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## The Benefits of Self-Compassion

**O**n the first night of our course, Marion was pretty skeptical. “How will self-compassion help me? I’m in the habit of being really hard on myself—it’s the devil I know. It’s what got me to where I am today. Why should I change? Can I change? How can I be sure it’s a safe thing to do?”

Luckily, Marion didn’t have to just take our word for it. Over a thousand research studies have demonstrated the mental and physical health benefits of self-compassion.

People who are more self-compassionate experience greater well-being:

Less	More
Depression	Happiness
Anxiety	Life satisfaction
Stress	Self-confidence
Shame	Physical health

Although people naturally vary in terms of how self-compassionate they are, it is also the case that self-compassion can be learned. Research has shown that people who took the MSC course (the program this workbook is based on) increased their levels of self-compassion by an average of 43%. Participation in the course also helped them to become more mindful and compassionate toward others, feel more social connectedness, life satisfaction, and happiness, and be less depressed, anxious, and stressed. Participants were also less likely to avoid their difficult emotions after taking MSC.

Most of these benefits were tied directly to learning to be more self-compassionate. Moreover, the increase in self-compassion and other benefits of MSC were maintained one year later. Gains in self-compassion were linked to how much self-compassion

practice participants did (either days per week spent meditating or times per day spent doing informal practices). This research suggests that by practicing the various exercises in this book, you can radically transform the way you relate to yourself, and by doing so radically transform your life.

*MSC practices can transform how you relate to yourself and in turn transform your life.*

*Marion had an enviable life on the outside—two great kids, a happy marriage, fulfilling work—but she went to bed almost every night a nervous wreck: worrying that she had offended someone or beating herself up because she didn't do enough as a mom, and feeling disappointed that she was not keeping up with her high expectations. No amount of reassurance seemed to make a difference. Marion was the kind of person whom everyone else could rely on to say just the right thing at the right time, and to be kind and supportive to just about everyone, but somehow that didn't translate into how Marion treated herself. She knew that a change had to come from the inside. But how?*

*Self-compassion seemed like it might provide an answer so she signed up for an MSC course. Before starting the program, Marion filled out the Self-Compassion Scale (see the next page) and realized that she was probably her own worst enemy. In the first MSC class, Marion discovered that she was not alone; in fact, criticizing ourselves, isolating ourselves, and getting stuck in rumination when things go wrong is pretty instinctive for all of us.*

*Marion's next step toward self-compassion—recognizing the pain of self-criticism—came easily to her. Her need for approval was starting to wear out her friends and family, and Marion was already too aware of her desperate wish to be perfect. That longing had deep roots in Marion's childhood. She was raised by a financially successful, but emotionally distant, father and an ex-beauty-queen mother who resented the tedium of being a full-time mom. Marion yearned for more warmth and closeness with her parents, but it always seemed slightly out of reach. As she grew up, Marion managed to get attention by succeeding at most everything she did. It came at a cost, however, because success never made Marion feel the way she wanted to feel.*

*The first epiphany came to Marion when she connected with how much and how unconditionally she loved her young children. Marion wondered, "Why do I systematically exclude myself from that love?" Couldn't she tuck herself into that good feeling, Marion wondered, much like she sometimes tucks herself into bed with her kids at the end of the day? Couldn't she talk to herself in the same caring way she talked to her friends? "After all," Marion thought, "I need to be loved just like everyone else!"*

*As Marion gave herself permission to love herself, she started to feel some of the old longing and loneliness of her childhood. By then, however, Marion was committed to the idea that she deserved compassion as much as anyone else. She even started to feel some grief for the many long years that she struggled to get the affection of others to fill the hole in her heart. Self-compassion*

*practice was hard, but she persisted. She knew that these old feelings needed to come out, and she was learning the resources she needed to meet them—mindfulness and self-compassion. She could now start to give herself what she had longed to receive from others.*

*Her friends and family started to notice a change in Marion. It was small things at first, like deciding not to go out with friends when she felt exhausted. Marion found she could fall asleep more easily, perhaps because she wasn't taking inventory of all her missteps during the day. She still occasionally woke up with nightmares—such as dreaming that she had to make a presentation at work and she didn't remember what it was about—but she simply put her hand over her heart and spoke comforting words to herself and fell right back to sleep. Her husband noted, only partly in jest, that Marion required “less maintenance.” By the end of the eight-week MSC course, Marion and her family all agreed that she had become a happier person. But what was really amazing was that she stopped berating herself for making mistakes, let go of the need to be perfect, and began to love and accept herself just as she was.*



#### EXERCISE

### *How Self-Compassionate Am I?*

The path to self-compassion often begins with an objective assessment of how self-compassionate or not we are. The Self-Compassion Scale measures the degree to which people show self-kindness or harsh self-judgment, have a sense of common humanity or feel isolated by their imperfection, and are mindful of or overidentify with their suffering. Most research uses this scale to measure self-compassion and determine its link to well-being. Take the test to find out how self-compassionate you are.

This is an adapted version of the short form of the Self-Compassion Scale. If you would like to try the full Self-Compassion Scale and have your results calculated for you, go to [www.self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are](http://www.self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are).

The following statements describe how you act toward yourself in difficult times. Read each statement carefully before answering, and to the left of each item indicate how often you behave in the stated manner on a scale of 1 to 5.

For the first set of items, use the following scale:

	<b>Almost never</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>4</b>		<b>5</b>
	<b>1</b>								<b>Almost always</b>
_____		I try to be understanding and patient toward those aspects of my personality I don't like.							
_____		When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation.							

- |  |                         |          |          |          |  |                          |
|--|-------------------------|----------|----------|----------|--|--------------------------|
|  | <b>Almost<br/>never</b> |          |          |          |  | <b>Almost<br/>always</b> |
|  | <b>1</b>                | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> |  | <b>5</b>                 |
- \_\_\_\_\_ I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When something upsets me, I try to keep my emotions in balance.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.

*For the next set of items, use the following scale (notice that the endpoints of the scale are reversed from those above):*

- |  |                          |          |          |          |  |                         |
|--|--------------------------|----------|----------|----------|--|-------------------------|
|  | <b>Almost<br/>always</b> |          |          |          |  | <b>Almost<br/>never</b> |
|  | <b>1</b>                 | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> |  | <b>5</b>                |
- \_\_\_\_\_ When I fail at something important to me, I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ When I'm feeling down, I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I'm intolerant and impatient toward those aspects of my personality I don't like.

*How to score your test:*

Total (sum of all 12 items) \_\_\_\_\_

Mean score = Total/12 \_\_\_\_\_

Average overall self-compassion scores tend to be around 3.0 on the 1–5 scale, so you can interpret your overall score accordingly. As a rough guide, a score of 1–2.5 for your overall self-compassion score indicates you are low in self-compassion, 2.5–3.5 indicates you are moderate, and 3.5–5.0 means you are high in self-compassion.

## REFLECTION

If you scored lower in self-compassion than you would like, don't worry. The beautiful thing about self-compassion is that it is a skill that can be learned. You might just have to give yourself some time, but it will happen eventually.



## INFORMAL PRACTICE

### *Keeping a Self-Compassion Journal*

Try writing a self-compassion journal every day for one week (or longer if you like). Journaling is an effective way to express emotions and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being.

At some point during the evening, when you have a few quiet moments, review the day's events. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. (For instance, perhaps you got angry at the waitstaff at a restaurant because they took forever to bring the check. You made a rude comment and stormed off without leaving a tip. Afterward, you felt ashamed and embarrassed.) For each difficult event that happened during the day, try mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to relate to the event in a more self-compassionate way. Here's how:

#### **Mindfulness**

This will mainly involve bringing balanced awareness to the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting and nonjudgmental of your experience, without diminishing it or becoming overly dramatic. (For example, "I was frustrated because the waitperson was so slow. I got angry, overreacted, and felt foolish afterward.")

#### **Common Humanity**

Write down the ways in which your experience was part of being human. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. ("Everyone overreacts sometimes—it's only human." "This is how people are likely to feel in a situation like that.") You might also want to think about the unique causes and conditions underlying your painful event. ("My frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was half an hour late for my doctor's appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different, my reaction probably would have been different.")

### Self-Kindness

Write yourself some kind, understanding words, much as you might write to a good friend. Let yourself know that you care about your happiness and well-being, adopting a gentle, reassuring tone. (“It’s okay. You messed up, but it wasn’t the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it. Maybe you can try being extra patient and generous to any waitstaff you encounter this week.”)

### REFLECTION

After keeping your self-compassion journal for at least a week, ask yourself if you noticed any changes in your internal dialogue. How did it feel to write to yourself in a more self-compassionate manner? Do you think it helped you to cope with the difficulties that arose?

Some people will find that keeping a self-compassion journal is a wonderful way to help support their practice, while for others it may seem like a chore. It’s probably worth trying it out for a week or so, but if journal writing isn’t your thing, you can skip the writing part. The important thing is that we practice all three steps of self-compassion—mindfully turning toward our pain, remembering that imperfection is part of the shared human experience, and being kind and supportive to ourselves because things are difficult.