

Self-Compassion and Psychological Wellbeing

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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

Physiology of compassion

- 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

Self-compassion linked to wellbeing

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

Linked to motivation

- Intrinsic motivation, desire to learn and grow
- Personal standards just as high, not as upset when don't meet them
- Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after task failure

Linked to personal accountability

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

Linked to healthier behaviors

- Diet, exercise, safe sex, quitting smoking, less alcohol use, more doctors visits

Linked to better body image and eating behavior

- Less body preoccupation, dissatisfaction, body shame, weight worries
- Less disordered eating behaviors
- More “intuitive” eating

Linked to Coping and Resilience

- More effective coping with divorce, combat trauma, HIV, chronic pain, etc.

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
- 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

Family Influences on Self-Compassion

- Attachment security
- Parental criticism
- Conflict in home
- History of abuse

How to Increase Self-Compassion?

Mindfulness-Based approaches

- MBSR and MBCT 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

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

Self-compassion and caregiver fatigue

- Caregivers are often pushed beyond their limits and experience burn out
- Mirror neurons create empathetic resonance
- Empathetic resonance can lead to secondary traumatic stress
- Setting boundaries and self-care strategies often recommended
 - Both have limits within caregiving situation itself
- Should compassion fatigue really be called empathy fatigue?
- Compassion allows us to be in the *presence* of suffering with an open heart
- Self-compassion provides the emotional resources needed to care for others
- Our calmer mind state will impact the mind state of those we care for

Self-compassion calculator, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises available at: www.self-compassion.org

Information on the MSC program available at: www.CenterforMSC.org

Suggested Reading:

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.

Six Session Audio Training

Neff, K. D. (2013). *Self-compassion step by step*. Sounds True

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.