

Self-Compassion for Parents

 greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/self_compassion_for_parents

Do you beat up on yourself for being a bad parent? There's an alternative.

By [Maryam Abdullah](#)

| April 17, 2018

When was the last time you beat yourself up for a parenting failure?



Perhaps your daughter got a D+ on the math test—and you regret some harsh words. Maybe you're telling yourself that you bungled advice to your fifth-grader about how to handle an annoying classmate. You couldn't keep your promise to attend your son's music recital—and there's a voice in your head telling you that

you're a terrible parent.

But there's an alternative to that harsh self-talk: self-compassion. According to researcher Kristin Neff, "self-compassion provides an island of calm, a refuge from the stormy seas of endless positive and negative self-judgment." As she defines it, self-compassion entails three components:

- "First, it requires *self-kindness*, that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental."
- "Second, it requires recognition of our *common humanity*, feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering."
- "Third, it requires *mindfulness*—that we hold our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it."

How is self-compassion related to parenting? A recent study found that self-compassionate parents of adult children with developmental disabilities tend to have lower levels of stress and depression. In a 2015 study of parents of

kids with autism, self-compassion is linked to more life satisfaction, hope, and re-engagement with life goals. Another study found that self-compassion may act as a shield against internalizing stigma—the negative evaluations and feelings others have about parenting children with autism.

A new study by Amy Mitchell and colleagues provided Australian mothers with self-compassion resources and exercises, such as imagining how you would support someone else, remembering that you are not alone, and giving yourself a small act of kindness. Mothers who used the resources reported feeling more self-compassionate compared to mothers who did not—and they were less stressed and more satisfied with breastfeeding after the intervention.

Taken together, these studies suggest self-compassion may be a resource for resiliency and a protective buffer against both internal and external criticism. Can parents learn to be more self-compassionate? Of course. Here are three steps you can take to build compassion for yourself.

1. Take routine self-compassion breaks

During the exhaustion and confusion of being a first-time parent, you may wonder how they even let you leave the hospital with the baby! *Why isn't breastfeeding magically easy? Where did you put the diapers? I stink! When am I going to be able to take another shower?*

Those are the moments when you might try to take a self-compassion break. What does that look like?

First, accept the moment of suffering with a statement like, "This hurts." Next, acknowledge that other first-time parents have felt this way—probably every first-time parent in the history of world! Last, offer yourself kindness, such as by saying, "May I give myself the compassion that I need as I try to care for my baby."

Of course, it's not always possible to take a break when you're struggling to calm a weeping toddler. In that case, take a moment after the crisis has passed to give yourself a few kind words. Neff also recommends putting your hand over your heart, as a gesture of comfort toward yourself, or even giving yourself a hug. That might sound strange—but try it. See if it helps.

2. Practice loving-kindness meditation

It's Monday. You're trying to leave the house with your child so that you can get her to preschool and yourself to work for a 9:00 am meeting. She's oblivious to the fact that even a five-minute delay would lead to a 15-minute difference in your commute time. She wants to put on her shoes and socks by

herself. That takes a long time; you get impatient. Pretty soon, both you and your child are having a meltdown. After the meeting, you beat up on yourself for losing it.

This is where a preemptive, early-morning loving-kindness meditation can help. The idea is quite simple:

- Think of a person close to you who loves you very much. Imagine that person sending you wishes for your safety, for your well-being and happiness. Feel the warm wishes and love coming from that person towards you.
- Send your love back to that person. You and this person are similar. Just like you, this person wishes to be happy.
- Next, think of an acquaintance, someone you don't know very well. You and this person are alike in your wish to have a good life.
- Then expand your awareness and picture the whole globe in front of you as a little ball. Send warm wishes to all living beings on the globe, who, like you, want to be happy.

In a recent study, Australian researchers James Kirby and Sarah Baldwin randomly assigned over 60 parents, mostly mothers in their mid-30s, to listen to either a 15-minute loving-kindness meditation or a focused imagery recording (a control condition). Before and after listening to the recordings, parents completed questionnaires on self-compassion and compassion motivation, and they provided their emotional responses to common parenting scenarios, such as children insisting on and crying loudly about having a candy bar during a shopping trip.

The results? Parents in the loving-kindness meditation group were more self-compassionate, more calm and sympathetic, and less angry and frustrated compared to the focused imagery control group. Kirby and Baldwin suggest that loving-kindness meditation “might help to support parents’ well-being, their capacity to be less reactive in responding to child distress, and their capacity to cultivate compassionate responses to their child.”

3. Visualize the presence of someone important to you when you need parenting support

Is there anything worse than an airplane meltdown? When your young child is crying about needing to sit still for hours on end, the glares of other people from the seats around you can make you feel very alone and despondent.

Try this: Displace those glares by visualizing a dear friend, partner, parent by your side, giving you support and help.

A 2015 study by Christopher Pepping and colleagues randomly assigned college freshmen to one of two groups. Students in the control group focused on reflecting on interpersonal skills that did not include security or compassion. The researchers asked students in the “attachment security priming group” to call to mind a person they are close to, that they could rely on to help them if they were in need. Perhaps not surprisingly, those students felt more self-compassion afterward than their counterparts in the control group.

I often call to mind the warmth of my own mom’s voice when I’ve struggled with parenting. I even use her nicknames and endearments in my self-compassion self-talk to marshal the power of her (and my own) tenderness to sustain me when I’m overwhelmed. Her presence in my mind’s eye reassures me even though she may not be physically beside me.

Indeed, our capacity for self-compassion is often formed by our relationship with our own parents. The 2015 study by Pepping and colleagues also found that college students who remembered parents as cold and rejecting were more likely to feel anxious about their close relationships, and in turn, tended to have lower levels of self-compassion.

Even if you didn’t grow up with good models of compassion, try to remember that self-compassion is a skill you can develop through practice. When you feel self-criticism rising in your head, put your hand on your heart—and talk to yourself as you would a dear friend who is suffering.

About the Author



Maryam Abdullah

UC Berkeley

Maryam Abdullah, Ph.D., is the Parenting Program Director of the Greater Good Science Center. She is a developmental psychologist with expertise in parent-child relationships and children’s development of prosocial behaviors.