

HOW WOULD YOU TREAT A FRIEND?

Difficulty: **CASUAL** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **15 MINS**

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Research suggests that people are usually harder on themselves than they are on others. Rather than motivating them to succeed, this often makes a mistake or stressful situation even more stressful—to the point that they'll simply avoid new or challenging experiences for fearing of failing and eliciting a new wave of self-criticism.

This exercise asks you to notice the differences between the way you typically treat the people you care about and the way you typically treat yourself. It also asks you to consider why there may be differences between the two, and to contemplate what would happen if you treated yourself as compassionately as you treat others. Research suggests that treating yourself more compassionately can benefit your physical and mental health.

TIME REQUIRED

15 minutes. While it may be hard to find time to do this practice every time you are struggling with a difficult situation, an initial goal could be to try it once a month.

HOW TO DO IT

Take out a sheet of paper or open a blank document on your computer and go through the following steps.

1. First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about themselves or is really struggling in some way. How do you respond to your friend in these situations (if you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do and say, and note the tone in which you talk to your friend.
2. Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Please write down what you typically do and say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.
3. Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?
4. Write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself when you're suffering in the same way you typically respond to a close friend.
5. Next time you are struggling with something, try treating yourself like a good friend and see what happens.

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.

Mostly white and female adults from Boston participated in an eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program, which included learning [exercises](#) like How Would You Treat a Friend? They reported feeling greater self-compassion at the end of the program than they had at the beginning, and compared to a group who didn't participate in the program. The MSC participants also reported greater mindfulness and life satisfaction, and lower depression, anxiety, and stress, than the comparison group.

Breines, J., & Chen, S. (2013). [Activating the inner caregiver: The role of support-giving schemas in increasing state self-compassion](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49, 58-64.

American undergraduates (mostly female and Asian American, European American, or Latino) recalled a time when they gave emotional support to a friend or gave actual support (in writing) to another person. Afterward, they reported greater self-compassion for themselves around a problem with which they were struggling, compared with participants who didn't think about supporting a friend.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

How Would You Treat a Friend? is included in Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), an eight-week program by Kristin Neff and Chris Germer that trains people to be more mindful and self-compassionate. Research suggests that this exercise and program can benefit people outside the U.S.:

- [German adults](#) who typed out an online version of How Would You Treat a Friend? became kinder and more compassionate toward themselves and isolated themselves from social situations less frequently.
- [Japanese adults](#) practiced How Would You Treat a Friend? as part of an Enhancing Self-Compassion program and exhibited improvements in anxiety, depression, shame, negative thoughts, self-esteem, and emotional well-being.
- [Spanish adults](#) who participated in MSC increased in mindfulness and self-compassion and decreased in anxiety and depression.
- [Norwegian university students](#) who completed a three-week version of MSC showed improvements in mindfulness, self-compassion, anxiety, and depression that lasted six months after the program.
- People in Slovakia who engaged in MSC-based programs experienced [increases in self-compassion and self-reassurance](#) and [reductions in self-criticism](#) that lasted two months.
- [Patients with diabetes in New Zealand](#) showed improvements in self-compassion, depressive symptoms, and distress related to their diabetes that lasted three months after MSC training.
- [Spanish patients with chronic pain](#) experienced less anxiety and were able to cope better with physical pain after an MSC program.
- [Chinese women](#) and [Northern Chinese mothers with postpartum depression](#) who completed MSC experienced reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms that lasted at least three months.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Research suggests that the way people treat themselves is shaped in part by how others have treated them, but it can also be influenced by how they treat others. Because people often find it more natural to be compassionate toward others than to be compassionate toward themselves in a challenging situation, one way to increase self-compassion is to imagine what one would say to a friend in a similar position, then direct those same sentiments toward oneself.

Reflecting on how kind you are capable of being toward others can remind you that you are also capable of being kind toward yourself—and that you deserve compassion, too. By treating yourself with this kind of sympathy and understanding—rather than beating yourself up—you help yourself bounce back from challenging situations with greater resilience.

SOURCES

[Kristin Neff, Ph.D.](#), University of Texas, Austin
[Center for Mindful Self-Compassion](#)

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](#).

