An Alternative to Self-Esteem: Fostering Self-Compassion in Youth

BY JAMES PERISINGER

F optimum to a child’s self-esteem is to offer the perception of being a unique individual, not a part of a group or society. Self-esteem is a complex concept that involves many factors, including self-worth, self-concept, and self-efficacy. Self-esteem is an important predictor of many positive outcomes, such as academic achievement, job performance, and overall well-being. Therefore, fostering self-compassion in youth is an important goal for educators and mental health professionals.

The research literature on self-esteem and self-compassion is growing. Self-esteem is often measured using global self-esteem scales, such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). These scales measure overall self-worth and self-acceptance. However, self-esteem is a multifaceted construct that includes other important dimensions, such as self-compassion.

Self-compassion is defined as the ability to be kind and understanding towards oneself in the face of failure or setbacks (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). Self-compassion involves being kind and understanding towards oneself, even in the face of failure or setbacks. Self-compassion is an important predictor of positive outcomes, such as increased resilience, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and better mental health outcomes.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS AND COROLLARIES OF SELF-COMPASSION

Kindness involves understanding one’s difficulties and being kind and warm in the face of failure or setbacks rather than harshly judgmental and self-critical. Common humanity involves seeing one’s experiences as part of the human condition rather than as personal, isolating, and shameful. Mindful acceptance involves mindful awareness and acceptance of painful thoughts and feelings, rather than overidentifying with them.

Neff and Pittman (2010) argue that self-compassion may be an important aspect of maturity, important for understanding and fostering healthy forms of self-relating. As stated earlier, the research suggests that self-compassion is strongly related to emotional well-being. Neff and Lamb (2009) report that self-compassion has significant positive correlations with emotional intelligence, and negative correlations with self-criticism. Self-compassion has also been linked to less anxiety, depression, rumination, thought suppression, and perfectionism (p. 3) and is associated with greater happiness, optimism, positive affect, wisdom, curiosity and exploration, and personal initiative (p. 4).

Parent and teacher communicator has a profound impact on children’s emotional development; within the context of self-compassion, it strongly relates to reflection and belongingness, holding negative emotions in mindful awareness, generating kindness.

James Perisinger, PhD, NCSP, is the director of the school psychology program at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas.

© 2012, National Association of School Psychologists
toward oneself, and focusing on interconnectedness. In the absence of reflection, past is prologue, with adults passing on to children unhealthy communication and thought patterns (Siegell & Hartnell, 2003). Self-compassion, on the other hand, stresses living in the present moment, aware of one’s own thoughts and feelings. This makes adults more open to thoughts and feelings of children in their care (Siegell & Hartnell, 2003) and, therefore, promotes healthy interaction and thought patterns.

According to Neff and Lamb (2009), self-compassion is also adaptive in academic contexts with self-compassionate students being more adaptive in coping with academic failures. Since self-compassion helps students perceive their failures proportionally, it promotes self-confidence in one’s ability to learn. For instance, it relates to mastery goals rather than performance goals, focusing students on the joy of learning rather than promoting self-worth through achievement.

**SELF-COMPASSION INTERVENTIONS**

The benefits of self-compassion and the dangers of unrealistically high self-esteem suggest that self-compassion can be deliberately fostered through empirically validated and scientifically supported interventions, some of which translate well into school activities. Neff and Pittman (2010) examined self-compassion among adolescents, reporting that it was highly associated with well-being and suggesting that self-compassion may be an effective intervention target for teens suffering from negative self-views and other difficulties. Compassion mind training (Gilbert & Procter, 2006) is designed for individuals who experience chronic shame and self-criticism. The pilot study reports that individuals experienced significant reductions in depression, anxiety, self-criticism, shame, inferiority, and submissive behaviors. Many of the following strategies designed to increase self-compassion would be suitable as preventive Tier 1 activities with a group, as well as targeted individual interventions.

**Blessings exercise.** At the end of the school day, children are given a moment to reflect and list three things that went well and the reasons that they went well. Alternatively, a gratitude journal kept at home can be used. The purpose is to prevent children from taking things for granted and to increase the importance of good acts (Emmons, 2008; Emmons & Mael, 2000; Reivich, 2009). This technique has been reported to increase well-being, optimism, and life satisfaction in early adolescence (Puh & Bur, 2008).

**Gratitude visit.** Children write a one-page letter to a somebody who did something for them for which they are grateful, but who they never properly thanked. The child then meet the individual and read the letter (Seligman, 2002). This exercise has been shown to have a significant positive effect on happiness and a reduction of symptoms of depression (e.g., Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

**Savoring exercise.** At the end of the school day, children reflect on two experiences they found pleasurable. The objective is to make the pleasure last as long as possible, extending the positive emotions of an experience by focusing on that moment of pleasure (Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

**Foot and seat.** Instruct children to sit in a chair with both feet flat on the floor. Walk them through a focus on one foot, then both, then to awareness of the sensations involved in sitting in their chairs, and finally, incorporate a focus on deep breathing (Kryder, 2008). The intent is to help increase mindfulness. As children practice attention to the here and now, this technique can help them feel calm and reflective during intense emotional situations. It is difficult to be worried, upset, or angry while simultaneously focusing on one’s feet! A useful script for the feet and seat and related exercises for children is available from Lieberman (2010) on the NASP website.

**Hugging practice.** Teach students that the skin responds to physical signs of warmth even if it comes from themselves in the form of a hug when feeling bad. While practicing in class to reaffirm the concept they will likely feel silly, which should be acknowledged. The students should be reassured, however, that their bodies don’t know that they are providing the comfort. It is generally agreed that humans possess a high warmth system (Gilbert & Procter, 2006) that responds to physical signals of warmth by activating neurohormones such as oxytocin and opiates. In contrast, students may be taught that aggressive signals within their bodies (e.g., clenching their jaw, making a fist, scowling) can activate stress-cortisol and physically can make them feel bad (Depue & Morrone-Strupinsky, 2005).

**Develop compassionate guardian images.** Invite older children to imagine a physical representation of their ideal of caring and compassion (Gilbert & Irons, 2004, 2005). That is, what does it look like? Ask the children to recall their own compassionate feelings flowing outwards to others. Children might be asked to imagine compassion and warmth for themselves or somebody they care about, and then try to draw a picture of it. “Ideal” is to be self-defined, but should have the qualities of acceptance, wisdom, and strength. Depending upon culture and developmental age, religious imagery (e.g., Christ) may be the form children choose, but there is a therapeutic appeal to guiding students toward superhero imagery (Rabin, 2007). The key is that the children should be guided toward imagining their personal perception of the perfect nurturer to whom they feel they can relate. They should be instructed that when they feel themselves being self-critical or feeling bad, they should focus on their image and ask, “What would they say to me?”

**Write compassionate letters.** Children can be asked to bring in their compassion image and write the letter that this nurturer might write to them. For ex-
ample: “Dear Emma, I was sad when I saw that your feelings were hurt. I want you to know that...” The purpose is to guide the children in having empathy for their distress, compassionately offer attention to it, and offer warmth to themselves. It is important to guide those children who write a calm or dismissive letter, or one which begins to dictate what they should or should not do, by encouraging a warmer style of thinking and feeling (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006).

As an alternative to self-esteem, self-compassion appears to derive most of its benefits without its potential drawbacks. It fosters warmth toward oneself, a sense of connection to others, improved reflection, better communication with others, and healthier thought patterns. Methods of promoting self-compassion are readily adaptable to school settings, and can be tailored to children of different ages. As part of their efforts to support positive learning environments, school psychologists should find promotion of self-compassion fits well into the social/behavioral service structures already in place in their schools.

References


CHOOSE CHAPMAN

EARN A GRADUATE DEGREE from the COLLEGE OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

Discovering innovative ways to understand and resolve the social, behavioral and emotional barriers that hinder academic success is a core pursuit of Chapman University’s College of Educational Studies.

PURSUE A CAREER AS A SCHOOL COUNSELOR OR PSYCHOLOGIST.

Our programs prepare graduates for careers as school counselors (K-12) or psychologists (preschool through grade 12):

- SCHOOL COUNSELING, MA
- SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY, MA or EdS.

OTHER MASTER’S DEGREES OFFERED IN:

- LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
- TEACHING
- COMMUNICATION SCIENCES AND DISORDERS
- SPECIAL EDUCATION (MILD/MODERATE OR MODERATE/SEVERE CREDENTIALS)

CHAPMAN ALSO OFFERS A PH.D. IN EDUCATION WITH EMPHASSES IN:

- DISABILITY STUDIES
- SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY
- CULTURAL AND CURRICULAR STUDIES
- LEADERSHIP

Chapman University delivers a uniquely personalized and comprehensive educational experience to highly qualified students. Our programs encourage innovation, creativity and collaboration, and focus on developing global citizen-leaders who are distinctly prepared to enhance education, teaching, leadership development and society.

Choose Chapman and discover the difference a graduate degree from Chapman University will make in your life — and in the lives of those around you. Financial aid is available. Take the first step and visit www.chapman.edu/ces/programs/grad.