



## **February 2024 News and Notes**

### **“Self-Compassion: Essential for Emotional Wellbeing”**

**By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT**

### **“Self-Compassion: Essential for Emotional Wellbeing”**

Over the last two decades, research on self-compassion and its effects on emotional health has grown rapidly. First measured in 2003 by Kristin Neff, PhD, Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin, self-compassion has been found to promote remarkable benefits in populations as diverse as kindergartners, teens and college students, and veterans returning from war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Research confirms, writes Dr. Neff, “that relating to ourselves in a kind, friendly manner is essential for emotional wellbeing.”<sup>1</sup>

A January 2024 article on [harvardhealthbeat](#) explains, “We usually think of compassion as it applies to others. But we can— and should— also show compassion to ourselves. Self-compassion means showing compassion towards ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Neff identified three components of self-compassion: The first is mindfulness, becoming aware of one’s emotions in the moment. Clinical psychologist and Harvard Medical School lecturer Chris Germer, PhD, explains, “To be kind to ourselves, we need to know that we’re struggling while we’re struggling. It helps to name the emotions we’re feeling in tricky situations and to ground ourselves in the here and now (sensations, sounds, sights).”<sup>3</sup>

The second component, Dr. Germer writes, is “common humanity. Knowing we’re not alone. Most of us tend to hide in shame when things go really wrong in our lives, or we hide from ourselves through distraction or with a few stiff drinks. “Shame, he points out, “has a way of wiping out the very observer who is needed to be mindful of our situation.” It isolates and separates us from others, rather than bringing us into connection.



The third component is self-kindness, “A kind and warm-hearted response to ourselves. . . . This can take many forms, such as a gentle hand over the heart, validating how we feel, talking to ourselves in an encouraging manner, or a simple act of kindness, such as drinking a cup of tea or listening to music.”

The effects of self-compassion are more than simply psychological.” Dr. Germer explains, “When we experience positive, warm connections . . . our system releases oxytocin, a feel-good hormone. . . . Taking a mindful pause and then bringing kindness to ourselves seems to activate our innate caregiving system and the calming effect of oxytocin, allowing the mind to clear and giving us a chance to take rational steps to resolve the issue.”

As Dr. Neff explains in her article, “The 5 Myths of Self-Compassion: What Keeps Us from Being Kinder to Ourselves?” several false assumptions surround self-compassion. “For many, it carries the whiff of all those other bad ‘self’ terms: self-pity, self-serving, self-indulgent, self-centered, just plain selfish.”

In fact, she states, it has been shown to be the antidote for these negative qualities. “The nurturing power of self-compassion is now being illuminated by the matter-of-fact, tough-minded methods of empirical science, and a growing body of research literature is demonstrating conclusively that self-compassion is not only central to mental health, but can be enriched through learning and practice, just like so many other good habits.”

Among its benefits, “Self-compassion is one of the most powerful sources of coping and resilience available to us. . . . Studies. . . suggest that it’s not just what you face in life, but how you relate to yourself when the going gets tough – as an inner ally or enemy – that determines your ability to cope successfully. . . . Self-compassion is a way of relating to the ever-changing landscape of who we are with kindness and acceptance especially when we fail or feel inadequate.”

In this regard, self-compassion can be contrasted with self-esteem, which “is inherently fragile, bouncing up and down according to our latest success or failure.”



Clearly in the expanding field of positive psychology, self-compassion is a very promising avenue for further exploration and development. One particularly important area, according to writer Rachael Simmons, is working with adolescents. “Adolescence is a developmental moment of peak stress, and a teen’s heightened self-consciousness. . . . cranks up the volume of the inner critic.” For this reason, “self-compassion might be most critical in adolescence, when researchers say [self-compassion] is at its lowest levels.”<sup>4</sup>

Simmons notes, “With self-compassion’s demonstrated ability to ease symptoms of psychopathology in adults. . . . psychologists have now turned their attention to self-compassion in adolescents. Their initial findings reveal an unusually powerful intervention for stressed out young adults, a potential crown jewel of resilience interventions.”

<sup>1</sup>[http://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The\\_5\\_Myths\\_of\\_Self-Compassion.Psychotherapy.Networker.Sept\\_.2015.pdf](http://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The_5_Myths_of_Self-Compassion.Psychotherapy.Networker.Sept_.2015.pdf)

<sup>2</sup><https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/the-power-of-self-compassion>

<sup>3</sup><https://hbr.org/2017/01/to-recover-from-failure-try-some-self-compassion>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/well/family/self-compassion-stressed-out-teens.html>