

Self-Compassion

Think about the times you felt compassion for others. Perhaps it was toward friends or family going through a difficult time, or when you heard of suffering on the other side of the world. During these experiences, feelings of kindness and caring spontaneously arise. As Kristin Neff¹ describes, when people feel compassion for others, they allow themselves to be touched by another person's suffering and care about their welfare in a non-judgmental way. We have a natural pull to look outside of ourselves and care for our fellow beings. So why then do we struggle to turn that love inwards and give ourselves that same compassion?

Why do we struggle with self-compassion?

One factor is the belief that self-love is narcissistic. We are often told to be humble, to not brag, that self-deprecation is more attractive than self-indulgence. It's easy to equate loving ourselves and being proud of ourselves as egocentric. However, research shows that practicing self-compassion is linked to improved self-esteem without any narcissistic tendencies.² The reality is that the one person we are constantly in relationship with is ourselves. So if we are encouraged to support, love, and be compassionate to our partners and loved ones, how can we ignore the person we have the longest and most intimate commitment to in our life?

A second factor is believing that we must focus on our flaws and failures to motivate ourselves and fuel our fire. The assumption is that self-compassion will mean letting ourselves off the hook and that we won't be pushed to achieve. We often believe that self-flagellation is the key to success, that we need to be hard on ourselves to get results, but when we examine the evidence is that true?

When considering who influenced your life, are there certain people who helped you achieve your goals? Were those people encouraging, gentle, kind and forgiving? Did they make you believe in yourself? Did they teach you that your flaws and failures were tools of teaching? Or, were there people who were critical and hard on you, always wanting more and never satisfied?

- Which of these approaches did you respond most favorably to?
- When you imagine both of these types of influences, how does your body react? Is there a difference in the tightness of your shoulders, the depth of your breathing, the tension in your brow?
- How do you feel? Is there a notable difference in your emotions? Is there fear or ease, stress or excitement?

^{1,2} Kristin D Neff, Ya-Ping Hsieh & Kullaya Dejitterat (2005) Self-compassion, Achievement Goals, and Coping with Academic Failure, *Self and Identity*, 4:3, 263-287, DOI: [10.1080/13576500444000317](https://doi.org/10.1080/13576500444000317)

A harsh, critical approach may produce some results, but typically with a hefty cost of stress and anxiety. Which approach do you identify most with when speaking to yourself? Which character do you take on when there is a setback, when your performance wasn't quite what you wanted, or when life hands you lemons?

If you can recognize that you respond best to supportive encouragement, then maybe it's time to turn that inner voice into the gentle, loving tone you need! Self-punishment tends to result in a narrowed vision, a viewpoint that cannot see outside our failures. It results in fear and negative assumptions about our abilities that keep us from reaching further. Compassion widens our viewpoint and lets us feel more comfortable exploring our potential because failure can be met with learning versus punishment.

Understanding self-compassion

In order to practice self-compassion we must understand it. Leading researcher in this area, Kristin Neff³ outlines three major components of self-compassion:

- 1. Self-Kindness:** Treating yourself with care. Being gentle and understanding with yourself, especially when you are suffering or feeling inadequate. Self-kindness means understanding that failure and pain are a part of life. Ignoring it or being critical towards yourself during these times only leads to further stress, frustration and negativity. Being kind to yourself involves acceptance and deciding to be loving and compassionate with yourself during these inevitable moments of life.
- 2. Common Humanity:** Human beings are inherently vulnerable and imperfect. We all experience pain, suffering, feelings of inadequacy, and moments of failure. Each of our experiences is unique to us, but the existence of pain and suffering is a normal aspect of each person's life. We are not alone.
- 3. Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is the ability to be present in the moment, in a non-judgmental way. You cannot ignore pain and be compassionate towards it at the same time. Mindfulness means allowing yourself to observe thoughts and feelings exactly as they are, without trying to suppress or ignore them. It means being present with these thoughts and feelings but not over-identifying with them.

³Neff, K. D. 2003b. Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2: 85-101.

These concepts may seem simple in theory, but putting them into practice takes effort and a willingness to be open-minded. Paul Gilbert⁴ writes in his book, *The Compassionate Mind*, that self-compassion doesn't just boost our happiness, it helps us cope with failure, criticism and conflicts, take risks, and improve our relationships. Research links self-compassion to decreases in anxiety, depression, perfectionism and rumination⁵.

A life of self-compassion starts with practice. The following exercises are adapted from the works of [Kristin Neff](#).

Practicing self-compassion

To highlight the inherent difference between the compassion we give to others versus the compassion we extend ourselves, start with a simple exercise:

- Imagine your friend had a really difficult semester and didn't perform as well as they expected. They are berating themselves and are very upset. Being the best friend you can, consider what you would say to them. Perhaps write it down. What would your tone be? What is the message you would want your friend to hear?
- Now, think of a time when you have been through something similar, where you felt awful about yourself or were really struggling. In those situations what sorts of things did you say to yourself? What words did you use? What tone did you use with yourself?
- Is there a difference in the two scenarios? If so, why was your response to your friend so different?
- How do you think you would feel if you responded to yourself the same way you would to a good friend?

The next time you are going through something difficult, try treating yourself like you would a good friend and see if you notice a difference!

Next let's explore self-compassion through journaling. This exercise will teach you how to process difficult moments in your day through writing, using a more compassionate lens.

- Take a moment to consider if there were any challenging moments in your day. As an example, let's say you didn't perform as well on a project as you had hoped. Consider that moment and write about it.
 - Write about your difficult event from a place of mindfulness. Be present with the experience of pain or suffering but don't over dramatize or judge the situation. Were you angry, sad, hurt, did you feel stressed or disappointed? These feelings are normal, so allow yourself to be aware of them,

⁴ Gilbert, Paul. *Compassionate Mind : A New Approach to Life's Challenges*, New Harbinger Publications, 2010.

⁵ Kristin D. Neff & Pittman McGehee (2010) Self-compassion and Psychological Resilience Among Adolescents and Young Adults, *Self and Identity*, 9:3, 225-240

without putting blame or judgement on yourself. Instead of “I felt sad and disappointed because I’m such a screw up and really should know better, simply write “I felt sad and disappointed with the situation.”

- Next, write about how your situation connects you to the experiences of others. How does it connect you with the common humanity you share with the world? Perhaps you could write about how being imperfect, having setbacks and going through difficult times is very human and something everyone experiences. Maybe you could bring to mind someone you know who went through something similar.
- Now take a moment to bring love and kindness to yourself. Consider again how you would speak to a friend if they went through something similar and offer yourself those same words of compassion and caring. Perhaps you can say to yourself, “I know you felt frustrated and sad with your performance, but nobody is perfect. It’s okay to feel this way. It’s normal. Next time you will know what to do to get a better result.”

These exercises can also help you become more aware of your inner critic, that negative voice that influences how you feel about yourself. Once you are aware of it, you can work to change that voice to be supportive and kind!

- You might notice you feel or behave differently when your inner critic appears. Pay attention and scan your thoughts as it can help you take control in that moment rather than spiral into further self-criticism. Feeling grumpy or down might be triggered by a negative or angry thought you weren’t even aware of. This awareness can then lead you to notice patterns in your thoughts. Are there certain words or phrases you tend to use when you are in a negative space? Are there situations where these inner judgments happen more frequently? Just like the saying “keep your friends close, your enemies closer,” you want to become very familiar with that inner critic.
- Once you better know your inner critic, you can start to challenge it with compassion. Instead of yelling obscenities at it, approach it like you would a kid throwing a tantrum. For example, “I know you are being hard on me because you think you know best, but how you are treating me is causing me unnecessary pain. Why don’t you let my compassionate side say a few things now.” Replace self-critical thoughts to be more in line with the type of compassion you would give a friend.
- It can be helpful to introduce some gentle soothing touch during this part of the exercise. Gently touch your arm, or warmly wrap your arms around your knees or shoulders, like a friend giving you a hug. Then try re-framing those negative thoughts from a compassionate perspective. You can even use common terms of endearment that you use with loved ones, like “hun, I know you are really upset about what happened, but don’t be so hard on yourself. Nobody is perfect and mistakes help us learn. We can take what we have learned from this and use it to do better in the future, it’s going to be ok my love.” Find words that fit for you.

In moments where life is causing you pain, or if you are struggling with a busy day of classes and responsibilities it can be helpful to allow yourself quick breaks to close your eyes and silently reconnect with your compassionate self.

- Start by simply acknowledging the thoughts or emotions that are present:

“This is a moment of sadness.”

“This is stress.”

“This is painful.”

- Next, allow yourself to connect to the common humanity you share:

“Others feel this way too.”

“I am not alone.”

“We all struggle sometimes.”

- Lastly, touch your hand to your heart or wrap your hands around your arms and repeat a compassionate phrase, or phrases that you need to hear in that moment:

“May I give myself the compassion I need.”

“May I be kind to myself.”

“May I accept myself as I am.”

You can also incorporate loving kindness meditation into your daily life. This practice allows you to deepen feelings of love and kindness toward yourself and all living beings. Research shows this practice benefits emotional intelligence, improves well-being and is one of the greatest practices for increasing compassion. You can do it as a guided practice using free apps like [Insight Timer](#); perhaps you can take a moment right now to explore this [practice](#).

Loving ourselves is a true act of bravery, and we are most courageous when we choose to love ourselves during our most painful moments. Self-compassion asks that we acknowledge our worth during times when we are most vulnerable, and provide gentle kindness to ourselves when our instinct is to be harsh and critical. Frequent practice of self-compassion will help change our inner voice to be encouraging and understanding. It can help lead to days, weeks, months, and eventually a life-time of happiness and well-being. As Christopher Germer says, “A moment of self-compassion can change your entire day. A string of such moments can change the course of your life.

⁶Seppala, E. (2014, Sept 15). 18 Science-Backed Reasons to Try Loving-Kindness Meditation. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/feeling-it/201409/18-science-backed-reasons-try-loving-kindness-meditation>