

Self-compassion and the art of overcoming one's inner critic

Poonam Yadav

Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, School of
Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

“If you don't love yourself, you cannot love others”. This is the ultimate truth. If one is not able to accept oneself with all the flaws and qualities that one possess, then there's no guarantee that he/she can accept the other person without being judgmental. What is needed is a positive attitude and self- understanding toward oneself, most importantly self-compassion. Basically being gentle, kind and understanding with oneself. Accepting that one is not perfect and that there is potential for learning and growth in every mistake one makes (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion has been shown to be positively related to psychological health and well-being. This paper is an attempt to show how one can use self-compassion to overcome one's inner critic and enhance well-being.

Keywords: self-compassion, well-being, psychological health

“You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe deserve your love and affection.”
Buddha

While searching topics for my article I read a lot, thought a lot, but what got my attention was a write up talking about self-compassion. I am a person who's non-judgmental when it comes to others, but I am my own critic. And there are many like me. There are number of people who have problem of over thinking, rumination and anxiety, which many a times lowers their self-esteem and self-confidence. There's always a voice in the head criticizing oneself. We all develop an inner guiding voice depending on the environment we have been brought up in and it can be both positively motivating and harshly self-critical. During our early years we were conditioned by our parents and guardians. We all have learned rules of life from them. Their manners, their style, with little modification. Depending on which values they lived by, we are most likely to adopt the same ones as a blueprint for understanding the world. “Values are a collection of guiding principles and they determine what we deem to be correct and desirable in life” (Schwartz, 1992).

Values create our subconscious representational map through which we assess and rate others and ourselves as worthy or ideal. For instance, values such as responsibility, openness and respect have the tendency to strengthen relationships and provide a basis for well-being and creativity. We are likely to take the values we grew up with. If our perception of what we are does not correlate with our values, like for example our performance, if one feel one has not done well enough, one will tend to deem oneself unworthy. The subjective and self-critical perception that we have has an impact on our sense of self-worth and that determines whether the voice in our head will be kind and supportive or destructive and devaluing. Also, our perception of ourselves influences our behavior, which means we create our own self-fulfilling prophecy (Schwartz, 1992), never living up to the “good enough” value. This not only lowers our self-

esteem and self-confidence but also compromises our well-being. We all know it's difficult to change deeply rooted values, but we can lessen the impact they have on us by learning to change the view we have of ourselves. This can be achieved through self-compassion.

Self-compassion is basically accepting oneself for what you are and treating oneself with warmth and understanding. Its human nature to lose hope and confidence during difficult time and self-blame is common but during these difficult times its utmost necessary to understand and recognize that making mistakes is part of being human (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion has three main components and it represents a warm and accepting stance towards those aspects of oneself and one's life that are unpopular, disliked (Neff, 2003b). First is self-kindness versus self-judgment, second, common humanity versus isolation, and third, mindfulness versus over-identification.

If individuals are self-compassionate then, when confronting suffering or failure instead of self-criticism and belittling oneself, they'll offer themselves warmth and non-judgmental understanding. This process of realization also requires one to understand that failure and difficulties are part and parcel of life, it's okay to be imperfect, everyone makes mistakes, it's something that we all go through rather than being something that happens to “me” alone. Self-compassion requires one to take a balanced approach towards one's negative experiences so that painful feelings are neither suppressed not exaggerated. One should not get carried away by negative emotions otherwise self-compassion will turn into melodrama and all perspective will be lost. Instead, self-compassion requires one to have the right amount of distance from one's emotions so that they are fully experienced while being approached with mindful objectivity.

According to Wallace and Shapiro (2006) research on self-compassion was carried out to investigate the validity of Buddhist ideas concerning the causes and amelioration of suffering and to examine the usefulness of techniques such as mindfulness for adaptive functioning. People typically value being kind and compassionate to others, but often they are harsh and uncaring toward themselves. Intense self-focus while confronting one's limitations can sometimes lead to a type of tunnel vision in which people become over identified with and carried away by negative thoughts and feelings about themselves. In such a situation feeling of

isolation can also occur when people temporarily forget that failure and imperfection are part of human life, this can result in prolonged suffering. Self-compassion, on the other hand, involves “being kind toward oneself when considering weaknesses, remembering that being human means being flawed and imperfect, and learning from one's mistakes”.

A number of studies have found that self-compassion is a powerful predictor of psychological health and well-being (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Self-compassion is found to be negatively associated with depression, anxiety, self-criticism etc. and positively associated with life satisfaction and social connectedness (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion has been found to have academic benefits as well. Neff, Hseih, and Dejithirat (2005) found that self-compassion was linked to intrinsic interest in learning and healthier coping strategies after failing an exam. Neff, Rude, and Kirkpatrick (2007) found that self-compassion was associated with happiness, optimism, personal initiative, positive affect etc. They also found that self-compassion was significantly associated with extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (negatively).

Self-compassion and self-esteem

The concept of self-compassion is somewhat familiar to the construct of self-esteem. But research has shown that self-compassion can be empirically differentiated from self-esteem. Although self-esteem and self-compassion are moderately correlated, self-compassion is a stronger unique (negative) predictor of anger, need for closure, social comparison, public self-consciousness, self-rumination (Neff, 2005). Moreover, self-esteem is significantly correlated with narcissism whereas self-compassion is not (Neff, 2003a, 2005). It was found by Neff et al. (in press) that self-compassion was associated with reduced anxiety after considering one's greatest weakness, self-esteem wasn't found to provide such buffer. In a series of controlled experiments, Leary, Tate, Adams, and Allen (2006) demonstrated that self-compassion was associated with more emotional balance than self-esteem when participants encountered potentially humiliating situations, received unflattering inter-personal feedback, or remembered past negative life events.

In a recent series of studies Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, and Hancock (2007) investigated the processes by which self-compassionate people deal with unpleasant life events. They employed a variety of research methodologies, including experience sampling, reactions to interpersonal feedback, reflections on real-life negative personal experiences, and mood inductions. It was found that those high on self-compassion demonstrated more emotional resilience (e.g., more adaptive responses to daily difficulties) and greater self-concept accuracy (in terms of rating their own performances) than those low in self-compassion. At the same time, self-compassion was more strongly associated with taking personal responsibility for one's role in negative events than was self-esteem.

Practicing self-compassion

It is imperative that we learn to practice self-compassion. It's not only important to love others but its equally important, or more so, to love and understand oneself. It's important to take out some time to realize how important it is to value oneself so that one can value others. Below are some steps to help increase self-compassion:-

Step 1: Learn to forgive your self: The first step is to stop punishing oneself for the mistakes that one has committed. We have to accept

that we are not perfect and need to be gentle with our self when we are confronted with our shortcomings. We need to remember that our friends and family members value us for what we are, not because we are flawless. Become aware when you derive a sense of self-worth from performance or perfection. Understand that you do not need to be a certain way to be worthy of love

Step 2: A growth mind set: The kind of mind set that we have has an effect on our well-being. It's important to have a growth mind set instead of a fixed one. We should not view challenges as obstacles rather chances to grow. It's important to become aware of our view of the world and try to employ a growth mind set. One should try to embrace rather than avoid challenges, persist in finding meaning in them. When you find you are criticizing yourself in comparison with others, try to find inspiration in their successes and strengths instead feeling threatened.

Step 3: Express gratitude: According to Emmons and Mc Cullough (2003) feeling a sense of gratitude is very powerful. Rather than wishing for what we do not have, there is a lot of strength in appreciating what we do have, right now. One should be grateful for what one have. By focusing on our blessings we employ a gentler voice and move the focus away from ourselves and our shortcomings and out to the world with all its beauty. This help us in focusing on all the positives and keeps negatives at bay.

Step 4: Do good, feel good: Raj Raghunathan (2016) has identified three different reciprocity styles: giver, taker and matcher. It is believed that givers are the most generous people and generosity is a great way of employing compassion. But for generosity to work in favor of your well-being you should be aware of your own needs before progressing. Doing good for others makes us happy but only if it does not reduce your own well-being. It is believed that givers can be both the most successful and the most unsuccessful of people as they may fall into a pattern of selfless giving, ignoring their own needs. So, it's important that you take into consideration your own needs while reaching out to help others.

Step 5: Being mindful: Mindfulness has been found to have a positive impact on self-compassion as it has the tendency to lessen self-judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 2014). Whatever you do, try to be in the moment and aware of what is happening around you in that moment, without judgment and labeling. Allow what you think or feel to have its moment, don't hide or suppress it. Allow it to come and then without attachment, let it go.

Conclusion

Love yourself, in order to love others. Self-love leads to other-love and results in psychological health and well-being. It not only benefit self but also help in formation of healthy and strong relationships. A healthy relationship with oneself result in a healthy relationship with the world around us. Being aware of our positive and our negatives, and accepting them with full heart help us in being self-compassionate. This further results in developing a positive view of oneself which extends outward and encompasses others.

Many a times, in our desire to be loved by others around us, we overlook ourselves. Sometimes it could work in our favor but mostly does not. When it does not, the self-deprecating cycle of loathing oneself starts, which is jeopardizing. It also depicts the negative impact expectations from others or oneself can have on the well-being. When the focus shifts from within to completely without, the

situation could be alarming. That is where the self-love helps one to sail through the unpleasant circumstances. Hence, love yourself not just to form healthy relationships but also to have fulfilling life experiences.

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