1

What Is Self-Compassion?

Self-compassion involves treating yourself the way you would treat a friend who is having a hard time—even if your friend blew it or is feeling inadequate, or is just facing a tough life challenge. Western culture places great emphasis on being kind to our friends, family, and neighbors who are struggling. Not so when it comes to ourselves. Self-compassion is a practice in which we learn to be a good friend to ourselves when we need it most—to become an inner ally rather than an inner enemy. But typically we don't treat ourselves as well as we treat our friends.

Through self-compassion we become an inner ally instead of an inner enemy.

The golden rule says "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." However, you probably don't want to do unto others as you do unto yourself! Imagine that your best friend calls you after she just got dumped by her partner, and this is how the conversation goes.

"Hey," you say, picking up the phone. "How are you?"

"Terrible," she says, choking back tears. "You know that guy Michael I've been dating? Well, he's the first man I've been really excited about since my divorce. Last night he told me that I was putting too much pressure on him and that he just wants to be friends. I'm devastated."

You sigh and say, "Well, to be perfectly honest, it's probably because you're old, ugly, and boring, not to mention needy and dependent. And you're at least 20 pounds overweight. I'd just give up now, because there's really no hope of finding anyone who will ever love you. I mean, frankly you don't deserve it!"

Would you ever talk this way to someone you cared about? Of course not. But strangely, this is precisely the type of thing we say to ourselves in such situations—or worse. With self-compassion, we learn to speak to ourselves like a good friend. "I'm

so sorry. Are you okay? You must be so upset. Remember I'm here for you and I deeply appreciate you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

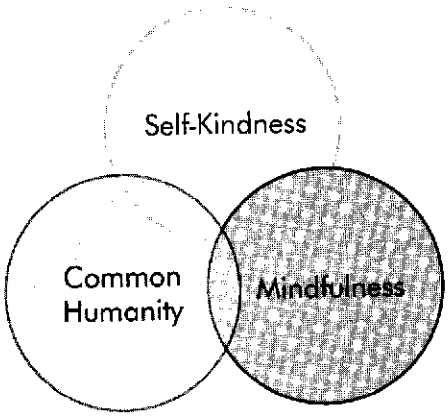
Although a simple way to think about self-compassion is treating yourself as you would treat a good friend, the more complete definition involves three core elements that we bring to bear when we are in pain: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Self-Kindness. When we make a mistake or fail in some way, we are more likely to beat ourselves up than put a supportive arm around our own shoulder. Think of all the generous, caring people you know who constantly tear themselves down (this may even be you). Self-kindness counters this tendency so that we are as caring toward ourselves as we are toward others. Rather than being harshly critical when noticing personal shortcomings, we are supportive and encouraging and aim to protect ourselves from harm. Instead of attacking and berating ourselves for being inadequate, we offer ourselves warmth and unconditional acceptance. Similarly, when external life circumstances are challenging and feel too difficult to bear, we actively soothe and comfort ourselves.

> *Theresa was excited. "I did it! I can't believe I did it! I was at an office party last week and blurted out something inappropriate to a coworker. Instead of doing my usual thing of calling myself terrible names, I tried to be kind and understanding. I told myself, 'Oh well, it's not the end of the world. I meant well even if it didn't come out in the best way.'"*

Common Humanity. A sense of interconnectedness is central to self-compassion. It's recognizing that all humans are flawed works-in-progress, that everyone fails, makes mistakes, and experiences hardship in life. Self-compassion honors the unavoidable fact that life entails suffering, for everyone, without exception. While this may seem obvious, it's so easy to forget. We fall into the trap of believing that

The Three Elements of Self-Compassion



things are "supposed" to go well and that something has gone wrong when they don't. Of course, it's highly likely—in fact inevitable—that we'll make mistakes and experience hardships on a regular basis. This is completely normal and natural.

But we don't tend to be rational about these matters. Instead, not only do we suffer, we feel isolated and alone in our suffering. When we remember that pain is part of the shared human experience, however, every moment of suffering is transformed into a moment of connection with others. The pain I feel in difficult times is the same pain you feel in difficult times. The circumstances are different, the degree of pain is different, but the basic experience of human suffering is the same.

> *Theresa continued: "I remembered that* everyone *has a slip of the tongue sometimes. I can't expect to say the right thing at every moment. It's only natural that these things happen."*

Mindfulness. Mindfulness involves being aware of moment-to-moment experience in a clear and balanced manner. It means being open to the reality of the present moment, allowing all thoughts, emotions, and sensations to enter awareness without resistance or avoidance (we will be delving more deeply into mindfulness in Chapter 6).

Why is mindfulness an essential component of self-compassion? Because we need to be able to turn toward and acknowledge when we're suffering, to "be" with our pain long enough to respond with care and kindness. While it might seem that suffering is blindingly obvious, many people don't acknowledge how much pain they're in, especially when that pain stems from their own self-criticism. Or when confronted with life challenges, people often get so caught up in problem-solving mode that they don't pause to consider how hard it is in the moment. Mindfulness counters the tendency to avoid painful thoughts and emotions, allowing us to face the truth of our experience, even when it's unpleasant. At the same time, mindfulness prevents us from becoming absorbed by and "overidentified" with negative thoughts or feelings, from getting caught up and swept away by our aversive reactions. Rumination narrows our focus and exaggerates our experience. Not only did I fail, *"I am a failure."* Not only was I disappointed, *"my life is disappointing."* When we mindfully observe our pain, however, we can acknowledge our suffering without exaggerating it, allowing us to take a wiser and more objective perspective on ourselves and our lives.

To be self-compassionate, mindfulness is actually the first step we need to take—we need presence of mind to respond in a new way. So immediately after the office party faux pas, for instance, instead of drowning her sorrows in a box of chocolates, Theresa summoned the courage needed to face what had happened.

> *Theresa added: "I just acknowledged how bad I felt in the moment. I wish it didn't happen, but it did happen. What was amazing is that I could actually be with the feelings of embarrassment, the flushed cheeks, the heat rising in my head, without getting lost in self-judgment. I knew the feelings wouldn't kill*

me, and they would eventually pass. And they did. I gave myself a little pep talk, saw my coworker the next day to apologize and explain myself, and everything was fine."

Cultivating a state of loving, connected presence can change our relationship with ourselves and the world around us.

Another way to describe the three essential elements of self-compassion is *loving* (self-kindness), *connected* (common humanity) *presence* (mindfulness). When we are in the mind state of loving, connected presence, our relationship to ourselves, others, and the world is transformed.

EXERCISE

How Do I Treat a Friend?

- Close your eyes and reflect for a moment on the following question:
  - Think about various times when you've had a close friend who was struggling in some way—had a misfortune, failed, or felt inadequate—and you were feeling pretty good about yourself. How do you typically respond to your friends in such situations? What do you say? What tone do you use? How is your posture? Nonverbal gestures?
- Write down what you discovered.

- Now close your eyes again and reflect on the next question:
  - Think about various times when *you* were struggling in some way—had a misfortune, failed, or felt inadequate. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? What do you say? What tone do you use? Your posture? Nonverbal gestures?
- Write down what you discovered.

- Finally, consider the differences between how you treat your close friends when they are struggling and how you treat yourself. Do you notice any patterns?

REFLECTION

What came up for you while doing this practice?

When they do this exercise many people are shocked at how badly they treat themselves compared to their friends. If you are one of these people, you are not alone. Preliminary data suggests that the vast majority of people are more compassionate to others than to themselves. Our culture doesn't encourage us to be kind to ourselves, so we need to intentionally practice changing our relationship with ourselves in order to counter the habits of a lifetime.

EXERCISE

Relating to Ourselves with Self-Compassion

Think about a current struggle you're going through in your life—one that's not too serious. For example, maybe you had a fight with your partner and you said something you regret. Or maybe you really blew it on a work assignment and you're frightened your boss is going to call you in for a meeting to reprimand you.

- Write down the situation.

- First write down any ways you may be lost in the story line of the situation and running away with it. Is it all you can think about, or are you making a bigger deal out of things than is warranted? For example, are you terrified that you will be fired even though the mistake was pretty minor?

- Now see if you can mindfully acknowledge the pain involved in this situation without exaggerating it or being overly dramatic. Write down any painful or difficult feelings you may be having, trying to do so with a relatively objective and balanced tone. Validate the difficulty of the situation, while trying not to get overly caught up in the story line of what you're feeling. For example: "I'm feeling really frightened that I will get in trouble with my boss after this incident. It's difficult for me to feel this right now."

- Next write down any ways you may be feeling isolated by the situation, thinking that it shouldn't have happened or that you're the only one who has been in this situation. For example, are you assuming that your work should be perfect and that it's abnormal to make mistakes? That no one else at your work makes these types of mistakes?

- Now try to remind yourself of the common humanity of the situation—how normal it is to have feelings like this and the fact that many people are probably experiencing feelings similar to yours. For example: "I guess it's natural to feel frightened after making a mistake at work. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, and I'm sure many other people have been in a similar situation to what I'm facing right now."

- Next write down any ways you may be judging yourself for what happened. For example, are you calling yourself names ("stupid idiot") or being overly harsh with yourself ("You are always messing up. Why can't you ever learn?")?

- Finally, try writing yourself some words of kindness in response to the difficult emotions you are feeling. Write using the same type of gentle, supportive words you might use with a good friend you cared about. For example: "I'm so sorry that you're feeling frightened right now. I'm sure it will be okay, and I'll be here to support you whatever happens." Or else, "It's okay to make mistakes, and it's okay to feel scared about the consequences. I know you did your best."

2

What Self-Compassion Is Not

Often people have misgivings about whether it's a good idea to be self-compassionate or whether we can be *too* self-compassionate. Certainly Western culture doesn't promote self-compassion as a virtue, and many people harbor deep suspicions about being kind to themselves. These misgivings often block our ability to be self-compassionate, so it's good to take a close look at them.

EXERCISE

My Misgivings about Self-Compassion

- Write down any misgivings that you personally have about self-compassion—any fears or concerns you have about its possible downsides.

- Sometimes our attitudes are shaped by what other people in our life think about self-compassion. Write down any misgivings that other people or society at large have about self-compassion.

REFLECTION

If you identified some misgivings that you hold, that's a good thing. These misgivings are actually barriers to your ability to be self-compassionate, and awareness is the first step toward starting to dismantle these barriers.

Misgivings about self-compassion are likely to be misconceptions.

Fortunately, an ever-increasing body of research shows that the most common misgivings about self-compassion are actually misconceptions. In other words, our misconceptions are generally unfounded. Below are some of the fears people express over and over again at our courses, followed by a brief description of the evidence to the contrary.

"Doesn't self-compassion just mean throwing a pity party for poor me?"

Many people fear that self-compassion is really just a form of self-pity. In fact, self-compassion is an *antidote* to self-pity. While self-pity says "poor me," self-compassion recognizes that life is hard for everyone. Research shows that self-compassionate people are more likely to engage in perspective taking, rather than focusing on their own distress. They are also *less* likely to ruminate on how bad things are, which is one of the reasons self-compassionate people have better mental health. When we are self-compassionate, we remember that everyone suffers from time to time (common humanity), and we don't exaggerate the extent of our struggles (mindfulness). Self-compassion is not a "woe is me" attitude.

"Self-compassion is for wimps. I have to be tough and strong to get through my life."

Another big fear is that self-compassion will make us weak and vulnerable. In fact, self-compassion is a reliable source of inner strength that confers courage and enhances resilience when we're faced with difficulties. Research shows self-compassionate people are better able to cope with tough situations like divorce, trauma, or chronic pain.

"I need to think more about other people, not myself. Being self-compassionate is way too selfish and self-focused."

Some worry that by being self-compassionate rather than just focusing on being compassionate to others, they will become self-centered or selfish. However, giving compassion to ourselves actually enables us to give more to others in relationships. Research shows self-compassionate people tend to be more caring and supportive in romantic relationships, are more likely to compromise in relationship conflicts, and are more compassionate and forgiving toward others.

"Self-compassion will make me lazy. I will probably just skip work whenever I feel like it and stay in bed eating chocolate chip cookies all day!"

Although many people fear that being self-compassionate means being self-indulgent, it's actually just the opposite. Compassion inclines us toward long-term health and well-being, not short-term pleasure (just as a compassionate mother doesn't let her child eat all the ice cream she wants, but says, "eat your vegetables"). Research shows self-compassionate people engage in healthier behaviors like exercise, eating well, drinking less, and going to the doctor more regularly.

"If I'm compassionate to myself, I'll let myself get away with murder. I need to be hard on myself when I mess up to make sure I don't hurt other people."

Another fear is that self-compassion is really a form of making excuses for bad behavior. Actually, self-compassion provides the safety needed to admit mistakes rather than needing to blame someone else for them. Research shows that self-compassionate people take greater personal responsibility for their actions and are more likely to apologize if they've offended someone.

"I will never get to where I want in life if I let up on my harsh self-criticism for even one moment. It's what drives me to succeed. Self-compassion is fine for some people, but I have high standards and goals I want to achieve in my life."

The most common misgiving people have is that self-compassion might undermine their motivation to achieve. Most people believe self-criticism is an effective motivator, but it's not. Self-criticism tends to undermine self-confidence and leads to fear of failure. If we are self-compassionate, we will still be motivated to reach our goals—not because we're inadequate as we are, but because we care about ourselves and want to reach our full potential (see Chapter 11). Research shows that self-compassionate people have high personal standards; they just don't beat themselves up when they fail. This means they are less afraid of failure and are more likely to try again and to persist in their efforts after failing.

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

Often when telling people about self-compassion, we get this type of comment.

"That's just like Stuart Smalley on *Saturday Night Live,* who loved to gaze in the mirror and say 'I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!' Isn't it?"

To truly understand what self-compassion is, it's important to distinguish it from a close cousin—self-esteem. In Western culture, high self-esteem requires standing out in a crowd—being special and above average. The problem, of course, is that

it's impossible for *everyone* to be above average at the same time. While there may be some areas in which we excel, 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 ourselves.

Self-compassion should not be confused with self-esteem.

The desire to see ourselves as better than average, however, and to *keep* that elusive feeling of high self-esteem, can lead to some 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, or political group is better than yours, I get a self-esteem boost.

But self-compassion is different from self-esteem. Although they're both strongly linked to psychological well-being, they diverge in significant ways:

- Self-esteem is a positive evaluation of self-worth. 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.
- Self-esteem requires feeling better than others. Self-compassion requires acknowledging that we are all imperfect.
- Self-esteem tends to be a fair-weather friend, there for us when we succeed but deserting us precisely when we need it the most—when we fail or make a fool of ourselves. 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 *because* it hurts. "Wow, that was pretty humiliating. I'm so sorry. It's okay though; these things happen."
- Compared with self-esteem, self-compassion is less contingent on conditions like physical attractiveness or successful performance and provides a more stable sense of self-worth over time. It is also linked to less social comparison and narcissism than self-esteem is.

EXERCISE

How Is Self-Esteem Working for You?

- How do you feel when you receive the feedback that your performance is average in an area of life that you care about (e.g., work, parenting, friendship, romance)?

- How do you feel when someone is *better* at doing something you really care about (e.g., achieving more sales, baking tastier cookies for the school party, being a better basketball player, looking better in a swimsuit)?

- How does it impact you when you *fail* at something that you care about (e.g., your teaching evaluations are poor, your kid says you're a horrible dad, you don't get asked out for a second date)?

3

The Benefits of Self-Compassion

On the first night of our course, Marion was pretty skeptical. "How will self-compassion help me? I'm in the habit of being really hard on myself—it's the devil I know. It's what got me to where I am today. Why should I change? Can *I change? How can I be sure it's a safe thing to do?"*

Luckily, Marion didn't have to just take our word for it. Over a thousand research studies have demonstrated the mental and physical health benefits of self-compassion.

People who are more self-compassionate experience greater well-being:

Less	More
Depression	Happiness
Anxiety	Life satisfaction
Stress	Self-confidence
Shame	Physical health

Although people naturally vary in terms of how self-compassionate they are, it is also the case that self-compassion can be learned. Research has shown that people who took the MSC course (the program this workbook is based on) increased their levels of self-compassion by an average of 43%. Participation in the course also helped them to become more mindful and compassionate toward others, feel more social connectedness, life satisfaction, and happiness, and be less depressed, anxious, and stressed. Participants were also less likely to avoid their difficult emotions after taking MSC.

Most of these benefits were tied directly to learning to be more self-compassionate. Moreover, the increase in self-compassion and other benefits of MSC were maintained one year later. Gains in self-compassion were linked to how much self-compassion

practice participants did (either days per week spent meditating or times per day spent doing informal practices). This research suggests that by practicing the various exercises in this book, you can radically transform the way you relate to yourself, and by doing so radically transform your life.

MSC practices can transform how you relate to yourself and in turn transform your life.

Marion had an enviable life on the outside—two great kids, a happy marriage, fulfilling work—but she went to bed almost every night a nervous wreck: worrying that she had offended someone or beating herself up because she didn't do enough as a mom, and feeling disappointed that she was not keeping up with her high expectations. No amount of reassurance seemed to make a difference. Marion was the kind of person whom everyone else could rely on to say just the right thing at the right time, and to be kind and supportive to just about everyone, but somehow that didn't translate into how Marion treated herself. She knew that a change had to come from the inside. But how?

Self-compassion seemed like it might provide an answer so she signed up for an MSC course. Before starting the program, Marion filled out the Self-Compassion Scale (see the next page) and realized that she was probably her own worst enemy. In the first MSC class, Marion discovered that she was not alone; in fact, criticizing ourselves, isolating ourselves, and getting stuck in rumination when things go wrong is pretty instinctive for all of us.

Marion's next step toward self-compassion—recognizing the pain of self-criticism—came easily to her. Her need for approval was starting to wear out her friends and family, and Marion was already too aware of her desperate wish to be perfect. That longing had deep roots in Marion's childhood. She was raised by a financially successful, but emotionally distant, father and an ex-beauty-queen mother who resented the tedium of being a full-time mom. Marion yearned for more warmth and closeness with her parents, but it always seemed slightly out of reach. As she grew up, Marion managed to get attention by succeeding at most everything she did. It came at a cost, however, because success never made Marion feel the way she wanted to feel.

The first epiphany came to Marion when she connected with how much and how unconditionally she loved her young children. Marion wondered, "Why do I systematically exclude myself from that love?" Couldn't she tuck herself into that good feeling, Marion wondered, much like she sometimes tucks herself into bed with her kids at the end of the day? Couldn't she talk to herself in the same caring way she talked to her friends? "After all," Marion thought, "I need to be loved just like everyone else!"

As Marion gave herself permission to love herself, she started to feel some of the old longing and loneliness of her childhood. By then, however, Marion was committed to the idea that she deserved compassion as much as anyone else. She even started to feel some grief for the many long years that she struggled to get the affection of others to fill the hole in her heart. Self-compassion

practice was hard, but she persisted. She knew that these old feelings needed to come out, and she was learning the resources she needed to meet them—mindfulness and self-compassion. She could now start to give herself what she had longed to receive from others.

Her friends and family started to notice a change in Marion. It was small things at first, like deciding not to go out with friends when she felt exhausted. Marion found she could fall asleep more easily, perhaps because she wasn't taking inventory of all her missteps during the day. She still occasionally woke up with nightmares—such as dreaming that she had to make a presentation at work and she didn't remember what it was about—but she simply put her hand over her heart and spoke comforting words to herself and fell right back to sleep. Her husband noted, only partly in jest, that Marion required "less maintenance." By the end of the eight-week MSC course, Marion and her family all agreed that she had become a happier person. But what was really amazing was that she stopped berating herself for making mistakes, let go of the need to be perfect, and began to love and accept herself just as she was.

EXERCISE

How Self-Compassionate Am I?

The path to self-compassion often begins with an objective assessment of how self-compassionate or not we are. The Self-Compassion Scale measures the degree to which people show self-kindness or harsh self-judgment, have a sense of common humanity or feel isolated by their imperfection, and are mindful of or overidentify with their suffering. Most research uses this scale to measure self-compassion and determine its link to well-being. Take the test to find out how self-compassionate you are.

This is an adapted version of the short form of the Self-Compassion Scale. If you would like to try the full Self-Compassion Scale and have your results calculated for you, go to *www.self-compassion.org/test-how-self-compassionate-you-are*.

The following statements describe how you act toward yourself in difficult times. Read each statement carefully before answering, and to the left of each item indicate how often you behave in the stated manner on a scale of 1 to 5.

For the first set of items, use the following scale:

Almost never				Almost always
1	2	3	4	5

_____ I try to be understanding and patient toward those aspects of my personality I don't like.

_____ When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation.

Almost never				Almost always
1	2	3	4	5

_____ I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.

_____ When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.

_____ When something upsets me, I try to keep my emotions in balance.

_____ When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.

For the next set of items, use the following scale (notice that the endpoints of the scale are reversed from those above):

Almost always				Almost never
1	2	3	4	5

_____ When I fail at something important to me, I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.

_____ When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.

_____ When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.

_____ When I'm feeling down, I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.

_____ I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.

_____ I'm intolerant and impatient toward those aspects of my personality I don't like.

How to score your test:

Total (sum of all 12 items) _____

Mean score = Total/12 _____

Average overall self-compassion scores tend to be around 3.0 on the 1–5 scale, so you can interpret your overall score accordingly. As a rough guide, a score of 1–2.5 for your overall self-compassion score indicates you are low in self-compassion, 2.5–3.5 indicates you are moderate, and 3.5–5.0 means you are high in self-compassion.

REFLECTION

If you scored lower in self-compassion than you would like, don't worry. The beautiful thing about self-compassion is that it is a skill that can be learned. You might just have to give yourself some time, but it will happen eventually.

INFORMAL PRACTICE

Keeping a Self-Compassion Journal

Try writing a self-compassion journal every day for one week (or longer if you like). Journaling is an effective way to express emotions and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being.

At some point during the evening, when you have a few quiet moments, review the day's events. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. (For instance, perhaps you got angry at the waitstaff at a restaurant because they took forever to bring the check. You made a rude comment and stormed off without leaving a tip. Afterward, you felt ashamed and embarrassed.) For each difficult event that happened during the day, try mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to relate to the event in a more self-compassionate way. Here's how:

Mindfulness

This will mainly involve bringing balanced awareness to the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting and nonjudgmental of your experience, without diminishing it or becoming overly dramatic. (For example, "I was frustrated because the waitperson was so slow. I got angry, overreacted, and felt foolish afterward.")

Common Humanity

Write down the ways in which your experience was part of being human. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. ("Everyone overreacts sometimes—it's only human." "This is how people are likely to feel in a situation like that.") You might also want to think about the unique causes and conditions underlying your painful event. ("My frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was half an hour late for my doctor's appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different, my reaction probably would have been different.")

Self-Kindness

Write yourself some kind, understanding words, much as you might write to a good friend. Let yourself know that you care about your happiness and well-being, adopting a gentle, reassuring tone. ("It's okay. You messed up, but it wasn't the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it. Maybe you can try being extra patient and generous to any waitstaff you encounter this week.")

REFLECTION

After keeping your self-compassion journal for at least a week, ask yourself if you noticed any changes in your internal dialogue. How did it feel to write to yourself in a more self-compassionate manner? Do you think it helped you to cope with the difficulties that arose?

Some people will find that keeping a self-compassion journal is a wonderful way to help support their practice, while for others it may seem like a chore. It's probably worth trying it out for a week or so, but if journal writing isn't your thing, you can skip the writing part. The important thing is that we practice all three steps of self-compassion—mindfully turning toward our pain, remembering that imperfection is part of the shared human experience, and being kind and supportive to ourselves because things are difficult.

4

The Physiology of Self-Criticism and Self-Compassion

According to Paul Gilbert, who created compassion-focused therapy (CFT), when we criticize ourselves we're tapping into the body's threat-defense system (sometimes referred to as our reptilian brain). Among the many ways we can react to perceived danger, the threat-defense system is the quickest and most easily triggered. This means that self-criticism is often our first reaction when things go wrong.

The threat-defense system evolved so that when we perceive a threat, our amygdala (which registers danger in the brain) gets activated, we release cortisol and adrenaline, and we get ready to fight, flee, or freeze. The system works well for protecting against threats to our physical bodies, but nowadays most of the threats we face are challenges to our self-image or self-concept.

When we feel inadequate, our self-concept is threatened, so we attack the problem—ourselves!

Feeling threatened puts stress on the mind and body, and chronic stress can cause anxiety and depression, which is why habitual self-criticism is so bad for emotional and physical well-being. With self-criticism, we are both the attacker and the attacked.

Luckily, we're not just reptiles, but also mammals. The evolutionary advance of mammals is that mammalian young are born very immature and have a longer developmental period to adapt to their environment. To keep infants safe during this vulnerable period, the mammalian care system evolved, prompting parents and offspring to stay close.

When the care system is activated, oxytocin (the love hormone) and endorphins (natural feel-good opiates) are released, which helps reduce stress and increase feelings of safety and security. Two reliable ways of activating the care system are soothing touch and gentle vocalizations (think of a cat purring and licking her kittens).

Compassion, including *self*-compassion, is linked to the mammalian care system. That's why being compassionate to ourselves when we feel inadequate makes us feel safe and cared for, like a child held in a warm embrace.

Extending compassion to ourselves when we feel insecure is like getting comfort from a parent.

Self-compassion helps to downregulate the threat response. When the stress response (fight–flight–freeze) is triggered by a threat to our self-concept, we are likely to turn on ourselves in an unholy trinity of reactions. We fight ourselves (self-criticism), we flee from others (isolation), or we freeze (rumination). These three reactions are precisely the opposite of the three components of self-compassion—self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. The following table illustrates the relationship of the stress response to self-compassion.

Stress Response	*Stress Response Turned Inward*	*Self-Compassion*
Fight	Self-criticism	Self-kindness
Flight	Isolation	Common humanity
Freeze	Rumination	Mindfulness

When we practice self-compassion, we are deactivating the threat-defense system and activating the care system. In one study, for instance, researchers asked participants to imagine receiving compassion and feeling it in their bodies. Every minute they were told things like "Allow yourself to feel that you are the recipient of great compassion; allow yourself to feel the loving-kindness that is there for you." It was found that the participants given these instructions had lower cortisol levels after the imagery than those in the control group. Participants also demonstrated increased heart-rate variability afterward. The safer people feel, the more open and flexible they can be in response to their environment, and this is reflected in how much their heart rate varies in response to stimuli. So you could say that when they gave themselves compassion, participants' hearts actually opened and became less defensive.

Thomas was a good, conscientious man who volunteered at his church and could always be counted on to lend a helping hand to others. He was also a relentless self-critic. He criticized himself for almost everything—he wasn't successful enough, smart enough, giving enough. He was too self-critical! Whenever Thomas noticed anything he did that he didn't like about himself, the insults began. "Lame-ass. Stupid fool. Loser." Constant self-criticism was wearing him down, and he started to become depressed.

After learning that self-criticism is associated with feeling threatened, Thomas wondered what he might be afraid of that made him so self-critical. It immediately became clear to him that he was afraid of being rejected. As a

child, Thomas was badly bullied for having learning differences and never felt he fit in. There was a part of him that believed that if he bullied and attacked himself for his inadequacies now, it would somehow miraculously motivate him to do better so that others would accept him while also protecting him from the pain of being judged—he'd beat them to the punch. Of course, self-criticism didn't work—it just made him depressed.

Thomas had also learned that he could feel safe by activating the care system—simple things like speaking to himself in a friendly, understanding way. So he gave it a try. When the slew of insults began, he would catch himself: "I see you feel afraid and you're trying to protect yourself." Eventually he started to add things like "It's okay. You aren't perfect, but you're trying your best." Although the habit of self-criticism was still strong, acknowledging where it came from helped him to not get so sucked into it and gave him hope that, with time, he could learn to treat himself with the kindness and acceptance he wasn't shown as a child.

INFORMAL PRACTICE

Soothing Touch

Although it may seem a bit "touchy-feely" at first—and in fact it is—it's useful to harness the power of physical touch to help us trigger the compassion response. By putting one or two hands on our physical body in a warm, caring, and gentle way, we can help ourselves to feel safe and comforted. It's important to note that different physical gestures evoke different emotional responses in different people. The invitation is to find a manner of physical touch that feels genuinely supportive, so that you can use this gesture to care for yourself whenever you're under stress.

What touch do I need to feel safe and comforted?

Find a private space where you don't have to worry about anyone watching you. Below is a list of different ways that people comfort themselves with touch. Go ahead and try them out, and also feel free to experiment on your own. You may want to do this exploration with your eyes closed so you can focus on what feels just right for you.

- ✧ One hand over your heart
- ✧ Two hands over your heart
- ✧ Gently stroking your chest
- ✧ Cupping your hand over a fist over your heart
- ✧ One hand on your heart and one on your belly
- ✧ Two hands on your belly
- ✧ One hand on your cheek

- ✧ Cradling your face in your hands
- ✧ Gently stroking your arms
- ✧ Crossing your arms and giving yourself a gentle hug
- ✧ One hand tenderly holding the other
- ✧ Cupping your hands in your lap

Continue your exploration until you find a type of touch that is truly comforting—everyone is different.

REFLECTION

What was this practice like for you? Were you able to find a gesture that felt genuinely soothing and supportive?

If you found a physical touch that works for you, try adopting this gesture whenever you feel stress or emotional pain in everyday life. By helping your body feel cared for and safe, you will make it easier for your mind and heart to follow.

Sometimes it can feel awkward or uncomfortable when we give ourselves soothing touch, however. In fact, "backdraft" often arises—a concept we will discuss further in Chapter 8. *Backdraft* refers to old pains that emerge when we give ourselves kindness, such as remembering times when we were *not* treated kindly. This is why soothing touch might not feel soothing. If that happens to you, you can try touching an external object that is warm and soft, like petting a dog or cat, or holding a pillow. Or maybe a firmer gesture would feel better, such as tapping or fist-bumping your own chest. The point is to express care and kindness in a manner that meets your own needs.

INFORMAL PRACTICE

Self-Compassion Break

This practice is a way to help remind ourselves to apply the three core components of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness—when difficulties arise in our lives. It also harnesses the power of soothing touch to help us feel safe and cared for. It's important to find language that is effective for you personally—you don't want to have an internal argument about whether the words make sense. For example, some people prefer the word *struggle* to the word *suffering,* or prefer the word *support* or *protect* to the word *kindness.* Try out a few different variations and then practice what works for you.

After reading through these instructions, you may want to try them out with your eyes closed so you can go inward more deeply. You can also find a guided recording of this practice online (see the end of the Contents for information).

- Think of a situation in your life that is causing you stress, such as a health problem, relationship problem, work problem, or some other struggle.

  Choose a problem in the mild to moderate range, not a big problem, as we want to build the resource of self-compassion gradually.

- Visualize the situation clearly in your mind's eye. What is the setting? Who is saying what to whom? What is happening? What *might* happen?

  Can you feel discomfort in your body as you bring this difficulty to mind? If not, choose a slightly more difficult problem.

- Now, try saying to yourself: "This is a moment of suffering."
  - That's mindfulness. Perhaps other wording speaks to you better. Some options are:
    - *This hurts.*
    - *Ouch.*
    - *This is stressful.*

- Now, try saying to yourself: "Suffering is a part of life."
  - That's common humanity. Other options include:
    - *I'm not alone.*
    - *Everyone experiences this, just like me.*
    - *This is how it feels when people struggle in this way.*

- Now, offer yourself the gesture of soothing touch that you discovered in the previous exercise.
- And try saying to yourself: "May I be kind to myself" or "May I give myself what I need."

  Perhaps there are particular words of kindness and support that you need to hear right now in this difficult situation. Some options may be:
  - *May I accept myself as I am.*
  - *May I begin to accept myself as I am.*
  - *May I forgive myself.*
  - *May I be strong.*
  - *May I be patient.*
- If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person? What simple message would you like to deliver to your friend, heart to heart?

  Now see if you can offer the same message to yourself.

REFLECTION

Take a moment to reflect on how the experience of this exercise was for you. Did you notice anything after you evoked mindfulness with the first phrase, "This is a moment of suffering"? Any shifts?

How about the second phrase, reminding you of common humanity, or the third, which invited self-kindness? Were you able to find kindhearted words you would say to a friend, and if so, what was it like to say the same words to yourself? Easy? More difficult?

Sometimes it takes a bit of time to find language that works for you personally and feels authentic. Allow yourself to be a slow learner—eventually you will find the right words.

Note that this informal practice can be done slowly as a sort of mini-meditation, or you can use the words as a three-part mantra when you encounter difficulties in daily life.

INFORMAL PRACTICE

Compassionate Movement

This informal practice can be used whenever you need a stretch break. It can be practiced with open or closed eyes. The main idea is to move compassionately from the inside out, not necessarily in prescribed ways.

Anchoring

- Stand up and feel the soles of your feet on the floor. Rock forward and backward a little and side to side. Make little circles with your knees, feeling the changes of sensation in the soles of your feet. Anchor your awareness in your feet.

Opening

- Now open your field of awareness and scan your whole body for other sensations, noticing any areas of ease as well as areas of tension.

Responding Compassionately

- Now focus for a moment on any places of *discomfort*.
  - Gradually begin to move your body in a way that feels really good to you—giving yourself compassion. For example, let yourself gently twist your shoulders, roll your head, turn at the waist, drop into a forward bend . . . whatever feels just right for you now.
  - Give your body the movement it needs, letting your body guide you.
  - Sometimes our bodies disappoint us, or we're not happy with the way

they look or feel or move. If that is so for you, just be with yourself and your tender heart for a moment. Your body is doing its best. What do you need right now?

Coming to Stillness

- Finally, come to stillness. Stand again and feel your entire body, noting any changes.
    - Allow yourself to be just as you are in this moment.

REFLECTION

Take a moment to reflect on how the experience of this exercise was for you. Did it feel different to stretch as an intentional caring response to discomfort? Were you able to find a way of moving that gave your body what it needed?

This practice can be used multiple times throughout the day. Whether or not your body feels better after stretching is actually less important than the intention to notice where you're holding tension in your body and responding in a caring manner. We often ignore our bodies' subtle distress signals, and getting into the habit of checking in and intentionally giving ourselves what we need can go a long way toward developing a healthier and more supportive self-to-self relationship.