SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

Difficulty: CASUAL | Frequency: 1X/DAY | Duration: 5 MINS

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Difficult situations become even harder when we beat ourselves up over them, interpreting them as a sign that we're less capable or worthy than other people. In fact, we often judge ourselves more harshly than we judge others, especially when we make a mistake or feel stressed out. That can make 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 walks you through all three of those components when you're going through a stressful experience. Research suggests that people who treat themselves with compassion rather than criticism in difficult times experience greater physical and mental health.

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

1. Think of a situation in your life that is difficult and is causing you stress. For this practice, especially if you are new to it, it's better to choose something that is moderately difficult in your life, rather than overwhelming.
2. Call the situation to mind and get in touch with what happened or what you think might happen.
3. Now say to yourself, "This is a moment of suffering." This acknowledgment is a form of mindfulness—of noticing what is going on for you emotionally in the present moment, without judging that experience as good or bad. You can also say to yourself, "This hurts" or "This is stress." Use whatever statement feels most natural to you.
4. Next, say to yourself, "Suffering is a part of life." This is a recognition of your common humanity with others—that all people have trying experiences, and these experiences give you something in common with the rest of humanity rather than mark you as abnormal or deficient. Other options for this statement include "Other people feel this way," "I'm not alone," or "We all struggle in our lives."
5. Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch on your chest, and say, "May I be kind to myself." You can also consider whether there is another specific phrase that would speak to you in that particular situation. Some examples: "May I give myself the compassion that I need," "May I accept myself as I am," "May I learn to accept myself as I am," "May I forgive myself," "May I be

strong," and "May I be patient."

This practice can be used any time of day or night. If you practice it in moments of relative calm, it might become easier for you to experience the three parts of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—when you need them most.

To provide even more structure, you can listen to audio guiding you through this practice in the player below. Self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff provides this and other guided self-compassion practices on her Self-Compassion website.

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.

People in an eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program, which included practicing the Self-Compassion Break, among other exercises, reported feeling greater self-compassion at the end of the program than they had at the beginning and when compared to a group that didn't participate. The (largely Caucasian) MSC participants also reported greater mindfulness and life satisfaction, and lower depression, anxiety, and stress, than the comparison group.

Who Has Tried The Practice?

Additional research has engaged members of other groups:

- People in Slovakia who took Self-Compassion Breaks as part of an MSC-based program experienced increases in self-compassion and self-reassurance that lasted two months, compared to people who did not participate in the program.
- Depressed Chinese graduate students who practiced this exercise as part of a self-compassion program felt more self-compassion and self-kindness and less self-judgement, isolation, and depression than students who did not.

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

WHY TO TRY IT

The three elements in this practice—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—all play important roles in increasing self-compassion. Mindfulness allows people to step back and recognize that they are experiencing suffering, without judging suffering as something bad that they should try to avoid. Sometimes people fail to notice when they are in pain, or deny that they are suffering because it brings up feelings of weakness or defeat. Common humanity reminds people of their connection with other people—all of whom suffer at some point in their lives—and eases feelings of loneliness and isolation. Self-kindness is an active expression of caring toward the self that can help people clarify their intentions for how they want to treat themselves.

Going through these steps in response to a stressful experiences can help people replace their self-critical voice with a more compassionate one, one that comforts and reassures rather than berating them for shortcomings. That makes it easier to work through stress and reach a place of calm, acceptance, and happiness.

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.