

The role of self-criticism in the relationship between infertility-related stress and anxiety and depression symptoms in women facing infertility

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Introduction

Infertility is a demanding and stress-inducing medical condition, which can trigger anxiety and depression symptoms in women. Feelings of being inadequate, failing to achieve a major life goal and experiences of shame might develop dysfunctional strategies such as self-criticism attitudes. Self-criticism has been associated with poor mental health outcomes. However, in the field of infertility, the role of self-criticism in mental health outcomes has never been explored.

Material and Methods

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Women (in a heterosexual relationship), having an infertility diagnosis and/trying to conceive for more than 12 months and aged between 18 and 45 years were invited to participate in the study. Data were collected through an online platform, after the dissemination of the study on social media created specifically for this purpose, though a snowball strategy between December 2021 and March 2022.

MEASURES

Infertility-related stress (COMPI, Schmidt et al. 2005; Portuguese v. Sobral et al., 2017)

Self-criticism (FSCRS, Gilbert, et al., 2004; portuguese v.Castilho & Pinto-Gouveia, 2011)

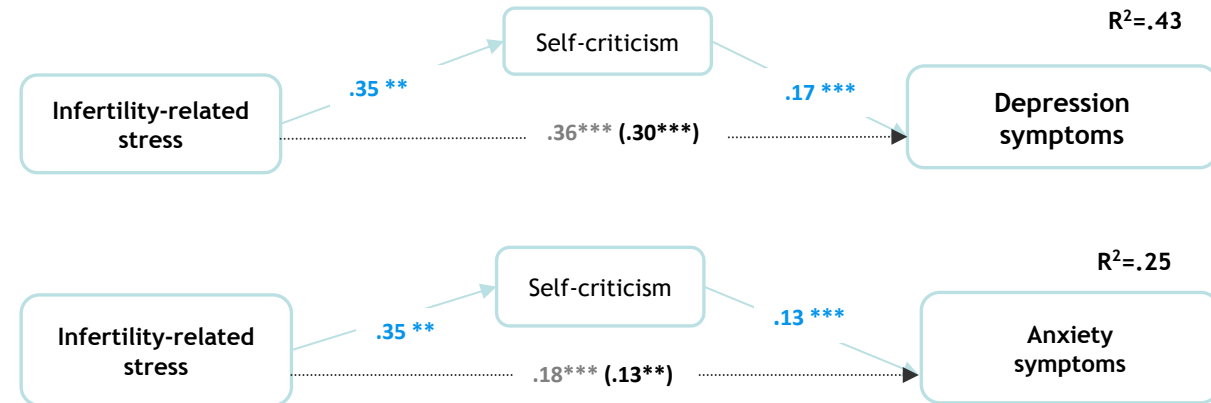
Anxiety and depression (DASS-21, Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Portuguese v. Pais-Ribeiro et al., 2004)

DATA ANALYSIS

A mediation model using PROCESS was used to test whether the relationship between infertility-related stress and anxiety and depression symptoms is mediated by self-criticism. Psychological support was used as control variable, since preliminary analyses revealed that this variable has a multivariate effect on the outcomes.

Results

Women (n=130) were on average 34 years old and the majority were married. 73% had already undergone fertility treatments and the most frequent diagnosis were unexplained infertility and female factor. About 30% were having psychological support.



Note: in grey, direct effect before including mediators; in black, direct effect after including mediators

Conclusions

This work highlighted the role of self-criticism as explaining the relationship between infertility-related stress and anxiety and depression symptoms. Due to the nature of our sample, the results need to be interpreted with caution. The cross-sectional design does not allow drawing causal directions; further longitudinal studies exploring the role of these variables are needed and exploring the role of possible confounders. Studies including men are needed. Psychological support aiming to promote self-compassion (in contrast with self-criticism) attitudes might help to develop more functional strategies and contribute to better mental health outcomes in women facing infertility.