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What Self-Compassion Is Not

Often people have misgivings about whether it's a good idea to be self-compassionate or whether we can be *too* self-compassionate. Certainly Western culture doesn't promote self-compassion as a virtue, and many people harbor deep suspicions about being kind to themselves. These misgivings often block our ability to be self-compassionate, so it's good to take a close look at them.



EXERCISE

My Misgivings about Self-Compassion

- Write down any misgivings that you personally have about self-compassion—any fears or concerns you have about its possible downsides.
- Sometimes our attitudes are shaped by what other people in our life think about self-compassion. Write down any misgivings that other people or society at large have about self-compassion.

REFLECTION

If you identified some misgivings that you hold, that's a good thing. These misgivings are actually barriers to your ability to be self-compassionate, and awareness is the first step toward starting to dismantle these barriers.

Fortunately, an ever-increasing body of research shows that the most common misgivings about self-compassion are actually *misconceptions*. In other words, our misconceptions are generally unfounded. Below are some of the fears people express over and over again at our courses, followed by a brief description of the evidence to the contrary.

Misgivings about self-compassion are likely to be misconceptions.

“Doesn't self-compassion just mean throwing a pity party for poor me?”

Many people fear that self-compassion is really just a form of self-pity. In fact, self-compassion is an *antidote* to self-pity. While self-pity says “poor me,” self-compassion recognizes that life is hard for everyone. Research shows that self-compassionate people are more likely to engage in perspective taking, rather than focusing on their own distress. They are also *less* likely to ruminate on how bad things are, which is one of the reasons self-compassionate people have better mental health. When we are self-compassionate, we remember that everyone suffers from time to time (common humanity), and we don't exaggerate the extent of our struggles (mindfulness). Self-compassion is not a “woe is me” attitude.

“Self-compassion is for wimps. I have to be tough and strong to get through my life.”

Another big fear is that self-compassion will make us weak and vulnerable. In fact, self-compassion is a reliable source of inner strength that confers courage and enhances resilience when we're faced with difficulties. Research shows self-compassionate people are better able to cope with tough situations like divorce, trauma, or chronic pain.

“I need to think more about other people, not myself. Being self-compassionate is way too selfish and self-focused.”

Some worry that by being self-compassionate rather than just focusing on being compassionate to others, they will become self-centered or selfish. However, giving compassion to ourselves actually enables us to give more to others in relationships. Research shows self-compassionate people tend to be more caring and supportive in romantic relationships, are more likely to compromise in relationship conflicts, and are more compassionate and forgiving toward others.

“Self-compassion will make me lazy. I will probably just skip work whenever I feel like it and stay in bed eating chocolate chip cookies all day!”

Although many people fear that being self-compassionate means being self-indulgent, it’s actually just the opposite. Compassion inclines us toward long-term health and well-being, not short-term pleasure (just as a compassionate mother doesn’t let her child eat all the ice cream she wants, but says, “eat your vegetables”). Research shows self-compassionate people engage in healthier behaviors like exercise, eating well, drinking less, and going to the doctor more regularly.

“If I’m compassionate to myself, I’ll let myself get away with murder. I need to be hard on myself when I mess up to make sure I don’t hurt other people.”

Another fear is that self-compassion is really a form of making excuses for bad behavior. Actually, self-compassion provides the safety needed to admit mistakes rather than needing to blame someone else for them. Research shows that self-compassionate people take greater personal responsibility for their actions and are more likely to apologize if they’ve offended someone.

“I will never get to where I want in life if I let up on my harsh self-criticism for even one moment. It’s what drives me to succeed. Self-compassion is fine for some people, but I have high standards and goals I want to achieve in my life.”

The most common misgiving people have is that self-compassion might undermine their motivation to achieve. Most people believe self-criticism is an effective motivator, but it’s not. Self-criticism tends to undermine self-confidence and leads to fear of failure. If we are self-compassionate, we will still be motivated to reach our goals—not because we’re inadequate as we are, but because we care about ourselves and want to reach our full potential (see Chapter 11). Research shows that self-compassionate people have high personal standards; they just don’t beat themselves up when they fail. This means they are less afraid of failure and are more likely to try again and to persist in their efforts after failing.

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

Often when telling people about self-compassion, we get this type of comment.

“That’s just like Stuart Smalley on *Saturday Night Live*, who loved to gaze in the mirror and say ‘I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!’ Isn’t it?”

To truly understand what self-compassion is, it’s important to distinguish it from a close cousin—self-esteem. In Western culture, high self-esteem requires standing out in a crowd—being special and above average. The problem, of course, is that

it's impossible for *everyone* to be above average at the same time. While there may be some areas in which we excel, there's always someone more attractive, successful, and intelligent than we are, meaning we feel like failures whenever we compare ourselves to those "better" than ourselves.

Self-compassion should not be confused with self-esteem.

The desire to see ourselves as better than average, however, and to *keep* that elusive feeling of high self-esteem, can lead to some downright nasty behavior. Why do early adolescents begin to bully others? If I can be seen as the cool tough kid in contrast to the wimpy nerd I just picked on, I get a self-esteem boost. Why are we so prejudiced? If I believe that my ethnic, gender, national, or political group is better than yours, I get a self-esteem boost.

But self-compassion is different from self-esteem. Although they're both strongly linked to psychological well-being, they diverge in significant ways:

- Self-esteem is a positive evaluation of self-worth. Self-compassion isn't a judgment or an evaluation at all. Instead, self-compassion is way of *relating* to the ever-changing landscape of who we are with kindness and acceptance—especially when we fail or feel inadequate.
- Self-esteem requires feeling better than others. Self-compassion requires acknowledging that we are all imperfect.
- Self-esteem tends to be a fair-weather friend, there for us when we succeed but deserting us precisely when we need it the most—when we fail or make a fool of ourselves. Self-compassion is always there for us, a reliable source of support even when our worldly stock has crashed. It still hurts when our pride is dashed, but we can be kind to ourselves *because* it hurts. "Wow, that was pretty humiliating. I'm so sorry. It's okay though; these things happen."
- Compared with self-esteem, self-compassion is less contingent on conditions like physical attractiveness or successful performance and provides a more stable sense of self-worth over time. It is also linked to less social comparison and narcissism than self-esteem is.



EXERCISE

How Is Self-Esteem Working for You?

- How do you feel when you receive the feedback that your performance is average in an area of life that you care about (e.g., work, parenting, friendship, romance)?

- How do you feel when someone is *better* at doing something you really care about (e.g., achieving more sales, baking tastier cookies for the school party, being a better basketball player, looking better in a swimsuit)?

- How does it impact you when you *fail* at something that you care about (e.g., your teaching evaluations are poor, your kid says you're a horrible dad, you don't get asked out for a second date)?

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REFLECTION

If you're like most people, you'll find that it doesn't feel okay to be average, that you don't like it when people outperform you, and that—to put it bluntly—failure sucks. This is only human. But it's important to consider that these are all major limitations of self-esteem: self-esteem causes us to constantly compare ourselves to others and means that our self-worth bounces up and down like a Ping-Pong ball depending on our latest success or failure. When we notice that our need for high self-esteem is causing problems for us, it's time to practice a new way of relating to ourselves—with self-compassion!

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