



# From Existential Concerns to Stress-Related Growth: The Mediating Role of Self-Compassion

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## Abstract

Young adulthood is a critical developmental stage during which individuals often grapple with existential concerns (ECs), such as meaning, purpose, and mortality. These concerns may prevent psychological adjustment if left unexplored, but resources such as self-compassion (SC) can encourage adaptive growth. This study explores how ECs affect stress-related growth (SRG) via the mediating role of SC. The study group comprised 331 young adults aged 18 to 37 ( $M^{\text{age}} = 21.05$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ). Of these, 271 (81.87%) were female and 60 (18.13%) were male. Data were collected using the Existential Concerns Scale, the Self-Compassion Scale Short Form, and the Stress-Related Growth Scale. After verifying the assumptions of normality, descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlations, and mediation analysis using Hayes's PROCESS macro (Model 4) were conducted. The results showed that ECs were negatively associated with SC, while SC was positively linked to SRG. ECs did not directly affect SRG. However, they indirectly reduced SRG through decreased SC. The indirect (negative) and direct (positive) effects were in opposite directions, indicating the opposing mediation effect. This pattern suggests that SC plays a pivotal role in buffering the adverse effects of ECs, thereby fostering SRG in young adults. This study offers new insights into SC's protective and transformative role in the relationship between ECs and SRG, providing significant contributions to psychological counseling services and preventive mental health interventions for young adults.

## Keywords:

Existential concerns • Self-compassion • Stress-related growth • Young adulthood

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## Introduction

Young adulthood represents a critical developmental stage characterized by intense questioning of identity and profound contemplation on the meaning of life (Lundvall, Lindberg, Hörberg, Palmér, & Carlsson, 2019; Lundvall, Hörberg, Palmér, Carlsson, & Lindberg, 2020). This study uses “young adulthood” instead of “emerging adulthood” since the sample includes university students with a broader age range, some already in stable adult roles. While increased freedom and new roles offer developmental opportunities, they concurrently generate uncertainty and ECs for many individuals (Lundvall et al., 2020). Young adults grapple intensely with fundamental existential questions and choices, rendering them particularly susceptible to societal problems and global conflicts (Lundvall et al., 2019). This period often involves intense future anxiety, difficulty to evaluate life positively, and challenges in attributing meaning to actions, stemming from incomplete identity formation and complex decision-making processes (Gawda, 2022). These difficulties are exacerbated by the increasingly mechanistic nature of life driven by rapid digitalization and information technologies, which further impedes meaning-making (Hashmi, Syed, & Zafar, 2024). Successfully navigating the core developmental task of establishing a unique, meaningful sense of self within the social context is essential for well-being. However, failure in this task predisposes individuals to negative emotions like anxiety, loneliness, and guilt (Galanaki, Nelson, & Antoniou, 2023). Consequently, addressing ECs-related problems during young adulthood to identify protective and supportive factors remains an individual and societal imperative.

ECs is one of the key concepts of Existential Psychotherapy. Developing from the work of continental philosophers, Existential Psychotherapy is concerned with people and their existence, focusing on issues such as death, freedom, responsibility, meaning, and meaninglessness (Sharf, 2011). This approach is defined as a process that allows individuals to explore the elements that limit their existence. During this process, individuals work through their anxieties and uncertainties while moving toward authentic integration (Yalom & Josselson, 2018). The Existential Therapy school recognizes that everyone experiences concerns (Yalom, 2024). According to this school of thought, anxiety is defined as a persistent threat to the center of existence rather than a response to environmental threats and is considered a human quality originating from human existence (May, 2018). Separate ECs are described as the emotion created by the possibility of losing consciousness of one’s own existence (Gençtan, 2017). ECs encompass fears arising from fundamental human existential threats, including death, loneliness, identity uncertainty, free will, responsibility, and life meaning uncertainties, fostering constant awareness of one’s existence (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006; van Bruggen et al., 2017). Young adulthood, marked by developmental tasks like identity exploration, purpose finding, and gaining independence, is a period where ECs prominently emerge.

Future uncertainty, performance pressure, societal expectations, and external crises—especially where cultural coping mechanisms falter—trigger profound questioning about life’s meaning, choices, and responsibilities (Lundvall et al., 2019; Smirnov & Makarova, 2025).

Building on these foundational challenges, ECs are significantly associated with adverse mental health outcomes in young adults, including heightened symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and identity disturbances (Alshehri et al., 2024; Berman, Weems, & Stickle, 2006; Menzies, Sharpe, Favaloro, & Kearney, 2025). Young adults navigate complex educational and career choices alongside decisions regarding beliefs and values, fundamentally confronting the challenge of establishing a meaningful life. Understanding these existential issues is therefore critical for supporting young adult well-being (MacMillan, 2019). While developmental stressors like ECs pose significant risks, they concurrently present opportunities for individual growth and positive transformation. The SRG perspective offers crucial insights into how young people cope with ECs. SRG, linked to reduced anxiety and depression, enhances mental health by fostering a development-oriented perspective derived from challenging experiences (Wang, Rendina, & Pachankis, 2016). Individuals with higher SRG levels achieve psychological benefits by employing more adaptive coping responses to high stress (Mansfield & Diamond, 2017). Although the inherent search for existential meaning in young adulthood can provoke intense anxiety, effectively managing this stress can catalyze inner development and psychological transformation. Beyond aiding individual coping, widespread SRG can generate positive societal effects, such as improved population health and health behaviors (Park, 1998). Consequently, investigating the psychological responses elicited by ECs in young adulthood, and how these are associated with SRG, has significant theoretical and practical potential for advancing mental health. Furthermore, identifying mediating variables within this relationship is crucial. This knowledge is essential for refining individual-level psychological interventions and for structuring more effective community-based mental health policies (Mansfield & Diamond, 2017). Therefore, ECs should not be only considered as the sources of psychological distress, but also as potential predictors for growth, provided sufficient internal resources are provided.

Research shows that ECs are common among adolescents and young adults, with links to psychological difficulties such as emotional distress and identity-related challenges (Arredondo & Caparrós, 2023; Berman et al., 2006; Menzies et al., 2025; Scott & Weems, 2013). However, recognizing and making sense of ECs also presents a critical opportunity for deepening self-understanding, developing life control, and fostering positive inner transformation (Moore & Goldner-Vukov, 2009). ECs can lead individuals to experience meaningful events that enhance feelings of maturity, wisdom, and emotional development (Smirnov & Makarova, 2025). Challenging experiences, like the COVID-19 pandemic, can trigger ECs, prompting re-evaluation

of past difficulties and transforming life enjoyment, mental balance, and existential beliefs (Tomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2020). Thus, while often approached from psychopathology, intense stress from ECs can also enable the restriction of self-perception and SRG, facilitated by meaning-making processes over time (Arredondo & Caparrós, 2023; Scott & Weems, 2013).

SRG refers to positive psychological, emotional, and existential changes occurring after stressful or challenging life events, enabling individuals to surpass prior functionality and achieve higher well-being (Dolbier, Jaggars, & Steinhardt, 2010; Kesimci, Göral, & Gençöz, 2005; Sim & Frydenberg, 2011). Rooted in the understanding that life's challenges are prerequisites for self-realization and meaning construction (Aslam, 2012), SRG manifests as an increased life appreciation, deeper relationships, strengthened self-concept, shifted priorities, and enriched existential/spiritual perspectives (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Although termed variably (e.g., "post-traumatic growth", "benefit finding"), "stress-related growth" is used here for its applicability to stressors of varying severity, not just high trauma (Cho & Park, 2013; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Sim & Frydenberg, 2011). This growth process involves reflecting on events and reinterpreting experiences with new values and meanings (Solcova & Tavel, 2017).

SRG aligns with humanistic and existential psychology, facilitating more authentic, conscious, and purposeful living (Joseph, 2015). Meaning-making is central to coping with ECs and stress, sustaining existence and bridging meaning gaps (Park & Folkman, 1997). Intense stressors can fragment an individual's assumptive world, necessitating the construction of a new, coherent life narrative (Bray, 2010). Through attributions, reattributions, and positive reframing, individuals construct meaning, potentially leading to SRG and the reestablishment of existential balance (Park, 1998). Thus, SRG represents the deeper insights and positive changes gained over time through meaning-making in response to ECs, transforming existential challenges into opportunities for restructuring and growth. Given these potential growth opportunities, identifying psychological resources that facilitate adaptive coping becomes particularly important. Among these, SC emerges as a potential critical factor that may buffer the negative effects of ECs while fostering SRG.

SC, as a key determinant of well-being, enhances individuals' psychological resilience in the face of stressful life events by fostering a kind, accepting, and nonjudgmental attitude toward personal failures and difficulties (Allen & Leary, 2010; Neff, 2023). Conceptualized as a healthy self-related approach, SC involves recognizing one's suffering as a part of the shared human experience, replacing harsh self-criticism with understanding, and approaching negative emotions with mindful awareness (Crego, Yela, Riesco-Matías, Gómez-Martínez, & Vicente-Arruebarrena, 2022; Neff, 2011). Individuals with high levels of SC are more likely

to engage in adaptive coping strategies, while those with low SC tend to respond in more maladaptive ways (Ewert, Vater, & Schröder-Abé, 2021; Germer & Neff, 2013). This regulatory function of SC is particularly critical during ECs, as it helps mitigate feelings of meaninglessness, isolation, and inadequacy by promoting emotional stability and enabling individuals to view crises as opportunities for inner transformation (Neff, 2023; Umandap & Teh, 2020).

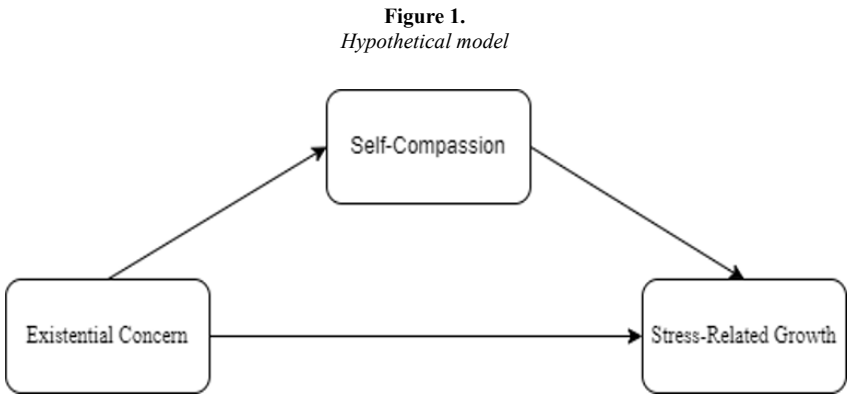
SC has been identified as a protective factor against adverse outcomes associated with challenging life experiences, such as trauma (Zeller, Yuval, Nitzan-Assayag, & Bernstein, 2015). Adonis, Loucaides, Sullman, and Lajunen (2025) explored in their study with adults who had experienced trauma that SC was linked to higher SRG, even among the participants with high levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms. Similarly, Wong and Yeung (2017) found that SC influences SRG through positive reframing and sense of meaning. This suggests that SC is a resource that enhances adaptive cognitive coping processes and is associated with higher levels of SRG. Consistent with these findings, Yuhan, Wang, Canada, and Schwartz (2021) have observed that SC acts as a resilience factor. They argue that it provides the individuals with the cognitive and emotional resources necessary for their growth by mediating the capacity to grow from challenging experiences. Extending this perspective, Chan et al. (2020) also demonstrated that SC may be an underlying mediating process in alleviating SRG and psychological distress. The findings suggest that SC may play different roles: It can enhance personal resources when confronting challenging experiences and facilitate greater SRG. SC supports the development of a compassionate inner dialogue, which facilitates the constructive interpretation of adverse experiences and promotes SRG (Han & Kim, 2023; Mansfield, Pasupathi, & McLean, 2015; Yuhan et al., 2021). Furthermore, by mediating the relationship between individual experiences and emotional well-being, SC underscores the significance of SC-based interventions in promoting emotional well-being (Bluth & Blanton, 2014). Therefore, SC can be considered a significant cognitive and emotional resource that not only buffers the psychological impact of ECs but also fosters positive adaptation, potentially mediating the relationship between ECs and SRG.

Despite previous insights in the literature, the relationship between ECs and SRG remains under-researched, particularly regarding the psychological mechanisms that facilitate the transformation of existential distress into growth. This study contributes to the literature by introducing SC as a potential mediating variable in this transformation process. Given that SC nurtures a kind, accepting, and emotionally balanced attitude in the face of suffering, it may enable young adults to reframe ECs-induced distress in more constructive and growth-promoting ways. Thus, the investigation of SCs mediating role in the ECs–SRG link will provide novel theoretical insights. Moreover, this study theoretically integrates concepts from existential psychology, humanistic approaches, and third-wave cognitive-behavioral models by emphasizing SC as a core psychological resource that supports emotional regulation,

meaning construction, and authentic self-development in young adults facing ECs. By examining how SC functions as an adaptive mechanism during developmental processes—such as identity formation, value clarification, and life purpose construction—it advances a nuanced understanding of adaptive coping responses to ECs. This perspective transcends pathology-oriented frameworks, reframing ECs as the catalysts for SRG and existential maturation. Furthermore, the research enriches SRG theory by expanding its scope to include non-traumatic, developmentally existential stressors and identifying SC as a growth-facilitating variable. These theoretical insights carry significant practical implications: SC’s promotive role in the ECs–SRG process informs the design of early interventions, prevention programs, and psychoeducational initiatives for youth confronting existential difficulties (e.g., future uncertainty, identity confusion, value conflicts). Cultivating SCs may reduce maladaptive coping, foster positive reappraisal, and strengthen inner resilience, thereby enabling individuals to navigate existential vulnerability with heightened emotional intelligence. Consequently, it facilitates healthier psychological adjustment and long-term well-being—findings directly applicable to community-based mental health initiatives, school/university counseling curricula, and evidence-informed young policy development.

Building on previous literature, this study investigates the correlations between ECs, SC, and SRG. Moreover, the present study also focuses to advance this understanding by specifically investigating the mediating role of SC in the relationship between ECs and SRG (see Figure 1). The hypotheses of the present study are as follows:

- H1a.** Existential concerns negatively correlate with self-compassion.
- H1b.** Self-compassion positively correlates with stress-related growth.
- H1c.** Existential concerns negatively correlate with stress-related growth.
- H2.** Self-compassion mediates the relationship between existential concerns and stress-related growth.



## Method

### Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational design—a quantitative research method—to explore the relationships between variables and the mechanisms of mediation within these relationships. The indirect effects between the variables were tested with the mediation analysis conducted within the framework of Model 4 proposed by Hayes (2018).

### Study Group

The research group comprised 331 undergraduate students from four different departments within the Faculty of Education of a state university, who were selected using a convenience sampling method. Of the participants, 271 (81.87%) were female and 60 (18.13%) were male. The ages of the participants ranged between 18 and 37, with a mean age of 21.05 ( $SD = 1.78$ ), indicating that the majority of the sample consisted of young adults in the university student population. Perceived socioeconomic status information was collected to describe the demographic characteristics of the participants; 310 participants (93.66%) identified as middle, 11 (3.32%) as high, and 10 (3.02%) as low.

### Data Collection Tools

**Information Form.** The form includes age, gender, and perceived socioeconomic status.

**Existential Concerns Scale.** The original form of the scale was developed by van Bruggen et al. (2017) and adapted into Turkish by Ümmet, Ekşi, Özkapu, and Ekşi (2018). The measurement tool is designed to measure the ECs levels of individuals aged between 19 and 50 years. The scale is a 5-point Likert-type ( $1 = \text{Never}$ ,  $5 = \text{Always}$ ). The scale comprises 22 items and three sub-dimensions: general existential worry, death anxiety, and avoidance. A sample item from the scale; “*Hayatın anlamı hakkında endişelenirim.*” According to the confirmatory factor analysis results of the scale, the fit indices of the model were acceptable ( $\chi^2/df = 2.495$ , RMSEA = 0.062, SRMR = 0.057, GFI = 0.909, NNFI = 0.904). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was found to be 0.81 for the whole scale. Cronbach’s ( $\alpha$ ) values for the sub-dimensions are 0.65 for general existential anxiety, 0.79 for death anxiety, and 0.83 for avoidance, respectively (Ümmet et al., 2018). This study’s confirmatory factor analysis indicated an acceptable model fit, with the following values: CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.068, and SRMR = 0.050. The total score was also used in the analyses, for which Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  and McDonald’s  $\omega$  values were calculated as 0.94.

**Self-compassion Scale Short Form.** The original form of the scale was developed by Raes et al. (2011) and its Turkish adaptation was carried out by Yıldırım and Sarı (2018). The scale aims to measure the level of SC in individuals. The Self-Compassion Scale Short Form is a 5-point Likert-type scale (*1 = Never, 5 = Always*) comprising 11 items in total. A sample item from the scale; “*Üzücü bir durumda karşılaştığımda dengeli bir bakış açısı sergilemeye çalışırım.*” According to the confirmatory factor analysis results, the model fit indices of the scale were adequate ( $\chi^2 = 90.05$ , RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.95, GFI = 0.96, NNFI = 0.94). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.75 for the entire measurement tool. Additionally, a high level of correlation was observed in the reliability analysis conducted using the test-retest method ( $r = 0.840$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) (Yıldırım & Sarı, 2018). This study’s confirmatory factor analysis indicated an acceptable model fit, with the following values: CFI = 0.93, GFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.077, and SRMR = 0.074. The total score was also used in the analyses, with Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  and McDonald’s  $\omega$  values calculated respectively as 0.80 and 0.81.

**Stress-Related Growth Scale.** The original form of the scale was developed by Park et al. (1996), and its Turkish adaptation was carried out by Yazıcı-Kabadayı and Öztemel (2022). The scale aims to measure the SRG levels of individuals. The scale is a 3-point Likert-type scale (*0 = Not at all appropriate, 1 = Somewhat appropriate, 2 = Very appropriate*) comprising 15 items. A sample item from the scale; “*Sorunlar karşısında sadece pes etmemeyi değil onlarla baş edebilmeyi de öğrendim.*” According to the confirmatory factor analysis results of the scale, the fit indices of the model were acceptable ( $\chi^2/df = 2.49$ , RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06, CFI = 0.92, GFI = 0.90, NNFI = 0.91). The internal consistency of the scale was evaluated with Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  value for the Turkish form was found to be 0.83 (Yazıcı-Kabadayı & Öztemel, 2022). This study’s confirmatory factor analysis indicated an acceptable model fit, with the following values: CFI = 0.90, GFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.070, and SRMR = 0.054. The total score was also used in the analyses, for which Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  and McDonald’s  $\omega$  values were calculated as 0.87.

## Process

After the study’s design was completed, permission to use the measurement tools was obtained. The present study was approved by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 2024/454, Date of Approval: 11/12/2024). The data was collected through Google Forms during in-class sessions in the spring semester of the 2024-2025 academic year, where students participated using their own smartphones. The survey link was accessed via a QR code provided in the classroom, which students scanned with their devices to participate. Participation was voluntary, responses were anonymous, and privacy was ensured by allowing students to complete the survey individually without peer



or instructor interference. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement.

### **Data Analysis**

The study data were first subjected to descriptive analyses. No missing data were observed in the dataset. The largest and smallest values in the data set were examined, and the outliers were assessed. Then the assumption of normal distribution was checked by evaluating the skewness and kurtosis values. After confirming the normal distribution, Pearson correlation analysis was used to determine the relationships between the variables. Analyses were then performed within the framework of Model 4, proposed by Hayes (2018), in order to test the mediation effect, as it is specifically designed to assess simple mediation models involving a single mediator. In mediation analysis, a significant direct relationship between the independent and dependent variables is not a prerequisite, as the indirect effect through the mediator can still be significant even if the total effect is not (Hayes, 2009; Memon et al., 2018). To test the significance of indirect effects, a bootstrap resampling procedure with 5000 samples was applied. JASP 0.19.3 software was used in all data analyses.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The study data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. In this direction, the mean, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis, minimum, and maximum values for each variable were calculated and reported (See Table 1). Table 1 showed that the skewness and kurtosis values of the variables are within acceptable limits, and the data are normally distributed (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Participants' scores on ECs ( $M = 54.25$ ,  $SD = 14.69$ ), SC ( $M = 33.98$ ,  $SD = 5.41$ ), and SRG ( $M = 22.58$ ,  $SD = 5.58$ ) were calculated. No outliers beyond  $\pm 3$  were detected.

### **Correlations Between Variables**

The relationships between the study's variables were analyzed using the Pearson correlation coefficient (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows a significant negative correlation between ECs and SC ( $r = -0.442$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). According to Cohen's (1988) criteria, this represents a medium-to-large effect size, supporting H1a, which hypothesized that ECs negatively correlate with SC. Additionally, a significant positive correlation was found between SC and SRG ( $r = 0.290$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This corresponds to a small-to-medium effect size and confirms H1b, which hypothesized that SC positively correlates with SRG. On the other hand,

**Table 1.**  
*Descriptive statistics and pearson correlation results*

| Variable              | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Skewness | Kurtosis | Minimum | Maximum | $\alpha$ | $\omega$ | 1       | 2      | 3 |
|-----------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|---------|---------|----------|----------|---------|--------|---|
| Existential Concerns  | 54.245   | 14.690    | -0.163   | -0.596   | 22.000  | 88.000  | 0.94     | 0.94     | —       |        |   |
| Self-Compassion       | 33.979   | 5.413     | -0.240   | 0.302    | 17.000  | 49.000  | 0.80     | 0.81     | -0.442* | —      |   |
| Stress-Related Growth | 22.577   | 5.584     | -0.546   | -0.535   | 6.000   | 30.000  | 0.87     | 0.87     | -0.025  | 0.290* | — |

*Note.* \* $p < 0.001$

no significant correlation was found between ECs and SRG ( $r = -0.025, p > .05$ ). This indicates a negligible effect size, and thus, H1c, which posited a negative correlation between ECs and SRG, was not supported.

**The Mediating Role of Self-Compassion**

In the study, a mediating analysis was conducted within the scope of Model 4 (see Figure 2), as suggested by Hayes (2018), to examine the indirect effect of ECs on SRG through the SC variable (See Table 2). In the analysis process, the bootstrapping method was applied using 5000 samples to evaluate the statistical significance of the indirect effects, with 95% confidence intervals serving as the basis. Whether the indirect effect was significant was determined by considering whether the confidence interval included the value of zero.

**Table 2.**  
*The Mediating Role*

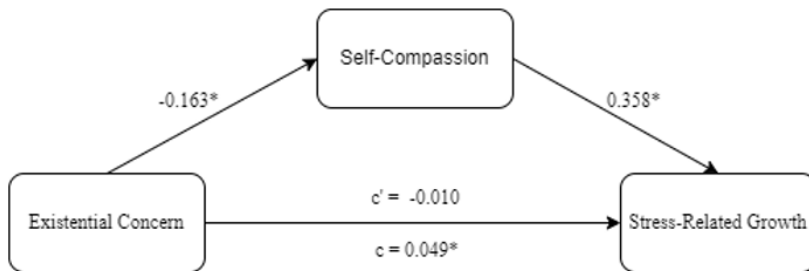
| Direct Effect          | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>z</i> | <i>p</i> | 95% CI           | $\beta$ |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------------|---------|
| ECs → SRG              | 0.049    | 0.022     | 2.197    | 0.028    | [0.0005, 0.096]  | 0.128   |
| ECs → SC               | -0.163   | 0.018     | -8.964   | < 0.001  | [-0.197, -0.127] | -0.442  |
| SC → SRG               | 0.358    | 0.060     | 5.960    | < 0.001  | [0.236, 0.480]   | 0.347   |
| <b>Indirect Effect</b> |          |           |          |          |                  |         |
| ECs → SC → SRG         | -0.058   | 0.012     | -4.963   | < 0.001  | [-0.082, -0.037] | -0.153  |
| <b>Total Effect</b>    |          |           |          |          |                  |         |
| ECs → SRG              | -0.010   | 0.021     | -0.463   | 0.643    | [-0.056, 0.035]  | -0.025  |

*Note.* ECs = Existential Concerns; SC = Self-Compassion; SRG = Stress-Related Growth

Table 2 presents the mediation analysis results, conducted to test the mediating role of SC in the effect of ECs on SRG, are presented. ECs had a significant negative effect on SC ( $B = -0.163, p < 0.001$ ), whereas SC positively affected SRG ( $B = 0.358, p < 0.001$ ). The direct effect of ECs on SRG was found to be positive and statistically significant ( $B = 0.049, p = 0.028$ ). The indirect mediation effect was found to be significant in a negative direction ( $B = -0.058, p < 0.001$ ), and the 95% confidence interval (-0.082, -0.037) does not include the value of zero. This shows that SC mediates the relationship between ECs and SRG. In addition, the total effect

was insignificant in the model ( $B = -0.010$ ,  $p = 0.643$ ), indicating that the indirect and direct effects are in opposite directions, resulting in an opposing mediation pattern, with the overall model explaining 9.8% of the variance in SRG ( $R^2 = 0.098$ ).

**Figure 2.**  
*The Mediating Role of Self-Compassion*



## Discussion

The primary focus of this study was to explore the correlations between ECs, SC, and SRG. The findings provided that ECs and SC were negatively correlated (H1a), and SRG was positively correlated (H1b). Contrary to expectations, no significant correlation was found between ECs and SRG (H1c). Subsequently, the secondary focus of the study was to examine the mediating role of SC in the relationship between ECs and SRG (H2). The findings provided that ECs had a significant negative effect on SC, whereas SC had a significant positive effect on SRG. The results of the mediation analysis revealed that the indirect effect of ECs on SRG was significant through the mediating variable of SC. However, the fact that the total effect was not statistically significant and that the direct and indirect effects occurred in opposite directions suggests an opposing mediation pattern (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007).

The findings of this study revealed a significant negative correlation between ECs and SC, confirming H1a. Previous studies in the literature have reported that SC is associated with psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety (de Souza, Policarpo, & Hutz, 2020; Kretschmer & Storm, 2018), but research exploring the relationship between ECs and SC remains insufficient. Farooq, Ahmed, Siddique, and Shoaib (2021) found a negative relationship between SC and ECs. Individuals experiencing ECs tend to develop an internally blaming, critical, and ruthless attitude towards themselves while questioning their identities and life goals (Lundvall et al., 2020). This tendency can lead to feelings of worthlessness, fragility, and social withdrawal, ultimately undermining individuals' SC. In children struggling with the disease, ECs can also cause them to feel guilty by frequently associating the situation they are experiencing with their own mistakes and criticizing themselves harshly in the process (Scott et al., 2023). SC can reduce anxiety levels, especially those

triggered by perfectionism and external pressures through enabling them to develop a kind, understanding, and inclusive attitude towards themselves. In this context, SC plays a regulatory role in anxiety by developing an internal support system based on compassion instead of destructive self-criticism (Egan et al., 2022). Such internal criticisms may affect individuals' ability to show SC, which could partly explain the negative association between ECs and SC reported in previous studies.

The findings of this study revealed a significant positive correlation between SC and SRG, confirming H1b—a result consistent with previous research (Basharpoor, Mowlaie, & Sarafrazi, 2021; Özönder Ünal, Ünal, Duymaz, & Ordu, 2023; Wong & Yeung, 2017). The link between SC and SRG may be grounded in the fact that both constructs encourage individuals to adopt a positive perspective on their experiences (Özdemir, Eruyar, Yazıcı, & Tan, 2022). SC lays a mental foundation for growth by promoting acceptance of personal mistakes and framing failures as opportunities for development (Mansfield et al., 2015). In this regard, individuals with higher levels of SC tend to adopt more functional thinking and behavior patterns, which may help them avoid unnecessary psychological distress. Moreover, SC cultivates a safe internal environment in which individuals can accept their imperfections and remain open to change and growth (Umandap & Teh, 2020). When supported by effective coping strategies, this internal stance contributes to positive mental health outcomes and facilitates psychological growth following stressful life events (Mazor, Gelkopf, & Roe, 2018). SC also offers a balanced coping framework that helps individuals contextualize their difficulties within the broader human experience, adopt an accepting and supportive attitude, and acknowledge their emotions without harsh self-judgment (Ewert et al., 2021). Taken together, these findings suggest that higher levels of SC tend to be correlated with greater SRG, possibly reflecting shared underlying factors such as psychological flexibility, self-awareness, and a deeper sense of meaning in one's experiences.

The findings of the present study, contrary to expectations, showed that there was no significant correlation between ECs and SRG, thus not supporting H1c. While ECs generally negatively impact psychological well-being, they can also be associated with positive outcomes such as growth. For example, recent research suggests that increased ECs in university students can reduce death anxiety and promote healthier attitudes toward life and death (Evram & Çakıcı Eş, 2020). However, high ECs have also been found to be associated with an increased hopelessness and low meaning in life (Sarıçalı & Çarkit, 2025). Furthermore, meaning-based interventions have been reported to be effective in reducing death anxiety (Shaygan et al., 2024). These findings suggest that ECs carry both risk and transformative potential, depending on contextual factors and individual coping resources. Findings that intense stress from ECs can facilitate growth and the restructuring of self-perception through meaning-

making processes over time (Arredondo & Caparrós, 2023; Scott & Weems, 2013) suggest that the relationship between ECs and SRG may be influenced by a number of contextual and individual factors. Coping strategies, cultural differences, levels of social support, and personal resources may play an important role in shaping this relationship. This indicates that the connection between ECs and SRG may not manifest in the same way for every individual, and the role of mediating variables should be considered. Therefore, these findings highlight the need for further exploration of this relationship within a broader context, taking into account different variables, such as the role of mediation.

The findings also revealed that SC mediates the relationship between ECs and SRG, confirming H2. The results showed that ECs did not directly affect SRG, but only indirectly through SC. The results in the literature regarding this finding differ. While findings generally indicate that ECs increase the likelihood of growth and meaningfulness (Arredondo & Caparrós, 2023; Barr, 2011), some studies also show no statistically significant relationship between ECs and growth (Ghonchehpour, Nasab, Maghsoudi, & Mehdipour-Rabari, 2025). Researchers note that this effect of ECs on growth occurs indirectly (Tomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2020). The finding that there is no direct relationship between SRG and ECs in this study aligns with the existing literature in this respect. For example, one study found no direct relationship between SRG and psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress); however, SC indirectly supported SRG by reducing psychological distress, highlighting its protective function in well-being as a mechanism that fosters SRG (Chan et al., 2020). Individuals with high levels of SC may develop a more positive self-perception by approaching themselves with compassion after negative experiences, demonstrating the supportive role of SC in the growth process (Tekcan, 2018). Previous studies suggest that SC plays a mediating role in positive psychological outcomes (Bluth & Blanton, 2014; Fong & Loi, 2016; Stoeber, Lalova, & Lumley, 2020). Similarly, research has demonstrated a positive relationship between SRG and SC, a key indicator of positive mental health, and that SC has a positive impact on SRG (Liu, Wang, & Wu, 2023). Findings indicating that SRG observed after challenging experiences can be influenced by SC (Chi et al., 2021) underscore the importance of SC in promoting growth (Özdemir et al., 2022). Research has well established that SC fosters higher levels of growth through more adaptive cognitive processes (Wong & Yeung, 2017). The capacity to grow from challenging experiences is mediated by one's SC disposition, suggesting the urgent need for SC interventions to protect against psychopathologies (Yuhan et al., 2021). Young adulthood, marked by identity exploration, purpose seeking, and gaining independence, is a period where ECs prominently emerge (Lundvall et al., 2019; May & Yalom, 2005). In this stage, uncertainties about life's meaning, responsibilities, and future choices often heighten anxieties (van Bruggen et al., 2017; Koole et al., 2006), yet this confrontation with

ECs also carries a transformative potential, fostering opportunities for authentic self-integration (Yalom & Josselson, 2018). Moreover, in the face of challenging life events, including traumatic experiences, SC plays a protective role (Zeller et al., 2015) and simultaneously functions as a resilience factor (Yuhan et al., 2021). These findings contribute to a growing body of literature suggesting that the impact of ECs on SRG primarily operates through psychological resources such as SC, rather than via a direct pathway. Consistent with previous research, SC functions as a central mechanism that facilitates adaptive coping, positive reframing, and meaning-making, and promotes growth following challenging experiences. This mediating role of SC highlights its importance as a protective factor that buffers the negative effects of ECs and promotes resilience and well-being.

Unlike previous studies, the present research found no significant direct relationship between ECs and SRG (H1c) but confirmed the mediating role of SC (H2). This pattern points to a phenomenon known as “opposing mediation”. The critical role of SC in this process may stem from its capacity to transform the adverse effects of ECs in young adults, laying the groundwork for more adaptive coping and growth processes. In collectivist cultures such as Türkiye (Hofstede, 2011; Triandis, 2001), individuals experiencing ECs may be more inclined to share their problems with peers who have undergone similar experiences. Such peer interactions may help individuals practice SC, thereby contributing to the development of SRG. Previous research has also demonstrated that SC supports higher levels of growth through more adaptive cognitive processes (Chan et al., 2020; Wong & Yeung, 2017). Therefore, the present model emphasizes the key role of SC in this mediating process by demonstrating an opposing mediation effect. This shows that the effects of ECs on SRG are mediated by SC rather than direct. This finding contributes to current literature by emphasizing the transformative role of SC in facilitating growth in young adults experiencing ECs.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although our study provides important insights, some limitations should be taken into account when considering its findings. First, the data collected in this study are based on the participants’ self-reports. Since the data are based on the participants’ statements, the accuracy of the responses may be influenced by various biases, such as social desirability bias or recall bias, depending on the participants’ subjective perceptions. The second limitation of the study is related to its cross-sectional nature. Cross-sectional studies do not reveal a causal relationship between variables and cannot provide information about changes in variables over time. The third limitation of the study was that the sample group consisted of young adult university students. This situation limits the generalizability of the study findings to different developmental periods and young adults without a university education. Another limitation of the study is the gender imbalance

in the sample, as 81.9% of the participants were female. A preliminary analysis based on gender was not conducted due to the limited number of male participants, which would compromise the statistical power and reliability of subgroup comparisons. This gender imbalance should be considered a critical limitation of the study. Furthermore, potential confounding factors such as gender and socioeconomic status were not controlled, which may have influenced the relationships. Future research should prioritize achieving a more balanced sample in terms of gender distribution to enable robust gender-based analyses and enhance the generalizability of findings.

The findings of the present study offer several implications for future research. To enhance the validity and depth of future findings, researchers are encouraged to employ multiple data collection methods beyond self-report measures. Additionally, using longitudinal designs can allow for examining changes in variable relationships over time and provide stronger inferences regarding causality. Future studies should consider collaborating with culturally diverse populations and include more heterogeneous samples to improve the generalizability of findings. Although no direct association was found between ECs and SRG, the mediating role of SC suggests that other potential mediators may also exist in this relationship. Given the opposing mediation effect demonstrated in the present study, future research should further investigate alternative psychological resources that may mediate the relationship between ECs and SRG. In particular, variables such as emotion regulation skills, coping strategies, resilience, and cognitive flexibility could be explored as the potential mechanisms that buffer the adverse effects of ECs and facilitate positive adaptation in the face of stress. These mediators can be tested through both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs by examining whether the indirect effect of ECs on SRG through SC observed in the current longitudinal model is replicated, and by integrating cross-sectional models to explore the potential mediating roles of alternative variables. Moreover, advanced methodologies such as dyadic designs or experimental interventions may provide deeper insights into these processes' operations. Investigating these mediators using different methods may provide a more in-depth understanding of young adults.

For mental health practitioners, given the mediating results, structured psychoeducational workshops enhancing SC can be integrated into university counseling services to buffer the effects of ECs and promote SRG. Moreover, these programs may focus on mindfulness practices, SC exercises, and narrative reframing techniques to help young adults manage ECs and foster SRG. The development of preventative mental health strategies is recommended, focusing on the role of SC in mitigating ECs and facilitating SRG during academic and life transitions in young adulthood. To promote SRG, individual and group-based therapy modules (e.g., Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) that explicitly cultivate SC should be

incorporated into therapeutic interventions, particularly for clients experiencing ECs related to life purposes.

**Conclusion**

This study provides an important contribution to understanding the relationship between ECs and SRG in young adults through SC. The findings of the study revealed that SC is not just a concept, but a powerful force that can transform our understanding of mental health. It plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between ECs and SRG. Although no direct significant relationship emerged between ECs and SRG, SC indirectly influenced this relationship, supporting individuals’ growth potential. The fact that SC is negatively related to ECs and positively related to SRG suggests that SC serves as an important resource, increasing positive mental health outcomes in the face of life stressors. These results highlight the protective and transformative power of SC in the existential questioning experienced by university youth, offering valuable insights to practitioners regarding the content of psychological counseling services. This study enriches the literature on SRG and SC, providing a scientific basis for preventive mental health interventions among university students.

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