

## Wellness Tips Self-Compassion

It's common for people to report being their own biggest critic. When struggling in some way, individuals often describe an inner narrative that is harsh, critical, or mean.

In comparison, individuals tend to have ample compassion for others who are struggling. There is a willingness to be with that other person in their pain, use a gentle tone of voice, and ask open-ended questions like "What can I do to help?"

To improve your well-being, we encourage you to cultivate self-compassion. This is a practice in which you learn to be a good friend to yourself. To become an *inner ally* rather than an inner enemy.

People who practice self-compassion experience less depression, anxiety, stress, and shame. They report greater happiness, life satisfaction, self-confidence, and better physical health.

There are three components of self-compassion:

- **Self-kindness** is putting a supportive arm around our own shoulder rather than beating ourselves up when we make a mistake or fail in some way. Rather than being harsh and critical when noticing personal shortcomings, we are *supportive, encouraging, and offer ourselves warmth*. When circumstances are challenging, we soothe and comfort ourselves.
- **Common humanity** is fostering a sense of *interconnectedness with others*. It is reminding ourselves that we all fail, makes mistakes, have moments of suffering, and experience hardship. The pain I feel in difficult times is the same pain you feel in difficult times. The circumstances and degree of pain may be different, but the experience of human suffering is the same.
- **Mindfulness** is purposefully paying attention to something in the present moment non-judgmentally. It is essential to self-compassion because we must be able to acknowledge when we are suffering - to be with our pain long enough to respond with care. Many folks don't acknowledge how much pain they're in, especially when the pain comes from self-criticism.

So, in summary, self-compassion is a state of *loving, connected presence* with the self.

### Misconceptions About Self-Compassion:

- Self-compassion is NOT self-pity. While self-pity says "poor me," self-compassion recognizes that life is hard for everyone.
- Self-compassion does NOT make you weak and vulnerable. It's a reliable source of inner strength that helps you to have courage to face difficulty and enhances resilience.
- Self-compassion will NOT make you self-centered or selfish. Giving compassion to ourselves actually enables us to give more to others.
- Self-compassion will NOT make you lazy. Compassion inclines us toward long-term health and well-being, not short-term pleasure.
- Self-compassion does NOT make excuses for bad behavior. Self-compassion provides the safety needed to actually admit mistakes and take greater personal responsibility for your actions.
- Self-compassion does NOT undermine motivation to achieve. Self-compassion allows you to stay motivated to reach your goals because you care about yourself and want to reach your full potential. Research shows self-compassionate people have high personal standards – they just don't beat themselves up when they fail. It means they are less afraid of failure and are more likely to try again and persistent in their efforts.

### How do we cultivate self-compassion?

Rather than activating your stress response system – which happens during self-criticism – we want you to tap into your body's innate caregiving system. This soothes the nervous system. By using self-compassion, you are responding using

*self-kindness* instead of self-criticism, remembering your *common humanity* instead of isolating, and *mindfully* engaging in this moment instead of getting preoccupied by self-critical thoughts.

Oxytocin and endorphins are released when the caregiving system is activated, which reduce stress and increase feelings of safety and security. Two ways of activating this system are through *soothing touch and gentle vocalizations*. It is important to find behaviors and language that are effective for you personally, so play around with what words/phrases and actions feel soothing.

One example of this practice is the **Tender Self-Compassion Break**. This exercise (4:47) can be found at <https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tender-SelfCompassion-Break-2.mp3> and you're encouraged to practice consistently.

In brief, think of a situation currently causing you stress. Choose a struggle in the mild / moderate range as you want to build the skill of self-compassion gradually starting with lower levels of difficulty. Can you feel the discomfort internally as you bring this difficulty to mind? Thinking of the difficulty, say to yourself "This is stressful, this hurts, & struggle is a part of life." Tell yourself "This is how it feels when people struggle. Everyone experiences pain, just like me." Now offer yourself a gesture of soothing touch. Maybe put a hand over your heart, feeling its weight and warmth. Maybe cross your arms and give yourself a gentle hug. Try to find some form of comforting, gentle touch. Repeat to yourself "May I be kind to myself, may I be patient with myself, may I accept myself as I am in this moment." If you're having trouble, imagine a loved one having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person? What message would you like to deliver? See if you can offer this message to yourself.

The majority of this information came from The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook by Dr. Kristen Neff and Dr. Christopher Germer. For more information on the power of self-compassion, or the work of Dr. Neff and Dr. Germer, visit <https://chrisgermer.com/mindful-self-compassion-msctm/> or <https://self-compassion.org/>.

If you'd like to talk with someone about cultivating more self-compassion, or for any other questions / concerns, feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment.

Check out the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

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Remember, life is really hard at times - be gentle with yourself!

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