

## **Self-Compassion: Treating Yourself as You'd Treat a Good Friend**

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**By Kristin Neff, PhD, Associate Professor of Human Development**

The golden rule tells us that we should treat others as we would want them to treat us. Maybe so, but hopefully we won't treat them even half as badly as we treat ourselves. "You're so lame!"

"What a screw-up!"

"How can you ever show your face in public again!"

Would you talk this way to a friend -- or even to a stranger, for that matter? Of course not. (Or at least I hope not!) It's natural for us to try to be kind to the people we care about in our lives. We let them know it's okay to be human when they fail. We reassure them of our respect and support when they're feeling bad about themselves. We comfort them when they're going through hard times. In other words, most of us are very good at being understanding, kind and compassionate toward others.

But how many of us are good at being compassionate to ourselves?

Think of all the generous, caring people you know who constantly beat themselves up. For some strange reason our culture tells us that this is the way we should be -- women especially -- or else we'll become self-centered egomaniacs. But is it true?

The answer is no. All beating ourselves up does is make us feel depressed, insecure and afraid to take on new challenges because we're afraid of the self-punishment that will follow if we fail. It also makes it harder for us to see ourselves clearly because it's too painful. Much better to blame my problems on someone else so that I can avoid my inner tyrant.

For the past decade I've been conducting research on self-compassion and have found that people who are compassionate to themselves are much less likely to be depressed, anxious, insecure, and stressed, and are much more likely to be happy, resilient, optimistic and motivated to change themselves and their lives for the better. They also tend to have better relationships with others. In short, self-compassionate people experience greater psychological well-being.

It makes sense. When our inner voice continually criticizes and berates us, we often end up in negative cycles of self-sabotage and self-harm. However, when our inner voice plays the role of a supportive friend we can -- when we notice some personal failing --

feel safe and accepted enough to both see ourselves clearly and make the changes needed to be healthier and happier.

But what is self-compassion, exactly? Drawing on the writings of various Buddhist scholars, I have defined self-compassion as having three main components: kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Self-kindness refers to the tendency to be supportive and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical or judgmental. Instead of tearing ourselves to shreds when we fail or make a mistake, we soothe and comfort ourselves, providing the caring concern needed to try again. To get a sense of how this feels, try putting both arms straight out to the sides and clenching your fists hard. This is what self-judgment feels like. Then release your clenched fists and open your hands. This is what letting go of self-judgment feels like. Then take both hands and place them gently over your heart. This is what self-kindness feels like. (There are different physiological processes underlying these various feelings that I'll write about in a future blog.)

Common humanity involves recognizing that all humans are imperfect. It allows us to connect our own flawed condition to the shared human condition so that we can have a greater perspective on our personal shortcomings and difficulties.

Mindfulness can be defined as the clear seeing and acceptance of what is occurring in the present moment. It involves being aware of one's painful feelings in a balanced manner so that one neither ignores nor exaggerates personal suffering.

Paradoxically, the more you're able to admit the pain of being a limited human being and accept this fact with kindness and equanimity, the more you'll be able to heal your pain. By soothing and comforting yourself, just as a caring mother soothes and comforts her child when he or she is hurt, you will be able to rebound from setbacks more quickly. You will have the emotional resources needed to take on new challenges and reach your full potential. Beating yourself up doesn't help anyone -- least of all yourself.

Self-compassion.org offers a great tool for [testing your own self-compassion level and finding out if you need to start being kinder to yourself](#). If you find that you need to develop more self-compassion, there are a number of exercises and guided meditations that can help you cultivate a new way of being.

Luckily, most of are already quite skilled at being kind, understanding and compassionate to those we care about. To realize the benefits of self-compassion, therefore, all you need to do is turn around and apply those same skills toward yourself. It's easier than you think, and it could change your life.

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*To learn more, or to order my new book, "Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind," go to [www.self-compassion.org](http://www.self-compassion.org).*