

The Neuroscience of Self-Compassion

Presented by Kelly McGonigal, PhD at the Self-Acceptance Summit hosted by Sounds True

The 5 elements that define compassion are:

1. Becoming aware of pain and suffering.
2. Experiencing care, concern, or connection for the person who is experiencing the pain or suffering.
3. A desire to relieve that suffering.
4. A willingness to respond to that suffering.
5. A warm glow or sense of satisfaction that comes from helping or responding compassionately.

There are 3 areas in the brain that become activated when we experience compassion for others. These areas are:

- The emotional system, which activates the experience of empathy.
- The social engagement system, this system allows us to have a sense of boundary that *separates* us from the person who is suffering.
- The reward system, which activates a desire to want to approach and help the other person. The reward system utilizes dopamine to motivate us to move toward the suffering the same way you would a chocolate bar.

What makes practicing self-compassion more difficult than compassion for other people?

Similar systems in the brain are activated when we are the ones who experience suffering, however they activate a little differently which can lead to a different result.

- The emotional and empathy centers are activated similarly when we are the ones experiencing suffering.
- Rather than the social engagement system activating, which allows us to see a sense of separation between ourselves and someone else, our self-referential processing system becomes activated. When this happens we are most likely to experience self-criticism and to begin to construct alternative realities, like what we could've done differently in the past or what we need to do differently in the future.
- The reward system also becomes activated, however because the self-referential system has been activated in a negative way, the reward system is activated to attempt to try to get us out of the pain as quickly as possible. The brain looks for what will bring relief quickly. Instead of activating self-compassion it may activate the desire to escape by watching Netflix, binge eating, or self-medicating with drugs and alcohol.

Another challenge to practicing self-compassion is that typically when we act in a compassionate way towards other people we receive some sort of internal warm glow or positive feelings about ourselves for helping someone who is in pain. When we are asked to turn this same awareness of suffering and compassion inward, we often feel selfish and as if we are being too nice or too easy on ourselves.

How Can I Practice Self Compassion Most Effectively Based on Neuroscience?

What can be helpful in developing a self-compassion practice is to establish a “self to self relationship.” This means it’s helpful to see your self that is suffering from another vantage point so that we can best activate the social engagement system of the brain and sense a separation between the part that is suffering and the part that can offer tender care.



Here some exercises to try:

- Write a letter to yourself in the second person. (For example: *Dear_____ . You are suffering right now and here is what I want you to remember. You are loved and cared for. You matter. This may be hard right now but it will get better.*)
- Develop a list of empathy statements that you would offer to someone you care about who is suffering. Practice the statements to yourself in the mirror. This is one of the most helpful ways for your compassionate self to witness your suffering self.
- Imagine your future compassionate self, a self that is loving, kind, and wise, and have a dialogue with this future compassionate self.
- Practice gratitude. A recent study at the University of Rome showed that the effect of gratitude taps into the knowledge that we are interdependent and inter-connected. This helps to increase compassion, decrease self-criticism, and ultimately decrease depression and anxiety. Practice thinking about 3 things you are grateful for and 3 people you are grateful for every day.