

HOLISTIC healing

Go Easy on Yourself

Self-compassion comes with a host of physical and emotional benefits.

Here you go again, diving into another bag of potato chips. So you beat yourself up with harsh words.

You'd never treat a friend this way! You know she feels better when you show her some love. Do that for yourself and you'll feel better, too.

Showing yourself such kindness isn't always easy, however. "Seventy-six percent of people are more compassionate to others than to themselves," says Kristin Neff, PhD, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* (William Morrow) and the audiobook *Compassionate*

Body Scan (Sounds True).

Maybe you think if you criticize yourself, others won't. Or if you give yourself a break, you'll let yourself get away with too much, so instead, you shame yourself into action.

Our society tends to see self-compassion as self-indulgence, self-pity and selfishness. "Women, especially, are taught to care more for others," says Neff. "Most people aren't raised to be kind and supportive to themselves." Those who were had responsive parents who made them feel valued and securely loved.

Self-compassion fosters self-worth. "You're also more optimistic and satisfied with your life, and are happier in relationships. You're better able to

cope and be resilient, and there's less depression and anxiety," says Neff.

A 2012 workshop with Neff kept Bal Phipps, 49, of Lincolnshire, England, on the self-compassion path. "Now I feel motivation to take better care of myself," Phipps says. "I'm more relaxed, and have more confidence and courage, so I'm more comfortable in social situations."

With self-compassion comes self-acceptance, including recognition that everyone has imperfections. "And you're able to understand that everyone suffers sometimes," says James Doty, MD, director of Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education and author of *Into the Magic Shop: A*

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"When you see someone suffer, you want to help them. We're wired for that, for our offspring and others, including ourselves."

It all starts with the *vagus nerve*, which runs from the lowest end of the brainstem to the heart and other organs. This nerve sets off the *autonomic nervous system*: Berate yourself and the *vagus nerve* reads it as an attack. It warns the brain to switch on the sympathetic nervous system—fight, flight or freeze—so your body can react to the threat with increased heart rate, blood pressure, cortisol and other stress hormones, and more.

When you're self-compassionate, the opposite happens and the calming *parasympathetic nervous system* is activated. "The executive control center of the brain is also functioning at its best, so you're more attentive and focused," says Doty. "When you focus



on being self-compassionate, your brain releases *oxytocin*, a hormone that makes you feel good and want to bond with others."

Let the *vagus nerve* work for your good health by cultivating self-compassion. "It's a decision you make," Neff says. "Set the intention to practice responding to yourself with goodwill." To help that intention along, take several deep, relaxing breaths, stimulating the *vagus nerve* to open your lungs, heart and mind.

Whether you're in emotional pain or you just want to practice, here's Neff's

Self-Compassion Break. First tell yourself, "This hurts. It's really hard right now," followed by, "I'm not alone. Other people feel this way, too." With warm hands, gently touch yourself in soothing places, like over your heart or on your cheek, and talk to yourself with kindness. Phipps says she likes to repeatedly tell herself, "May I feel safe. May I accept myself just as I am."

Doty suggests spending time in the company of people "who love and accept you, and understand that you need to be your authentic self." Sometimes that means being vulnerable, exposing your weaknesses and flaws. "Then people know they can do that, too," he says, adding that once you get the hang of it, "You'll have this air of positivity and potential, and people will more likely want to connect with you."

Being kind to herself has helped Phipps. "I've developed a stronger compassionate voice connecting me to my wisdom," she says. "It feels like I'm carrying within me my own best friend." —CLAIRE SYKES

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