

SELF-COMPASSIONATE LETTER

Difficulty: **CASUAL** | Frequency: **1X/WEEK** | Duration: **15 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

We often judge ourselves more harshly than we judge others, beating ourselves up over our faults, flaws, and shortcomings. That makes us feel isolated, unhappy, and even more stressed; it may even make us try to feel better about ourselves by denigrating other people.

Rather than harsh self-criticism, a healthier response is to treat yourself with compassion and understanding. According to psychologist Kristin Neff, this “self-compassion” has three main components: mindfulness, a feeling of common humanity, and self-kindness. This exercise asks you to write a letter to yourself expressing compassion for an aspect of yourself that you don’t

like. Research suggests that people who respond with compassion to their own flaws and setbacks—rather than beating themselves up—experience greater physical and mental health.

TIME REQUIRED

15 minutes. Try to do this practice once per week, or at least once per month.

HOW TO DO IT

First, identify something about yourself that makes you feel ashamed, insecure, or not good enough. It could be something related to your personality, behavior, abilities, relationships, or any other part of your life.

Once you identify something, write it down and describe how it makes you feel. Sad? Embarrassed? Angry? Try to be as honest as possible, keeping in mind that no one but you will see what you write.

The next step is to write a letter to yourself expressing compassion, understanding, and acceptance for the part of yourself that you dislike.

As you write, follow these guidelines:

1. Imagine that there is someone who loves and accepts you unconditionally for who you are. What would that person say to you about this part of yourself?
2. Remind yourself that everyone has things about themselves that they don’t like, and that no one is without flaws. Think about how many other people in the world are struggling with the same thing that you’re struggling with.
3. Consider the ways in which events that have happened in your life, the family environment you grew up in, or even your genes may have contributed to this negative aspect of yourself.
4. In a compassionate way, ask yourself whether there are things that you could do to improve or better cope with this negative aspect. Focus on how constructive changes could make you feel happier, healthier, or more fulfilled, and avoid judging yourself.
5. After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back to it later and read it again. It may be especially helpful to read it whenever you’re feeling bad about this aspect of yourself, as a reminder to be more self-compassionate.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Shapira, L. B., & Mongrain, M. (2010). [The benefits of self-compassion and optimism exercises for individuals vulnerable to depression](#) *Journal of Positive Psychology*

, 5, 377-389.

Participants who wrote a self-compassionate letter every day for a week reported lower symptoms of depression and greater happiness three months later than they had beforehand; they also seemed happier and less depressed three months later than participants who had written about an early memory every day for a week. Their increase in happiness persisted six months later.

Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). [A pilot study and randomized controlled trial of the mindful self-compassion program](#) *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(1), 28-44.

Participants in an eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program, which included practicing the self-compassionate letter, [among other exercises](#), reported feeling greater self-compassion at the end of the program than they had at the beginning. Their self-compassion at the end of the eight weeks was also greater than that of a comparison group that didn't participate in the program. The MSC participants also reported greater mindfulness and life satisfaction, and lower depression, anxiety, and stress, than the comparison group.

Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2012). [Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18(9), 1133-1143.

Participants in an online study who wrote a compassionate paragraph to themselves regarding a personal weakness subsequently reported greater feelings of self-compassion. They also experienced other psychological benefits, such as greater motivation for self-improvement, compared to participants who focused on boosting their self-esteem, distracting themselves, or nothing in particular.

WHY IT WORKS

Self-compassion reduces painful feelings of shame and self-criticism that can compromise mental health and well-being and stand in the way of personal growth. Writing in a self-compassionate way can help you replace your self-critical voice with a more compassionate one—one that comforts and reassures you rather than berating you for your shortcomings. It takes time and practice, but the more you write in this way, the more familiar and natural the compassionate voice will feel, and the easier it will be to remember to treat yourself kindly when you're feeling down on yourself.

SOURCES

[Kristin Neff, Ph.D.](#), University of Texas, Austin
[Center for Mindful Self-Compassion](#)

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).



SELF-COMPASSION BREAK

Difficulty: **CASUAL** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **5 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Difficult situations become even harder when we beat ourselves up over them, interpreting them as a sign that we're less capable or worthy than other people. In fact, we often judge ourselves more harshly than we judge others, especially when we make a mistake or feel stressed out. That makes us feel isolated, unhappy, and even more stressed; it may even make us try to feel better about ourselves by denigrating other people.

Rather than harsh self-criticism, a healthier response is to treat yourself with compassion and understanding. According to psychologist Kristin Neff, this “self-compassion” has three main components: mindfulness, a feeling of common humanity, and self-kindness. This exercise walks you through all three of those components when you're going through a stressful experience. Research suggests that people who treat themselves with compassion rather than criticism in difficult times experience greater physical and mental health.

TIME REQUIRED

5 minutes. While it may be challenging to do this practice every time you face a stressful situation, an initial goal could be to try it at least once per week.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Think of a situation in your life that is difficult and is causing you stress.
2. Call the situation to mind and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.
3. Now say to yourself, “This is a moment of suffering.” This acknowledgment is a form of mindfulness—of simply noticing what is going on for you emotionally in the present moment, without judging that experience as good or bad. You can also say to yourself, “This hurts” or “This is stress.” Use whatever statement feels most natural to you.
4. Next, say to yourself, “Suffering is a part of life.” This is a recognition of your common humanity with others—that all people have trying experiences, and these experiences give you something in common with the rest of humanity rather than mark you as abnormal or deficient. Other options for this statement include “Other people feel this way,” “I’m not alone,” or “We all struggle in our lives.”
5. Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch on your chest, and say, “May I be kind to myself.” This is a way to express self-kindness. You can also consider whether there is another specific phrase that would speak to you in that particular situation. Some examples: “May I give myself the compassion that I need,” “May I accept myself as I am,” “May I learn to accept myself as I am,” “May I forgive myself,” “May I be strong,” and “May I be patient.”

This practice can be used any time of day or night. If you practice it in moments of relative calm, it might become easier for you to experience the three parts of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—when you need them most.

To provide even more structure, you can listen to audio guiding you through this practice in the player below. Self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff provides this and other guided self-compassion practices on her [Self-Compassion website](#).

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

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Participants in an eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program, which included practicing the self-compassion break, [among other exercises](#), reported feeling greater self-compassion at the end of the program than they had at the beginning. Their self-compassion at the end of the eight weeks was also greater than that of a comparison group that didn't participate in the program. The MSC participants also reported greater mindfulness and life satisfaction, and lower depression, anxiety, and stress, than the comparison group.

WHY IT WORKS

The three elements in this practice—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—all play important roles in increasing self-compassion. Mindfulness allows people to step back and recognize that they are experiencing suffering, without judging suffering as something bad that they should try to avoid. Sometimes people fail to notice when they are in pain, or deny that they are suffering because it brings up feelings of weakness or defeat. Common humanity reminds people of their connection with other people—all of whom suffer at some point in their lives—and eases feelings of loneliness and isolation. Self-kindness is an active expression of caring toward the self that can help people clarify their intentions for how they want to treat themselves.

Going through these steps in response to a stressful experiences can help people replace their self-critical voice with a more compassionate one, one that comforts and reassures rather than berating them for shortcomings. That makes it easier to work through stress and reach a place of calm, acceptance, and happiness.

SOURCES

[Kristin Neff, Ph.D.](#), University of Texas, Austin
[?Center for Mindful Self-Compassion](#)

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 Compassion Exercise 60 min Client No

Self-Care Vision Board

Self-care activities are things we do to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health. Countless research findings demonstrate the importance of one's ability to attend to and meet personal needs. For instance, self-care has been found to increase empathy and immunologic functioning and decrease anxiety and depression (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008).

Self-care is sometimes mistaken for selfishness; however, according to Mills, Wand, and Fraser (2015), self-care allows people to take better care of others. These authors argued that a lack of self-care during times of distress has a negative effect on one's ability to provide care and compassion to others. Because self-care ensures that we have taken care of our needs, we operate from a state of inner balance, which renders us better equipped to meet others' needs.

While self-care may sound simple enough, it is often difficult to execute. One of the most common reasons for people not engaging in regular self-care is that they "don't have time." Fortunately, there are many different self-care practices one can do, and none of them are especially time-consuming or require a lot of planning. Once self-care becomes a part of everyday life, people will likely become more and more protective of that time and wonder how they ever managed without it.

Doing kind and caring things for ourselves, particularly when we are struggling, can help us cope and move through difficult emotional experiences. Self-care activities can be sensory, emotional, physical, spiritual, and social. The idea of initiating self-care and integrating it into everyday life is to find out what feels good to you—something that you genuinely enjoy doing and that fits your lifestyle and your values.

This exercise involves creating a self-care vision board. A vision board is a visual representation of a particular concept using images, illustrations, and/or words. The exercise aims to help clients increase self-care and self-compassion in a creative way.



Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.).



Self-Care Vision Board

Instructions

This exercise involves creating a self-care vision board. A vision board is a visual representation of a particular concept using images, illustrations, and/or words. Thus, a self-care vision board is a collection of images and words that reflect ideas for self-care. Self-care activities are things we do to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health. Follow the following three steps to create your self-care vision board.

Step 1: Brainstorm self-care activities

Come up with a list of as many potential self-care activities as possible. Be bold and creative, allowing yourself to consider new and different potential activities. Only include activities that you would genuinely enjoy doing and that fit your lifestyle and your values. Refer to Appendix for inspiration.

Step 2: Collect images for your vision board

Find positive images that correspond with your chosen self-care activities. Look for images that resonate with you and inspire you. You might like to use the Internet, magazines, and photographs as potential sources. Use photos of activities that you can do to take better care of yourself and your needs.

Step 3: Collect words for your vision board

You can decide to keep your vision board completely visual or to add words and phrases to it. The words and phrases you choose should reflect or relate to your chosen self-care activities. You might like to cut words out of magazines or print them from the Internet. Choose words and fonts that resonate with you and inspire you.

Step 4: Put your vision board together

Once you have gathered your images and inspiring phrases, get creative with your arrangement.



Appendix: Examples of self-care activities

Emotional self-care

- Learn to say “no.”
- Intentionally schedule “me time” on your calendar or planner.
- Reward yourself for completing small tasks.
- Use online tutorials to learn something new.
- Develop a relaxing evening ritual.
- Allow yourself to feel and express all your feelings (in a safe and appropriate environment).
- Try some mindful exercises to help bring you into the present moment.
- Try some adult coloring as a form of anxiety and/or stress release.
- Remind yourself of the good stuff in life by writing a list of things you’re grateful to have.
- Take a moment to allow your feelings to be present without judging them.
- Stop being your harshest critic. Allow yourself to make mistakes.

Physical self-care

- Do some stretching exercises.
- Take a walk.
- Drink more water.
- Exhaust yourself physically. Do whatever helps you feel fatigued.
- Get a massage.
- Go out and spend 10 minutes under the sun.
- Go for a bike ride to nowhere in particular.
- Go hiking, camping, or backpacking and spend some time in nature.
- Go to bed early.

Social self-care

- Avoid toxic people.
- Ask for help. Let people know you need some help.
- Call a trusted friend or family member and talk things out.
- Choose who you spend your time with today. Spend time with people who are enthusiastic and positive.
- Intentionally reconnect with someone you’ve lost touch with or have unresolved conflict with.
- Join a support group for people who are going through what you’re going through.
- Schedule a regular date night with your significant other.
- Take a road trip with your siblings.



Spiritual self-care

- Make time for meditation in your day.
- Do a 10-minute body scan technique to check in with each part of your body.
- Do something nice for someone in secret.
- Donate money to a charity of your choosing.
- Help someone in some way.
- Find an opportunity to use your strengths, that is, the things that energize you, more often.