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Self-Compassion

The Secret to Empowered Action is Learning Not to Beat Yourself Up

by Emma Seppala
Illustration by Farida Zaman

Strive for more, work even harder, aim to be the best! We live in a society that regularly sends us such messages. Meanwhile, most of us don't stop to consider whether our goals are possible or whether they would even bring us lasting happiness. Even if we were to win a gold medal at the Olympics, our status as reigning champion would only last a few years and would most likely be accompanied by anxiety about losing in the future. On my first day at Yale, one of the deans proclaimed, "You are not only the elite; you are the elite of the elite," and I still remember the wave of nausea this comment evoked in me. Success, after all, is a precarious position. While we strive to become infallible and to retain our position at the top, we cannot escape suffering.

This suspicion was confirmed as I observed my fellow classmates progress through freshman year. Each of us had previously been at the top of his or her class in high school. But we now found ourselves as one smart student among many, no longer special and no longer standing out. Yet we still continued to sweat, struggle, and strive. We had learned that we had to be the best. Most of us found this experience hard to bear, and it left me wondering whether this maddening competitiveness is the reason why anxiety and depression are exceptionally rampant on Ivy League campuses.

Kristin Neff, associate professor of human development at the University of Texas and a pioneer of research on self-compassion, believes that our society's emphasis on achievement and self-esteem lies at the heart of much unnecessary and even counterproductive suffering. From an early age, we are taught to build our self-esteem by competing successfully, yet competition is a losing battle. Psychologists have discovered that most people believe they are above average and better than others on almost every trait (the better-than-average effect). This belief helps us ward off painful feelings of inadequacy, but it comes at a price. When our self-esteem rests on the premise of successfully competing against others, we are always precariously teetering on the edge of losing. Social comparison and competition also foster disconnection by causing us to view others as obstacles to overcome in order to keep our position, mark our territory, and vanquish potential rivals. We ultimately feel more separate from others when the primary goal of our desire for success is to belong and to be loved.

It is quite simply impossible to be better than everyone at all times. Yet research shows that when we lose we tend to feel highly self-critical, adding to our misery. Faced with criticism, we become defensive and may feel crushed. Mistakes and failure make us so insecure and anxious that we give up early when faced with future challenge. Down

the road this type of competitive self-esteem has been tied to larger societal problems such as loneliness, isolation, and even prejudice.

After observing the pitfalls of self-esteem, Neff went looking for an alternative, a way to set and achieve our goals without beating up ourselves — or anyone else — in the process. Through the practice of Buddhism, she found it in the form of self-compassion. With self-compassion, you value yourself not because you've judged yourself positively and others negatively but because you're intrinsically deserving of care and concern like everyone else. Where self-esteem leaves us powerless and distraught, self-compassion is at the heart of empowerment, learning, and inner strength.

Treating Yourself Like Your Best Friend

Working hard, striving to meet one's goals, and performing to the best of one's potential are obviously tremendously useful skills in the areas of both professional and personal growth. However, Neff 's research suggests that replacing self-esteem with self-compassion may have far superior implications for our mental health and well-being. In one study, for example, Neff found that when faced with a threatening situation (having to describe one's weaknesses in a job interview), self-compassion was associated with lower anxiety, whereas self-esteem did not impact anxiety levels.

Neff defines self-compassion as "being kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure, rather than being harshly self-critical; perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience, rather than seeing them as isolating; and holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness, rather than over-identifying with them." (See "The Three Elements of Self-Compassion," page 62.)

It is, in a sense, taking on the attitude that one might have toward a friend who has failed at something. Rather than berating him, judging him, and adding to his despair, we listen with empathy and understanding, encourage him to remember that mistakes are only normal, and validate his emotions without adding fuel to the fire. Self-compassion is the ability to act with ourselves as we would with such a friend.

Neff explains that self-compassion is not a way of avoiding goals or becoming self-indulgent. Instead, self-compassion is a great motivator because it involves the desire to alleviate suffering, to heal, to thrive, and to be happy. A parent who cares about her child will insist on the child's eating vegetables and doing her homework, no matter how unpleasant these experiences are for the child. Similarly, taking it easy on yourself may be appropriate in some situations, but in times of over-indulgence and laziness, self-compassion involves toughening up and taking responsibility.

A Better Way to Deal with Failure

When you are motivated by self-compassion, you see failure as the best learning opportunity. Criticism, for example, usually consists of a grain of truth that pertains to us and a grain of resentment or untruth that pertains to the critic's perception. Because of the sting that accompanies criticisms, we either become defensive or beat ourselves up — and ultimately miss the useful lesson. With self-compassion, however, we view failure with greater calm and understand it as an opportunity from which growth can follow.

Moreover, by preventing the defeating effects of self-criticism, self-compassion allows us to maintain peace of mind and thereby retain our energy. By remaining level-headed and understanding in the face of rejection, failure, or criticism, we develop an unshakable strength and ensure emotional stability independent of external circumstances. Neff explains that self-compassion provides a stable sense of self-worth that fluctuates much less over time, because it is not contingent on looking a certain way or competing successfully. In this way, it allows us to both experience well-being and contribute to society in meaningful ways.

Though research into the physiology of self-compassion versus self-criticism is still pending, Neff hypothesizes a simple model. Harsh self-criticism activates the sympathetic nervous system ("fight or flight") and elevates stress hormones such as cortisol in our bloodstream. When this sting has a hold on us, we cannot learn from or engage with the kernel of truth that may be there to serve us. Self-compassion, on the other hand, may trigger the mammalian care-giving system and hormones of affiliation and love, such as oxytocin. Also known as the "cuddle hormone," oxytocin is released in lactating mothers, during hugging and sex, and is associated with feelings of well-being, allowing us to hold the truth without attacking ourselves.

Developing Self-Compassion

We all know of people who seem to take care of everyone but themselves — and who berate themselves for not doing more. Neff's work confirms this observation: there is no correlation between the trait of self-compassion and feelings of compassion toward others. She noticed that many people, women in particular, are far more compassionate and kinder to others than to themselves. She gives the example of a pediatric oncology nurse who spent her life giving to others, yet was extremely hard on herself because she felt that she was not doing enough.

Yet self-compassion can be learned. It is a practice that can help us all become less self-critical and perhaps even achieve more and give more. One great example of self-compassion in action is Bonnie Thorne, who has been devoted to humanitarian work throughout her life, starting with caring for street children, disadvantaged youth, and prostitutes by successfully raising funds for service organizations. Most recently, she is leading the funding agenda for the university of Wisconsin–Madison's Center for Investigating Healthy Minds' mission to use rigorous scientific research to improve well-being in the community. Bonnie explains, "Self-compassion gives me permission to breathe my own humanity into each situation that arises and greets me and to transmit that energy into kindness to others." To know Bonnie is to see her take advantage of every opportunity and interaction to connect with others in friendship, warmth, and the intention to serve where she can.

Thorne explains that as a child, she received tremendous pressure to perform and succeed. She had few compassionate role models and was highly self-critical. However, when she was placed in foster care, she witnessed the unconditional compassion of foster parents who whole-heartedly raised her as well as other foster children of diverse races and backgrounds. Bonnie attributes their love and respect and the safe environment they created to her development into a more integrated, creative, and giving person. Through her foster parents' acceptance and kindness, the self-critical voice within her began to quiet down. Bonnie keeps that critical voice quiet with a regular meditation practice.

A Boost for High-Achievers

Etelle Higonnet is another example of how learning self-compassion can empower even super-achievers. The daughter of Harvard professors, Higonnet graduated with honors from Yale College and attended Yale law School and then continued in a blaze of successes, working at Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the United Nations. Her human rights work saved thousands of lives, and she received recognition and awards. But she tells of an important shift in her life.

Says Higonnet, "I grew up with the idea that you should always criticize yourself and that you should never be satisfied but should always strive for better. If you received an A, why didn't you get an A+? If you're on the top soccer team, why are you not the number one scorer on the soccer team? It was 'quitters never win, and winners never quit' in all domains of life, from sports to academics." As a college student, human rights violations outraged her. Her activist spirit was fueled with anger, and she threw herself into overdrive to combat human rights issues.

"It took a car accident in which I nearly lost my life and a deep experience with yogic practice and philosophy that allowed my activist anger to be transformed into activist action. I realized that, despite the human rights violations being wrong, being angry would not change anything and would only hurt me and estrange me from others. Only solutions, and not anger, really change things."

After surviving the car accident, Etelle began to feel a deep sense of gratitude for a life she now understood to be a gift. Soon thereafter, she took an intensive week-long yogic breathing and philosophy workshop that shifted her perspective. "The Art of Living course was like a tsunami of yogic learning all at once that taught me explicitly about loving others and myself and developing harmony, balance, acceptance, and compassion, not only for myself and other people but for the planet itself. That's when I understood that life was not about winning, competing, or suffering through pain in order to win. It opened up a whole way of seeing love and acceptance and balance and harmony as a big part of me and that's how I try to live my life now. I've noticed that I am much more effective and happy."

Self-Compassion in Students and Veterans

Carole Pertofsky, head of health promotion at Stanford university, is a passionate advocate of resiliency and well-being through self-compassion. Pertofsky sees many Stanford students who are passionate about service but suffer from

overexertion. She advocates the following: “Put your own oxygen mask on before giving it to others. If you run out of oxygen, you aren’t going to help anybody. Our own basic needs must be met first; only then do we have the ability to help others. As humans, when we over-give, we become empty on the inside. We dry up and feel resentful. Our energy runs scarce, and we feel as if we have no more to give.” This state has often been called “compassion fatigue” and is common in service professions, such as those of social workers and humanitarian aid workers.

Pertofsky also works with students who succumb to what’s called the “Stanford floating duck” syndrome: on the surface they look like they are calmly gliding along, but if you look underneath the water you’ll observe their legs pedaling away furiously, just to stay afloat. Carole teaches: “When we stop being self-critical and self-harming and start being kind to ourselves, it opens up the pathway to increase resilience.” Rather than wasting energy pretending to be calm while being closet workaholics and overachievers, students can actually learn to take care of themselves and to be balanced and happy.

In my own research with veterans at the university of Wisconsin–Madison, I have found that self-compassion can be very helpful for returning soldiers. One man I’ll call Mike was highly self-critical and had developed extreme forbearance and self-discipline — attributes that earned him awards for courageous actions in combat. But at home he could not reconcile his actions as a soldier with his values as a civilian, and he had come to think of himself as a terrible human being. Suffering from anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, Mike could not sleep at night. After participating in a yoga, breathing, and meditation-based workshop as part of our study, Mike’s attitude changed. He shared that though he remembers everything that happened, he understands that his past actions under orders do not represent who he is as a person now. Mike has recovered his ability to sleep.

Neff tells a similar story of working with a group of young veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. She taught them ways in which, in a challenging or anxiety-provoking situation, it is possible to evoke self-compassion through touch. From an observer’s perspective, they are simply crossing their arms, but there is a private intention of giving a self-hug. One of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder is feeling severely isolated. She describes how one of the toughest-looking veterans in the room said, “I don’t want to let go.” He felt such relief from this new attitude of self-nurturing. And that’s something you can try right now.

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Practices for Boosting Self-Compassion

1) Write yourself a letter: Take the perspective of being a compassionate friend, so you can imagine that you are this other person. Ask yourself, “What would a compassionate and kind friend say to me right now? What would his or her words be?” Later, come back and read the letter, and receive it from yourself.

2) Write down your Self-talk: If you are self-criticizing because your jeans don’t fit or you said the wrong thing in a situation, write down the self-critical words that come to mind, and then ask if you would ever say these words to a friend. What would a friend say?

3) Develop a self-Compassion mantra: Neff suggests developing something that is easily memorized, so that when something difficult happens you can go to your phrases.

These are not positive affirmations but reminders. Here is the self-compassion she developed for herself: “This is a moment of suffering. Suffering is part of life. May I be kind to myself in this moment; may I give myself the compassion that I need.” Neff’s son has autism, and when he would have a tantrum in public, she would immediately turn to her self-compassion mantra, partly as a focus for her mind but also because what she needed most at that moment was emotional support for herself, so she could deal with the situation calmly and with more grace.

For additional techniques by Kristin Neff to increase self-compassion, go to self-compassion.org.

The Three Elements of Self-Compassion

Self-kindness: Self-compassion entails being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism. Self-compassionate people recognize that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties are inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences, rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals. People cannot always be or get exactly what they want. When this reality is denied or fought against, suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration, and self-criticism. When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced.

Common humanity: Frustration at not having things exactly as we want them is often accompanied by an irrational but pervasive sense of isolation — as if “I” am the only person suffering or making mistakes — but all humans suffer. The very definition of being “human” means that one is mortal, vulnerable, and imperfect. Therefore, self-compassion involves recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience — something that we all go through, rather than being something that happens to “me” alone. It also means recognizing that personal thoughts, feelings and actions are impacted by “external” factors, such as parenting history, culture, and genetic and environmental conditions, as well as the behavior and expectations of others. Thich Nhat Hahn calls the intricate web of reciprocal cause-and-effect in which we are all imbedded “interbeing.” Recognizing our essential interbeing allows us to be less judgmental about our personal failings. After all, if we had full control over our behavior, how many people would consciously choose to have anger issues, addiction issues, debilitating social anxiety, eating disorders, and so on? Many aspects of ourselves and the circumstances of our lives are not of our choosing but instead stem from innumerable factors (genetic and/or environmental) over which we have little control. By recognizing our essential interdependence, therefore, failings and life’s difficulties do not have to be taken so personally but can be acknowledged with nonjudgmental compassion and understanding.

Mindfulness: Self-compassion also requires taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. This equilibrated stance stems from the process of relating personal experiences to those of others who are also suffering, thus putting our own situation into a larger perspective. It also stems from the willingness to observe our negative thoughts and emotions with openness and clarity, so that they are held in mindful awareness. Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental, receptive mind-state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. Mindfulness requires that we not be “over-identified” with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negative reactivity.

— Kristin Neff, PhD

Happiness — real, lasting happiness — can best be experienced when we are engaged in the flow of life - connected to rather than separate from everything else," writes self compassion pioneer ***Kristen Neff, Ph.D.*** *Her fine new book,* Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind *(William Morrow, 2011) provides a clear path for letting go into joy.*

– The Editors

source: http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/self-compassion-how-value-yourself