

WHAT SELF-COMPASSION IS NOT

(by Dr. Kristin Neff – <http://www.selfcompassion.org/>)

Self-Compassion is not self-pity.

When individuals feel self-pity, they become immersed in their own problems and forget that others have similar problems. They ignore their interconnections with others, and instead feel that they are the only ones in the world who are suffering. Self-pity tends to emphasize egocentric feelings of separation from others and exaggerate the extent of personal suffering. Self-compassion, on the other hand, allows one to see the related experiences of self and other without these feelings of isolation and disconnection. Also, self-pitying individuals often become carried away with and wrapped up in their own emotional drama. They cannot step back from their situation and adopt a more balanced or objective perspective. In contrast, by taking the perspective of a compassionate other towards oneself, “mental space” is provided to recognize the broader human context of one’s experience and to put things in greater perspective.

Self-Compassion is not self-indulgence.

Self-compassion is also very different from self-indulgence. Many people say they are reluctant to be self-compassionate because they’re afraid they would let themselves get away with anything. “I’m stressed out today so to be kind to myself I’ll just watch TV all day and eat a quart of ice-cream.” This, however, is self-indulgence rather than self-compassion. Remember that being compassionate to oneself means that you want to be happy and healthy in the long term. In many cases, just giving oneself pleasure may harm well-being (such as taking drugs, over-eating, being a couch potato), while giving yourself health and lasting happiness often involves a certain amount of displeasure (such as quitting smoking, dieting, exercising). People are often very hard on themselves when they notice something they want to change because they think they can shame themselves into action. In contrast, the care intrinsic to compassion provides a powerful motivating force for growth and change, while also providing the safety needed to see the self clearly without fear of self-condemnation.

Self-Compassion is not self-esteem.

Although self-compassion may seem similar to self-esteem, they are different in many ways. Self-esteem refers to our sense of self-worth, perceived value, or how much we like ourselves. While there is little doubt that low self-esteem is problematic and often leads to depression and lack of motivation, trying to have higher self-esteem can also be problematic. In modern Western culture, self-esteem is often based on how much we are different from others, how much we stand out or are special. It is not okay to be average; we have to feel above average to feel good about ourselves. This means that attempts to raise self-esteem may result in narcissistic, self-absorbed behaviour, or lead us to put others down in order to feel better about ourselves. We also tend to get angry and aggressive towards those who have said or done anything that potentially makes us feel bad about ourselves. The need for high self-esteem may encourage us to ignore, distort or hide personal shortcomings so that we can't see ourselves clearly and accurately. Finally, our self-esteem is often contingent on our latest success or failure, meaning that our self-esteem fluctuates depending on ever-changing circumstances.

In contrast to self-esteem, self-compassion is not based on self-evaluations. People feel compassion for themselves because all human beings deserve compassion and understanding, not because they possess some particular set of traits (pretty, smart, talented, and so on). This means that with self-compassion, you don't have to feel better than others to feel good about yourself. Self-compassion also allows for greater self-clarity, because personal failings can be acknowledged with kindness and do not need to be hidden. Moreover, self-compassion isn't dependent on external circumstances; it's always available – especially when you fall flat on your face! Research indicates that in comparison to self-esteem, self-compassion is associated with greater emotional resilience, more accurate self-concepts, more caring relationship behaviour, as well as less narcissism and reactive anger.