



How to Cultivate More Self-Compassion

Learning to be kind to yourself.

Self-compassion or self-love may be a foreign concept for some people. This is especially true for those who were raised in abusive or unloving homes, where compassion may have been non-existent.

A construct drawn from Buddhist psychology, self-compassion refers to a way of relating to the self—with kindness. It is not to be confused with arrogance or conceit, which usually indicates a lack of self-love.

Psychologist Kristin Neff was the first person to measure and operationally define the term “self-compassion.” She describes self-compassion as kindness toward the self, which entails being gentle, supportive, and understanding: “Rather than harshly judging oneself for personal shortcomings, the self is offered warmth and unconditional acceptance.” In other words, being kind to ourselves in good times and bad, in sickness and in health—and even when we make mistakes.

Having self-compassion means being able to recognize the difference between making a bad decision and being a bad person. When you have self-compassion, you understand that your worth is unconditional.

Why Self-Compassion?

Over the last decade or so, research has consistently shown a positive correlation between self-compassion and psychological well-being. People who have self-compassion also have greater social connectedness, emotional intelligence, happiness, and overall life satisfaction. Self-compassion has also been shown to correlate with less anxiety, depression, shame, and fear of failure.

Ravi Shah, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center, believes self-compassion is critical for healthy self-esteem and resilience: “There is a lot of discussion today about

narcissism and its problems, but we do want people to have some healthy narcissism.” This provides for a stable sense of self when things don't go well in life, whether it's a bad day, a loss in competition, or the loss of a job. If we lose our sense of self-worth during these challenges of life, we will have a hard time recovering.

“If you can't love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?” –RuPaul

People who lack self-compassion often exhibit a pattern of unhealthy relationships. As author Anis Qizilbash puts it, “How you treat yourself reflects how you let others treat you. If you're unkind to yourself, you create a standard for how much abuse you accept from others and as a result end up attracting abusive and disrespectful relationships.”

Or, as Shah says, “If we hold ourselves to impossible standards, if we never give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, chances are we will have trouble doing so for others. And thinking about others' feelings and giving others breaks are key skills for developing solid relationships.”

When we have self-compassion, we are less likely to depend on others to validate our self-worth.

Psychologist Carla Marie Manly believes self-compassion is a necessary ingredient for a healthy relationship: “If an individual is geared toward neglecting the self while doting on others, this uneven balance will eventually take its toll. When a person has true compassion for the self, that compassion then supports healthy, balanced relationships.”

Following are five ways to begin practicing self-compassion and stop being so hard on yourself:

1. Treat yourself as you would a small child.

Manly suggests considering what a child might want or need in a hurtful situation. That child could be your own, or you could imagine yourself as a child. “Although many adults do not have compassion for themselves,” she says, “they are often able to recognize that a child with a bee sting or hurt knee wants/needs to be hugged or held. Much progress can be made by giving the self the very compassion that one might give to a child.” You can also think of the way you would treat a good friend, or even a beloved pet, and then begin treating yourself accordingly.

2. Practice mindfulness.

When we find ourselves caught in a barrage of self-criticism, it is often because we have gotten swept away in our negative storylines—usually ones that often play on repeat in our heads: “You always say such stupid things. You don't know what you're talking about. That's why nobody likes you,” and so on. This process of over-identification, giving in to our internal critic, is usually accompanied by its counterpart, negative rumination. Mindfulness, or the state of non-judgmental awareness, is the antidote to both.

Psychotherapist and wellness coach Megan Bruneau suggests practicing simple awareness of thoughts and feelings, particularly the “critical inner voice”—without trying to change anything. She helps her clients understand how their critical inner voice has been helpful in the past. “What or who was it protecting you from? How did it motivate or comfort you? Once you find understanding and compassion for the critical voice, you can thank it for the good intentions.”

3. Remember that you're not alone.

Bruneau reminds clients that to feel is to be human, and that whatever they're going through is also being experienced by millions of others. If we can recognize our shared humanity—that not one of us is perfect—we can begin to feel more connected to others, with a sense that we're all in this together. "So many people believe they're 'broken' or 'screwing up,'" says Bruneau, "when in actuality we're all fumbling our way through this script-less existence together."

Daniel Bober, an assistant clinical professor at the Yale University School of Medicine, agrees: "Self-compassion is about being kind to ourselves and realizing that the human condition is imperfect and that our flaws and setbacks should connect us and not divide us."

4. Give yourself permission to be imperfect.

Columnist and breakup coach Chelsea Leigh Trescott says that "self-compassion is about giving ourselves room to be human, to be flawed and sensitive, lazy and unproductive, without having to define ourselves by those flashes of feelings and ways of being. It's about cultivating a perspective over ourselves so we never shut ourselves down and never lose faith in our own potential just because we may fly off the deep end one night or hole up in our apartment all weekend."

Psychotherapist Kristen Martinez likes to use the "permission slip" metaphor, which is the idea of giving yourself permission to make a mistake—as a way of accepting however you are feeling, and acknowledging that other people feel or have felt this way before.

5. Work with a supportive therapist or coach.

We know that our brains have the ability to learn self-compassion but cultivating new patterns of thought or behavior takes effort. "It's tough to learn self-compassion all on our own," Shah says. "Therapy provides a safe environment in which the therapist can help you: notice your thoughts and feelings; have a realistic perspective of yourself and others; and demonstrate empathy for you. In time, you will begin to internalize these skills and integrate them into your own life perspective."