



# Self-compassion promotes mental help-seeking in older, not in younger, counselors

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## Abstract

While self-compassion and mental help-seeking are two important aspects emphasized in mental health literature and counseling practice, very little research has focused on how these two are associated particularly among counseling professionals—individuals providing mental health support to others but whose mental health are often overlooked. This cross-sectional study investigated a moderated mediation model examining the role of age and attitudes in the positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention. Using a paper-and-pencil survey, data were collected from a total of 158 Filipino counseling professionals. Results revealed that mental help-seeking attitudes significantly and partially mediated the positive association between self-compassion and mental help-seeking intention. Additionally, age significantly moderated the positive relationship between self-compassion and mental help-seeking attitudes. The significant positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes was strong among older participants, weak among middle-age, and diminished among younger participants. The findings provided insights on the importance of a self-compassion-based approach to counselor training. The implications of preserving counselors' mental health in counseling practice were discussed

**Keywords** Mental help-seeking · Self-compassion · Counseling professionals · Philippines

## Introduction

Counseling professionals have an important role in improving people's lives. Through effective assessment and intervention, they help counseling clients understand their mental health problems and provide the best available interventions. Counseling professionals also contribute to reaching their clients' full potential by helping them identify and invigorate their strengths, and address their weaknesses. However, counselors may also face mental health problems (Roxas et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2014) caused by the challenges in their personal lives and by the nature of their professional role (Thompson et al., 2014). Maintaining stable mental

health among counselors is necessary because it could preserve the quality of their counseling practice and protect client welfare. Despite the critical importance of maintaining counselors' mental health, literature on mental help-seeking among counselors is rather sparse. In addition, studies that focus on counselors in the Philippines, an underrepresented group, are rare and need additional scientific attention. To address these gaps, this study aims to examine the predictors and mechanisms that influence mental help-seeking intention among counselors in the Philippines. Specifically, we aim to examine how mental help-seeking attitudes mediate the positive impact of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention among counselors in the Philippines. We also aim to investigate whether age moderates the influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes.

## Predictors of Mental Help-Seeking

Mental help-seeking is defined as an adaptive coping process and an attempt to obtain external assistance to deal with a mental health concern (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). Previous studies identified predictors of mental help-seeking (Shahwan et al., 2020). For instance, mental health literacy and previous

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history of help-seeking were found to facilitate greater mental help-seeking among Asian Americans (Cheng et al., 2018). Moreover, current experience of psychological distress also motivates help-seeking among Asian Americans (Cheng et al., 2018) and Canadian and American university students (Digal & Gagnon, 2020; Ward-Ciesielski et al., 2019). On the other hand, recent research documented several factors that could hinder people to seek help from mental health professionals including self-stigma (Cheng et al., 2018; Topkaya et al., 2017; Yee et al., 2020), public stigma, social network stigma (Topkaya et al., 2017), preference for self-reliance and low perceived need for care (Clement et al., 2015; Gulliver et al., 2010; Mojtabai et al., 2011), masculine norms and restricted emotionality common among males (Judd et al., 2008). Additionally, the colonial mentality was found to predict negative attitudes towards mental help-seeking among Filipino Americans (Tuazon et al., 2019). Furthermore, there exists an emerging but limited body of research (e.g., Heath et al., 2017, 2018; Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018) that has given attention to the potential role of self-compassion in promoting mental help-seeking, which was the focus of this study.

## Self-Compassion

Self-compassion involves viewing oneself with kindness and in a non-judgmental manner in the face of suffering. It also involves the recognition that one's personal suffering and inadequacy is a common human experience (Neff, 2003). Research indicates that self-compassionate people experience higher levels of psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and better mental health outcomes including lower levels of depression, self-evaluative anxiety, rumination, and negative affect (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003, 2009). Furthermore, emerging research identified self-compassion as an important promoting factor for seeking psychological help. For example, recent findings found that self-compassion predicted more favorable attitudes toward mental help-seeking among intercollegiate athletes (Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018).

Additionally, self-compassion was found to reduce the impact of public stigma and self-stigma on mental help-seeking (Heath et al., 2018). It was also found to buffer the negative influence of masculine norms on mental help-seeking among undergraduate men (Heath et al., 2017). While extant research suggested that self-compassion can encourage mental help-seeking among adolescents, males, and community populations (e.g., Heath et al., 2017, 2018; Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018), there is a dearth of research that focuses on the role of self-compassion on the mental help-seeking among mental health professionals, specifically Filipino counselors, who are underrepresented in the literature. This is despite the critical role of mental health providers' mental health in the quality of care that they provide. The present study addresses this gap by investigating

how self-compassion could predict the mental help-seeking intention among Filipino counseling professionals.

## Counseling Profession in the Philippines

In 2004, the Republic Act 9258, or the Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004 in the Philippines was launched (Tuason & Arellano-Carandang, 2013). This act sought to provide legal rights for counseling professionals to provide counseling services to the Filipino public, with a greater focus on students in public and private school systems. To be a registered guidance counselor, one has to have at least a master's degree in guidance and counseling and pass the national board examination which was first held in 2008. To date, there are at least 4399 registered guidance counselors in the country, with only approximately 400 registered guidance counselors (not including the non-registered counselors working in Philippine public schools) accommodating over 20.4 million K-12 students enrolled in public schools in the school year 2020–2021 (Department of Education, 2020), resulting in a counselor student ratio of approximately 1:51,000. This is not anywhere near the recommended counselor-client ratio of 1:250 by the American School Counselor Association.

Given the personal and psychological impacts of work-related stress and burnout experienced by mental health professionals including counselors (Lim et al., 2010; Moate et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2017), it is therefore imperative to examine mental help-seeking of professional counselors, especially in the Philippine context that has a wide counselor-client ratio gap. As evidence on the detrimental mental health consequences of work-related stress and burnout among counseling professionals emerges (Lent & Schwartz, 2012; Mullen et al., 2017), it is necessary to examine the mental help-seeking intention among counselors in countries like the Philippines where there is a wide gap in the counselor-student ratio.

## Attitudes as a Mediator between Self-Compassion and Mental Help-Seeking

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) proposed that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are important predictors of people's intention to engage in the target behavior. In this study, we focused on mental help-seeking attitudes as a relevant mechanism that could boost Filipino counselors' intention to seek mental health services. Ajzen (1991) explained that people with positive attitudes towards the target behavior give importance to the positive consequences of engaging in the behavior. Past studies showed that attitudes toward mental health help-seeking are important predictors of intention to seek mental health services (Dalida et al., 2018; Hess & Tracey, 2013;

Mak & Davis, 2014; Mo & Mak, 2009; Shi & Hall, 2021; Tanhan & Young, 2022). For instance, more positive attitudes towards mental help-seeking increased people's intent to seek psychological help among Chinese college students (Shi & Hall, 2021) and adults (Mak & Davis, 2014; Mo & Mak, 2009). Given the scientific evidence on the positive impact of self-compassion on people's mental help-seeking attitudes and intention (Heath et al., 2017, 2018; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018) and the wealth of evidence on the proximal and positive influence of mental help-seeking attitudes on intention to seek psychological help (Hess & Tracey, 2013; Mak & Davis, 2014; Mo & Mak, 2009; Shi & Hall, 2021), there is a reason to speculate that mental help-seeking attitudes could operate as a psychological mechanism that facilitates the positive impact of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes. We tested this proposition by examining the mediating effect of mental help-seeking attitudes on the self-compassion and mental help-seeking intention association using a sample of professional counselors in the Philippines.

### The Role of Age

Past studies showed that self-compassion and mental help-seeking may vary across age groups. In terms of self-compassion, while other studies found that older adults have lower self-compassion compared to their younger counterparts (e.g., Bluth et al., 2017), there is extant evidence showing that older individuals have greater levels of self-compassion due to the breadth of life experiences that gave them opportunities to apply compassion strategies (Mackenzie et al., 2006; Zessin et al., 2015). A meta-analysis demonstrated that the impact of self-compassion on well-being was stronger among older adults (Zessin et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the lack of emotional competence among younger individuals was found to inhibit them from seeking psychological help (Ciarrochi et al., 2003).

In terms of mental help-seeking, several studies have suggested that age is a predictive factor for help-seeking with younger individuals holding more negative attitudes towards mental health services (Gonzalez et al., 2011; Golberstein et al., 2009), in comparison to the older individuals (Shahwan et al., 2020). For instance, older community-dwelling adults in Canada were found to have greater levels of intention to seek psychological help compared to their younger counterparts in the community (Mackenzie et al., 2006). More recent evidence showed that older adults carry less stigma and more positive attitudes toward mental help-seeking (Mackenzie et al., 2019). While previous studies examined the influence of self-compassion on help-seeking (e.g., Heath et al., 2017, 2018; Wasylikiw & Clairo, 2018), there is a lack of studies that focused on the buffering role of age in this relationship, especially among mental health providers specifically counseling professionals. This study aims

to fill this gap by examining the moderating effect of age on the positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes among Filipino counseling professionals.

### The Present Study

The current study sought to examine a moderated mediation model demonstrating the predictors and mechanisms that promote and/or hinder the mental help-seeking intention among counseling professionals in the Philippines. Specifically, we aimed to investigate the extent of the influence of self-compassion on the participants' intention to seek psychological help, and whether their mental help-seeking attitudes would mediate the self-compassion-mental help-seeking intention relationship. Moreover, this study also aimed to examine the moderating role of age, as a proxy for counseling professional experience, on the positive relationship between self-compassion and mental help-seeking attitudes among Filipino counseling professionals. We reason that this is an important scientific venture given the limited research that examined self-compassion and its impact on mental help-seeking within the context of one's professional role. As there are unwritten expectations for counselors to possess the needed skills in managing their personal mental health concerns (Roxas et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2017), it is imperative to investigate the factors and mechanisms that might predict their mental help-seeking intention.

In summary, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Filipino counselors with higher levels of self-compassion would report greater intention to seek psychological help.

H2: Mental help-seeking attitudes would mediate the positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention.

H3: Older Filipino counselors would endorse more positive attitudes towards mental help-seeking compared to the younger ones.

H4: Age would moderate the positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes among Filipino counselors. Specifically, the impact of self-compassion would be weak among younger professionals and strong among older professionals.

## Methods

### Participants and Procedure

This study set the target effect size as .30 and then set  $\alpha$  as .05 and statistical power ( $1-\beta$ ) as .95. These parameters were entered into G\*Power 3.1.9, which recommended total sample size of 111. Exceeding the recommended sample size,

a total of 158 professional counselors (Females = 80.4%) from the Philippines, with ages ranging from 21 to 74 years old (Mean age = 32.53) participated in this study. In terms of civil status, more than two-thirds of the sample (67.1%) were single, almost one-third of them were married (30.4%), and a few did not report (2.5%). Data were collected from counseling professionals who participated in professional training sessions and workshops conducted in three different parts of the country (the capital of Manila, and provinces of Cebu and Davao). A paper-and-pencil questionnaire was distributed to the participants. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed that their identity would be anonymous and that all their information would remain confidential. They were also informed about their right to withdraw from their participation or their data in the research at any time. After securing informed consent, participants were instructed to complete a paper-and-pencil self-report questionnaire consisting of measures of self-compassion, mental help-seeking attitudes and intention, and demographic information.

## Measures

### Self-Compassion

To assess the extent to which Filipino counselors are compassionate towards themselves, we employed the 12-item Self-Compassion Scale - Short Form (SCS-SF; Raes et al., 2011). A sample item is, “*I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.*” Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *almost never* to 5 = *almost always*. Higher scores in SCS-SF would mean greater levels of self-compassion. Previous studies showed that SCS-SF is a valid and reliable ( $\alpha = .85$ ) tool in assessing self-compassion among the general population in Spain (Garcia-Campayo et al., 2014). In the present study, participants’ scores on SCS-SF yielded overall reliability  $\alpha = .82$ .

### Mental Help-Seeking Intention

The present study utilized the 3-item Mental Help-Seeking Intention Scale (MHSIS; Hammer & Spiker, 2018) to assess Filipino counselors’ willingness to receive psychological help when they experience mental health concerns. One

sample item is, “*If I had a mental health concern, I would INTEND to seek help from a mental health professional.*” Participants rated each item on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *definitely false* to 7 = *definitely true*), with higher scores indicating greater intention to seek mental health assistance. Participants’ responses yielded an overall reliability  $\alpha = .93$ .

### Mental-Help Seeking Attitudes

We used the 9-item Mental Help-Seeking Attitudes Scale (MHSAS; Hammer et al., 2018) to measure Filipino counselors’ attitudes towards seeking psychological help from another professional. The participants were asked to read the statement, “*If I had a mental health concern, seeking help from a mental health professional:*” and indicated their attitude by rating the items (e.g., unfavorable, neutral, favorable) through a 7-point Likert scale. High scores indicated more favorable attitudes in seeking mental help from another professional. The overall reliability of the participants’ responses in MHSAS was  $\alpha = .90$ . Negatively-stated items were reverse-coded prior to data analysis.

## Results

### Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) and intercorrelations among the variables. Skewness and kurtosis were in the acceptable range ( $<|2|$ ) indicating approximately normal distribution across all the variables. In addition, the correlations among the variables were in the predicted direction except for age which did not correlate with mental help-seeking attitudes.

### Moderated Mediation Analysis

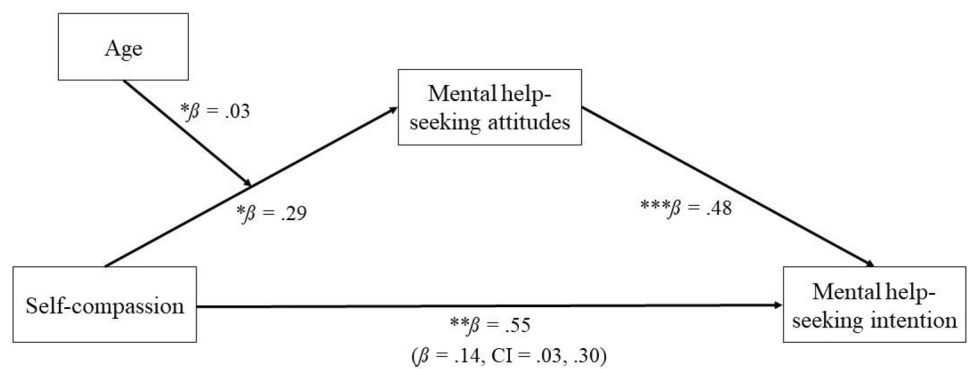
To test the forwarded hypotheses, we employed Model 7 of PROCESS macro for SPSS using 5000 bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence interval (CI) (Hayes, 2013). As illustrated in Fig. 1, the results provided support for H1 as Filipino counselors’ self-compassion positively and significantly predicted mental help-seeking intention ( $\beta = .55, p < .$

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1. Age	32.53	11.54	1.30	1.50	–		
2. Self-compassion	3.62	.51	–.19	.14	.17*	–	
3. Mental help-seeking attitudes	6.23	.83	–1.01	.30	.02	.18*	–
4. Mental help-seeking intentions	5.60	1.16	–.94	.94	.03	.30**	.39**

\*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

**Fig. 1** Final moderated mediation model predicting Filipino counselors’ mental help-seeking intention. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$



**Table 2** Indirect effects of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intentions via attitudes across age groups

Age groups	Indirect effect	SE	95% CI	
			LL	UL
Young counselors	.005	.07	-.14	.17
Middle-aged counselors	.15	.06	.04	.30
Older counselors	.30	.10	.11	.54

CI confidence interval, LL lower limit, UL upper limit, SD standard deviation, young counselors = -1 SD, middle-aged counselors = grand mean, older counselors = +1 SD

\*\* $p < .01$

01, CI = .22, .88). Confirming H2, results showed a significant mediation effect of mental help-seeking attitudes on the self-compassion-mental help-seeking intention relationship ( $\beta = .14$ , CI = .03, .30). Specifically, self-compassion significantly and positively predicted mental help-seeking attitudes ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .05$ , CI = .04, .54), and in turn, mental help-seeking attitudes significantly and positively influenced mental help-seeking intention ( $\beta = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI = .28, .68). To examine how the inclusion of age in the model has affected the mediation effect of mental help-seeking attitudes, we examined the mediation effects of attitudes on the positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention across the age levels. Through the automatic function of Model 7 of PROCESS Macro for SPSS, we identified +1 SD age as the older, grand Mean as middle-aged, and -1 SD as younger cohorts of counseling professionals. Table 2 illustrates that the partial indirect effect of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention via mental help-seeking attitudes was significant and strongest among older ( $\beta = .30$ , CI = .11, .54), significant but weaker among middle-aged ( $\beta = .15$ , CI = .04, .30) counselors, and not significant among their younger counterparts ( $\beta = .005$ , CI = -.14, .17).

Looking at the moderating influence of age on the positive relationship between self-compassion and mental help-seeking attitudes, results did not find support for H3 by showing that age did not have a direct effect on mental help-seeking

**Table 3** Conditional effects of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes across age groups

Age groups	$\beta$	SE	t	95% CI	
				LL	UL
Young counselors	.01	.18	.06	-.35	.37
Middle-aged counselors	.31**	.13	2.44	.06	.57
Older counselors	.62**	.19	3.10	.22	1.01

CI confidence interval, LL lower limit, UL upper limit, SD standard deviation, young counselors = -1 SD, middle-aged counselors = grand mean, older counselors = +1 SD

\*\* $p < .01$

attitudes ( $\beta = -.002$ ,  $p < .73$ ). However, age has a significant moderating impact on self-compassion ( $\beta = .03$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and mental help-seeking attitudes association, providing support for H4. Moreover, the impact of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes was analyzed across the age groups. Specifically, Table 3 shows that the positive impact of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes was strongest ( $\beta = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ) among older counselors, weaker ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ ) among the middle-aged, and diminished ( $\beta = .01$ ,  $p < .95$ ) among the younger counselor cohort. Results show that the overall model was significant ( $F [2, 155] = 20.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Self-compassion accounted for 9.17% of the variance in mental help-seeking intention. Adding mental help-seeking attitudes (8.65%) and age (2.77%) in the model resulted in a total of 20.59% of the variance accounting for Filipino counselors’ mental help-seeking intention.

## Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the antecedents of mental help-seeking intention among counseling professionals in the Philippines. We hypothesized that self-compassion will positively predict Filipino counselors’ mental help-seeking intention via mental help-seeking attitudes. Additionally, we proposed that age will moderate the positive relationship



between self-compassion and mental help-seeking attitudes. In general, we found support to our hypotheses by showing that mental help-seeking partially mediated the influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention. Findings also confirmed the moderating impact of age on the self-compassion-mental help-seeking attitudes association by showing that the impact of self-compassion on mental help-seeking was stronger among older Filipino counselors, but not significant among the younger ones.

## Key Findings

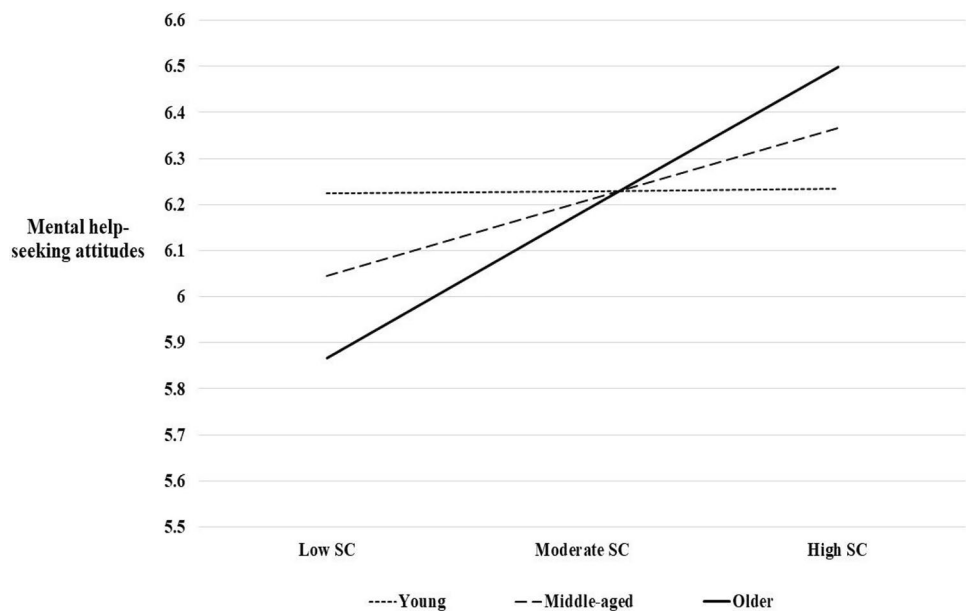
The results provided support for H1 as self-compassion positively and significantly predicted mental help-seeking intention among Filipino counselors. This implies that participants who treat themselves with kindness and recognize their suffering as a common human experience are more likely to endorse a willingness to seek psychological help from a fellow mental health professional. This finding lends support for previous studies (e.g., Heath et al., 2017, 2018; Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018) showing the relevant role of self-compassion in motivating people to seek psychological help in undergraduate students and male populations. The present findings extended this line of research by showing that self-compassion remains an important predictor of mental help-seeking intention among professional counselors who are often the ones providing mental healthcare service. This finding is particularly important as the study focused on an underrepresented context such as the Philippines.

Providing support for H2, we highlight the significant partial indirect effect of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention via mental help-seeking attitudes among Filipino counselors. In other words, Filipino counselors who

are kind to themselves and appreciate the common humanity in the face of adversities endorse more favorable attitudes towards seeking psychological help from a fellow mental health professional, which in turn increases their intention to actually seek help. While theory and previous research showed the importance of self-compassion in promoting mental help-seeking (Heath et al., 2017, 2018; Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018) and the facilitative role of attitudes towards mental help-seeking in motivating people to actually seek help (Ajzen, 1991; Hess & Tracey, 2013; Mak & Davis, 2014; Mo & Mak, 2009; Shi & Hall, 2021) in student and general populations, the current findings contributed to the literature by examining self-compassion, mental help-seeking attitudes, and intention in concert with each other in one coherent model among counseling professionals, which is often neglected in the literature. More importantly, the study demonstrated that attitudes towards mental help-seeking serve as a significant psychological mechanism that facilitates the positive influence of self-compassion on intention to seek psychological help.

Contrary to previous findings (Gonzalez et al., 2011; Golberstein et al., 2009; Shahwan et al., 2020) and H3, the current finding found no direct influence of age on Filipino counselors' mental help-seeking attitudes. Since we are more interested in the moderating role of age, we focused our explanation on the moderation analysis findings. Our most important finding was that age moderated the positive association between self-compassion and mental help-seeking attitudes, confirming H4. Specifically, Fig. 2 demonstrated that the positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes was strong among older and weakened among middle-aged counseling professionals. Interestingly, we found that the significant positive impact

**Fig. 2** Graphical representation of the interaction effect between self-compassion and age on mental help-seeking attitudes among Filipino counseling professionals. *Note:* SC = Self-compassion



diminished among their younger counterparts. Similarly, the mediating effect of attitudes on self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention was significant and strong among older counselors, significant but weak among the middle-aged cohort, and vanished among the younger counselors. In support of this finding, previous studies showed that age is a predictive factor for help-seeking behaviors such that younger individuals hold more negative attitudes towards mental health services (Gonzalez et al., 2011; Golberstein et al., 2009) compared to older adults (Shahwan et al., 2020). It is possible that the lack of sufficient professional experience may have heightened the reservations among younger counseling professionals to seek help due to fear of professional stigma. On the other hand, the breadth of experience among older counseling professionals may have equipped them not only with a conceptual understanding of self-compassion but also with in-depth appreciation that they may have applied in their personal and professional lives over the years. While past studies showed that self-compassion plays an important role in invigorating people's opinion about seeking mental health services (Heath et al., 2017, 2018; Wasyliw & Clairo, 2018), the current findings extended this line of research by elucidating that age could amplify the influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes among Filipino counselors.

Taken together, the present findings contributed to the literature in several important ways. First, this study illustrated that attitude towards mental help-seeking operates as a significant psychological mechanism that facilitates the positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking intention. Second, the current findings demonstrated that counseling professionals' age or maturity in the field could strengthen the importance of self-compassion in promoting their mental help-seeking when faced with adversities in life. Third, the present study contributed to the literature by focusing on counseling professionals who are largely neglected in the mental health literature. They are humans too who are not immune to the detrimental psychological consequences of personal and professional problems. Fourth, this study contributed to the predominantly Western-based literature by providing attention to samples in the Philippines, who are underrepresented in counseling research.

### Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of the present study offer opportunities for future research. First, the sample size in this study is small, hence, readers should be careful when generalizing the findings. Future research may consider recruiting a more representative sample for counseling professionals by sampling from different regions in the target country. Second, the participants were predominantly females. Although the psychology field is predominantly a female profession (APA

Workforce Study, 2016), studies in the future should recruit participants with comparable gender distribution. Given the previous evidence that males have a lower propensity for mental help-seeking due to endorsement of masculine norms (e.g., Judd et al., 2008), future research should examine the present hypotheses among male counseling professionals. Third, the outcome variable in this study focused on mental help-seeking intention and not on actual help-seeking behavior. Future studies may measure counselors' actual help-seeking behavior to have a more objective estimate on the predictive power of self-compassion in promoting help-seeking among counseling professionals. Fourth, the findings do not imply causation due to its correlational nature. Future studies may consider examining the hypotheses in a controlled laboratory setting to establish cause-and-effect. Fifth, there is a need to examine the hypothesis in cross-cultural contexts given the cultural malleability of psychological constructs such as self-compassion (Roxas et al., 2019) and mental help-seeking (Chen et al., 2016). Although the data were collected in a collectivistic culture like the Philippines (Aruta, 2016, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), conducting a cross-cultural analysis would provide meaningful insights when both country-level and individual-level factors are considered. Lastly, we recommend conducting an in-depth and innovative qualitative exploration of the self-compassion and mental health experiences of counselors. One potential approach is the use of Online Photovoice (OPV) which has been found to be useful in the effective expression of participants' experiences with little manipulation (Tanhan & Strack, 2020). Such an approach can also be useful given the current COVID-19 restrictions (Tanhan et al., 2021). Despite its limitations, the current study provided important implications for counseling training and practice.

### Implications for Counseling Practice

The findings of the present study provide several important implications to counseling practice. First, although not an explicit focus of the study, our findings indicated that Filipino counseling professionals may have varying degrees of mental help-seeking attitudes and intentions. Despite their training to value the importance of seeking help from mental health professionals when experiencing psychological distress, many counselors may still carry less favorable attitudes in seeking mental health services themselves from fellow professionals. This may be due to their perceived stigma or consequences to their image, competence, and status as a professional for being known to personally suffer from mental health concerns. Literature on stigma among mental health professionals highlighted that mental health professionals can both be stigma recipients and stigmatizers (Schulze, 2007). To reduce the perceived negative consequences of seeking

help, professional counseling organizations should create safe spaces where counseling professionals can seek help from fellow professionals without the fear of potential career repercussions.

Second, the results of this study identified the importance of self-compassion among counseling professionals by demonstrating that Filipino counselors who show self-kindness, avoid self-judgment, and appreciate the common humanity of their suffering endorse a greater willingness to seek psychological help themselves. Thus, counseling professionals may benefit by being exposed to self-compassion-based training and programs. Several studies highlighted that increases in people's self-compassion could encourage mental help-seeking (Heath et al., 2017, 2018; Wasylkiw & Clairo, 2018). Additionally, recent studies found the well-being benefits of self-compassion among counseling professionals (Roxas et al., 2019).

Third, our results found that attitudes towards mental help-seeking serve as a psychological mechanism that promotes self-compassion and the mental help-seeking intention relationship. Therefore, enhancing counselors' intention to seek psychological help requires solutions that focus on developing more favorable attitudes towards personal mental help-seeking. For instance, organizational, and professional cultures that put a greater premium on the personal and professional benefits of seeking help rather than emphasizing its negative professional consequences may be beneficial in encouraging counseling professionals to seek help when faced with life's challenges.

Fourth, our findings showed that the positive influence of self-compassion on mental help-seeking attitudes was strong among older professionals. However, its impact weakens among their middle-aged counterparts and diminished among the younger ones. Improving counseling practice may require further improvement of support and training for early career counseling professionals. More seasoned counselors may consider supporting beginning colleagues by providing advice and information on how to appreciate and apply self-compassion strategies in personal and professional contexts. Given that they can be especially prone to work-related stress and burnout (Cosgrave et al., 2018; Volpe et al., 2014), creating a professional culture with safe spaces where they would feel unthreatened to disclose their possible mental health concerns is imperative. More importantly, preserving the mental health of the mental health providers does not only protect them from the detrimental consequences of psychological concerns, but it could also serve as a way to protect client welfare. Counseling professionals with fulfilled mental health needs are better able to provide quality services to their counseling clients.

## Implications for Counselor Training

This study also identified important implications for counselor training. First, counselor educators may consider practicing a conscious effort to integrate the importance of personal mental help-seeking to counselors-in-training. Acting as role models in recognizing personal vulnerability to mental health problems despite one's professional training may communicate to students that even counselors are not immune to mental health problems and that experiencing mental health problems is acceptable, not threatening, and not a sign of professional weakness. Evidence suggests that counselors-in-training are likely to model the professional behavior of counselor educators that directly handle them (Aruta et al., 2019). At the graduate program level, graduate programs may provide training and opportunities to aspiring counselors that highlight the importance of recognizing one's vulnerability and the personal and professional benefits of seeking help when needed.

Counselor-educators may utilize pedagogical strategies that teach counseling trainees to develop self-compassion. For instance, providing opportunities for students to engage in novel experiences that would allow them to practice self-compassion and process the experiences in-depth during class discussions and supervision sessions may be particularly important. Counselor training programs should consider ways to incorporate self-compassion into the graduate training curriculum. Compassion-based courses and training may be developed and implemented to allow counseling students to understand the conceptual basis for self-compassion and to develop practical self-compassion skills that they can apply in their personal and professional lives. This recommendation is consistent with previous research that highlighted the importance of self-compassion in counselor training (Nelson et al., 2018; Roxas et al., 2019). When utilizing self-compassion training, counselor educators are encouraged to share personal experiences of using self-compassion, guide students in their engagement in self-compassion-based activities, and monitor the potential adverse reactions of trainees in the process of learning self-compassion strategies. More importantly, teach students to apply self-compassion in the counseling context given the evidence for the facilitative role of self-compassion in counseling practice (Patsiopoulos & Buchanan, 2011).

## Conclusion

One way to protect client welfare is to give attention to and support for the mental health of mental health providers. This current study surmises that counseling professionals who treat themselves with kindness, are non-judgmental of their shortcomings and failures, and view one's suffering as



a natural part of human existence is more likely to seek psychological help from a fellow professional in times of emotional distress. Self-compassion may serve as a protective factor against the further development of the inimical consequences of psychological problems due to its motivational role in seeking help. Moreover, there is a need to provide appropriate support to early career counseling professionals given that their lack of experience and grasp of the field may put them at risk for mental health problems as a result of less favorable attitudes towards personally seeking mental health support. In summary, the current findings offered insights on the importance of self-compassion in promoting mental help-seeking among counseling professionals from varying age cohorts in an underrepresented region such as the Philippines.

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**Data Availability** The data used in this study can be made available to any party upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Ethical Standards** All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki declaration or comparable ethical standards.

**Conflict of Interest** The author/s claimed no conflict of interest in the present study.

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