

HOW TO TREAT YOURSELF LIKE YOU ARE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND

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Imagine you just got a bad grade on a test. What kind of thoughts would be running through your head? When something difficult like this happens, a lot of us will talk to ourselves in a harsh tone of voice, be very critical, and call ourselves names. Now imagine it were your friend who got a bad grade—what would you say to them? Most people say that they would be much kinder to their friend, use a calmer tone of voice, and say something supportive and encouraging. They would show their friend compassion, which means they would feel what their friend was feeling and wish to help them. When people show that same level of compassion to themselves, it is called self-compassion. In this article, we will explain exactly what self-compassion is, how you can use it in your life, and how it can help you to be more satisfied in your life.

SELF-COMPASSION

To be kind to yourself.

MINDFULNESS

To notice what is happening in the present moment without saying it is “good” or “bad.”

COMMON HUMANITY

To remember that all human beings experience similar emotions and problems in life.

KINDNESS

Friendliness, generosity.

SUPPORTIVE TOUCH

Using physical touch to make you feel supported, by putting a hand on your heart, giving yourself a hug, or putting a hand on your stomach.

WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION?

Life can be difficult. We all experience challenges, big and small, like feeling nervous on our first day of school, feeling discouraged after getting a bad grade, or feeling sad after having an argument with a friend. How we treat ourselves in these situations can have a big impact on how we feel. Studies have shown that using **self-compassion** helps us manage these challenging situations better, makes us more satisfied in our life, and makes it easier to stay motivated, even after a setback. So, what is self-compassion?

Self-compassion means being kind and supportive to yourself, especially in difficult or challenging situations [1]. Self-compassion is like being your own best friend. One way to think of self-compassion is by breaking it down into three parts. The first part is called **mindfulness**. Mindfulness just means being aware of what is happening in the present moment without judging it as good or bad. For example, you can mindfully listen to the sounds in the room by really paying attention to what you are hearing, and without saying the sounds are good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. In self-compassion, mindfulness means being aware of how you are feeling without pretending that everything is okay, and without exaggerating the situation. For example, imagine you have plans to go to the beach on the weekend. When it is time to go, it starts to rain and thunder, and you cannot go. A mindful response might be to say, “I am disappointed that I do not get to go to the beach today.” A response that may be less mindful would be to pretend that you are fine, saying, “I do not care, I did not even want to go to the beach.” It would also be less mindful to exaggerate how you are feeling and say something like, “This is the worst day ever!”

The second part of self-compassion is called **common humanity**. That is just a complicated way to say that all human beings experience difficult emotions at times. All kids, teenagers, and adults will feel sad, angry, embarrassed, nervous, or guilty from time to time. All of us have experienced difficult situations, for example, not getting something that we really wanted, having an argument with someone, or losing an object that we cared about. Often when we feel bad, we feel self-pity—we think we are the *only* one who feels bad, and that can make us feel lonely and isolated from other people. Self-compassion reminds us that we are not alone in how we are feeling, and it can make us feel more connected with others around us.

The third part of self-compassion is called **kindness**. This one might seem simple, but it can be difficult to show yourself kindness when you feel bad. Sometimes it can help to ask yourself what you might say to a good friend or what a good friend might say to you. Another way you can show yourself kindness is by using what is called **supportive touch**. Have you ever given or received a hug from someone when you were feeling bad, and it made you feel supported? Or think about

how our pets respond when we show them that we care about them by petting them. A cat might start to purr, or a dog might roll on his back so that you can rub his belly. It feels very natural to pet an animal or hug a friend, and it feels good for both sides. It might feel new to you at first, but you could try doing something similar for yourself—by rubbing your hands together or crossing your arms like you are giving yourself a hug. You could try placing a hand on your heart. You can also think about what actions you could take that would support your body. This includes things like taking a hot shower, taking some deep breaths, or getting enough sleep. Finally, you could think about what you could do to support your mind. This could include things like watching a funny movie, reading an interesting book, or playing a game with a friend.

WHAT SELF-COMPASSION IS NOT

Some people worry that, if they are kind to themselves, they will not take responsibility when they make a mistake. But remember, self-compassion also includes mindfulness, which means that we look at what just happened truthfully, and without exaggerating what happened. If you break your friend's mug, a mindful and self-compassionate response may include something like, "I feel guilty for breaking my friend's mug and I want to do what I can to make it right. But I know that mistakes happen to all of us, and other kids have also broken something important before. I am not alone in how guilty I feel." One study showed that adults who did something they felt guilty about and treated themselves with kindness and understanding for it tried harder to make it right than adults who did not show themselves kindness [2].

Some people also worry that if they are kind to themselves, they will not try to do challenging things. But being kind to yourself does not mean that you do not want to challenge yourself or grow. It just means that, while you are doing something difficult, you can support yourself rather than beat yourself up. For example, imagine that you have a pet donkey, and you take him for a walk. On the way home, you must climb a steep mountain. What are some ways that you could motivate the donkey to keep going? Do you think the donkey would be happier and more motivated to walk up the mountain if you talked to him in a mean way and dragged him up the mountain, or if you spoke in an encouraging way, took a few moments to rest on the way up, and maybe offered him some food as a reward at the top? The same is true for us humans. College students who showed themselves kindness actually studied longer for a difficult test that they had failed in the past than did students who told themselves that they were smart [2]. This might seem confusing at first, because telling yourself that you are "smart" sounds like a kind thing to do. But let us look closely what the first group of students did to show themselves kindness. The researchers told them that this test was

difficult for many students. In other words, they were asked to remind themselves of the “common humanity” of failing this test. The second group of students was only told to remember that they had to be smart to get into college. So, the results of this study show that reminding yourself that we all find new tasks challenging and that we all might fail sometimes, can help us be less discouraged and more motivated to work harder at improving ourselves. Self-compassion is also not self-esteem. Self-esteem means that we focus on the things we are good at (e.g., telling ourselves that we are smart). Often this can make us feel worse about ourselves when we fall short. The students who failed the test and told themselves that they were smart, might have started to question whether this is true, and this might have made them feel down and discouraged (“Maybe I am not as smart as I thought if I failed this test, so there is no point in studying anyway”).

WHAT CAN SELF-COMPASSION HELP WITH?

Studies have shown that teenagers who felt more self-compassionate also felt less stress in their lives [3]. Interestingly, studies have also shown that you can teach teenagers to be kinder to themselves and that this will help them feel more satisfied with their lives. A number of studies have asked teenagers to be part of a self-compassion group, in which the participants learn ways to support themselves during difficult moments. Teenagers who practiced being kind to themselves over a 6–8-week period said that they felt more satisfied with their lives, felt more grateful for the positive things in their lives, were more open to trying new things, and felt less stress [4, 5].

HOW TO PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

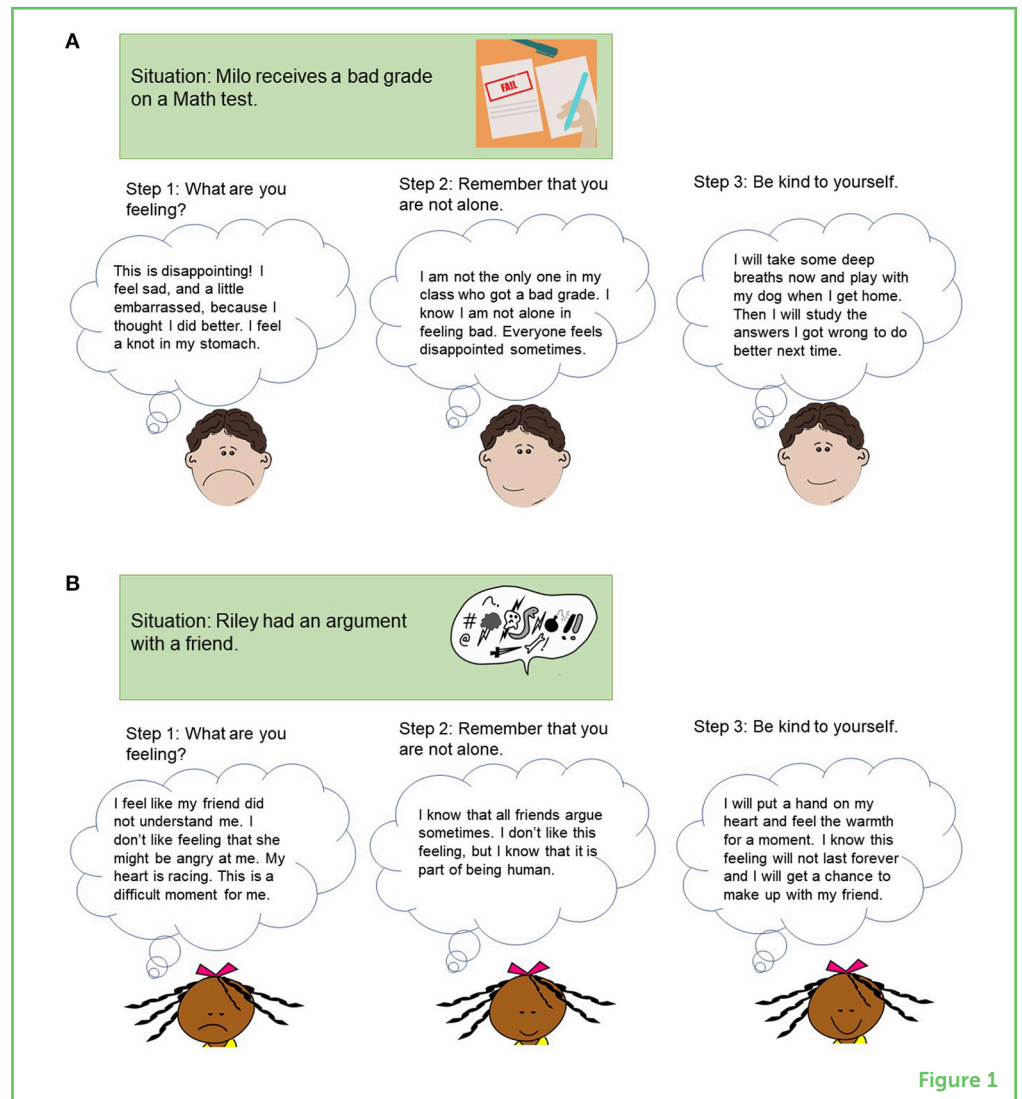
There are a lot of ways that you can practice being kind to yourself. One is called taking a self-compassion break. This is something you can practice when you are feeling a difficult emotion, like sadness, anger, fear, embarrassment, or nervousness. The self-compassion break has three simple steps (Figure 1).

Step 1: Say what you are feeling. This is mindfulness. Try to say how you are feeling without pretending that you are fine and without exaggerating what you are feeling. Or you could think to yourself, “This is a difficult moment.”

Step 2: Remember that you are not alone. This is common humanity. Maybe no one has experienced the exact same situation as you have, but all children, teenagers, and adults experience difficult emotions in life that they do not like. Remembering this can help you feel less lonely. You might think to yourself, “Other people feel this way sometimes, too.”

Figure 1

(A) See how Milo uses the self-compassion break after receiving bad grade on a test. In Step 1, he uses mindfulness to see how he is feeling. In Step 2, he remembers the common humanity of getting a bad grade and tells himself that other kids have gotten bad grades, too. In Step 3, he reminds himself to be kind to himself by taking some deep breaths and playing with his dog before reviewing what he got wrong on the test. (B) See how Riley uses the self-compassion break after having an argument with a friend. In Step 1, she uses mindfulness to check in with how she is feeling. She uses different words to describe how her body is feeling, what her emotions are and that this is a difficult moment for her. In Step 2, she reminds herself that all friends argue sometimes and that feeling sad after an argument is part of being a human being. In Step 3, she is kind to herself and uses supportive touch, by putting a hand on her heart and feeling the warmth.



Step 3: Show yourself kindness and support. This is self-kindness. Sometimes it can help to think about what you might say to a good friend or what a good friend might say to you! Or maybe you want to use supportive touch by rubbing your hands together, hugging a stuffed animal, or wrapping yourself in a soft blanket. Maybe you want to go outside and feel the sun on your face, drink a hot beverage, or take a few deep breaths.

SUMMARY

In summary, when you are going through a difficult situation, treating yourself like you would treat a good friend can help you feel less stressed, more satisfied with your life, and can make you more open and motivated to trying new and challenging things. Treating yourself with kindness when you experience a difficult situation might feel uncomfortable at first, so it can take some practice for it to become more automatic and natural. It is also important to remember that

when you are kind to yourself, the bad feelings and difficult situations will not go away. Remember, bad feelings and difficult situations will always be a part of life. However, you can be kind to yourself just because you feel bad, as a way to support yourself during a difficult moment—not because you want to make a bad feeling go away. Researchers continue to try to figure out how they can best help children, teenagers, and their parents be kinder to themselves and how this may impact people's quality of life.

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YOUNG REVIEWER



BRYSON, AGE: 9

I love reviewing papers because I can learn more about interesting topics. In school, I love math and science because the topics are so exciting. At home, I like to be with my friends from school and the gym.

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I am a social worker and psychotherapist at UCLA. I enjoy helping kids and teens (and their parents and teachers) understand why we have anxiety, what anxiety is meant to do for us, and how to manage our anxiety when it is hurting instead of helping us. I like to use self-compassion (treating yourself more like you treat your good friends) and mindfulness (guiding our mind to the present moment instead of the future or the past). I also like to use art, music, dance and other forms of creativity to help us shake off unhelpful habits. I live in California, so I get to enjoy hikes and skiing with my dog.



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I am a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and my research is about finding ways to help teens and young adults feel better about themselves and their lives. To do this, I teach them self-compassion, which is about how to be kinder and more supportive to yourself. I also teach them mindfulness, which is about noticing what is actually happening in your body and mind, and also in the world around you rather than the story that you tell yourself in your head.