

What Is Compassion?

Pain and the struggle to side-step it—suffering—are a normal part of life. Compassion involves being aware and open to the pain and suffering of others and your own and committing to lightening the pain and lessening the suffering (Gilbert, 2010). The word “compassion” comes from the Latin word *compati*, which means “to suffer with.” And so, compassion emerges from a combination of being mindful and caring and recognizing that pain and suffering are universal. Developing compassion for yourself and others can enhance your well-being.

Compassion Toward Others

Here are some signs of having compassion for others:

- Feeling like you have things in common with other people even when they seem very different from you.
- Understanding what other people are going through and feeling their pain.
- Being aware of other people’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
- Being able to act on your thoughts and feelings and those of others in pain.
- Offering help to someone in pain.
- Feeling thankful when someone offers you support for your own struggles.

Compassion toward others can improve relationships, boost happiness, contribute to more meaningful living, and increase longevity (Gilbert, 2005).

Self-Compassion

In our fast-paced and demanding world, it can be easy to forget to show ourselves the same kindness and understanding we extend to others. In pursuing success, we might push ourselves too much, setting impossibly high standards and criticizing ourselves when we fall short or make mistakes. Having self-compassion can break this cycle of self-criticism and negativity. Let’s explore what self-compassion is, its importance, and how practicing it can lead to a more fulfilling and emotionally healthy life.

Self-compassion refers to treating ourselves with the same kindness, care, and understanding that we would offer to a friend going through a difficult time (Neff, 2015). It involves recognizing our pain and struggles and acknowledging they are part of the shared human experience. Three key elements of self-compassion are (Neff, 2015):

1. **Self-Kindness:** This involves being gentle and understanding toward ourselves when we fail or make mistakes. Instead of criticizing ourselves, self-compassion encourages us to offer support and encouragement, just as we would to a friend facing a similar challenge. For example, imagine you didn’t perform well in an important presentation at work. Instead of telling yourself, “I’m such a failure; I’ll never get it right,” practice self-kindness by saying, “It’s okay to make mistakes; everyone does. I’ll learn from this experience and do better next time.”

2. **Common Humanity:** Self-compassion recognizes that struggles and imperfections are universal. Instead of feeling isolated or thinking we are the only ones going through tough times, we remember that everyone faces difficulties and setbacks. For example, suppose you feel overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness. Remember that many people experience moments of isolation and that you are not alone in this feeling.
3. **Mindfulness:** Self-compassion also involves embracing our thoughts, feelings, and experiences with an open heart without avoiding or trying to suppress them. Staying present in the moment and observing our thoughts and feelings allows us to acknowledge them without getting overwhelmed. For example, suppose you're feeling anxious about an upcoming exam. Allow yourself to feel the anxiety. Observe it as a passing feeling, knowing it's normal to feel this way before an important event.

Self-compassion is not about self-indulgence or avoiding responsibility for our actions. Instead, it provides a healthy way to respond to our imperfections and challenges, fostering resilience and growth. Here's why self-compassion is essential (Gilbert, 2005, 2010; Neff, 2015):

1. **Enhanced Well-Being:** Studies have shown that individuals who practice self-compassion experience lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. They tend to have higher life satisfaction and better overall well-being.
2. **Improved Relationships:** We become more understanding and compassionate toward others when we are kinder to ourselves. This positive attitude can lead to healthier and more fulfilling relationships.
3. **Increased Motivation:** Contrary to the belief that self-criticism is a better motivator, research suggests that self-compassion promotes greater motivation and productivity. By acknowledging our imperfections and treating ourselves with kindness, we are more likely to take risks and learn from our experiences.

To sum up, embracing self-compassion is not an overnight transformation but a gradual and empowering journey. We can cultivate a more compassionate relationship with ourselves by incorporating self-kindness, recognizing our common humanity, and practicing mindfulness. As we extend this kindness inward, we can find it radiating outward, positively impacting our interactions with others and fostering a more compassionate world. Practicing self-compassion nurtures the seeds of empathy, resilience, and personal growth within us. Remember, it's okay to be imperfect. It's part of what makes us human. And just as we offer compassion to others during difficult times, we deserve the same compassion and care from ourselves.

References

- Gallo, F. J. (2016). *A practitioner's guide to using the acceptance and commitment therapy matrix model*. Frank J. Gallo.
- Gilbert, P. (Ed.) (2005). *Compassion: Conceptualisations, research, and use in psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gilbert, P. (2010). *Compassion focused therapy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Neff, K. (2015). *Self-compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. New York, NY: William Morrow.

Disclaimer

The content in this handout is strictly educational in nature. We are NOT providing psychological services or medical advice or establishing a relationship of any kind, including doctor-patient or student-teacher. Please see our [Company Policies](#) for more information.