

# PRACTICING SELF-COMPASSION

## Workbook



Many of us learn to motivate ourselves through self-criticism, believing that being hard on ourselves is the best way to achieve success. But research shows that being kind to ourselves, showing ourselves compassion, has a powerful effect in many areas of our lives: our well-being, our ability to manage stressors, even our motivation. Use the activities below to help you develop the skill of self-compassion.

### Activity 1: Self-compassion self-check

Read the list of phrases below and consider how often you agree with them or how often they describe you. Be as honest as possible. The answers will help you identify areas to improve. Add up your responses to obtain a total score below.

	USUALLY	SOMETIMES	RARELY
I'm not sure that I deserve self-compassion.	1	2	3
When I make a mistake, I tend to be hard on myself.	1	2	3
Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one who makes mistakes or fails.	1	2	3
When I'm struggling, I feel like others are much better off than me.	1	2	3
I need to be hard on myself in order to succeed.	1	2	3
I feel overwhelmed with my emotions when something upsets me.	1	2	3
I'm critical of myself even when things are going well.	1	2	3
I disapprove of what I consider to be flaws in myself.	1	2	3
If I don't criticize myself for mistakes I feel like I'm giving myself a "pass."	1	2	3
I believe that being kind to myself when I'm in pain is self-pitying.	1	2	3
When things go wrong, I tend to blow them out of proportion.	1	2	3
I don't always do things that I find comforting because it feels indulgent.	1	2	3
I think that I appear weak when I acknowledge I'm having a hard time.	1	2	3
Even when I succeed or meet a goal, I find something to criticize.	1	2	3
When I feel negative emotions I tend to stuff them down.	1	2	3
Total score:			

### What do my responses mean?

- › Your total score should range from 15 to 45.
- › Scores from 15-35 indicate a low to moderate level of self-compassion. Consider how you might put the strategies you learn today into practice in your everyday life.
- › Scores higher than 35 indicate you have a higher level of self-compassion. As you learn additional strategies for self-compassion, consider how you can further enhance this skill for yourself.

Reference: Neff, K.D. (2003) Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, pp. 223-250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860390209035>

### Activity 2: Identifying our inner critic

Most of us have an “inner critic” that likes to point out our every mistake or flaw. This can be the result of pressure to succeed (either from others or from society as a whole). It can also be developed throughout our lives as we internalize messages of guilt, shame, and self-blame for mistakes and missteps in our youth.

Identifying the voice of our inner critic is a critical step in developing self-compassion. Discovering what it sounds like and what it’s saying can help you distance yourself from the criticism and make space for a more self-compassionate response. Use the example and spaces below to help you identify yours.

#### Example:

*Your colleague sent an email to your entire company regarding an organizational update. You replied to the email to tell them about a situation between two colleagues in your department. After you send the email, you realize that you accidentally hit ‘Reply all,’ and your story about your colleagues has reached the entire company.*

### Self-compassion is:

Offering comfort and care to yourself rather than judgment when you make a mistake, fall short, or face difficulties.

It is made up of three parts:

- › **Self-kindness:** Not ignoring or criticizing our pain. Being warm and understanding when we fail.
- › **Common humanity:** Recognizing that all humans suffer; that imperfection and vulnerability are part of being human.
- › **Mindfulness:** Observing thoughts and emotions with openness, not judgment. Balancing negative emotions.

Learn more from leading self-compassion researcher Dr. Kristin Neff at [self-compassion.org](https://self-compassion.org).

Reference: Neff, K. (n.d.) *Definition of self-compassion*. Self-compassion.org. <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>

What would your inner critic say?	What would you say if a dear friend were in this situation?
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	

When we do this activity, it is not uncommon to find a discrepancy between how we talk to ourselves and how we would talk to others. This is because we are socialized to give compassion to others, but consider self-criticism as a motivator for self-improvement.

Name an example of a time when you made a mistake that caused you to feel embarrassed, guilty, or regretful:

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### Turn self-judgment into self-kindness:

- › **Learn to recognize your self-critical voice:** What is it saying? What does it sound like? Verbalize its words out loud.
- › **Understand its motivation.** What is it trying to protect you from?
- › **Reframe critical thoughts in a friendly, positive way:** How would you offer comfort to a dear friend in this same situation?

What did your inner critic say to you?	What would you say to a friend who was in this situation?
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	

### Activity 3: Seeing setbacks differently

When we're struggling, our inner critic can trick us into thinking our problems are much more impactful than they will likely prove to be. Shifting our perspective is one way to train ourselves to have a more self-compassionate response.

#### Shift your perspective:

- › **Think about your troubles in the long-term:** Will you still be upset by this in a week? A month? A year?
- › **Put them into context using a control/ no control filter.** What parts of this situation did you consciously choose? What parts do you have no control over?
- › **Recognize the common humanity in suffering.** Remind yourself that fault, imperfection, vulnerability, even failure are part of being human.

- › Think about a challenge or setback you are currently facing. What is the situation?

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- › Consider how you might feel about this situation in the long-term. Will you still be upset by this in a week? \_\_\_\_\_

A month? \_\_\_\_\_ A year? \_\_\_\_\_

- › Now think about the factors that contribute to this situation. Which factors are outside of your control? \_\_\_\_\_

Which are within your power to control? \_\_\_\_\_

- › Do you know of anyone else who has had this challenge?

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How do you imagine other people feel who have been in this situation? \_\_\_\_\_

Is it the same or different from what you're feeling? \_\_\_\_\_

## Activity 4: Deploying self-compassion in the moment

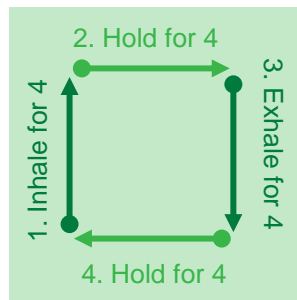
When we're judging ourselves harshly, our body is in a "threat state," the same fight-flight-freeze response that kicks in when we face a physical threat. We can calm this threat response in a few different ways.

### Breathing exercises:

Breathing slowly and rhythmically makes your body feel like it does when you are relaxed. This sends a message to your brain to calm down. Focusing on your breathing can also reduce your sense of stress by clearing your mind of negative thoughts.

#### Square breathing

- › Find a comfortable position. Take several slow natural breaths. Then close your eyes and picture a square in your mind. Choose one corner to be your starting point.
- › Count slowly to four as you inhale through your nose. Picturing your breath moving up one side of the square. You can also trace an outline of a square with your finger.
- › Then count slowly to four as you hold your breath and visualize moving across the next side of the square.
- › Moving down the next side, count slowly to four while exhaling.
- › Then hold without breathing in or out for a count of four on the last side.
- › Try to last for the full count, if you feel uncomfortable, reduce the count.
- › Repeat 4-5 times.



#### Belly breathing

- › Find a relaxed, comfortable position. Keep your back straight, but not tight. Put a hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other on your chest.
- › Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose. Let your belly push your hand out as the muscles relax.
- › Hold that breath for a moment, then breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Straighten the back. Let belly muscles tighten. Feel the hand on your belly go in.
- › Take your time with each breath. Try to increase each in and out breath. Notice where you feel your breath in your body – chest, abdomen, nostrils.
- › Your mind may wander. That's OK. Just notice the wandering and gently redirect your attention back to your breathing.
- › Do this 5 to 10 times.

### Calm your stress response:

- › **Focus on your breathing:** This cues our parasympathetic nervous system to calm the mind and body.
- › **Offer yourself comfort with supportive touch.** This releases hormones that help us feel calm, safe, and comforted.
- › **Practice self-acceptance with mindful awareness.** This helps us feel and accept negative emotions without feeling overwhelmed by them.

### Supportive touch:

These exercises can feel awkward or embarrassing, but your body responds to supportive touch from ourselves in the same way as a warm hug from others. Examples include:

- › Gently place one or both hands over your heart. Feel the gentle pressure and warmth of your hand(s).
- › Place a hand on your cheek.
- › Cradle your face in your hands.
- › Gently stroke your arms.
- › Cross your arms and give yourself a gentle hug.
- › Place a hand on your abdomen as you breathe in and out.
- › Place one hand on your abdomen and one over your heart.
- › Cup one hand in the other in your lap.

Pair physical comfort with reassuring words. In moments of stress, self-criticism, or discomfort, try the examples above while reminding yourself that you're not alone in this difficulty. Offer yourself kindness: "This is hard. Life is hard for everyone sometimes. I deserve to be kind to myself."

Reference: Neff, K. (n.d.) *Exercise 4: Supportive touch*. Self-Compassion.org. <https://self-compassion.org/exercise-4-supportive-touch/>

## Mindfulness practice:

Mindfulness is a practice that involves being open and aware of the present moment. We allow our thoughts, emotions, and sensations into our conscious awareness without judgment or criticism. Mindfulness helps us recognize when we're in pain. It also helps us balance our negative emotions, allowing us to feel and accept them without becoming overwhelmed by them.

**Loving-kindness meditation** is a specific type of mindfulness practice that directs thoughts of love, care, and concern to yourself and others. The below is an example of a loving-kindness practice to cultivate self-compassion. See the links below for more information and exercises for mindfulness practice, loving-kindness meditations, and more.

- › Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed.
- › Sit comfortably. Place your hands in your lap.
- › Relax your body. Close your eyes if comfortable doing so.
- › Bring your thoughts to what you are experiencing in this moment.
- › Picture a person you know standing in front of you. Choose someone with whom you have a positive relationship, who makes you feel happy and comfortable. It could be a pet.
- › As you see them standing there, send three positive wishes to them. Choose the words that resonate with you. Something like, "May you be well. May you find peace. May you be happy."
- › Imagine yourself reaching out and extending these thoughts to them three times. As you do this, allow yourself to feel whatever you feel. It may be nothing at all, and that is OK.
- › Now imagine that person or pet sending the same three messages of kindness back to you. Breathe in the sentiments of love as best you can.
- › Now, picture yourself standing in front of you. It could be as you appear now, or as a young person.
- › As you see yourself there, send yourself three messages of loving kindness that have meaning to you. "May I be well, may I know peace, may I be happy." Repeat and breathe in these sentiments three times.
- › Now image yourself turning and lovingly returning those wishes to yourself. Repeat.
- › Take a moment to breathe gently, then open your eyes.

### Explore further

There are many sources of guided audio mindfulness and self-compassion practices available online.

#### Center for Mindful Self-Compassion<sup>1</sup>:

[centerformsc.org/practice-msc/guided-meditations-and-exercises/](https://centerformsc.org/practice-msc/guided-meditations-and-exercises/)

Guided meditations, assessments, and other resources.

#### Self-compassion.org:

[self-compassion.org/category/exercises](https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises)

Find guided self-compassion meditation practices and other exercises for cultivating self-compassion.

#### Greater Good Science Center:

[ggia.berkeley.edu](https://ggia.berkeley.edu)

A wide range of practices to build empathy, compassion, mindfulness, and more.

### Mobile apps

#### Insight Timer: [insighttimer.com](https://insighttimer.com)

Offers thousands of meditations, discussion groups, and other features.

#### The Mindfulness App:

[themindfulnessapp.com](https://themindfulnessapp.com)

Timed guided meditations from 3-30 minutes.

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## Activity 5: Being self-compassionate through self-care

Self-care is an essential part of cultivating self-compassion. When we take care of our body, mind, and spirit, we are giving ourselves the care and energy we need to be at our best...for ourselves and for others. Check the areas below that you feel are the biggest struggle for you, and consider how you can implement self-care moves to improve. Examples of ways to incorporate into your daily routines are listed for each area.

- ☐ **Nutrition:** What we eat impacts our body's ability to manage stress and gives you the fuel you need to stay strong, focused, and resilient.
  - › Keep a water bottle with you to stay hydrated.
  - › Have regular meal times.
  - › Keep a stash of healthy and energizing snacks, such as nuts, popcorn, or whole-grain crackers.
  - › Meal prep healthy lunches rather than going out.
- ☐ **Exercise:** Physical activity releases chemicals in our body to help us manage stress and lift our mood.
  - › Plan "mini workouts" of 10-15 minutes per day.
  - › Fold it into daily activities, such as jogging with your dog or spending time with your kids on a bike ride.
  - › Park at the far end of the parking lot.
  - › Do stretches or brief bursts of activity while watching a movie or TV show.
  - › Set a timer for regular stand and/or walk breaks.
- ☐ **Sleep:** Adequate sleep helps renew our resources, energy, and boosts our mood.
  - › Don't let sleep be optional. Have regular sleep and wake times, even on weekends.
  - › Create a bedtime ritual to cue sleep for your body.
  - › Put away "screens" (TV, mobile, computer, etc.) at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
  - › Talk to your doctor if you have problems with sleep.
- ☐ **Relaxation:** It's important to take time to relax to dissipate tension and help us feel calm and in control.
  - › Do short progressive relaxation or mindful meditation exercises at set times each day.
  - › Allot time each day for something you find to be relaxing: a warm bath, sitting outside, reading a chapter in a book, etc.
- ☐ **Emotional health:** Handling our emotions helps us experience them without being overwhelmed.
  - › When emotions start to escalate, stop and focus on taking a few deep breaths.
  - › Take mental "breaks" during the day to focus on something uplifting, or soothing.
  - › Before bed, write down your worries; then set them aside until the next day.
  - › Know that mental health professionals can help you find strategies to manage difficult feelings. Consider your EAP a resource.
- ☐ **Relationships:** Building and sustaining meaningful relationships is a form of self-care.
  - › Ask for support when you need it.
  - › Limit time with people who drain your energy.
  - › Send one personal check-in to a friend, family member, or loved one per day.
  - › Talk about your challenges with people who are nurturing, warm, and comforting.
- ☐ **Purpose and meaning:** Working towards meaningful goals increases positive emotions.
  - › Turn your dreams into achievable goals you can work towards. Track your progress.
  - › Get outdoors. Nature helps us feel happier, renewed, and connected to a larger purpose.
  - › Devote time each week to activities that you find engaging and challenging.
  - › Volunteer your time to a cause or charity you care about.
  - › Resurrect an old hobby or learn a new one you're interested in.
  - › Nurture your spiritual health in whatever way is meaningful to you (e.g., faith community, time in nature, personal relationships, etc.).

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