

On My Mind: Self-compassion



Can you imagine your friends saying to you all the horrible things you say to yourself about yourself? “Hi Ralph ... wow, you look really fat today. And that shirt looks like something no one else wanted from the Dumptique. Have I ever mentioned that I think you have a stupid laugh? Also, your teeth need whitening.”

We all have inner critics who can say mean things. Painful feelings such as shame, guilt, fear, envy, rage, loneliness, and the accompanying negative self-talk are familiar to all of us. A simple and powerful treatment for such feelings is called self-compassion. It is a central tenet of many therapies, and the focus of a well-studied, widely available eight-week course called Mindful Self Compassion (MSC). See centerformsc.org.

The essence of self-compassion is treating yourself with the same kindness and caring that you would extend to a friend who was suffering — “compassion directed inward.” It is a discipline that may not feel natural at first, but with practice it comes more easily, and can have transformative, positive effects on one’s sense of well-being.

Mindful self-compassion teaches three principles: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. The founders of MSC, Kristin Neff, Ph.D., and Christopher Germer, Ph.D., describe self-kindness as entailing “being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail or feel inadequate, rather than flagellating ourselves with self-criticism.” They go on to write that most people report that they are kinder to others than they are to themselves, and that it is not uncommon to find people who are kind and gentle to others but harsh and critical with themselves.

Common humanity starts with reminding oneself that suffering is part of every human’s experience, and that embedded in suffering is an opportunity to connect not only with others who can offer comfort, but also with the compassionate, accepting part of ourselves. Reminding oneself that there is nothing within the human experience that others haven’t experienced can ease the isolation and shame that most or all of us have experienced at one time or another.

Mindfulness, MSC’s third principle, is a process in which we allow an observing, nonjudgmental part of ourselves to watch our own internal experience. We detach from our worried, guilty, critical, angry or lonely parts, and simply observe. We can acknowledge our pain and suffering without blending with it, and in so doing, we diminish the ability of our suffering parts to take us over. (For a more in-depth discussion of mindfulness, see my earlier article, [bit.ly/OMMmindfulness](https://www.mvtimes.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.mvtimes.com%2F2019%2F01%2F16%2Fmind-self-compassion%2F).)

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

A central component to overcoming any fear or anxiety is exposing oneself to the thing that creates the anxiety in such a way that it is not overwhelming. For example, for someone who is afraid of going to parties, riding in an elevator, or leaving the Island, doing any of those things in a fashion that leads to success will lessen the fear. If, instead of shaming oneself about the ways in which the experience was uncomfortable, praising oneself for what worked, remembering that fears are common and normal, and watching the fear from the perspective of a kind and nonjudgmental friend can offer relief and facilitate overcoming the fear.

Over the past two decades, there have been over a thousand research studies that have found that MSC leads to better physical and mental health and increased kindness to others. People who practice self-compassion have fewer psychiatric

symptoms. Depression, anxiety, and stress are all reduced. Self-compassion results in greater resilience to trauma and life's challenges. Self-doubt and criticism are reduced, and happiness is increased. People who practice self-compassion are motivated to take care of themselves and others, more accepting of the inevitable failures that we all experience, and more accepting and sympathetic to failure in others. They are kinder and more connected with their romantic partners, family members, and friends.

There is evidence that self-compassion deactivates the part of the brain that responds to imminent threat and activates the part of the brain that is caregiving. It appears to calm the stress response and lower levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. At the same time, it appears to activate parts of the brain that are associated with attachment and safety, via the oxytocin-opiate system.

Adults who grew up in critical and shaming families are more likely to punish themselves with the same kind of negative, self-effacing messages that their parents inflicted on them. When self-compassion is suggested, sometimes such people respond, "That sounds so self-indulgent." In fact, compassion toward the damaged inner child brings about calm, relief, and resilience. And rather than making people complacent and self-centered, studies suggest that it induces empathy and altruistic behavior toward others, which in turn engenders more appreciation for and kindness toward oneself.

The ideas behind MSC resonate with another form of therapy that I have written about, called Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS). (See bit.ly/InternalFamily.) IFS posits that we all have a multiplicity of personalities within us, and by relating to them as separate entities, we can learn about ourselves, grow, and heal. As IFS points out, no one likes to be shamed, bullied, or bossed around. When voices within us do that, the natural response is to fight back. Say someone eats too much candy. His or her belittling voice is unlikely to decrease that behavior, because punishment is not nearly as effective in changing behavior as are reward and positive reinforcement. When that candy eater chooses an apple and nuts for a snack, and says to him- or herself, "Wow, that really tasted good. I love that you are eating healthy food and taking care of yourself," it is much more likely that the unwanted candy-eating behavior will change.

In 2018, Neff and Germer published "The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook." If you don't have time for the eight-week course, the workbook is a great start. The book is filled with useful exercises, such as imagining and writing about how you would talk to a suffering friend, and then talking to yourself in the same

manner. It includes suggested self-affirmations such as saying to oneself, “I am sorry that you are frightened right now. I am sure that it will be OK, and I will be here to support you no matter what happens.” There are also tools that help to remind oneself that making mistakes is part of every human experience, and that, indeed, they help us learn and grow. MSC and the workbook teach techniques for staying in a place of kindness. The exercises reinforce the language of self-compassion so that it is more and more present in our conscious and subconscious minds. As a result, not only do people who practice MSC become calmer, kinder, and more self-realized, but they also become agents for spreading positive energy to others.

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