

Compassion Practice

What is compassion?

The word “compassion” means “to suffer with.” When you have compassion for someone you experience his or her suffering. This is called “empathy.” Being compassionate also means you want to help ease the suffering. Extending compassion to yourself and others can improve your health and well-being. Having compassion for yourself is often more challenging than being compassionate toward others.

There are 3 parts to learning self-compassion:¹

- 1) **Self-kindness:** Be kind and understanding to yourself. Many people tend to judge or criticize themselves. This criticism may come in the form of guilt (“I have done something bad”) as well as shame (“I am bad”). It’s important to bring awareness to these thoughts rather than ignore them. Can you think of a time you experienced guilt or shame? Be present with how those thoughts make you feel and resist the urge to judge yourself.
- 2) **Common humanity:** Know that you are not alone. You share many experiences with people in your local area and around the world. Focus on things you have in common with others and allow them to extend compassion to you.
- 3) **Mindful awareness:** Practice mindful awareness. Often people tend to either ignore their pain or become overwhelmed by it. Mindful awareness may help you understand your relationship to pain and suffering. With practice, you may notice healthier responses to your experience of pain or other discomfort. (Refer to the handouts on [mindful awareness](#) for more information.)

How does practicing self-compassion affect my health?

Research indicates that self-compassion may help a person feel less depressed, stressed, or anxious.² It may also help someone feel more satisfied, with a greater sense of purpose in life.^{3,4} Self-compassion may help decrease worry and the fear of feeling a variety of emotions.^{5,6}

How do I practice self-compassion?

There are exercises you can do to help you practice compassion. The example below is called “Caring Moments.” It was adapted from the work of John Makransky, PhD, and Brooke Lavelle, PhD. Instead of just reading through the exercise, consider pausing after each step and being present with any physical sensations, thoughts, or emotions that surface. Please remember to care for yourself during this exercise and if you become overwhelmed by distractions or discomfort, stop practicing. It could then be possible to return to this exercise at a different time or consider working through these steps with a therapist or counselor. Feel free to start over as many times as you need to until you can slowly and comfortably move through all six steps.

- 1) Begin by breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth three times.
- 2) Think of a moment you felt appreciated and loved for who you are. The moment could include a family member or friend. It could be of a stranger who smiled at you as your paths crossed. For some, the memory might involve spending time with a pet. Others might envision a time with a spiritual figure. If this is challenging, consider connecting with the common human experience of wanting to be happy and free from fear.
- 3) Imagine that the moment where you felt cared for is happening right now ... not in the past, but right now. Notice the details around you—the colors, the smells, the sounds. Immerse yourself in the experience of being “enough”—fully welcome, fully understood, and fully loved.
- 4) Bring your attention to how this moment feels in your body. Perhaps you feel a physical warmth or spaciousness in your chest. Perhaps you feel relaxed. Maybe you don't feel anything in particular. All experiences are okay. Now, sense that every part of your body is fully accepted, loved, and appreciated, and that you are absorbing that feeling into your body, just like a cat may absorb the sunlight through a window while resting on the windowsill.
- 5) Receive this loving compassion into your mind—every part of your mind. Embrace thoughts or feelings of worry, tension, frustration, sadness, anger, and joy. Appreciate that every part of you is loved in its very being.
- 6) Finally, allow the details of the scene you recalled to fade into the background. As the pictures in your mind fade, see if the feelings and sensations of that moment can remain fully present in your body and mind. Rest in these feelings. Know that this experience of receiving compassion will always be available to you.

How do I practice extending compassion to others?

Below is an example of a compassion practice called “Loving-Kindness”. You may choose to take this practice one step at a time. One option would be to practice repeating just Step 1 for several days, weeks, or even months. When it feels appropriate to you, consider proceeding to Step 2. As with other compassion practices that incorporate mindful awareness, notice any body sensations, thoughts, or emotions that arise during this meditation. Be kind to yourself, recognize that all your experiences are okay:

- 1) Start by directing the following wishes to yourself:
 - a) May I be safe. (Take one breath)
 - b) May I be peaceful. (Breathe)
 - c) May I be kind to myself. (Breathe)
 - d) May I accept myself as I am. (Breathe)
- 2) Next, direct the wishes towards someone you love, or someone that you feel grateful to for their presence in your life:
 - a) May you be safe. (Take one breath)
 - b) May you be peaceful. (Breathe)
 - c) May you be kind to yourself. (Breathe)
 - d) May you accept yourself as you are. (Breathe)

- 3) Now think of someone you feel neutral about—you neither like nor dislike. Someone that you just met or passed in the hallway:
 - a) May you be safe. (Take one breath)
 - b) May you be peaceful. (Breathe)
 - c) May you be kind to yourself. (Breathe)
 - d) May you accept yourself as you are. (Breathe)
- 4) Next, think of someone who you don't like or who you are having a hard time with, and direct the wishes towards them. At first, don't choose the most difficult person in your life.
 - a) May you be safe. (Take one breath)
 - b) May you be peaceful. (Breathe)
 - c) May you be kind to yourself. (Breathe)
 - d) May you accept yourself as you are. (Breathe)
- 5) Finally, direct the wishes outward by saying: "May all beings everywhere be happy, healthy, safe, and live with ease."
- 6) Return your awareness to yourself and notice how you feel. Notice your breath, your body, and your heart.

For you to consider:

- How often do you show compassion toward others? When was the last time someone was compassionate towards you?
- What are some challenges in your life that make it difficult to practice self-compassion?
- What are some challenges in your life that make it difficult to practice compassion towards others?
- How do you think compassion practices will affect your own health and well-being?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health	A variety of handouts on: • topics related to family, friends, and co-workers • mindful awareness	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
UW Health Mindfulness Program	Offers a Compassionate Presence guided meditation in Additional Practices	https://www.uwhealth.org/meditation-stress-reduction/mindfulness-guided-practices/51578
Courage of Care Coalition	Offers courses in developing compassion that lasts	http://courageofcare.org/
Center for Mindful Self-Compassion	A variety of handouts and guided meditation audio recordings	http://centerformsc.org/practice-msc/guided-meditations-and-exercises/

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Vincent Minichiello MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a document for clinicians, "Compassion Practice," written by Christine Milovani, MSW, LCSW.

6/25/2019

References

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