The Transformative Effects of Mindful Self-Compassion

Leading experts on mindful self-compassion Drs. Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer share how self-kindness, recognition of our humanity, and mindfulness give us the strength to thrive.

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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, and academic failure, and even combat trauma.

The reason I (Kristin) *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.

Because of the intense sensory issues experienced by autistic children, 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. 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 the help of self-compassion, and refocus on supporting and loving Rowan.

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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. The more complete definition involves three core elements that we bring to bear

when we are in pain: self-kindness, common humanity (the recognition that *everyone* make mistakes and feels pain), and mindfulness.

For example, 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, your clothes don’t fit, and your hair is turning gray. 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 OK? You must be so upset. Remember I’m here for you and I deeply appreciate you. Is there anything I can do to help?”

When we mindfully observe our pain, we can acknowledge our suffering without exaggerating it, allowing us to take a wiser and more objective perspective on ourselves and our lives.

Can You Be Too Self-Compassionate?

Many people fear self-compassion is really just a form of self-pity. In fact, self-compassion is an antidote to self-pity. While self-pity says “poor me,” self-compassion recognizes that life is hard for everyone. Research shows that self-compassionate people are more likely to engage in perspective taking, rather than focusing on their own distress. They are also less likely to ruminate on how bad things are, which is one of the reasons self-compassionate people have better mental health.

Mindfulness or Self-Compassion? Actually, Both

Given that mindfulness is a core component of self-compassion, it’s worth asking, “How do mindfulness and self-compassion relate to one another?”

- Mindfulness focuses primarily on acceptance of experience itself. Self-compassion focuses more on caring for the experiencer.
- Mindfulness asks, “What am I experiencing right now?” Self-compassion asks, “What do I need right now?”
- Mindfulness says, “Feel your suffering with spacious awareness.” Self-compassion says, “Be kind to yourself when you suffer.”

Mindfulness and self-compassion both allow us to live with less resistance toward ourselves and our lives. If we can fully accept that things are painful, and be kind to ourselves because they're painful, we can be with the pain with greater ease.

The Physiology of Self-Criticism and Self-Compassion

When we criticize ourselves we're tapping into the body's threat-defense system (sometimes referred to as our reptilian brain). Among the many ways we can react to perceived danger, the threat-defense system is the quickest and most easily triggered. This means that self-criticism is often our first reaction when things go wrong.

Feeling threatened puts stress on the mind and body, and chronic stress can cause anxiety and depression, which is why habitual self-criticism is so bad for emotional and physical well-being. With self-criticism, we are both the attacker and the attacked.

Compassion, including self-compassion, is linked to the mammalian care system. That's why being compassionate to ourselves when we feel inadequate makes us feel safe and cared for, like a child held in a warm embrace. Self-compassion helps to downregulate the threat response. When the stress response (fight–flight–freeze) is triggered by a threat to our self-concept, we are likely to turn on ourselves in an unholy trinity of reactions. We fight ourselves (self-criticism), we flee from others (isolation), or we freeze (rumination).

When we practice self-compassion, we are deactivating the threat-defense system and activating the care system. Oxytocin and endorphins are released, which helps reduce stress and increase feelings of safety and security.

Fear vs. Truth

Fear: Self-compassion will make us weak and vulnerable.

Truth: In fact, self-compassion is a reliable source of inner strength that confers courage and enhances resilience when we're faced with difficulties. Research shows self-compassionate people are better able to cope with tough situations like divorce, trauma, or chronic pain.

Fear: Self-compassion is really the same as being self-indulgent.

Truth: It's actually just the opposite. Compassion inclines us toward long-term health and well-being, not short-term pleasure (just as a compassionate mother doesn't let her child eat all the ice cream she wants, but says, "eat your vegetables"). Research shows self-compassionate people engage in healthier behaviors like exercising, eating well, drinking less, and going to the doctor more regularly.

Fear: Self-compassion is really a form of making excuses for bad behavior.

truth: Actually, self-compassion provides the safety needed to admit mistakes rather than needing to blame someone else for them. Research shows self-compassionate people take greater personal responsibility for their actions and are more likely to apologize if they've offended someone.

Fear: Self-criticism is an effective motivator**.**

Truth: It's not. Our self-criticism tends to undermine self-confidence and leads to fear of failure. If we're self-compassionate, we will still be motivated to reach our goals—not because we're inadequate as we are, but because we care about ourselves and want to reach our full potential. Self-compassionate people have high personal standards; they just don't beat themselves up when they fail.

The Yin and the Yang of Self-Compassion

At first glance, compassion may seem like a soft quality, associated only with comforting and soothing. Mindful self-compassion contains a wide variety of practices and exercises that each person can explore to discover which ones work best. Some practices fit more into the yin category and some into the yang category, although most have aspects of both. Consider what attributes you might need to draw on the most right now.

The yin of self-compassion contains the attributes of "being with" ourselves in a compassionate way—comforting, soothing, validating.

Comforting is something that we might do for a dear friend who is struggling, especially by providing support for his emotional needs.

Soothing is also a way to help a person feel better, and it refers particularly to helping a person feel physically calm.

Validating helps a person feel better by understanding very clearly what she is going through and saying it in a kind and tender way.

The yang of self-compassion is about "acting in the world"—protecting, providing, and motivating ourselves.

The first step toward self-compassion is feeling safe from harm. Protecting means saying no to others who are hurting us or to the harm we inflict on ourselves, often in unconscious ways.

Providing means giving ourselves what we really need. First we have to know what we need, then we need the conviction that we deserve to get our needs met, and then we have to go ahead and try to meet our needs. No one can do this for us as well as we can do it for ourselves.

Most of us have dreams and aspirations that we would like to realize in this lifetime. We also have smaller, short-term goals. Self-compassion motivates like a good coach, with kindness, support, and understanding, not harsh criticism.

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A common thread through all these practices is a friendly, caring attitude. Sometimes compassionate care for ourselves takes the form of solace and a soft leaning in to difficult emotions (comforting); sometimes it involves a stern "No!" and turning away from danger

(protecting). Sometimes it involves letting our bodies know everything is OK with warmth and tenderness (soothing), and sometimes it means figuring out what we need and giving it to ourselves (providing).

Sometimes having self-compassion requires being accepting and open to what is (validating), and sometimes it means we need to jump up and do something about it (motivating). Consider the experience of Xavier.

Xavier didn't have a lot of drive, but he had a tender heart. He became adept at avoiding conflict by staying in the shadows. As he grew older, however, he needed strength and courage to step out into the world. He needed someone to believe in him and also to encourage him to achieve what he was capable of. The best self-compassion practice for Xavier was writing a compassionate letter (right) to motivate himself with kindness, just as he might write to a dear friend. He wrote himself a letter every week, focusing on whatever challenges he encountered. Little by little, a new voice emerged within Xavier—his own inner coach cheering him on from the sidelines.

This type of encouragement and support is likely to be much more effective and sustainable in the long run. Research shows that self-compassionate people not only have greater self-confidence, but they are less likely to fear failure and are more likely to try again when they do fail, and to persist in their efforts to keep learning.

Bill had a trainer at the gym who was about his age and who was endlessly supportive. For example, when Bill collapsed while doing push-ups, his trainer just said, "Great! Working to the point of muscle exhaustion is what we want," and when Bill wanted to lift weights that might have injured him, his coach said, "Hey, Bill, let's save that one for later. We'll get there sooner than you think." So Bill decided to apply the same attitude to his new business project. "Just give it a try," he told himself. "I know you can do it."

And he imagined what his trainer would say when a setback occurred: "Hang in there, bro. We've got this." Bill slowly began to discover his compassionate voice and learned how to support rather than sabotage himself. Eventually he quit his company job, found the venture capital needed to start his new project, and started living the life he needed to live—one that made him happy.

Sometimes Life Is Hard. Can You Be Kind to Yourself?

Pain in life—loss, worry, heartbreak, hardship—is inevitable, but when we resist the pain, it usually just makes the pain more intense. It's this add-on pain that can be equated with suffering. We suffer not only because it's painful in the moment, but because we bang our head against the wall of reality—getting frustrated because we think things should be other than they are.

Another common form of resistance is denial. We hope that if we don't think about a problem, it will go away. Research shows that when we try to suppress our unwanted thoughts or feelings, however, they just get stronger. Moreover, when we avoid or suppress painful thoughts and emotions, we can't see them clearly and respond with compassion.

Mindfulness and self-compassion are resources that give us the safety needed to meet difficult experience with less resistance. Just imagine how you would feel if you were overwhelmed

and a friend walked into the room, gave you a hug, sat down beside you, listened to your distress, and then helped you work out a plan of action. Thankfully, that mindful and compassionate friend can be you. It begins by opening to what is, without resistance.

After practicing speaking to herself compassionately for some months, Rafaella learned to hold herself and her anxiety with mindfulness and compassion, rather than fighting the experience. When she became anxious or even a little panicky, her inner dialogue went something like this, spoken from a compassionate part of herself: "I know you feel really scared right now. I wish things weren't so difficult, but they are. I know there is tightening in your throat and some dizziness in your head. Still, I care for you and I'm here for you. You are not alone. We'll get through this." With a new, more compassionate inner voice, Rafaella's panic attacks receded and she found she was much more capable of working with her anxiety than she had realized.

In a moment of struggle, we don't practice to be free of our pain—we practice compassion because sometimes it's hard to be a human being. Radical acceptance is like a parent comforting a child who has the 48-hour flu. The parent doesn't care for the child to try to drive the flu away—the flu is going to leave in its own time. But because the child has a fever and feels bad, the parent comforts her as a natural response to suffering while the process of healing occurs. It's like this when we try to comfort ourselves, too. When we fully accept the reality that we are imperfect human beings, prone to make mistakes and struggle, our hearts naturally begin to soften. We still feel pain, but we also feel the love holding the pain, and it's more bearable.

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Together, mindfulness and self-compassion form a state of warmhearted, connected presence that strengthens us during difficult moments in our lives.

Practicing Imperfection

Whenever you find yourself using self-compassion to try to make the pain go away or to become a "better person," try shifting your focus away from this subtle form of resistance and practice compassion simply because we're all imperfect human beings, living imperfect lives. And life is hard. In other words, practice being a "compassionate mess."

By simply asking the question "What do I need now?" you allow yourself a moment of self-compassion, even if you can't find an answer or don't have the ability to meet your needs at the time.

Write a Letter to Yourself

You can find your compassionate voice by writing a letter to yourself whenever you struggle or feel inadequate or when you want to help motivate yourself to make a change. It can feel uncomfortable at first, but gets easier with practice.

Here are three formats to try:

1. Think of an imaginary friend who is unconditionally wise, loving, and compassionate and write a letter to yourself from the perspective of your friend.
2. Write a letter as if you were talking to a dearly beloved friend who was struggling with the same concerns as you.
3. Write a letter from the compassionate part of yourself to the part of yourself that is struggling.

After writing the letter, you can put it down for a while and then read it later, letting the words soothe and comfort you when you need it most.