



# *The Promise of Self-Compassion for Solos*

By Christy Cassisa  
and Kristin Neff

**J**ustin Ortiz (a fictional solo attorney) felt heavy and immobilized. He was sitting at his desk early Monday morning, beginning to review his to-do list for the day. With equal parts shame, panic, and dread, he reread the notice from the court that he'd lost his motion for summary judgment in the Smith case. His stomach sank into his shoes, a feeling of despondence settled into his bones. He couldn't believe he'd lost. He thought to himself, "I am such an incompetent lawyer—I never should have gone to law school! Clearly I suck at research and my writing is even worse."

Moving back to his list for the day, he realized that there was no human way he could check through it. He reluctantly began to prioritize. Which tasks were least likely to get him disciplined or disbarred if they went undone? Maybe he could beg opposing counsel to agree to a continuance in the Meyer hearing so he could work on the Luca brief today. After only two weeks of researching and writing it, the gnawing in his stomach was telling him that he was sure he'd missed something. "I actually might be getting sick," he thought as he washed down two cold tablets with a slurp of cold coffee, followed by a jelly-filled doughnut.

He remembered that he had a doctor's appointment today that he'd already rescheduled twice. "I'll sleep when I'm dead, I guess." He realized that he would also have to miss yet another of his son Joey's little league games, despite his pinkie swear to the contrary, because he'd also signed up for that happy-hour networking event. "I am the worst parent ever, but at least they always have good beer at these things," he thought.

He groaned inwardly, then realized that it had actually been audible when his Yorkie, Mitzy, picked up her head to look balefully at him. As she regarded him with reproach for another missed walk, he informed her, "Well, Mitzy, your human is a worthless idiot, and you're responsible for fixing the printer today."

## SOLOS AND THE NEED FOR SELF-COMPASSION

Solo attorneys are unique in the legal

profession. Rainmaker, researcher, IT specialist, janitor, business owner, litigator. And maybe also parent, partner, volunteer, or one of any number of additional roles acquired in life. The pressure of trying to be and do it all can easily lead to exhaustion and burnout. The very nature of solo lawyering can be isolating. There is no firm full of associates to back you up, no partner to take over if you have a sick day.

One exhausted solo practitioner explained this experience as it appeared to her in a recurring dream: It's like riding an incredibly tall, very unstable bicycle while juggling a hundred balls. If you slow down, or, even worse, if you stop, the bike will fall over, you'll drop all the balls, and you will break into a million jagged pieces. And there is no rest in sight.

*Self-compassion* may hold the key to keeping that bicycle upright and keeping those balls moving. It will also help when some balls are inevitably dropped, when failure happens, and when feelings of isolation set in. And it may even help with the decision to put down some balls *on purpose* or say "no" to taking them in the first place.

### WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION?

Self-compassion is like having your own personal motivational coach with you 24/7, a kind, comforting, and yet demanding coach who holds you accountable and protects your long-term goals while also acknowledging the pain of failure and suffering. Below we'll elaborate on what self-compassion is and how it can be of great benefit to you in your life—personally and professionally.

The three core components of self-compassion according to Dr. Kristin Neff's theoretical model are self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness of suffering ("Self-Compassion: An Alternative Conceptualization of

a Healthy Attitude Toward Oneself," *Self and Identity*, 2003 (2:2), at 85–102). So, what does this actually look like in real life?

- **Self-kindness** means that we soothe and comfort ourselves when in pain. It is internally offering ourselves the same support and kindness that we would offer to a dear friend who was suffering—offering a kind ear and a hug instead of a criticism and a smack. It also means taking care of ourselves for our long-term benefit, putting ourselves on the priority list.
- **Common humanity** involves recognizing that suffering is part of the shared human condition. None of us is unique in suffering. To be human is to accept that pain, challenge, failure, and misfortune happen to everyone. Every lawyer feels fear and doubt sometimes, and every attorney encounters major obstacles. It's just part of being in the legal profession—and being human.
- **Mindfulness** allows us to be with and validate our pain in an open and accepting manner. We must notice that we're suffering in order to do anything about it. We learn to clearly see and accept the things that we can't change so that we can respond wisely to our challenges instead of reacting on autopilot without thinking. We recognize the self-judgment when it happens and acknowledge that the situation stinks. But we don't have to get lost in the feelings or the story.

Compassion is aimed at the alleviation of suffering—that of others or ourselves. Self-compassion activates the mammalian "care system," helping us to feel safe by being cared for and connected. This sense of safety helps gives us the emotional

### MINDFULNESS IN ACTION

*Self-compassion practice is enriched through awareness that we bring to our experience as it is.*

support we need to deal with the stress of life. Research finds that we can activate the care systems with simple actions like supportive touch (e.g., putting your hand on your own shoulder) and with a warm and gentle tone of voice.

But self-compassion can be ferocious as well as tender. These two poles are represented by the dialectic of yin and yang.

*Yin* compassion is like a mother tenderly comforting her crying child. In this case, kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness manifest as loving, connected presence.

*Yang* compassion is like a mother bear ferociously protecting her cubs from harm. In this case, the three components show up as fierce, empowered truth.

## Research supports the benefits of being kinder to ourselves.



*Self-kindness* means we fiercely protect ourselves. We stand up and say “NO! I need to do what is best for me and protect myself if necessary.” *Common humanity* helps us to recognize that we are not alone in this struggle. For the solo practitioner, it means mentally connecting with your community and feeling supported as a result. And *mindfulness* manifests as clearly seeing the real truth of our situations so that we can choose wise, intentional, and sometimes fierce action.

*When we accept our own pain with a fiercely loving and connected presence, we can transform and heal.*

### SELF-CRITICISM MAKES YOU STRONG, DOESN'T IT?

Many lawyers may believe that self-kindness is antithetical to being tough and successful.

Schooled in the Socratic method in law school, lawyers are trained to expect that shame and ridicule are the natural and justified byproducts of an incorrect

response. The practice of law requires intense attention to detail, and a mistake may result in millions of dollars in fines or multiple years in prison, so perfection seems a professional necessity, and shame a small price to pay in comparison.

The concept of actually being kind to ourselves when we make a mistake may also feel downright alien to many lawyers, who tend to be pessimistic, skeptical, and perfectionistic.

Predicting and planning for the worst may often save clients from negative outcomes, so this natural personality trait is often strengthened by positive results. But pessimists and skeptics tend to carry this negative thinking with them everywhere—into the home, relationships,

volunteer activities, recreational pursuits, and other arenas where it may not be valued or appreciated. This can lead to overall poor relationships and unhappiness.

High-achieving and hard-driving types abound in the legal profession, but perfectionism, defined as the compulsive need to achieve and accomplish one's goals, doesn't allow for shortcomings. Unfortunately, the energy required to maintain the facade of perfection takes its toll and can lead to anxiety, depression, and burnout.

### EVEN LAWYERS DESERVE KINDNESS AND CARE

Many lawyers may think that self-compassion is too touchy-feely and that if they indulge in such concepts, they will lose their edge. Fortunately, research supports the benefits of being kinder to ourselves and debunks many common misconceptions about the construct:

1. **Self-compassion is not self-pity.** Thinking about bringing kindness

to yourself when you make a mistake or feel bad may trigger thoughts of “Oh, woe is me” or “I'm so pitiful” or “It's all about me.” However, with self-compassion, the understanding of common humanity allows us to realize that we all suffer, and the mindful recognition of our own suffering helps us to see it clearly for what it is. Research shows that self-compassionate people are more able to take a clear-eyed perspective of the reality of their situation and are less likely to spend time ruminating.

2. **Self-compassion is not self-indulgent.** Self-kindness and offering ourselves what we need in the face of suffering may be misinterpreted as a form of self-indulgence that allows us to wallow in our misery with a pint of Chunky Monkey and a bottle of merlot. However, self-compassionate people, research shows, are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors such as exercise, eating well, drinking less, and going to the doctor more regularly. Self-compassion helps us keep in mind that we want long-term health and success, not short-term pleasure.
3. **Self-compassion is not selfish.** Sometimes we have to put our own needs first, and then meet others', an approach to which many of us aren't accustomed. Lawyers who take care of everything for everyone else, and who don't take care of themselves, burn out faster, build up resentment, and lose the ability to connect with their clients (and often family and friends, too). The analogy of “putting on your own oxygen mask first” when on an airplane is a clear example. There's no helping anyone if you've passed out! Research shows that those who bring themselves into the circle of compassion and care through that sense of common humanity have the ability to be more supportive and compassionate toward others.
4. **Self-compassion is not weak.** It takes strength to take care of yourself. Recall that concept of *yang*

compassion—a fierce protectiveness and motivator. Studies show that self-compassionate people are more resilient in the face of difficulty and challenges. They are able to cope more effectively with tough situations such as divorce, chronic pain, and trauma. For the solo attorney who may face many emotionally challenging situations, self-compassion offers an internal strength, a resource to handle and recover from setbacks.

5. **Self-compassion is not making excuses for yourself.** Some of us look for someone else, anyone else, to blame for mistakes because we can't stand the pain of admitting imperfection. Research shows self-compassionate people are actually *more* likely to take responsibility for their own actions because they realize that everyone makes mistakes, and accepting the reality of a tough situation allows a more intentional and effective response.
6. **Self-compassion will not undermine motivation.** This is a biggie for attorneys, especially solo attorneys who often must rely on their own internal drive and determination to get things done because there is no backup team ready to step in. Many of us grew up with the belief that mental self-flagellation was the only way to motivate ourselves. That inner critic has good intentions. It wants us to “do better,” “try harder,” “work smarter.” Unfortunately, this internal criticism often proves to be counterproductive. When our inner critic beats us up for making mistakes and experiencing failures, we become our own attacker and create our own fight/flight reactivity. When we make mistakes or fail, we learn that it's not safe to try again, and we become risk-averse. Research shows that self-compassionate people still have high standards, are less afraid of failure, and are more willing to try again if they do fail.

(For more, see Kristin Neff's “The

Five Myths of Self-Compassion,” *Psychotherapy Networker*, 2015 (39:5), at 30–35.)

### THE SELF-COMPASSIONATE SOLO

So, what might this actually look like in the real life of a solo practitioner, when the proverbial rubber hits the road? Let's take a look back at Justin Ortiz's day.

**Practicing mindfulness.** Justin realized that he was feeling heavy and immobilized. Sitting at his desk early Monday morning, he paused for his daily ten-minute mindful check-in meditation practice to calm and focus his mind and body before diving into his e-mail.

**Practicing kindness.** Once he opened his e-mail, he began reading the notice from the court that he'd lost his motion for summary judgment in the Smith case. His stomach sank into his shoes, a feeling of despondence settled into his bones. He couldn't believe he'd lost. He pressed his palm to his forehead and felt the warmth of his hand. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and acknowledged the pain of the loss. Then he offered himself some kind words of support, “Wow, this totally sucks. I feel so terrible for myself and for my client. I did a ton of research and I know I'm a good writer because I have lots of wins.”

**Practicing common humanity.** Then Justin was able to see the bigger picture. “This happens to lots of lawyers, almost every case has a losing side. The facts just weren't on our side this time. I will review it once more to make sure there wasn't



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**Kristin Neff** (kneff@austin.utexas.edu) is an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. She is a pioneer in self-compassion research, having conducted the first studies in the field 15 years ago. In addition to her numerous academic articles on the topic, she is author of the book *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* (William Morrow, 2011). She has also co-developed an empirically supported eight-week training program with Dr. Christopher Germer that is taught worldwide: Mindful Self-Compassion. *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* (Guilford, 2018) is now available.

## The Three Elements of Self-Compassion

1. **Self-kindness:** offering yourself the same kindness you would to a dear friend who is suffering.
2. **Common humanity:** recognizing that you're not alone, we all struggle.
3. **Mindfulness:** being aware of the reality of your experience as it is in this moment.

something we could have done better, but I'm pretty sure we did our best.”

**Yin and yang self-compassion.** He remembered that he'd not been feeling very well the last few weeks. He rubbed his temples gently as he thought to himself, “I have that doctor's appointment today—I've already rescheduled twice, and this is my only body. I'll request a continuance in the Meyer case and I'll submit the Luca brief today. I've worked on it for two weeks and I know it's good stuff. I've got this. After the doc, I'll swing by the networking event for an hour, drop off some business cards, and have a Perrier before heading over to catch the second half of Joey's ball game.”

Justin stretched, took another deep and cleansing breath, and dove into his challenging day with a sense of resilience and of being supported by his own internal coach.

Same day. Yet completely different. ■