

Mindfulness Practices: Self-Compassion

(Adapted from: Neff, Kristin; Germer, Christopher. *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* (p. 12). Guilford Publications.)

Self-compassion involves treating yourself the way you would treat a friend who is having a hard time. Western culture places great emphasis on being kind to our friends, family, and neighbors who are struggling. But not so much when it comes to ourselves. Self-compassion is a practice in which we learn to be a good friend to ourselves when we need it most—to become an inner ally rather than an inner enemy. But we often need to cultivate this; for many people self-compassion does not come naturally.

Self-compassion involves three core elements that we bring to bear when we are in pain: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness involves being aware of moment-to-moment experience in a clear and balanced manner. It means being open to the reality of the present moment, allowing all thoughts, emotions, and sensations to enter awareness without resistance or avoidance. Why is mindfulness an essential component of self-compassion? Because we need to be able to turn toward and acknowledge when we're suffering, to "be" with our pain long enough to respond with care and kindness. While it might seem that suffering is blindingly obvious, many people don't acknowledge how much pain they're in, especially when that pain stems from their own self-criticism. Or when confronted with life challenges, people often get so caught up in problem-solving mode that they don't pause to consider how hard it is in the moment.

Mindfulness counters the tendency to avoid painful thoughts and emotions, allowing us to fully experience our experience, rather than avoiding it, trying to distract ourselves or frantically ruminating about how to 'fix' it. At the same time, mindfulness prevents us from becoming absorbed by and "overidentified" with negative thoughts or feelings, from getting caught up and swept away by our aversive reactions. Rumination narrows our focus and exaggerates our experience. Not only did I fail, "I *am* a failure." Not only was I disappointed, "my life is disappointing." When we mindfully observe our pain, however, we can acknowledge our suffering without exaggerating it, allowing us to take a wiser and more objective perspective on ourselves and our lives. To be self-compassionate, mindfulness is actually the first step we need to take—we need to see clearly what is going on in order to respond in a new way.

Common Humanity. A sense of interconnectedness is central to self-compassion. This involves recognizing that all humans are flawed works-in-progress, that everyone fails, makes mistakes, and experiences hardship in life. We fall into the trap of believing that things are "supposed" to go well and that something has gone wrong when they don't. Of course, it's highly likely—in fact inevitable—that we'll make mistakes and experience hardships on a regular basis. But we don't tend to be rational about these

matters. Instead, not only do we suffer, we feel isolated and alone in our suffering, and we become convinced that something is wrong with us when we feel this way. When we remember that pain is part of the shared human experience, however, every moment of suffering is transformed into a moment of connection with others. The pain I feel in difficult times is the same pain you feel in difficult times. The circumstances are different, the degree of pain is different, but the basic experience of human suffering is the same. We are not alone and we are not broken.

Self-Kindness. When we make a mistake or fail in some way, we are more likely to beat ourselves up than put a supportive arm around our own shoulder. Self-kindness counters this tendency so that we are as caring toward ourselves as we are toward others. Rather than being harshly critical when noticing personal shortcomings, we are supportive and encouraging and aim to protect ourselves from harm. Instead of attacking and berating ourselves for being inadequate, we offer ourselves warmth and unconditional acceptance. Similarly, when external life circumstances are challenging and feel too difficult to bear, we actively soothe and comfort ourselves.

Another way to describe the three elements of self-compassion is loving (self-kindness), connected (common humanity) presence (mindfulness). When we are in the mind state of loving, connected presence, our relationship to ourselves, others, and the world is transformed.

For more info and a bibliography of research on self-compassion, here is the Mindful Self-Compassion website:

<https://centerformsc.org/>

And here is an audio link for the Self-Compassion Break that utilizes all three components in a brief practice:

https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/self-compassion.break_01-cleanedbydan.mp3