

The Science of Self-Compassion

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What is Self-Compassion?

- The three components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b)
- Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
 - Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
 - Actively soothing and comforting, supporting and protecting oneself
 - Desire to alleviate suffering (any pain or emotional discomfort – large or small)
- Common humanity vs. Isolation
 - Seeing own experience as part of larger human experience not isolating or abnormal
 - Recognizing that life is imperfect (us too!)
- Mindfulness vs. Over-identification
 - Allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they are
 - Avoids extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings

Fierce and Tender Self-Compassion (Neff, 2021)

- Yin - Tender aspect of self-compassion
 - “Being with” our suffering: comforting, soothing, validating
- Yang - Fierce aspect of self-compassion
 - “Acting in the world”: protecting, providing, and motivating

Research on self-compassion

- Explosion of research into self-compassion over the past decade
- Most research conducted with the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a)
- Other research methods: mood induction or interventions

Self-compassion linked to wellbeing (Zessin, Dickhauser & Garbadee, 2015)

- Reductions in negative mind-states: Anxiety, depression, stress, perfectionism, shame, body dissatisfaction, disordered eating
- Increases in positive mind-states: Life satisfaction, happiness, self-confidence, body appreciation

Physiological underpinnings (Gilbert, 2000)

- Self-criticism
 - Threat defense system
 - Cortisol and adrenaline
- Self-compassion
 - Mammalian care-giving system
 - Oxytocin and opiates

How self-compassion works in the body (Kirschner et al., 2020)

- Decreases sympathetic response (e.g. cortisol)
- Increases parasympathetic nervous system response (e.g. heart rate variability)

Self-compassion and physical health (Phillips, & Hine, 2019)

- Enhanced immune response in response to social stress
- Better sleep quality
- Fewer physical symptoms (aches, colds, etc.)

Self-compassion vs. self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009)

- Self-compassion offers same mental health benefits without pitfalls
 - Fewer social comparisons
 - Less contingent self-worth
 - No association with narcissism

Common misgivings about self-compassion

- Means weakness
- Is selfish
- Will lead to self-indulgence
- Will undermine motivation

Self-compassion is linked to coping and resilience

- More effective coping with divorce (Sbarra et al., 2012)
- Less likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma (Hiraoka et al., 2015)
- Better coping with chronic health conditions (Sirois, 2015)

Self-compassion is linked to more other-focused concern

- More caring and supportive relationship behavior (Neff & Beretvas, 2013)
- Less controlling and verbally aggressive
- More forgiveness and perspective taking (Neff & Pommier, 2013)

Self-compassion is linked to healthier behaviors (Terry & Leary, 2011)

- More exercise, more doctor visits, safer sex, less alcohol use

Self-compassion is linked to greater motivation (Breines & Chen, 2012)

- Personal standards just as high, not as upset when don't meet them
- Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after failure
- More personal responsibility and motivation to repair past mistakes

Early influences on self-compassion

- Secure versus insecure attachment (Wei, Liao, Ku & Shaffer, 2011)
- Parental criticism and family conflict (Neff & McGehee, 2010)
- History of sexual, emotional, physical abuse (Vettesse et al., 2011)

Self-compassion in Therapy

- Transdiagnostic mechanism of effective therapy
- Compassion Focused Therapy (Paul Gilbert, 2010)
- Self-compassion in Psychotherapy certificate program (CMSC)

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC; Neff & Germer, 2013)

- Empirically supported 8-week program designed to teach self-compassion skills
- 150,000 people have taken program
- 2200 trained teachers worldwide
- Adaptations for online training, young adults, teens, educators, parents, couples

Self-compassion for Healthcare Communities (Neff et al., 2020)

- Six one hour sessions, usually taught at lunch
- No meditation or homework
 - Practice self-compassion on the job
- Increased self-compassion, compassion for others, mindfulness, compassion satisfaction
- Reduced depression, stress, burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization
- All gains maintained for at least 3 months

Compassion, Empathy and Caregiving (Klimecki & Singer, 2012)

- Compassion involves concern with the alleviation of suffering
- Empathy involves emotional resonance
 - Preverbal capacity of the human brain
 - Doesn't necessary involve concern for suffering
- Empathic resonance can lead to secondary traumatic stress and burnout in caregivers
- Compassion provides a buffer while emotionally resonating with others' pain
- Empathy fatigue not compassion fatigue
- Our compassionate mind state will impact the mind state of those we care for

Equanimity Phrases

Everyone is on their own life journey.
I am not the cause of this person's suffering,
nor is it entirely within my power to make it go away,
even though I wish I could.
Moments like these can be difficult to bear,
yet I may still try to help if I can.

References

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RESOURCES

Websites

Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (For information on MSC 8-week courses and intensives and MSC teacher training): www.CenterForMSC.org

Self-Compassion website (Self-compassion survey, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises): www.Self-Compassion.org

Books:

Germer, C. K. & Neff, K. D. (2019). *Teaching the Mindful Self-Compassion program: A guide for professionals*. New York: Guilford Press.

Neff, K. D. & Germer, C. K. (2018). *The Mindful Self-Compassion workbook: A proven way to accept yourself, find inner strength, and thrive*. New York: Guilford Press.

Neff, K. D. (June 2021). *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power, and Thrive*. New York: Harper Wave.

Neff, K. D. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. New York: William Morrow.

Online Training:

Live Online MSC (10 week live online course) and Self-Compassion for Healthcare Communities (six week online course): www.CenterforMSC.org

Audio Training:

Self-Compassion Step by Step (2013). Kristin Neff: www.soundstrue.com

The Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion. 3 hr audio training by Neff:
www.soundstrue.com