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Self-Compassion: the Most Underutilized Secret To Happiness

By Sophia Godkin
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As children, most of us are taught in direct or indirect ways that self-judgment and self-criticism increase our inner motivation to become better persons. *But unfortunately, we got it all wrong.*

Self-judgment and self-criticism, whenever they happen, they actually leave us feeling helpless, unmotivated, and ill-prepared to handle the challenges of the world around us. Because they work through the fear of failure, a sense of perfectionism, and a feeling that you're not good enough. Let us suggest another approach: Self-compassion.

Self-compassion

Self-compassion is our ability to feel and understand our emotional experiences without judgment and criticism. According to Kristin Neff, associate professor of educational psychology in the University of Texas, who created the Self-Compassion Scale:

Self-compassion... involves being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness.

Self-compassion also involves offering nonjudgmental understanding to one's pain, inadequacies and failures, so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience.

As it turns out, self-compassion is one of most important predictors of satisfaction

in life. Here are three big life changes you can expect when you turn self-compassion into a daily habit:

Motivations — Your motivations will soar. The common belief that self-compassion leads to self-indulgence, laziness, and lack of motivation is a myth. In actuality, being self-compassionate strengthens motivation and helps you to see yourself as more competent.

Emotions — Your emotional wellbeing will get a boost. Self-compassionate people, the scientific literature reveals, have an overall greater sense of well-being. Compared to those who lack self-compassion, self-compassionate people have greater emotional resilience and stability and less perceived stress and negative emotion.

Being self-compassionate also helps you to have a healthy, adaptive response to life's challenges. As you become more self-compassionate, you are more likely to use emotion- than avoidance- focused coping, tending to (rather than denying) your emotional experience.

And when it comes to mental health, the more self-compassionate you are, the less likely you are to experience depressive symptoms, anxiety and stress.

Relationships — Your relationships will improve dramatically. According to science, if you want to enhance your relationships, practice self-compassion. Those positive relationship behaviors (like being authentic, caring, supportive, and willing to compromise) that scientists say lead to healthy conflict resolution – you're far more likely to have them if you are self-compassionate.

It turns out that learning to “swipe right” on yourself before you swipe right on others immensely benefits your relationships. And it could very well be the practice that keeps you happily married rather than divorced.

5 Steps to Grow Self-Compassion

So, self-compassion strengthens motivation, builds emotional well-being, and helps relationships. You can learn to be better at it. Here are five simple steps you can take to become more self-compassionate and self-loving right now.

Step 1: Tend To The Way You Are Feeling

Stop everything you are doing, prioritize yourself, and let yourself feel.

Oftentimes, we experience events and associated feelings that beg for self-compassion, yet we gloss over them and continue on with life just as is. These feelings, however, are your heart and soul speaking to you, letting you know something doesn't feel good.

Feelings are messengers and just like the mail that appears on your doorstep or the instant message that pops up on your phone, need to be opened and read.

Let yourself know that it is okay to feel, that feelings need not be suppressed, and ask yourself “How am I really feeling right now?” As you do, let the answer arise in whatever way it does, whether a verbal expression (as, a grunt or vocalization of “I’m sad”), a physical action (as, stomping your feet on the ground in frustration), a physical sensation (as, a tear dripping down your cheek), or simply a knowing.

Step 2: Separate Yourself From The Critical Voice In Your Head

Catch yourself talking about yourself in unkind words.

Notice the unkind words that you automatically and unconsciously use to refer to yourself. And acknowledge that this habit was formed through your interactions with other people through childhood and adolescence.

Understanding that every negative remark your mind has made about you in the past was simply conditioned (that is, internalized by you as a child from the often critical voices of the adults around you) and therefore unmerited can give you the tools to turn self-criticism into self-appreciation.

Begin by separating the critical voice from who you really are. Scientific studies suggest that it may help even to refer to yourself using third (“you”, “she”, “he”, or your first name) rather than first person pronouns (“I”, “me”, or “my”). Recognize that the unkind words you silently or quietly speak to yourself are a function of what you learned while growing up; they are not you. You deserve to be spoken to with care, kindness, and support.

Step 3: Tune Into Your Heart

As long as you are operating from the thinking mind, the feelings and intuition that live in your heart and soul will be clouded. Notice and appreciate the ingrained desire you have to approach situations with logic and reason and choose, for just a moment, to leave rationality aside. You can always come back to it later.

Know that your intellect is bound by what you do and do not know, by what you have and have not yet experienced, and all the fears that come along with it. Your heart has no boundaries; it only knows love.

So just for now, put your hand on your heart and tune into the wisdom that lives there. Once the wisdom of your heart reveals itself to you, act on it to truly and fully be good to yourself.

Step 4: Stop Judging Yourself Negatively

For once, you will do fine to stop judging yourself in harsh tones and negative hues.

Do you have imperfections? Sure. Do we all have imperfections? Sure. Are you and everyone else on the planet all nevertheless worthy, wonderful, and deserving of love? Absolutely.

The next time you catch your mind saying “I’m not good enough”, “I’m not important”, “I’m a failure”, “I’m unlovable”, or whatever the equivalent happens to be for you in that moment, question it, challenge it, and change it.

Ask yourself “Is this really true?” and “Is there evidence in my life that contradicts this?” to get your mind out of the habit of accepting each thought as absolute truth. It is in recognizing your imperfection as perfection that self-compassion arises.

Step 5: Befriend Yourself

Be your own friend, stop being hard on yourself. Instead, build a voice of self-kindness.

When your friend is hurting and something in life leads them to feel sad, angry, or frustrated, what do you do? What do you say? What do you make sure not to do or not to say?

Learn to treat yourself as you would a friend. It might feel silly, but thinking and relating to yourself as your own friend reliably builds self-compassion. If this feels difficult at first or you just don’t know where to begin, ask yourself this: “If I really loved myself, what would I do for myself in this very moment?” Then, and most importantly, give yourself what you need.

Call a friend and talk for hours, take a walk in the park, lay your head on the pillow and cry, eat your favorite sweet treat. Whatever it is, do it knowing that it isn’t selfish and it isn’t self-indulgent. It is, however, extremely beneficial and even necessary if you are to live a life of joy.

Final words

The fact of the matter is: You can never be too good to yourself. The most important relationship in this life is the one you have with yourself. And it’s time we all recognized that.

There is no sense in punishing your future for the mistakes of your past. Forgive yourself, grow from it, and then let it go. — Melanie Koulouris