The Power of Self-Compassion - Kristen Neff, PHD

Mental Health Research proves more self-empathy and compassion equals less stress. Studies are also finding that compassion is a powerful predictor of enhanced mental health overtime. (Self-compassion and adaptive psychological functioning: Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude 2006)

Other research studies have proven that people who practice self compassion experience measurable positive changes in their mental health, including less depression, less anxiety, less perfectionism, more social connectedness, and a more life affirming experience that leads to lower levels of stress and blood pressure, in a five week mindfulness course. (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Health Care Professionals: Shapiro, Aston, Bishop, Cordova 2005)

We humans tend be self-critical and self-judgmental. We often experience unrealistic expectations from others and ourselves. This can lead to anguish, distress and low motivation.

Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind, accepting and understanding when confronted with personal failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect? So rather than ignoring your pain or flagellating yourself with self-criticism, self-compassion means recognizing that negative emotions, as much as they suck, are a normal part of being human. That means letting yourself feel them.

“We’ve been taught that we need to be harsh with ourselves in order to get ourselves going, whereas the truth is just the opposite,” she says. When you attack yourself, you actually make it harder to succeed. That’s because self-criticism releases the stress hormone cortisol, sending you into a state of stress that’s similar to feeling physically threatened. A common reaction to constant self-imposed stress is depression, which kills your motivation.

“That’s where self-compassion comes in. When you feel reassured that failure isn’t the end of the world and that you’re not alone in failing, you’re actually in a position to try harder. “People who are more self-compassionate are actually more motivated and more likely to pick themselves up when they do fail.” (Kristen Neff, PHD. Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind)

You may try to change in ways that allow you to be more healthy and happy, but this is done because you care about yourself, not because you are worthless or unacceptable as you are.

Perhaps most importantly, having compassion for yourself means that you honor and accept your humanness. Things will not always go the way you want. You will encounter frustrations, losses will occur, you will make mistakes, bump up against your limitations, fall short of your ideals. This is the human condition, a reality shared by all of us. The more you open your heart to this reality instead of constantly fighting against it, the more you will be able to make the changes you desire.

Self-compassion doesn’t mean wallowing in self-pity, however. It’s meant to free up the energy that was spent on judging yourself- so that you can proceed and move positively forward in a your life, knowing you will make mistakes -and that’s perfectly human and perfectly okay!

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The next time a judgmental thought pops into your head, understand that your inner critic is just trying to help you. Unfortunately, it’s not helpful.

**Self-compassion involves having the right amount of distance from one’s emotions so that they are fully experienced while being approached with mindful objectivity.**

In order to be a mindful witness to your critical thoughts rather than identifying yourself by them, it can be helpful to give it a name, a label or by name it as a “tendency.”

This creates a little distance so that you can watch and observe your thoughts, emotions, and reactions, but not fully identify yourself with them.

Brain science and brain scans show that we label or name our thoughts and emotions- it activates the neuro-pathways of the Left Frontal Cortex (the reasoning, compassionate, objective intelligence part of our brain) instead of the Limbic part of our brain (the site of our emotional responses). Therefore; this creates less emotional reactivity or the activation of the stress response in our bodies and brain.

It’s also helpful to share your name or the name of your tendency with others, so they also can refer to it as your tendency rather than “that’s who you are”. And if they’re open to it- have them do the same thing. Just “naming it” brings more awareness to it, takes some of the charge off- making it feel lighter, even playful. Plus, it makes it easier and faster to shift into a more positive, resourceful state.

Examples:

**Oh that’s just the voice of my...**

Mean girl / Mean guy
Critical parent
Inner critic
Ego mind
Small self
Debbie Downer, Chicken Little, Nervous Nellie, etc.

**Here’s just my ________ tendency:**

Fearful self
Catastrophic-“Sky is Falling”
Perfectionist
Survival mode
Righteous
Criticizing
Control Freak

**Give a Name and Voice to your Powerful, Wise, Loving, Knowing, Compassionate Self such as:**

My WISEwoman, WISEman Self
My Loving Heart
My Higher Self

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Create a self-soothing gesture. Humans have actually evolved to respond to a gentle, warm touch with a lowering of cortisol and a release of soothing oxytocin. This happens even when the touch is our own. Use some sort of physical gesture to express care, compassion, and soothing. It could be anything from placing your hand over your heart or your forehead, to stroking, massaging your arm or hand.

Once you’ve invented your gesture, you can break it out in the middle of a stressful situation. *When you calm your body down first, it’s actually easier for your mind to follow suit.* (Derived from the research on Self-Compassion, Kristin D. Neff)

Fill in the blank with your Self “Judge-Mental” statement and then replace or reframe it with a Self-Compassionate statement.

*If it’s hard for you to come up with a self-compassion statement, then imagine what a compassionate, wise and loving person or Being would say to you. Or imagine what you would say to your best friend or loved one if they were being hard on themselves.*

- I “should have” OR I “shouldn’t have”

*Take a Deep Breath and replace with a Self-Compassionate statement:*

______________________________________________________________

- By NOW I should have (expectation / comparison)

*Take a Deep Breath and replace with a Self-Compassionate statement*

______________________________________________________________

- I’m not ________________ enough

*Take a Deep Breath and replace with a Self-compassionate statement:*

______________________________________________________________

- Any self -attacking statement (I always screw up, I’m such a failure, I’m bad)

*Take a Deep Breath and Replace with a self-compassionate statement.*

______________________________________________________________
Sample Compassionate Statements:

• Even though________ I love and accept myself.

• I did the best I could at the time.

• I’m learning new ways to take better care of myself and to manage my life / challenges.

• I accept this is totally natural and okay to make mistakes- its just part of being human.

• There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m not (a loser, failure, wrong or bad person I just (made a poor decision, acted out, etc.) due to (my conditioning, fear, insecurity, lack of skills, stress, not feeling well, exhaustion, etc.)

• I can’t compare myself to anyone else, because I have my own unique, (divine expression, purpose, challenges, soul’s journey, priorities, values).