

# For Valentine's Day, Try Being Nice to Yourself

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Valentine's Day prompts many of us to send messages of love to the special people in our lives. But I'd like to propose a new tradition. Why not use this day to start being kinder to ourselves?

Being nice to yourself, particularly during a personal setback or a stressful experience, is known among psychologists as self-compassion. It's a simple concept — treat yourself as kindly as you would treat a friend who needs support — but it's one that most people find exceedingly difficult to adopt.

"We tend to give compassion to others much more readily than we do ourselves," says [Kristin Neff](#), one of the field's leading researchers and a professor of human development and culture at the University of Texas at Austin. "The good news is that it can be learned. It's a skill anyone can cultivate."

Self-compassion is rooted in centuries of Buddhist tradition, but it's been only within the past decade that researchers, led by Dr. Neff, have subjected the concept to empirical scrutiny. Numerous studies have shown that self-compassion is strongly linked to overall well-being. Practicing self-compassion can reduce depression, stress, performance anxiety and body dissatisfaction. It can lead to increases in happiness, self-confidence and even immune function.

Despite the evidence that self-compassion can be good for us, many people resist it.

"One of the reasons self-compassion is hard is because we've been harshly judging ourselves for 20, 30 or 50 years," said Mark Coleman, a clinical psychologist and [popular meditation teacher and author](#). "The self-compassion perspective, in contrast, is saying, 'There is a lot of pain in life, but you're doing the best you can.' You're not wrong for feeling the pain."

The struggle for self-compassion can be difficult for even the most enlightened among us. Haemin Sunim, a Buddhist monk and best-selling author, tells of his own struggle for self-compassion in his new book, "[Love for Imperfect Things: How to Accept Yourself in a World Striving for Perfection](#)." For most of his life, he had believed it was important to always put the needs of others

ahead of his own. During graduate school, he found it difficult to say no when others asked him to take on extra work. A trusted friend gave him this advice: "Be good to yourself first, then to others."

"It was like being struck by lightning," he writes. "Up until then, I had only ever worried about what other people thought of me. I had never once thought properly about caring for myself, or loving myself."

Dr. Neff notes that she often hears misgivings about practicing self-compassion. Some people worry that self-compassion is a form of self-pity and suggests weakness. They worry it will lead to self-indulgent behavior and undermine motivation. But studies show that when people practice self-compassion they tend to adopt healthier behaviors.

The reality is that by being kind to ourselves, we become stronger, more resilient and less focused on our problems. In one study of military veterans who spent time in Iraq and Afghanistan, those who measured higher on the self-compassion scale were less likely to develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. In fact, the presence of self-compassion was a better predictor of long-term mental health than how much combat action they had seen.

So how can we learn self-compassion? In 2010, Dr. Neff and her colleague Chris Germer, a clinical psychologist and lecturer at Harvard Medical School, developed an eight-week mindful self-compassion program that has since been taught to thousands of people. In 2012, the Journal of Clinical Psychology published the results of small clinical trial (27 people) in which half the participants took part in the self-compassion course while the control group remained on a wait-list. The course takers reported significantly larger gains in self-compassion, mindfulness and well-being compared to the wait-list group, and the benefits were lasting, still there one year after the class ended.

In an effort to reach more people, the authors distilled the eight-week course into the "The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook," published by Guilford Press last summer. The workbook offers numerous writing exercises, guided meditations and informal practices to teach self compassion.

Dr. Neff notes that self-compassion does not come naturally to most of us and requires practice. To learn self-compassion, we must first mindfully acknowledge our pain in a nonjudgmental way. Then we need to remind ourselves that we are not alone, that imperfection is part of a shared human experience. Finally, we need to offer ourselves kindness and support, similar to how we would treat a close friend.

Here are some exercises to help you improve your self-compassion skills. These exercises have been summarized for brevity here, but you can find more complete descriptions in the workbook or on Dr. Neff's website.

## Take the self-compassion test

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Use this [short test developed by Dr. Neff](#) to gain a snapshot of your own level of self-compassion. If you score low, commit to learning some self-compassion practices. If you score high in self-compassion, continue to practice self-compassion to build on what you already have.

## How do I treat a friend?

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Close your eyes and think about a time when a close friend came to you because he or she was struggling with a misfortune, failure or feelings of inadequacy. Now write down what you said. What tone did you use? Did your interaction include any nonverbal gestures — touching, hugs or other actions? Now think about a similar situation in which you were struggling. What did you say to yourself? Write it down. Now compare the two answers. Were you as kind to yourself as you were to your friend?

## Keep a self-compassion journal

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Each evening think about an area where you are struggling and focus on mindfulness, common humanity and self kindness. First mindfully acknowledge your pain. Write down the difficult feelings you have. (I'm worried about a mistake I made at work. I just can't seem to get my act together at home.)

Next, remind yourself of the common humanity of the situation. Do you know anyone else at work or in your personal life who has similar struggles?

Finally, write some words of kindness in response to the difficult emotions you are feeling. If you have trouble, imagine you are talking to a friend with a similar struggle. "I'm sorry you're feeling frightened. It will be O.K. I'm here to support you. You are a good person. I know you did your best."

## Soothing touch

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You know how good it feels to be hugged or touched when you need comfort. This exercise allows you to provide comfort to yourself. Everyone responds differently to touch, so find a physical touch that feels genuinely supportive during times of stress. As you think about an area of difficulty in your life, try one of these touches.

- Place one or both hands over your heart. Or place one hand on your heart and one on your stomach. Or you can place both hands on your stomach. Do whatever feels most comforting to you.
- Cradle your face in your hands or hold your hands gently in your lap.

- Wrap your arms around yourself as a gentle hug or stroke your arm gently.

## Take a self-compassion break

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Close your eyes and think of a situation causing you a mild or moderate amount of stress. (Don't try to tackle your biggest problems right away) Take a mindful moment and acknowledge your suffering. "This is stressful. This is difficult." Remind yourself that everyone struggles. "Stress is part of life. I'm not alone." Now soothe yourself by placing your hands on your heart or stomach, or wrap your arms around your body. Now give yourself words of kindness. "May I be kind to myself. May I forgive myself. May I be strong. May I accept myself as I am."

In addition to these practices, you can come up with your own ideas to show yourself the same kindness you would show to a friend. Here at The Times we developed the [30-Day Well Challenge](#), which offers a month of daily tasks focused on being kind to yourself.

As Haemin Sunim explains throughout his book, self-compassion does not mean being selfish. It's only when we take care of ourselves, he explains, that we can care for others.

"You deserve your care and attention," he writes. "Treat yourself to a delicious meal, a good book, a nice walk with a lovely view. As you would invest in the person you love, so you should invest in yourself."