

FIERCE SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **VARIABLE** | Duration: **5 MINS**

Fierce Self-Compassion Break

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

When we are hurt or suffering, it can help to soothe ourselves with warmth and acceptance. But in many situations, we also need to protect ourselves: to speak up, say no, draw boundaries, or fight injustice.

Fierce self-compassion is a way to stand up for ourselves. It has the same three components as tender self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—but they manifest in slightly different ways. In fierce self-compassion, **mindfulness** means acknowledging the harm we’ve experienced and recognizing what needs to change; **common humanity** allows us to see that when we stand up for ourselves, we are also standing up for others like us; and **self-kindness** translates into powerful, courageous action to protect ourselves.

Research suggests that more self-compassionate people are more empowered and resilient. They tend to **take more action** to solve their problems, and cope better with **stigma**, **microaggressions**, and **bullying**.

TIME REQUIRED

5 minutes. While it may be challenging to do this practice every time you face a stressful situation, an initial goal could be to try it at least once per week.

HOW TO DO IT

Think of a situation in your life in which you feel the need to protect yourself, draw boundaries, or stand up to someone. Maybe you’re being taken advantage of by a coworker, or your neighbor blasts music late at night, or a relative constantly tries to push their political views on you. Please choose a situation where you feel mildly to moderately threatened, but not in real danger, so that you can learn the skill without overwhelming yourself.

When you’re ready, call up the situation in your mind’s eye. Try not to focus too much on any particular person or group of people causing the situation. Rather *focus on the harm itself*. What’s happening? What’s going on? What is the boundary violation or threat or injustice? Try to allow yourself to feel whatever emotions come up: fear, anger, frustration? See if you can stop thinking about how and why you’re in this situation and instead just tune in to the physical discomfort it gives you. Notice any bodily sensations without judging or trying to change them.

Now sit or stand up tall and roll your shoulders back, so that your posture embodies strength and determination. Then say a series of phrases (aloud or silently to yourself) designed to invoke the three components of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—in terms that feel active and protective. Below are some suggestions, but the goal is to find language that works for you personally.

1. The first phrase is meant to help you be mindful of what is happening. While focusing on the harm, rather than the person or people causing the harm, say to yourself slowly and with conviction, “I clearly see the truth of what’s happening.” That’s mindfulness; we see things as they are. Other options are: “This is not OK,” “I should not be treated this way,” or “This is unfair.” Find the words that seem right for you.
2. The purpose of the second phrase is to help you remember your common humanity with other people so you can draw strength from your connections to them while protecting yourself. Try saying, “I am not alone; other people have experienced this, as well.” Other options are: “By standing up for myself, I stand up for everyone,” or “All human beings deserve just treatment,” or

simply “Me too.”

3. Now put a fist over your heart, as a gesture of strength and bravery. Commit to being kind to yourself by keeping yourself safe. For the third phrase, try asserting confidently, “I will protect myself.” Other options might be “I will not yield,” or, “I am strong enough to take this on.”
4. If you’re having trouble finding the right words, imagine that someone you really care about was being mistreated or threatened in the same way you are. What would you say to this person to help them be strong, stand tall, have courage? Now, can you offer the same message to yourself?
5. Finally, put your other hand over your fist and hold it tenderly. The invitation is to combine the fierce energy of brave, empowered clarity with the [tender energy of loving, connected presence](#). Give yourself full permission to feel the force of your anger and resolve, but also let this force be caring. Remember, we’re aiming the fierce compassion at the harm or injustice itself, not at the person causing the harm. They are human and you are human. Can you draw on your fierceness to commit to taking action, while still holding space in your heart for love and compassion?

After this practice, you may be feeling very activated. Do what you need to in order to take care of yourself. Perhaps take some deep breaths, stretch, or have a cup of tea. If calling on fierce self-compassion feels awkward or scary, allow yourself to go as slowly as you need to. The important thing is setting your intention to care for yourself as best you can.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). [A pilot study and randomized controlled trial of the mindful self-compassion program](#) *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(1), 28-44.

Participants in an eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program, which included practicing a series of self-compassion exercises, reported feeling greater self-compassion at the end of the program than they had at the beginning. Their self-compassion at the end of the eight weeks was also greater than that of a comparison group that didn’t participate in the program. The MSC participants also reported greater mindfulness and life satisfaction—and less depression, anxiety, and stress—than the comparison group.

WHY TO TRY IT

The three parts of fierce self-compassion each serve a purpose. When we are being harmed, it can be uncomfortable to face the truth, especially when those harming us are, for example, family members or people with power over us at work. Mindfulness counteracts this tendency and allows us to acknowledge what’s really going on.

Being harmed can make us feel alone, ashamed, and helpless, but recognizing our common humanity—both the fact that others suffer and that our actions can help them—creates a sense of empowerment.

Active and engaged self-kindness gives us the determination and energy to take those steps to protect ourselves and our fellow human beings. Together, this feeling of fierce self-compassion gives us a sense of brave, empowered clarity about our situation and how to respond to it.

SOURCES

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This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

