



# A quick guide to Self-compassion

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## A QUICK GUIDE TO SELF-COMPASSION

If you are anything like me, when you don't perform up to your expectations, you get very critical of yourself.

The underlying belief many of us hold is that this critical approach to ourselves will motivate us to be better next time.

The thing is, self-criticism doesn't work. If it did, I'd be happy to tell you to keep flagellating yourself with your perceived and actual inadequacies.

But Powers et al (2011) found that in university students pursuing valued goals in either weight loss, music or academic performance that self-criticism was shown to be significantly negatively related to goal progress across all three goals.

Self-critics ruminate more, procrastinate more, aren't as resilient when they fail and give up more easily.

If you've been trying to motivate yourself to improve your health or get better grades or be a better friend, by constantly demeaning and criticising yourself, then it might be time to consider a mindset upgrade.

The best upgrade is self-compassion. Self-compassion is the antithesis to self-criticism.

The two most common responses to 'you should be more self-compassionate' are:

- 1) 'What the hell is that?'
- 2) 'That sounds stupid'

reflecting just how embedded self-criticism as a motivation strategy is in our culture.

First up, let's get a couple of myths about self-compassion out of the way. Self-compassion is NOT:

- Self-indulgence or giving yourself whatever you want to make you feel OK – in fact, self-compassion can often mean taking the more difficult road because it is the right thing to do.
- Complacency or being happy with mediocrity – in fact, self-compassion is used by very high performers to keep them motivated to keep pursuing excellence
- Self-pity or feeling sorry for yourself – in fact, self-compassion is very action oriented as the goal is to address setbacks directly.
- Selfish or self-centred – in fact, self-compassion is the acknowledgement that we're all connected by suffering and that self-compassion is how we transcend that both individually, but also as a group.

*“self-compassionate people have less fear of failure, and when they do fail, are more likely to try again...”*

Warren, Smeets, & Neff. Current Psychiatry, 2016

## What is self-compassion then?

Self-compassion is:

- 1) Acknowledging failure or setbacks and sitting mindfully but non-judgementally with the difficult thoughts and feelings that come with setbacks and failure.
- 2) Acknowledging that failure and setbacks come with suffering and that this is normal and that you are not a broken human being because you failed or are upset about it.
- 3) Being as kind to ourselves as we would be to a close friend or family member in a similar situation.
- 4) Focusing our energy and attention on addressing the setback or working out how to avoid a similar failure in the future.

If you've relied on self-criticism a lot in your life, it will feel strange to approach yourself in a self-compassionate way.

This handout contains a couple of exercises that can help you develop self-compassion.

It is worth viewing self-compassion like a muscle. You need to exercise it regularly in order for it to grow stronger.



## Where to go to learn more about self-compassion

The CCI in Western Australia have a whole self-help program for developing self-compassion - <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Self-Compassion>

Kristin Neff is one of the leading figures in self-compassion research and a lot of her stuff can be found here: <https://self-compassion.org/>

Kristin Neff wrote a good article on the myths of self-compassion: [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the\\_five\\_myths\\_of\\_self\\_compassion](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_five_myths_of_self_compassion)

Another self-compassion focused exercise - [https://gqia.berkeley.edu/practice/how\\_would\\_you\\_treat\\_a\\_friend](https://gqia.berkeley.edu/practice/how_would_you_treat_a_friend)

## EXERCISE 1 - SELF-COMPASSIONATE LETTER

taken from - [https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/self\\_compassionate\\_letter#data-tab-how](https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/self_compassionate_letter#data-tab-how)

learn more at <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/04/19/exercise-build-self-compassion/>

Start by identifying something about yourself that makes you feel ashamed, insecure or not good enough. It might be some aspect of your personality, behaviour, abilities, relationships, or another aspect of your life. Write it down.

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How does it make you feel? – sad, embarrassed, guilty, angry? Be as honest as possible. You can always destroy this letter after you are finished.

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On the next page, you are going to write a letter to yourself, expressing compassion, understanding, and acceptance for the part of yourself you dislike.

Given that this can feel unusual at first, especially for people who are quite self-critical, here are some tips for how to make the letter more self-compassionate.

- 1) Imagine that there is someone who loves and accepts you unconditionally for who you are. What would that person say to you about this part of yourself?
- 2) Remember that everyone has things about themselves they don't like and no-one is without flaws. There are probably many people in world struggling with what you are struggling with. What would you say to them? How would you treat them kindly?
- 3) Consider the ways that events in your life, the family environment in which you grew up, or even your genes may have contributed to this negative aspect of yourself.
- 4) Rather than focus on judging yourself, are there constructive ways that you could try to improve or better cope with this negative aspect of yourself? In a kind way, suggest changes you could make to feel happier, healthier or more fulfilled.
- 5) When you've finished the letter, put it aside for a little while. Maybe come back to it later and read it again. You might find it helpful to read this letter when you are feeling bad about this aspect of yourself, as a reminder to be more self-compassionate.



## EXERCISE 2 - SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

This brief meditation can be used when confronted by a setback or failure:

Talk yourself through the following three steps:

### Step 1. “This is a moment of suffering”

Acknowledging a moment of stress is a type of mindfulness. If you are able, you may like to name the emotions present – *“this is what it feels like when I feel stressed/angry/overwhelmed...”*

Other options include: *“This hurts”*; *“Ouch”*; *“This is stress”*

### Step 2. “Suffering is a part of life”

It can be useful to connect to our common humanity. Remind yourself that other people have also had challenges in their lives. You are not broken or damaged because you are struggling. Tell yourself one of the following:

*“Other people feel this way”*

*“I’m not alone”*

*“We all struggle in our lives”*

### Step 3. “May I be kind to myself”

Offer yourself kindness in this moment. Ask yourself *“What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?”* Is there a word you need for this such as compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, strength or patience.

It can be useful to practice this meditation first with little setbacks (e.g. stuck in traffic) or by calling previous setbacks to mind. As the meditation becomes more automatic, you may find it easier to practice during more upsetting situations. In essence, this meditation helps you get into a self-compassionate mindset, from which you will be able to launch a more effective response to the situation.

Find the full version here - [https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/self\\_compassion\\_break](https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/self_compassion_break)