



Three Elements of Self-Compassion

Louise CLARK

Self-kindness vs Self-judgement

Self-compassion entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or beating ourselves up with self-criticism. Self-compassionate people recognise that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties is inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals.

People cannot always be or get exactly what they want. When this reality is denied or fought against, suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration, and self-criticism.

When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced. Embracing self-kindness means treating ourselves with the same care and concern we would offer to a good friend. It involves acknowledging our own pain and mistakes without harsh judgment.

Instead of berating ourselves for our shortcomings, we can offer ourselves words of encouragement and support.

This compassionate approach allows us to maintain a balanced perspective, recognising that setbacks and failures are part of the human experience. By responding to our difficulties with warmth and understanding, we cultivate resilience and a more positive outlook. Self-kindness fosters a nurturing inner voice that can soothe us during tough times, helping us to recover more quickly and move forward with greater confidence and self-acceptance.

Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgement

Techniques and Exercises:

- **Self-Compassion Letter:**
 - Write a letter to yourself describing a situation that caused you pain or stress.
 - Then, write to yourself with understanding and kindness, as if you were writing to a dear friend who is going through the same situation.
 - Focus on expressing empathy, understanding, and encouragement.
- **Supportive Touch:**
 - Place your hand on your heart, face, or arm and gently stroke or hold it, as a physical reminder to treat yourself with kindness.
 - Use this gesture when you notice self-judgment arising to provide comfort and reassurance.
- **Positive Affirmations:**
 - Create a list of affirmations that remind you to be kind to yourself.
 - Examples include "I am doing my best," "I deserve love and respect," and "I am enough just as I am."
 - Repeat these affirmations daily, especially when you catch yourself being self-critical.

2. Common humanity vs Isolation

Frustration at not having things exactly as we want is often accompanied by an irrational but pervasive sense of isolation – as if “I” were the only person suffering or making mistakes. All humans suffer, however. The very definition of being “human” means that one is mortal, vulnerable, and imperfect. Therefore, self-compassion involves recognising that suffering and personal inadequacy are part of the shared human experience – something that we all go through rather than being something that happens to “me” alone.

Understanding this common humanity helps us realise that we are not alone in our struggles. When we acknowledge that others also face challenges and make mistakes, it fosters a sense of connection and belonging. This awareness can be incredibly comforting, as it reminds us that imperfection is a universal trait, not a personal failing.

By embracing our shared humanity, we can approach our own difficulties with more compassion and less judgment. It becomes easier to extend empathy to ourselves, knowing that our experiences are part of what it means to be human.

This perspective can diminish feelings of isolation and foster a greater sense of community and support.

Recognising our common humanity also encourages us to be more understanding and forgiving toward others. When we see that everyone is navigating their own set of challenges, we become more patient and compassionate in our interactions. This mutual empathy strengthens our relationships and creates a more supportive and caring environment for everyone.

Common Humanity vs. Isolation

Techniques and Exercises:

- **Shared Experience Reflection:**
 - Reflect on how your experiences of suffering or challenges are part of the shared human experience.
 - Write about how other people might be facing similar issues and how they cope with them.

- **Compassion Meditation:**
 - Sit quietly and bring to mind people you know who might be struggling in the same way you are.
 - Silently repeat phrases such as "May we all find peace," "May we all find strength," and "May we all be free from suffering."
 - Extend this compassion first to yourself, then to those close to you, and finally to all beings.

- **Group Support:**
 - Join a support group or community where you can share your experiences and hear others' stories.
 - Engaging in group activities can help you realise you are not alone in your struggles.

3. Mindfulness vs Over identification.

Self-compassion also requires taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. This equilibrated stance stems from the process of relating personal experiences to those of others who are also suffering, thus putting our own situation into a larger perspective. It also stems from the willingness to observe our negative thoughts and emotions with openness and clarity, so that they are held in mindful awareness.

Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, receptive mind state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. Mindfulness requires that we not be “over-identified” with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negative reactivity.

By practicing mindfulness, we learn to stay present with our emotions, acknowledging them without becoming overwhelmed. This practice allows us to create a space between ourselves and our experiences, providing room to respond with compassion rather than reacting impulsively.

Mindfulness helps us to see our thoughts and emotions as transient events in the mind, rather than defining features of who we are. This perspective can significantly reduce the intensity of our negative reactions and help us approach our challenges with a calm and balanced mindset.

Furthermore, mindfulness cultivates an attitude of curiosity and openness. Instead of avoiding or clinging to certain emotions, we can explore them with gentle curiosity, understanding their origins and effects on our well-being. This exploration can lead to deeper self-awareness and insight, enhancing our ability to manage difficult emotions constructively.

By integrating mindfulness into our daily lives, we can foster a greater sense of inner peace and stability. It enables us to accept our experiences without judgment, reducing the tendency to over-identify with negative thoughts and feelings.

In doing so, we can approach ourselves and our struggles with greater compassion and kindness, ultimately leading to a more balanced and fulfilling life.

Techniques and Exercises:

- **Mindful Breathing:**

- Practice focusing on your breath for a few minutes each day.
- Notice the sensation of the air entering and leaving your body without trying to change it.
- When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breath.

- **Thought Labelling:**

- When you notice strong emotions or thoughts, label them as "thinking," "feeling," "worrying," etc.
- This helps create a space between you and your thoughts, reducing the tendency to over-identify with them.

- **Body Scan Meditation:**

- Lie down or sit comfortably and slowly bring your attention to different parts of your body, starting from your toes and moving up to your head.
- Notice any sensations, tensions, or areas of relaxation without trying to change anything.
- This practice helps you stay present and aware of your physical state.

These exercises can be a great way to incorporate self-compassion into daily life and foster better mental health and well-being.