

## Cultivating Self-Compassion: Towards Greater Self-Acceptance (i)

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You are nearer to home than you have ever been. If home is embracing yourself unconditionally, vulnerabilities, limitations and all, then moving away from self-judgement and self-criticism is leading you closer to home. If you have started to recognise the inner-critic in you and have begun to make an ally of the self-critic, (previous article) you have indeed made a big leap forward. You are not home yet. There is a bridge ahead. "We can't just go from self-criticism to self-love; we need to travel the path of self-compassion," so says a sage. Imagine you're standing on one side, where self-criticism lives. On the other side is self-love. You can't leap across in one giant step; instead, you need to walk across the bridge of self-compassion, taking it one step at a time.

What is self-compassion? It is treating ourselves with the same kindness, understanding, and care that we would offer to a good friend, especially during times of difficulty. The practice of self-compassion enhances our mental, emotional, and physical well-being. However, it is rarely taught at home or in schools, making it somewhat unfamiliar to many. The practice of self-compassion, much like empathy, should become second nature to us.

Dr Kristin Neff, a pioneer in Self-Compassion research has done much research and writing on this subject. The notes in this article are largely extracts from her writings.

Dr Kristin and her research partners found that people who practise self-compassion are happier, more optimistic and more satisfied with their lives. They develop a stable and unconditional sense of self. They are more forgiving and compassionate towards others, stronger and more resilient when faced with hardship. They are able to maintain healthier work-life balance and draw healthy boundaries. They are more authentic and connected. They are able to experience greater intimacy in relationships.

It would look like there is everything to gain and nothing to lose from practising self-compassion? Yet people have their reservations about it. Has it to do with their unfamiliarity with the concept? Or the actual practice of it? Or even misconceptions about the practice?

In this article, we shall look at the misconceptions first. In the next, we will use a scenario to show how the practice of self-compassion can help us cope with overwhelming emotions and difficulty.

Many men resist the practice of self-compassion. They exclude themselves the way they would distance from a manicure or pedicure salon. They perceive the practice of self-compassion as for softies, not congruent with toughness and stoicism, treasured traits of traditional masculinity. It does not help that our cultural expectations discourage emotional expressions.

The traits of toughness and stoicism and the practice of self-compassion are not mutually exclusive. Attending to self with kindness does not erode our toughness. In fact, offering kindness to self builds up our inner resilience so that our toughness is not only a facade while we crumble on the inside. We will be truly strong inside out.

“Self-compassion undermines me,” critics say. “My self-criticism and self-judgement drive me towards my goal. I will lose my cutting edge if I practise self-compassion.” Those who subscribe to this belief are often driven by perfectionism. Their inner-critics push them towards striving to be mistake-free. Since no one can attain perfectionism, they suffer the inevitable burnout down the road. If they are willing to perceive failure as a reality, if they can understand that failing does not make one a failure, they can shift from the approach of perfectionism to a pursuit of excellence. The spirit of excellence unlike perfectionism, is about doing one’s best, whether as a guiding principle or to becoming the best versions of themselves. This pursuit coupled with practising self-compassion, will in fact help them go further in reaching their goals and enjoying their ride at the same time.

Self-compassion is also often confused with self-pity. Self-pity says, “Poor me” and questions “Why must it always be me?” Self-pity reinforces self-rejection and self-isolation. Self-compassion recognises that suffering and pain happen to everyone. No one is spared from it. Acknowledging that pain is universal doesn’t lessen the pain, it helps us to accept pain and suffering better.

Self-compassion is often also mistaken for self-indulgence. Someone wisely explains the difference this way; - ‘Being your own supportive friend is not the same as wallowing in your problems or sitting in your pyjamas watching Netflix and eating pizzas.’ Self-indulgence is short-sighted. Practising self-compassion is taking self-responsibility towards becoming happy and healthy in the long term.

Finally, self-compassion is often thought to foster self-centredness. Far from being so. Self-centredness is about me, my interest and I only. The practice of self-compassion often leads to one realising that as one takes care of oneself, one is better able to take greater care of others. One is able to extend the empathy towards oneself to others.

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## Connect-Point

“ *Self-compassion takes practice; it doesn't come naturally.*  
(Kristin Neff, author and researcher)

The practice of self-compassion premises on three main beliefs. It premises on honouring and accepting our being human, whatever our gender. We can never be wrong in giving ourselves the attention, the care and love that we deserve.

The second premise is in believing that all emotions including painful ones like sadness, fear, shame, sorrow etc. are not undesirable. They are neutral. They are not something to be avoided. They are all our faithful friends, always loyally letting us know that some parts of us need attention. We can change the way we treat our emotions; not curse nor dread them but to respond to and accept them.

To feel is to heal. We must learn to remain present with our painful emotions. We need to give ourselves the permission to courageously acknowledge the pain or challenge we are going through. We do this by creating for ourselves a safe inner space, each time we hurt. We give priority to attending to how we feel, what we are thinking and to the parts of our body that hurt.

We ask ourselves, ‘What do I need?’ before going on to, ‘What do I do now?’ This means we harbour no agenda to make the pain go away. We work with it and not fight against it. Sometimes not doing anything but just validating the pain by acknowledging ‘this is hard for me’ is doing something.

Last but not least, this practice premises on the belief that suffering is part and parcel of being alive and human in a fallen world. The pain especially those we suffered as young children is stuck with us because we were microscopic and narrow-minded in the way we looked at life. An update to the truth that everyone goes through pain of different kinds and degrees can free us from feeling isolated in our pain.

Self-compassion is not a destination but a continuous process of growth and self-discovery. To cultivate this practice, we should ask ourselves pertinent questions: How do I currently treat myself when different emotions arise during challenges and difficulties? What am I afraid to lose by practising self-compassion? What small step can I take today to become more self-compassionate and give myself the love and attention I deserve?

May we be honest and courageous in our self-reflection, and may it lead us to a more fulfilling life.