

# How to practice self-compassion - Vox

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“Oh, no!” I thought when I took an online test to measure my level of self-compassion and saw my score. “I’m below average!”

Immediately I felt the urge to berate myself for the inadequacy — proving, of course, the test’s point.

The test’s creator, psychologist Kristin Neff, pioneered the scientific study of self-compassion two decades ago. The field has exploded since then, with new research on the topic coming out all the time. It’s not just a hot topic among researchers; it’s also popular with the public.

This year marks 10 years since Neff, together with her colleague Chris Germer, created a course to teach people self-compassion. Well over 100,000 people have gone through the eight-week course, and clinical trials have found very positive effects on mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, as well as on physical health. Notably, those effects persist even a year after the course.

Neff began by developing a model of what self-compassion is. She identified three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Self-kindness means you’re warm toward yourself when you suffer or mess up, rather than judging yourself harshly (as I did above). Common humanity means you remind yourself that everyone suffers or messes up sometimes, rather than succumbing to the feeling that you’re the only one going through such hard things. Mindfulness, here, means you’re neither under- nor overidentified with your painful thoughts — you acknowledge them as painful, but you also recognize that they’re just thoughts, not your whole being.

If you’re anything like me, you’re already feeling skeptical about all this. Maybe you’re thinking that you need self-criticism to motivate yourself to improve. Maybe you’re worried that self-compassion would breed self-indulgence, leading you to let yourself off the hook too easily.



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Well, it turns out the research dispels these misconceptions. Let’s dig into why self-compassion is not only an effective intervention for alleviating mental distress — something we desperately need — but also an effective way to become a better person, and how it’s

something you yourself can achieve.

## **Common objections to self-compassion — and how the research dispels them**

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The most common objection — one I had myself — is the concern that self-compassion might rob us of the motivation to improve. If I don't self-criticize when I make mistakes, will I still feel driven to learn from them?

In 2012, psychologists at the University of California Berkeley conducted a great bit of experimental research to see whether self-compassion and motivation were really at odds.

The guinea pigs were Berkeley students, who were instructed to take an extremely challenging academic exam — so challenging, in fact, that everyone did badly. But the students had been divided into three groups, and each group received a different message after the test.

One group was given a message of self-compassion: "If you had difficulty with the test you just took, you're not alone. It's common for students to have difficulty with tests like this." Another group was given a self-esteem boost: "You must be intelligent if you got into Berkeley!" (Note that self-esteem is not the same as self-compassion, since it focuses on validating strengths rather than accepting that we all have weaknesses.) The last group was not told anything; the researchers' assumption was that the students, being students at a highly competitive university, would judge themselves harshly for failing a test.

Then the researchers gave all the students a chance to study for as long as they wanted for a new test. The self-compassion group studied the longest, displaying the greatest motivation to improve after an initial failure (and also scoring slightly higher!).

This motivation for improvement extends to the interpersonal realm, too. The same researchers found that more self-compassionate people are more likely to want to apologize and make amends to others when they mess up. They're more able to acknowledge when they've made a mistake because mistakes don't feel so psychologically damning. That allows them to take more, not less, responsibility for their actions.

"What self-compassion does is actually give you that sense of safety to be able to say, 'Okay, I blew it. I feel so bad. Well, it's human. People make mistakes. How can I repair this?'" Neff told me. By contrast, "If you feel shame, it shuts down your ability to learn from your mistakes."

A quick refresher here: Shame is "I am bad." Guilt is "I did something bad." Now, what's really interesting is that while self-compassionate people are less likely to feel shame, they're more likely to feel guilt.

In 2016, researchers showed this experimentally by asking students to make a choice: Either do an annoying task yourself or palm it off on someone else. Those who chose to palm it off were then divided into two groups: One did a written self-compassion practice, while a control group just wrote about a random hobby.

When the students were then asked to rate how acceptable it was to palm off the annoying task, those in the control group saw their selfish act as more acceptable, while those in the self-compassion group saw it as less acceptable.

“Our findings demonstrate that higher self-compassionate people endorse harsher moral judgment of themselves and accept their own moral violations less,” the authors wrote.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/YFhcNPjIMjc>

## **How to start practicing self-compassion: A crash course**

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The great thing about self-compassion is that it's a skill anyone can learn. Although it might be harder for some people, like those who've experienced the kind of trauma that breeds a harsh inner critic, anyone can practice self-compassion and build it up over time.

Laura Silberstein-Tirch, director of the Center for Compassion Focused Therapy and the author of a book on the topic, explained how the process works using the example of a young woman she knows. The woman is a new mom who recently started putting her kid in day care. The kid's distress upon being dropped off led the mom to feel intense shame,

thinking, “I’m a bad mother!” She started ruminating about how she should’ve done things differently in life, like pursuing a more lucrative career, so she could afford to put her kid in a better day care or keep the kid home.

How can this new mom begin to practice self-compassion?

Step one is for her to become mindful of what she’s feeling in the present moment — simply to be aware that she’s in pain. She might say something like, “This is hard. It hurts.” Or, “Wow, there’s a lot of suffering here.”

Step two is to understand that this kind of suffering is part of the human condition. It’s part of our common humanity. She might say something like, “It’s not just me. It’s hard for a lot of moms to put their kid in day care.”

Step three is to offer self-kindness. A good way to start is by shifting basic physiology. As mammals, we’re soothed by physical touch. So the new mom might put her hands over her heart, signaling to her body that it can ease out of a threat state.

She can then begin to ask herself: “What would I say or do for a friend who was in the same situation? I wouldn’t berate her the way I’m berating myself. I’d probably tell her she’s trying really hard to be the best mom she can, and the fact that she’s so distressed shows how deeply she cares about her kid. Maybe after day care drop-off I’d take her out to a nice coffeeshop, where she can have a warm drink and take a few minutes to soothe herself before continuing with her day.” Then the mom can try saying and doing that for herself.

“We call that the compassionate U-turn,” psychologist Chris Germer, Neff’s colleague, told me. If people have trouble offering themselves the full compassion they’d offer to a friend, Germer says he asks them, “Would you be willing to consider treating yourself just a little bit as you might treat a friend?”

Silberstein-Tirch told me about another form of troubleshooting she does with clients. When they’re resistant to letting go of self-criticism, she asks them, “What function is that serving for you? If I could wave a magic wand and make it so that you could never beat yourself up about this again, what would be your greatest fear about that?”

Sometimes, people realize their fear is that they might get lazy or let themselves off the hook too easily, in which case it helps to be reminded of the research above. If they keep clinging to self-criticism as a strategy for dealing with these fears, Silberstein-Tirch might ask them, “How’s that working for you?”

People typically acknowledge their current strategy isn’t helping them overall. From there, they might become more willing to try something new.

If you're still feeling skeptical — whether because you doubt self-compassion will make you a better person or because you doubt it's something you can tap into — that's okay. Rather than trying to force yourself to accept it intellectually, you can adopt the attitude of a scientist running an experiment.

“Try some self-compassion in a moment of distress and just see what happens,” Germer says. He's willing to bet that if you try it, even in small ways, the results will start to convince you it's a better approach than beating yourself up.

If you're feeling motivated to learn more, you can pick up a copy of the popular and inexpensive workbook Neff and Germer co-wrote. You can also sign up for the full eight-week self-compassion course, which is run by their nonprofit, the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion.

“That course is the mothership, but we need to have different on-ramps,” Germer says. “The future of self-compassion training is adaptations.”

To that end, researchers have been busy figuring out how to tailor the course to specific populations like teenagers, health care workers, educators, and LGBTQ people; it's now taught on every continent except Antarctica. If the first 10 years of the course were about proving its benefits, the next 10 years will be about expanding its reach.

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