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Self-Compassion: One Key to Mental Health

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Summary: In today's society, many people feel pressured that they should feel happy. The truth is that life isn't easy, and we all encounter disappointment, loss or suffering at times. Life is a road with potholes. The problem is that we may respond to bumps in the road with a negative inner voice that criticizes or lays blame. That just makes things even worse.

The good news is that there is a solution. When faced with disappointment, loss or suffering, we can treat ourselves with loving kindness and self-compassion. We can give ourselves emotional support, just as we would a close friend or family member who's suffering. Self-compassion is not about telling ourselves that we're better than others in some way. It's about accepting reality: no matter how special we'd like to think we are, we're human just like everyone else. And part of being human is that we'll all face failure, disappointment and loss at some point.

By accepting that we're imperfect, we can change our inner voice to one that's supportive, self-accepting and self-compassionate. As a result, our brains will make fewer stress chemicals so that we can feel and cope better.

Samantha's Story, Part 1

Samantha usually has a good day at work. She's normally on time, she has a reasonable boss, and her co-workers are pretty easy-going. But recently, she had a very bad day. She was late for work. Her boss was upset. And she had a disagreement with a co-worker.

As a result, a negative, self-critical voice started running in her head: "I'm such a disappointment. Nobody likes me! Why do I even bother? No matter what I do, it's going to fail."

Samantha had a rough childhood. She didn't feel accepted by her parents, and at school, there was a bully who tormented her for years.

Samantha wants to believe that deep down she's a good person. But it's so hard to change that negative voice.

Do I Have Self-Compassion?

When you face disappointment, loss or suffering, what type of inner voice do you tend to have?

a) A negative, self-critical voice that:

- Blames yourself?
- Makes yourself feel worse about it?
- Feels sorry for yourself?
- Is harder on yourself than you would be if you were supporting a friend or a loved one?

b) A positive, self-compassionate voice that:

- Accepts that you are imperfect?
- Supports you in the same way that you'd support a loved one?

Do you have a negative voice?

If so, you're not alone! The good news is that you can change the negative voice that brings you down into a more positive inner voice that brings you up.

What Is Self-Compassion?

"It is not your job to like me. It's mine."
— Toni Bernard

Self-compassion is being kind and compassionate to yourself during times when you feel that you're inadequate, a failure or suffering (Neff, 2011).

Self-compassion is incredibly important (Neff, 2011):

- We're a social species and are wired this way. It helps us feel better when others love and nurture us. We respond the same way to the love and nurturing that we can give ourselves by having a self-compassionate inner voice.
- When you have difficulties, other people are not always around to provide compassion. But there's one person who's always around — you. You're always with yourself, 24/7, 365 days a year. So when you treat yourself with loving kindness, it can make a big difference to your own mental health.
- Studies show that people who practice self-compassion have improved mental health and emotional resilience, feel more connected to others, and suffer less depression, anxiety and self-criticism.

Dr. Kristin Neff defines self-compassion as having three elements:

- Self-kindness: Being kind to yourself, as you might be towards a best friend, a loved one, a child or a beloved pet. Self-compassion is the opposite of being self-critical.
- Common humanity: Knowing that you're not alone, we're all simply human, and we all experience suffering and personal failure. No one is human without hurting or failing at something at least some of the time. Self-compassion means knowing you're not unique, special or better than others.
- Mindfulness: Accepting and acknowledging your feelings and thoughts without judgement, rather than suppressing them. Self-compassion is the opposite of ignoring your feelings or trying to push them down.

Self-compassion is part of many traditional practices such as Buddhism. In the Western world, we're starting to realize that self-compassion can be incredibly helpful for the issues seen in modern society.

Why Self-Compassion May Be More Important Than Self-Esteem

"If you don't love yourself, you cannot love others. You will not be able to love others. If you have no compassion for yourself, then you will not be able to develop true compassion for others."

— Dalai Lama

There has been a lot of attention to improving self-esteem, as studies show that low self-esteem is often seen in problems like depression and anxiety.

One of the ways to boost low self-esteem in Western society is to cheer people up by telling them that they are

special and unique, sometimes by pointing out that they are better than others at something.

Here’s an example:

- Your friend: “I’m so sad, I failed my math test.”
- You: “I’m so sorry! Well, on the bright side, you are awesome at music. I wish I was as good at music as you were.”

However, there's a problem with this approach:

- Cheering ourselves up through comparisons relies on us being better than others in that area, and this cannot always be the case. It’s a statistical impossibility for us all to be better than others — let’s face it, most people are “normal”.
- We don’t permit ourselves to really feel sad and ‘grieve’ the loss that we're experiencing.
- Some people start believing they’re special and better than others, which can lead to being self-centred, narcissistic and self-critical.

What’s the solution?

The good news is that self-compassion offers another way to feel better about ourselves. It’s self-sustainable and long lasting, and in the end, it leads to good self-esteem.

Here's how to foster self-compassion in a loved one:

- Your loved one: “I’m so sad. I failed my math test.”
- You: “I’m so sorry! That’s upsetting.”
- Your loved one: “Yeah, I studied so hard, and I still failed.”
- You: “How can I be helpful? Want to talk about it?”
- Your loved one: “It’s okay — I appreciate you asking.”
- You: “You know I’m always here for you... even if you’re not a math genius.”

Benefits of Self-Compassion

Studies on people that practice self-compassion show the following:

- They are more likely to take responsibility for their actions and not blame others, showing that self-compassion is not simply letting yourself off the hook.
- They are more likely to study more after a disappointing result
- Their self-compassion connects them with the rest of humanity while the emphasis on always having to be better than others disconnects you from others
- Veterans that harness their “inner ally” are more likely to recover more quickly than those who focus on their inner enemy.

Where Does Our Self-Critical Inner Voice Come From?

There are many reasons that you may find yourself being self-critical:

- You may have grown up experiencing critical voices at home, for example:
    - Parent: “You won’t get anywhere in life if you don’t do better.” “You’re going to be a failure!”
    - If we were raised with parents who were often critical, then we may often be critical ourselves. Most of the time, even critical parents have good intentions, wanting to help us by pushing us harder. They simply didn't realize that criticism often creates the opposite effect.

- Modern society is judgmental and critical. From an early age, children attend school, and school teaches them that their self-worth is based on their behaviour and achievements. With their peers, students learn that fitting in and being accepted by your peers is not about being yourself, but about being a certain way.

- We end up being critical because we believe it helps us do better. You may worry that if you start accepting or forgiving yourself, then you won't be pushing yourself to do better. The truth, however, is that when you're overly self-critical, it drains your mental energy, leaving you less mental energy to succeed or carry on.

How To Be Self-Compassionate

The next time that you have a loss (such as a breakup in a relationship, or problems with work or school) or face suffering (such as having a medical problem, or mental health issues such as depression or anxiety)...

Do the following:

• Identify and express how you're feeling.	• If you're feeling sad and upset, then simply say to yourself, "I'm sad and upset about this." • If you're feeling angry, then accept that there are usually feelings underneath the anger, for example, "I'm angry, because I'm actually sad about..." • If you feel like crying, then allow the tears to come out. Although many of us (especially men) may have learned to suppress our feelings and not cry, crying is actually one of the most powerful ways for our brains to cope with a disappointment or loss, and then be able to move on with things.
• Accept and validate how you're feeling.	• "It's okay to feel this way. There's nothing wrong with feeling like this, because other people would feel sad and upset about this too."
• Remind yourself that you're not alone but instead, precisely because of this, are connected to what others experience.	• "I'm not the only person who has stuff like this happen." • "This is just part of being human. Everyone feels this way at some point." • "I'm only human. Nobody has a perfect life."
• Remind yourself that the fact you're in pain doesn't mean you're bad.	• "This doesn't make me a bad person. I'm simply human and imperfect, just like everyone else."
• Give yourself hope	• "It's going to be okay." • "I'm going to get through this."
• Tell yourself the same thing that you'd say to comfort someone you care about.	• "I'm a good person." • "I'm not alone."
• Be grateful for what you have. This helps you think about positives and counter the natural human tendency to be negative.	• "I'm fortunate to have ____" • "I'm lucky that ___"
• Move on and do helpful things.	• "I'm not going to make myself feel worse. I'm going to support myself like I'd support someone else going through this." • "There are some healthy things I can do about this, like get to bed earlier, eat healthier and get outside every day."

Self-Compassion Exercises

Are you finding self-compassion hard? Consider this exercise from Dr. Kristin Neff. Studies have shown that doing even just a week of daily self-compassion exercises such as the following can lead to improved mental health, even months later. Learning self-compassion is like any other skill. Some skills are easier than others, but they still benefit from practice over time.

Exercise: How would you support a friend?

Imagine that you have a friend who is going through a difficult situation.

How would you support your friend? What would you say?

You might say:

- “I’m so sorry, that sounds horrible. “
- “It’s not your fault. You’re not a bad person.”
- “You’re not alone. That just shows you’re human, like the rest of us.”
- “I’m here for you.”
- “How can I be helpful?”

Imagine yourself in a difficult situation.

What would you say to yourself to feel better?

When To See a Professional

If you find that you or a loved one are still struggling with self-compassion in spite of trying things on your own, then consider:

- Seeing a professional who is familiar with self-compassion. This includes professionals with training in acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), where concepts of self-acceptance and self-compassion are built into the therapy.
- Spiritual practices with self-compassion, such as Buddhist practice or mindfulness practice (often found in yoga).

Samantha’s Story, Part 2

When Samantha has a bad day, the self-critical thoughts start running in her head.

She realizes, though, that if a good friend (or even a stranger that she met) were going through the same thing, she’d be more supportive.

She starts to ask herself: “What would I say to a friend in the same situation?” Over time and with a lot of practice, she starts to find the voice of self-acceptance and self-compassion. “I’m not perfect…nobody’s perfect. We’re all imperfect in some way. That’s part of life, and that’s okay.”

Summary

In today’s society, many people feel pressured that they should feel happy. The truth is that life isn't easy, and we all encounter disappointment, loss or suffering at times. Life is a road with potholes. The problem is that we may respond to bumps in the road with a negative inner voice that criticizes or lays blame. That just makes things even worse.

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Quotes on Self-Compassion

“If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.”
-- Jack Kornfield

“You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.”
-- Buddha

“I have a new best friend. When I am happy, my best friend is happy for me. When I am down, my best friend tells me that it’s okay, that we’ll get through this. When I feel like I’ve screwed up in life, my best friend listens and accepts me no matter how I am. Who’s my best friend? My best friend is me...”
-- From “My New Best Friend,” written by Sara Marlowe

For More Information

Video

Dr. Kristin Neff’s TEDx Talk on self-compassion, “The Space Between Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion.”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvtZBUSplr4

Websites

Self-Compassion.org
Official website for Dr. Kristin Neff, self-compassion researcher, author, and teacher. Lots of practical exercises (including guided meditations) to help you with your journey of self-compassion.

Books

How to be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers, by Toni Bernhard

Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself, by Kristin Neff, 2011

The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are, by Brené Brown, 2010

Further Readings (en français)

S’aimer: Comment se réconcilier avec soi-même, par Kristin Neff, 2013

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About This Document

Written by mental health professionals at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre, and members of the Mental Health Promotion Committee at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) (in Ontario, Canada). Special thanks to Dr. Kristin Neff's inspiration for this article, and to Noah Spector (social worker, CHEO) and Eva Schacherl for proof-reading/editing.

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