

## Spirituality and Neuroscience of Self-Compassion

### Three Components of Self-Compassion

1. Self-Kindness - Send yourself kindness and understanding, instead of judgment.
2. Common Humanity - Suffering and failing are part of human experience - we're human!!! Perfectionism & being alone with difficulty is destructive.
3. Mindfulness - Being mindful versus over-identifying with bad feelings. Helps us accept difficult situations, decreases our fears and negative emotions. Become better at letting go of troublesome thoughts.

Brother Lawrence: "Little glances to God all throughout the day."

\*\*\*Research on Mindfulness shows that it can affect our DNA: Significant improvements in the psychological/social wellbeing, greater sense of connection, and more mindful awareness. (After just 12 weeks!)

~2016 research showed mindfulness increased activity in areas of the brain related to calm and focus.

~Significantly lower expression of inflammatory genes, and greater expression of genes boosting immunity.

~ Just practicing mindful breathing will help us tamp down our stress reaction.

Feb 2016 Time Magazine article: 'Stress effects health at the cellular level:

Chronic stress harms DNA by shortening telomeres, the protective caps on the end of chromosomes." "Some forms of meditation practice, (including mindfulness) may even slow the biological signs of aging by stabilizing telomeres."

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### Five Paths to Self-Compassion (based on Christopher Germer's research)

#### 1. Softening into the body

~Taking care of our physical selves can clear the mind

~Pause for a moment, allow our breath to soften the body.

~Massage, acupuncture, Stretching (Yoga, Tai Chi), simple Chair Yoga if you sit most of the day.

~Don't rush around morning, noon, and night, every day

#### 2. Allowing your thoughts

~Create mental space where upsetting thoughts can come in and out easily

~ Avoid the extremes of suppressing thoughts or letting them run our lives.

~Use mantra ("This too will pass." "Que sera sera." "Let Go. Let God.")

~Mindfulness: Cultivate present-moment awareness.

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### 3. Befriending your feelings

- ~ Stop fighting and resisting our feelings
- ~ Emotions are natural responses. Staying with an emotion for a few minutes is usually enough.
- ~ Give yourself sympathy and forgiveness
- ~ Simply sit with a feeling for a few minutes. I
- ~ Activity to lift our mood, ie. taking a walk, listening to music, gardening, etc.

### 4. Relating to others

- ~ Feeling lonely and marginalized is bad for our mental and physical health. (Equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.)
- ~ How we relate to ourselves can provide lasting happiness. We benefit when we treat other people with kindness, and this includes ourselves as well.

### 5. Nourishing your spirit.

- ~ Be uplifted by a transcendent ideal and/or grounded in "ordinary" miracles
- ~ Spiritual self-care: Take time to cultivate the values you hold dear. Less "selfing" (ie, taking ourselves less seriously)
- ~ Walking in nature, playing or listening to music, meditating, painting, sitting in silence, inspirational reading, prayer, playing with the dog
- ~ Formal religious practice not necessary

### **Resources:**

Self-Compassion, by Kristen Neff

The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion, by Christopher K. Germer

A Year of Spiritual Companionship: 52 Weeks of Wisdom for a Life of Gratitude, Balance and Happiness, by Anne Kertz Kernion

### **Practices and Techniques to Foster Self-Compassion**

(summarized from Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley website)

1. Self-Compassionate Letter - Try to do this a few times a year.

How to do it:

First, identify something about yourself that makes you feel ashamed, insecure, or not good enough. Write it down and describe how it makes you feel. Sad?

Embarrassed? Angry? Be as honest; only you will see what you write.

Then write a letter to yourself expressing compassion, understanding, and acceptance for the part of yourself that you dislike.

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Follow these guidelines as you write:

Imagine that there is someone who loves and accepts you unconditionally for who you are. What would that person say to you about this part of yourself? Remind yourself that no one is without flaws. Remember that many others are struggling with the same thing that you're struggling with.

Consider the ways in which events that have happened in your life, the family environment you grew up in, or even your genes may have contributed to this negative aspect of yourself.

Are there things that you could do to improve or better cope with this negative aspect. Focus on how constructive changes could make you feel happier, healthier, or more fulfilled. Avoid judging yourself.

Put the letter down, then come back to it later and read it again. It may be especially helpful to read it whenever you're feeling bad about this aspect of yourself, as a reminder to be more self-compassionate.

### 2. Self-Compassion Break

Try this practice when you face stressful situations.

How to do it:

1. Think of a situation in your life that is difficult and causing you stress.
2. See if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.
3. Now say to yourself, "This is a moment of suffering." This acknowledgment is a form of mindfulness—of simply noticing what is going on for you emotionally in the present moment, without judging that experience as good or bad.
4. Next, say to yourself, "Suffering is a part of life." This is a recognition of your common humanity with others—that all people have trying experiences.
5. Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch on your chest, and say, "May I be kind to myself." You can also consider another specific phrase, like "May I give myself the compassion that I need," "May I accept myself as I am," "May I be strong," and "May I be patient."

You can use this practice any time. If you practice it in moments of relative calm, it might be easier to experience the three parts of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—when you need them most.

### 3. How would you treat a friend?

Try this practice every time you are struggling with a difficult situation.

How to do it:

Write out answers to the following:

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First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about him- or herself or is really struggling in some way. How do you respond to your friend in these situations (if you're at your best)? Write down what you typically do and say, and note the tone in which you talk to your friend.

Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Write down what you typically do and say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.

Next time you are struggling with something, try treating yourself like a good friend and see what happens.