Mindful Self-Compassion

We all have ‘self-talk’—a way of speaking to ourselves and thinking about what has happened to us and what we have done.

For example, suppose a person has suffered an injury or suppose that same person has done something to injure another person.

One way to ‘self-talk’ about what has happened is to use ‘self-critical’ language:

“I am just such a stupid and careless person to allow this accident to have occurred. I should have been more careful. I am clumsy and careless and absent-minded. I will never change!’

Another way to use ‘self-talk’ is to utilize ‘self-compassion. This means that you begin to speak to yourself as if you were talking to a friend who needed support. Even if the friend had been clumsy or careless, or even if the friend had done something wrong or immoral, you would not be harshly critical. You would label your friend as a ‘stupid’ or ‘careless’ or ‘immoral’ ‘they had done that was wrong:

‘You made a mistake, but you are not a bad person. You are sorry for what you have done to cause someone else pain and injury. There must be some steps you can take to begin to improve the situation. For example, why don’t you . . . ‘

**One Advantage of Mindful Self-Compassion (Compared to Mindfulness Meditation):**

Self-Compassion is much easier to learn compared to Mindfulness Meditation. Many of us have great difficulty in ‘paying attention’ to our breath or to some other focus of attention during Meditation. Our mind wanders. The experience can be frustrating. Many of us find Meditation difficult and unpleasant. Many (most?) of us stop trying to meditate after only a few real attempts.

Self-Compassion, on the other hand, is more intuitive. Almost all of us have experience in caring about (and being compassionate towards) at least one other human being.

Think about a time when you have been actively and enthusiastically supportive and kind to another human being (or to a beloved pet). Think of how you would treat that person and how you were supportive of that person, kind to that person. Think of what you would say to that person if they were in trouble or emotionally upset.

Now try this:

Put your hand on your heart and say something kind and supportive to yourself. Say to yourself what you would say to a beloved friend or sibling or parent who needed to be told something kind and supportive.

**The Self-Critical ‘Defender’ Stance**

Most, perhaps all, of us have feelings of shame, of self-criticism, of ‘not being good enough’. The common attitude is to be ‘defensive’—to defend against the ‘wounds’ of the shameful parts of ourselves and to be angry at those ‘defects’ or ‘weaknesses’ that we see in ourselves. ‘You are such an IDIOT!’ we can say to ourselves, instantly, whenever we make a mistake.

The basic function of this sort of ‘negative’ psychology is ‘safety’ or ‘survival’. This ‘defensive’ or ‘self-critical’ part of our mind is protecting our ego as a form of survival; it is defending us against feelings of shame by internally shaming us in order to shame us into improving. But this ‘self-criticism’ can get out of control. When it does, the results can be high levels of anxiety, and even serious depression.

The ’Self-Compassionate’ Part of Ourselves

But there is another ‘side’ to our psychology. There is a compassionate part of ourselves—a pro-social part that is essential for bonding with others and essential for group survival. We can ‘turn’ this compassionate part towards our own inner selves.

The compassionate part of ourselves is typically called upon when we deal with other people who we care about (our children, friends, parent, siblings, and so on). The important point is this: we are already very familiar with how to be kind and supportive (compassionate) to people (and pets) who matter to us.

We can now take this compassionate part of ourselves and ‘aim it inward’—instead of aiming it ‘outward’ towards our friends and family, we can focus on our own ‘subjective well-being’. We can focus on our own happiness.

This is NOT selfishness or self-indulgence. If someone else needs our help and support, we would NOT tell them to spend hours on their smartphone or hours playing online games. We would NOT tell them to eat a bunch of ‘junk food’ or to take drugs.

Each of us has a great deal of skill at being kind and supportive to those we love and care about.

We can use this skill towards ourselves.

And we can use it to improve our academic and work performance, as well as use it to improve our psychological well-being.

**Harsh Self-Criticism Is Often Used to ‘Push’ Our Self to Succeed**

Some people think of harsh self-criticism as necessary to keep an ‘edge’ or ‘sharpness’ in their attitude and in their activities. ‘Be the Best you can be. Don’t accept anything but the Best. Be Tough on your self if you don’t meet your standards.’

This kind of harsh self-criticism can be effective. Many people have achieved success academically (law school, medical school, business school, and so on) but the psychological price is very high:

* One example: **performance anxiety**: Realizing that you will ‘beat yourself up’ if you don’t do well (anticipating ‘negative’ reinforcement) will actually increase your level of anxiety and this will tend to undermine your performance. (‘Stage fright’ is an exteme example of this phenomenon: an accomplished actor goes on the stage and completely ‘freezes’, cannot remember their lines, cannot move or do anything connected with the play in which they are acting.)
* Another example: **feeling disconnected and alienated from others**: This habit of harsh self-criticism is a form of ‘self-absorption’ or selfish focus on your own self such that you ignore your connections to other people. In other words, you can become disconnected from others if you are completely focused on doing better than other people. This in turn can lead to a whole series of little ‘anti-social’ behaviors—interpersonal behaviours that are harmful to social closeness and connection. Isolated people tend to be less happy than people who have strong social connections to others.

Self-Compassion and Constructive Self-Criticism is Much More Effective

Constructive (supportive) criticism is more useful and more effective than hash criticism. Suppose you are a highly-skilled athlete or computer games-player. You will want to excel at your chosen activity because that excellence is related to your own happiness and well-being.

But what will help you do your best? Research on Self-Compassion provides evidence that it is Constructive criticism that does best for improvement and enjoyment of the activity. Constructive Self-Criticism can be articulated as follows:

“Okey. Well let’s examine what did not work. You did it this way and that did not work. Why don’t we try this other method? I believe in you. You have my support. I am here for you to help you in any way I can.”

Dealing with yourself using this kind of self-talk will NOT make you lose your ‘competitive edge’. Studies continually demonstrate that constructive criticism gives you more of an edge (or advantage or ability to improve) that destructive harsh criticism.

Here is a link to ‘Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation:

<https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/selfimp.motivation.pdf>

Here is the information you need to make an in text reference or a full citation in your ‘References’ page:

Date of publication: 2012

Authors: Breines, J. G. & Chen, S.

Title of article: Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation

Journal: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*

Volume Number: 20

Issue Number: 10

Page Numbers: 1-11

DOI: 10.1177/0146167212445599

In this study, students were split into three groups:

* Group 1 received instructions to be self-compassionate about failure; “It was really hard and difficult test. You should try not to beat yourself up too much about the results. Just try to be kind and supportive to yourself about failing the test. Believe in yourself—you can and will do better in the next test.” [Please note: When using ‘positive’ self-talk, it is more effective to address yourself in the second person—that is, use the word, “you”; for example: “YOU can do better.” For some reason, this seems to be more effective that thinking “I can do better.”
* Group 2 received instruction to boost ‘self-esteem’: “Don’t worry about it. You got into Berkely, a top school. You know you are smart. This test doesn’t mean anything.” [Note: ‘self-esteem’ can be defined as self-perceptions of confidence in domains of importance. In other word, self-esteem is about our need to be competent and successful at those things in life that we value.]
* Group 3 received no instructions at all. This means that they were probably harsh in their self-criticism of themselves.

**The results (findings) of the study**:

People who were instructed to be self-compassionate about their failure in the test studied longer and harder (more focused in their work) than the other two groups. How long people in the three groups studied was directly related to how well they did on the next test.

Suppose you ‘fail’ at something—Self-Compassion is the best way to deal with failure:

Being self-compassionate about a failure (and we all fail at something sometime), allows you to learn much more from that failure than if you take a self-critical or self-affirming attitude (self-esteem reaction: “The test was not fair or not accurate; I am great and wonderful”).

Failure is our best teacher, but if you become full of shame and get extremely angry with yourself you will not have the ‘presence of mind’ needed (think of the concept of ‘Awareness’ in Dahl et al. (2020) or the concept of ‘Mindfulness’ we have been discussing in lecture). This ‘presence of mind’ will allow you to objectively (accurately) assess what went wrong and how you can do things better next time (the steps you need to take in order to improve).

Self-compassion and a self-supportive attitude can give you the ‘Awareness’ and ‘presence of mind’ to be able to learn from adverse experiences—that is, a ‘growth mindset’. Self-compassion can lead to what the researchers call ‘grown mindset’—a set of attitudes whereby you actually learn (and learn quickly) from your mistakes—as opposed to the usual ‘fixed mindset’ that most of us have most of the time. (A ‘fixed mindset’ just means that you think of yourself as either ‘smart’ or ‘stupid’, ‘talented’ or ‘untalented’, one or the other.)

See the Wikipedia entry on ‘Mindset’:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindset#Fixed_and_Growth_Mindset>

See also:

Yousefi, H & Khalkali, V. (2020). The effects of mastery versus social comparison praise on students’ persistence: A role of fixed versus growth mindset. Education Sciences & Psychology, 55(1), 3-9.

For the positive effects of self-compassion while writing in a Journal (which all students are required to do in this course), see:

Hussein, H. (2018). Examining the effects of reflective journals on students' growth mindset: A case study of tertiary level EFL Students in the United Arab Emirates. *IAFOR Journal of Education. 6* (2), 33–50. doi:10.22492/ije.6.2.03.

Learning to be Self-Compassionate:

Dr. Kristen Neff, one of the leading researchers on Self-Compassion, has developed a scale for measuring self-compassion in young people (age 14 and up). Here is the link:

<https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-scales-for-researchers/>

This link provides a list of relevant research articles to help you understand the concepts of self-compassion and growth mindset.

Young people can be introduced to the concept of self-compassion as early as seven or eight, but most training occurs later (from age 14 and upwards). In order to be self-compassionate, you need to be able to take the perspective of another person towards yourself. Once you reach adolescence or young adulthood, you are better able to understand ‘meta-awareness’ or ‘meta-cognition’—the ability to form a genuine ‘self-concept’: “What kind of person am I?” You become able to see that your sense of self-worth should not depend on handsome or pretty you are or how intelligent you are. You become able to think about what characteristics you admire in a human being and how you can improve those aspects of your own character.

Think of self-compassion this way: There are three components to self-compassion: first, kindness towards yourself (which requires ‘Awareness’; second, Mindfulness (which again, is an aspect of ‘Awareness’); finally, a sense of your ‘common humanity’ or your sense of social connectedness (‘Connection’ in Dahl et al., 2020).

Self-Compassion is NOT Self-Pity

The first component of self-compassion is ‘self-kindness’. This is NOT the same thing as ‘self-pity’. If you have ‘self-love’ or ‘self-kindness’ without Awareness and without Connection, then you can fall into a state of self-pity. But this state is self-destructive. Self-pity is a state in which you focus solely on your individual self—‘poor me’ and feeling sorry for yourself without any thought of others in your life. Pity is a ‘condescending’ attitude towards another or towards yourself—it has a feeling of superiority over the person begin pitied.

Compassion, on the other hand, has no connotation of superiority. Rather, compassion si a state of ‘connection’ to the other person, an attitude that says: ‘I have been in the same terrible state you are in now and I am here to help and support you.”

So, in self-compassion, the element of ‘kindness’ to oneself must include the sense of common humanity. Ant that combination of kindness towards oneself and sense of ‘social connection’ requires ‘Awareness’ or ‘Mindfulness’. You need to be able to recognize that, like all other humans, you are imperfect and that you will live an imperfect life—there will be suffering, failure, hardship, disappointment, and all the difficulties inherent in the ‘shared human condition.’

Whenever you lack awareness and mindfulness and also lack a sense of social connection (which can easily happen when you are in a strange place such as residence on the Burnaby SFU Campus or living in a strange city such as Vancouver), then you may be prone to self-pity.

Self pity is NOT mindful. Self-pity tends to exaggerate and to ‘catastrophize’ (make every difficulty a catastrophe!): “Poor me! This is the worst thing ever! No one suffers like I do!” This is a very ‘self-focused’ state of mind. This state of mind is almost guaranteed to harm your psychological well being.

Mindfulness (or any form of ‘Awareness’ as discussed in Dahl et al., 2020) has more tranquillity and balance. It allows you to see your situation as it is (realistically without excess drama). Mindfulness prevents you from simply ignoring difficulties (the psychological concept of ‘denial’). It also prevents you from catastrophizing.

For a full discussion of the three components of Self-Compassion, see:

Neff, K. D. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 2*, 223-250. <https://doi.10.1080/15298860390209035>

Here is a link to the article:

<https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/empirical.article.pdf>

**Self-Criticism is Based on our Need for Safety—But It Does NOT Work**

Self criticism (even the harshest most destructive self-criticism) comes from a desire to be safe. We criticize ourselves, often habitually, because: we want to be safe, to do our best, to be well and high functioning, to be loved by others, to be admired and supported. We also self-criticize because we are afraid that bad things will happen to us if we don’t do well and good things can only happen when we do things well.

Unfortunately, in the long run ‘beating ourselves up’ (attacking ourselves and berating ourselves) does not work. It does not work because the self-critical part of ourselves is scared and fearful for its life so it is not really a ‘rational’ part of our cognition. It is operating with negative emotions (‘negative affect’ as per the PANAS test you did weeks ago). It will not make us happy over the years.

**Self-Compassionate Motivation Does Work**

Having an attitude of self-compassion and inner gratitude to our inner critic for trying to keep us safe will help us get motivated (and stay motivated) to correct our mistakes and improve our lives. We cannot simply ignore the inner ‘self-critic’—if we tell our ‘self-critic’ to ‘shut up’, if we try to ignore the negative thoughts and feelings, those thoughts and feelings will become LOUDER and more powerful: “Listen! Life is going to END if you don’t listen to me and you are NOT listening to me! Listen, listen, listen. Life is going to END!!”

Instead, if we do listen to and acknowledge our inner ‘self-critic’—and say to it, “Okay. I understand. I can see that you are worried about my safety and my future. Thanks so much for looking out for me. I hear you. I honor you. Trust me: I will do everything I can to keep myself safe, now and into the future.”

Once we do that—acknowledge and recognize and be ‘aware’ and ‘mindful’ of the inner self-critical voice—then it is much easier for the more compassionate part of ourselves to attempt to motivate an improvement in our behaviors and attitudes. After all, the self-compassionate part of ourselves wants to keep us safe just as much as the self-critical part does. The difference is that the self-compassionate part will help us stay safe, do our best, change unhealthy or unproductive behaviors, without telling us how fearful we should be or how inadequate we are. The self-compassionate part is a more effective and sustainable ‘voice’ of motivation simply because it care about us. Being cared for and supported is the true basis for improvement and learning.

**Mindfulness and Self-Compassion in Actual Situations**

If something upsetting occurs in the grocery store or at a take-out restaurant, you won’t be able to sit down and meditate to calm down. However, you can simply put your hand on your heart, close your eyes for a moment, and say something supportive to yourself: “Okay. You’re getting impatient and irritated. But this inefficiency in service does not really matter. You are more important. It is more important to just stay calm. Breathe. Feel your breath. Stop worrying about how long the line is . . .”

While Mindfulness Meditation is very useful, you can also simply be ‘Mindful’ without meditation. Be aware. Whenever your consciously ‘Aware’ that you are suffering, you are being ‘mindful’ of that suffering.

You can then take steps to be ‘self-compassionate’ towards yourself regarding any negative emotions you are feeling during that suffering. Think of the three components of self-compassion—self-kindness, mindfulness, and connection to others—and develop phrases and sayings that you can say to yourself (with your hand on your heart) that will make you relieve your suffering and make you feel better. For further guidance on this practice, see the ‘Self-Compassion Break’ link:

<https://self-compassion.org/exercise-2-self-compassion-break/>

Further Sources:

The Self-Compassion Website:

<https://self-compassion.org/>

On the benefits of self-compassion exercises for people who tend to suffer depression:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2010.516763?journalCode=rpos20>

A research paper about a ‘pilot study’ of a mindful self-compassion treatment program: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23070875/>

**For Those Who are Interested in ‘Training’ Themselves to be Self-Compassionate:**

See the following workbook for teens and young adults on how to enhance Mindfulness and Compassion Skills (available via Amazon; may not be available via SFU Library);

Bluth, K. (2017). The self-compassion workbook for teens: Mindfulness and compassion skills to overcome self-criticism and embrace who you are.

Here is a link to the Amazon page regarding the book:

<https://www.amazon.com/Self-Compassion-Workbook-Teens-Mindfulness-Self-Criticism/dp/1626259844>

**For Those Interested in Health and Fitness, Self-Compassion is also Effective:**

Self-compassion is linked to better physical health. See the following article:

Dunn, S., Sheffield, D., & Chilcot, J. (2016). Brief report: Self-compassion, physical health and the mediating role of health-promoting behaviours. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 1-7. <https://doi.10.1177/1359105316643377>

Here is a link:

<https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Dunne-et-al_2016.pdf>