

# Reflections on self-compassion: building a more compassionate self

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When working with children and families and, indeed, even for ourselves in our personal and professional lives, self-compassion is a way of relating to suffering that can enhance our own well-being and our capacity to be compassionate and caring toward others.

Kristin Neff, an internationally recognised expert in self-compassion, aligns her conceptualisation of self-compassion with Buddhist philosophy which describes compassion as being *omni-directional*—that is, directed towards oneself as well as toward others.<sup>1,2</sup> According to Neff, self-compassion involves (1) how individuals respond to suffering, with self-kindness or self-compassion instead of self-judgement; (2) how individuals think about their challenging circumstances, as a part of human experience instead of being isolating; and (3) how they attend to suffering, in a mindful way instead of in a negatively focused way where a person over-identifies with negative thoughts and feelings.<sup>2</sup>

There is a rapidly expanding body of research that examines self-compassion in a variety of populations, cultures and contexts. Data consistently demonstrate links between self-compassion and better mental and physical health.<sup>3,4</sup> Self-compassion has also been studied among caregivers, for example among parents of children with autism and is an important predictor of wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> Self-compassion among parents more broadly is associated with reduced parenting stress, greater parenting self-efficacy, stronger parent-child relationships and greater child wellbeing.<sup>6-8</sup> Among the caring professions, self-compassion is associated with greater compassion for others, better care delivery, better professional quality of life and reduced rates of burnout.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, self-compassion is modifiable through intervention and systematic reviews of interventions designed to boost self-compassion have yielded promising results. Self-compassion interventions for parents reduce depression,

anxiety and stress and improve wellbeing when dealing with challenging parenting events.<sup>10,11</sup> Similarly, interventions for those in the caring professions reduce stress and burnout and improve self-compassion, resilience and work-related wellbeing.<sup>12,13</sup> Among health professionals specifically, boosting self-compassion may protect against the negative impacts of caring for others.<sup>14</sup> Among nurses, interventions including mindfulness and self-compassion training have been linked to increased self-compassion, compassion satisfaction (satisfaction derived from caring for others) and reduced stress and burnout.<sup>15,16</sup>

Despite growing evidence for the effectiveness of self-compassion approaches to protect and improve mental health and wellbeing, successful implementation of strategies to support self-compassionate attention and action is not without challenges. “Fears of self-compassion” are common<sup>17</sup> and may be evident among those of us who find it difficult or distressing to approach ourselves more compassionately, even despite having high levels of compassion for others. Seeing self-compassion as unnecessary, self-indulgent, weak or distressing can inhibit self-compassion and working with avoidance or resistance to self-compassion may be an important step on the path to greater self-compassion.<sup>17</sup>

While there are many online programs and resources to support the development of self-compassion, simple strategies can also be an effective place to start. Visualisation exercises, such as imagining compassion as a ball of glowing warm light that radiates out and around yourself, is a well-known and commonly used exercise for beginners. If this type of direct approach is too difficult to start with, it might be easier to bring to mind someone you care about, think about how you would show your love and care for them and then try, as best you can, to treat yourself the same way. Giving ourselves small but regular acts of kindness (a mindful moment, a cup of tea) and being open to the kindness of others are also good ways to start building a more compassionate life. For those seeking more, Compassion with Equanimity is a practice developed by Germer & Neff to support compassion and self-compassion for caregivers.<sup>18</sup> For professionals, the Compassionate Mind Foundation<sup>19</sup> (<https://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/>) provides a wealth of resources to support practice and research into the use of compassion interventions across diverse contexts.

Engaging in the practice of self-compassion supports wellbeing and can build our ability to be compassionate towards others. We hope you enjoy this edition and that it informs your care of children and families.

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