

Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself

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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
- Potential problems with high self-esteem - Not *if* you have it, but *how* you get it
 - The need to be special and above average
 - Social Comparison
 - Narcissism
 - Bullying and Prejudice
 - Contingency of Self-Worth
 - Inevitable Feelings of Inadequacy

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
 - Allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they are
 - Avoids extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings
- 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 weak, complacent and passive
 - Compassion can be a strong, powerful force for change
- Confusion with Self-Indulgence
 - Compassion wants long term health not short term pleasure
- Belief that self-compassion will undermine motivation
 - 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

Research on self-compassion

- Explosion of research into self-compassion over the past decade
- Most research conducted with the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003)
- Other methods of examining self-compassion: Behavioral ratings by others, Mood inductions, Intervention studies

Self-compassion and wellbeing

- Reductions in: anxiety, depression, stress, neuroticism, rumination, thought suppression, shame
- Increases in: life satisfaction, autonomy, self-confidence, wisdom, happiness, optimism

Self-compassion vs. self-esteem

- Offers same benefits without pitfalls
 - Fewer social comparisons
 - Less contingent self-worth
 - No association with narcissism

Linked to motivation

- 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 and persist in efforts after task failure

Linked to flexibility and creativity

- More creative problem solving
- Greater perspective taking
- More cognitive flexibility
- Less dogmatism

Linked to health behaviors

- Exercise, doctor's visits, less alcohol use, quitting smoking

Linked to better physical health

- Enhanced immune response
- Fewer physical symptoms (fatigue, colds, etc.)

Linked to better body image and eating behavior

- Less body preoccupation, dissatisfaction, weight worries
- Negatively linked to drive for thinness and anorexia
- Less binge eating, more "intuitive" eating
- Reduced urge to overeat among those who have "blown" their diet

Linked to Coping and Resilience

- More effective coping with divorce, combat trauma, chronic pain

Linked to personal accountability

- More conscientiousness
- Take greater responsibility for past mistakes
- Disposition to apologize

Linked to better romantic relationships

- More caring and supportive relationship behavior (as rated by partners)
- Less controlling and verbally aggressive

Linked to other-focused concern

- More forgiveness
 - More compassion and empathy for others
- Link weak in adults, non-significant in youths

Self-compassion for caregivers

- Less burnout and caregiver fatigue
- More satisfaction with caregiving role
- Increased wellbeing and coping for parents of autistic children

Early Influences on Self-Compassion

- Attachment security
- Parental criticism
- Conflict in home
- History of abuse

Therapeutic approaches to teaching self-compassion

- Compassion Focused Therapy (Paul Gilbert):
 - Less depression, anxiety, shame, dysfunction
 - Effective with a variety of clinical populations

Mindfulness-based approaches to teaching self-compassion

- MBSR and MBCT have both been shown to increase self-compassion
- Self-compassion appears to be a key mechanism of program effectiveness

Self-compassionate letter writing

- Participants wrote SC letter for seven days
- SC letter (N = 63) vs. early memory control (N = 70)
- Significantly less depression (3 months later) and greater happiness (6 months later)

Becoming your own mental coach

- College undergraduates given concepts, experiential exercises, and home practice (no meditation)
- Three brief sessions (two 1.5 hours, one 45 min.)
- SC (N = 27) vs. time management control (N = 25)
- Increased SC, mindfulness, optimism, and self-efficacy, decreased rumination

Self-compassion meditation and body image

- Women with body image concerns listened to guided self-compassion meditations for three weeks
- SC condition (N = 98) vs. waitlist control (N = 130)
- More SC and body appreciation, less body dissatisfaction, self-worth contingent on appearance
- Gains maintained three months later

Mindful Self-Compassion

- 8-week intervention created by Chris Germer and Kristin Neff
- 2.5 hours once a week, 4 hour retreat
- Uses meditation, informal practice, and homework exercises as teaching tools
- Randomized wait-list controlled study (N = 52)
 - Increase in self-compassion, compassion for others, mindfulness, life satisfaction
 - Decrease in depression, anxiety, stress, emotional avoidance
 - Gains maintained over time (one year)
- Degree of formal and informal self-compassion practice both related to gains in self-compassion

Self-compassion calculator, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises available at: www.self-compassion.org

Information on MSC available at: www.CenterforMSC.org

Suggested Reading:

Germer, C. K. (2009). *The mindful path to self-compassion*. New York: Guilford Press.

Gilbert, P. (2009). *The compassionate mind*. London: Constable.

Neff, K. D. (2011). *Self-Compassion*. New York: William Morrow.

6 Session Audio Training

Neff, K. D. (2013). *Self-compassion step by step: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. Sounds True

SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

When you notice that you're feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.

Now, say to yourself, slowly:

1. ***This is a moment of suffering***

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- *This hurts.*
- *This is tough.*
- *Ouch!*

2. ***Suffering in a part of living***

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- *Other people feel this way.*
- *I'm not alone.*
- *We all struggle in our lives.*

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hands.

Say to yourself:

3. ***May I be kind to myself***

See if you can find words for what *you need* in times like this. Other options may be:

- *May I accept myself as I am*
- *May I give myself the compassion that I need*
- *May I learn to accept myself as I am*
- *May I forgive myself.*
- *May I be strong.*
- *May I be safe*

If you're having trouble finding the right language, sometimes it helps to imagine what you might say to a dear friend struggling with that same difficulty.

Can you say something similar to yourself, letting the words roll gently through your mind?

Available as an mp3

<http://self-compassion.org/01-Kristin-Neff-The-Self-Compassion-Break.mp3>