Self-Compassion: Theory, Research and Practice

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Self-Esteem
- For years self-esteem was seen as the ultimate marker of wellbeing
- Self-esteem is a global evaluation of self-worth
- Movement in schools to enhance students’ self-esteem
- Potential problems with high self-esteem - Not if you have it, but how you get it
  - The need to be special and above average
  - Narcissism
  - Social Comparison
  - Bullying and Prejudice
  - Ego-Defensive Anger
  - Contingency and Instability of Self-Worth

Self-Compassion
- The three components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003)
- Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
  - Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
  - Actively soothing and comforting oneself
- Common humanity vs. Isolation
  - Seeing own experience as part of larger human experience not isolating or abnormal
  - Recognizing that life is imperfect (us too!)
- Mindfulness vs. Over-identification
  - Avoiding extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings
  - Allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they are

Paul Gilbert - Social Mentality Theory
- Physiological underpinnings of self-esteem
  - Social rank system
  - Dopamine activation
- Physiological underpinnings of self-criticism
  - Threat defense system
  - Cortisol and adrenaline
- Physiological underpinnings of self-compassion
  - Mammalian care-giving system
  - Oxytocin and opiates
Common confusions
- Belief that self-compassion is wimpy
  - Compassion can be a strong, powerful force for change
- Confusion with Self-Pity
- Harsh Self-Judgment vs. Discriminating Wisdom
  - Self-compassion provides the safety needed to see ourselves clearly
- Confusion with Self-indulgence
- Confusion with Making Excuses

Self-Compassion as a Motivational Tool
- Most people believe self-criticism is an effective motivator
- Motivation with self-criticism comes from fear of being worthless
- Motivation with self-compassion comes from the desire for health and well-being
- Self-compassion provides the emotionally supportive environment needed for change and growth

Research on self-compassion
- Reductions in: anxiety, depression, stress, rumination, perfectionism, body shame
- Increases in: life satisfaction, happiness, self-confidence, optimism, curiosity, creativity, gratitude

Self-compassion vs. self-esteem
- Offers same benefits without pitfalls
  - Fewer social comparisons
  - Less ego-defensive anger
  - Less contingent self-worth
  - More stable self-worth
  - No association with narcissism

Linked to motivation
- Greater intrinsic motivation, desire to learn and grow
- Personal standards just as high, not as upset when don’t meet them
- Less fear of failure
- More likely to try again when fail
- Linked to health behaviors
  - Diet, exercise, quitting smoking, safe sex, doctors visits

Linked to personal accountability
- Taking greater responsibility for past mistakes
- Disposition to apologize
Linked to Coping and Resilience
- More effective coping with academic failure, chronic pain, child maltreatment, divorce

Linked to Other-Focused Concern
- Greater compassion and empathy for others
- More forgiveness of others
- More caring and supportive relationship behavior (as rated by partners)

Family Influences on Self-Compassion
- Attachment security
- Parental criticism
- Conflict in home

Mindful Self-Compassion Program (MSC)
- 8-week workshop designed to explicitly teach skills of self-compassion
- Uses meditation, informal practice, group discussion and homework exercises
- Randomized clinical trial of MSC with intervention group vs. wait-list control group
  - Experimental group had significantly more change in self-compassion, mindfulness, compassion for others, depression, anxiety, stress, avoidance, life satisfaction
  - Follow-up survey found controls were reading books and actively trying to practice self-compassion
  - All well-being gains maintained over time (for one year)

Suggested Reading:
