

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Becoming a friend to yourself
- » Exploring the three components and yin and yang of self-compassion
- » Discovering the fundamental question of self-compassion
- » Getting to know the Mindful Self-Compassion program and its founders

Chapter 1

Exploring Self-Compassion

Welcome to the next step on a journey to greater self-compassion in your life. Take a moment to appreciate the road you have traveled thus far and how you came to be holding this book. It is probably safe to say that, if you are reading these words, you do not consider yourself skilled at being kind to yourself or treating yourself compassionately when you have a hard time. After all, *those* people don't buy books like this. Maybe you're "self-compassion-curious," and you are here because you have become increasingly aware that being hard on yourself, perfectionistic, and prone to bouts of shame and maybe even self-loathing is not serving you. In fact, this way of being with yourself has caused you a great deal of emotional pain and impacted your ability to do what you want to do in life and to have the things you most desire, like joy, happiness, and satisfaction. Maybe you've observed a repeating pattern of destructive relationships, unfulfilling jobs, or unhealthy habits that you engage in to mute the pain you feel.

It may be pain or struggle or stress that brought you through the door, so to speak, but before you move on, consider looking just a little bit below the surface of those painful challenges. Specifically, the reason you took action and are seeking to find out about self-compassion is actually *not* because of the discomfort or pain that you feel. Instead, it is another part of you, that deeply understands that you

deserve better, that motivated and moved you. At your very core is a deep desire to be happy and free from suffering. It is this quiet but persistent voice and inclination of the heart that moves you to seek out something better for yourself.

The practice of self-compassion is really about accessing that small voice and giving it space to grow and expand. Becoming more self-compassionate is like pulling weeds around a tender seedling full of potential and beauty and bounty so that it can reach its full potential. In this metaphor, you are both the seedling and the gardener, so with a fair amount of patience, persistence, and kind intention toward yourself, you can tend this garden and harvest the fruits of your labor. You actually have everything you need inside of you to do this kindhearted, important work, and my intention is to support you in accessing those inner resources (that you may doubt that you possess) and discover how to embrace them to fulfill your potential as a living, loving human being no less deserving of your own love and affection than any other person on the planet.

Befriending Yourself: A Splendid New Relationship

If you're like most people, you are a really good friend. When your pals have a hard time, when they miss out on a promotion or go through a divorce, you know how to respond in just the right way. You can comfort and soothe if needed, you may inspire self-confidence or cheer them on at other times, and you're generally their "rock" when times are tough. It's what you do. You're a mensch as they say in Yiddish, a good person, a stand-up guy. Not always, not perfectly, but you do your best, and friends appreciate your kind intention.

But maybe something different happens when the one who struggles is *you*. Take a moment to pause and consider this brief, guided reflection drawn from the Mindful Self-Compassion program:

- 1. Pause for a moment to allow your mind to settle and to become aware of your body as it sits just where it is.**

Create a brief pause between reading and reflecting.

- 2. Call to mind a situation when a close friend was having a hard time.**

Perhaps they failed a test in school, or they interviewed for a desirable job and they didn't get it, or they accidentally said something that made someone angry at them.

3. See if you can recall how you responded to your friend in this situation.

Maybe recall how you found out about the situation and what you did upon hearing of it. What were the kinds of things you said to your friend? See if you can remember the tone of voice you used or your body posture at the time.

4. Now take a moment to consider another scenario. Think of a time when you faced a misfortune.

Maybe you made a proposal at work that was rejected by management, or you said something that upset a romantic partner and they ended the relationship.

5. Call to mind what went on inside your mind and heart at the time.

Again, how did you react? See if you can recall the words you used with yourself in the aftermath of the event. And even if you can't recall the exact words, you may recall the tone of your inner voice. You may even recall how your body felt to hear this or what emotions came up.

6. Compare these two situations. Is there a difference in how you respond to a friend versus how you respond to yourself under similar circumstances?

If what you discovered in the previous reflection was that you are harder on yourself than you are on your friends when things go wrong, you are in very good company. Researchers have found that the vast majority (78 percent) of the general population (at least in the United States) shares your bias toward cutting more slack to your friends. Sixteen percent report that they are more balanced in their treatment of themselves and others. And finally, 6 percent say that they are more compassionate to themselves than others (those folks are unlikely to buy this book!).

But the point of this reflection is not to highlight yet another way that you are not perfect or to imply that there is something wrong with you for being so hard on yourself. Instead, you can actually take heart! Consider the fact that you already know how to cultivate compassion and kindness, because you admitted you can do it for your dear friends.



TIP

All you have to do is orchestrate a U-turn on that compassion for others and, bingo, you've befriended yourself and you are on the road to more self-compassion. Simple. But of course, not so easy. Whenever you may struggle to offer yourself compassion in a difficult moment, consider starting by asking yourself, "How would I treat a good friend if they were going through what I'm going through? What would I say? What tone of voice would I use? What might I do to let them know that I'm here for them?" Asking yourself this question can "jump-start" your practice when your self-compassion "battery" has run down.

Understanding Self-Compassion

It's important to begin by being completely clear on what, exactly, self-compassion is, so that you can then proceed to cultivate it in your life. By necessity, this discussion must begin with Dr. Kristin Neff, an author and social psychologist who is the world's leading researcher and authority on self-compassion. Kristin's work, in collaboration with clinical psychologist Dr. Chris Germer, who is a pioneer in exploring the integration of psychology and contemplative practice, has resulted in the empirically supported Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program (described later in this chapter). But beyond the development of MSC, Neff and Germer (through their writing, speaking, and research) have raised the profile of self-compassion in the popular consciousness and contributed to a new appreciation in clinical and contemplative circles for the role of self-compassion in resilience, well-being, and the relief of human suffering. (*Note:* Much of what I know about this topic, and write about in this book, is a direct result of studying the work of Chris and Kristin, and working closely with them as friends and colleagues, and as a teacher and teacher trainer of MSC.)

Kristin Neff's research on the topic of self-compassion arose out of her own experience of discovering just how hard she was on herself as a graduate student. She thought it might be possible to cultivate a more harmonious relationship with herself through cultivating self-compassion. This direct personal experience led her to want to study the concept and understand it in a way that had not yet been researched. In turn, this led to a remarkable body of research that is cited widely around the globe, pointing to the benefits of self-compassion. Kristin developed the empirically supported Self-Compassion Scale (I present a version of it in Chapter 2), which enabled her and her colleagues to more directly study self-compassion and begin to understand how it is related to various other things like mood, well-being, motivation, behavior change, and so on.



TIP

If you're particularly interested in the research aspect of this topic, see Kristin's website (self-compassion.org) for a huge bibliography of published research studies on self-compassion.

Compassion at the core



REMEMBER

First and foremost, it's important to be completely clear that compassion is the foundation for everything that you discover and practice in this book. Whether you direct that compassion at others or yourself, the definition of compassion remains the same. A number of different authorities, from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary to the Dalai Lama, essentially define compassion in similar terms: the awareness of distress and the desire to alleviate that distress. (Some use the term "suffering" instead of "distress," but again, it's easiest to think of these as equivalent: distress, suffering, stress, pain.)

This two-part definition (awareness of distress and the desire to alleviate it) helps to also clarify the difference between empathy and compassion, which is another question that people often have. In simple terms, empathy is the first part of the definition of compassion, without the second part. Empathy is the human capacity to relate to and sense another person's pain. Period. I often say that "empathy is a one-way street" in this regard, and it lacks the action component of compassion. One can have empathy for another person's struggle without having compassion.

Most people tend to think of compassion as it relates to compassion for other people, which is probably why self-compassion gets lost in the shuffle and so many of us are in need of a "booster" when it comes to directing this warmth toward ourselves! Self-compassion is simply the capacity to include ourselves within the circle of our compassion, a kind of "compassionate U-turn." This may sound simple on the one hand, but if you've tried, you know that it can be challenging. To appreciate the elements involved in self-compassion, it may help to start with unpacking the experience of compassion for others. By doing so, you begin to see the connection between this and self-compassion.

Take a moment to imagine a scenario where you are walking down the street and encounter a homeless woman sitting on the curb, rumpled, dirty, holding a paper cup for donations, and clearly suffering. As you consider this situation, what do you think would have to be present in you for compassion for this woman to arise? I often present this exercise when I speak about self-compassion, and invariably, the responses that I get are very similar, group after group. One can easily group the responses into three general areas that, remarkably enough, align with what Kristin Neff's research has uncovered regarding self-compassion:

- » **"You have to even notice that the person is there."** This is a way of saying that one has to first be mindful to actually notice that there is a person in front of you who is suffering. Without awareness, there is no possibility of compassion, and this awareness is referred to as mindfulness. The simple capacity to notice what is present in the moment, without judgment, is not so easy sometimes, but each of us possesses the ability.
- » **"I realize that there but for the grace of God go I."** The recognition that this person is a fellow human being, who just like me, wants to be happy and free from suffering, is a powerful acknowledgement of what Kristin Neff calls common humanity. This ability to remember that all of us are human, all of us are imperfect, and that we need each other to survive is often forgotten when you are feeling isolated and different from others. But when you connect with it, it provides a solid support.

» **“I feel the desire to do something to help them out.”** Simply being aware, or even noticing the common humanity, does not automatically mean that compassion has arisen, unless it includes that action component of wanting to relieve the suffering or the difficulty. You can’t always actively change the circumstances, but even in this scenario, noting the desire to relieve her suffering or offering the simple gift of eye contact or a smile may be an act of kindness that is possible in the moment.

Mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness. These are the three components of self-compassion that have emerged from Kristin Neff’s research, and they point the way forward for developing self-compassion if they are directed inwardly in the same way that most of us easily direct them outwardly. One way to capture this self-compassionate stance is by boiling it down to what my dear colleague Michelle Becker coined as a “loving, connected presence.”



REMEMBER

When you can be a loving (self-kindness), connected (common humanity) presence (mindfulness) for yourself, you are practicing self-compassion. Much, much easier said than done, but a nice way to keep a simple vision of your intention going forward.

Mindfulness

Chapter 4 explores the topic of mindfulness in greater depth, but for now it’s helpful to get a basic grasp of how mindfulness plays a role in self-compassion and to contrast it with other ways of being that are less helpful or counterproductive to becoming more self-compassionate. With each of the three components — mindfulness, common humanity, and self-compassion — you may find it helpful to think of it as falling in the center of a continuum. In the case of mindfulness, it is the middle point between over-identification and being completely avoidant and checking out.

For example, consider the situation where your partner is facing a difficult medical procedure and you are concerned, worried, or afraid about the outcome of the procedure. From the standpoint of awareness, you would be most supported by finding a space between the two possible extremes:

- » Constantly ruminating over potential outcomes and becoming paralyzed with anxiety constitutes over-identification
- » Being totally checked out and in denial that something significant is happening to your beloved partner

Instead, you would want to stay connected, in tune with your reasonable fears but not overwhelmed by them, so that you can be present and supportive of your partner in the process. This attentional middle ground is mindfulness.

Common humanity

I cover the important role of common humanity in more detail in Chapter 5, but getting a general sense of it here can help ground you in the foundation of self-compassion. Returning to the metaphor of balance when looking at common humanity, you can probably relate to all points on that continuum. The extremes look like this:

- » On one end of the scale is a deep and painful sense of isolation, loneliness, and feeling different from others, especially when you fail or fall short. When something goes wrong, you are convinced it is because *you* are somehow wrong or flawed or uniquely imperfect.
- » On the other end of the spectrum are those times when you become so swallowed up in another's troubles that you lose yourself in the process and become overwhelmed.

Calmly in the middle between these two extremes is a balanced sense of connection and commonality with your fellow human beings, a deep awareness that at times we all suffer, fall short, and fail. When you are resting in a sense of common humanity after having flubbed an important job interview, you recognize that your imperfections are not actually *yours* in the sense that all humans (and the other candidates for the job) are imperfect. Rather than feeling uniquely flawed and fatally doomed to a life of mediocrity and solitude, you see this as one episode in a larger life. You can learn from your errors and perhaps seek the comfort of friends and colleagues who can relate with having had unfortunate experiences in key important situations. This is the healing power of common humanity.

Self-kindness

Our innate inclination toward kindness and happiness is further explored in Chapter 6, and as the third component of self-compassion, it is the warm ribbon that ties all three together into a package of goodwill in the face of difficulty. As nice as you may feel when you can muster up some kindness for yourself in challenging times, it may feel incredibly elusive at other times. Opposite ends of the self-compassion spectrum look like this:

- » Many people are more acutely aware of self-criticism, self-deprecation, and self-recrimination. You may be someone who lives with the voice of a harsh

and judgmental inner critic: a constant badgering, undermining, and demeaning voice that pokes you unmercifully and may have been with you for as long as you can remember (more on working with the inner critic in Chapter 9).

- » The other end of the spectrum is slightly more seductive and seems quite nice at first glance, but self-indulgence, just doing what feels good in the moment regardless of whether it is exactly what you need or even in your best interests, is another extreme that does not support self-compassion.

Self-kindness is that middle space that you might think of as the good parenting that you may or may not have had growing up. As an adult, you understand how to keep the big picture in mind when your son stays out past curfew because he was with friends having fun and lost track of the time. You know that berating him for being irresponsible and lazy is not a helpful way to react (however afraid you were that something had happened to him when he wasn't home at the appointed time). On the other hand, simply shrugging it off and saying, "That's ok, I'm just glad you're fine" may not be appropriate either if you want him to develop responsibility and maturity. The reasonable, compassionate response is somewhere in between, where you make clear your expectations and how he violated them, provide appropriate consequences, and emphasize your love and respect for him. This is the balanced essence of kindness that is not indulgent but not overly critical either.

Looking at the Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion

Self-compassion suffers from what people in the public relations business call "an image problem." Think about what comes to mind when you first see the phrase "self-compassion," or what a stranger might think when they see the title of this book. I would be willing to bet that something comforting or soothing or cuddly springs to mind. Maybe the term conjures up the image of a rustic hot tub on a chilly autumn evening or a warm cup of cocoa by the fire in the ski lodge. You might think of this practice as soothing, comforting, and nurturing — something to do when you hit a bumpy stretch that helps you settle down and meet yourself with patience and kindness, the way you would counsel a good friend to handle such a situation. And you would not be wrong about that. But there is a whole other side of the practice that balances out this softer side of self-compassion and is equally important.

You may have tendency to see self-compassion as nurturing and soothing because our mental model of what compassion looks like usually comes from the example of how a mother may nurture or comfort her child when the child is upset or

suffering. As a result, you are likely to link compassion more broadly to a more traditional feminine gender role, and therein lies the flaw in our appreciation of what compassion really includes.

My goal here is to help illuminate your understanding of self-compassion so that you can appreciate its full expression, which will likely dispel some myths or misunderstandings you may have about the practice and allow you to open up to it more easily.

Compassion can best be thought of as a complete whole that has a complementary side to this soft side as well. The other side of compassion (including self-compassion) is more stereotypically masculine and linked to action-oriented gender roles.

Consider the job of a brave Coast Guardsmen (the official title for a uniformed member of the U.S. Coast Guard, irrespective of gender). These individuals risk their lives, dangling out of helicopters to pluck hapless boaters from the icy waves and pulling shivering fishermen from the hulls of capsized boats. It's hard to imagine a more compassionate act than putting aside one's own safety for the good of another. There's nothing warm and fuzzy about that!

Or, in another scenario, imagine facing someone making an unwanted and uninvited romantic advance, and needing to firmly say “no!” to protect yourself. This is also an act of self-compassion that is more about strength and speaking your truth than soothing or comforting yourself.

Taken together, we can appreciate that self-compassion has both tender (stereotypically feminine) and fierce (stereotypically masculine) sides. They complement each other in a beautiful dance between “being with” ourselves in a compassionate way and “acting in the world” to get things done. In Chinese philosophy this combination is represented by yin and yang, and indicates that all seemingly opposite attributes, like masculine-feminine, light-dark, and active-passive, are complementary and interdependent. This idea is represented by the familiar symbol shown in Figure 1-1.

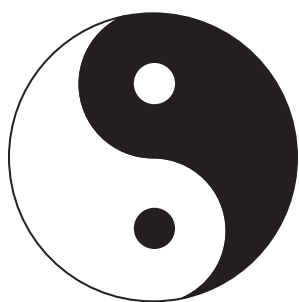


FIGURE 1-1:
The yin-yang
symbol.

The *yin* side is most associated with the tender aspect of comforting, soothing, and validating ourselves in times of great difficulty. On the flip side, the *yang* aspect of self-compassion is linked to fiercely protecting ourselves, providing for our needs, and motivating ourselves to take action. All of these are self-compassion, and all are ultimately in our own best interests, but in quite different and complementary forms.



REMEMBER

It is notable that each side of the symbol contains a dot of the other side within it, showing that neither side loses touch with the other. For example, imagine finding out that you failed an important test because your professor accidentally told you to read the wrong chapter in the textbook. You are fuming over the unfairness of it and considering writing a nasty email to the professor that vents a semester's worth of frustration in a couple of paragraphs. You pause for a moment and simply acknowledge the situation by saying to yourself, "This is really unfair, and it hurts to feel this anger right now." In this moment you are both validating your anger in a *yin* way by naming it and acknowledging that it is hard, but it also requires a "dot" of *yang* strength and resolve to be willing to turn toward your anger first, when you really want to discharge it with a nasty email that will certainly make things worse.

Taken together, the *yin* and the *yang* energy of self-compassion support us in making wiser, more effective choices that are ultimately in our best interests.

"Yin-sights"

Make no mistake, the fact that you are considering becoming more self-compassionate is a big deal, and it won't always be easy. It will be especially hard because you have a lifetime's experience of probably being less compassionate with yourself than you could have been, or even downright mean to yourself at times. If you've experienced a breakup initiated by the other person, maybe you ruminate for hours, days, or even weeks over what you must have done wrong or how you could have been so terrible. Do you hear the voice of an inner critic berating you for not being *enough* . . . tolerant enough, loving enough, fun enough? For any one of a million reasons and a multitude of life experiences, you may have developed a tendency to be less than *yin* with yourself when you encounter failure, frustration, disappointment, or imperfection in yourself. It happens. Could you possibly even pause and forgive yourself just now, simply because that has been your experience in the past?

At first, when you make a commitment to be as kind to yourself as you are with your dear friends when they face the same hardships, it may feel weird, unfamiliar. It may feel like you just slipped your left foot into your right shoe. But see if you can be patient with yourself and the discomfort and continue to offer the natural kindness that you show your friends. Let it envelop you and warm your heart. Stay curious and see what may arise if, this time, you let yourself receive a little bit of your own kindness. Again, patience is the key.

Perhaps your go-to response when you face difficulties is to beat yourself up for falling short, harangue yourself for being imperfect, or take action that you may later regret. See if you can, for just this moment, let those harsh voices be there, but in the background, and make a little space for another voice that may be very quiet or timid just now. For *just this one moment* try simply soothing yourself for having a hard time, for no other reason than you are having it.



TIP

The next time you are aware that you're feeling uncomfortable or upset in some way, try the simple experiment of simply placing a hand on your body someplace that is soothing or supportive and notice how that feels. Nothing else. Notice if you have any thoughts and see if you can see them just scroll across your awareness like those stock tickers on Wall Street. Don't give them any importance by trying to argue with them or answer them. Just focus on what it feels like to comfort and soothe yourself in a moment of difficulty. It's perfectly natural to do this. Give yourself full permission to feel your own compassion, in the form of warm, supportive touch, for as long as you like. What are you aware of when you do this? What is the "yin-sight" that you discover by accessing, even for a moment, the warm, feminine, nurturing side of self-compassion?

WHAT FIERCE AND TENDER SOUND LIKE IN YOUR HEAD

It's all well and good to talk about yin and yang compassion in the abstract, but if you're like me, you're a practical person and you want to know how it actually plays out in real life. You can't always stop and affectionately place your hands on your heart in a moment of suffering (imagine doing that while making a presentation to the board of directors or with your fellow firefighters on the way to a fire). And other times you need to give yourself a kick in the pants, but despite the fact that that term is a cliché, I haven't yet figured out how to physically pull it off.

So sometimes the best way to recognize the quality of your attention is to take note of what you say to yourself and the tone you use. To get you started, I've provided a short list of phrases you may consider (or already use) to access each of the two sides of self-compassion. Try them out, write them down, tattoo them on your forearm — whatever works for you to be able to access them when you need them most. (And if you forget to use them when you could have used them, don't beat yourself up; just recognize that even that oversight is just another opportunity to be self-compassionate.)

(continued)

(continued)

Yang self-talk:

- “You’ve got this, big guy.”
- “This crappy situation doesn’t define you.”
- “Your voice matters here; speak your truth.”
- “You’ve faced hard times before, and you can do it again.”
- “You belong. You matter. You have something to contribute.”
- “How great would it feel to get a little exercise right now?”
- “WWJD: What would Jesus do?”
- “Remember: Discretion is the better part of valor.”
- “Let’s do this!”
- “Ahhhhhhhh.”

Yin self-talk:

- “Oh man, this is so hard right now.”
- “There’s nothing to change, sweetheart. It’s okay for now.”
- “I’m here for you. You’re not alone.”
- “Awwwwwww.”
- “This is big. It’s okay to go slow.”
- “You’re doing the best you can, darling.”
- “Right now, it’s like this. And that’s okay.”
- “What do you need right now, my friend?”
- “What do you need to hear?”

“Yang-sights”

One of the most common hesitations that people have about practicing self-compassion is their sense that it is a kind of passive, “it’s all good” kind of response to every situation. Nothing could be further from the truth when you look a bit closer, but it’s worth exploring a bit more deeply to fully grasp the potential strength, power, and resolve that is inherent in self-compassion.

It can be helpful to differentiate between feelings and our responses to those feelings, because this is where the rubber meets the road in self-compassion. Have you ever tried to change an emotion that you were experiencing? We often do, but we rarely succeed. Perhaps you are angry because someone disrespected you, and you are fuming and ruminating over this injustice and telling a friend all about it. Think about how it would feel if your friend told you, “Just stop being so angry. Get over it!” My guess is that this would just intensify your anger, now including your friend for telling you not to be angry! I talk more in Chapter 3 about the consequences of resisting the reality of feelings and facts, but just now we can suffice to say that trying not to feel a feeling is nearly impossible, despite how often we try to do it. Take even the old example of inadvertently getting the giggles in a funeral service or some other serious gathering. Have you ever tried to stop the giggles in that moment? How did *that* work out?



REMEMBER

Self-compassion teaches us to simply meet ourselves with kindness *because* we are having difficult feelings, without the agenda to make them go away (which is usually impossible anyway). But the key to yang compassion in particular is to know that simply comforting and soothing ourselves because we feel badly may be only half of the equation. Once we can fully acknowledge simply the *presence* of a feeling or a problem of some kind, we can also potentially chart a course of wise action in response.

Sometimes the wise “action” that is called for is actually to choose inaction. Perhaps, in a situation where someone has done something hurtful to you and is still angry and may continue to do harm, the wisest way forward is to move backward in that moment and wait to advocate for yourself in more supportive circumstances. But sometimes you need to step up and speak your truth, say “no” to things that you truly see as clearly wrong or hurtful, or make changes that need to be made. In each of these cases, a conscious choice to act (through speaking up when you might have stayed quiet, saying “no” when you mean it, changing your behavior because you see that it is not in your best interest, or simply *not* acting because action would not serve you in the long run) is a true act of self-compassion. When you access the yang side of compassion, you hold the truth of your feelings but let them inform and energize you for action, so that you focus on the things that need to be done. This is very far from passivity and looks a lot more like wisdom: seeing the whole situation from the larger perspective and choosing a response that best suits it.



TIP

As you have been practicing thus far, the next time you face a challenging situation where you feel overwhelmed, powerless, or helpless in the face of it, see if you can maintain some patience and curiosity to explore it a bit further than usual. You might temporarily soothe yourself with some yin compassion by resting a hand on your body or even giving yourself a brief inner pep talk along the lines of “you’ve got this” to just cultivate a bit of clarity and ease within you. With a little

space and time to allow the adrenaline to loosen its grip on your nervous system, see if there is any indication of something that needs to be done or something you really need in this moment. Whether you provide for your needs simply by validating your emotions and not acting, or stand up to someone who is causing harm, or simply resolve to make change in the future, these can all be important expressions of yang (active) self-compassion.

Balancing soothing and strong

As you have probably already discovered, self-compassion is not really yin or yang but yin *and* yang. Just like the light and dark sides of the moon, these are part and parcel of each other, and one does not exist without the other. So self-compassion is neither all soft, warm, and fuzzy nor all strong, bold, and active. It is a complementary blend of these qualities that balance out each other and support us in navigating life in a wise and balanced way. If we are too yin, we become too passive, accepting, and wishy-washy and we are vulnerable to being taken advantage of, mistreated, or simply self-absorbed. When we have all yang with no yin, we risk reacting without wisdom because our emotions are not acknowledged and held so that they can truly inform and guide us in the actions we choose; instead, they lead us to impulsive actions that have negative consequences.

Finding a balance between yin and yang is not an easy task, but it is well worth the effort. I find it particularly helpful to really tune in to how my body feels when I'm practicing self-compassion and to fine-tune my practice to find a kind of balanced inner state that is somewhere between soothing and strong. That balance point is different in different situations, so it all comes down to the fundamental question of self-compassion: What do I need?



REMEMBER

If you can become aware of your inner state in a given moment, you may notice a feeling of passivity or helplessness that can be balanced by some validation or accessing of a protective yang energy. On the other hand, if you feel a sense of ferocity that is like unleashing a slightly unpredictable inner tiger, you may warm up the inner environment with some soothing words (I'm partial to "Whoa, big guy! Hold on there!" as one example). These two complementary forces combine to help you find the wise way through the tough spots, holding you when you need to be held, propelling you when you need to take action — always with that little dot from the yin-yang diagram of warmth in the yang and action in the yin to hold it all together.

Asking the Fundamental Question of Self-Compassion

In the end, for all the components and facets and considerations about self-compassion, it boils down to developing our capacity to ask and respond to a very simple question:

What do I need?

That's it. It's no more complex than simply stopping in a moment (or a whole stream of moments) and checking to respond to what is present for you and to see what you need. The act of stopping itself is an act of kindness, and it creates a space for you to step out of the stream (or raging river!) of life and to see with clarity and kindness what you may need.

Okay, although it is simple, I'm not suggesting that it's easy; otherwise, Kristin Neff and Chris Germer would not have dedicated their entire professional careers to understanding, exploring, and sharing the practice (and I wouldn't have taken the time to write this book!). But at its core, it comes down to this simple question and how we answer it. As I note earlier, this is generally easy enough for most of us to do for our friends and loved ones when *they* struggle, face failure, or have a hard time, but so often we look past our own struggles and pain, ignore them, deny them or push them aside for whatever reason (all to be explored in the pages ahead).



REMEMBER

But there is profound truth in the statement (sometimes attributed to the Buddha): “You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.”

Why not? Who are you *not* to deserve your own kindness, patience, and care?

Introducing the Mindful Self-Compassion Program

In 2009, Chris Germer published *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*, which was the culmination of many years of contemplative practice, clinical experience, and training. Chris's personal journey (much like Kristin's, which was detailed in her own book, *Self-Compassion*) had led him to his life's work of teaching and

speaking about integrating self-compassion practice into daily life and into psychotherapy to support people in feeling happier, more fulfilled, and able to overcome challenging histories. In 2008 Chris and Kristin (at the time, mere distant colleagues) were invited to participate in an important meeting of the Mind and Life Institute in upstate New York and Chris offered to give Kristin a ride to that conference. On the auspicious journey back to the airport after the conference, the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program was born.

I like to joke that the two of them were like those old commercials for Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Kristin was the social psychologist who had done significant research on self-compassion but never considered herself someone who could teach the practice to others. Chris was a well-respected clinical psychologist with years of experience, study, and teaching of the practical application of self-compassion with a relatively modest research background. Chris and Kristin each started out suggesting the other was the perfect person to create a self-compassion training program and ultimately decided that they were better together than apart. In the commercials, one person enjoying peanut butter accidentally bumps into someone eating chocolate and their foodstuffs intermingle. "Hey, you got peanut butter on my chocolate!" says one. The other indignantly retorts, "Hey, you got chocolate in my peanut butter!" They each taste the magical combination, and the rest is history. Such was the case with Mindful Self-Compassion as well.

Working together and drawing on their respective experience and study, Chris and Kristin developed the program that they first offered at a workshop in 2010 at the fabled Esalen Institute on the central California coast. Despite the later success, it was an inauspicious beginning, as 12 people had signed up for the course and 3 dropped out within a day or so. (These days, their programs draw huge crowds.) Kristin and Chris later conducted a randomized controlled trial of the MSC program with very promising results, pointing to increased self-compassion as a result of the training (an important first point to establish — that one can actually learn to be more self-compassionate), as well as improved mood and greater quality of life, among other findings.

The MSC program has since grown and improved year by year, with the help and support of the nonprofit Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (the organization for which I work as the executive director), and over 2,700 people are now trained to teach the program worldwide. Research on MSC continues, and it is estimated that over 100,000 people worldwide have experienced the program in one form or another. The teachers continue to report remarkable impact on the participants in their courses.

This book and the vast majority of meditations, exercises, and topics in it are largely inspired by and drawn from the MSC program and my experience of learning and teaching it. It is a powerful and empirically supported way of

systematically developing greater self-compassion. I highly recommend MSC for those who find the material in this book to be helpful. The opportunity to discover and practice self-compassion in the context of a group (whether in-person or online) is tremendously valuable because of the greater sense of common humanity, among many other reasons.

Practice: The Self-Compassion Break



This is the quintessential practice taken directly from the Mindful Self-Compassion program and is perfectly suited to support you in deploying the three components of self-compassion in a moment of difficulty. I present it here like a formal meditation, but this is only to help you become familiar with the practice. The real value is in practicing it when you face a difficult moment or a time when you are feeling distressed or upset in some way. But for now, give yourself this opportunity to become familiar with the practice. Follow these steps:

1. **Begin by taking some time to relax.**

Allow your gaze to soften and your face to relax. Notice your body sitting here. Perhaps take note of your breath moving in and out, over and over, as it does whether we are attending to it or not.

2. **Call to mind a situation in your life that is difficult right now and causing you stress.**

It may be a health issue, a challenging relationship, a work problem, or perhaps stress related to one of your identities, such as your gender, race, ethnicity, age, or ability. Do your best to choose a problem in the mild to moderate range, not a big problem. Remember, this time through you are just learning this skill of self-compassion, perhaps for the first time.

3. **Give yourself time to really bring the situation to mind, to see, hear, and feel your way into the problem, perhaps enough so that you notice some uneasiness or discomfort in your body associated with it.**

Where do you happen to feel it the most just now? See if you can have a sense of where it is in the body and simply open up to noticing it as it is.

4. **As you sense the discomfort in your awareness, note to yourself, slowly and clearly, “This is a moment of suffering.”**

This is *mindfulness*, simply opening awareness to what is present. Other words you might use are “Ouch!” or “This hurts,” or “This is painful.” Take your time and acknowledge what is here for you.

5. Say to yourself, slowly and clearly, “Suffering is a part of living.”

This is *common humanity* as you note that all humans have moments like this. You may say instead, “I’m not alone,” or “Me too,” or “Others in my community would feel a lot like me in a situation like this.” Remember that suffering is a universal experience, even though it is not equal across individuals or groups. Maybe you can have a sense of at least one person similar to yourself who may feel this like you do.

6. Place your open palms over your heart or wherever it may feel supportive to you, feeling the warmth and tenderness of your touch.

You might say to yourself, “May I be kind to myself,” or “May I give myself what I need.” This is the self-kindness that we often long for but may not receive from ourselves.

You can even explore just what kind of self-compassion you need just now, whether it is yin compassion or yang compassion. Yin might be “May I accept myself as I am” or “May I bring tenderness to myself just now.” If you feel that yang is more appropriate, you might say, “No. I will not allow this to continue,” or perhaps “May I have the courage and strength to make a change when I can.”



TIP

If you find it hard to locate just the right words for yourself at any point in this Self-Compassion Break, you might consider imagining what would flow from your heart and mouth if a dear friend were facing a similar situation. What would you say to them, heart to heart, if they were feeling this discomfort? Once you’ve identified some words, can you offer those same words to yourself as well?

7. Whenever you are ready and you feel you’ve given yourself what you need, allow your gaze to raise and your eyes to take in your surroundings.

Take some time to settle, reflect, and perhaps take notes.

Inquiring: What arose for you when you took a Self-Compassion Break?

Notice that the Self-Compassion Break incorporates the three components of self-compassion (mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness) as well as the two sides of self-compassion (yin and yang), all wrapped up in a fairly straightforward practice. As I note in the preceding section, this practice is intended for you to deploy at a moment’s notice when you become aware of

struggle, pain, or stress in a moment. It can be as simple and brief as stepping through the three components in a cascade for a few seconds or creating some time and space to linger with each element of the break, whatever is needed and possible in a moment.

Reflect on the break afterward by considering the following questions:

- » When you called to mind the difficult situation, how was that for you? What was most noticeable when you imagined the difficult situation?
- » What was your experience in each of the three steps of the Self-Compassion Break? What was it like to acknowledge mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness?
- » Do you think you could use this practice in the future, the next time you face a challenge or difficulty?

Give it a try and see if you can do a Self-Compassion Break a time or two in the next day or so and see what happens and what you notice. Let go of needing anything to change just yet, and be patient with yourself as you slowly develop this capacity to respond differently in challenging situations. This will all take time, and we are only just beginning!

By the way, it is possible that you found placing your hands over your heart not particularly supportive or pleasant. A certain percentage of people find this to be the case. For now, be willing to experiment and see if there are other places on the body that may be better for you. Chapter 2 gives you an opportunity to explore other options for this soothing and supportive touch.

One last note: In this practice run, I invited you to call to mind a difficult situation in order to have a problem to work with as you begin to practice the process. I am absolutely *not* suggesting that you continue to do this, pausing now and then to call to mind a challenging situation to practice. Trust me, life will do quite a good job of handing you all the difficulties you need to master the practice; there's no need for you to open yourself to additional, unnecessary suffering. Just be patient and begin to notice when it happens. And it will.

