

Self-Compassion: Learning to be Kind to Yourself
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Introduction

We all experience setbacks in life, it's human nature, but the question is how do we respond to those negative experiences in life? We have two responses, we either beat ourselves up or treat ourselves with grace. However, in most cases, we tend to beat ourselves up because we want to be perfect and do everything right. There is always the pressure of expectations and standards that causes one to be their biggest self-critic. Women struggle the most because of the expectations of being strong, being successful, looking good, always being kind, caring for others while putting up with disrespect, discrimination, and oppression. However, if we take the time to extend ourselves with kindness and grace to process our emotions, simply being compassionate to ourselves could result in a healthier, happier lifestyle.

What is Self-compassion?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary¹³, compassion is the “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it”. For one to have compassion, they must be able to notice suffering; feel moved by others' suffering so the heart responds to pain; offer any type of understanding and gentleness to others in their time of struggle; and finally realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection is a normal part of the human experience¹. Compassion comes in many forms from helping your classmate catch up with missing schoolwork or giving your best friend encouraging words of advice after a bad breakup.

Just as you would be kind to others in their time of need, self-compassion is being kind and understanding to oneself when confronted with personal failings or negative feelings¹. As humans we need to understand that we are not perfect, we are bound to fail and experience difficulties in life, and that is okay! What matters is how we cope and get through those tough experiences. Some of examples of self-compassion would be:

- Failing a test but reminding yourself, “It’s alright, we all fail sometimes. I’m still a pretty good student overall.”
- Not making the school soccer team and saying, “Making the team does not define me. There is always next year if I stay consistent and work a little harder. I’ll get it next time!”
- Raising your voice to your child in the heat of the moment and reminding yourself “You’re not a bad parent, you just lost your temper. We all lose our temper once in a while. I need to apologize to my child and forgive myself.”

Let’s break it down. There are three elements of self-compassion: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness. **Mindfulness** is being present in the moment, observing thoughts and feelings for what they are, without trying to judge, suppress or deny them^{1,15}. The idea is

not to ignore the painful emotions, but allow compassion to help to confront our emotions and experiences. **Common Humanity** is understanding that suffering and failure are part of the shared human experience ¹. People tend to punish themselves for mistakes that are common and made by many individuals. Practicing common humanity means you realize there are thousands of other people in the world going through similar experiences. **Self-kindness** includes being gentle with yourself when confronted with painful experiences rather than getting angry and shutting down when life is challenging. Remember that self-compassion involves confronting your emotions and accepting them for what they are, understanding that suffering is a part of the human life experience, and always be gentle to yourself. Failures, mistakes, and negative experiences are painful, but you shouldn't be too harsh on yourself for it.

Misconceptions of self-compassion

Self-compassion is not a common practice, so it is often confused with self-love, self-esteem, self-pity, and weakness. Confusing these concepts blocks individuals from truly understanding what self-compassion is and how to practice it.

Although Self-love and self-compassion are related, they are still two different concepts, self-love is a little more complex as it is something that is built up over time. Self-love involves being able to appreciate oneself through growth with actions that support the individual's overall well-being ³. Examples are learning how to say no to others and prioritizing time for yourself, or it could be setting up standards or boundaries that you want to live by.

Self-esteem and self-compassion are often used interchangeably but are different in many ways. Self-esteem refers to our perceived value and self-worth, which in turn, makes self-esteem based on self-evaluations, including comparing ourselves to others. To say it simply:

Self-esteem:	Self-compassion:
self-worth (how one views themselves)	self-kindness (how one treats themselves)

Let's be clear, self-compassion is not self-pity and/or weakness. Self-pity focuses on the problem, emphasizing egocentric feelings of separation from others and exaggerates the extent of personal suffering, whereas self-compassion understands that others go through the same struggles ⁵. This directly relates to the second element of self-compassion, common humanity. Unfortunately, self-compassion is sometimes seen as a weakness in our society, where we are often encouraged to be tough and get through it, "move on and over it". In turn, this can suggest to individuals that processing, feeling, and expressing our negative emotions is 'weak' or 'soft and fragile.

Why do we struggle with self-compassion?

Self-compassion is a simple concept, yet for many, it is not easy to come by. Our environment and culture can play a huge role in why an individual may lack self-compassion. Western culture often emphasizes high self-esteem and being successful financially, educationally, etc. This can lead to a competitive-based society that makes it hard for individuals to grasp the concept of common humanity. Take social media, for example, we live in a social media-driven society now

where most individuals post about their lifestyle, accomplishments, bodies, etc. We cannot ignore the fact that social-media life results in appearance-based social comparisons. These comparisons could be associated with multiple things, like body dissatisfaction among women, low self-esteem, self-pity, etc.⁶. Overall, the focus on success and having high self-esteem stimulates a “generation-me”⁴ competitive environments, where people tend to compare their failures to others, resulting in harsh self-criticism.

Research studies have also found that women have lower levels of self-compassion compared to men. Studies suggest that gender role orientation could be a reason behind the results of the study¹⁸. Women find themselves having a hard time being self-compassionate due to the pressures and expectations of gender roles. So the way we act, speak, dress, and how we carry ourselves is constantly being watched.

Race and ethnicity is also a contributing factor to lack of self-compassion. Let’s take a look at black women specifically. Black women have been portrayed as always being strong and can get through anything. The strong black woman is a race-gender schema that sets up black women to have unyielding strength while taking on multiple roles and caring for others¹⁹. In turn, many internalize this persona and fail to realize when they need assistance²⁰. The SBW schema can harm many black women because they don’t take the time to show compassion towards themselves.

As women, because we are expected to keep up with society’s expectations, we are more likely to overlook what it means to be self-compassionate.

The benefits of self-compassion

So, you may be wondering, does practicing self-compassion have benefits? Well, it does actually! Self-compassion is positively associated with a person’s general health, positive affect, optimism, emotional resistance, successful aging, and happiness⁷. Other benefits include positive mental health and/or wellbeing, decreased stress, increased productivity, and increased resilience. Specifically, studies on adults have found that those with greater self-compassion were more likely to be optimistic and happy, and less likely to experience self-criticism, depression, anxiety, thought suppression, etc., and more likely to report greater life satisfaction and social connectedness⁸. These findings are logical in that an individual who is self-compassionate likely allows themselves to process their experiences, practice self-forgiveness, and learn from past mistakes.

Self-compassion also activates our biological nurturance and soothing systems to lower stress.⁹ For instance, practices such as meditation have been shown to decrease physiological markers of stress⁹. In turn, less stress is associated with better sleep, a better mood, and overall better well-being. Increased productivity is another benefit of self-compassion when one remains calm in any moment of failure, defeat, or rejection, and in turn may be more productive¹⁰. Finally, Self-compassion is associated with higher resilience as well, the capacity to recover quickly

from difficulties¹². The more resilient you are, the easier it is for you to process and move on from difficult times.

Steps, Tips, and Resources

In summary, being self-compassionate starts with forgiveness and simply being kind towards oneself. Always remind yourself that you are doing the best you can and although you may not come out on top, you can only move forward from there. While it may be difficult at first, here are some tips and resources you can consult for the journey to becoming more compassionate to yourself. Think of this shift as the *backdraft* phenomenon¹⁴, where we open the door of our hearts allowing love, forgiveness, and growth to go in and old pain comes out.

Meditation. Perhaps you start with some mindfulness meditation, a practice that promotes the ability to be present and mindful throughout your day. When meditating let your mind wander and observe, do not judge your thoughts and feelings. Practice being present and aware of where you are and what you are doing, but not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around you¹¹. In addition, you could share words of affirmation with yourself when difficult moments arise. For instance, you could repeat these phrases to yourself¹¹:

- May I be kind to myself at this moment
- May I accept this moment exactly as it is
- May I accept myself exactly as I am at this moment
- May I give myself all the compassion that I need

Creative Outlets: Any creative outlet like writing in a journal could be useful as well, it allows you to lay all your emotions out and process them individually. Some helpful resources include @selfcompassion on Instagram or websites like Mindful.org. Books can also be a great guide including:

- *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* by Kristen Neff
<https://www.amazon.com/Self-Compassion-Proven-Power-Being-Yourself/dp/0061733520>
- *Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of RAIN* by Tara Brach
<https://www.amazon.com/Radical-Compassion-Learning-Yourself-Practice/dp/0525522816>
- *The Self Compassion Workbook: Practical Exercises to Approach Your Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions with Kindness* by Joy Johnson
<https://www.amazon.com/Self-Compassion-Workbook-Practical-Exercises/dp/1647398061>

The possibilities are endless, but what's most important is figuring out what techniques work best for you!

Conclusion

Life is a rollercoaster, and undoubtedly, it will have its ups and downs. There are many health benefits from learning and practicing self-compassion instead of feeling overwhelmed with anger, sorrow, and self-pity. The increasing amount of research on the concept of

self-compassion shines a positive light on the importance of this practice. It is helpful to remember to be kind to yourself and understand that you don't have to have it "together" every day. Make room for mistakes and failures in your life in order to experience growth and know that you are capable of amazing things!

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