

Practicing Self-Compassion

■ by Kelsee Costanza, MS, LPC

Compassion is an empathetic response to another person's pain and suffering, with a desire to help or to relieve the pain. Having compassion requires noticing the pain, feeling motivated to respond to the pain, and offering support and kindness to the person in pain. We extend this compassion even when someone's pain is brought on by a mistake or error on their part, because we recognize that imperfection is part of being human. However, when we are the one experiencing pain, our first response is often to criticize and judge ourselves.

Self-compassion is the antidote to self-criticism; we take that same kindness we offer to another and offer it to ourselves. When faced with a difficulty, we can approach ourselves with compassion by mindfully noticing our pain, acknowledging our common humanity (i.e., all humans suffer, and we are all imperfect beings), and offering ourselves kindness rather than judgment.

Why is Self-Compassion Worth Practicing?

Self-compassion is a valuable practice because we are all worthy of love and respect, and this worthiness is completely independent of our actions or mistakes. We are all made in God's image (Genesis 1:27), i.e., *Imago Dei*, or "image of God". *Imago Dei* is the truth that we all have inherent value and dignity because we carry God's image stamped upon us. So to be compassionate to ourselves is to honor our value as God's creation and our God-given gifts and unique qualities.

Additionally, self-compassion is beneficial for our mental wellbeing, and this is evident in how self-criticism and self-compassion manifest in our bodies. When we receive criticism (from others or from the self), the brain's "threat system" turns on. The threat system helps us respond to danger or crises, and when it is triggered, the brain releases the hormone cortisol, which activates the "fight-flight-freeze-fawn" response (more commonly called "fight or flight"). Our bodies are prepared to either confront or avoid the threat. This response is draining both physically and emotionally, and it can cause us distress. Self-compassion, on the other hand, has been shown to lower cortisol levels and release oxytocin, a hormone that plays a role in feelings of trust, safety, warmth, and connectedness. Self-criticism activates our threat system; self-compassion activates our "soothing system."

How Can We Practice Self-Compassion?

An important part of practicing self-compassion is being mindful, which simply means to notice or observe without judgment. In order to show ourselves compassion, we must first be able to non-judgmentally bring awareness to our feelings and sensations, rather than suppressing or ignoring them. Examples of this kind of mindful attention are "I notice I am feeling sad" or "I'm observing that my heart

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is beating quickly right now". The identification of these emotions and sensations helps us to slow down and determine what kind of self-compassionate practice would be helpful.

There are various ways to practice self-compassion. Some specific exercises are:

- Ask yourself what you would say to or do for a friend in this situation.
- Explore self-compassion through writing or journaling.
 - ◇ Keep a journal to write about difficult events through a self-compassionate lens. Through this lens, you can non-judgmentally note your feelings, acknowledge your humanity as an imperfect person, and show yourself kindness through comforting words.
 - ◇ Write yourself a letter from the perspective of an unconditionally loving and accepting friend. You may imagine that this letter is from an imaginary friend, or you might envision it coming from God, whose love and grace abounds no matter what.
- Challenge and reframe your self-critical thoughts. Using a [thought record](#) can be a helpful tool for step-by-step identification of critical thoughts and replacement with compassionate responses.
- Use soothing self-touch to bring calmness to your body.
 - ◇ Give yourself a hug: Cross your arms and give yourself a gentle squeeze.
 - ◇ Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen while breathing deeply.
 - ◇ Gently stroke your arm.
 - ◇ Place one hand on your cheek.
 - ◇ Cradle your face in your hands.
- Engage in self-soothing activities such as listening to music, going for a walk, enjoying the sounds and scents in nature, talking to a friend, petting your dog or cat, cooking a nice meal, and pampering yourself.

Like many other self-care activities or life habits, self-compassion is a practice, and perfection is not the goal. Be gentle and patient with yourself in the process. ■



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