like 'Where does it come from?' 'Why is it here?' 'What can I do with it?'. And individuals usually realise that the techniques of self-compassion are very effective in handling those difficult emotions. The attitude in the second phase usually develops however to tolerance because individuals think that they might even get away completely from experiencing the bad emotions, and their primary intention is to use the techniques for avoiding feeling bad. The fourth phase is the confident use of the self-compassion technique, where the key becomes allowing (the fourth stage) whenever a negative

life experience comes up, individuals are being able let it be without the urge to getting rid of it. According to Germer (2009), aversion is the natural reaction towards negative emotions of individuals' who are unfamiliar with the approach of self-compassion, because whenever we experience something unpleasant, the instinctive drive tells us to turn away from it (fight or flight). It might therefore take time, when first introducing self-compassion, to understand the concept of it and moreover, to apply it longitudinally in someone's life.

Although the Renewal program was effective in the view of the general burnout scores of the participants, it is also true that only five of them were fully engaged with the program, as only five participants did their homework regularly. It has been also revealed that not only did those participants who were more engaged achieve bigger decreases of burnout level, but also that those whose risk factor ratio was initially high, but nonetheless did their homework regularly, achieved a higher decrease in the dimensions of burnout. It can therefore be concluded that Renewal programme is fully effective only for those who are dedicated.

Regarding the inventory results, two of the burnout scales and the negative scales of self-compassion increased in the follow-up measurement – in contrast to our expectations. The reason for this might be because of lack of social support. The importance of social support as a protecting factor for burnout has been recognised by many previous studies (e.g., Avanzi et al., 2018; Burke and Greenglass, 1995; Fiorilli et al., 2015; Ju et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2014). Thus, the reason for depersonalisation and decreased personal accomplishment increase, and the emerge of self-criticism, isolation, and over-identification with emotions in the follow-up measurement may be because as the Renewal programme ended, teachers who participated had no companions any more who could give them social support. Towards the end of the intervention, the participants chose the figures from the Blob trees that had been collected in the group.

## 7 Limitations, suggestions for future research

Our study was limited in a sense that only 16 participants took the Renewal Program, and we could draw conclusions only according to their data. However, with qualitative methods, used to measure the programme's effectiveness, we obtained a deeper understanding of how the Renewal Programme affected them, and we also gained insights into what explains the results we saw in the pre- and post-measurement.

The low number of participants and the lack of control group might make this research look like a speculation, but it is a very good first start of measuring the effectiveness of such a programme, where the development of the programme itself required the researchers' time and efforts. In the future, an idea for improvement would be to reframe the research as a case study with multiple cases – by having the opportunity to have a deeper understanding of the individuals who participated in the Renewal Programme, or to try and collect additional data (even perhaps in the form of a brief online experiment or as a shortened intervention in schools).

As for supporting participants in their wish to maintain contact with each other even after the programme ended, in the future, a private Facebook-group could be created, which could provide the opportunity not only for creating long-term communicational platform for the participants, but also it may motivate participants to engage more with the intervention, since this platform would allow the programme's trainer to communicate and to send reminders to participants between the contact sessions of the Renewal programme, as well as to encourage participants to ask questions and talk about any issues affecting

their ability to do their homework. Besides, a Facebook group may affect better the effectiveness of self-compassion practices, as according to Seekis et al. (2020), when individuals share their personal experiences relating to self-criticism and negative life-experiences via a private social-media group, and see similar stories from others, it deepens the feelings of common humanity, and shows up close examples that others are dealing with similar issues in their lives. Opening private groups for Renewal programme members and encouraging them for continual conversation and sharing could be an addition that increase the effectiveness of the Renewal programme. With the help of the Renewal programme, it can be hoped that teachers in Hungary may learn to be more self-compassionate, less prone to burnout and more able to create goals that are self-concordant. In such a way, they may resemble true models of enthusiasm, happiness, openness and understanding for their students.

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