

**Compassion**

Exercise



10-15 min.



Client



No



How would you treat a friend?

Self-compassion is simply compassion directed inwards. Kristin Neff, a pioneer in compassion research, suggests self-compassion consists of three main elements: kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness. According to Neff, these three elements combined facilitates a self-compassionate mindset.

The kindness element of self-compassion involves being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we are suffering rather than being self-critical. In this way, our inner dialogue is gentle and encouraging, and we acknowledge our problems and shortcomings with openness and without judgment. Unfortunately, most of us tend to use harsh, critical language when we are going through a difficult time, such as, “wow, that was dumb,” or “I’m a failure.”

Consider for a moment, would you say such things to a close friend, or even a stranger for that matter?

Research has shown that most people are kinder to others than they are to themselves (Neff, 2003). This is even true for events or situations that are beyond our control, such as getting in a car accident (Germer & Neff, 2013).

Author

This tool was adapted from K. Neff’s ‘How would you treat a friend?’ exercise (see <http://self-compassion.org/exercise-1-treat-friend/>) by Lucinda Poole (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lucinda_Poole).

Goal

The goal of this exercise is twofold: first, to highlight the discrepancy between how one treats oneself versus how one treats a friend when life is difficult; and second, to practice cultivating self-compassion.



Advice

- This tool can be used to practice cultivating self-compassion by tapping into a current personal situation, or more generally by using a past or imagined situation (see Step 2).
- It may be the case that clients feel worse after beginning to practice self-compassion. Neff advises sharing the following metaphor with clients in such circumstances: When a door in a burning house is opened, oxygen goes in and flames rush out. A similar process may occur when we practice self-compassion—love goes in and old pain comes out. The practitioner may help clients to accept this pain in a mindful way (see acceptance of emotions exercise), stressing the fact that pain can be a natural by product of self-compassion practice.



Suggested Readings

Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223–250.

Neff, K. (2011). *Self compassion*. Hachette UK.

Germer, C. K., & Neff, K. D. (2013). Self-compassion in clinical practice. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 69(8), 856-867.

<http://self-compassion.org/tips-for-practice/>



How would you treat a friend?

Instructions

Complete these four steps to practice cultivating self-compassion.

Step 1

Bring to mind a time when a close friend was suffering in some way, or felt badly about themselves. Write down what you would tend to do and say to your friend, and note the tone of voice in which you would use.

Friend's situation:

My response:

Step 2

Now think about a time when you yourself were struggling. Perhaps there is something in your life right now that you feel badly about? Write down what you tend to do and say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.

My situation:



My response:

Step 3

Was there a difference between how you tend to respond to a friend versus how you respond to yourself? If so, ask yourself why this may be so, and write down what might lead you to treat yourself and others so differently:

Step 4

Now, write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you would respond to a close friend when you're suffering:

When things in your life don't go as planned, have a go at treating yourself like a good friend and see what happens. The more you practice being compassionate towards yourself, the more natural and habitual it will become.