

Introducing Self-Compassion

Now that we've been through some of the self-care habits that can help us take proper care of our bodies and live healthier lives, let's dive a little deeper into taking care of our minds. In this chapter, we'll explore the key to approaching our self-stories with acceptance: self-compassion. This practice opens the door to living in ways that really matter, which, as you've seen, our self-esteem holds us back from doing.

WHAT IS COMPASSION ANYWAY?

The word “compassion” is derived from the Latin *compati*, which means “with suffering.” The origins of the word point to the notion of suffering with or alongside someone or oneself. Compassion can motivate us to help alleviate suffering, but often it is as much about just being with someone when they are hurting. As a kind person once said to another person in pain, “If I can't help you see the light, I'll sit with you in the dark.”

At its heart, being self-compassionate means becoming aware of our pain and our flaws and acknowledging them, rather than pretending they're not there or trying to fantasize them away. It means recognizing that having flaws, making mistakes, and being in pain is a human experience and therefore connects us with others, rather than isolating us. Finally, it means responding toward ourselves with acts of kindness, warmth, and acceptance—even, or especially, when our self-esteem monster is at its loudest.

Often, our flaws, the parts of ourselves we're insecure about or dislike, keep us from being able to view ourselves compassionately. The Japanese art form known as *kintsugi* provides us with insight into what you can do about this—and how self-compassion changes *how you feel about yourself*.

Kintsugi and the Art of Self-Acceptance

The Japanese art form of *kintsugi* involves repairing broken pottery in a unique way. Instead of working to *hide* the cracks, artists use gold to make the repair, thereby *emphasizing* the cracks. *Kintsugi* teaches something interesting about the scars of life we all bear but might instinctively hide away out of shame.

The artform is underpinned by a philosophy, *wabi-sabi*, that emphasizes understated beauty and taking pleasure in imperfection. Rather than relentlessly seeking to improve, *wabi-sabi* looks to celebrate things as they are, not as they should be. With regard to our self-stories, this suggests several notions that run counter to our typical flaw-focused self-stories. It says we can see value in our imperfections, as they make us unique and precious, and that we can work to embrace them. Crucially, it allows for permission to be yourself.

Like *kintsugi*, What are some of your own “imperfections” that give you character, uniqueness, and beauty?

Another way self-compassion is helpful is in terms of *what we want to achieve*—what we want to do with our lives, what we want our lives to be about. Remember, in quadrant 1 of the matrix is a question referring to your values: “Who or what really matters to you in the context of this particular situation?” If we were to extend this, we would want to ask, how are *you* included in this? If you were acting toward yourself in the way that was consistent with your values, how would that look? This is a particularly important question for those times in life when things are difficult or we are in pain. These will be the times when we are not at our best, and our relationship with ourselves is perhaps not at its best either. We might berate ourselves or tell ourselves that we should be feeling better and should stop whining or complaining. Sound familiar?

That's where self-compassion comes in. The demands of the modern age mean that we spend a lot of time moving between what psychologist Paul Gilbert calls our drive and threat systems (Gilbert 2005). The *drive system* is characterized by drive, motivation, and goal pursuit. The *threat system* focuses on threat detection and protection from anxiety often experienced in this mode. Gilbert also proposed a third system, called the *soothing system*. This system promotes care, compassion, and safety

in the face of distress. It's this third system that tends to be hugely underutilized, particularly with people whose early environment didn't nurture or promote this system. Underutilizing your soothing system is a little like not using third gear in a car. If you're always in first or second gear, you run the risk of burning out your gearbox. Moving into third gear takes the pressure off, allows restoration, and makes for a much smoother ride.

Coach A or Coach B?

Take a moment to consider the following scenario:

Imagine you were about to learn a new skill. You've never done it before, and it's quite complicated and demanding, so you decide to enlist the assistance of a coach. You hear about two coaches who could help. They both come highly recommended, and you will get results whomever you pick.

Coach A is tough and harsh. She will drive you hard, never let you rest. Anytime you slack off, she will criticize you and pick up on any mistake you make. Even though she keeps you moving, it feels like she's sometimes being cruel.

Coach B is encouraging and kind. She helps you to set goals and will push you toward them, but she is supportive and motivating. When times get tough, she'll listen to you, but she'll also remind you of your skills and strengths in order to keep you motivated.

Remember, they both get the same results. So, which do you choose?

In our experience, most people choose Coach B. The idea of someone who is kind, supportive, and encouraging generally sounds much more appealing, especially if they get you the same results! However, outside the bounds of this hypothetical scenario, choosing Coach B is not always so straightforward because a number of common objections and worries surface. See if you recognize any from the list below. Put a check mark next to the ones that come up for you:

- If I'm kind to myself, then I won't drive myself and I won't achieve anything.
- I don't deserve to be kind toward myself.
- If I'm kind toward myself, I'll be letting myself off the hook.
- Being kind is a sign of weakness and I'd just be setting myself up for a world of pain.
- Being kind to myself is selfish or self-indulgent.

Any others you can think of? _____

Now, we don't want to discount these reasons automatically, because it's entirely possible they may be valid; that is, there's nothing wrong with being driven, keeping safe, and only being kind for deserving reasons. But we'd ask you first to listen to what sits underneath them. Think back to chapter 2, where we introduced the notion of your self-esteem monster. We'd like you to check out whether or not this is your monster showing up to sell you stories about yourself, like you're lazy, weak, or useless. If that's the case, then your reasons for not being kind to yourself may be based less on your own choices and more on the fact that you've been convinced that kindness is not for you because of who you are.

Based on the notion of moving toward self-acceptance that we introduced in chapter 3, here's an idea to consider: what if you're a complete and good-enough person just as you are? This doesn't mean that improvements can't be made or improvements aren't on the table. It's just that the basic starting point for whatever comes next is very different.

There is a pragmatic point to be considered, too. If rules like "Being kind to myself is self-indulgent" or "If I'm kind to myself, I won't drive myself to achieve anything" are in place for you, then you might be depriving yourself of valuable resources that come from the soothing system. It might be that you're whirring away in first or second gear when there's a whole other gear to be using.

It's Okay to Be Critical

Imagine you have a glass of salty water in front of you that you want to drink. As it is, the water is too salty to drink. One solution is to spend time attempting to pick out the grains of salt. With the aid of a powerful magnifying glass and some pretty fine tweezers, it might just be possible. But of course, there's an alternative. The trick is to add more *fresh* water into the glass. The amount of salt in the water remains the same, but proportionally, it lessens. Suddenly, what was undrinkable becomes drinkable. It's a little bit like that with critical thoughts. Let us explain.

Here's an important message we want to make sure isn't lost in all this talk about kindness and compassion. *It's okay to be critical of yourself.* It's fine to be judgmental, harsh, and demeaning. It's even okay to hate yourself. We're not here to say you shouldn't do those things or be that way toward yourself. In fact, we'd even say keep doing those things if you find them helpful at times. We recognize that you're not weird, crazy, or strange for being critical. It's a totally normal and human thing to do, and often it's born out of circumstances that made it utterly understandable, useful, and necessary. The environments some of us grew up in required us to push ourselves to keep high standards, keep ourselves safe by never showing weakness, or just desperately make sense of a chaotic or neglectful environment by telling ourselves we are the problem, not our parents. However, over time, as we practice self-compassion, we can fill ourselves with kinder thoughts. And while the critical thoughts don't go away—that, as we've discussed, is a misconception about self-esteem and about the nature of negative thoughts, which are inevitable—they *do* come to seem less important and to have less impact.

Sometimes, the problem is just that terms like “compassion” and “kindness” are hard to sit with. Perhaps because they don’t sound tough or come across as weak. This is somewhat ironic because most often being kind and compassionate with ourselves and others requires deep reservoirs of strength. Of course, it’s important to find words that work for you. If “self-compassion” or “kindness” don’t feel like quite the right fit, here are some of our favorite alternatives:

- Acting with integrity toward yourself
- Treating yourself with warmth
- Trusting yourself
- Backing yourself
- Being honest with yourself
- Being your own best coach
- Cutting yourself some slack
- Accepting the difficult stuff

Which ones resonate for you? Is there another term you prefer?

SELF-COMPASSION STRATEGIES

In this next section, we’re going to introduce you to several of our favorite self-compassion exercises, ones we use regularly in our therapy practice and in our personal lives. They are designed to be practical and simple, but feel free to adapt them to fit your needs. We’d also encourage you to enter into this practice in the spirit of experimentation. Be curious. Notice what the experience is actually like (rather than what your mind predicts it’s going to be like). Give things a go.

Self-compassion is multifaceted and complex and requires guts, determination, and skill. Practicing it well requires the ability to be mindfully present and the ability to gain distance from negative thoughts, which allows you to de-fang/de-claw your self-esteem monster—skills you’ll work to develop later in this book (so you may want to come back to this chapter once you’ve completed those chapters). But let’s start with the “simple” stuff and get a look at what being kind to yourself looks like, boots on the ground.

IMAGINE THIS...

Part I: The World's Best Therapist

We'd like you to imagine for a moment that you came across the world's best therapist. This therapist is able to adapt to be perfect for you, helping you get to where you want to in life. They work hard for you and are also kind and understanding at the same time. See if you can bring an image of this person to mind. Write below what they look like, what clothes they wear, and what kind of expression they have on their face.

What kinds of things does the therapist say...

To motivate you?

To soothe you when you hurt?

To challenge and push you?

When you've screwed up and made a mistake?

Okay, cards on the table. What we're asking you to do is start getting a compassionate language up and running. The attitude and stance of support, warmth, and kindness, especially in the face of adversity, is what we'd like to you consider carrying forward in terms of how you are with yourself. In the next part, we want to bring it a little closer to home.

Part 2: Your Loved One

We'd like you to bring someone to mind whom you love and care about. Someone for whom you truly and genuinely want the best in life. Now, imagine you find them in a state of hurt, anguish, or suffering. And suppose there isn't anything immediate to be done to take away their hurt; for example, they've lost someone close to them, they've experienced a relationship breakup, or they've received some painful news. What would you say to them so that they understand you recognize their pain? What kind words would you offer them? How could you acknowledge their hurt without attempting to push it away?

Write down the things you would say here:

Our proposal is that the essence of these words represents your intuitive ability to apply kindness and compassion. We would suggest that these are the kinds of words and gestures that you could apply to yourself in the times in life when you are hurting.

Take some time now and reflect on the last two parts of this exercise. What have you learned about the kinds of messages that you would like to give yourself? What kinds of things you would you like to keep in mind? Make some notes below:

Part 3: Your Advisor

For this final part of the exercise, pause for a few moments and imagine the face of someone you love and trust. Someone who would always want the best for you. This person might be a friend, a loved one, or someone you don't actually know, like a personal hero of yours. They will be like a trusted advisor who will be with you for the exercise, in spirit, if not physically.

Now imagine a difficult situation you are dealing with or negative feelings you are having about yourself. And imagine that you are standing face to face with your trusted advisor. Now, try a harder thing. Imagine you are looking back at yourself through their eyes.

Consider each of these questions, pausing a while after each one.

- What do you imagine that they are thinking in this moment?
- What do they want for you out of today?
- How would they want you to be?
- What qualities would they want you to embody?
- How would they want you to act?
- What difficult thoughts and feelings would they know you might have to make room for?
- What stand would they want you to take toward those more difficult things?

See if you can get in touch with the kindness and compassion you know that they would have for you in this moment. Now look back at your advisor through your own eyes. Notice what you feel toward them. If you could distill your response to them in to one sentence, what would you say?

Finally, consider how to honor what your advisor would want for you. If you wish, you could make a commitment to yourself that you will try to act in at least one of ways you have just considered today. You might also want to commit to being kind to yourself if anything difficult arises that gets in the way of that commitment. Make some notes about what that commitment could involve:

How we hold our body can be very important for self-compassion. Although it's often exceedingly difficult to control how we feel, we can have far more control over how we act, how we move, and what we do with our body. Practicing self-compassion is not about feeling a certain way, but far more about acting in particular ways toward ourselves.

This next exercise is designed to be used in those moments when you are hurting or are in pain. It's not aimed at taking away the pain, but, with kindness and warmth, simply acknowledging that it is there. We'd like you to practice this first.

COMPASSIONATE SOOTHING

Get into a nice comfy position somewhere you can sit for five to ten minutes. Prop your book or device up on something so you can read hands-free, or download the audio recording of this exercise at <http://www.newharbinger.com/43031>.

1. First, turn your attention to your breath. We'd like you to regulate your breathing to slow it down and get big, full breaths that fill out your lungs right down to your diaphragm. On the in-breath, count "in, 2, 3, 4, 5," hold for a second, then breathe out, counting "out, 2, 3, 4, 5," counting about one second each. Do this for about a minute.
2. Next, bring to mind a time in the last few weeks when you remember feeling in pain, upset, or hurt. See if you can drop back into the memory, so much so that you can bring the feeling back into the present with you now.
3. Observe the feeling in your body, noticing where it's located. Notice the size of the feeling, it's shape and its boundaries.
4. Now see if you can give the feeling a name. Use descriptive words (rather than judgmental evaluations), such as sadness, tension, anger, or heaviness.
5. Notice all the judgments and evaluations that come rushing forward in the presence of this feeling. See if you can simply allow these to be there and let go of the need to respond to these.
6. Now, soften into the feeling. Take your hand and place it on your body, over where you are feeling the emotion, a bit like you would to soothe someone close to you. Let this gesture represent warmth, understanding, and kindness. These aren't feelings you have to have, but rather this is an action.
7. As you're doing this, become aware of your breathing. As you breathe in, imagine you are breathing in space, in and around the emotion, so as to give it a bit more room to move. And as you breathe out, bring warmth to the feeling.

Here's another exercise to help promote self-compassion.

COMPASSIONATE UNDERSTANDING EXERCISE

In this exercise, designed to be used at times in life when you are especially hurting, we'd like you to spend some time writing a letter to yourself in which you practice expressing warmth and kindness. As you're writing, hold in mind the kind of tone you would like to express toward someone you cared about at a point when they were hurting. We'd also like you practice being understanding toward yourself—able, for instance, to forgive yourself for mistakes you might have made. Use the following prompts for the letter:

What is the situation that led to my feeling hurt or upset?

What am I feeling right now? Where in my body am I holding my emotions?

What is my self-esteem monster saying right now? About me? About feeling as I do? How is it criticizing me?

In what ways does my monster help? How does it make me feel better? How does it make me feel safer? How does it help me feel normal or in control?

What kind, compassionate things could I say to myself right now? How could I show myself understanding? What words could I use to demonstrate warmth toward myself?

In what ways does being compassionate toward myself scare or worry me? What would I have to let go of or give up to be kind?

What important life direction or value is at play here? When I am in charge, rather than my self-esteem monster, what actions would I choose to take? With my feelings? In regard to the situation?

Do you remember Ruby from chapter 2? She's gone through a difficult experience that brought up lots of painful emotions, and she completed the letter writing exercise. Let's see what she said.

What is the situation that led to my feeling hurt or upset?

I was so nervous at Tasha's big birthday dinner with all her glamorous friends I didn't know and I drank way too much. I made an idiot of myself. Everyone could see I was drunk.

What am I feeling right now? Where in my body am I holding my emotions?

I feel acute embarrassment and shame. I also feel anxious about having to talk to anyone from last night. It's like a ball in the pit of my stomach.

What is my self-esteem monster saying right now? About me? About feeling as I do? How is it criticizing me?

You're a fucking idiot. Why do you always do this? Everything you touch turns to shit and you screw up everything.

In what ways does my monster help? How does it make me feel better? How does it make me feel safer? How does it help me feel normal or in control?

It feels good to hear that, because it helps me keep myself in check. It also means no one else can hurt me by saying this. I know they're thinking it, but this is a preemptive strike.

What kind, compassionate things could I say to myself right now? How could I show myself understanding? What words could I use to demonstrate warmth toward myself?

It's OK, it's not the worst thing in the world to do. You weren't out to harm anyone, you just got carried away. It's OK to make mistakes. Other people also make mistakes, you're not the only one.

In what ways does being compassionate toward myself scare or worry me? What would I have to let go of or give up to be kind?

It scares me to be kind to myself. I worry about letting myself off the hook and doing the same thing again, like I always do. It also means I may actually have to take proper responsibility and make amends. Beating myself up is normally enough.

What important life direction or value is at play here? When I am in charge, rather than my self-esteem monster, what actions would I choose to take? With my feelings? In regard to the situation?

I'm important. I want to take actions that are helpful to me. I get why I beat myself up, but it's never worked before. Plus, it's just all old stuff from the past my dad used to say to me. I want to be kind and understanding toward myself. I also want to apologize to Tasha and explain to her why I was so nervous.

We've put these prompts into a handy worksheet format for you to practice on. If you find it helpful, you can download additional copies of this worksheet at <http://www.newharbinger.com/43031>.

Compassionate Prompt Sheet

Describe the situation.					
Describe how are you feeling.					
What is your self-esteem monster saying to you?					
How is your monster helping?					
What kind things could you say to yourself?					
What do you need to let go of to be kind?					
What value is at play here? What actions would you choose to take?					

PRACTICING SELF-COMPASSION IN TOUGH SITUATIONS

Of course, it's easy to use these strategies to accept yourself when everything is plain sailing. The real trick is being able to practice acceptance, kindness, and compassion when things are not going so well. Now that you've had some opportunities to practice self-compassion, we'd like to help you think about how to translate these into actual life, where you can practice these strategies at those particularly difficult points. It's these difficult points where it can be easy to respond in autopilot mode, and we can end up in a downward spiral with our self-esteem monster. Here are some situations in which we'd like you to move up to your third gear using self-compassion. Practice while:

- Getting rejected—if you meet enough people, some will reject you
- Performing poorly at something
- Being negatively evaluated
- Putting yourself first
- Being honest with others
- Disagreeing with people
- In the company of people you don't like
- Doing something embarrassing

IN SUMMARY

Again, self-compassion works like a third gear and as an alternative to the drive and threat system gears. It provides an antidote to the powerful self-critical thoughts that self-esteem monsters love to throw at us. It seeks to provide comfort, safety, and soothing when we're hurting. It allows us to connect better with ourselves and others when we are in pain.

Most of us find it far easier to be kind and understanding toward other people than to ourselves. We hold on to powerful rules that get in the way of applying kindness and compassion to ourselves—rules that seek to drive us forward relentlessly but that are often based on outdated stories we hold about ourselves. Self-compassion doesn't mean letting ourselves off the hook; it doesn't mean we sink into a swamp of mediocrity or that we don't care about others. It does mean that YOU get to choose your relationship with yourself. Being self-compassionate, like any skill, takes practice.

Now that we have hopefully given you something to think about in terms of taking better care of yourself, part 3 will focus on six specific skills for developing self-acceptance. In the next chapter, we are going to focus on the first step to self-acceptance: the art and science of mindfully tuning in to your own body. This skill goes hand-in-hand with self-compassion.

Bringing It All Together

Take a moment to consider what this chapter has added to your understanding of compassion and self-compassion. What caught your attention as new or novel?

What does your self-esteem monster say about the prospect of kindness and compassion? What exercises feel like they are going to be useful? What feels like it is going to be challenging?
