

Developing Compassion for Yourself and Others

Harper West, MA, LLP
Psychotherapist
Great Lakes Psychology Group

NOTE: There is a lot of information below. I'd suggest reading it through fairly quickly, then going back and taking on each task in order and working on them slowly over time.

Feelings of shame, inadequacy, or low self-worth are core causes of most emotional and behavioral problems, such as anxiety, depression, anger, substance abuse issues, and child/teen behavioral problems. Poor shame tolerance and lack of self-compassion can also cause relationship problems. Healing your own feelings of shame can lead to a happier life and may even heal your marriage. Self-compassion promotes emotional resilience and improves your ability to soothe yourself.

By developing a sense of compassion for yourself and others you can reduce thoughts and feelings that bring messages of self-shame and self-criticism. Doing so then reduces the tendency of your body and mind to react with a fearful response, which reduces your level of "stress."

FIRST: Learn the Five Causative Factors on my website (www.harperwest.co) and how they affect you.

Attributes of Compassion

1. A motivation to be caring toward self and others
2. Sensitivity to the feelings and needs of self and others
3. Sympathy and the ability to be moved and emotionally in tune with one's feelings and needs for growth
4. The ability to tolerate, rather than avoid, difficult feelings, memories or situations
5. Insight and understanding of how our mind works and why we feel as we do
6. An accepting, non-condemning, non-submissive orientation to ourselves and others

How The Brain Works When Not Compassionate

Many people (who haven't learned self-compassion!) have a running loop of messages in their brain that are self-critical: "I am not good at math," "I can never lose weight," "I am not socially awkward," etc, etc. At the core is often a deeper, more primal worry: "I am unloveable and I will be rejected by others."

Usually, these beliefs are learned early in life through messages of shame or judgment communicated, often inadvertently, by one's parents. A lack of secure attachment or bond to parents can also contribute to feelings of inadequacy. Or one may have had traumatic experiences or difficult relationships that taught these beliefs.

Feelings of shame are actually a survival mechanism. To ensure that we stay safe and belong to a group, we experience embarrassment when we do something wrong. This teaches us to correct inappropriate behavior to avoid being rejected by our tribe.

However, when shameful feelings become overwhelming or are hidden from others and not resolved regularly, it can become a problem. Shame feels scarier when it is handled alone.

When one feels inadequate, one feels powerless or "less than" others. One naturally reacts with a feeling of threat or fear if faced with an emotionally difficult situation. This leads to reactions of "fight," "flight," "freeze," or "avoidance."

The brain goes into a primal “survival mode” and reacts, rather than pauses and thinks realistically about a situation. The brain is relying on its limbic system where reactive, fear-based emotions are processed. In contrast, another part of the brain — the prefrontal cortex (PFC) — is where reasoning, problem solving, creativity, and imagination take place. It also helps us generate pro-social emotions, such as empathy, sharing, and compassion.

If the brain spends enough time in an emotionally fearful state, it can become a habit.

But we don’t need to be held hostage by our primitive limbic system. Through mindfulness we can learn to be aware of the emotions and desires that our brain generates. But then we can also choose whether we want to be swept away by these unthinking reactions, or if we want to redirect our thoughts and emotions. Through self-compassion we notice those thoughts that are not kind and helpful to us and choose to deliberately refocus our attention and thoughts on things that are helpful to us. Generating positive, warm feelings and thoughts reduced self-shaming and anxiety.

Skills or Goals

1. Learn to deliberately focus attention on things that are helpful and bring balanced perspective.
2. Develop mindful attention and use that attention to bring to mind helpful, compassionate images and/or a sense of self.
3. Learn to think and reason, using the rational mind, looking at evidence and bringing a balanced perspective.
4. Learn to plan and engage in behaviors that relieve distress.
5. Reduce self-protective behaviors, develop trust and vulnerability, move toward others and forward toward goals with courage.
6. Learn to act with the attributes and character of a compassionate person: wisdom, strength, warmth, courage, fortitude, kindness, vulnerability, accountability, acceptance, strength of mind, resilience, responsibility, forgiveness, gratitude, generosity, and non-judgment.

How to Develop Compassion — Specific Steps

1. Learn to be more mindful.

Practice mindfulness meditation. Learn to still your body and brain. Read my handout on “How to Develop a Mindfulness Practice” for basic meditation “how-to’s.” Being able to pause, be aware of your thoughts and slowing down enough to manage them is an essential first skill.

Once you have been meditating for awhile, try out some compassion-focused meditations, some of which are available as guided meditations in the Resources section at the end.

Read: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201305/compassion-can-be-trained>

For free meditation training audios: www.marc.ucla.org

Solitude is where one discovers one is not alone.

— Marty Rubin

2. Observe your thoughts.

Through mindfulness, improve your ability to *non-judgmentally* observe your thoughts, beliefs and emotions. Adopt a curious, wise mind, like a detective who is being objective and non-emotional. Once you are able to pause and note your self-talk, observe how many times your mind engages in self-comparisons, self-doubt, self-judgments, self-criticisms and negativity.

Observe how easy it is to be critical and how difficult it may be to be kind and gentle to yourself and others. Self-criticism triggers the threat response mechanism in the brain, which can lead you to feeling anxious, angry and depressed.

Say to yourself: “This is a moment of suffering.” Then reflect: “How does this experience feel emotionally and in my body? Is it painful? Does this self-judgment serve me? Would I say this to a friend?” If not, then why are you saying it to yourself?

Compassion starts with listening to the self, rather than merely talking to the self.
— Harper West

Your life is a reflection of your thoughts. Think well.
— Danielle Pierre

3. Engage in self-compassion.

When you get good at observing your thoughts, engage in active self-compassion. Think: “This is an opportunity to engage in self-compassion.”

Consider: “What do I need right now?” A Buddhist saying is: “When love meets suffering and stays loving, that’s compassion.” Ask yourself: “How would I talk to a child or a friend who was feeling as I am right now?” Or “What would my wisest self say right now?” Compassion is how you *relate to yourself* — hopefully with love and kindness. Be your own best friend. Be accepting, kind and forgiving toward yourself.

You might consider something as simple as a deep inhale, placing your hands on your heart, followed by a full, long exhale to generate feelings of safety and soothing. It might be thoughts of “I am safe right now. I am worthy of care and kindness.” It might be pausing to challenge your negative thoughts: “Did the professor really glare at me?” “Am I really a ‘completely worthless human being?’”

You learned to be critical, you can un-learn that skill and learn to be compassionate. Every day, engage in this simple practice. Place your hand on your heart, close your eyes, take a few deep breaths to center yourself. Then tell yourself: “I am doing the best I can,” or “I am lovable just the way I am,” or “I love myself and others love me, too.” Self support is more powerful and consistent than support from others.

Recognize that compassion is not just being nice or “soft.” Compassion might include a firm, loving push to take action to protect yourself by being assertive toward others. Or it might be a compassionate “kick in the butt” to stop watching TV and start exercising.

Compassionate thinking trains our minds to reason about ourselves, our emotions, and our relationships in a way that is helpful, not hurtful. Ask yourself: “What is a helpful way for me to think about this problem or situation?” It may actually be true that being painfully honest with yourself or assertive with others is the most compassionate thing to do.

This Sufi saying is often used when considering how to speak to others, but it also works when speaking to yourself:

Before you speak let your words pass through three gates.

*At the first gate, ask yourself, "Is it true?"
At the second ask, "Is it necessary?"
At the third gate ask, "Is it kind?"
— Sufi saying*

How to Develop Compassion: The Big Picture

1. Slow down.

Practice yoga, tai chi, prayer or other contemplative practices. Simplify your life, reduce chaos, reduce noise, reduce pressure. Moving at a fast pace with no quiet time means you have less access to your intuition, your emotions, your thoughts. These are powerful resources to use in developing insight and compassion.

Bessel A. van der Kolk, M.D., has said: "The clinical research and treatment program showed that doing yoga was a more effective treatment for traumatized people...than any medication that had ever been studied. Opening up that relationship with your body, opening up your body to breathe, and to feel your body is very important."

2. Learn to accept that you are flawed and will make mistakes.

All humans are imperfect, but many people have beliefs that they should be perfect. This is often done to avoid feeling ashamed or inferior. Learning to radically accept that you are imperfect can be very freeing from the fear of shame and failure. When we no longer need to hide our flaws behind inauthenticity, fear of vulnerability, or over-achieving and perfectionism we can show up in relationships as real, open, loving and calm. Read this [blog](#).

*She was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world.
— Kate Chopin, "The Awakening"*

*"And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good."
— John Steinbeck, "East of Eden"*

*Therapy or personal growth is not about solving problems or fixing oneself.
It is about accepting one's self completely.
— Harper West*

3. Give up the myth that self-hatred helps fix you.

Most people believe they must constantly nag at themselves in a self-critical way so that they correct bad behavior. But the exact opposite is true! Harsh self-judgments only reinforce feelings of shame. When you feel "less than" and weak, you are less likely to feel self-accepting and self-affirming. Self-forgiveness makes us more responsible, not less.

Key for relationships: You are much more likely to be critical, harsh and rejecting toward others if you are practicing those same behaviors on yourself. One way to improve relationships is to tone down the self-judgment. When we have high levels of self-shame, the tendency is to both "lash in" at ourselves but also to "lash out" at others in anger. Those with high levels of anger at others must first address the high levels of anger they have with themselves.

“When we stop judging and evaluating ourselves, we don’t need to worry so much about others’ approval and can instead focus on meeting the emotional needs of others.”

— Kristin Neff

When I accept myself as I am, then I can change.

— Carl Rogers

4. Identify the beliefs you have about yourself.

Self-understanding can liberate us from mental models or beliefs that we learned in the past and that we continue to automatically accept. These mental models may lead us to unthinkingly behave in ways that are unhealthy and can bias our perceptions of ourself, our world and our relationships.

Ask yourself: “What is it about myself that I don’t want others to see?” “What do I most judge about myself” or “What am I most trying to hide?” Identify where those thoughts came from. Did your parents or former partners convince you that you were unworthy or unloveable? Take a realistic look at your beliefs and the agenda of those who may have instilled them. Were these people critical of everyone, not just you? Do you need to keep accepting these opinions as accurate and reasonable?

Have the courage to be imperfect.

— Alfred Adler

5. Become more aware of your threat emotions (fear, anger, shame).

Observe how you feel and think when these emotions take over. Label emotions — this engages the pre-frontal cortex and disengages the limbic system. Be aware that fear for self-safety interferes with your ability to be compassionate for others. When we are chronically afraid, we spend our emotional and mental energy on self-protection, such as lashing out in “fight” response, retreating in “flight” response, or becoming passive in “freeze” or “fold” responses. When we are reacting with self-protection we are not capable of caring and empathy — even for ourselves! In addition, when we criticize ourselves mentally, it feels like an attack from within and triggers the release of certain neurochemicals and the fear response.

Most people’s greatest fear is feeling shame or humiliation. These emotions can trigger a natural sense of unworthiness and fear of rejection by others. But it also leads to self-protective behaviors of being unable to be accountable, to admit fault, to apologize or be wrong. It can cause a fear of failure because one may not want to risk additional feelings of shame. Lack of motivation may be another result, because trying may produce failure, which feels shameful. Developing self-compassion can lead to improved motivation because one has less fear of failure and shame.

The more parts of ourselves we reject, the more important it is that we feel accepted.

— Harper West

6. Observe what happens when you become hijacked by fear emotions.

Fear-triggering beliefs of inadequacy usually lead people to become self-critical and self-shaming, because they are afraid others will find them unlovable. People are afraid of the thought that if others knew them and saw these flaws, they would reject them. These lead to a need to self-protect with distancing in relationships, lack of vulnerability, anger and harsh criticism of others.

Anger is shame’s bodyguard.

7. Choose to take control of your emotions.

You are not your thoughts or emotions. You do not have to let them control you. Emotions are signals from our body, mind and intuition. Thoughts and beliefs are just events in the mind. Use these signals as information, not as a requirement to react. Learn to let them flow through your brain. Through mindfulness we can learn to use our thinking brain to reflect, pause, and manage our emotional brain.

Taking time to observe, reflect and choose new responses opens the door to conscious awareness, which brings possibility for change.

*Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.
-Viktor Frankl*

8. Recognize thoughts and beliefs that are approval seeking.

Being dependent on others for approval and self-worth puts you in a one-down position, making you fearful and dependent on others for feelings of “safety”. When you become completely self-accepting, this feeling of being helpless and powerless before others disappears and your fears and anxieties about being judged are eliminated.

Sometimes we're so concerned with being in love and wanting to be loved that we forget to love ourselves in the process.

9. Learn the difference between shame-based criticism and compassionate self-correction.

Many people are dependent on others to fulfill their need for acceptance and approval. This leads to strong feelings of fear of failure, fear of exposure, and feelings of shame, which can trigger the threat response. Compassionate people have strong self-worth and self-acceptance, so they can be open-hearted and honest about their mistakes, acknowledge them, and be accountable for their behaviors without feelings of shame, fear, and anger.

G'mar chatimah tovah

“The first step to true repentance is to overcome our natural, understandable resistance to finding ourselves at fault. If you could put your pride aside, what might you be prepared to admit, to apologize for, or to do?”

— Rabbi Debra Orenstein

*If you don't love yourself, you will try to manage others as a way to get them to like you.
— Harper West*

*Most of us are busy trying to manipulate others so we can manage the flow of shameful, critical messages we are so afraid of receiving.
— Harper West*

10. Develop a sense of we-ness and connection to others.

Feeling different from or odd increases the feeling of fear and isolation. Look for the universality among all living things. We are more alike than we are different. Everyone struggles with feelings of inferiority

and weakness, not just you. We are all imperfect. These ideas will reduce one's sense of being isolated from others.

*The Universe is not outside of you.
Look inside yourself; everything that you want, you already are.*
— Rumi

Activities that might help:

1. Engage in a daily gratitude practice to improve feelings of safety, abundance and self-protection. End each meditation with three thoughts of gratitude. Write down things you are grateful for. Look at this list every day and sit quietly feeling the warmth these thoughts bring to your heart. Many religious traditions pray and give thanks for blessings, which is also a useful practice that improves gratitude.
2. Learn to recognize your physical and mental experiences. It may help to speak out loud about an experience or feeling: “I am feeling anxious, so my chest is tight.” or “When I am around my father, I become irritable and impatient.” or “I feel as if everyone is looking at me and thinks I am stupid, so I feel myself becoming flushed and nervous.”
3. Start improving self-awareness and mindfulness. Perhaps pick a small personal habit and work to be aware of it (mindfulness) then observe it in action/in the moment, then change it. Maybe start with a habit such as saying “like” every other sentence or fidgeting in annoying ways. When you observe these habits, be kind to yourself, and work to change using self-compassion.
4. Explore and write about memories from your childhood that taught you to be critical or judgmental of yourself. Recall memories of your parents or caregivers and how you felt when they criticized you. If you were traumatized in childhood by abuse, molestation, substance abusing parents, neglect or abandonment, you likely developed feelings of low self-worth and are easily triggered into your emotional brain or the threat response. Discuss these memories and experiences in therapy.
5. Develop your self-discipline, because through self-discipline we gain self-respect. Stop promising yourself you’ll exercise or eat healthier or clean out your closets and actually do it — consistently and for a long time. When you fall off the wagon — and you will — be ready to engage with self-compassion for this failure. Say to yourself: “I am human and I have failed, but that’s ok. I’ll begin again and keep working on myself. This is a process and perfection isn’t the goal.”
6. Write down a list of your negative attributes (lazy, greedy, unkind, etc). Then write a list of your positive attributes (loving, responsible, generous, etc). Observe the lists and consider how it felt to perform this exercise. What was the experience like to write each list? Was it easier to write one list?
7. Ask for help. Many who struggle with low self-worth and lack of self-compassion feel they must not burden others. They feel they must be hyper-independent and they fear vulnerability. Often this comes from childhood experiences of being abused, bullied, ignored or not warmly treated when they did need comfort or assistance. Practice asking for help by starting small with a close friend and then building up to bigger “asks.” Explore how this feels to be interdependent.
8. Admit you have a flaw and practice radically accepting that flaw. Admit a past mistake and own that feeling of shame. Admit you don’t know something. Be honest with yourself about your traits and behaviors that harm others. Learn to accept instruction with equanimity and poise.
9. Apologize to anyone you have wronged. Learn the four steps of an apology: 1) Acknowledging how your behaviors or words harmed another. 2) Apologizing fully and authentically 3) Promising to change 4) Change!
10. When you observe yourself engaging in self-judgment and threat-based thinking, engage your cognitive/thinking brain and ask yourself:
 - Is this thinking helpful to me?
 - Would I think like this if I weren’t upset (using threat emotions)?

- Would I teach a child or friend to think like this?
- If not, how would I like to teach them to think about these things?
- How might I think about this when I am at my compassionate best?

Blog: 10 simple habits proven to make you happier

<http://www.spring.org.uk/2014/03/10-simple-habits-proven-to-make-you-happier.php>

A new survey of 5,000 people has found a strong link between self-acceptance and happiness, despite the fact that it's a habit not frequently practiced.

The finding comes from a survey carried out by the charity *Action for Happiness*, in collaboration with *Do Something Different*.

For their survey, they identified ten everyday habits which science has shown can make people happier.

Here are the 10 habits, with the average ratings of survey participants on a scale of 1-10, as to how often they performed each habit:

- 1 Giving: do things for others — 7.41
- 2 Relating: connect with people — 7.36
- 3 Exercising: take care of your body — 5.88
- 4 Appreciating: notice the world around — 6.57
- 5 Trying out: keep learning new things — 6.26
- 6 Direction: have goals to look forward to — 6.08
- 7 Resilience: find ways to bounce back — 6.33
- 8 Emotion: take a positive approach — 6.74
- 9 Acceptance: be comfortable with who you are — 5.56
- 10 Meaning: be part of something bigger — 6.38

(You'll notice that the first letters spell out the words GREAT DREAM.)

The survey showed that one of the largest associations between these happy habits and reported happiness was for self-acceptance.

This category, though, got the lowest rating for people actually performing the habit, with an average of only 5.56.

Top of the list of happy habits that people performed was 'giving'. In this category, one in six reported a 10 out of 10; just over one-third scored an 8 or 9; slightly fewer scored 6 or 7; and less than one in six (15%) rated themselves at 5 or less.

One of the psychologists involved, Professor Karen Pine said: "Practicing these habits really can boost our happiness. It's great to see so many people regularly doing things to help others — and when we make others happy we tend to feel good ourselves too. This survey shows that practicing self-acceptance is one thing that could make the biggest difference to many people's happiness."

Here are three ways to boost your self-acceptance, as suggested by the researchers:

1. Be as kind to yourself as you are to others. See your mistakes as opportunities to learn. Notice things you do well, however small.
2. Ask a trusted friend or colleague to tell you what your strengths are or what they value about you.
3. Spend some quiet time by yourself. Tune in to how you're feeling inside and try to be at peace with who you are."

blog by Christopher Germer, PhD, a leading researcher on self-compassion

Through the Eyes of Self-Compassion

Definitions of a highly subjective state of mind like compassion can sometimes become murky and abstract. That's why I prefer the simple Buddhist definition: "When love meets suffering and stays loving, that's compassion." Compassion is a deep feeling for a suffering individual with the wish and effort to alleviate it. And *self-compassion* is compassion directed toward oneself; it means treating ourselves with the same kindness and understanding with which we'd want to treat someone we truly love.

Mindfulness, as it's typically understood nowadays, focuses on closely observing moment-to-moment *experience*, whereas compassion focuses on an inner relationship to the *experiencer*—our often-beleaguered sense of self. When we're overwhelmed with intense and disturbing emotions, such as shame, just noticing what's happening is often not enough. We need to *embrace* ourselves. While mindfulness tells us, "*Hold* your suffering in spacious awareness," the wisdom of self-compassion says, "Be *kind* to yourself when you suffer." Self-kindness opens a new path to healing. Warmth creates space. **Mindfulness invites us to ask, "What am I *experiencing* right now?" Self-compassion invites us to ask, "What do I *need* right now?"**

http://www.psychonetnetworker.org/daily/posts/mindfulness/expanding-your-therapeutic-presence-with-self-compassion/?utm_source=Silverpop&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=091915_pn_i_rt_WIR_9am_throttled

RESOURCES:

Take a self-compassion test: <https://self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are/>

Guided Meditations & Info:

Chris Germer's Website and Guided Meditations: <http://www.mindfulselfcompassion.org/>

Kristen Neff's Website and Guided Meditations: <http://www.self-compassion.org/>

Self-compassion exercises: <http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/>

Center for Mindful Self-Compassion and Guided Meditations: <https://centerformsc.org/practice-msc/>

Center for Compassion Focused Therapy: <http://www.mindfulcompassion.com/what-we-do-1-1/>

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center Guided Meditations: www.marc.ucla.edu

Tara Brach's Dharma Talks: <http://www.dharmaseed.org>

Mindful Self-Compassion for Teens: www.mindfulselfcompassionforteens.com

Mindfulness Exercises and Resources for Children: <https://www.shambhala.com/sittingstilllikeafrog/>

Books: Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself, by Kristin Neff, PhD, 2011

The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion, by Christopher Germer

Mindful Compassion, Paul Gilbert, PhD, and Choden

List of additional books: <http://self-compassion.org/resources-2/>

Classes: www.CenterforMSC.org

Articles:

On the power of gratitude:

[http://www.businessinsider.com/a-neuroscience-researcher-reveals-4-rituals-that-will-make-you-a-happier-person-2015-9?](http://www.businessinsider.com/a-neuroscience-researcher-reveals-4-rituals-that-will-make-you-a-happier-person-2015-9?utm_content=bufferc7137&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

[utm_content=bufferc7137&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer](http://www.businessinsider.com/a-neuroscience-researcher-reveals-4-rituals-that-will-make-you-a-happier-person-2015-9?utm_content=bufferc7137&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

Article: <https://aeon.co/essays/learning-to-be-kind-to-yourself-has-remarkable-benefits>

Kristen Neff on the Need for Fierce Compassion: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_women_need_fierce_self_compassion