

This is a chapter excerpt from Guilford Publications.
The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook:
A Proven Way to Accept Yourself, Build Inner Strength, and Thrive.
Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer. Copyright © 2018.
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Introduction: How to Approach This Workbook

Our task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all
the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

—RUMI

We have all built barriers to love. We've had to in order to protect ourselves from the harsh realities of living a human life. But there is another way to feel safe and protected. When we are mindful of our struggles, and respond to ourselves with compassion, kindness, and support in times of difficulty, things start to change. We can learn to embrace ourselves and our lives, despite inner and outer imperfections, and provide ourselves with the strength needed to thrive. An explosion of research into self-compassion over the last decade has shown its benefits for well-being. Individuals who are more self-compassionate tend to have greater happiness, life satisfaction, and motivation, better relationships and physical health, and less anxiety and depression. They also have the resilience needed to cope with stressful life events such as divorce, health crises, academic failure, even combat trauma.

When we struggle, however—when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate—it's hard to be mindful toward what's occurring; we'd rather scream and beat our fists on the table. Not only do we not like what's happening, we think there is something wrong with us because it's happening. In the blink of an eye we can go from "I don't *like* this feeling" to "I don't *want* this feeling" to "I *shouldn't* have this feeling" to "Something is *wrong* with me for having this feeling" to "I'm *bad!*"

*Learning to embrace
yourself and your
imperfections gives you the
resilience needed to thrive.*

That's where self-compassion comes in. Sometimes we need to comfort and soothe ourselves for how hard it is to be a human being before we can relate to our lives in a more mindful way.

Self-compassion springs from the heart of mindfulness during moments of suffering.

Self-compassion emerges from the heart of mindfulness when we meet suffering in our lives. Mindfulness invites us to *open* to suffering with loving, spacious awareness. Self-compassion adds, “*be kind to yourself* in the midst of suffering.” Together, mindfulness and self-compassion form a state of warmhearted, connected presence during difficult moments in our lives.

MINDFUL SELF-COMPASSION

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) was the first training program specifically designed to enhance a person's self-compassion. Mindfulness-based training programs such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy also increase self-compassion, but they do so more implicitly, as a welcome byproduct of mindfulness. MSC was created as a way to explicitly teach the general public the skills needed to be self-compassionate in daily life. MSC is an eight-week course where trained teachers lead a group of 8 to 25 participants through the program for 2¾ hours each week, plus a half-day meditation retreat. Research indicates that the program produces long-lasting increases in self-compassion and mindfulness, reduces anxiety and depression, enhances overall well-being, and even stabilizes glucose levels among people with diabetes.

The idea for MSC started back in 2008 when the authors met at a meditation retreat for scientists. One of us (Kristin) is a developmental psychologist and pioneering researcher into self-compassion. The other (Chris) is a clinical psychologist who has been at the forefront of integrating mindfulness into psychotherapy since the mid-1990s. We were sharing a ride to the airport after the retreat and realized we could combine our skills to create a program to teach self-compassion.

I (Kristin) first came across the idea of self-compassion in 1997 during my last year of graduate school, when, basically, my life was a mess. I had just gotten through a messy divorce and was under incredible stress at school. I thought I would learn to practice Buddhist meditation to help me deal with my stress. To my great surprise the woman leading the meditation class talked about how important it was to develop self-compassion. Although I knew that Buddhists talked a lot about the importance of compassion for others, I never considered that having compassion for *myself* might be just as important. My initial reaction was “What? You mean I'm *allowed* to be kind to myself? Isn't that selfish?” But I was so desperate for some peace of mind I gave it a try. Soon I realized how helpful self-compassion could be. I learned to be a good, supportive friend to myself when I struggled. When I started to be kinder to and less judgmental of myself, my life transformed.

After receiving my PhD, I did two years of postdoctoral training with a leading

self-esteem researcher and began to learn about some of the downsides of the self-esteem movement. Though it's beneficial to feel good about ourselves, the need to be "special and above average" was being shown to lead to narcissism, constant comparisons with others, ego-defensive anger, prejudice, and so on. The other limitation of self-esteem is that it tends to be contingent—it's there for us in times of success but often deserts us in times of failure, precisely when we need it most! I realized that self-compassion was the perfect alternative to self-esteem because it offered a sense of self-worth that didn't require being perfect or better than others. After getting a job as an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin, I decided to conduct research on self-compassion. At that point, no one had studied self-compassion from an academic perspective, so I tried to define what self-compassion is and created a scale to measure it, which started what is now an avalanche of self-compassion research.

The reason I *really* know self-compassion works, however, is because I've seen the benefits of it in my personal life. My son, Rowan, was diagnosed with autism in 2007, and it was the most challenging experience I had ever faced. I don't know how I would have gotten through it if it weren't for my self-compassion practice. I remember the day I got the diagnosis, I was actually on my way to a meditation retreat. I had told my husband that I would cancel the retreat so we could process, and he said, "No, go to your retreat and do that self-compassion thing, then come back and help me." So while I was on retreat, I flooded myself with compassion. I allowed myself to feel whatever I was feeling without judgment—even feelings I thought I "shouldn't" be having. Feelings of disappointment, even of irrational shame. How could I possibly feel this about the person I love most in the world? But I knew I had to open my heart and let it all in. I let in the sadness, the grief, the fear. And fairly soon I realized I had the stability to hold it—that the resource of self-compassion would not only get me through, but would help me be the best, most unconditionally loving parent to Rowan I could be. And what a difference it made!

Because of the intense sensory issues experienced by children with autism, they are prone to violent tantrums. The only thing you can do as a parent is to try to keep your child safe and wait until the storm passes. When my son screamed and flailed away in the grocery store for no discernible reason, and strangers gave me nasty looks because they thought I wasn't disciplining my child properly, I would practice self-compassion. I would comfort myself for feeling confused, ashamed, stressed, and helpless, providing myself the emotional support I desperately needed in the moment. Self-compassion helped me steer clear of anger and self-pity, allowing me to remain patient and loving toward Rowan despite the feelings of stress and despair that would inevitably arise. I'm not saying that I didn't have times when I lost it. I had many. But I could rebound from my missteps much more quickly with self-compassion and refocus on supporting and loving Rowan.

I (Chris) also learned self-compassion primarily for personal reasons. I had been practicing meditation since the late '70s, became a clinical psychologist in the early '80s, and joined a study group on mindfulness and psychotherapy. This dual passion for mindfulness and therapy eventually led to the publication of *Mindfulness*

and Psychotherapy. As mindfulness became more popular, I was being asked to do more public speaking. The problem, however, was that I suffered from terrible public speaking anxiety. Despite maintaining a regular practice of meditation my whole adult life and trying every clinical trick in the book to manage anxiety, before any public talk my heart would pound, my hands began to sweat, and I found it impossible to think clearly. The breaking point came when I was scheduled to speak at an upcoming Harvard Medical School conference that I helped to organize. (I still tried to expose myself to every possible speaking opportunity.) I'd been safely tucked in the shadows of the medical school as a clinical instructor but now I'd have to give a speech and expose my shameful secret to all my esteemed colleagues.

Around that time, a very experienced meditation teacher advised me to shift the focus of my meditation to loving-kindness, and to simply repeat phrases such as "May I be safe," "May I be happy," "May I be healthy," "May I live with ease." So I gave it a try. In spite of all the years I'd been meditating and reflecting on my inner life as a psychologist, I'd never spoken to myself in a tender, comforting way. Right off the bat, I started to feel better and my mind also became clearer. I adopted loving-kindness as my primary meditation practice.

Whenever anxiety arose as I anticipated the upcoming conference, I just said the loving-kindness phrases to myself, day after day, week after week. I didn't do this particularly to calm down, but simply because there was nothing else I *could* do. Eventually, however, the day of the conference arrived. When I was called to the podium to speak, the typical dread rose up in the usual way. But this time there was something new—a faint background whisper saying, "May you be safe. May you be happy . . ." In that moment, for the first time, something rose up and took the place of fear—*self-compassion*.

Upon later reflection, I realized that I was unable to mindfully accept my anxiety because public speaking anxiety isn't an *anxiety* disorder after all—it's a *shame* disorder—and the shame was just too overwhelming to bear. Imagine being unable to speak about the topic of mindfulness due to anxiety! I felt like a fraud, incompetent, and a bit stupid. What I discovered on that fateful day was that sometimes—especially when we're engulfed in intense emotions like shame—we need to hold *ourselves* before we can hold our moment-to-moment experience. I had begun to learn self-compassion, and saw its power firsthand.

In 2009, I published *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion* in an effort to share what I had learned, especially in terms of how self-compassion helped the clients I saw in clinical practice. The following year, Kristin published *Self-Compassion*, which told her personal story, reviewed the theory and research on self-compassion, and provided many techniques for enhancing self-compassion. Together we held the first public MSC program in 2010. Since then we, along with a worldwide community of fellow teachers and practitioners, have devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy to developing MSC and making it safe, enjoyable, and effective for just about everyone. The benefits of the program have been supported in multiple research studies, and to date tens of thousands of people have taken MSC around the globe.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Most of the MSC curriculum is contained in this workbook, in an easy-to-use format that will help you start to be more self-compassionate right away. Some people who use this workbook will be currently taking an MSC course, some may want to refresh what they previously learned, but for many people this will be their first experience with MSC. This workbook is designed to also be a stand-alone pathway for you to learn the skills you need to be more self-compassionate in daily life. It follows the general structure of the MSC course, with the chapters organized in a carefully sequenced manner so the skills build upon one another. Each chapter provides basic information about a topic followed by practices and exercises that allow you to experience the concepts firsthand. Most of the chapters also contain illustrations of the personal experiences of participants in the MSC course, to help you know how the practices may play out in your life. These are composite illustrations that don't compromise the privacy of any particular participant, and the names are not real. In this book, we also alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to a single individual. We have made this choice to promote ease of reading as our language continues to evolve and not out of disrespect toward readers who identify with other personal pronouns. We sincerely hope that all will feel included.

We recommend that you go through the chapters in order, giving the time needed in between to do the practices a few times. A rough guideline would be to practice about 30 minutes a day and to do about one or two chapters per week. Go at your own pace, however. If you feel you need to go more slowly or spend extra time on a particular topic, please do so. Make the program your own. If you are interested in taking the MSC course in person from a trained MSC teacher, you can find a program near you at www.centerformsc.org. Online training is also available. For professionals who want to learn more about the theory, research, and practice of MSC, including how to teach self-compassion to clients, we recommend reading the MSC professional training manual, to be published by The Guilford Press in 2019.

The ideas and practices in this workbook are largely based on scientific research (notes at the back of the book point to the relevant research). However, they are also based on our experience teaching thousands of people how to be more self-compassionate. The MSC program is itself an organic entity, continuing to evolve as we and our participants learn and grow together.

Also, while MSC isn't therapy, it's very therapeutic—it will help you access the resource of self-compassion to meet and transform difficulties that inevitably emerge as we live our lives. However, the practice of self-compassion can sometimes activate old wounds, so if you have a history of trauma or are currently having mental health challenges, we recommend that you complete this workbook under the supervision of a therapist.

Tips for Practice

As you go through this workbook, it's important to keep some points in mind to get the most out of it.

- MSC is an adventure that will take you into uncharted territory, and unexpected experiences will arise. See if you can approach this workbook as an experiment in *self-discovery* and *self-transformation*. You will be working in the laboratory of your own experience—see what happens.
- While you will be learning numerous techniques and principles of mindfulness and self-compassion, feel free to tailor and adapt them in a way that works for you. The goal is for you to *become your own best teacher*.
- Know that tough spots will show up as you learn to turn toward your struggles in a new way. You are likely to get in touch with difficult emotions or painful self-judgments. Fortunately, this book is about building the emotional resources, skills, strengths, and capacities to deal with these difficulties.
- While self-compassion work can be challenging, the goal is to find a way to practice that's pleasant and easy. Ideally, every moment of self-compassion involves *less stress, less striving, and less work, not more*.
- It is good to be a “slow learner.” Some people defeat the purpose of self-compassion training by pushing themselves too hard to become self-compassionate. Allow yourself to go at your own pace.
- The workbook itself is a training ground for self-compassion. The way you approach this course should be self-compassionate. In other words, the means and ends are the same.
- It is important to allow yourself to go through a process of *opening* and *closing* as you work through this book. Just as our lungs expand and contract, our hearts and minds also naturally open and close. It is self-compassionate to allow ourselves to close when needed and to open up again when that naturally happens. Signs of opening might be laughter, tears, or more vivid thoughts and sensations. Signs of closing might be distraction, sleepiness, annoyance, numbness, or self-criticism.
- See if you can find the right balance between opening and closing. Just like a faucet in the shower has a range of water flow between off and full force that you can control, you can also regulate the degree of openness you experience.

The quintessential self-compassion question is “What do I need?” This theme will be carried throughout the book.

Your needs will vary: sometimes you may not be in the right space to do a particular practice, and other times it will be exactly what you need. *Please take responsibility for your own emotional safety, and don't push yourself through something if it doesn't feel right in the moment.* You can always come back to it later, or do the practice with the help and guidance of a trusted friend or therapist.

The Design of This Workbook

You'll discover that this workbook contains different elements, each of which has a distinct purpose. The chapters typically begin with general information and concepts that need simply be read and understood.

The workbook has many written *exercises* that are designed primarily to be completed once, although it can be helpful to do the exercises again at a later date to observe changes. *Informal practices* are intended to be done regularly in daily life—such as in the checkout line at the grocery store—whenever needed. Some practices, like journal writing, need some special time set aside. *Meditations* are more formal practices that you should do regularly to get the maximum benefit, and in a place where you are free from outside distractions.

After most practices in this book, there is a reflection section that will help you take in and process your experience. There may be some questions to consider, and a brief discussion of what might come up for you. This includes potentially difficult reactions, with a bit of advice about how to work with your reactions in a helpful manner. Some people may just want to consider the reflections silently, but others may want to have a special notebook for writing them down. This notebook might also come in handy if you find that you want more space than the book allows to jot down your answers to the exercise questions (or if you don't want to worry about others reading what you've written in this workbook and prefer to use a private notebook for all the exercises). The most important thing to remember is to do the practices you find most enjoyable or personally beneficial, as these are the ones that are most likely to stick with you over time.

While going through the workbook, your goal should be to do some combination of meditation and informal practice for about 30 minutes every day. Research on MSC shows that the amount of self-compassion participants gain in the program is linked to the amount of time they practice, but that informal versus formal practice does not make a difference.



Exercises are usually done once, although they can be repeated.



Informal practices are done frequently, typically in the course of daily life.



Meditations are formal practices that are done regularly, at times set aside specifically for the purpose of meditation.