

# The Science of Self-Compassion

Dr. Kristin Neff

Educational Psychology Dept., University of Texas at Austin

## Self-Compassion

- The three components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003)
- Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
  - Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
  - Actively soothing and comforting oneself
- 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 of self-criticism
  - Threat defense system
  - Cortisol and adrenaline
- Physiological underpinnings of self-compassion
  - Mammalian care-giving system
  - Oxytocin and opiates

## Research on self-compassion

- Explosion of research into self-compassion over the past decade
- Most research conducted with the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003)
- Other methods of examining self-compassion
  - Behavioral ratings by others
  - Mood inductions
  - Intervention studies

## Self-compassion strongly linked to wellbeing

- Reductions in negative mind-states: Anxiety, depression, stress, rumination, thought suppression, perfectionism, shame
- Increases in positive mind-states: Life satisfaction, happiness, connectedness, self-confidence, optimism, curiosity, gratitude

## Self-compassion vs. self-esteem

- Offers same wellbeing benefits without pitfalls
  - Fewer social comparisons
  - Less contingent self-worth
  - No association with narcissism
- Buffers against negative effects of low self-esteem in adolescents

### Linked to coping and resilience

- More effective coping with divorce, chronic pain
- Less likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma
- Less anxiety coping with HIV

### Linked to motivation

- Intrinsic motivation, desire to learn and grow
- Greater perceived competence
- Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after failure

### Linked to personal accountability

- More conscientiousness
- Taking greater responsibility for past mistakes
- Disposition to apologize

### Linked to health

- Healthier behaviors
  - More exercise, safer sex, helps smokers quit, less alcohol use, more doctors visits
- Better physical health
  - Enhanced immune response to stress
  - Fewer physical symptoms (aches, colds, etc.)

### Linked to healthier body image and eating behavior

- Less body preoccupation and dissatisfaction
- More body appreciation
- Less disordered eating behaviors
- More intuitive eating

### Linked to other-focused concern

- Linked to better romantic relationships
  - More caring and supportive relationship behavior (as rated by partners)
  - Less controlling and verbally aggressive
- More forgiveness and perspective taking
- More compassion, empathy, altruism for others

### Self-compassion for caregivers

- Less burnout and “compassion” fatigue
- More satisfaction with care-giving role
- Increased wellbeing and coping for parents of autistic children

## **How to Increase Self-Compassion?**

### Mindfulness-Based approaches

- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy have both been shown to increase self-compassion
- Self-compassion appears to be a key mechanism of program effectiveness

### Compassion Focused Therapy (Paul Gilbert):

- Less depression, anxiety, shame, dysfunction
- Effective with a variety of clinical populations

### Self-compassionate letter writing

- Participants wrote SC letter for seven days
- SC letter (N = 63) vs. early memory control (N = 70)
- Significantly less depression (3 months later) and greater happiness (6 months later)

### Guided self-compassion meditation

- Women with body image concerns listened to guided self-compassion meditations for three weeks
- SC condition (N = 98) vs. waitlist control (N = 130)
- More SC and body appreciation, less body dissatisfaction, self-worth contingent on appearance
- Gains maintained three months later

### Mindful Self-Compassion Program (MSC)

- 8-week workshop designed to explicitly teach skills of self-compassion
- Uses meditation, informal practice, group discussion and homework exercises
- Randomized clinical trial of MSC with intervention group vs. wait-list control group
- MSC led to significantly greater gains in self-compassion, mindfulness, compassion, life satisfaction, as well as greater reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, emotional avoidance
- All well-being gains maintained for one year
- Degree of formal and informal self-compassion practice both related to gains in self-compassion
  - Days per week spent meditating
  - Hours per day spent in informal practice

## 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:

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

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

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

### 2. ***Suffering is a part of living***

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- *Other people feel this way.*
- *I'm not alone.*
- *We all struggle in our lives.*

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*

(pause)

If you're having trouble finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one had a similar difficulty as you. What would you say to this person?

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

## SOLES OF THE FEET

This is a very effective way to anchor your awareness in body sensation, especially when you're upset and would like to help calm and anchor yourself.

- Stand up and feel the soles of your feet on the floor. Rock forward and back a little, and side to side. Make little circles with your knees, feeling the changes of sensation in the soles of your feet.
- When you notice your mind has wandered, just feeling the soles of your feet again.
- If you wish, you can begin to walk slowly, noticing the changing sensations in the soles of your feet. Noticing the sensation of lifting a foot, stepping forward, and the placing the foot on the floor. Doing the same with both feet as you walk.
- As you walk, perhaps also noticing for a moment how small the surface area of your feet is, and how hard your feet work to keep your body off the ground. See if you can notice that with appreciation or gratitude.
- When you are ready, returning to standing.

## MANAGING CAREGIVER BURNOUT

- Please bring to mind someone you are caring for who can exhaust you or frustrate you, or someone who suffers with whom you feel sympathy. For this introductory exercise, please choose someone who is not your child, as this can be a more complicated dynamic. See the person 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  
Moments like this are difficult to bear,  
yet I may still try to help if I can.*

- Now, aware of the stress you are carrying in your body, inhaling fully and deeply, drawing compassion inside your body and filling every cell with compassion. Letting yourself be soothed by inhaling deeply, and by giving yourself the compassion you need when you experience discomfort.
- As you exhale, sending out compassion to the other person who is associated with your discomfort, or exhaling compassion to living beings in general.
- Continue breathing compassion in and out, letting your body gradually find a natural, relaxed breathing rhythm. Breathing in for yourself and out for the other. *One for me, one for you.*
- Occasionally scanning your inner landscape for any distress and respond by inhaling compassion for yourself and exhaling compassion for the person who needs it. If you find that you, or the other person, needs *extra* compassion, feel free to focus your breath more in that direction.
- Noticing the gentle rocking motion of your body as you breathe, like the tides flowing in and out 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  
Moments like this are difficult to bear,  
yet I may still try to help if I can.*

- Slowly open your eyes.

## Resources

Self-compassion calculator, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises available at: [www.self-compassion.org](http://www.self-compassion.org)

Information on the MSC program available at: [www.CenterforMSC.org](http://www.CenterforMSC.org)

### **Books and Audio:**

Germer, C. K. (2009). *The mindful path to self-compassion*. New York: Guilford Press.

Gilbert, P. (2009). *The compassionate mind*. London: Constable.

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.)