

What is self-compassion?

To define self-compassion, we really need to start with what is compassion. The two are really one and the same. Compassion is an attitude that involves a certain set of feelings, thoughts, motives, desires, urges, and behaviours that can be directed towards any living thing (e.g., ourselves, another person, a group of people, a society, animals, the environment). Therefore, when we talk about self-compassion, we are specifying that this attitude is being directed internally towards ourselves. Self-compassion involves being aware of our own pain and suffering, and understanding that while feeling this pain is hard, it is a normal human experience. Directing feelings of kindness and care towards ourselves, and focusing our attention and energy on how we might alleviate our pain, are also crucial components of self-compassion.

Why is self-compassion important? Self-compassion can bring great benefits for our mental health and well-being. Particularly, self-compassion can activate our soothe system, which calms our threat system (the system responsible for detecting potential dangers in order to protect ourselves) and our drive system (the system that spurs us on to get things done and be active in life). This is important, as without our soothe system, our threat and drive systems become overactive and can lead to difficult emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression. The opposite of self-compassion is self-criticism. We can get stuck in a self-critical cycle, where any problem we face activates our threat system and anxious, angry or depressive responses then follow. If we then use self-criticism as our way of dealing with whatever we are going through, that just keeps the threat system active, and keeps us stuck in the problem and our emotional suffering. Those who are highly self-critical particularly can benefit from developing the ability to relate to themselves in a more compassionate way.

Why is it hard to be self-compassionate? Being self-compassionate is hard for most of us for various reasons: The threat system - Our brain is hardwired to shift into threat mode easily to protect ourselves. Seeing the negative is our default attention bias, so turning our attention to more self-compassionate endeavours might not be something that comes naturally to us. Early life experiences - We might not have been taught or shown when growing up how to be compassionate to ourselves, and it might have never occurred to us that treating ourselves kindly was an option! Negative beliefs about self-compassion - Because it is not something we are taught about or talk about a lot, the idea of self-compassion can carry some negative connotations. Some people may think being self-compassionate is too 'touchy feely', and will lead to laziness, self-indulgence or self-pity. However, self-compassion is none of these things, and everyone can benefit from a little more self-compassion. How can I develop more self-compassion? There are many ways of building self-compassion. By practising ways to stimulate the soothe system we can begin to cultivate an attitude of kindness, warmth, concern, understanding and strength within us, and then use this attitude to respond to our own struggles, rather than reverting to our usual self-critical habits.

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