

Learning self-compassion

www.studentsagainstdepression.org

Self-compassion is the attitude that underpins all other depression-beating strategies. If we can learn to treat ourselves kindly and support ourselves through our struggles then everything else becomes a lot easier!

Are you your own worst enemy? It is very rare for depression to exist without a certain amount of 'self-bullying'. Depression is a bully, and it preys on and reinforces the habit of self-bullying. To beat depression you need to sort your inner bully out!

Self-compassion is a skill that you can learn and practise without having to 'believe' it first – we can train our minds to bring greater compassion to all our thoughts and feelings.

1. Tune in

First you need to notice how self-bullying you can be, because often we do this without even realising it. Spend a day or a week writing down some of the things you say to yourself as part of your inner running commentary when you are feeling low. Just write it all down exactly the way you speak to yourself, with the words you use – the name-calling, the self-blame, the criticism of specific things that you do etc. Also make a note of the tone that you use with yourself. It might be interesting to hear if you sound like anyone in your past (a critical parent or teacher, for example)?

Write down the most common phrases below:

(eg. "Idiot! Why did you do that?" "You're always getting it wrong" "What a loser" "Stop being such a lazy cow." "That's pathetic" etc)

2. Evaluate

Now look back over what you have written and think about whether you would ever speak this way to someone else that you cared about, like a friend? Especially if that person was feeling low? It's unlikely!

You may feel that your critical voice is trying to 'help' you – to keep you safe or help you improve as a person – but it is important to recognise how ineffective it is to do this in a harsh, self-critical way. Being caring and encouraging in your tone is much more effective...

STUDENTS AGAINST DEPRESSION
.ORG



4. Keep a self-compassion journal

Another way to extend this exercise is described by the leading US self-compassion researcher, Dr Kristin Neff, who suggests keeping a 'self-compassion journal' for a week (or longer) in which you write down the things in your day that have caused you pain, that you felt unhappy about, or that you judged yourself for, and then to use her 3 components of self-compassion to process the event:

1. Mindfulness: Bring your feelings to your awareness, trying to be accepting and non-judgemental, just describing the feelings without either overstating or understating them.

___ eg. I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable when the tutor asked me a question in the seminar and I didn't know the answer. I went red and stammered. Then I felt more and more anxious and in the end I said I needed to go to the loo and left early ___

2. Common humanity: Now write down how your experience connects to imperfection and shared pain of the human condition.

___ eg. Anyone else would have felt embarrassed and awkward as well - there were probably lots of others in the seminar who didn't know the answer and I was just the unlucky one who got asked! There've been so many essay deadlines lately that lots of us have found it difficult to prepare properly for seminars - it's not just me. ___

3. Self-kindness: Then write yourself some kind, understanding words of comfort using a gentle and reassuring tone.

___ Poor you - that was bad luck. It's not nice to get shown up in public like that and it's not surprising you felt embarrassed and awkward. You didn't need to be so hard on yourself about getting red and stammering. Maybe next time you can remember to be kinder to yourself and then you won't get so anxious afterwards. ___

5. Next steps

Find a self-compassion test, more self-compassion training exercises, and some mp3 downloads with self-compassion meditations on Dr Kristin Neff's website at www.self-compassion.org

A very good way to develop more self-compassion is learning the skill of mindfulness – learn more on the 'Practising mindfulness' page of the website and look out for courses or workshops run by your uni or college counselling service.

STUDENTS AGAINST DEPRESSION
.ORG

