

**Self-Compassion Exercises from  
The Mindfulness Self-Compassion Workbook by Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer.**

These exercises are taken directly from Kristin Neff's website (<https://self-compassion.org>). She has generously supplied many other materials and guided meditation on the website. I used her book in a very successful 8-week course I taught at our Center in Keene several years ago. I think it is the best resource for people wanting to develop more self-compassion. As one of my students remarked at the end of the course: "I've realized that when I don't have compassion for myself, my compassion for others feels a bit hollow now."

**Exercise 1: How would you treat a friend?**

Please take out a sheet of paper and answer the following questions:

First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about him or herself or is really struggling in some way. How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you typically talk to your friends. Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.

Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?

Please write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.

Why not try treating yourself like a good friend and see what happens?

**Exercise 2: Exploring self-compassion through writing**

Part One: Which imperfections make you feel inadequate?

Everybody has something about themselves that they don't like; something that causes them to feel shame, to feel insecure, or not "good enough." It is the human condition to be imperfect, and feelings of failure and inadequacy are part of the experience of living a human life. Try writing about an issue you have that tends to make you feel inadequate or bad about yourself (physical appearance, work or relationship issues...) What emotions come up for you when you think about this aspect of yourself? Try to just feel your emotions exactly as they are – no more, no less – and then write about them.

Part Two: Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of an unconditionally loving imaginary friend

Now think about an imaginary friend who is unconditionally loving, accepting, kind and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see all your strengths and all your weaknesses, including the aspect of yourself you have just been writing about. Reflect upon what this friend feels towards you, and how you are loved and accepted exactly as you are, with all your very human imperfections. This friend recognizes the limits of human nature, and is kind and forgiving towards you. In his/her great wisdom this friend understands your life history and the millions of things that have happened in your life to create you as you are in this moment. Your particular inadequacy is connected to so many things you didn't necessarily choose: your genes, your family history, life circumstances – things that were outside of your control.

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend – focusing on the perceived inadequacy you tend to judge yourself for. What would this friend say to you about your “flaw” from the perspective of unlimited compassion? How would this friend convey the deep compassion he/she feels for you, especially for the pain you feel when you judge yourself so harshly? What would this friend write in order to remind you that you are only human, that all people have both strengths and weaknesses? And if you think this friend would suggest possible changes you should make, how would these suggestions embody feelings of unconditional understanding and compassion? As you write to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, try to infuse your letter with a strong sense of his/her acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness.

Part Three: Feel the compassion as it soothes and comforts you

After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you like a cool breeze on a hot day. Love, connection and acceptance are your birthright. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

### **Exercise 3: The criticizer, the criticized, and the compassionate observer**

This exercise is modeled on the two-chair dialogue studied by Gestalt therapist Leslie Greenberg.

In this exercise, you will sit in different chairs to help get in touch with different, often conflicting parts of yourself, experiencing how each aspect feels in the present moment. To begin, put out three empty chairs, preferably in a triangular arrangement. Next, think about an issue that often troubles you, and that often elicits harsh self-criticism. Designate one chair as the voice of your inner self-critic, one chair as the voice of the part of you that feels judged and criticized, and one chair as the voice of a wise, compassionate observer. You are going to be role-playing all three parts of yourself – you, you, and you. It may feel a bit silly at first, but you may be surprised at what comes out once you really start letting your feelings flow freely. Think about your “issue,” and then sit in the chair of the self-critic. As you take your seat, express out loud what the self-critical part of you is thinking and feeling. For example “I hate that fact that you’re such a wimp and aren’t self-assertive.” Notice the words and tone of voice the self-critical part of you uses, and also how it is feeling. Worried, angry, self-righteous, exasperated? Note what your body posture is like. Strong, rigid, upright? What emotions are coming up for you right now?

Take the chair of the criticized aspect of yourself. Try to get in touch with how you feel being criticized in this manner. Then verbalize how you feel, responding directly to your inner critic. For example, “I feel so hurt by you” or “I feel so unsupported.” Just speak whatever comes into your mind. Again, notice the tone of your voice? Is it sad, discouraged, childlike, scared, helpless? What is your body posture like? Are you slumped, downward facing, frowning? Conduct a dialogue between these two parts of yourself for awhile, switching back and forth between the chair of the criticizer and the criticized. Really try to experience each aspect of yourself so each knows how the other feels. Allow each to fully express its views and be heard.

Now occupy the chair of the compassionate observer. Call upon your deepest wisdom, the wells of your caring concern, and address both the critic and the criticized. What does your compassionate self say to the critic, what insight does it have? For example, “You sound very much like your mother” or, “I see that you’re really scared, and you’re trying to help me so I don’t mess up.” What does your compassionate self say to the criticized part of yourself? For example, “It must be incredibly difficult to hear such harsh judgment day after day. I see that you’re really hurting” or “All you want is to be accepted for who you are.” Try to relax, letting your heart soften and open. What words of compassion naturally spring forth? What is the tone of your voice? Tender, gentle, warm? What is your body posture like – balanced, centered, relaxed?

After the dialogue finishes (stop whenever it feels right), reflect upon what just happened. Do you have any new insights into how you treat yourself, where your patterns come from, new ways of thinking about the situation that are more productive and supportive? As you think about what you have learned, set your intention to relate to yourself in a kinder, healthier way in the future. A truce can be called in your inner war. Peace is possible. Your old habits of self-criticism don’t need to rule you forever. What you need to do is listen to the voice that’s already there, even if a bit hidden – your wise, compassionate self.

#### **Exercise 4: Changing your critical self-talk**

This exercise should be done over several weeks and will eventually form the blueprint for changing how you relate to yourself long-term. Some people find it useful to work on their inner critic by writing in a journal. Others are more comfortable doing it via internal dialogues. If you are someone who likes to write things down and revisit them later, journaling can be an excellent tool for transformation. If you are someone (like me) who never manages to be consistent with a journal, then do whatever works for you. You can speak aloud to yourself, or think silently.

The first step towards changing the way to treat yourself is to notice when you are being self-critical. It may be that – like many of us — your self-critical voice is so common for you that you don’t even notice when it is present. Whenever you’re feeling bad about something, think about what you’ve just said to yourself. Try to be as accurate as possible, noting your inner speech verbatim. What words do you actually use when you’re self-critical? Are there key phrases that come up over and over again? What is the tone of your voice – harsh, cold, angry? Does the voice remind you of any one in your past who was critical of you? You want to be able to get to know the inner self-critic very well, and to become aware of when your inner judge is active. For instance, if you’ve just eaten half a box of Oreo’s, does your inner voice say something like “you’re so disgusting,” “you make me sick,” and so on? Really try to get a clear sense of how you talk to yourself.

Make an active effort to soften the self-critical voice, but do so with compassion rather than self-judgment (i.e., don’t say “you’re such a bitch” to your inner critic!). Say something like “I know you’re worried about me and feel unsafe, but you are causing me unnecessary pain. Could you let my inner compassionate self say a few words now?”

Reframe the observations made by your inner critic in a friendly, positive way. If you’re having trouble thinking of what words to use, you might want to imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you in this situation. It might help to use a term of endearment that

strengthens expressed feelings of warmth and care (but only if it feels natural rather than schmaltzy.) For instance, you can say something like “Darling, I know you ate that bag of cookies because you’re feeling really sad right now and you thought it would cheer you up. But you feel even worse and are not feeling good in your body. I want you to be happy, so why don’t you take a long walk so you feel better?” While engaging in this supportive self-talk, you might want to try gently stroking your arm, or holding your face tenderly in your hands (as long as no one’s looking). Physical gestures of warmth can tap into the caregiving system even if you’re having trouble calling up emotions of kindness at first, releasing oxytocin that will help change your bio-chemistry. The important thing is that you start acting kindly, and feelings of true warmth and caring will eventually follow.

### **Exercise 5: Self-Compassion Journal**

Try keeping a daily self-compassion journal for one week (or longer if you like.) Journaling is an effective way to express emotions, and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being. At some point during the evening when you have a few quiet moments, review the day’s events. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. (For instance, perhaps you got angry at a waitress at lunch because she took forever to bring the check. You made a rude comment and stormed off without leaving a tip. Afterwards, you felt ashamed and embarrassed.) For each event, use mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to process the event in a more self-compassionate way.

#### **Mindfulness**

This will mainly involve bring awareness to the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting and non-judgmental of your experience, not belittling it nor making it overly dramatic. (For example, “I was frustrated because she was being so slow. I got angry, over-reacted, and felt foolish afterwards.”)

#### **Common Humanity**

Write down the ways in which your experience was connected to the larger human experience. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect, and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. (“Everyone over-reacts sometimes, it’s only human.”) You might also want to think about the various causes and conditions underlying the painful event. (“My frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was late for my doctor’s appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different my reaction probably would have been different.”)

#### **Self-Kindness**

Write yourself some kind, understanding, words of comfort. Let yourself know that you care about yourself, adopting a gentle, reassuring tone. (It’s okay. You messed up but it wasn’t the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it. Maybe you can try being extra patient and generous to any wait-staff this week…)”) )

Practicing the three components of self-compassion with this writing exercise will help organize your thoughts and emotions, while helping to encode them in your memory. If you keep a journal

regularly, your self-compassion practice will become even stronger and translate more easily into daily life.

### **Exercise 6: Identifying what we really want**

Think about the ways that you use self-criticism as a motivator. Is there any personal trait that you criticize yourself for having (too overweight, too lazy, too impulsive, etc.) because you think being hard on yourself will help you change? If so, first try to get in touch with the emotional pain that your self-criticism causes, giving yourself compassion for the experience of feeling so judged.

Next, see if you can think of a kinder, more caring way to motivate yourself to make a change if needed. What language would a wise and nurturing friend, parent, teacher, or mentor use to gently point out how your behavior is unproductive, while simultaneously encouraging you to do something different. What is the most supportive message you can think of that's in line with your underlying wish to be healthy and happy?

Every time you catch yourself being judgmental about your unwanted trait in the future, first notice the pain of your self-judgment and give yourself compassion. Then try to reframe your inner dialogue so that it is more encouraging and supportive. Remember that if you really want to motivate yourself, love is more powerful than fear

### **Exercise 7: Taking care of the caregiver**

If you work in a care-giving profession (and that certainly includes being a family member!), you'll need to recharge your batteries so you have enough energy available to give to others. Give yourself permission to meet your own needs, recognizing that this will not only enhance your quality of life, it will also enhance your ability to be there for those that rely on you. For instance, you might listen to relaxing music, take a yoga class, hang out with a friend for an evening, or get a massage.

Of course, sometime our time is limited and we aren't able to take care of ourselves as much as we'd like. Also, one limitation of self-care strategies is that they're "off the job," and can't be done while you're actually caregiving. Thus, it's important to also engage in "on the job" self care. When you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed when with the person you're caring for, you might try giving yourself soothing words of support (for example "I know this is hard right now, and it's only natural you're feeling so stressed. I'm here for you."). Or else you might try using soothing touch or the self-compassion break. This will allow you to keep your heart open, and help you care for and nurture yourself at the same time you're caring for and nurturing others.

