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What Is Self-Compassion?

Self-compassion involves treating yourself the way you would treat a friend who is having a hard time—even if your friend blew it or is feeling inadequate, or is just facing a tough life challenge. Western culture places great emphasis on being kind to our friends, family, and neighbors who are struggling. Not so when it comes to ourselves. Self-compassion is a practice in which we learn to be a good friend to ourselves when we need it most—to become an inner ally rather than an inner enemy. But typically we don't treat ourselves as well as we treat our friends.

*Through self-compassion
we become an inner ally
instead of an inner enemy.*

The golden rule says “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” However, you probably don't want to do unto others as you do unto yourself! Imagine that your best friend calls you after she just got dumped by her partner, and this is how the conversation goes.

“Hey,” you say, picking up the phone. “How are you?”

“Terrible,” she says, choking back tears. “You know that guy Michael I've been dating? Well, he's the first man I've been really excited about since my divorce. Last night he told me that I was putting too much pressure on him and that he just wants to be friends. I'm devastated.”

You sigh and say, “Well, to be perfectly honest, it's probably because you're old, ugly, and boring, not to mention needy and dependent. And you're at least 20 pounds overweight. I'd just give up now, because there's really no hope of finding anyone who will ever love you. I mean, frankly you don't deserve it!”

Would you ever talk this way to someone you cared about? Of course not. But strangely, this is precisely the type of thing we say to ourselves in such situations—or worse. With self-compassion, we learn to speak to ourselves like a good friend. “I'm

so sorry. Are you okay? You must be so upset. Remember I'm here for you and I deeply appreciate you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Although a simple way to think about self-compassion is treating yourself as you would treat a good friend, the more complete definition involves three core elements that we bring to bear when we are in pain: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Self-Kindness. When we make a mistake or fail in some way, we are more likely to beat ourselves up than put a supportive arm around our own shoulder. Think of all the generous, caring people you know who constantly tear themselves down (this may even be you). Self-kindness counters this tendency so that we are as caring toward ourselves as we are toward others. Rather than being harshly critical when noticing personal shortcomings, we are supportive and encouraging and aim to protect ourselves from harm. Instead of attacking and berating ourselves for being inadequate, we offer ourselves warmth and unconditional acceptance. Similarly, when external life circumstances are challenging and feel too difficult to bear, we actively soothe and comfort ourselves.

Theresa was excited. "I did it! I can't believe I did it! I was at an office party last week and blurted out something inappropriate to a coworker. Instead of doing my usual thing of calling myself terrible names, I tried to be kind and understanding. I told myself, 'Oh well, it's not the end of the world. I meant well even if it didn't come out in the best way.'"

Common Humanity. A sense of interconnectedness is central to self-compassion. It's recognizing that all humans are flawed works-in-progress, that everyone fails, makes mistakes, and experiences hardship in life. Self-compassion honors the unavoidable fact that life entails suffering, for everyone, without exception. While this may seem obvious, it's so easy to forget. We fall into the trap of believing that

The Three Elements of Self-Compassion



things are “supposed” to go well and that something has gone wrong when they don’t. Of course, it’s highly likely—in fact inevitable—that we’ll make mistakes and experience hardships on a regular basis. This is completely normal and natural.

But we don’t tend to be rational about these matters. Instead, not only do we suffer, we feel isolated and alone in our suffering. When we remember that pain is part of the shared human experience, however, every moment of suffering is transformed into a moment of connection with others. The pain I feel in difficult times is the same pain you feel in difficult times. The circumstances are different, the degree of pain is different, but the basic experience of human suffering is the same.

Theresa continued: “I remembered that everyone has a slip of the tongue sometimes. I can’t expect to say the right thing at every moment. It’s only natural that these things happen.”

Mindfulness. Mindfulness involves being aware of moment-to-moment experience in a clear and balanced manner. It means being open to the reality of the present moment, allowing all thoughts, emotions, and sensations to enter awareness without resistance or avoidance (we will be delving more deeply into mindfulness in Chapter 6).

Why is mindfulness an essential component of self-compassion? Because we need to be able to turn toward and acknowledge when we’re suffering, to “be” with our pain long enough to respond with care and kindness. While it might seem that suffering is blindingly obvious, many people don’t acknowledge how much pain they’re in, especially when that pain stems from their own self-criticism. Or when confronted with life challenges, people often get so caught up in problem-solving mode that they don’t pause to consider how hard it is in the moment. Mindfulness counters the tendency to avoid painful thoughts and emotions, allowing us to face the truth of our experience, even when it’s unpleasant. At the same time, mindfulness prevents us from becoming absorbed by and “overidentified” with negative thoughts or feelings, from getting caught up and swept away by our aversive reactions. Rumination narrows our focus and exaggerates our experience. Not only did I fail, “*I am a failure.*” Not only was I disappointed, “*my life is disappointing.*” When we mindfully observe our pain, however, we can acknowledge our suffering without exaggerating it, allowing us to take a wiser and more objective perspective on ourselves and our lives.

To be self-compassionate, mindfulness is actually the first step we need to take—we need presence of mind to respond in a new way. So immediately after the office party faux pas, for instance, instead of drowning her sorrows in a box of chocolates, Theresa summoned the courage needed to face what had happened.

Theresa added: “I just acknowledged how bad I felt in the moment. I wish it didn’t happen, but it did happen. What was amazing is that I could actually be with the feelings of embarrassment, the flushed cheeks, the heat rising in my head, without getting lost in self-judgment. I knew the feelings wouldn’t kill

me, and they would eventually pass. And they did. I gave myself a little pep talk, saw my coworker the next day to apologize and explain myself, and everything was fine.”

Cultivating a state of loving, connected presence can change our relationship with ourselves and the world around us.

Another way to describe the three essential elements of self-compassion is *loving* (self-kindness), *connected* (common humanity) *presence* (mindfulness). When we are in the mind state of loving, connected presence, our relationship to ourselves, others, and the world is transformed.



EXERCISE

How Do I Treat a Friend?

- Close your eyes and reflect for a moment on the following question:
 - Think about various times when you’ve had a close friend who was struggling in some way—had a misfortune, failed, or felt inadequate—and you were feeling pretty good about yourself. How do you typically respond to your friends in such situations? What do you say? What tone do you use? How is your posture? Nonverbal gestures?
- Write down what you discovered.

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- Now close your eyes again and reflect on the next question:
 - Think about various times when you were struggling in some way—had a misfortune, failed, or felt inadequate. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? What do you say? What tone do you use? Your posture? Nonverbal gestures?
- Write down what you discovered.

- Finally, consider the differences between how you treat your close friends when they are struggling and how you treat yourself. Do you notice any patterns?

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REFLECTION

What came up for you while doing this practice?

When they do this exercise many people are shocked at how badly they treat themselves compared to their friends. If you are one of these people, you are not alone. Preliminary data suggests that the vast majority of people are more compassionate to others than to themselves. Our culture doesn't encourage us to be kind to ourselves, so we need to intentionally practice changing our relationship with ourselves in order to counter the habits of a lifetime.



EXERCISE

Relating to Ourselves with Self-Compassion

Think about a current struggle you're going through in your life—one that's not too serious. For example, maybe you had a fight with your partner and you said something you regret. Or maybe you really blew it on a work assignment and you're frightened your boss is going to call you in for a meeting to reprimand you.

- Write down the situation.

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- First write down any ways you may be lost in the story line of the situation and running away with it. Is it all you can think about, or are you making a bigger deal out of things than is warranted? For example, are you terrified that you will be fired even though the mistake was pretty minor?

- Now see if you can mindfully acknowledge the pain involved in this situation without exaggerating it or being overly dramatic. Write down any painful or difficult feelings you may be having, trying to do so with a relatively objective and balanced tone. Validate the difficulty of the situation, while trying not to get overly caught up in the story line of what you're feeling. For example: "I'm feeling really frightened that I will get in trouble with my boss after this incident. It's difficult for me to feel this right now."

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- Next write down any ways you may be feeling isolated by the situation, thinking that it shouldn't have happened or that you're the only one who has been in this situation. For example, are you assuming that your work should be perfect and that it's abnormal to make mistakes? That no one else at your work makes these types of mistakes?

- Now try to remind yourself of the common humanity of the situation—how normal it is to have feelings like this and the fact that many people are probably experiencing feelings similar to yours. For example: "I guess it's natural to feel frightened after making a mistake at work. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, and I'm sure many other people have been in a similar situation to what I'm facing right now."

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- Next write down any ways you may be judging yourself for what happened. For example, are you calling yourself names (“stupid idiot”) or being overly harsh with yourself (“You are always messing up. Why can’t you ever learn?”)?

- Finally, try writing yourself some words of kindness in response to the difficult emotions you are feeling. Write using the same type of gentle, supportive words you might use with a good friend you cared about. For example: “I’m so sorry that you’re feeling frightened right now. I’m sure it will be okay, and I’ll be here to support you whatever happens.” Or else, “It’s okay to make mistakes, and it’s okay to feel scared about the consequences. I know you did your best.”

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REFLECTION

What was this practice like for you? Take a moment and try to fully accept how you're feeling in this moment, allowing yourself to be just as you are.

Some people feel soothed and comforted by words of mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness when they do this writing exercise. If it felt supportive for you, can you allow yourself to savor the feeling of caring for yourself in this way?

For many people, however, writing in this way feels awkward or uncomfortable. If this describes your experience, can you allow yourself to learn at your own pace, knowing that it takes time to form new habits?