Self-Compassion

By Dr. Kristin Neff

Definition of self-compassion

Having compassion for oneself is really no different than having compassion for others. Think about what the experience of compassion feels like. First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. If you ignore that homeless person on the street, you can't feel compassion for how difficult his or her experience is. Second, compassion involves feeling moved by others' suffering so that your heart responds to their pain (the word compassion literally means to "suffer with"). When this occurs, you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly. Finally, when you feel compassion for another (rather than mere pity), it means that you realize that suffering, failure, and imperfection is part of the shared human experience. "There but for fortune go I."

Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself when you are having a difficult time, fail, or notice something you don't like about yourself. Instead of just ignoring your pain with a "stiff upper lip" mentality, you stop to tell yourself "this is really difficult right now," how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment? Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect? You may try to change in ways that allow you to be more healthy and happy, but this is done because you care about yourself, not because you are worthless or unacceptable as you are. Perhaps most importantly, having compassion for yourself means that you honor and accept your humanness. Things will not always go the way you want them to. You will encounter frustrations, losses will occur, you will make mistakes, bump up against your limitations, fall short of your ideals. This is the human condition, a reality shared by all of us. The more you open your heart to this reality instead of constantly fighting against it, the more you will be able to feel compassion for yourself and all your fellow humans in the experience of life.

The three elements of self-compassion

Self-kindness. Self-compassion entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism. Self-compassionate people recognize that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties is inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals. People cannot always be or get exactly what they want. When this reality is denied or fought against suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration and self-criticism. When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced.

Common humanity. Frustration at not having things exactly as we want is often accompanied by an irrational but pervasive sense of isolation – as if "I" were the only person suffering or making mistakes. All humans suffer, however. The very definition of being "human" means that one is mortal, vulnerable and imperfect. Therefore, self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience - something that we all go through rather than being something that happens to "me" alone. It also means recognizing that personal thoughts, feelings and actions are impacted by "external" factors such as parenting history, culture, genetic and environmental conditions, as well as the behavior and expectations of others. Thich Nhat Hahn calls the intricate web of reciprocal cause and effect in which we are all imbedded "interbeing." Recognizing our essential interbeing allows us to be less judgmental about our personal failings. After all, if we had full control over our behavior, how many people would consciously choose to have anger issues, addiction issues, debilitating social anxiety, eating disorders, and so on? Many aspects of ourselves and the circumstances of our lives are not of our choosing, but instead stem from innumerable factors (genetic and/or environmental) that we have little control over. By recognizing our essential interdependence, therefore, failings and life difficulties do not have to be taken so personally, but can be acknowledged with non-judgmental compassion and understanding.

Mindfulness. Self-compassion also requires taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. This equilibrated stance stems from the process of relating personal experiences to those of others who are also suffering, thus putting our own situation into a larger

perspective. It also stems from the willingness to observe our negative thoughts and emotions with openness and clarity, so that they are held in mindful awareness. Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, receptive mind state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. At the same time, mindfulness requires that we not be "over-identified" with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negative reactivity.

What self-compassion is not

When individuals feel self-pity, they become immersed in their own problems and forget that others have similar problems. They ignore their interconnections with others, and instead feel that they are the only ones in the world who are suffering. Self-pity tends to emphasize egocentric feelings of separation from others and exaggerate the extent of personal suffering. Self-compassion, on the other hand, allows one to see the related experiences of self and other without these feelings of isolation and disconnection. Also, self-pitying individuals often become carried away with and wrapped up in their own emotional drama. They cannot step back from their situation and adopt a more balanced or objective perspective. In contrast, by taking the perspective of a compassionate other towards oneself, "mental space" is provided to recognize the broader human context of one's experience and to put things in greater perspective. ("Yes it is very difficult what I'm going through right now, but there are many other people who are experiencing much greater suffering. Perhaps this isn't worth getting quite so upset about...")

Self-compassion is also very different from self-indulgence. Many people say they are reluctant to be self-compassionate because they're afraid they would let themselves get away with anything. "I'm stressed out today so to be kind to myself I'll just watch TV all day and eat a quart of ice cream." This, however, is self-indulgence rather than self-compassion. Remember that being compassionate to oneself means that you want to be happy and healthy in the long term. In many cases, just giving oneself pleasure may harm well-being (such as taking drugs, over-eating, being a couch potato), while giving yourself health and lasting happiness often involves a certain amount of displeasure (such as quitting smoking, dieting, exercising). People are often very hard on themselves when they notice something they want to change because they think they can

shame themselves into action – the self-flagellation approach. However, this approach often backfires if you can't face difficult truths about yourself because you are so afraid of hating yourself if you do. Thus, weaknesses may remain unacknowledged in an unconscious attempt to avoid self-censure. In contrast, the care intrinsic to compassion provides a powerful motivating force for growth and change, while also providing the safety needed to see the self clearly without fear of self-condemnation.

Self-compassion versus self-esteem

Although self-compassion may seem similar to self-esteem, they are different in many ways. Self-esteem refers to our sense of self-worth, perceived value, or how much we like ourselves. While there is little doubt that low self-esteem is problematic and often leads to depression and lack of motivation, trying to have higher self-esteem can also be problematic. In modern Western culture, self-esteem is often based on how much we are different from others, how much we stand out or are special. It is not okay to be average, we have to feel above average to feel good about ourselves. This means that attempts to raise self-esteem may result in narcissistic, self-absorbed behavior, or lead us to put others down in order to feel better about ourselves. We also tend to get angry and aggressive towards those who have said or done anything that potentially makes us feel bad about ourselves. The need for high self-esteem may encourage us to ignore, distort or hide personal shortcomings so that we can't see ourselves clearly and accurately. Finally, our self-esteem is often contingent on our latest success or failure, meaning that our self-esteem fluctuates depending on ever-changing circumstances.

In contrast to self-esteem, self-compassion is not based on self-evaluations. People feel compassion for themselves because all human beings deserve compassion and understanding, not because they possess some particular set of traits (pretty, smart, talented, and so on). This means that with self-compassion, you don't have to feel better than others to feel good about yourself. Self-compassion also allows for greater self-clarity, because personal failings can be acknowledged with kindness and do not need to be hidden. Moreover, self-compassion isn't dependent on external circumstances, it's always available – especially when you fall flat on your face! Research indicates that in comparison to self-esteem, self-compassion is associated with greater emotional resilience,

more accurate self-concepts, more caring relationship behavior, as well as less narcissism and reactive anger.

Self-Compassion Exercises

Exercise 1

How self-compassionate are you?

How do you typically react to yourself?

- What types of things do you typically judge and criticize yourself for (appearance, career, relationships, parenting, etc.)?
- What type of language do you use with yourself when you notice some flaw or make a mistake (do you insult yourself, or do you take a more kind and understanding tone)?
- When you are being highly self-critical, how does this make you feel inside?
- When you notice something about yourself you don't like, do you tend to feel cut off from others, or do you feel connected with your fellow humans who are also imperfect?

- What are the consequences of being so hard on yourself? Does it make you more motivated and happy, or discouraged and depressed?
- How do you think you would feel if you could truly love and accept yourself exactly as you are? Does this possibility scare you, give you hope, or both?

How do you typically react to life difficulties?

- How do you treat yourself when you run into challenges in your life? Do you tend to ignore the fact that you're suffering and focus exclusively on fixing the problem, or do you stop to give yourself care and comfort?
- Do you tend to get carried away by the drama of the situation, so that you make a bigger deal out of it than you need to, or do you tend to keep things in balanced perspective?
- Do you tend to feel cut off from others when things go wrong, with the irrational feeling that everyone else is having a better time of it then you, or do you get in touch with the fact that all humans experience hardship in their lives?

If you feel that you lack sufficient self-compassion, check in with yourself – are you criticizing yourself for this too? If so, stop right there. Try to feel compassion for

how difficult it is to be an imperfect human being in this extremely competitive society of ours. Most of us live in cultures that do not emphasize self-compassion, quite the opposite. We're told that we're being lazy and self-indulgent if we don't harshly criticize ourselves. We're told that no matter how hard we try, our best just isn't good enough. It's time for something different. We can all benefit by learning to be more self-compassionate, and now is the perfect time to start.

Exercise 2

Exploring self-compassion through writing

Part One:

Everybody has something about themselves that they don't like; something that causes them to feel shame, to feel insecure, or not "good enough." It is the human condition to be imperfect, and feelings of failure and inadequacy are part of the experience of living a human life. Try writing about an issue you have that tends to make you feel inadequate or bad about yourself (physical appearance, work or relationship issues…) How does this aspect of yourself make you feel inside - scared, sad, depressed, insecure, angry? What emotions come up for you when you think about this aspect of yourself? This is just between you and the paper, so please try to be as emotionally honest as possible and to avoid repressing any feelings, while at the same time not being overly melodramatic. Try to just feel your emotions exactly as they are – no more, no less – and then write about them.

Part Two:

Now think about an imaginary friend who is unconditionally loving, accepting, kind and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see all your strengths and all your weaknesses, including the aspect of yourself you have just been writing about. Reflect upon what this friend feels towards you, and how you are loved and accepted exactly as you are, with all your very human imperfections. This friend recognizes the limits of human nature, and is kind and forgiving towards you. In his/her great wisdom this friend understands your life history and the millions of things that have happened in your life to create you as you are in this moment. Your particular inadequacy is connected to so many things you didn't necessarily choose: your genes, your family history, life circumstances – things that were outside of your control.

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend – focusing on the perceived inadequacy you tend to judge yourself for. What would this friend say to you about your "flaw" from the perspective of unlimited compassion? How would this friend convey the deep compassion he/she feels for you, especially for the pain you feel when you judge yourself so harshly? What would this friend write in order to remind you that you are only human, that all people have both strengths and weaknesses? And if you think this friend would

suggest possible changes you should make, how would these suggestions embody feelings of unconditional understanding and compassion? As you write to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, try to infuse your letter with a strong sense of his/her acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness.

After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you like a cool breeze on a hot day. Love, connection and acceptance are your birthright. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

Exercise 3

The criticizer, the criticized, and the compassionate observer

This exercise is modeled on the two-chair dialogue studied by Gestalt therapist Leslie Greenberg. In this exercise, clients sit in different chairs to help get in touch with different, often conflicting parts of their selves, experiencing how each aspect feels in the present moment.

To begin, put out three empty chairs, preferably in a triangular arrangement. Next, think about an issue that often troubles you, and that often elicits harsh self-criticism. Designate one chair as the voice of your inner self-critic, one chair as the voice of the part of you that feels judged and criticized, and one chair as the voice of a wise, compassionate observer. You are going to be role-playing all three parts of yourself - you, you, and you. It may feel a bit silly at first, but you may be surprised at what comes out once you really start letting your feelings flow freely.

1) Think about your "issue," and then sit in the chair of the self-critic. As you take your seat, express out loud what the self-critical part of you is thinking and feeling. For example "I hate that fact that you're such a whimp and aren't self-

assertive." Notice the words and tone of voice the self-critical part of you uses, and also how it is feeling. Worried, angry, self-righteous, exasperated? Note what your body posture is like. Strong, rigid, upright? What emotions are coming up for you right now?

2) Take the chair of the criticized aspect of yourself. Try to get in touch with how you feel being criticized in this manner. Then verbalize how you feel, responding directly to your inner critic. For example, "I feel so hurt by you" or "I feel so unsupported." Just speak whatever comes into your mind. Again, notice the tone of your voice? Is it sad, discouraged, childlike, scared, helpless? What is your body posture like? Are you slumped, downward facing, frowning?

3) Conduct a dialogue between these two parts of yourself for a while, switching back and forth between the chair of the criticizer and the criticized. Really try to experience each aspect of yourself so each knows how the other feels. Allow each to fully express its views and be heard.

4) Now occupy the chair of the compassionate observer. Call upon your deepest wisdom, the wells of your caring concern, and address both the critic and the

criticized. What does your compassionate self say to the critic, what insight does it have? For example, “You sound very much like your mother” or, “I see that you’re really scared, and you’re trying to help me so I don’t mess up.” What does your compassionate self say to the criticized part of yourself? For example, “It must be incredibly difficult to hear such harsh judgment day after day. I see that you’re really hurting” or “All you want is to be accepted for who you are.” Try to relax, letting your heart soften and open. What words of compassion naturally spring forth? What is the tone of your voice? Tender, gentle, warm? What is your body posture like - balanced, centered, relaxed?

5) After the dialogue finishes (stop whenever it feels right), reflect upon what just happened. Do you have any new insights into how you treat yourself, where your patterns come from, new ways of thinking about the situation that are more productive and supportive? As you think about what you have learned, set your intention to relate to yourself in a kinder, healthier way in the future. A truce *can* be called in your inner war. Peace *is* possible. Your old habits of self-criticism don’t need to rule you forever. What you need to do is listen to the voice that’s already there, even if a bit hidden - your wise, compassionate self.

Exercise 4

Changing your critical self-talk

This exercise should be done over several weeks, and will eventually form the blueprint for changing how you relate to yourself long-term. Some people find it useful to work on their inner critic by writing in a journal. Others are more comfortable doing it via internal dialogues. If you are someone who likes to write things down and revisit them later, journaling can be an excellent tool for transformation. If you are someone (like me) who never manages to be consistent with a journal, then do whatever works for you. You can speak aloud to yourself, or think silently.

1) The first step towards changing the way to treat yourself is to notice when you are being self-critical. It may be that – like many of us - your self-critical voice is so common for you that you don't even notice when it is present. Whenever you're feeling bad about something, think about what you've just said to yourself. Try to be as accurate as possible, noting your inner speech verbatim. What words do you actually use when you're self-critical? Are there key phrases that come up over and over again? What is the tone of your voice – harsh, cold, angry? Does

the voice remind you of any one in your past who was critical of you? You want to be able to get to know the inner self-critic very well, and to become aware of when your inner judge is active. For instance, if you've just eaten half a box of Oreo's, does your inner voice say something like "you're so disgusting," "you make me sick," and so on? Really try to get a clear sense of how you talk to yourself.

2) Make an active effort to soften the self-critical voice, but do so with compassion rather than self-judgment (i.e., don't say "you're such a bitch" to your inner critic!). Say something like "I know you're trying to keep me safe, and to point out ways that I need to improve, but your harsh criticism and judgment is not helping at all. Please stop being so critical, you are causing me unnecessary pain."

3) Reframe the observations made by your inner critic in a friendly, positive way. If you're having trouble thinking of what words to use, you might want to imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you in this situation. It might help to use a term of endearment that strengthens expressed feelings of warmth and care (but only if it feels natural rather than schmaltzy.) For instance, you can say

something like “Darling, I know you ate that bag of cookies because you’re feeling really sad right now and you thought it would cheer you up. But you feel even worse and are not feeling good in your body. I want you to be happy, so why don’t you take a long walk so you feel better?” While engaging in this supportive self-talk, you might want to try gently stroking your arm, or holding your face tenderly in your hands (as long as no one’s looking). Physical gestures of warmth can tap into the caregiving system even if you’re having trouble calling up emotions of kindness at first, releasing oxytocin that will help change your bio-chemistry. The important thing is that you start *acting* kindly, and feelings of true warmth and caring will eventually follow.

Exercise 5

Self-compassion journal

Try keeping a daily self-compassion journal for one week (or longer if you like.) Journaling is an effective way to express emotions, and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being. At some point during the evening when you have a few quiet moments, review the day's events. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. (For instance, perhaps you got angry at a waitress at lunch because she took forever to bring the check. You made a rude comment and stormed off without leaving a tip. Afterwards, you felt ashamed and embarrassed.) For each event, use mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to process the event in a self-compassionate way.

Mindfulness. This will mainly involve bring awareness to the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting and non-judgmental of your experience, not belittling it nor

making it overly dramatic. (For example, “I was frustrated because she was being so slow. I got angry, over-reacted, and felt foolish afterwards.”)

Common Humanity. Write down the ways in which your experience was connected to the larger human experience. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect, and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. (“Everyone over-reacts sometimes, it’s only human.”) You might also want to think about the various causes and conditions underlying the painful event. (“My frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was late for my doctor’s appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different my reaction probably would have been different.”)

Self-Kindness. Write yourself some kind, understanding, words of comfort. Let yourself know that you care about yourself, adopting a gentle, reassuring tone. (It’s okay. You messed up but it wasn’t the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it. Maybe you can try being extra patient and generous to any wait-staff this week…”)

Practicing the three components of self-compassion with this writing exercise will help organize your thoughts and emotions, while helping to encode

them in your memory. If you keep a journal regularly, your self-compassion practice will become even stronger and translate more easily into daily life.

Exercise 6

Identifying what we really want

1) Think about the ways that you use self-criticism as a motivator. Is there any personal trait that you criticize yourself for having (too overweight, too lazy, too impulsive, etc.) because you think being hard on yourself will help you change? If so, first try to get in touch with the emotional pain that your self-criticism causes, giving yourself compassion for the experience of feeling so judged.

2) Next, see if you can think of a kinder, more caring way to motivate yourself to make a change if needed. What language would a wise and nurturing friend, parent, teacher, or mentor use to gently point out how your behavior is unproductive, while simultaneously encouraging you to do something different. What is the most supportive message you can think of that's in line with your underlying wish to be healthy and happy?

3) Every time you catch yourself being judgmental about your unwanted trait in the future, first notice the pain of your self-judgment and give yourself compassion. Then try to reframe your inner dialogue so that it is more

encouraging and supportive. Remember that if you really want to motivate yourself, love is more powerful than fear.

Exercise 7

Taking care of the caregiver

If you work in a care-giving profession (and that certainly includes being a family member!), you'll need to recharge your batteries so you have enough energy available to give to others. Give yourself permission to meet your own needs, recognizing that this will not only enhance your quality of life, it will also enhance your ability to be there for those that rely on you. Here are some ideas:

- Get a massage, a pedicure, or other form of pampering.
- Take a nap in the middle of the day.
- Go to a comedy club.
- Rent a tear-jerker DVD and let it all out.
- Listen to relaxing music while lying on the sofa with your eyes closed.
- Practice loving-kindness meditation or do yoga for a half-hour.
- Lie on the floor, stomach-side down, while a significant other or close friend gently rocks your lower back from side to side. (I call this a "diaper shake" because it's so relaxing it makes you feel like a baby in diapers.)
- Hang out with a friend for an evening.

- Go dancing. If you don't want to go to a club or take formal dance lessons, there are many informal dance groups (often held in yoga studios or similar spaces) where you can express yourself through dance without having to worry about looking cool. Do an internet search on "ecstatic dance," "five rhythms," "free-form dance" or "expressive dance" in your area.)
- Do the self-compassionate body scan (a guided meditation available at: www.self-compassion.org)
- And when you have that oh-so-compassionate glass of red wine, accompany it with a large glass of water to help your body cope with its dehydrating effects. Or, if you find you are drinking too much and it's starting to harm rather than to enhance your well-being, have some dark red juice (cranberry, pomegranate, or cherry) mixed with sparkling water in a wine glass. Often just the site of dark red liquid in a wine glass will trigger a relaxation response.