SELF-ESTEEM & SELF-COMPASSION · WORKSHEET

Self-Compassion Exercises

Guided exercises drawn from Dr. Kristin Neff's research to help you meet hard moments with kindness instead of harsh self-criticism.

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What this tool does

Self-compassion means treating yourself with the same warmth and understanding you would offer a good friend who is struggling. The concept was defined and measured by psychologist Dr. Kristin Neff, whose research describes three core elements: self-kindness rather than self-judgment, a sense of common humanity rather than isolation, and mindfulness rather than over-identifying with painful thoughts and feelings.

Self-kindness is the choice to be gentle and supportive with yourself when things go wrong, instead of attacking yourself. Common humanity is the recognition that suffering, failure, and imperfection are part of the shared human experience, not personal flaws that set you apart.

Mindfulness is holding painful feelings in balanced awareness, neither suppressing them nor being swept away by them.

A large body of research links higher self-compassion with lower anxiety and depression, greater resilience, and healthier motivation. Contrary to a common worry, self-compassion does not make people lazy or self-indulgent. People who are kinder to themselves tend to take more responsibility for mistakes and bounce back faster, because they are not paralyzed by shame.

These exercises put the three elements into practice. Like any skill, self-compassion grows with repetition, so it helps to return to them regularly rather than only in a crisis.

How to use it

1. **Pick a recent moment when you were hard on yourself,** an everyday one, and describe what happened in a few sentences.
2. **Notice the pain without minimizing or exaggerating it,** naming the feelings and where they sit in your body.
3. **Remember the common humanity,** writing down how other people might feel in exactly this situation.
4. **Run the friend test,** writing what you would say to a close friend going through this, then offering yourself those same words.
5. **End with a caring next step,** one small concrete thing, because kindness includes asking what would genuinely help right now.

A COMPLETED EXAMPLE

What happened? *I blanked on a colleague's name while introducing her at a meeting, then apologized about five times.*

What are you feeling right now? *Embarrassed, frustrated*

Where do you feel it in your body? *Warm face, tight shoulders*

How might other people feel in a situation like this? *Most people would cringe too. Almost everyone has blanked on a name they know perfectly well.*

What would you say to a friend? *That was an awkward ten seconds, not a verdict on you. She has probably forgotten it already.*

Those same words to yourself: *It was ten awkward seconds. I know her name, and I can let this go.*

What small, caring step could you take? *Stop replaying it, make a cup of tea, and write the names down before tomorrow's meeting.*

1 Name the moment

Bring to mind a recent situation where you struggled, failed, or felt inadequate.

What happened? (a few sentences)

2 Mindfulness: notice the pain

Acknowledge how this feels, without minimizing it or exaggerating it.

What are you feeling right now?

- ○ Disappointed
- ○ Ashamed
- ○ Anxious
- ○ Sad
- ○ Frustrated
- ○ Embarrassed
- ○ Inadequate
- ○ Lonely
- ○ Hurt

Where do you feel it in your body?

3 Common humanity: you are not alone

Remind yourself that struggle is part of being human, shared by everyone.

How might other people feel in a situation like this?

4 Self-kindness: the friend test

Imagine a close friend told you they were going through exactly this.

What would you say to a friend in this situation?

Now write those same words to yourself

5 A supportive next step

Kindness is not just soothing. Ask what would genuinely help.

What do you need right now? What small, caring step could you take?

Looking back

Is the gap shrinking between what you would say to a friend and what you say to yourself first?

Which of the three elements comes hardest for you: self-kindness, common humanity, or mindfulness? That is the one to practice on smaller moments.

What does your self-critical voice claim it is doing for you, and has the kinder voice actually cost you any standards?

Sources

- Neff KD. Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself. William Morrow; 2011.
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- MacBeth A, Gumley A. Exploring compassion: a meta-analysis of the association between self-compassion and psychopathology. Clin Psychol Rev. 2012;32(6):545-552.

Want support building a kinder inner voice?

Browse therapists who work with self-criticism, shame, and self-esteem. Free to search, no account needed. Start at psychology.com/therapist.

These exercises are an educational self-help tool, not therapy or a diagnosis. If self-criticism, shame, or low mood are persistent or distressing, please consider working with a licensed mental-health professional. In an emergency, call your local emergency number or, in the US, call or text 988.

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