



## **The Healing Power of Self-Compassion**

Kate Lewis © 19 November 2023

I'm very aware that this is the first service since Clay died that we're not using one of his talks. I've been on the calendar for months, and Ted and I decided that this would be an alright topic for today since we're hurting and I hope that some of these words may be useful for all of us in dealing with grief.

I also feel the need to give a disclaimer because I'm an academic, and this isn't my field. I am talking about self-compassion because becoming more compassionate towards myself and others is a path that I am on and something I'm striving for. I have become interested in the psychology behind it and have done some reading, and I'm convinced that most of us can benefit from an increased dose of self-kindness.

Our second principle explicitly points to the importance of compassion in human relations. I think that we can make the world a better and kinder place if we work on ourselves first and then spread that love and compassion to others. I think that so many of us suffer from a lack of self-compassion that there is something to be learned in talking about our experiences.

Since I'm not a psychologist or scholar in self-compassion research, this is based on my personal experience and reading and thinking about it; it's a work in progress. I can imagine Clay laughing at me, saying, of course Kate! This is about what makes us human and about the attempt to be more loving, so I hope he would say that that's enough.

The last song today is The Greatest Love of All, made famous by George Benson in 1976 and Whitney Houston in 1985. I'm having us sing it because it mostly fits the theme, except there's one thing that I really take issue with. In the chorus they sing, "The greatest love of all is easy to achieve. Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all."

I have found that learning to love myself, to feel and act out of compassion for myself, is the hardest thing to achieve. It is not

straightforward and not easy. For most of us loving and caring for ourselves is way harder than loving and caring for other people.

It takes a lot of patience, work, and drumming up kindness for ourselves when we're hurting, especially when we blame ourselves for that hurt. We have to begin by seeing ourselves and how we are in the world in a different way, and that insight may be the hardest thing of all.

I was up at the altar a few months ago sharing my joy at finally seeing a specialist who I hope can help me with chronic sleep problems. The specialist and I agreed that the sleep issues are fundamentally associated with my high levels of anxiety, and he recommended a three-fold treatment. For starters the plan includes medication and psychological support, which is counseling or therapy. The third thing was completely new to me coming from a psychiatrist, and that was to acknowledge my high level of self-criticism and to tone that down by increasing my level of self-compassion. Hmmm.

I was suspicious.

I've heard people pushing self-compassion, and my response was a big negative. No way. As with many other people, a variety of fears and resistance went through my head. From self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff on people's resistance: "Isn't self-compassion just a form of self-pity? Or a dressed-up word for self-indulgence?" "...won't being nice to myself make me weak, selfish, or lazy?"

From Stan Steindl, another researcher in self-compassion: "Do we worry that being compassionate towards others will make us weak and people will take advantage of us? Do we feel we don't deserve to receive compassion from someone else?"

Yes. All of the above.

But here's the twist: A decade of research and thousands of projects have shown that the opposite is true. If we care for ourselves better, want health and well-being for ourselves, we become more proactive to better our situation. We don't become passive, lazy, and self-indulgent. We become better friends and lovers, better parents, better citizens of the world. Our third principle points to the importance of accepting one another; self-compassion research suggests we can do that by being more accepting of ourselves.

As Neff writes,

”Self-compassion doesn’t make you weak; in fact it’s an incredibly powerful source of strength, coping, and resilience. It’s not selfish, it leads to more giving and caring relationship behavior, and allows us to sustain giving to others without becoming drained. And far from making us lazy, self-compassion is like rocket fuel for getting things done, keeping us focused on our goals, reducing performance anxiety, and most importantly, allowing us to learn from our mistakes, so we can grow from them.... The ever-expanding body of research on self-compassion shows it can radically transform our lives for the better.”

Buddhists have practiced it for centuries. Neff and fellow researchers found that in countries where Buddhism plays a larger role in daily life, such as Thailand, people are much more self-compassionate.

So why are we so resistant to self-kindness, self-love, and self-compassion?

As Steindl says, ”We have tricky brains.” We have brains that are both ancient - “reptilian” – hundreds of millions of years in development and newly developed over the last few 10’s of thousands of years since we became human.

Our ancient brains are threat and drive oriented. We prefer to err on the side of mistakenly identifying a threat that isn’t there than to miss a threat that is. But we can’t always avoid threats; we have to leave the cave to go out and get food. We want to improve our situation, want to make things better for ourselves and our group. We also have a desperate need to stay in our human group. We will do pretty much anything to avoid being expelled from our group because for our ancestors that was the only way to survive.

We’re born into circumstances that we didn’t choose and over which we have no control. These circumstances and the behaviour of adults around us in childhood and adolescence affect our brains and our behaviour and thought processes. And we have no control over that. As Steindl puts it, ”It is not your fault.”

Out of this messiness of our brains and our development it is very easy to develop an inner critic. This is a voice that criticises our behaviour and our thoughts and feelings. It often comes from how our parents were with us but it can come from any adults who were critical and judgmental with

us. In some cases we don't know where it came from, just that we have a critical inner voice that may be hateful and harsh.

If we feel humiliation and shame as children we incorporate that into our brains and carry it with us into adulthood. This can turn into self-criticism.

The strength of the inner critic depends on the person; some are mild and some are ferocious. When I started talking to my sleep specialist psychiatrist he said, "Your self-critic has a PhD!"

We laughed about it, but he's absolutely right. My self-critic is highly trained and eloquent and has fine-tuned the art of casting doubt. It has made it almost impossible for me to be "good enough." I am a master procrastinator because I dread putting words down that may show my lack of eloquence and foolishness.

I spent a long time deciding on whether to do this talk because of my lack of expertise. There is an irony to the suffering I caused myself while preparing a talk on self-compassion.

This talk fired up my highly educated self-critic – how dare you talk about self-criticism and self-compassion when you're not an expert? What do you know? Everyone will judge and criticise your hubris. They won't like you anymore. They'll kick you out of the group.

You don't need to have a PhD to have a relentless self-critic; you just need to be human and have lived through some challenges while your brain was developing. It is way too normal and common.

And there is a way out through self-compassion.

Kristin Neff talks about three core components of self-compassion, self-kindness, recognition of our common humanity, and mindfulness.

Self-kindness means being gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental.

Recognition of our common humanity means feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated in our suffering.

Mindfulness is holding our experience in balanced awareness rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it. Our first principle says we should recognise the inherent worth and dignity of every person; that includes yourself.

I have been working through Steindl and Neff's books and doing lots of exercises, reflecting on how I've come to be the way I am and how to change it. Both researchers emphasize doing things, writing, reflecting, meditating both with and without imagery. We can retrain our brains to be more loving both towards ourselves and others.

It is a huge part of the process to learn to feel compassion, to feel loving feelings towards yourself. This can be very painful and difficult at first. I rebelled over and over.

Steindl helped by starting with imagining an Ideal Compassionate Being – what would that look like? What would that feel like, to be embraced by total love, total understanding, total forgiveness? This caused a lot of tears for me, letting myself feel completely and unconditionally loved.

Then Steindl has us imagine our Compassionate Self – take those feelings that our ideal being has given us and realise we can do that for ourselves. What?? Really?? How can this be ok? It's ok. It's more than ok. It is life-changing and helps both us and those around us.

I said earlier that Steindl writes that many aspects of our lives are not our fault; much of our suffering is not our fault. But, critically, he adds that it is our responsibility. We have to decide how we want to be in the world. We have to retrain ourselves to be the way we want, and self-compassion can help us.

So, the obvious question is, is this helping me? Am I taking better care of myself, being less self-critical, and sleeping better? Well... sort of. I'm still too overcommitted and stressed and don't take enough time to exercise or recover from long work weeks. I still procrastinate out of fear of being judged and criticised by others.

Changing decades of bad sleep habits takes a long time. The difference now is that I have hope that I'm taking steps towards helping myself and therefore those that I love. I am being a better friend and a better citizen of the world because I'm holding myself as precious and therefore everyone else as precious as well. It's a work in progress.

Instead of a reading we'll do a meditation on loving kindness, led by teacher Sharon Salzberg. This is an example of how we can learn to be kind to ourselves over time.

### **Meditation**

Loving Kindness Meditation by Sharon Salzberg

### **Meditation / Discussion Question**

If you're feeling brave please share how you and people close to you are affected by self-criticism.

How can you practice self-compassion and encourage it in others?