

Chapter 16

Being Kind to Yourself

The Science of Self-Compassion

Feeling good about yourself does not require feeling better than others

Being compassionate to yourself is a powerful source of emotional resilience

Self-compassion leads to greater motivation and personal flourishing

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Being Kind to Yourself

How do you typically react to difficulties in life – stress, feeling rejected, physical problems, a major failure at work? As human beings, most of us instinctively fight negative experiences and find fault in ourselves when things go wrong: “This shouldn’t be happening!” “What’s the matter with me!?” Unfortunately, this tendency just adds insult to injury. But what would happen if, instead, you took a moment to calm and comfort yourself when you felt bad, just *because* you felt bad – much like you’d do for a friend or a loved one? In other words, what if you practiced the art of *self-compassion*?

Self-compassion can be learned by anyone, even those who didn’t receive enough affection in childhood or who find it embarrassing to be kind to oneself. It’s actually a courageous mental attitude that stands up to harm – the harm that we inflict on ourselves every day by beating ourselves up, pushing ourselves too hard, and holding ourselves to unrealistic standards of perfection. Self-compassion gives us emotional strength and resilience, allowing us to recover more quickly from bruised egos so we can admit our shortcomings, forgive ourselves, and respond to ourselves and others with care and respect. After all, making mistakes is part of being human. Self-compassion also provides the support and inspiration required to make necessary changes in our lives and reach our full potential.

This chapter will first consider what self-compassion is and what it is not, and then review the scientific evidence for the benefits of cultivating self-compassion.

What is Self-Compassion and Why Do We Need It?

Compassion involves sensitivity to the experience of suffering, coupled with a deep desire to alleviate that suffering[1]. *Self-compassion* is simply compassion directed inward. Drawing on the writings of various Buddhist teachers[2], Neff has operationalized self-compassion as consisting of three main elements: kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness [3]. These components combine and mutually interact to create a self-compassionate frame of mind. Self-compassion is relevant when considering personal inadequacies, mistakes and failures, as well as when confronting painful life situations that are outside of our control.

Self-Kindness

Western culture places great emphasis on being kind to our friends, family and neighbors who are struggling. Not so when it comes to ourselves. When we make a mistake or fail in some way, we may be more likely to beat ourselves up than put a supportive arm around our own shoulder. And even when our problems stem from forces beyond our control, such as an accident or traumatic event, we often focus more on fixing the problem than calming and comforting ourselves. Self-kindness counters this tendency so that we are nurturing, understanding and sympathetic towards ourselves when noticing personal shortcomings rather than being harshly critical. Self-compassion is expressed in internal dialogs that are benevolent and encouraging rather than cruel or disparaging. Instead of attacking and berating ourselves for being inadequate, we offer ourselves warmth and unconditional acceptance. Similarly, when external life circumstances are challenging and difficult to bear, self-compassion involves active self-soothing and support[3].





Common Humanity

A sense of common humanity is central to self-compassion and involves recognizing that all humans are flawed works-in-progress; everyone fails, makes mistakes and engages in dysfunctional behavior. Often, however, we feel isolated and cut off from others when considering our struggles and personal shortcomings, irrationally reacting as if failure and pain were aberrations. This isn't a logical process, but a kind of tunnel vision in which we lose sight of the larger human picture and focus primarily on our own seemingly feeble and worthless selves. Similarly, when things go wrong in our external lives through no fault of our own, we often assume that other people are having an easier time of it, that our own situation is abnormal or unfair. We feel cut off and separate from other people who are presumably leading "normal" happy lives. With self-compassion, however, our outlook becomes broad and inclusive, recognizing that life's challenges and personal failures are simply part of being human. This helps us to feel more connected and less isolated when we are in pain.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is awareness of present moment experience in a clear and balanced manner[4]. It involves being "experientially open" to the reality of the present moment, allowing whatever thoughts, emotions and sensations enter awareness without judgment, avoidance or repression[4]. Why is mindfulness an essential component of self-compassion? First, it is necessary to recognize you're suffering in order to give yourself compassion. While it might seem that suffering is blindingly obvious, many people don't acknowledge how much pain they're in, especially when that pain stems from their own inner self-critic. Or when confronted with life challenges, people often get so lost in problem-solving mode that they don't pause to consider how much they are struggling in the moment. Mindfulness counters the tendency to avoid painful thoughts and emotions, allowing us to hold the truth of our experience even when unpleasant. At the same time, being mindful means that we don't become "overidentified"[3] with negative thoughts or feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by our aversive reactions[4]. This type of rumination narrows our focus and exaggerates implications for self-worth. Not only did I fail, "I AM A FAILURE". Not only was I disappointed, "MY LIFE IS DISAPPOINTING". When we observe our pain mindfully, however, we can acknowledge our suffering without exaggerating it, allowing us to take a wiser and more objective perspective on ourselves and our lives.

Although mindfulness is required to experience self-compassion, it is important to recognize that the two constructs are not exactly the same. First, the type of mindfulness entailed in self-compassion is narrower in scope than mindfulness more generally. The mindfulness component of self-compassion refers to balanced awareness of the *negative* thoughts and feelings involved in personal suffering. Mindfulness in general refers to the ability to pay attention to any experience – positive, negative or neutral – with acceptance and equanimity. Another distinction between mindfulness and self-compassion lies in their respective targets[5]. Mindfulness tends to focus on one's internal *experience* (sensations, emotions, thoughts) rather than oneself as the *experiencer*. For example, in the case of lower back pain, mindful awareness might be directed at the changing pain sensations, perhaps noting a stabbing, burning quality, whereas self-compassion would be aimed at the person who is suffering from back pain (see also [chapter 14](#)). Self-compassion emphasizes soothing and comforting the "self" when distressing experiences arise, remembering that such experiences are part of being human.

Research on Self-Compassion

Self-Compassion and Well-Being

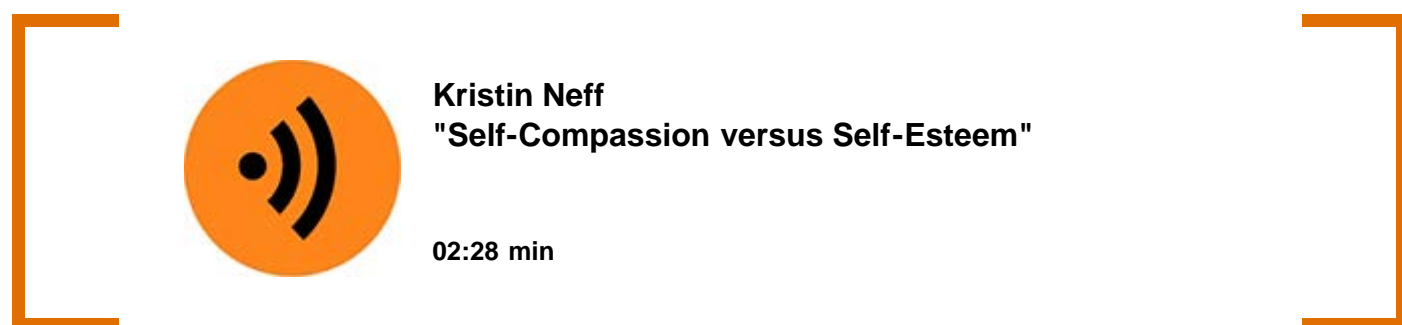
A large body of research indicates that self-compassion enables people to thrive[6]. Much of this research has been conducted using the Self-Compassion Scale[7], a 26-item scale that measures the various dimensions of self-compassion: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. (To calculate your own self-compassion score using the scale.).

Increasingly, however, researchers are also using methods like mood inductions[8],[9], behavioral observations[10] or short-term interventions[11] as a means of examining the impact of self-compassion on well-being.

One of the most consistent findings in the research literature is that greater self-compassion is linked to less anxiety and depression. In fact, a recent meta-analysis[12] found a large effect size when examining the link between self-compassion and psychopathology across 20 studies. Of course, a key feature of self-compassion is the lack of self-criticism, and self-criticism is known to be an important predictor of anxiety and depression[13]. However, self-compassion offers protection against anxiety and depression when controlling for self-criticism[7]. Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude[14] conducted a study that involved a mock interview task in which participants were asked to write their answer to a difficult interview question: "Please describe your greatest weakness". Individuals with higher levels of self-compassion experienced less anxiety after the task. Self-compassionate people have also been found to ruminate much less than those who lack self-compassion[7], presumably because they can break the cycle of negativity by accepting their human imperfection with kindness. A study by Raes[15] found that rumination mediated the association between self-compassion and depression and anxiety, suggesting that reduced rumination is one of the key benefits of self-compassion. There may be physiological processes underlying the buffering effects of self-compassion: Rockcliff et al.[16] found that an exercise designed to increase feelings of self-compassion reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol and increased heart-rate variability, which is associated with a greater ability to regulate emotions (e.g., self-soothing when stressed)[17].

Interestingly, although self-compassionate people are less likely to be overwhelmed by negative emotions, they're also more willing to experience difficult feelings and to acknowledge them as valid and important[7],[14]. The beauty of self-compassion is that instead of replacing negative feelings with positive ones, new positive emotions of care and connectedness are generated by *embracing* the negative ones, so that both are experienced simultaneously (see also chapter 15). Not surprisingly, then, self-compassion is also strongly linked to positive emotions like happiness, satisfaction with life, optimism, curiosity, enthusiasm, interest, inspiration and excitement[18].

Self-Compassion versus Self-Esteem



Kristin Neff
"Self-Compassion versus Self-Esteem"
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Because they can seem similar on the surface, it's important to distinguish self-compassion from self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to the degree to which we evaluate ourselves positively. In American culture, having high self-esteem means standing out in a crowd – being special and





above average. There is general consensus that self-esteem is essential for good mental health, while the lack of self-esteem undermines well-being by fostering depression, anxiety and other pathologies[19]. There are potential problems with high self-esteem, however, not in terms of having it, but in terms of how you get it and keep it. Research increasingly shows that people may engage in dysfunctional behaviors in order to obtain a sense of high self-worth, such as prejudice, narcissism or putting others down[20]. Self-esteem also tends to be contingent on particular outcomes such as being smart, attractive or popular, and it fluctuates up and down according to our latest success or failure[21]. In contrast, self-compassion is not based on positive judgments or evaluations – it is a way of *relating* to ourselves. People feel compassion for themselves because they are human beings, not because they are special or above average. This means that with self-compassion, you don't have to feel better than others to feel good about yourself. Self-compassion also offers more emotional stability than self-esteem because it is always there for you – when you're on top of the world and when you fall flat on your face.

Research indicates that trait levels of self-esteem and self-compassion are moderately correlated[7]. This is unsurprising given that both constructs represent a positive emotional stance towards the self. Similarly, self-esteem and self-compassion are both associated with emotional well-being – for instance, less anxiety and depression, as well as more happiness, optimism and life satisfaction. Unlike self-esteem, however, the healthy states of mind associated with self-compassion do not depend on positive evaluations of the self, on meeting set standards or on favorable comparisons with others. Rather, they stem from recognizing the need to be kind to oneself in instances of suffering and framing one's experience in light of the shared human experience – fragile and imperfect as it is.

Self-compassion appears to provide emotional resilience over and above that attributable to self-esteem. For example, when controlling for self-esteem, self-compassion is still a robust (negative) predictor of depression and anxiety[7], and of happiness, optimism and positive affect[22]. And while high self-esteem depends on successful performances and positive self-evaluations, self-compassion is relevant precisely when self-esteem tends to falter – when one fails or feels inadequate. In the Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude[14] mock interview study asking people to describe their greatest weakness, for instance, self-compassion provided a buffer against anxiety while trait self-esteem did not.

Leary et al.[9] found that when considering hypothetical scenarios involving failure or embarrassment (e.g., being responsible for losing an athletic competition for their team), participants with greater self-compassion reported less negative affect (e.g., sadness or humiliation) and more emotional equanimity (e.g., remaining calm and unflustered). In contrast, global levels of trait self-esteem predicted no variance in outcomes after controlling for self-compassion levels. In another study, participants were asked to give a brief introduction of themselves on video (describing interests, future plans, etc.), and were then given positive or negative feedback about the introduction that was ostensibly made by an observer. Participants' reactions to the feedback were then assessed, including their attributions for the observer's feedback. Individuals with low self-compassion gave defensive attributions – they were more likely to attribute the observer's feedback to their own personality when the feedback was positive rather than negative. High self-compassion individuals, however, were equally likely to attribute the feedback to their personality regardless of whether the feedback was positive or negative. An opposite pattern was found for self-esteem. Low self-esteem individuals were equally likely to attribute the feedback to their personality when feedback was positive or negative, but high self-esteem participants were more likely to attribute the feedback to their own personality when the feedback was positive rather than negative. This suggests that self-compassion enables people to admit and accept that there are negative as well as positive aspects of their personality. The

maintenance of high self-esteem is more dependent on positive self-evaluations, and therefore may lead to cognitive distortions in order to preserve positive self-views[23].

In a survey involving a large community sample in the Netherlands, self-compassion was shown to be a stronger predictor of healthy functioning than self-esteem[22]. Self-compassion was associated with more stability in state feelings of self-worth over an eight-month period (assessed 12 different times) than trait self-esteem. This may be related to the fact that self-compassion was also found to be less contingent on things like physical attractiveness or successful performances than self-esteem. Results indicated that self-compassion was associated with lower levels of social comparison, public self-consciousness, self-rumination, anger and need for cognitive closure than self-esteem. Also, self-esteem had a robust association with narcissism while self-compassion had no association with narcissism. These findings suggest that, in contrast to those with high self-esteem, self-compassionate people are less focused on evaluating themselves, feeling superior to others, worrying about whether or not others are evaluating them, defending their viewpoints or angrily reacting against those who disagree with them. In sum, self-compassion is a healthier way of feeling good about oneself than self-esteem that is based on the need to feel better than others.

Self-Compassion and Motivation

Many people think that they need to be self-critical to motivate themselves – that if they're too self-compassionate they'll be complacent and lazy. Although constructive and supportive self-criticism is certainly helpful (and is part of being kind to oneself), harsh and belittling self-criticism is not: it tends to make people depressed and lose self-confidence[24]. Research shows that self-compassion is linked to enhanced motivation to learn and grow. In a study of self-compassion and learning goals, Neff, Hsieh and Dejithirat[25] found that compassion for the self was associated with mastery rather than performance goals. Students with a mastery orientation towards learning are intrinsically motivated by curiosity and the desire to learn new skills, and tend to view the making of mistakes as a part of the learning process. Students with a performance orientation, on the other hand, are extrinsically motivated to succeed as a means of defending or enhancing their sense of self-worth, and tend to fear failure[26]. Neff et al.[25] demonstrated that self-compassion is positively associated with mastery goals and negatively associated with performance goals, a relationship that is mediated by the lesser fear of failure and greater perceived competence of self-compassionate individuals (which is likely related to lessened self-criticism). They also examined the reactions of students who had recently failed a midterm exam, and found that self-compassionate individuals were more able to cope with and accept their failure as a learning experience. Rather than being complacent and merely accepting the status quo, it appears that self-compassion enables people to grow from their failures because they don't interpret failure as an indictment of their self-worth.

Self-compassion has no association with the level of performance standards adopted for the self, but it is negatively related to maladaptive perfectionism[7]. In other words, self-compassionate people aim just as high as those who lack self-compassion, but don't become as distressed and frustrated when they can't meet their goals. They are also more likely to pick themselves up and try again after failing[27]. Self-compassion has been found to promote health-related behaviors such as sticking to one's diet[28], quitting smoking[29] and starting a physical fitness regime[30]. Self-compassionate people are motivated to make productive changes in their lives not because they are unacceptable as they are, but because they care about themselves and want to be happy and healthy.

Self-compassionate people are also more likely to take responsibility for past mistakes and to apologize when they have hurt someone[9],[31]. For instance, a recent study by Breines and





Chen[8] asked undergraduate students think about a recent moral transgression that they regretted and felt guilty about. One group of participants were then told to write something “kind and understanding” about what happened, another were told to “think about your positive qualities” and another group were told simply to write about their favorite hobbies. The group given instructions to be self-compassionate were significantly more motivated to repair any harm caused by the transgression and committed not to repeat the mistake again than the other two groups.

It's easier to see oneself clearly and own up to past misdeeds when this type of honesty is met with kindness and self-acceptance rather than harsh self-condemnation.

Self-Compassion and Coping

Self-compassion can be seen as an effective way to cope with difficult emotional experiences. For instance, Sbarra, Smith & Mehl[10] found that self-compassion was key in helping people adjust after divorce. Researchers asked divorcing adults to complete a 4-minute stream-of-consciousness recording about their separation experience, and independent judges rated how self-compassionate their dialogs were. Those who displayed greater self-compassion when talking about their break-up not only evidenced better psychological adjustment at the time, but this effect persisted over nine months. Findings were significant even after accounting for a number of competing predictors such as self-esteem. Research also indicates that self-compassion helps people cope with early childhood traumas. In a youth sample, Vettese, Dyer, Li and Wekerle[32] found that self-reported levels of self-compassion mediated the link between childhood maltreatment and later emotional dysregulation. This suggests that people with trauma histories who have compassion for themselves are better able to deal with upsetting events in a productive manner. Self-compassion also appears to help people cope with chronic physical pain, allowing them to maintain emotional balance and function better in daily life[33].

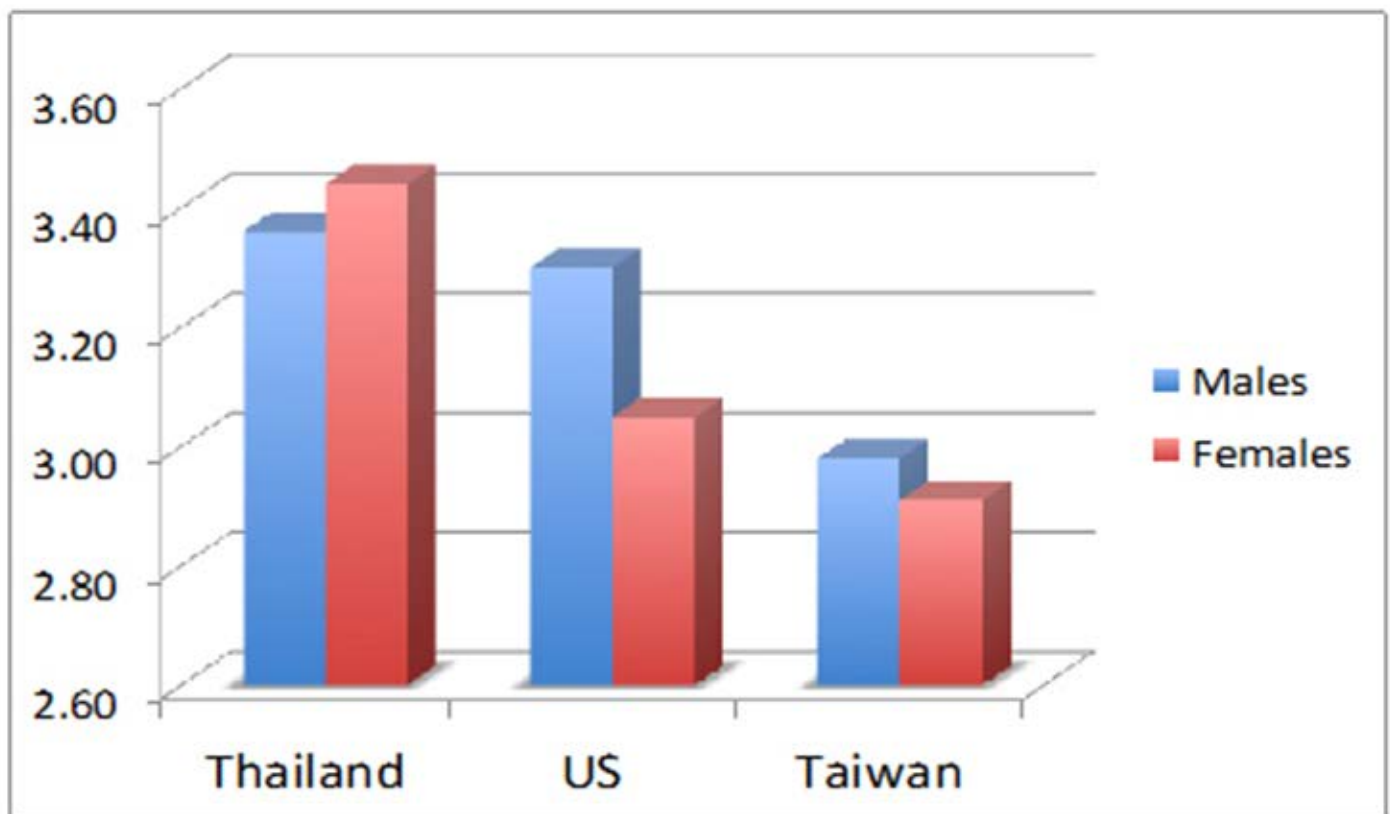


Figure 1. Cross-cultural differences in Self-compassion

Self-Compassion and Culture

There has been a small amount of research exploring whether self-compassion levels differ across cultures. Neff, Pisitsungkagarn and Hsieh[34] examined self-compassion, independent and interdependent self-construal, and psychological well-being in Thailand, Taiwan and the United States. Mean self-compassion levels were highest in Thailand and lowest in Taiwan, with the United States falling in between. (All cultures differed significantly from one another, although within-culture variations in self-compassion were as great as between-culture variations).

These cross-cultural differences may be explained by the fact that Thais are strongly influenced by Buddhism and the value of compassion is emphasized in parenting practices and everyday interactions in Thailand. In contrast, the Taiwanese are more influenced by Confucianism, and shame and self-criticism is more strongly emphasized as a means of parental and social control in Taiwan. Americans may have reported in-between self-compassion levels because the culture displays more mixed messages with regard to self-compassion (e.g., a strong emphasis on positive self-affect but also an isolating, competitive ethos.) Although Thais had the highest levels of self-compassion, Americans had the highest levels of self-esteem. In all three cultures, however, greater self-compassion significantly predicted less depression and greater life satisfaction, suggesting that there may be universal benefits to self-compassion despite cultural differences in its prevalence.

Self-Compassion and Interpersonal Relationships

While there is evidence that self-compassion psychologically benefits the individual, there is also evidence that self-compassion enhances interpersonal relationships. In a study of heterosexual couples[35], for instance, self-compassionate individuals were described by their partners as being more emotionally connected, accepting and autonomy-supporting while being less detached, controlling and verbally or physically aggressive in their relationship than those lacking self-compassion. Self-compassionate people also appear to have more compassion for others. A recent study by Neff and Pommier[36] found that self-compassionate people reported feeling higher levels of empathetic concern, forgiveness and altruism towards others than those who lacked self-compassion, and they were also less likely to experience personal distress when considering others' suffering. This suggests that self-compassion may be an important skill to teach caregivers, especially since it has been found to be a protective factor against caregiver burnout[37].

Self-Compassion in Clinical Contexts

An exciting area of research concerns the implications of self-compassion for clinical practice. People who lack self-compassion are more likely to have critical mothers, come from dysfunctional families and display insecure attachment patterns than self-compassionate people do[38]. Given that therapy clients often have problems related to their family backgrounds, they may be especially likely to benefit from developing greater self-compassion.

It is an interesting empirical question whether self-compassion is implicitly generated in psychotherapy, and is one of the factors underlying effective treatment. This certainly seems to be the case, and may have important implications for understanding the therapeutic process. Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude[14] conducted a study that tracked changes in self-compassion experienced by therapy clients over a one-month interval. Therapists used a Gestalt two-chair technique[39] designed to help clients lessen self-criticism and have greater compassion for themselves. Results indicated that increased self-compassion levels over the month-long period (which were assessed





under the guise of an unrelated study) were linked to fewer experiences of self-criticism, depression, rumination, thought suppression and anxiety.

Paul Gilbert has developed a group-based therapy intervention called Compassionate Mind Training (see [chapter 3](#)). CMT is designed to help people develop skills of self-compassion, especially when their more habitual form of self-to-self relating involves self-attack. In a pilot study of CMT involving hospital day patients with intense shame and self-criticism, significant decreases in depression, self-attacking, shame and feelings of inferiority were reported after participation in the CMT program[40]. Moreover, almost all of the participants felt ready to be discharged from their hospital program at the end of the study.

Therapeutic approaches that rely on mindfulness, like Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program[41], may also be an effective way for people to develop self-compassion. Mindfulness teaches people to notice the difficult thoughts and emotions that arise in present-moment awareness, so that they can be experienced with kindness, acceptance and non-judgment. MBSR courses are commonly taught by therapists and other health professionals to help people deal with stress, depression and other forms of mental suffering. Research has demonstrated that MBSR significantly increases self-compassion[42],[43]. In fact, some researchers have proposed that self-compassion may be a key mechanism by which mindfulness-based interventions improve well-being[44],[45]. In support of this idea, Shapiro, Astin, Bishop and Cordova[41] found that healthcare professionals who took an MBSR program reported significantly increased self-compassion and reduced stress compared to a waitlist control group, and that self-compassion mediated the reductions in stress associated with the program. Similarly, Kuyken et al.[46] examined the effect of MBCT compared to maintenance anti-depressants on relapse in depression, and found that increases in mindfulness and self-compassion both mediated the link between MBCT and depressive symptoms at 15-month follow-up. They also found that increased self-compassion (but not mindfulness) reduced the link between cognitive reactivity and depressive relapse.

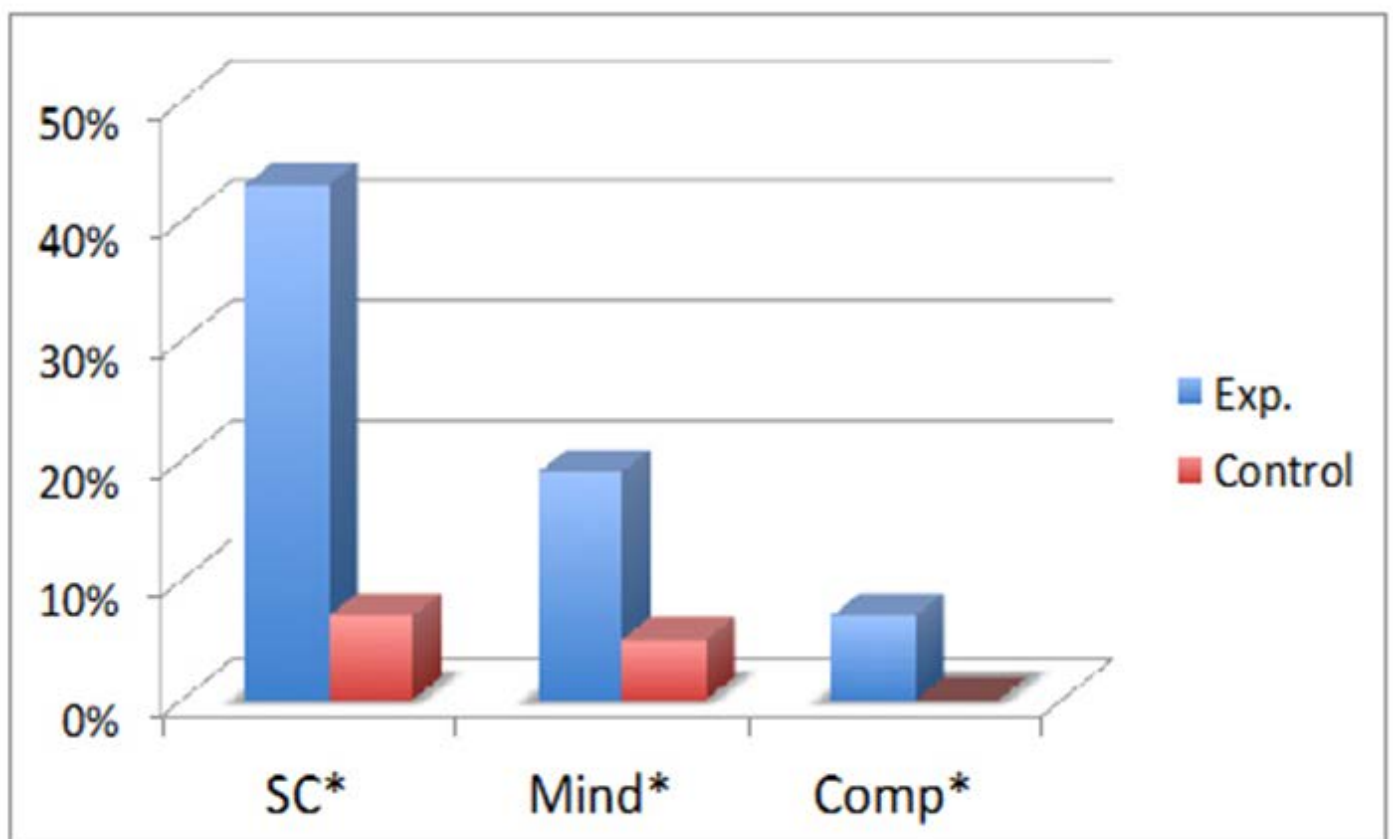


Figure 2. Percent increase in self-compassion, mindfulness, and compassion for others

Although mindfulness-based interventions can increase self-compassion, these programs devote relatively little time to explicitly teaching skills of self-compassion and focus primarily on teaching techniques to enhance mindfulness. For this reason, Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff have developed a short-term intervention program specifically designed to teach self-compassion skills called Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), which is described in detail in [Box 1](#). There is already preliminary evidence that the program is effective[47]. A randomized controlled study of the MSC program compared outcomes for a treatment group ($N = 24$; 78% female; M age = 51.21) to those who were randomized to a waitlist control group ($N = 27$; 82% female; M age = 49.11). Compared to the control group, participation in MSC was significantly more likely to increase participants' degree of self-compassion. In fact, MSC increased self-compassion levels by 43%.

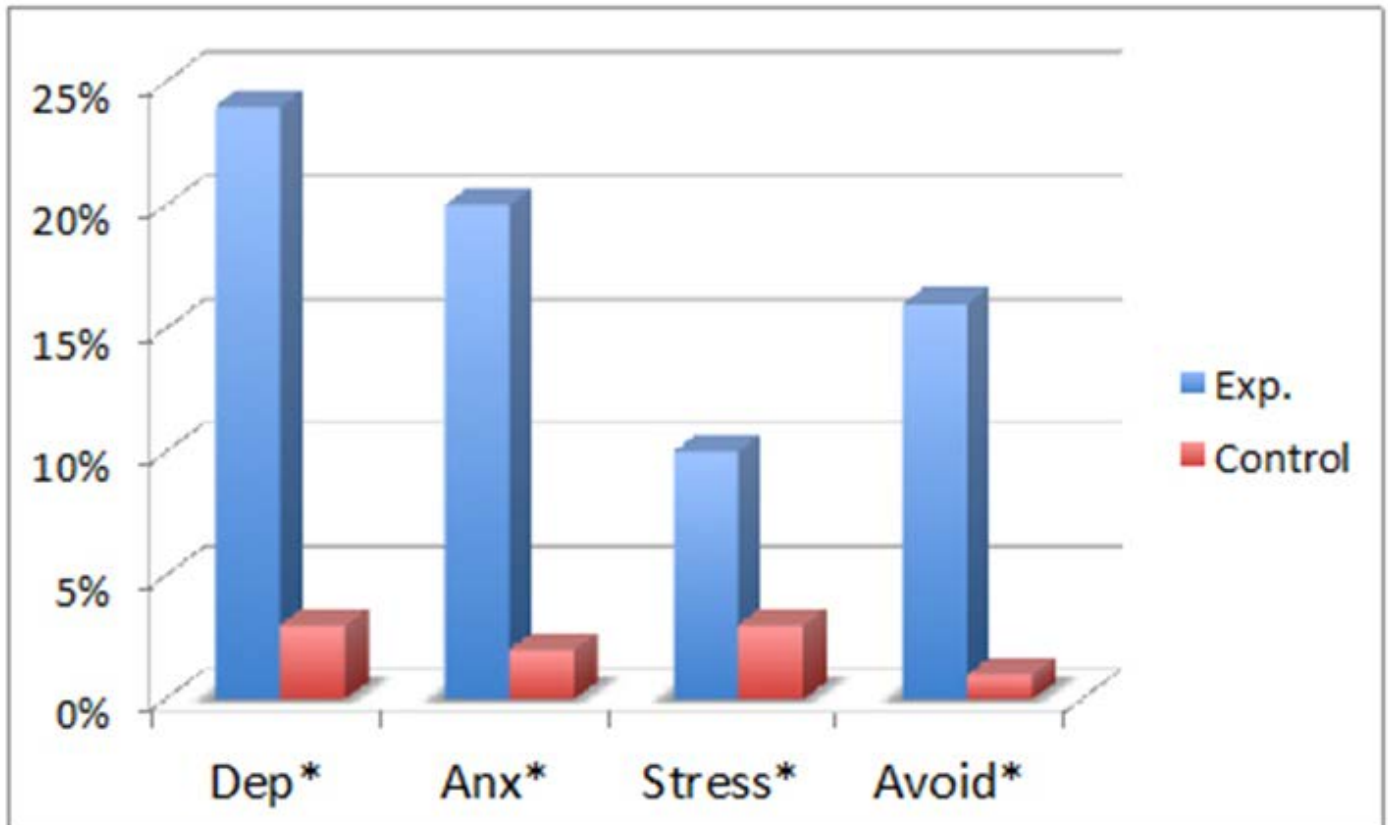


Figure 3. Percent decrease in depression, anxiety, stress and emotional avoidance

To provide comparative insight into the size of this increase, MSC increased self-compassion by 1.13 points on a 5-point scale. A review of the literature revealed that five MBSR studies yielded an average increase of .44 points (range of .11 to .61) on the SCS[42],[43],[48],[49],[50], while three MBCT studies yielded an average increase of .30 points (range of .22 to .38) on the SCS[46],[51],[52]. This suggests that the specific teaching of self-compassion skills in the MSC program is particularly effective for increasing self-compassion levels.

Participation in the MSC program also significantly increased mindfulness and compassion for others compared to the control group, but to a lesser extent. Program participation was associated with other beneficial outcomes, significantly decreasing depression, anxiety, stress and emotional avoidance, and significantly increasing life satisfaction.

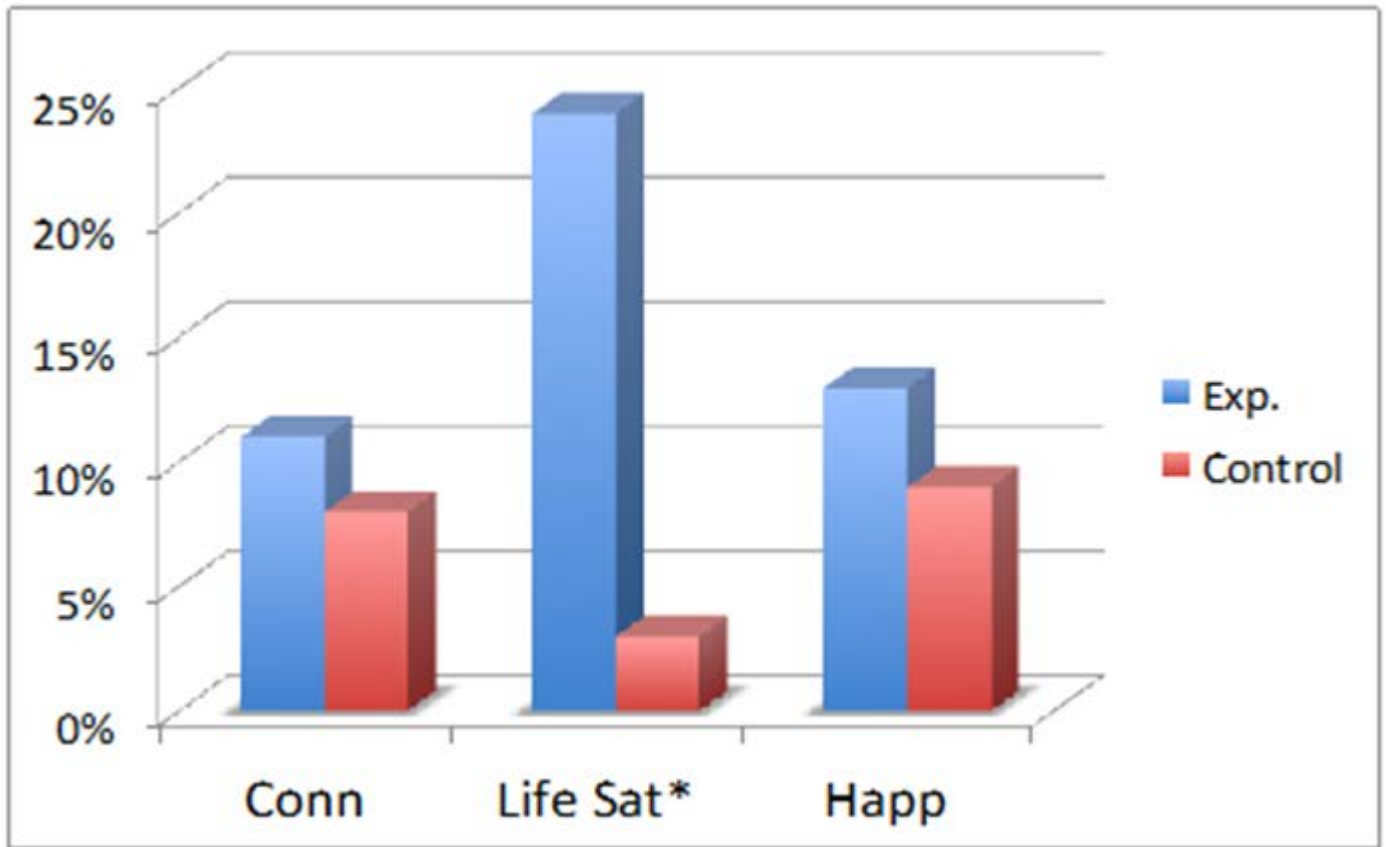


Figure 4. Percent increase in connectedness, life satisfaction, and happiness

Further analyses found that the reduction in anxiety and depression associated with the MSC program were explained by increases in self-compassion, but not mindfulness. Increased mindfulness and self-compassion both predicted decreased stress and increased life satisfaction, while increased mindfulness, but not self-compassion, predicted decreased emotional avoidance. These results underscore the fact that mindfulness and compassion are both important means of enhancing mental health, and that each construct has unique yet overlapping impacts on psychological functioning. The degree to which participants' self-compassion levels increased was significantly linked to their degree of self-compassion practice, both in terms of formal meditation and informal practice in daily life. Gains in all study outcomes were maintained at six-month and one-year follow-up. In fact, life satisfaction actually increased from just after the MSC program ended to the one-year follow-up, suggesting that the continued practice of self-compassion can continue to enhance one's quality of life over time.

Given that research on MSC is brand new, future research directions for the MSC program are numerous. For instance, it might be helpful to teach the MSC course to targeted populations such as adolescents, college students, clinicians, healthcare professionals, parents, spouses, etc., to help them to deal with the challenges of life with greater ease. By wrapping emotional pain in the warm embrace of self-compassion, suffering is ameliorated and well-being is enhanced, allowing for a healthier and more balanced way of being.

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