

SELF-COMPASSIONATE LETTER

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

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

We often judge ourselves more harshly than we judge others, beating ourselves up over our faults, flaws, and shortcomings. That makes us feel isolated, unhappy, and even more stressed; it may even make us try to feel better about ourselves by denigrating other people.

Rather than harsh self-criticism, a healthier response is to treat yourself with compassion and understanding. According to psychologist Kristin Neff, this “self-compassion” has three main components: mindfulness, a feeling of common humanity, and self-kindness. This exercise asks you to write a letter to yourself expressing compassion for an aspect of yourself that you don’t like. Research suggests that people who respond with compassion to their own flaws and setbacks—rather than beating themselves up—experience greater physical and mental health.

TIME REQUIRED

5–15 minutes per day. Try to do this practice daily for a week to start. Later, you might try it once per week, or at least once per month—whatever works best for you.

HOW TO DO IT

First, think of something about yourself that makes you feel mildly ashamed, insecure, or not good enough. It could be something related to your personality, behavior, abilities, relationships, or any other part of your life.

Once you choose something, reflect on how it makes you feel. Sad? Embarrassed? Angry? The next step is to write a letter from yourself, to yourself, expressing compassion, understanding, and acceptance for this part of yourself that you struggle with.

As you express your thoughts and feelings in the letter, try to be good to yourself and be as honest as possible. Write whatever comes to you, but try to write in a way that makes you feel nurtured and soothed. Keep in mind that no one but you will see your letter and there is no “right” or “wrong” way of doing this exercise. You can spend anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes writing.

As you write this letter, follow these guidelines:

1. Imagine that there is someone who loves and accepts you unconditionally for who you are. What would that person say to you about this part of yourself? Think about what you would say to a friend in your position, or what a friend would say to you in this situation.
2. Remind yourself that everyone has things about themselves that they don’t like, and that nobody is perfect. Think about how many other people in the world might be struggling with the same thing that you’re struggling with.
3. Consider the ways in which events that have happened in your life, the family environment you grew up in, or even your genetic makeup may have contributed to this thing about yourself that you dislike.
4. In a compassionate way, ask yourself whether there are things that you could do to improve or better cope with this part of you. Focus on how positive changes could make you feel happier, healthier, or more fulfilled. Try to avoid judging yourself.

5. After writing the letter, put it out of sight for a little while. Then come back to it later and read it again. It may be especially helpful to read it whenever you're feeling bad about this part of yourself, as a reminder to be more self-compassionate.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Shapira, L. B., & Mongrain, M. (2010). [The benefits of self-compassion and optimism exercises for individuals vulnerable to depression](#). *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5, 377-389.

Canadians (mostly Caucasian) who wrote a Self-Compassionate Letter every day for a week reported lower symptoms of depression and greater happiness three months later than beforehand; they also seemed happier and less depressed three months later than participants who had written about an early memory every day for a week. Their increase in happiness persisted six months later.

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.

A group of mostly female and Caucasian Americans in an eight-week [Mindful Self-Compassion](#) (MSC) program, which included practicing the Self-Compassionate Letter, [among other 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 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. G., & Chen, S. (2012). [Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18(9), 1133-1143.

American undergraduate students (mostly of Asian or European descent) who wrote a compassionate paragraph to themselves regarding a personal weakness subsequently reported greater feelings of self-compassion. They also experienced other psychological benefits, such as greater motivation for self-improvement, compared to participants who focused on boosting their self-esteem, distracting themselves, or nothing in particular.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

Self-Compassionate Letter is included in several programs that aim to improve well-being with various compassion exercises, including MSC (a program by Kristin Neff and Chris Germer that trains people to be more mindful and self-compassionate) and [Compassionate Mind Training](#) (CMT, a central technique in Paul Gilbert's [Compassion-Focused Therapy](#) designed to improve the mental health of people with high levels of shame and self-criticism).

Research suggests that programs like these can benefit different groups and cultures:

- [Mental health patients in Iceland](#) who participated in a four-week CMT program experienced reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress.
- [American women](#) (mostly of African and Southeast Asian descent, who were currently, recently, or intending to become pregnant) who completed four CMT exercises that included Self-Compassionate Letter showed larger reductions in depression and anxiety symptoms compared to those who completed cognitive behavioral therapy exercises.
- [Japanese individuals](#) wrote Self-Compassionate Letters as part of an Enhancing Self-Compassion Program that also included [Compassion Meditation](#) and [Mindful Breathing](#). They exhibited improvements in anxiety, depression, shame, negative thoughts, self-esteem, and emotional well-being.
- [Chinese women](#) and [Northern Chinese mothers with postpartum depression](#) who wrote Self-Compassionate Letters as part of MSC programs experienced significant reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms that lasted at least three months.
- [Iranian mothers](#) of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder who wrote Self-Compassionate Letters

during an eight-week CMT program experienced reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms.

- [Persian college students](#), [elderly adults](#), [migraine patients](#), and [HIV-positive patients](#) who attended CMT programs in Iran showed improvements in well-being and healthy emotional processes.
- [Diabetic patients in New Zealand](#) who attended an MSC program experienced reductions in depression and diabetes distress that lasted three months after the program.
- [Chronic pain patients in Spain](#) who engaged in MSC showed improvements in anxiety, unhealthy thought processes, and pain symptoms.
- [British couples](#) experiencing a dementia diagnosis improved in depression, anxiety, and quality of life through Compassion-Focused Therapy.
- [Nigerian young adults](#) with substance abuse disorder completed a 10-week CMT program and reported lower rates of substance abuse afterward.

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

WHY TO TRY IT

Self-compassion reduces painful feelings of shame and self-criticism that can compromise mental health and well-being and stand in the way of personal growth. Writing in a self-compassionate way can help you replace your self-critical voice with a more compassionate one—one that comforts and reassures you rather than berating you for your shortcomings. It takes time and practice, but the more you write in this way, the more familiar and natural the compassionate voice will feel, and the easier it will be to remember to treat yourself kindly when you're feeling down on yourself.

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](#).

