

11

Self-Compassionate Motivation

One of the biggest blocks to self-compassion is the belief that it will undermine our motivation. We fear that if we're kind to ourselves, we won't have the drive needed to make changes or reach our goals. The thinking is "If I'm too self-compassionate, won't I just sit around all day surfing the Internet and eating junk food?" Well, does a compassionate mother who cares about her teenage son let him do whatever he wants (like sit around all day surfing the Internet and eating junk food)? Of course not. She tells him to go to school, do his homework, and get to bed on time. Why would it be any different for *self-compassion*?

Self-compassion does not make us lazy.

And what if the mother wants to *motivate* her child to make necessary changes? Let's say her teenage son comes home from school with a failing math grade. She has choices for how to help him improve. One way is with harsh criticism: "I'm ashamed of you. You're a loser. You'll never amount to anything." Makes you cringe, doesn't it? (Yet don't we say some pretty awful things to ourselves when we fail or feel inadequate?) And does it work? Temporarily perhaps. The boy might work harder for a while to escape his mother's wrath, but in the long term he'll no doubt lose confidence in his ability to do math and become afraid of failure, and he won't sign up for advanced math courses any time soon.

Bill was a highly successful computer engineer in Silicon Valley. Top of his class at UC Berkeley, he was now thinking of launching his own business where he could create software that was exciting and innovative. The way Bill had always motivated himself to succeed was with relentless self-criticism. When he received an A- on an exam in college, for instance, he would cut himself down mercilessly. "What kind of loser are you? If you aren't at the top of your class, you're a failure. You should be ashamed that you didn't get an A." He still used

this approach to motivate himself as an adult, and he truly believed that if he were not harsh with himself, he would turn into a slacker.

Lately, Bill had begun having intense anxiety whenever he tried to move forward with his new business. What if he didn't succeed? What if this new project proved to everyone that he was a failure? An imposter? A fake? Bill got himself so worked up about the price of failure and his life became so unhappy that the only relief came when he considered giving up on his dream.

But there is another way the mother can motivate her son, help him bounce back from failure and succeed—by giving him compassion. For example, “Oh, dear, you must be so upset. Come here, let me give you a hug. You know I love you no matter what.” That tells her son that he’s acceptable even when he fails. But a compassionate mother doesn’t stop there if she truly cares about her son’s well-being. There’s an action component. She’s likely to add something like “I know you want to go to college and, of course, you need to do well on your entrance exams to get in. What can I do to help you? I know you can do it if you work hard enough. I believe in you.”

This type of encouragement and support is likely to be much more effective and sustainable in the long run. Research shows that self-compassionate people not only have greater self-confidence, but they are less likely to fear failure and are more likely to try again when they do fail, and to persist in their efforts to keep learning.

The motivation of self-compassion arises from love, while the motivation of self-criticism arises from fear. Love is more powerful than fear.

Still, it’s important to understand *why* we criticize ourselves. It hurts like hell, so why do we do it?

As mentioned in Chapter 4, self-criticism is rooted in the threat-defense system. At some level, our inner critic is trying to force us to change so that we’ll be *safe*. For example, why would we beat ourselves up for being out of shape? Because we’re afraid our bodies are going to fall apart and stop working properly. Why do we criticize ourselves for procrastinating on an important task at work? So we can avoid failing, losing our job, and becoming homeless. At some level, our inner critic is constantly trying to ward off dangers that might cause us harm. Of course, the inner critic may not be helpful at all—this approach may be completely counterproductive—but its intentions are often good. With this understanding, we can start to transform the critical voice within us so it’s not so harsh and unforgiving. We can learn to motivate ourselves with a *new* voice—that of the *compassionate self*.

It was initially quite difficult for Bill to become more self-compassionate because of his fear that going easier on himself would make him work less and abandon his goals. Ironically, the reality was quite the opposite. Bill’s inner critic was so harsh that he dreaded the possibility of failure and he couldn’t see his way around simple challenges. So he started to seriously procrastinate about taking even small steps toward his dream. Bill knew his merciless inner

voice was part of the problem, and he decided that something had to change if he was to make any progress.

At the time, Bill had a trainer at the gym who was about his age and who was endlessly supportive. For example, when Bill collapsed while doing push-ups, his trainer just said, “Great! Working to the point of muscle exhaustion is what we want,” and when Bill wanted to lift weights that might have injured him, his coach said, “Hey Bill, let’s save that one for later. We’ll get there sooner than you think.” So Bill decided to apply the same attitude to his new business project. “Just give it a try,” he told himself. “I know you can do it.” And he imagined what his trainer would say when a setback occurred: “Hang in there, bro. We’ve got this.” Bill slowly began to discover his compassionate voice and learned how to support rather than sabotage himself. Eventually he quit his company job, found the venture capital needed to start his new project, and started living the life he needed to live—one that made him happy.



EXERCISE

Finding Your Compassionate Voice

This exercise will help you hear the critical voice inside, discover how your inner critic may be trying to help you, and learn to motivate yourself with a new voice—that of your inner compassionate self.

Sometimes the inner critic does not appear to have our best interests in mind. This can especially be true if our inner critic is the internalized voice of someone from our past who was abusive. Please be compassionate with yourself as you do this exercise. If you find yourself getting into uncomfortable territory, let it go and return to it only when you feel strong and ready. You might wish to reread the “Tips for Practice” in the Introduction before doing this exercise.

- In the space provided below and on the next page, write down a behavior that you would like to change—something you often beat yourself up about. Choose a behavior that is unhelpful to you and is causing you unhappiness, but for this exercise, select a behavior in the mild to moderate range of difficulty. Also, pick a behavior that is potentially changeable. (Don’t choose a permanent characteristic like “My feet are too big.”) Examples are “I’m impatient,” “I don’t exercise enough,” “I procrastinate.”

Ask yourself, “What do I need right now?”

Identifying Your Self-Critical Voice

- Write down what you typically say to yourself when you engage in this behavior. Sometimes the inner critic is harsh, but sometimes it manifests more as a discouraged feeling or in some other way. What *words* does it use, and importantly, what *tone* does it use? Or perhaps there are no words at all, but an image. How does your inner critic express itself?
- Now, take a moment to notice how it *feels* when you criticize yourself. Consider how much distress the voice of self-criticism has caused you. If you wish, try giving yourself compassion for how hard it is to hear such harsh language, perhaps by validating the pain: "This is hard." "I'm so sorry, I know how much it hurts to hear this."

- Reflect for a moment on *why* the criticism has gone on for so long. Is your inner critic trying to protect you in some way, to keep you safe from danger, to help you, even if the result has been unproductive? If so, write down what you think might be motivating your inner critic.

- If you can't find any way that your critical voice is trying to help you—sometimes self-criticism has no redeeming value whatsoever—please don't go further and simply continue to give yourself compassion for how you've suffered from it in the past.

If you did identify some way your inner critic might be trying to help you or keep you safe, however, see if you can acknowledge its efforts, perhaps even writing down a *few words of thanks*. Let your inner critic know that even though it may not be serving you very well now, its intention was good, and it was doing its best.

Finding Your Compassionate Voice

- Now that your self-critical voice has been heard, see if you can make some space for another voice—your inner *compassionate* voice. This comes from a part of yourself that is very wise and recognizes how this behavior is causing you harm. It also wants you to change, but for very different reasons.
- Put your hands over your heart or another soothing place, feeling their warmth. Now reflect again on the behavior you're struggling with. Begin to repeat the following phrases that capture the essence of your inner compassionate voice:
 - "I love you and I don't want you to suffer."
 - Or if it feels more authentic, say something like "I deeply care about you, and that's why I'd like to help you make a change." Or "I'm here for you and will support you."
- When you're ready, begin to write a message to yourself in the voice of your inner compassionate self. Write freely and spontaneously, addressing the behavior you would like to change. What emerges from the deep feeling and wish "I love you and don't want you to suffer"? What do you need to hear to make a change? Or if it's a struggle to find words, try writing down the words that would flow from your loving heart when speaking to a dear friend who was struggling with the same issue as you.

REFLECTION

What was that exercise like for you? Could you identify the voice of inner criticism?

Did you find any way your critical voice was trying to help you? Did it make sense to thank the inner critic for its efforts?

What was the impact of saying the words “I love you and don’t want you to suffer”? Could you get in touch with your inner compassionate voice? Were you able to write from this perspective?

If you found some words that came from your inner compassionate self, let yourself savor the feeling of being supported. If you had *difficulty* finding words of kindness, that’s okay too. It takes some time. The important thing is that we set our intention to be more self-compassionate, and eventually new habits will form.

This is a powerful exercise for many people. The revelation that our inner critic is actually trying to help us allows us to stop judging ourselves for judging ourselves. Once we see that the inner critic is trying to keep us safe by screaming “Danger! Danger!” and we validate those efforts and thank the critic for its good intentions, the critic usually relaxes and makes space for another voice to emerge—the voice of our inner compassionate self. (For more on this approach, readers might wish to explore the internal family systems model of Richard Schwartz.)

Many people find it especially surprising that our inner critic and our inner compassionate self are often seeking the same behavior change—the message simply has a very different quality or tone. As a humorous aside, an MSC participant once told us, “It’s amazing. My inner critic used to always scream at me ‘You bitch!’ And my inner compassionate self just said, ‘Whoa, Tiger . . .’”

Some readers might experience backdraft after this exercise. If you do, refer to Chapter 8 for guidance about how to work with backdraft, such as

labeling the emotion, taking a walk and feeling the soles of your feet, or engaging in ordinary, pleasant activities. Sometimes the most compassionate thing we can do for ourselves is to have a chat with friends or simply to disengage from self-compassion practice for a while.



INFORMAL PRACTICE

Compassionate Letter to Myself

You can continue listening to your compassionate voice by writing a letter to yourself whenever you struggle or feel inadequate or when you want to help motivate yourself to make a change. There are three main ways you can write the letter:

- Think of an imaginary friend who is unconditionally wise, loving, and compassionate and write a letter to yourself *from the perspective of your friend*.
- Write a letter as if you were talking to a dearly beloved friend who was struggling with the same concerns as you.
- Write a letter from the compassionate part of yourself to the part of yourself that is struggling.

After writing the letter, you can put it down for a while and then read it later, letting the words soothe and comfort you when you need it most.

It can take a while to feel comfortable writing to yourself in the voice of a good friend, but it definitely gets easier with practice. This is a sample letter that Karen, an up-and-coming graphic designer, wrote to herself about not spending the time she'd like with her two children, ages 8 and 13. She wrote it as if it were coming from her best friend, with whom she is very close.

Dearest Karen, I know you feel bad about not spending enough time with your kids. You had to miss little Sophie's ballet rehearsal, and Ben had to microwave their dinner twice last week when you were held up at work. But please don't beat yourself up about it. It hurts me when you do that. You're a good mom, and the time you spend with your kids is real quality time. It's been so tough trying to balance your career with your family life. You need to give yourself a break. You're doing the best you can, and the way I see it you're doing incredibly well. Your kids love you deeply. I love you deeply.

I know you'd like to not work such late hours so that you can spend more time with Sophie and Ben. Maybe you can talk to your boss about it and tell him your concerns. You've been with the company seven years now and proven yourself. You're allowed to ask for what you need. The worst that can happen is he says no. And even if things don't change, you're a loving mom. Please don't forget that.