

THE BIG IDEAS

Self-Compassion Defined

The three key components.

#1. Self-Kindness

Be nice to yourself!

#2. Common Humanity

We're all in this together.

#3. Mindfulness

Seeing reality clearly.

Suffering =

Pain x Resistance

The Noting Practice

Is worth noting.

Re-Setting Expectations

It's not all supposed to be perfect.

Failure =

Life's apprenticeship.

Self-Efficacy

Is enhanced via self-compassion.

Self-Compassion

The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself

BY KRISTIN NEFF, PH.D. · WILLIAM MORROW © 2011 · 320 PAGES

"The research that my colleagues and I have conducted over the past decade shows that self-compassion is a powerful way to achieve emotional well-being and contentment in our lives. By giving ourselves unconditional kindness and comfort while embracing the human experience, difficult as it is, we avoid destructive patterns of fear, negativity, and isolation. At the same time, self-compassion fosters positive mind-states such as happiness and optimism. The nurturing quality of self-compassion allows us to flourish, to appreciate the beauty and richness of life, even in hard times. When we soothe our agitated minds with self-compassion, we're better able to notice what's right as well as what's wrong, so that we can orient ourselves toward that which gives us joy. . . .

You can't always have high self-esteem and your life will continue to be flawed and imperfect—but self-compassion will always be there, waiting for you, a safe haven. In good times and bad, whether you're on top of the world or at the bottom of the heap, self-compassion will keep you going, helping you move to a better place. It does take work to break the self-criticizing habits of a lifetime, but at the end of the day, you are only being asked to relax, allow life to be as it is, and open your heart to yourself. It's easier than you might think, and it could change your life."

~ Kristin Neff from *Self-Compassion*

I first heard about Kristin Neff and her work from [Brené Brown](#)—who is a huge (!) fan. (See Notes on Brené's great books [Daring Greatly](#) + [The Gifts of Imperfection](#).)

And I can see why Brené is such a big fan. Kristin is awesome.

Kristin is one of the world's leading researchers on self-compassion. In fact, she is the one who first established self-compassion as a field of study almost a decade ago—bringing the Buddhist practice of self-compassion into her labs so the benefits could be empirically validated. Very cool stuff.

The book walks us through the scientific research underpinning the why's and how's of cultivating our self-compassion and is packed with theoretical and practical goodness.

Let's start by defining self-compassion then looking at the three keys to self-compassion (self-kindness + common humanity + mindfulness) in more detail plus some of my favorite Big Ideas to help us bring this to life!

SELF-COMPASSION: DEFINED

"As I've defined it, self-compassion entails three core components. First, it requires *self-kindness*, that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental. Second, it requires recognition of our *common humanity*, feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering.

"Compassion involves the recognition and clear seeing of suffering. It also involves feelings of kindness for people who are suffering, so that the desire to help-to ameliorate suffering-emerges. Finally, compassion involves recognizing our shared human condition, flawed and fragile as it is."

~ Kristin Neff

Third, it requires *mindfulness*—that we hold our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it. We must achieve and combine these three essential elements in order to be truly self-compassionate.”

Self-compassion has three primary components:

1. *Self-kindness*. In short: We need to be nice to ourselves! Beating ourselves up = not helpful.
2. *Common humanity*. We’re not alone. It’s important to see that our suffering is a part of the shared human experience.
3. *Mindfulness*. We want to observe our experience—holding it in “balanced” awareness without trying to push our pain away or make it a bigger deal than it is.

Kristin unpacks each of those core ideas in its own chapter and comes back to them throughout the rest of the book as we apply self-compassion to different aspects of our lives.

Powerful stuff.

Let’s take a quick look at each in a little more detail.

#1: SELF-KINDNESS

“You don’t want to beat yourself up for beating yourself up in the vain hope that it will somehow make you stop beating yourself up.”

~ Kristin Neff

“Self-kindness, by definition, means that we stop the constant self-judgment and disparaging internal commentary that most of us have come to see as normal. It requires us to *understand* our foibles and failings instead of condemning them. It entails clearly seeing the extent to which we harm ourselves through relentless self-criticism, and ending our internal war.

But self-kindness involves more than just stopping self-judgment. It involves *actively* comforting ourselves, responding just as we would to a dear friend in need. It means we allow ourselves to be emotionally moved by our own pain, stopping to say, “This is really difficult right now. How can I care for and comfort myself in this moment?” With self-kindness, we soothe and calm our troubled minds. We make a peace offering of warmth, gentleness, and sympathy *from* ourselves to ourselves, so that true healing can occur.”

Self-kindness.

Our first key component to self-compassion.

I love the image of treating *ourselves* in the same way we would want to treat a dear friend—slowing down and allowing ourselves to be emotionally moved by our own pain and actively comforting ourselves.

First step: Stop the internal heckling. You know, fun stuff like, “*Why are you such an idiot?!?*” And, “*I can’t believe you did/said that. Wow.*”

Instead, we can (literally) say to ourselves, “*Gah. I feel your pain right now. This is tough. How can I best take care of myself right now?*”

In short: BE NICE TO YOURSELF.

Sounds simple. But it’s huge.

Self-Kindness. That’s step #1 in self-compassion.

#2: COMMON HUMANITY: WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

“The second fundamental element of self-compassion is recognition of the common human experience. Acknowledgment of the interconnected nature of our lives—indeed of life itself—helps to distinguish self-compassion from mere self-acceptance and self-love. Although self-acceptance and self-love are important, they are incomplete by themselves. They leave out an essential factor—other people. Compassion is, by definition, relational. Compassion literally

"Sadly, however, most people don't focus on what they have in common with others, especially when they feel ashamed or inadequate. Rather than framing their imperfection in light of their shared human experience, they're more likely to feel isolated and disconnected from the world around them when they fail."

~ Kristin Neff

means "to suffer *with*" which implies a basic mutuality in the experience of suffering. The emotion of compassion springs from the recognition that the human experience is imperfect. Why else would we say "It's only human" to comfort someone who has made a mistake? Self-compassion honors the fact that all human beings are fallible, that wrong choices and feelings of regret are inevitable, no matter how high and mighty one is. (As the saying goes, a clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.)

When we're in touch with our common humanity, we remember that feelings of inadequacy and disappointment are shared by all. This is what distinguishes self-compassion from self-pity. Whereas self-pity says "poor me," self-compassion remembers that everyone suffers, and it offers comfort because everyone is human. The pain I feel in difficult times is the same pain you feel in difficult times. The triggers are different, the circumstances are different, the degree of pain is different, but the process is the same. *You can't always get what you want.* This is true for everyone, even the Rolling Stones."

Common humanity.

What a beautiful concept.

In our hyper-individualistic, equally hyper-comparative society, it's easy to always try to outdo everyone around us and feel disconnected—either better than or worse than those around us.

But what if we slowed down and appreciated our sameness? The fact that, as Kristin points out, we're all in this together. That we share a common humanity.

That's our second key component to self-compassion.

Goes nicely with self-kindness. And with our third component: Mindfulness.

#3: MINDFULNESS

"The third key ingredient of self-compassion is mindfulness. Mindfulness refers to the clear seeing and nonjudgmental acceptance of what's occurring in the present moment. Facing up to reality, in other words. The idea is that we need to see things as they are, no more, no less, in order to respond to our current situation in the most compassionate—and therefore effective—manner."

Mindfulness.

This is a great definition: *"the clear seeing and nonjudgmental acceptance of what's occurring in the present moment."*

It's easy to either ignore or exaggerate our experience.

To clearly, nonjudgmentally see reality?

That takes some practice. :)

SUFFERING = PAIN X RESISTANCE

"I once went on a meditation retreat with a wonderful teacher named Shinzen Young, who gave me words of wisdom that I'll never forget. He said that the key to happiness was understanding that suffering is caused by *resisting* pain. We can't avoid pain in life, he said, but we don't necessarily have to suffer because of that pain... he chose to express these words of wisdom with an equation: "Suffering = Pain x Resistance." He then added, "Actually, it's an exponential rather than a multiplicative relationship." His point was that we can distinguish between the normal pain of life—difficult emotions, physical discomfort, and so on—and actual suffering, which is the mental anguish caused by fighting against the fact that life is sometimes painful."

Suffering = Pain x Resistance.

"To give ourselves compassion, we first have to recognize that we are suffering. We can't heal what we can't feel."

~ Kristin Neff

"Judgment defines people as bad versus good and tries to capture their essential nature with simplistic labels. Discriminating wisdom recognizes complexity and ambiguity."

~ Kristin Neff

As many wise teachers have told us: Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.

Pain happens.

How we RESPOND to that pain determines our levels of suffering.

Resist that pain—by trying to convince ourselves that whatever is happening (whether it's something mundane like traffic on the way to work or something more significant like a serious illness or death of a loved one) and watch the suffering grow exponentially.

As Kristin tells us: "Our emotional suffering is caused by our desire for things to be other than they are."

Plus: "Once something has occurred in reality, there is nothing you can do to change that reality in the present moment. *This is how things are.* You can choose to accept this fact or not, but reality will remain the same either way."

How do we properly relate to reality?

Mindfulness.

The book is packed with practical exercises we can engage in to cultivate self-compassion. This is one of my favorites to help us build mindfulness:

THE NOTING PRACTICE

"An important tool used to develop mindfulness is the practice of noting. The idea is to make a soft mental note whenever a particular thought, emotion, or sensation arises. This helps us to become more consciously aware of what we're experiencing. If I note that I feel angry, for instance, I become consciously aware that I'm angry. If I note that my back is uncomfortable as I'm sitting at my desk, I become consciously aware of my discomfort. This then provides me with the opportunity to respond wisely to my current circumstances. Perhaps I should take a few deep breaths to calm down or stretch to relieve my back pain. The noting practice can be used in any situation and helps engender mindfulness in daily life."

Noting.

It's a *really* cool (and simple!) way to cultivate mindfulness.

[Dan Siegel](#) (see Notes on [Mindsight](#)) likes to say we need to "name it to tame it."

We need to be able to *see* the state we're in if we want to wisely respond to that state.

I love to use this as a part of my actual meditation at times. For example, when I notice my mind wanders off and I am strategizing or planning I can softly say to myself "... strategy ..." or "... planning ..." and then bring my attention back to my breath.

Or during my day I may notice that I'm feeling a little rushed and I can note that and choose to take a few nice, deep breaths to bring myself back to this moment.

How about you?! Give it a shot!

RE-SETTING EXPECTATIONS

"Everybody makes mistakes at one time or another, it's a fact of life. And if you think about it, why should you expect anything different? Where is that written contract you signed before birth promising that you'd be perfect, that you'd never fail, and that your life would go on absolutely the way you want it to? *Uh, excuse me. There must be some error. I signed up for the "everything will go swimmingly until the day I die" plan. Can I speak to management please?* It's absurd, and yet most of us act as if something has gone terribly awry when we fall down or life takes an unwanted or unexpected turn."

*"Mindfulness allows us to see that our negative thoughts and emotions are just that—thoughts and emotions—not necessarily reality. They are therefore given less weight—they are *observed,* but not necessarily *believed.*"*

~ Kristin Neff

One of the keys to having compassion for ourselves is to realize that making mistakes, falling short of our goals, and life simply not being perfect is PERFECTLY NORMAL.

As [Maslow](#) says, there are no perfect human beings. And, as I say often in these Notes, we aren't going to be the first. :)

Embracing this fact is extraordinarily liberating. Makes you just want to take a deep breath in and nice, deep exhale to realize you do not (I repeat: do not!) need to be perfect.

FAILURE = LIFE'S APPRENTICESHIP

"Imperfection also makes growth possible. Like it or not, the main way we learn is by falling flat on our face, just as we did when we first learned to walk. Our parents may tell us a million times not to touch that hot stove, but it's only after we actually burn ourselves that we really understand why it's not such a great idea. The learning opportunities provided by failure can actually help us to achieve our dreams. In the words of restaurateur Wolfgang Puck, "I learned more from the one restaurant that didn't work than from all the ones that were successes." Yes, failure is frustrating. But it's also temporary and eventually yields wisdom. We can think of failure as part of life's apprenticeship. If we were perfect and had all the answers, we'd never get to ask questions, and we wouldn't be able to discover anything new."

Ah. Mistakes. Failures.

Don't you just love 'em? Hah. Right.

Well, how about we reframe failure and think of it as life's apprenticeship?!

Robert Emmons' wisdom comes to mind here. Emmons is the world's leading authority on the science of gratitude. Check out the Notes on his great book [Thanks!](#) where he tells us: *"It is relatively easy to feel grateful when good things are happening, and life is going the way we want it to. A much greater challenge is to be grateful when things are not going so well, and are not going the way we think they should. Anger, bitterness, and resentment seem to be so much easier, so much more a natural reaction in times like these..."*

The religious traditions encourage us to do more than react with passivity and resignation to loss and crisis; they advise us to change our perspective, so that our suffering is transformed into an opportunity for growth. Not only does the experience of tragedy give us an exceptional opportunity for growth, but some sort of suffering is also necessary for a person to achieve maximal psychological growth. In his study of self-actualizers, the paragons of mental wellness, the famed humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow noted that "the most important learning lessons... were tragedies, deaths, and trauma... which forced change in the life-outlook of the person and consequently in everything that he did."

Goosebumps reading that line by Maslow.

And this is worth a re-read: *"Not only does the experience of tragedy give us an exceptional opportunity for growth, but some sort of suffering is also necessary for a person to achieve maximal psychological growth..."*

Sounds an awful lot like life's apprenticeship.

Can you reframe any failures in your life in a more empowering (+ self-compassionate!) way?

SELF-EFFICACY + SELF-COMPASSION

"Researchers who study motivation have consistently found that our level of self-confidence has a dramatic impact on our ability to reach our goals. Dozens of studies have confirmed that our beliefs in our own abilities—which research psychologist Albert Bandura terms "self-efficacy" beliefs—are directly related to our ability to achieve our dreams.

"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

~ Carl Rogers

For example, one study followed more than two hundred high school wrestlers through the course of one wrestling season. It was found that, independent of prior success at wrestling, those students who had stronger self-efficacy beliefs won more matches than those who doubted themselves. This was especially apparent in high-pressure overtime situations where the match was tied. Wrestling matches decided in overtime are "sudden death"—where the first wrestler to score wins. They are difficult because both wrestlers are exhausted, and a tie indicates an even match of physical skills. In such cases, the only factor that predicts a win is the wrestler's mental belief in his own ability."

Wow. First, that's awesome.

Self-efficacy. Our belief in our own abilities. It's an *incredibly* important part of our ability to actualize our potential and achieve our dreams in life.

Second: Can you guess what enhances our self-efficacy?

Hint: It's not self-criticism. (Research shows that self-criticism leads to anxiety which leads to "self-handicapping" protective behaviors like not trying very hard or procrastinating—giving us the excuse that we just didn't go for it and that's why we didn't succeed. <— Not helpful.)

How about self-compassion?

Yep. That's where it's at.

Self-kindness + common humanity + mindfulness does the trick to boost our self-efficacy and boost our shot at achieving our dreams!

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.