

# The Science of Self-Compassion

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## Self-Compassion

- The three components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b)
- Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
  - Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
  - Actively soothing and comforting, supporting and protecting oneself
  - Desire to alleviate suffering (any pain or emotional discomfort – large or small)
- Common humanity vs. Isolation
  - Seeing own experience as part of larger human experience not isolating or abnormal
  - Recognizing that life is imperfect (us too!)
- Mindfulness vs. Over-identification
  - Allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they are
  - Avoids extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings

## Physiological underpinnings

- Self-criticism
  - Threat defense system
  - Cortisol and adrenaline
- Self-compassion
  - Mammalian care-giving system
  - Oxytocin and opiates

## Self-compassion linked to wellbeing ((Zessin, Dickhauser & Garbadee, 2015)

- Reductions in negative mind-states: Anxiety, depression, stress, maladaptive perfectionism, shame, suicidality
- Increases in positive mind-states: Life satisfaction, happiness, self-confidence, optimism, immune function

*Self-compassion leads to wellbeing by holding negative thoughts and emotions in loving, connected, presence*

## Self-compassion vs. self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009)

- *Offers same benefits without pitfalls*
  - Fewer social comparisons
  - Less contingent self-worth
  - No association with narcissism

## Linked to coping and resilience

- More effective coping with divorce (Sbarra et al., 2012)

- Less likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma (Hiraoka et al., 2015)
- Better coping with chronic health conditions (Sirois, 2015)

Linked to motivation (Breines & Chen, 2012)

- Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after failure
- More personal responsibility and motivation to repair past mistakes

Linked to healthier behaviors (Terry & Leary, 2011)

- More exercise, more doctors visits, safer sex, less alcohol use

Linked to healthier body image and eating (Braun, Park & Gorin, 2016)

- Less body shame and dissatisfaction
- Less body preoccupation and weight worries
- Less disordered eating behavior

Linked to better romantic relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013)

- More caring and supportive relationship behavior (as rated by partners)
- Less controlling and verbally aggressive

Linked to other-focused concern (Neff & Pommier, 2013)

- More forgiveness and perspective taking
- More compassion, empathy, altruism for others

Self-compassion for caregivers (Raab, 2014)

- Less burnout and “compassion” fatigue
- More satisfaction with care-giving role

Early influences on self-compassion

- Secure versus insecure attachment (Wei, Liao, Ku & Shaffer, 2011)
- Parental criticism and family conflict (Neff & McGehee, 2010)
- History of sexual, emotional, physical abuse (Vetesse et al., 2011)

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC; Neff & Germer, 2013)

- 8 week program designed to teach self-compassion to nonclinical populations
- Includes meditation and informal practices
- RCT found MSC increased self-compassion, compassion, mindfulness, wellbeing
  - Skills maintained one year later
- RCT found reduced diabetes-related distress, stabilized glucose levels in patients (Friis et al., 2016)
- Adapted for teens – Making Friends with Yourself (Bluth et al., 2015)

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## INFORMAL PRACTICE: SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

When you notice that you're feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.

Now, say to yourself, slowly:

### 1. ***"This is a moment of suffering"***

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- *This hurts.*
- *Ouch!*
- *This is stressful.*

### 2. ***"Suffering is a part of life"***

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- *I'm not alone.*
- *We all struggle in our lives*
- *This is how it feels when a person struggles in this way*

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hands.

Say to yourself:

### 3. ***"May I be kind to myself"***

See if you can find words for what *you need* in times like this. Other options may be:

- *May I accept myself as I am*
- *May I give myself the compassion that I need*
- *May I learn to accept myself as I am*
- *May I forgive myself.*
- *May I be strong.*
- *May I be safe*

If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person? If your friend would leave with just a few words in mind, what would you like those words to be? What message would you like to deliver, heart to heart?

Now see if you can offer the same message to yourself.

## OTHER CONCEPTUAL POINTS

### Mindfulness vs. Compassion

- Mindfulness accepts painful experience without resistance, “being” with things as they are
- Compassion wishes the experiencer to be free from suffering, “active” comfort and soothing
- Paradox of mindfulness and self-compassion: *“We give ourselves compassion not to feel better but because we feel bad”*
- Self-compassion provides the emotional safety needed to mindfully open to our pain

### Backdraft

- Backdraft refers to discomfort that may arise when we give ourselves compassion. The experience of backdraft can be confusing for some practitioners but it is a key part of the transformation process. It helps to understand the nature of backdraft and to know how to respond to it.
- “Backdraft” is a term that firefighters use to describe how a fire can grow when fresh air is introduced through an open door. A similar effect can occur when we open the door of our hearts with self-compassion. Most of our hearts are hot with pain accumulated over a lifetime. In order to function in our lives, we needed to shut out stressful or painful experiences. However, when the door of our hearts opens and kindness flows in, old hurts are likely to come out. The discomfort we feel is not *created* by self-compassion practice—it’s simply being re-experienced and transformed by the power of compassion.

### How Do We Recognize Backdraft?

- Often uneasiness appears out of nowhere and we may not understand why it’s happening. A tear can appear while meditating, or a sadness, or a sense of vulnerability.
- Secondary reactions may also arise when we struggle not to feel backdraft. For example, we might go into our heads (intellectualize), become agitated, withdraw, space-out, or criticize ourselves and others. All these reactions are quite natural and can also be met with kindness and compassion.

### What Can We Do About Backdraft?

- Practice mindfulness to regulate attention.
- Label the experience as backdraft – “Oh, this is ‘backdraft’”—as you might for a dear friend.
- Redirect your attention to a neutral focus inside your body (e.g., the breath), or a sensation at the boundary of the body (see Soles of Feet practice).
- Practice ordinary activities with the intention to do them as a caring response to backdraft - drink a cup of tea, pet the cat, take a walk.

### **Self-Compassion for Caregivers**

- Mirror neurons create empathetic resonance

- Empathetic resonance can lead to secondary traumatic stress and burnout
- Self-care strategies don't work "on the job"
- There is no such thing as compassion fatigue, only empathy fatigue
- Compassion holds the pain of others in kindness, activates reward centers of brain
- Self-compassion provides the emotional resources needed to care for others
- Our calmer mind state will impact the mind state of those we care for

## SOOTHING TOUCH

One easy way to soothe and comfort yourself when you're feeling badly is to give yourself a gentle hug or caress, or simply put your hand on your heart and feel the warmth of your hand. It may feel awkward or embarrassing at first, but your body doesn't know that. It just responds to the physical gesture of warmth and care, just as a baby responds to being cuddled in its mother's arms. Our skin is an incredibly sensitive organ. Research indicates that physical touch releases oxytocin, provides a sense of security, soothes distressing emotions, and calms cardiovascular stress. So why not try it?

You might like to try putting your hand over your heart during difficult periods several times a day for a period of at least a week.

### ***Hand-on-Heart***

- When you notice you're under stress, take 2-3 deep, satisfying breaths.
- Gently place your hand over your heart, feeling the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand. If you wish, place *both* hands on your chest, noticing the difference between one and two hands.
- Feel the touch of you hand on your chest. If you wish, you could make small circles with your hand on your chest.
- Feel the natural rising and falling of your chest as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
- Linger with the feeling for as long as you like.

Some people feel uneasy putting a hand over the heart. Feel free to explore where on your body a gentle touch is actually soothing. Some other possibilities are:

- One hand on your cheek
- Cradling your face in your hands
- Gently stroking your arms
- Crossing your arms and giving a gentle squeeze
- Gently rubbing your chest, or using circular movements
- Hand on your abdomen
- One hand on your abdomen and one over heart
- Cupping one hand in the other in your lap

Hopefully you'll start to develop the habit of physically comforting yourself when needed, taking full advantage of this surprisingly simple and straightforward way to be kind to ourselves.

## SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

When you notice that you're feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.

Now, say to yourself, slowly:

### 4. ***"This is a moment of suffering"***

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- *This hurts.*
- *Ouch!*
- *This is stressful.*

### 5. ***"Suffering is a part of life"***

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- *I'm not alone.*
- *We all struggle in our lives*
- *This is how it feels when a person struggles in this way*

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hands.

Say to yourself:

### 6. ***"May I be kind to myself"***

See if you can find words for what *you need* in times like this. Other options may be:

- *May I accept myself as I am*
- *May I give myself the compassion that I need*
- *May I learn to accept myself as I am*
- *May I forgive myself.*
- *May I be strong.*
- *May I be safe*

If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person? If your friend would leave with just a few words in mind, what would you like those words to be? What message would you like to deliver, heart to heart?

Now see if you can offer the same message to yourself.

## WORKING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

The following exercise helps one to meet difficult emotions with greater ease. There are 3 components to this exercise: (1) labeling emotions, (2) mindfulness of emotion in the body, and (3) soften-soothe-allow. These components can be practiced individually or together. They can also be practiced in daily life or as a reflective meditation.

- Place your hand on your heart, or another soothing place, for a few moments to remind yourself that you are in the room, and that you, too, are worthy of kindness.
- Let yourself recall a mild to moderately difficult situation that you are in right now, perhaps a health problem, stress in a relationship, or a loved one in pain. Do not choose a very difficult problem, or a trivial problem—choose a problem that can generate a little stress in your body when you think of it.
- Clearly visualize the situation. Who was there? What was said? What happened?

### Labeling Emotions

- Now that you're thinking about this situation, seeing if you can name the different emotions that arise within you:
  - Anger?
  - Sadness?
  - Grief?
  - Confusion?
  - Fear?
  - Longing?
  - Despair?
  - Shame?
- Now seeing if you can name the *strongest* emotion—a difficult emotion—associated with that situation.
- Repeating the name of the emotion to yourself in a gentle, understanding voice, as if you were validating for a friend what he or she is feeling: “That’s longing.” “That’s grief.”

### Mindfulness of Emotion in the Body

- Now expanding your awareness to your body as a whole.
- Recalling the difficult situation again and scan your body for where you feel it most easily. In your mind’s eye, sweeping your body from head to toe, stopping where you can sense a little tension or discomfort.

- Now please *choose a single location in your body* where the feeling expresses itself most strongly, perhaps as a point of muscle tension, an achy feeling, or a heartache.
- In your mind, inclining gently toward that spot.

### **Soften-Soothe-Allow**

- Now, **softening** into that location in your body. Letting the muscles soften, letting them relax, as if in warm water. Softening...softening...softening... Remember that we're not trying to change the feeling—we're just holding it in a tender way.
- If you wish, just softening a little around the edges.
- Now, **soothing** yourself because of this difficult situation.
- If you wish, placing your hand over the part of your body that feels uncomfortable and just feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hand. Perhaps imagining warmth and kindness flowing through your hand into your body. Maybe even thinking of your body as if it were the body of a beloved child. Soothing...soothing...soothing.
- And are there some comforting words that you might need to hear? If so, imagine you had a friend who was struggling in the same way. What would you say to your friend? ("I'm so sorry you feel this way." "I care deeply about you.")
- Can you offer yourself a similar message? ("Oh, it's so hard to feel this." "May I be kind to myself.")
- If you need, feel free to open your eyes whenever you wish, or let go of the exercise and just feel your breath.
- Finally, **allowing** the discomfort to be there. Making room for it, releasing the need to make it go away.
- And allowing *yourself* to be just as you are, just like this, if only for this moment.
- Softening...soothing...allowing. Softening...soothing...allowing.
- Now letting go of the practice and allowing yourself to be exactly as you are in this moment.
- Gently ring the bell

## COMPASSION WITH EQUANIMITY

This exercise is intended for use in actual caregiving situations. It is a way of being compassionate with ourselves while maintaining connection to others. It combines the Giving and Receiving Compassion meditation with phrases that cultivate equanimity. Equanimity is balanced awareness in the midst of pleasant or unpleasant emotions.

- Please find a comfortable position and take a few deep breaths to settle into your body and into the present moment. You might like to put your hand over your heart, or wherever it is comforting and soothing, as a reminder to bring affectionate awareness to your experience and to yourself.
- Please bring to mind someone you are caring for who is exhausting you or frustrating you—someone whom you care about who is suffering. For this introductory exercise, please choose someone who is *not* your child, as this can be a more complicated dynamic. Visualize the person and the caregiving situation clearly in your mind, and feel the struggle in your own body.
- Now please listen carefully to these words, letting them gently roll through your mind:

*Everyone is on his or her own life journey.  
I am not the cause of this person's suffering,  
nor is it entirely within my power to make it go away,  
even though I wish I could  
There are times when this relationship is difficult to bear,  
yet I may still try to help if I can.*

- Aware of the stress you are carrying in your body, inhaling fully and deeply, drawing compassion inside your body and filling every cell of your body with compassion. Letting yourself be soothed by inhaling deeply, and by giving yourself the compassion you need.
- As you exhale, sending out compassion to the person who is associated with your discomfort, or to others in general.
- Continue breathing compassion in and out, allowing your body to gradually find a natural, breathing rhythm—letting your body breathe itself.
- “One for me, one for you.” “In for me, out for you.”
- Occasionally scanning your inner landscape for any distress and responding by inhaling compassion for yourself and exhaling compassion for others.

- If you find that anyone needs *extra* compassion, focusing your attention and your breath in that direction.
- Noticing how your body is caressed from the inside as you breathe.
- Letting yourself float on an ocean of compassion—a limitless ocean that embraces all suffering.
- And listening to these words once again:

*Everyone is on his or her own life journey.  
I am not the cause of this person's suffering,  
nor is it entirely within my power to make it go away,  
even though I wish I could  
There are times when this relationship is difficult to bear,  
yet I may still try to help if I can.*

- Now letting go of the practice and allowing yourself to be exactly as you are in this moment.
- Gently open your eyes.

## RESOURCES

### **Websites**

Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (For info on MSC, including directory of courses, teachers, and workshops)

[www.CenterForMSC.org](http://www.CenterForMSC.org)

Self-Compassion website (Self-compassion survey, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises)

[www.Self-Compassion.org](http://www.Self-Compassion.org)

### **Books and Audio:**

Neff, K. D. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. New York: William Morrow.

Neff, K. D. (2013). *Self-compassion step by step*. Sounds True. (6 hr. audio training.)

### **Online Training:**

Self-Compassion with Kristin Neff and Brené Brown: [www.self-compassion.org](http://www.self-compassion.org)

Online MSC (10 week online course): [www.CenterforMSC.org](http://www.CenterforMSC.org)