Why Self-Compassion Trumps Self-Esteem

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Researcher **Kristin Neff** reveals the benefits of going easy on yourself: less anxiety, less conflict, and more peace of mind.

By Kristin Neff
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In this incredibly competitive society of ours, how many of us truly feel good about ourselves?

I remember once, as a freshman in college, after spending hours getting ready for a big party, I complained to my boyfriend that my hair, makeup, and outfit were woefully inadequate. He tried to reassure me by saying, "Don't worry, you look fine."

Juan Estey

"*Fine*? Oh great, I always wanted to look *fine* . . ."

The desire to feel special is understandable. The problem is that by definition it's impossible for *everyone* to be above average at the same time. Although there are some ways in which we excel, there is always someone smarter, prettier, more successful. How do we cope with this?

Not very well. To see ourselves positively, we tend to inflate our own egos and put others down so that we can feel good in comparison. But this strategy comes at a price—it holds us back from reaching our full potential in life.

How can we grow if we can't acknowledge our own weaknesses? We might *temporarily* feel better about ourselves by ignoring our flaws, or by believing

our issues and difficulties are somebody else's fault, but in the long run we only harm ourselves by getting stuck in endless cycles of stagnation and conflict.

Continually feeding our need for positive self-evaluation is a bit like stuffing ourselves with candy. We get a brief sugar high, then a crash. And right after the crash comes a pendulum swing to despair as we realize that—however much we'd like to—we can't always blame our problems on someone else. We can't always feel special and above average.

The result is often devastating. Most of us are incredibly hard on ourselves when we finally admit some flaw or shortcoming: "I'm not good enough. I'm worthless."

And of course, the goalposts for what counts as "good enough" seem always to remain out of reach. No matter how well we do, someone else always seems to be doing it better. The result of this line of thinking is sobering: Millions of people need to take pharmaceuticals every day just to cope with daily life. Insecurity, anxiety, and depression are incredibly common in our society, and much of this is due to self-judgment, to beating ourselves up when we feel we aren't winning in the game of life.

Another way

So what's the answer? *To stop judging and evaluating ourselves altogether*. To stop trying to label ourselves as "good" or "bad" and simply accept ourselves with an open heart. To treat ourselves with the same kindness, caring, and compassion we would show to a good friend—or even a stranger, for that matter.

When I first came across the idea of "self-compassion," it changed my life almost immediately. It was during my last year in the human development doctoral program at the University of California, Berkeley, as I was putting the finishing touches on my dissertation. I was going through a really difficult time following the breakup of my first marriage, and I was full of shame and self-loathing. I thought signing up for meditation classes at a local Buddhist center might help. As part of my exploration, I read Sharon Salzberg's classic book *Lovingkindness* and was never the same again.

I had known that Buddhists talk a lot about the importance of compassion, but I had never considered that having compassion for *yourself* might be as important as having compassion for others. From the Buddhist point of view, you have to care about yourself before you can really care about other people.

I remember talking to my new fiancé, Rupert, who joined me for the weekly Buddhist group meetings, and shaking my head in amazement. "You mean you're actually allowed to be *nice* to yourself, to have compassion for yourself when you mess up or are going through a really hard time? I don't know . . . if I'm too self-compassionate, won't I just be lazy and selfish?" It took me a while to get my head around it.

But I slowly came to realize that self-criticism—despite being socially sanctioned—was not at all helpful, and in fact only made things worse. I wasn't making myself a better person by beating myself up all the time. Instead, I was causing myself to feel inadequate and insecure, then taking out my frustration on the people closest to me. More than that, I wasn't owning up to many things because I was so afraid of the self-hate that would follow if I admitted the truth.

After getting my Ph.D., I did two years of postdoctoral training with a leading self-esteem researcher. I quickly learned that although thousands of articles had been written on the importance of self-esteem, researchers were now starting to point out all the traps that people can fall into when they try to get and keep a sense of high self-esteem: narcissism, self-absorption, self-righteous anger, prejudice, discrimination, and so on.

I realized that self-compassion was the perfect alternative to the relentless pursuit of self-esteem. Why? Because it offers the same protection against harsh self-criticism as self-esteem, but without the need to see ourselves as perfect or as better than others. In other words, *self-compassion provides the same benefits as high self-esteem without its drawbacks*.

Although no one had yet defined self-compassion from an academic perspective—let alone done any research on it—I knew that this would be my life's work.

Over the past decade, research that my colleagues and I have conducted shows that self-compassion is a powerful way to achieve emotional well-being and contentment in our lives, helping us avoid destructive patterns of fear, negativity, and isolation. More so than self-esteem, the nurturing quality of self-compassion allows us to flourish, to appreciate the beauty and richness of life, even in hard times. When we soothe our agitated minds with self-compassion, we're better able to notice what's right as well as what's wrong, so that we can orient ourselves toward that which gives us joy.

The science of self-compassion

So what is self-compassion? What does it mean exactly?

Kristin Neff's new book, _Self-Compassion_ (William Morrow, 2011).
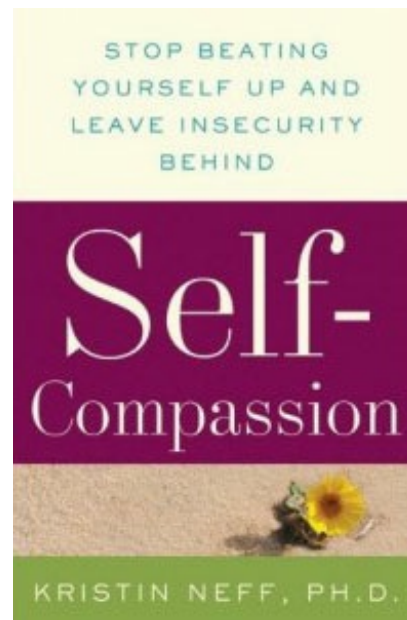
As I've defined it, self-compassion entails three core components. First, it requires _self-kindness_, that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental. Second, it requires recognition of our _common humanity_, feeling connected with others in the experience 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. We must achieve and combine these three essential elements in order to be truly self-compassionate.

This means that unlike self-esteem, the good feelings of self-compassion do not depend on being special and above average, or on meeting ideal goals. Instead, they come from caring about ourselves—fragile and imperfect yet magnificent as we are. Rather than pitting ourselves against other people in an endless comparison game, we embrace what we share with others and feel more connected and whole in the process. And the good feelings of self-compassion don't go away when we mess up or things go wrong. In fact, self-compassion steps in precisely where self-esteem lets us down—whenever we fail or feel inadequate.

Sure, you skeptics may be saying to yourself, but what does the research show?

The bottom line is that according to the science, self-compassion does in fact appear to offer the same advantages as high self-esteem, with no discernable downsides.

The first thing to know is that self-compassion and self-esteem do tend to go together. If you're self-compassionate, you'll tend to have higher self-esteem than if you're endlessly self-critical. And like high self-esteem, self-compassion

is associated with significantly less anxiety and depression, as well as more happiness, optimism, and positive emotions. However, self-compassion offers clear advantages over self-esteem when things go wrong, or when our egos are threatened.

In one study my colleagues and I conducted, for instance, undergraduate students were asked to fill out measures of self-compassion and self-esteem. Next came the hard part. They were asked to participate in a mock job interview to "test their interviewing skills."

A lot of undergrads are nervous about the interviewing process, especially given that they will soon be applying for jobs in real life. As part of the experiment, students were asked to write an answer to that dreaded but inevitable interview question, "Please describe your greatest weakness." Afterward they were asked to report how anxious they were feeling.

Participants' self-compassion levels, but not their self-esteem levels, predicted how much anxiety they felt. In other words, self-compassionate students reported feeling less self-conscious and nervous than those who lacked self-compassion, presumably because they felt okay admitting and talking about their weak points.

Students with high self-esteem, by contrast, were no less anxious than those with low self-esteem, having been thrown off balance by the challenge of discussing their failings. And interestingly, self-compassionate people used fewer first-person singular pronouns such as "I" when writing about their weaknesses, instead using more first-person plural pronouns such as "we." They also made references to friends, family, and other humans more often. This suggests that the sense of interconnectedness inherent to self-compassion plays an important role in its ability to buffer against anxiety.

Another study required people to imagine being in potentially embarrassing situations: being on a sports team and blowing a big game, for instance, or performing in a play and forgetting one's lines. How would participants feel if something like this happened to them?

Self-compassionate participants were less likely to feel humiliated or incompetent, or to take it too personally. Instead, they said they would take things in stride, thinking thoughts like "Everybody goofs up now and then" and "In the long run, this doesn't really matter." Having high self-esteem, however, made little difference. Those with both high *and* low self-esteem were equally likely to have thoughts like, "I'm such a loser" or "I wish I could die." Once again, high self-esteem tends to come up empty-handed when the chips are down.

In a different study, participants were asked to make a videotape that would introduce and describe themselves. They were then told that someone would watch their tape and give them feedback in terms of how warm, friendly, intelligent, likable, and mature they appeared (the feedback was bogus, of course).

Half the participants received positive feedback, the other half neutral feedback. Self-compassionate people were relatively unflustered regardless of whether the feedback was positive or neutral, and they were willing to say the feedback was based on their own personality either way. People with high levels of self-esteem, however, tended to get upset when they received neutral feedback (what, I'm just *average*?). They were also more likely to deny that the neutral feedback was due to their own personality (surely it's because the person who watched the tape was an idiot!).

This suggests that self-compassionate people are better able to accept who they are regardless of the degree of praise they receive from others. Self-esteem, on the other hand, only thrives when the reviews are good and may lead to evasive and counterproductive tactics when there's a possibility of facing unpleasant truths about oneself.

Recently, my colleague Roos Vonk and I investigated the benefits of self-compassion versus self-esteem with more than three thousand people from various walks of life, the largest study to examine this issue so far.

First, we examined the stability of positive feelings these people experienced toward themselves over time. Did these feelings tend to go up and down like a yo-yo or were they relatively constant? We hypothesized that self-esteem would be associated with relatively *un*stable feelings of self-worth, since self-esteem tends to be diminished whenever things don't turn out as well as desired. On the other hand, because compassion can be extended to oneself in both good times and bad, we expected the feelings of self-worth to remain steadier over time among self-compassionate people.

To test this idea, we had participants report on how they were feeling toward themselves at the time—for instance, "I feel inferior to others at this moment" or "I feel good about myself"—doing so 12 different times over a period of eight months.

Next, we calculated the degree to which overall levels of self-compassion or self-esteem predicted stability in self-worth over this period. As expected, self-compassion was clearly associated with steadier and more constant feelings of self-worth than self-esteem. We also found that self-compassion was less likely than self-esteem to be contingent on outside factors like social approval, success in competitions, or feeling attractive. When our sense of self-worth

stems from being a human being intrinsically worthy of respect—rather than being contingent on reaching certain goals—our sense of self-worth is much less easily shaken.

We also found that in comparison to self-esteem, self-compassion was associated with less social comparison and less need to retaliate for perceived personal slights. It was also linked to less "need for cognitive closure," which is psych-speak for the need to be right without question. People who invest their self-worth in feeling superior and infallible tend to get angry and defensive when their status is threatened. People who compassionately accept their imperfection, however, no longer need to engage in such unhealthy behaviors to protect their egos.

In fact, a striking finding of the study was that people with high self-esteem were much more narcissistic than those with low self-esteem. In contrast, self-compassion was completely unassociated with narcissism, meaning that people who are high in self-compassion are no more likely to be narcissistic than people low in self-compassion.

An island of calm

Taken together, this research suggests that self-compassion provides an island of calm, a refuge from the stormy seas of endless positive and negative self-judgment, so that we can finally stop asking, "Am I as good as they are? Am I good enough?" By tapping into our inner wellsprings of kindness, acknowledging the shared nature of our imperfect human condition, we can start to feel more secure, accepted, and alive.

It does take work to break the self-criticizing habits of a lifetime, but at the end of the day, you are only being asked to relax, allow life to be as it is, and open your heart to yourself. It's easier than you might think, and it could change your life.