

What is self-compassion?

"It is not this nimby, bimby stuff," said Paul Gilbert, a researcher at Kingsway Hospital in the United Kingdom. "Compassion is sensitivity to the suffering of self and others and a commitment to do something about it."

Self-compassion, as defined by Neff in the academic literature, has three aspects: mindfulness, common humanity and kindness.

1. Mindfulness is **holding your own thoughts and feelings rather than suppressing** or being carried away by them. For example, when finding out a loved one has been diagnosed with a chronic illness, mindfulness means pausing the flood of worries and accepting the anger, disappointment and pain.
2. Common humanity, in part, is the understanding that your feelings and experiences are not completely unique. No matter how hard we try to avoid or hide them, **all humans go through hardships** and have daily pains, frustrations and disappointments.
3. Being kind to yourself is not only providing comfort in the moment; it is also committing, whenever possible, to **reducing future instances of such suffering**.

Decades of research, particularly in the 1970s and '80s, suggested having high self-esteem is the cornerstone of happy, successful lives. This spurred an emphasis on self-esteem-building in parenting books, schools and even prisons. But now scientists are realizing they may have been measuring the wrong thing; all the benefits of having high self-esteem are equally found among the self-compassionate, said psychologist Mark Leary, a researcher at Duke University. And when statistically looking at self-compassion alone, the negative aspects of high self-esteem, such as narcissism, disappear.

Where self-compassion is a way of relating to your self — especially when times are tough — self-esteem is a measure of yourself against others. In order to keep self-esteem high, you have to convince yourself you are better (or, preferably, the best), either by denying your faults and pains or by putting others down, and usually both. But putting such stress on maintaining high self-esteem can be problematic, Leary said. While often erroneously used as a source of comfort, self-esteem is supposed to guide us, telling us when to try harder or when to apologize, he said. It should work like the gas gauge in a car, Leary explained. "If you artificially get stuck on full, you are going to make bad judgments about when to fill your tank up."

With or without self-esteem interventions, most people think they are better than average on just about every trait, including self-awareness, Neff explained. And today's

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Handout compiled by Teresa Kleffner, MSW, LCSW. St. Louis Counseling and Wellness. www.stlcw.com

college students, according to a 2010 meta-analysis of past relevant research, published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, are more narcissistic than they have ever been. They may also be less resilient and more fragile psychologically, according to experts such as Hara Estroff Marano, author of "A Nation of Wimps" (Broadway, 2008). Kids who grow up constantly hearing "You are so smart," may start believing "smartness" is part of what makes them lovable. And therefore, anything that does not support this picture of themselves, such as a C on a test, a negative evaluation or a job rejection, causes them to become defensive, anxious or, in some extreme cases, completely fall apart, Marano contends.

Rather than continuing to put stock in building self-esteem, psychologists are increasingly finding, as Gilbert put it, "the secret to success is the ability to fail." And this is exactly where self-compassion steps in.

Will self-compassion make me lazy?

Due to our ever-increasing competitive societies, researchers speculate the tendency to choose self-punishment, rather than self-compassion, is on the rise. People often believe that punishing themselves will keep them in line and ultimately keep them safe. Unfortunately, self-criticism can lead to generalized hostility (toward oneself and others), anxiety and depression; these are problems that can handicap people from reaching their full potential. Self-critics also report feeling like they have lower energy levels, researchers have found, and often subconsciously engage in self-handicapping strategies, such as procrastination, Neff told LiveScience.

Turning instead to the side that will offer a mental hug may sound soft. And according to Neff, the most common fear about becoming self-compassionate is that it will lower performance standards and encourage laziness. But researchers have found that self-compassionate people are actually *less* likely to sit on the couch all day eating bonbons. "Self-compassion begins to sound like you are indulging yourself, but we don't find that. People high in self-compassion tend to have higher standards, work harder and take more personal responsibility for their actions," Leary said. Presumably because they are not afraid of being mentally taken through the ringer, researchers also think self-compassionate people may be more aware of their own faults, have more courage and be more motivated to persevere. Those with self-compassion may even open access to higher levels of creative thinking, suggests one 2010 study in the *Creativity Research Journal*.

Like a good parent, the compassion-giving system also makes sure your goals are actually in your best interest. In other words, it gently nudges you away from "striving" that is fueled by addictive behaviors, such as greed, unhealthy eating and substance abuse and towards goals motivated by desires for greater health and well-being for

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yourself and others. For example, self-compassion training has been found to help both anorexics and people who are overweight.

Self-compassion encourages a person's "drive" while also giving it focus and healthy, wholesome boundaries. "The soothing system," as Gilbert put it, "gives the context for the striving."

Self Compassion Skills – Putting Self Compassion into Practice

1. Be realistic. Life is, and always will be, made up of both highs and lows. And as much as we may celebrate the good, part of living is learning how to accept the bad.
2. Learn how to deal with your emotions. Part of healthy coping is learning how to deal with your emotions and understanding yourself as a social being.
3. Learn not only how to care for yourself and others but also learn how to ask others for help.
4. Researchers are finding the key to a happy and successful life is resilience, being able to rebound in the face of difficulties. And the key to resilience is self-compassion.
5. Understand that emotions are universal. We all have them. "It is normal to feel frustrated and disappointed when you don't get what you want;" "It is human to feel jealous sometimes.
6. Honestly critique your *behavior*, but not your character. This distinction makes it less likely that you will confuse your actions or accomplishments with your self-worth. For example, telling yourself "that was an irresponsible thing I did" instead of "I am an irresponsible person.
7. Refrain from extreme punishment. Treating yourself harshly when you do something wrong offers little instruction on what to do when similar difficulties again arise. Being harshly self-critical saps energy and motivation levels and undermines your quality of life.
8. It is not best for everybody if you beat yourself up for weeks; it is best if you apologize and move on.