

# ***Self-Compassion: A Healthy Way of Relating to Yourself***

*(Adapted from Neff, 2012)*

## **Exercise 1** **How self-compassionate are you?**

*How do you typically react to yourself?*

- What types of things do you typically judge and criticize yourself for (e.g., appearance, career, relationships, parenting, the past)?
- What type of language do you use with yourself when you notice some flaw or make a mistake (e.g., do you insult yourself, or do you take a more kind and understanding tone)?
- When you are being highly self-critical, how does this make you feel?
- When you notice something about yourself you don't like, do you tend to feel cut off from others, or do you feel connected with others who are also imperfect?
- What are the consequences of being so hard on yourself? Does it make you more motivated and happy, or discouraged and depressed?
- How do you think you would feel if you could truly love and accept yourself exactly as you are? Does this possibility scare you, give you hope, or both?

*How do you typically react to life difficulties?*

- How do you treat yourself when you run into challenges in your life? Do you tend to ignore the fact that you're suffering and focus exclusively on fixing the problem, or do you stop to give yourself care and comfort?
- Do you tend to get carried away by the drama of the situation, so that you make a bigger deal out of it than you need to, or do you tend to keep things in balanced perspective?
- Do you tend to feel cut off from others when things go wrong, with the irrational feeling that everyone else is having a better time of it than you, or do you get in touch with the fact that all humans experience hardship in their lives?

*If you feel that you lack sufficient self-compassion, check in with yourself – are you criticizing yourself for this too? If so, stop right there. Try to feel compassion for how difficult it is to be an imperfect human being in this extremely competitive society. Most of us live in cultures that do not emphasize self-compassion; quite the opposite. We're told that we're being lazy and self-indulgent if we don't harshly criticize ourselves. We're told that no matter how hard we try, our best just isn't good enough. It's time for something different. We can benefit by learning to be more self-compassionate, and now is a great time to start.*

## Exercise 2

### Exploring self-compassion through writing

#### *Part One:*

Everybody has something about themselves that they don't like; something that causes them to feel shame, to feel insecure, or not *good enough*. It is the human condition to be imperfect, and feelings of failure and inadequacy are part of the experience of living a human life. Try writing about an issue you have that tends to make you feel inadequate or bad about yourself (e.g., abilities, physical appearance, work or relationship issues) How does this aspect of yourself make you feel inside – scared, sad, depressed, insecure, angry? What emotions come up for you when you think about this aspect of yourself? This is just between you and the paper, so please try to be as emotionally honest as possible and to avoid repressing any feelings, while at the same time not being melodramatic. Try to just feel your emotions exactly as they are – no more, no less – and then write about them.

#### *Part Two:*

Now think about an imaginary friend who is unconditionally loving, accepting, kind and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see all your strengths and all your weaknesses, including the aspect of yourself you have just been writing about. Reflect upon what this friend feels towards you, and how you are loved and accepted exactly as you are, with all your very human imperfections. This friend recognizes the limits of human nature, and is kind and forgiving towards you. In his/her great wisdom this friend understands your life history and the millions of things that have happened in your life to create you as you are in this moment. Your particular inadequacy is connected to so many things you didn't necessarily choose: your genes, your family history, life circumstances – things that were outside of your control.

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend – focusing on the perceived inadequacy you tend to judge yourself for. What would this friend say to you about your *flaw* from the perspective of unlimited compassion? How would this friend convey the deep compassion he/she feels for you, especially for the pain you feel when you judge yourself so harshly? What would this friend write in order to remind you that you are only human, that all people have both strengths and weaknesses? If you think this friend would suggest possible changes you should make, how would these suggestions embody feelings of unconditional understanding and compassion? As you write to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, try to infuse your letter with a strong sense of his/her acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness.

After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you like a cool breeze on a hot day. Love, connection and acceptance are your birthright. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

### Exercise 3 The criticizer, the criticized, and the compassionate observer

This exercise is modeled on the two-chair dialogue studied by Gestalt therapist Leslie Greenberg. In this exercise, clients sit in different chairs to help get in touch with different, often conflicting parts of their selves, experiencing how each aspect feels in the present moment.

To begin, put out three chairs, preferably in a triangular arrangement. Next, think about an issue that often troubles you, and that often elicits harsh self-criticism. Designate one chair as the voice of your *inner self-critic*, one chair as the voice of the part of you that feels *judged and criticized*, and one chair as the voice of a *wise, compassionate observer*. You are going to be role-playing all three parts of yourself – you, you, and you. It may feel a bit silly at first, but you'll be surprised at what comes out once you really start letting feelings flow freely.

- (1) Think about your *issue*, and then sit in the chair of the self-critic. As you take your seat, express out loud what the self-critical part of you is thinking and feeling. For example, "I hate that fact that you're such a whimp and aren't self-assertive." Notice the words and tone of voice the self-critical part of you uses, and also how it is feeling. Worried, angry, self-righteous, exasperated? Note what your body posture is like. Strong, rigid, upright? What emotions are coming up for you right now?
- (2) Take the chair of the criticized aspect of yourself. Try to get in touch with how you feel being criticized in this manner. Then verbalize how you feel, responding directly to your inner critic. For example, "I feel so hurt by you" or "I feel so unsupported." Just speak whatever comes into your mind. Again, notice the tone of your voice? Is it sad, discouraged, childlike, scared, helpless? What is your body posture like? Are you slumped, downward facing, frowning?
- (3) Conduct a dialogue between these two parts of yourself for a while, switching back and forth between the chair of the criticizer and the criticized. Really try to experience each aspect of yourself so each knows how the other feels. Allow each to fully express its views and be heard.
- (4) Now occupy the chair of the compassionate observer. Call upon your deepest wisdom, the wells of your caring concern, and address both the critic and the criticized. What does your compassionate self say to the critic, what insight does it have? For example, "You sound very much like your mother" or, "I see that you're really scared, and you're trying to help me so I don't mess up." What does your compassionate self say to the criticized part of yourself? For example, "It must be incredibly difficult to hear such harsh judgment day after day. I see that you're really hurting" or "All you want is to be accepted for who you are." Try to relax, letting your heart soften and open. What words of compassion spring forth? What is the tone of your voice? Tender, gentle, warm? What is your body posture like – balanced, centered, relaxed?
- (5) After the dialogue finishes (i.e., stop whenever it feels right), reflect upon what just happened. Do you have any new insights into how you treat yourself, where your patterns come from, new ways of thinking about the situation that are more productive and supportive? As you think about what you have learned, set your intention to relate to yourself in a kinder, healthier way in the future. A truce *can* be called in your inner war. Peace *is* possible. Your old habits of self-criticism don't need to rule you forever. What you need to do is listen to the voice that's already there, even if a bit hidden – your wise, compassionate self.

## Exercise 4

### Changing your critical self-talk

This exercise should be done over several weeks, and will eventually form the blueprint for changing how you relate to yourself long-term. Some people find it useful to work on their inner critic by writing in a journal. Others are more comfortable doing it via internal dialogues. If you are someone who likes to write things down and revisit them later, journaling can be an excellent tool for transformation. If you are someone (like me) who never manages to be consistent with a journal, then do whatever works for you. You can speak aloud to yourself, or think silently.

(1) The first step towards changing the way to treat yourself is to notice when you are being self-critical. It may be that, like many of us, your self-critical voice is so common for you that you don't even notice when it is present. Whenever you're feeling bad about something, think about what you've just said to yourself. Try to be as accurate as possible, noting your inner speech verbatim. What words do you actually use when you're self-critical? Are there key phrases that come up over and over again? What is the tone of your voice – harsh, cold, angry? Does the voice remind you of any one in your past who was critical of you? You want to be able to get to know the inner self-critic very well, and to become aware of when your inner judge is active. For instance, if you've just eaten a packet of cookies, does your inner voice say something like “you're so disgusting,” “you make me sick,” and so on? Really try to get a clear sense of how you talk to yourself.

(2) Make an active effort to soften the self-critical voice, but do so with compassion rather than self-judgment (i.e., don't say “you're such a loser” to your inner critic!). Say something like “I know you're trying to keep me safe, and to point out ways that I need to improve, but your harsh criticism and judgment is not helping at all. Please stop being so critical, you are causing me unnecessary pain.”

(3) Reframe the observations made by your inner critic in a friendly, positive way. If you're having trouble thinking of what words to use, you might want to imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you in this situation. It might help to use a term of endearment that strengthens expressed feelings of warmth and care (but only if it feels natural rather than schmaltzy.) For instance, you can say something like “Darling, I know you ate that packet of cookies because you're feeling really sad right now and you thought it would cheer you up. But you feel even worse and are not feeling good in your body. I want you to be happy, so why don't you take a long walk so you feel better?” While engaging in this supportive self-talk, you might want to try gently stroking your arm, or holding your face tenderly in your hands (as long as no one is looking!). Physical gestures of warmth can tap into the care-giving system even if you're having trouble calling up emotions of kindness at first, releasing *Oxytocin* (a natural *feel good* hormone) that will help change your bio-chemistry. The important thing is that you start *acting* kindly, and feelings of true warmth and caring will eventually follow.

## **Exercise 5**

### **Self-compassion journal**

Try keeping a daily self-compassion journal for one week (or longer if you like.) Journaling is an effective way to express emotions, and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being. At some point during the evening when you have a few quiet moments, review the day's events. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. (For instance, perhaps you got angry at a waitress at lunch because she took forever to bring the bill. You made a rude comment and stormed off. Afterwards, you felt ashamed and embarrassed.) For each event, use mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to process the event in a self-compassionate way.

*Mindfulness:* This will mainly involve bring awareness to the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting and non-judgmental of your experience, not belittling it nor making it overly dramatic. (For example, "I was frustrated because she was being so slow. I got angry, over-reacted, and felt foolish afterwards.")

*Common Humanity:* Write down the ways in which your experience was connected to the larger human experience. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect, and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. ("Everyone over-reacts sometimes, it's only human.") You might also want to think about the various causes and conditions underlying the painful event. ("My frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was late for my doctor's appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different my reaction probably would have been different.")

*Self-Kindness:* Write yourself some kind, understanding, words of comfort. Let yourself know that you care about yourself, adopting a gentle, reassuring tone. ("It's okay. You messed up but it wasn't the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it. Maybe you can try being extra patient and generous to any wait-staff this week.")

Practising the three components of self-compassion with this writing exercise will help organize your thoughts and emotions, while helping to encode them in your memory. If you keep a journal regularly, your self-compassion practice will become even stronger and translate more easily into daily life.

## **Exercise 6**

### **Identifying what we really want**

(1) Think about the ways that you use self-criticism as a motivator. Is there any personal trait that you criticize yourself for having (e.g., being overweight, too lazy, always impulsive) because you think being hard on yourself will help you change? If so, first try to get in touch with the emotional pain that your self-criticism causes, giving yourself compassion for the experience of feeling so judged.

(2) Next, see if you can think of a kinder, more caring way to motivate yourself to make a change if needed. What language would a wise and nurturing therapist, friend, parent, teacher, or mentor use to gently point out how your behavior is unproductive, while simultaneously encouraging you to do something different. What is the most supportive message you can think of that's in line with your underlying wish to be healthy and happy?

(3) Every time you catch yourself being judgmental about your unwanted trait in the future, first notice the pain of your self-judgment and give yourself compassion. Then try to reframe your inner dialogue so that it is more encouraging and supportive. Remember that if you really want to motivate yourself, love is more powerful than fear.

## **Exercise 7**

### **Taking care of the caregiver**

If you work in a care-giving profession (and that also certainly includes anyone who is in a family!), you'll need to recharge your batteries so you have enough energy available to give to others. Give yourself permission to meet your own needs, recognizing that this will not only enhance your quality of life, it will also enhance your ability to be there for those who rely on you.

Here are just a few ideas (Your imagination will give you more ideas):

- Get a massage, a pedicure, or other form of pampering.
- Take a nap in the middle of the day.
- Go to a comedy club.
- Rent a tear-jerker DVD and let it all out.
- Listen to relaxing music while lying on the couch with your eyes closed.
- Practice meditation or do yoga for a half-hour.
- Hang out with a friend for an evening or afternoon.
- Do whatever you find pleasurable or fun.
- Go dancing. If you don't want to go to a club or take formal dance lessons, there are many informal dance groups where you can express yourself through dance without having to worry about looking cool. (Do an internet search on places in your area.)
- Do a self-compassionate body scan.
- And if you have that oh-so-compassionate glass of red wine, accompany it with a large glass of water to help your body cope with its dehydrating effects. Or, if you find you are drinking too much and it's starting to harm rather than to enhance your well-being, have some dark red juice (e.g., cranberry, pomegranate, cherry, pink grapefruit, grape) mixed with sparkling water in a wine glass. Often just the sight of dark red liquid in a wine glass will trigger a relaxation response.

*From:*

**Dr John Barletta**  
Clinical Psychologist  
Level 1, Suite 2  
3 Days Rd, Grange 4051  
Tel: 3356 4400  
john@johnbarletta.com  
www.johnbarletta.com