

Self compassion

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Imagine a time when you were feeling guilt-wracked. Maybe a time you hurt a friend badly. Maybe a time you tried to do get some important work done, and found you couldn't, and this kicked off a failure spiral leading to a deep depression. Maybe some other time: the important thing is to load into memory a time you felt guilt-wracked, and recall how you felt towards yourself in that case.

(When I do this, I get an internal sense of resistance, of not-wanting-to-look, of willing-the-past-to-be-different.)

Now imagine you have a child, who grows to the same age that you were then, who finds themselves in exactly the same situation. Maybe they, too, hurt somebody badly -- they didn't consciously realize how badly they were about to hurt a friend until one moment too late, and now they feel terrible. Or maybe they, too, tried to do something important, and found it hard, and started doubting themselves, and spiraled downwards into a depression that they now have trouble climbing out of.

Imagine what you might feel towards your child, in this scenario.

(When I do this, I get a sense of compassion, of protectiveness, and a desire to reassure them that this is what it looks like to learn hard lessons, for us monkeys.)

I encourage you to simulate the feelings you would feel towards your child in this situation —

— and then check whether you can *also* feel that way towards *yourself*.

When you think of your own failings, can you feel that compassion and protectiveness and impulse to reassure towards *you*?

Many can't. Some don't feel compassion towards others in the first place (this post is not for them — if you want help feeling compassion towards your fellow humans, then maybe try [this post](#) and see if it works for you.) Others can as easily feel compassion for themselves as others. But many people I've spoken to experience a wide gulf between compassion for others and self-compassion — which is a shame, because self-compassion is an important part of self-loyalty and the mental toolset I'm trying to convey with these posts.

To close the gap between compassion and self-compassion, I offer two tools. The first is a reminder that self-compassion is not the same thing as self-pity, and nor is it the same thing as making excuses for yourself. It is well possible to feel self-compassion even while thinking that you are not moving fast enough. It is perfectly possible to feel self-compassion

even as you notice that you're completely failing to act as you wish to.

For example, imagine someone going through boot camp in World War II, filled with resolve and determination to become a soldier and defend the free world — except they are a small person, and a weak one. Imagine them working their heart out, trying as hard as they can, and failing anyway. Imagine them failing to make the cut. Now, can you imagine feeling compassion for them, feeling warmth towards them, and maybe feeling a hint of sadness for their loss, without feeling any sense of pity? Compassion for yourself can be similar, without any hint of pity.

Or imagine another person going through the same boot camp, who really wants to go defend the free world with all their peers (on some level), but who lacks the deep drive. They *want* to feel the same passion and fire as their diminutive counterpart, but instead they feel resistance and suffer from depression — and every day they drag themselves out of bed (slightly too late), and every day they force themselves through the obstacle courses (but not quickly enough), and they aren't going to make the cut, and they're sick with guilt about it. Can you imagine feeling compassion for them in their plight, while making absolutely no excuses for their performance? Again, self-compassion can be the same way. You don't need to make excuses for yourself, to take the outside view and feel the same warmth for a monkey that's *trying* to try, against the gradient of depression and doubt.

Now imagine someone else doing what you're trying to do. Imagine them working on hard problems, and putting in what effort they can muster — sometimes it is enough, sometimes it isn't; sometimes they are highly motivated, other times they are blocked by their own mind and unable to act as they wish. Look at them and see the fragile monkey trying to build a satisfactory life, trying to improve their world. See if you can feel compassion for them. You don't need to pity them, you don't need to make excuses for their failures, you don't need to find ways they could improve: simply see if you can feel some warmth, for a fellow lost monkey — and then shift your gaze to yourself, and see if you can feel a similar sort of warmth.

The second tool I offer, to close the gap between compassion for others and compassion for yourself, is this: I recommend that you pinch yourself, and remember what you are. Practice original seeing while looking upon yourself and your situation. What do you see?

I see bundles of proteins and lipids arranged in a giant colony of cells, their lives given over to the implementation of a wet protein computer that thinks it's a person.

I see fractal patterns that arise on precisely the right sort of planet when you pour sunlight into it for a billion years.

I see wiggles in the Sun's wake that struggle to understand the universe. Incomprehensibly large constructs made of atoms, which are unnoticeably small on the scale of galaxies.

Look at us, the first species among the animals that can figure out what the stars are, yet still tightly bound to impulse and social pressure. (Notice how silly it is, monkeys acting all serious and wise as they try to affect the course of history.)

Look at us: half monkey, half god; towering below the stars.

Look at whatever quest you've taken on, you who was forged by the death of your father's brothers and now claims dominion over the future. Acknowledge that what you're trying to do is difficult. Turn the monkey sight on yourself, and see the lost monkey who's trying to steer an entire universe...

and say hello. Check in with the monkey. See how it's doing.

Steering the future is a difficult thing. The world is large beyond comprehension, and the monkey wasn't really built for this. The monkey isn't really used to this sort of thing, and it can be pretty hard to work with sometimes.

Let the monkey know that you have its back. Let it know that you'll still have its back, even if it gets ornery or difficult or depressed. Through thick and thin, let you know that

you have your support; that even when you screw everything, you'll stand by yourself, and help you through the mess, and help you figure out how to do better in the future.

See if you can resolve to work with yourself. You can do powerful things, if you work together.