

The Five Myths of Self-Compassion

Kristin Neff tackles the misconceptions that stop us from being kinder to ourselves.

BY KRISTIN NEFF | SEPTEMBER 30, 2015

Most people don't have any problem with seeing compassion as a thoroughly commendable quality. It seems to refer to an amalgam of unquestionably good qualities: kindness, mercy, tenderness, benevolence, understanding, empathy, sympathy, and fellow-feeling, along with an impulse to help other living creatures, human or animal, in distress.

But we seem less sure about *self-compassion*. For many, it carries the whiff of all those other bad "self" terms: self-pity, self-serving, self-indulgent, self-centered, just plain selfish. Even many generations removed from our culture's Puritan origins, we still seem to believe that if we aren't blaming and punishing ourselves for something, we risk moral complacency, runaway egotism, and the sin of false pride.



Consider Rachel, a 39-year-old marketing executive with two kids and a loving husband. A deeply kind person, devoted wife, involved parent, supportive friend, and hard worker, she also finds time to volunteer for two local charities. In short, she appears to be an ideal role model.

But Rachel's in therapy because her levels of stress are so high. She's tired all the time, depressed, unable to sleep. She experiences chronic low-level digestive problems and sometimes—to her horror—snaps at her husband and kids. Through all this, she's incredibly hard on herself, always feeling that whatever she's done isn't good enough. Yet she'd never consider trying to be compassionate to herself. In fact, the very idea of letting up on her self-attack, giving herself some kindness and understanding, strikes her as somehow childish and irresponsible.

And Rachel isn't alone. Many people in our culture have misgivings about the idea of self-compassion, perhaps because they don't really know what it looks like, much less how to practice it. Often the practice of self-compassion is identified with the practice of mindfulness, now as ubiquitous as sushi in the West. But while mindfulness—with its emphasis on being experientially open to and aware of our own suffering without being caught up in it and swept away by aversive reactivity—is necessary for self-compassion, it leaves out an essential ingredient. What distinguishes self-compassion is that it goes beyond accepting our experience as it is and adds something more—embracing the *experiencer* (i.e., ourselves) with warmth and tenderness when our experience is painful.

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Self-compassion also includes an element of wisdom—recognition of our common humanity. This means accepting the fact that, along with everyone else on the planet, we're flawed and imperfect individuals, just as likely as anyone else to be hit by the slings and arrows of outrageous (but perfectly normal) misfortune. This sounds obvious, but it's funny how easily we forget. We fall into the trap of believing that things are "supposed" to go well and that when we make a mistake or some difficulty comes along, something must have gone terribly wrong. (*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 the management please?*) The feeling that certain things "shouldn't" be happening makes us feel both shamed and isolated. At those times, remembering that we aren't really alone in our suffering—that hardship and struggle are deeply embedded in the human condition—can make a radical difference.

I remember being at the park with my son, Rowan, when he was about four years old, at the peak of his autism. I was sitting on the bench, watching all the happy children playing on the swings, chasing each other, and having fun while Rowan was just sitting on the top of the slide repeatedly

banging his hand (something known as stimming). Admittedly, I started to go down the path of self-pity: “Why can’t I have a ‘normal’ child like everyone else? Why am I the only one who’s having such a hard time?” But years of self-compassion practice gave me enough presence of mind to catch myself, pause, take a deep breath, and become aware of the trap I was falling into.

With a little distance from my negative thoughts and feelings, I looked out at the other mothers and their children and thought to myself, “I’m assuming that these kids are going to grow up with carefree, unproblematic lives, that none of these mothers will have to struggle as they raise their children. But for all I know, some of these kids could grow up to develop serious mental or physical health issues, or just turn out to be not very nice people! There’s no child who’s perfect, and no parent who doesn’t go through some form of hardship or challenge with their children at one time or another.”

And at that moment, my feelings of intense isolation turned into feelings of deep connection with the other mothers at the park, and with all parents everywhere. We love our kids, but damn—it’s tough sometimes! As odd as it may sound, by practicing self-compassion as we muddle through, we don’t feel so alone.

Fortunately, this isn’t just wishful thinking about another self-help approach. In fact, there’s now an impressive and growing body of research demonstrating that relating to ourselves in a kind, friendly manner is essential for emotional wellbeing. Not only does it help us avoid the inevitable consequences of harsh self-judgment—depression, anxiety, and stress—it also engenders a happier and more hopeful approach to life. More pointedly, research proves false many of the common myths about self-compassion that keep us trapped in the prison of relentless self-criticism. Here are five of them.

1. Self-compassion is a form of self-pity



One of the biggest myths about self-compassion is that it means feeling sorry for yourself. In fact, as my own experience on the playground exemplifies, self-compassion is an *antidote* to self-pity and the tendency to whine about our bad luck.

This isn’t because self-compassion allows you to tune out the bad stuff; in fact, it makes us more willing to accept, experience, and acknowledge difficult feelings with kindness—which paradoxically helps us process and let go of them more fully. Research shows that self-compassionate people are less likely to get swallowed up by self-pitying thoughts about how bad things are. That’s one of the reasons self-compassionate people have better mental health.

A study by Filip Raes at the University of Leuven examined the association of self-compassion with ruminative thinking and mental health among undergraduates at his university. He first assessed how participants were using the self-report Self-Compassion Scale I developed in 2003, which asks respondents to indicate how often they engage in behaviors corresponding to the main elements of self-compassion. Examples include statements such as “I try to be understanding and patient toward aspects of my personality I don’t like”; “When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through”; and “When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation.”

Raes found that participants with higher levels of self-compassion tended to brood less about their misfortune. Moreover, he found that their reduced tendency to ruminate helped explain why self-compassionate participants reported fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression.

2. Self-compassion means weakness



John had always considered himself a pillar of strength—an ideal husband and provider. So he was devastated when his wife left him for another man. Secretly racked with guilt for not doing more to meet her emotional needs before she sought comfort in someone else’s arms, he didn’t want to admit how hurt he still felt and how hard it was for him to move on with his life.

When his colleague suggested that he try being compassionate to himself about his divorce, his reaction was swift: “Don’t give me that hearts-and-flowers stuff! Self-compassion is for sissies. I had to be hard as nails to get through the divorce with some semblance of self-respect, and I’m not about to let my guard down now.”

What John didn’t know is that instead of being a weakness, researchers are discovering that self-compassion is one of the most powerful sources of coping and resilience available to us. When we go through major life crises, self-compassion appears to make all the difference in our ability to survive and even thrive. John assumed that being a tough guy during his divorce—stuffing down his feelings and not admitting how much pain he was in—is what got him through. But he wasn’t “through”: he was stuck, and self-compassion was the missing piece that would probably have helped him to move on.

David Sbarra and his colleagues at the University of Arizona examined whether self-compassion helps determine how well people adjust to a divorce. The researchers invited more than 100 people recently separated from their spouses to come into the lab and make a four-minute stream-of-consciousness recording of their thoughts and feelings about the separation experience. Four trained judges later coded how self-compassionate these discussions were, using a modified version of the Self-Compassion Scale. They gave low scores to participants who said things like “I don’t know how I managed to do this. It was all my fault. I pushed him away for some reason. I needed him so much, still need him. What did I do? I know I did it all wrong.” High scores were given to people who said things like “Looking back, you have to take the best out of it and move on from there. Just forgive yourself and your ex for everything you both did or didn’t do.”

The researchers found that participants who displayed more self-compassion when talking about their breakup evidenced better psychological adjustment to the divorce at the time, and that this effect persisted nine months later. Results held even when controlling for other possible explanations, such as participants’ initial levels of self-esteem, optimism, depression, or secure attachment. Studies like this one suggest that it’s not just what you face in life, but how you relate to yourself when the going gets tough—as an inner ally or enemy—that determines your ability to cope successfully.

3. Self-compassion will make me complacent



Perhaps the biggest block to self-compassion is the belief that it’ll undermine our motivation to push ourselves to do better. The idea is that if we don’t criticize ourselves for failing to live up to our standards, we’ll automatically succumb to slothful defeatism. But let’s think for a moment how parents successfully motivate their children. When Rachel’s teenage son comes home one day with a failing English grade, she could look disgusted and hiss, “Stupid boy! You’ll never amount to anything. I’m ashamed of you!” (Makes you cringe, doesn’t it? Yet that’s exactly the type of thing Rachel tells herself when she fails to meet her own high expectations.) But most likely, rather than motivating her son, this torrent of shame will just make him lose faith in himself, and eventually he’ll stop trying altogether.

Alternatively, Rachel could adopt a compassionate approach by saying, “Oh sweetheart, you must be so upset. Hey, give me a hug. It happens to all of us. But we need to get your English grades up because I know you want to get into a good college. What can I do to help and support you? I believe in you.” Notice that there’s honest recognition of the failure, sympathy for her son’s unhappiness, and encouragement to go beyond or around this momentary bump in the road. This type of caring response helps us maintain our self-confidence and feel emotionally supported. Ironically, even though Rachel wouldn’t even dream of taking the former approach with her son, she unquestionably believes that self-flagellation is necessary for her to achieve her goals. She assumes that her anxiety, depression, and stress are a result of her not trying hard enough.

But there’s now a good deal of research clearly showing that self-compassion is a far more effective force for personal motivation than self-punishment.

For instance, a series of research experiments by Juliana Breines and Serena Chen of the University of California at Berkeley examined whether helping undergraduate students to be more self-compassionate would motivate them to engage in positive change. In one study, participants were asked to recall a recent action they felt guilty about—such as cheating on an exam, lying to a romantic partner, saying something harmful—that still made them feel bad about themselves when they thought about it. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the self-compassion condition, participants were instructed to write to themselves for three minutes from the perspective of a compassionate and understanding friend. In the second condition, participants were instructed to write about their own positive qualities; and in the third, they wrote about a hobby they enjoyed. These two control conditions helped differentiate self-compassion from positive self-talk and positive mood in general.

The researchers found that participants who were helped to be self-compassionate about their recent transgression reported being more motivated to apologize for the harm done and more committed to not repeating the behavior again than those in the control conditions. Self-compassion, far from being a way to evade personal accountability, actually *strengthens* it.

If we can acknowledge our failures and misdeeds with kindness—“I really messed up when I got so mad at her, but I was stressed, and I guess all people overreact sometimes”—rather than judgment—“I can’t believe I said that; I’m such a horrible, mean person”—it’s much safer to see ourselves clearly. When we can see beyond the distorting lens of harsh self-judgment, we get in touch with other parts of ourselves, the parts that care and want everyone, including ourselves, to be as healthy and happy as possible. This provides the encouragement and support needed to do our best and try again.

4. Self-compassion is narcissistic

In American culture, high self-esteem requires standing out in a crowd—being special and above average. How do you feel when someone calls your work performance, or parenting skills, or intelligence level average? Ouch! The problem, of course, is that, Garrison Keillor’s *Lake Wobegone* notwithstanding, it’s



impossible for everyone to be above average at the same time. We may excel in some areas, but there's always someone more attractive, successful, and intelligent than we are—meaning we feel like failures whenever we compare ourselves to those “better” than us.

The desire to see ourselves as better than average, however, to get and keep that elusive feeling of high self-esteem, can lead to downright nasty behavior. Why do early adolescents begin to bully others? If I can be seen as the cool, tough kid in contrast to the wimpy nerd I just picked on, I get a self-esteem boost. Why are we so prejudiced? If I believe that my ethnic, gender, national, political group is better than yours, I get

a self-esteem boost.

Indeed, the emphasis placed on self-esteem in American society has led to a worrying trend: researchers Jean Twenge of San Diego State University and Keith Campbell of the University of Georgia, who've tracked the narcissism scores of college students since 1987, find that the narcissism of modern-day students is at the highest level ever recorded. They attribute the rise in narcissism to well-meaning but misguided parents and teachers, who tell kids how special and great they are in an attempt to raise their self-esteem.

But self-compassion is different from self-esteem. Although they're both strongly linked to psychological wellbeing, self-esteem is a positive evaluation of self-worth, while self-compassion isn't a judgment or an evaluation at all. Instead, self-compassion is way of relating to the ever-changing landscape of who we are with kindness and acceptance—especially when we fail or feel inadequate. In other words, self-esteem requires feeling better than others, whereas self-compassion requires acknowledging that we share the human condition of imperfection.

Self-esteem is also inherently fragile, bouncing up and down according to our latest success or failure. I remember a time my self-esteem soared and then crashed within about five seconds. I was visiting an equestrian stable with friends, and the old Spanish riding instructor there apparently liked my Mediterranean looks. “You are veeerrrry beautiful,” he told me, as I felt myself glow with pleasure. Then he added, “Don't ever shave your mooostache.” Self-esteem is a fair-weather friend, there for us in good times, deserting us when our luck heads south. But self-compassion is always there for us, a reliable source of support, even when our worldly stock has crashed. It still hurts when our pride is dashed, but we can be kind to ourselves precisely because it hurts. “Wow, that was pretty humiliating, I'm so sorry. It's okay though, these things happen.”



There's solid research for the idea that self-compassion helps us in good times and bad. Mark Leary and colleagues at Wake Forest University conducted a study that asked participants to make a video that introduced and described themselves. For instance, “Hi, I'm John, an environmental sciences major. I love to go fishing and spend time in nature. I want to work for the National Park Service when I graduate,” and so on. They were told that someone would watch their tape and then rate them on a seven-point scale in terms of how warm, friendly, intelligent, likeable, and mature they appeared. (The feedback was bogus, of course, given by a study confederate.) Half the participants received positive ratings and the others neutral ratings. The researchers wanted to examine if participants' levels of self-compassion (as measured by scores on the Self-Compassion Scale), would predict reactions to the feedback differently from their levels of self-esteem (as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale).

They found that self-compassionate people reported similar emotional reactions in terms of how happy, sad, angry, or tense they were feeling, regardless of whether the feedback was positive or neutral. People with high levels of self-esteem, however, tended to get upset when they received neutral feedback (*What, I'm just average?*). They were likelier to deny that the feedback was due to their own personality and blamed it on external factors, such as the observer's being in a bad mood. This suggests that self-compassionate people are better able to remain emotionally stable, regardless of the degree of praise they receive from others. Self-esteem, in contrast, thrives only when the reviews are good, and it may lead to evasive tactics when there's a possibility of facing unpleasant truths about oneself.

5. Self-compassion is selfish



Many people are suspicious of self-compassion because they conflate it with selfishness. Rachel, for instance, spends a large portion of her days caring for her family and many of her nights and weekends volunteering for the charities she supports. Raised in a family that emphasized the importance of service to others, she assumes that spending time and energy being kind and caring toward herself automatically means she must be neglecting everybody else for her own selfish ends. Indeed, many people are like Rachel in this sense—good, generous, altruistic souls, who are perfectly awful to themselves while thinking this is necessary to their general goodness.

But is compassion really a zero-sum game? Think about the times you've been lost in the throes of self-criticism. Are you self-focused or other-focused in the moment? Do you have more or fewer resources to give to others? Most people find that when they're absorbed in self-judgment, they actually have little bandwidth left over to think about anything other than their inadequate, worthless selves. In fact, beating yourself up can be a paradoxical form of self-centeredness. When we can be kind and nurturing to ourselves, however, many of our emotional needs are met, leaving us in a better position to focus on others.

Unfortunately, the ideal of being modest, self-effacing, and caring for the welfare of others often comes with the corollary that we must treat ourselves badly. This is especially true for women, who, research indicates, tend to have slightly lower levels of self-compassion than men, even while they tend to be more caring, empathetic, and giving toward others. Perhaps this isn't so surprising, given that women are socialized to be caregivers—selflessly to open their hearts to their husbands, children, friends, and elderly parents—but aren't taught to care for themselves. While the feminist revolution helped expand the roles available to women, and we now see more female leaders in business and politics than ever before, the idea that women should be selfless caregivers hasn't really gone away. It's just that women are now supposed to be successful at their careers in addition to being ultimate nurturers at home.

The irony is that being good to yourself actually helps you be good to others, while being bad to yourself only gets in the way. In fact, I recently conducted a study with my colleague Tasha Beretvas at the University of Texas at Austin that explored whether self-compassionate people were more giving relationship partners. We recruited more than 100 couples who'd been in a romantic relationship for a year or longer. Participants rated their own level of self-compassion using the Self-Compassion Scale. They then described their partner's behavior in the relationship on a series of self-report measures, also indicating how satisfied they were with their partners. We found that self-compassionate individuals were described by their partners as being more caring (e.g., "gentle and kind toward me"), accepting (e.g., "respects my opinions"), and autonomy-supporting (e.g., "gives me as much freedom as I want") than their self-critical counterparts, who were described as being more detached (e.g., "doesn't think about me very much"), aggressive (e.g. "yells, stomps out of the room"), and controlling (e.g., "expects me to do everything his/her way").

Participants also reported being more satisfied and securely attached in their relationship with self-compassionate partners—which makes sense. If I'm withholding toward myself and relying on my partner to meet my emotional needs, I'm going to behave badly when they're not met. But if I can give myself care and support, to meet many of my own needs directly, I'll have more emotional resources available to give to my partner.

The research literature is unclear about whether self-compassion is actually necessary to be compassionate to others, given that many people do a pretty good job of caring for others while shortchanging themselves. However, a growing body of research indicates that self-compassion helps people sustain the act of caring for others. For instance, it appears that counselors and therapists who are self-compassionate are less likely to experience stress and caregiver burnout; they're more satisfied with their careers and feel more energized, happy, and grateful for being able to make a difference in the world.



Because we evolved as social beings, exposure to other people’s tales of suffering activates the pain centers of our own brains through a process of empathetic resonance. When we witness the suffering of others on a daily basis, we can experience personal distress to the point of burning out, and caregivers who are especially sensitive and empathetic may be most at risk. At the same time, when we give ourselves compassion, we create a protective buffer, allowing us to understand and feel for the suffering person without being drained by his or her suffering. The people we care for then pick up our compassion through their own process of empathic resonance. In other words, the compassion we cultivate for ourselves directly transmits itself to others.

I know this firsthand through my experience of raising an autistic child. Rowan is now 13, and although he can be a grumpy adolescent, he’s a loving kid, who poses few parenting challenges. But it wasn’t always so. I often faced situations that I thought were beyond my ability to cope and sometimes had to rely on the power of self-compassion to get me through.

Once, when Rowan was five, I took him to England to see his grandparents. In the middle of the transatlantic flight, he threw an almighty tantrum. I have no idea what set him off, but I suddenly found myself with a flailing, screaming child and a plane full of people looking at us with dagger eyes. What to do? I tried taking him to the bathroom in hopes that the closed door would muffle his screams. But after I’d shuffled down the aisle, trying to keep him from accidentally hitting passengers along the way, I found the toilet was occupied.

Huddled with Rowan in the tiny space outside the toilet, I felt helpless and hopeless. But then I remembered self-compassion. *This is so hard for you, darling*, I said to myself. *I’m sorry this is happening. I’m here for you.* While making sure that Rowan was safe, 90 percent of my attention was on soothing and comforting myself. My mind became flooded with compassion, to the point that it dominated my experience—far more than my screaming child. Furthermore, as I’d already discovered, when I was in a more peaceful and loving frame of mind, Rowan also calmed down. As I soothed myself, he was soothed as well.

When we care tenderly for ourselves in response to suffering, our heart opens. Compassion engages our capacity for love, wisdom, courage, and generosity. It’s a mental and emotional state that’s boundless and directionless, grounded in the great spiritual traditions of the world but available to every person simply by virtue of our being human. In a surprising twist, the nurturing power of self-compassion is now being illuminated by the matter-of-fact, tough-minded methods of empirical science, and a growing body of research literature is demonstrating conclusively that self-compassion is not only central to mental health, but can be enriched through learning and practice, just like so many other good habits.

Therapists have known for a long time that being kind to ourselves isn’t—as is too often believed—a selfish luxury, but the exercise of a gift that makes us happier. Now, finally, science is proving the point.

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About the Author



Kristin Neff

Kristin Neff, Ph.D., is an associate professor in educational psychology at the University of Texas, Austin. She is the author of *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* (William Morrow, 2011) and co-author of *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* (Guilford, 2018).
