

Why Self-Compassion Beats Self-Confidence - The New York Times

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“Be more confident,” a friend once told me as we made the rounds at a swanky networking event where I felt terribly out of place. Faking confidence is easy: I pulled my shoulders back and spoke louder and with more assertiveness.

Like many soft-spoken, mild-mannered people, I’ve spent a great deal of time trying to present myself this way. As it turns out, confidence may be overrated.

“We like confidence because it feels good and gives us a sense of control. The alternative would be constant anxiety,” said Eric Barker, author of “Barking Up the Wrong Tree.”

We live in a culture that reveres self-confidence and self-assuredness, but as it turns out, there may be a better approach to success and personal development: self-compassion. While self-confidence makes you feel better about your abilities, it can also lead you to vastly overestimate those abilities.

Self-compassion, on the other hand, encourages you to acknowledge your flaws and limitations, allowing you to look at yourself from a more objective and realistic point of view. Both have merits, but many experts believe that self-compassion includes the advantages of self-confidence without the drawbacks.

In his book, Mr. Barker asserts that productivity culture often promotes faking confidence without considering these drawbacks. Namely, when you fake it, you may start to believe your own lie, which can lead to disastrous outcomes.

Because confidence feels good “we often don’t notice when it creeps across the line to overconfidence,” Mr. Barker said. This is better known as the Dunning-Kruger effect: a cognitive bias in which you overestimate your ability in something.

But this isn’t to say you have to go around feeling inadequate. Dr. Kristin Neff, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas, suggests a solution to the problem of overconfidence: self-compassion.

“Self-compassion is treating yourself with the same kindness, care and concern you show a loved one,” Dr. Neff said. “We need to frame it in terms of humanity. That’s what makes self-compassion so different: ‘I’m an imperfect human being living an imperfect life.’”

By that definition, self-compassion is the opposite of overconfidence. Admitting we have flaws just like anyone else keeps us connected to others, Dr. Neff said, and also keeps us from exaggerating our flaws or strengths. Unlike overconfidence, which attempts to hide self-doubt and other pessimistic shortcomings, self-compassion accepts them. Self-compassion, Mr. Barker writes, includes the benefits of confidence without the downside of delusion.

“A lot of people think self-compassion is weak, but it’s just the opposite,” Dr. Neff said. “When you’re in the trenches, do you want an enemy or an ally?” Whereas confidence is aimed at feeling adequate and powerful despite how adequate and powerful you actually are, self-compassion encourages you to accept a more objective reality.

For example, a study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology asked people to describe themselves while being recorded on video. Those subjects were then told they would be rated on how likable, friendly and intelligent they seemed in the video. Subjects who had high levels of self-compassion had generally the same emotional reaction no matter how they were rated. By contrast, people with high levels of self-esteem had negative emotional reactions if the feedback was simply neutral and not exceptional. They were also more likely to blame unexceptional ratings on outside factors.

“In general, these studies suggest that self-compassion attenuates people’s reactions to negative events in ways that are distinct from and, in some cases, more beneficial than self-esteem,” the researchers concluded.

Without the pressure to be superhuman, it’s easier to accept feedback and criticism. It’s much harder to learn and improve when you believe you already know everything.

Dr. Neff said resilience may be the most remarkable benefit of self-compassion. In one study, she and her colleagues worked with veterans returning from war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The subjects worked with clinical psychologists who determined that nearly half of the group (42 percent) experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Using a 26-item self-report questionnaire that included statements like, “I’m tolerant of my own

flaws and inadequacies,” Dr. Neff and her colleagues rated subjects’ level of self-compassion. The study concluded that the more self-compassionate veterans were, the less severe their PTSD symptoms were.

Dr. Neff added that self-compassionate people also tend to ruminate less because they can “break the cycle of negativity” by accepting their own imperfections.

Still, of course, there are many benefits to being confident, even if it’s a put-on. A study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology found that simply appearing more confident makes people believe you deserve more respect and admiration, possibly helping you reach higher social status. Another study published in Plos One found that when people are overconfident, others overrate them as smarter and more skilled. In other words, there’s something to the “fake it until you make it” phenomenon.

But self-compassion and acceptance can offer a whole suite of other benefits: It’s easier for self-compassionate people to improve on those mistakes, failures or shortcomings because they view them more objectively. Research shows self-compassion is an effective motivator in this way.

Self-compassionate people are better at owning up to their mistakes. Juliana Breines and Serena Chen of the University of California at Berkeley conducted a series of experiments to measure the effect of self-compassion on personal growth. In one study, they asked people to think about something they’ve done that made them feel guilty (lying to a partner, for example). From there, subjects were assigned to a group: self-compassion, self-esteem control or positive distraction control. The self-compassion group had to write to themselves “from a compassionate and understanding perspective.”

The self-esteem group was instructed to write about their own positive qualities, and the positive distraction group was asked to write about a hobby they enjoyed. According to the study, those who practiced self-compassion were more motivated to admit and apologize for their mistake than people in the self-esteem group or positive distraction group. The self-compassion group was also more committed to not repeating their mistakes.

What’s more, self-compassion has been shown to help people better empathize with others. Dr. Neff and her colleague, Tasha Beretvas at the University of Texas at Austin, have found that people rate self-compassionate partners as more caring and supportive than self-critical ones. So if your partner points out a flaw, you’ll do better to accept it and forgive yourself than beat yourself up and dwell on it.

Pulling your shoulders back is easy. Learning to be kind to yourself takes considerably more effort. In his book, Mr. Barker suggests a few ways to embrace self-compassion: Accept that you're human, recognize your failures and frustrations, and avoid dwelling on mistakes.

"The first and most important thing to do is to notice that voice in your head – that running commentary we all have as we go about our lives," Mr. Barker said. "Often that voice is way too critical. You beat yourself up for every perceived mistake. To be more self-compassionate, you need to notice that voice and correct it."

That doesn't mean lying to yourself, Mr. Barker says, but rather changing the way you talk to yourself. It may help to imagine the way a loved one would talk to you about your mistakes, then switch that voice out for a more supportive one. Keep in mind, however, that the harsh critic in your head is not your enemy. This is a common misconception that can make things worse, Dr. Neff said, because that voice is a survival mechanism that's intended to keep you safe.

"Don't beat yourself up for beating yourself up," she said. "We just need to learn to make friends with our inner critic."