



#CompassionateMe

AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO HELP TEENS DEVELOP SELF-COMPASSION



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Self-Attitudes Lab



Dr. Allison Kelly

Click on the logos to learn more!

Important Information About This Book

This workbook presents information about self-compassion based on scientific theories and research. It also includes activities that are used in compassion-focused therapy.

This resource was designed primarily for teens, and especially older adolescents, who are interested in learning more about treating themselves with more compassion. Teens may find it helpful to work through some of the exercises with a trusted adult, like a therapist, if one is available. Mental health professionals who work with teenagers may also find this to be a useful resource.

It should be noted that self-compassion is like any other skill we learn; it can feel challenging, strange, and awkward, and often takes time to develop. Working on developing self-compassion may bring up difficult feelings at first, especially if it is very different from the way we usually treat ourselves. We encourage an attitude of kindness, patience, and non-judgment while going through this workbook.

This workbook is **NOT** a replacement for psychotherapy or other forms of mental health treatment and was not developed to treat mental health disorders. If teens are experiencing psychological distress, they should seek out support from a trusted adult, services from an appropriate professional, and/or call a crisis line.

For more information about mental health resources near you, click [HERE](#).



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01 What is Compassion?

When you hear the word "compassion," what sorts of things come to mind? What do you think compassion looks like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like in your body?



Compassion involves two key components:

- A desire to see and turn toward the emotional pain
- A commitment to try and help make things better

Gilbert et al. (2017)



02

From Compassion to Self-Compassion

Humans have tricky but cool brains!

When our brains think about things in a negative way it can cause us a lot of suffering and stress.

EXAMPLE

Our brains might keep thinking about the fact that we didn't do as well as our friend on an exam or sports competition.

In a similar way, our brains can also create different emotions when we think about positive experiences and thoughts.

EXAMPLE

Our brains can imagine someone talking kindly and compassionately to us, or we can talk to ourselves in a kind way.



Research shows that our body's response to **imagining** someone being compassionate to us and **actually being** with someone compassionate is essentially the same! Similarly, talking to ourselves in a kind, warm way has the same effect as someone else speaking to us that same way.

We Are 'Hardwired' to Need Compassion

We are hardwired to need care and love from others from the moment we are born, or we wouldn't survive. Evolutionary systems in our body motivate us to care for others - they are designed to help us notice and respond to cues that others might need support. These systems were developed so that parents would care for their babies and help them survive. However, these systems have grown to be sensitive to the suffering of not just our own children, but also other loved ones, strangers, and even animals.



The threat centres in the human brain have developed to have special receptors that respond to oxytocin. Oxytocin is a hormone that is released by close contact with loved ones, like hugging or cuddling. When oxytocin is released, such as when we get a hug from a parent, the stress centres in our brain "turn off". As a result, we might feel more calm and soothed.

Take-Home Message

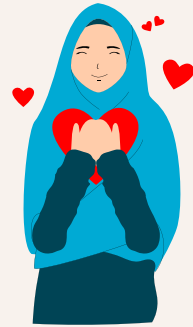
- ✓ Our brain is wired to NEED compassion when we are stressed or upset.
- ✓ Without compassion from others or ourselves, our stress levels stay very high and we stop being able to function well.

03

What is Self-Compassion?

Self-compassion is compassion turned inwards.

We can respond to difficult situations with self-compassion by treating ourselves with the same level of care and understanding we would give someone we care about.



According to Dr. Kristin Neff, there are three components of self-compassion:



1 MINDFULNESS

Paying attention, on purpose, to our thoughts and feelings in the present moment without judgment



2 SELF-KINDNESS

Treating yourself with gentleness, warmth, and understanding in times of difficulty



3 COMMON HUMANITY

Understanding that you are not alone in your experiences, and that all people, at some point or another, encounter painful situations and experiences

Neff (2003)

Creating an Ideal Compassionate Image

By now, you would have read about what compassion is and how we are hardwired to need it, but this raises the question: **what does it feel like when we receive compassion?**

One way for us to experience what it feels like to receive compassion is to use our imagination to build our own ideal compassionate caring image. An image of some being or object – human or not – that totally understands you, doesn't judge you, accepts you just as you are, and is always there for you whenever you need them to be. Because of how our brains are wired, using our imagination to create this compassionate image will help activate feelings of compassion within our body in real life.

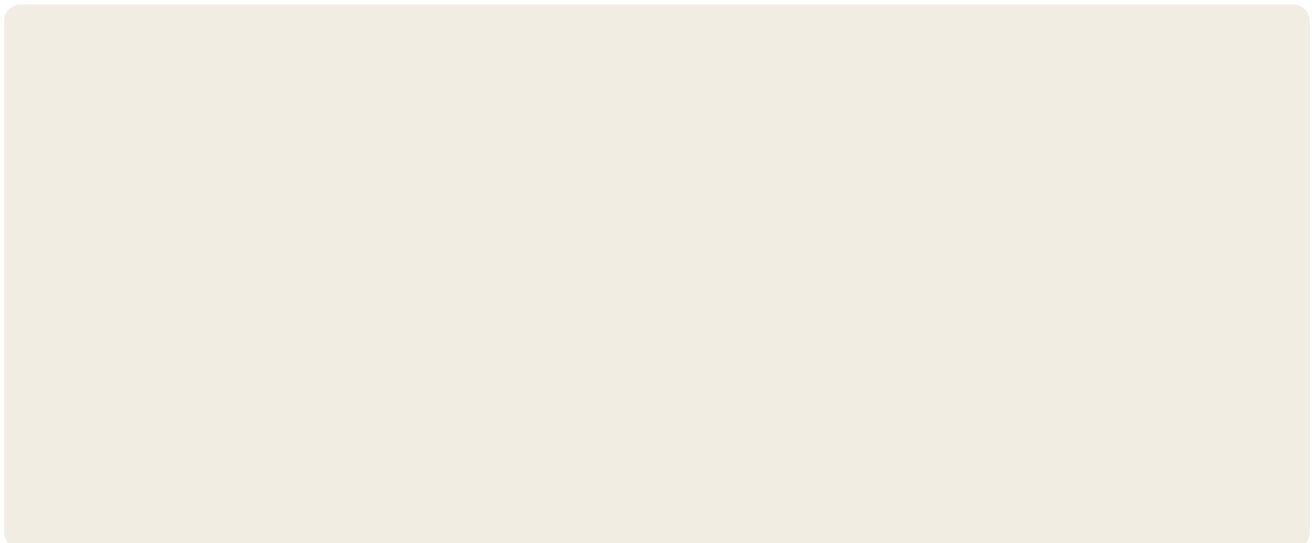
Use the questions on the following pages to help you brainstorm what this ideal compassionate caring image might be like.



Creating an Ideal Compassionate Image Cont'd

What does your compassionate image look like?

First, let's think about what you would like your ideal compassionate caring image to look like. Your compassionate image can be whatever you want it to be! Perhaps it is a person you know in real life (e.g., a parent), a character from your favourite tv show or movie, or a fantasy person that doesn't exist. Or, maybe it isn't a human at all! Maybe it is an animal or an object (e.g., a tree or rock). It is okay if you don't have clear images right away; perhaps you just have a fuzzy sense of something (e.g., a colour or shape); that's okay too. If you do have an image in mind, use the space below to describe it in as much detail as you can. For example, if you are imagining a person or an animal, you might think about whether they are young or old, what colour their eyes are, what facial expressions they are making toward you, what their posture is like, and what their hair or fur looks like.



Creating an Ideal Compassionate Image Cont'd

What does your compassionate image **sound** like?

Next, try to imagine what your ideal compassionate image sounds like. What tone of voice does the image use? How loud or quiet is their voice? Describe what your image sounds like below.

How does your compassionate image **relate to you**?

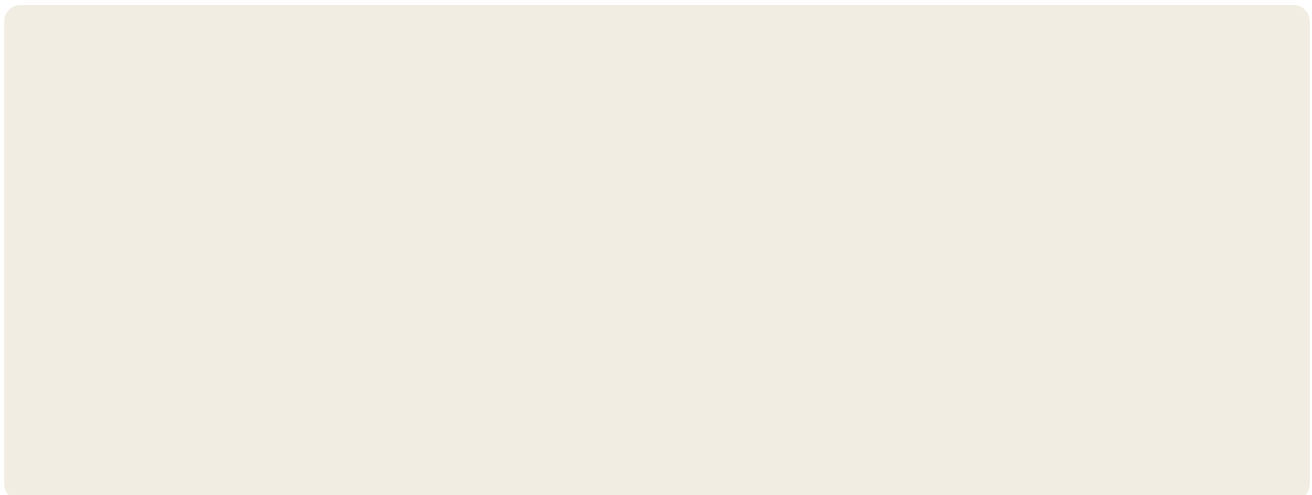
Now that you have a sense of what your image would look and sound like, let's imagine what qualities you might want your image to relate to you. What words might the image say to you? What would this image want you to know? What actions might this image take to comfort or support you? How would they communicate or interact with you? Use the space below to describe how you would like your image to relate to you:

Creating an Ideal Compassionate Image Cont'd

Putting it all together

Once you have created your compassionate image, take a moment to close your eyes to paint a picture of this image in your imagination, slowing down your breathing a little as you do. Take your time to allow that image to come to life in your mind. It does not have to be a vivid picture; even a fuzzy image or a felt sense is okay. Spend some time being with this image that fully understands and accepts you. You might even imagine it saying the words or taking the actions that you described above. As you spend time with your image, try to notice how your body feels. Are you noticing any physical sensations? Where are you noticing those sensations in your body? Are there any words to describe the emotions you are feeling? Once you are ready, you can open your eyes.

Use the space below to describe what you noticed while you spent time with your compassionate image:



Creating an Ideal Compassionate Image Cont'd

If you had a hard time imagining your compassionate image or didn't feel anything in your body, that is okay! Sometimes it takes time and practice. You can always try again with a different or the same image and see what happens.



If you would like to try listening to an audio version of a similar exercise, click the play button!

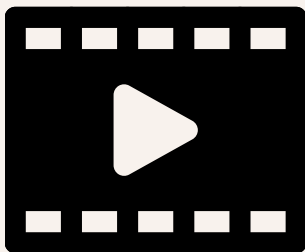
Remember, your compassionate image is never far (it is in your mind!) and is there for you, and only you, whenever you need it. If you ever want to activate the compassion system, whether you are going through a tough time or just want a bit of extra care, you always have your compassionate image to turn to.





04

All About Self-Criticism



If You Talked To People
the Way You Talk To
Yourself



Why do you think we might talk to ourselves more critically than we would talk to others?

It can feel like being self-critical serves a function for us. There are a few possible reasons that people might be critical of themselves:

1

It may be that we are trying to achieve goals and that being self-critical feels like it will help us get where we want to be in our lives.

2

We may feel that self-critical thoughts help to motivate us to "change for the better."

3

We may worry that, if we don't criticize ourselves, we will become someone that we don't want to be and/or we will fail to live up to our own high standards or the standards of others.

4

We may think that criticizing ourselves will help us to undo whatever bad things we have done in the past, even though, in reality, we can't change the past.

A low amount of self-criticism can be helpful when it allows us to be more self-aware. For example, a little bit of self-criticism allows us to reflect on mistakes and failures and can create positive change. But, it is not helpful when our self-critical thoughts negatively impact our ability to function and our mental health.



Our brains cannot tell the difference between an internal threat (i.e., being mean to ourselves) and an external threat (i.e., someone else being mean to us).

Being self-critical means:

- Being very focused on achievement
- Having harsh self-evaluation
- Fearing failure and rejection

Self-criticism is associated with:

- Anger towards oneself
- Self-disgust
- Higher shame
- Greater risk of mental health difficulties
- Greater risk of social problems
- Loneliness
- Negative worldviews

05 Benefits of Self-Compassion

Growing up is tough! Experiencing stress is very common for people your age.



Approximately 1 in 5 children and youth in Ontario has significant difficulties with their mental health (CMHA Ontario, 2023).

ABOUT

70%

Of significant mental health difficulties begin during childhood or youth (CMHA Ontario, 2023).

A research study by Mission Australia found that 38.4% of 15- to 19-year-olds were very concerned or extremely concerned about their ability to cope with stress (Cave et al., 2015).

Some other common stressors for youth include:

- School demands and frustrations
- Negative thoughts or feelings about themselves
- Changes in their bodies and/or body image
- Problems with friends and/or peers at school
- Family conflicts
- Family financial problems
- Unsafe living environments
- Chronic illness
- Taking on too many activities or having too high expectations
- Changing schools

IN 2021

1 in 5

Ontario students in grades 7-12 reported that they often or always feel lonely (Boak et al., 2022).

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2019)

Benefits of Self-Compassion Cont'd

Treating oneself with compassion during difficult times can have a number of benefits for youth, including:

Improved Mental Health

Self-compassion is associated with less mental health concerns, like anxiety, depression and eating disorders (Kelly et al., 2014; Lahtinen et al., 2020; Neff & McGehee, 2010).

Improved Ability to Cope with Difficulties

Self-compassion helps people respond to life's challenges in healthy ways, while also reducing the negative impact of these challenges on one's mental health and well-being (Bluth et al., 2016; Ewert et al., 2021).

Improved Social Functioning

Self-compassion can make people more accepting of and emotionally-connected to others. It can also lead to more social support and trust in relationships (Yang et al., 2019), as well as a greater willingness to talk to others about things we may be embarrassed about (Dupasquier et al., 2020).

Greater Self-Improvement Motivation

Self-compassion can help people feel motivated to become a better version of themselves and not repeat mistakes they have had in the past (Breines & Chen, 2012).

What are the pros and cons of being self-compassionate? List them below.

If you are scared of becoming self-compassionate, you are not alone!



What do common self-compassion fears sound like?

- "Self-compassion is weak"
- "Self-compassion is uncomfortable"
- "My personal standards will drop"
- "Self-compassion is hard"
- "I am not deserving of compassion or kindness"
- "I don't know how to start"

06

Adding Compassion Into Your Life

You have been provided with a ton of new information so far about compassion - what it means, how it works, and what it might look and sound like. How might you use this information to better support each other in your class and school?



When others are going through a difficult time, listen without judgment or criticism.



Take the time to put yourself in others' shoes to understand how they might be thinking and feeling.



Practice being patient towards one another, even at times when it might feel challenging!



Be aware that we are all human - none of us are perfect, and we all make mistakes.



Be a friend to others – we all go through difficult times. Reach out to those who may need someone to talk to.

Adding Compassion Into Your Life Cont'd

What are some ways that you might apply self-compassion in your everyday life?

NOTICE

Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings (good or bad) when they arise without judgment.

PLAN AND ACT

Brainstorm ways to help yourself feel better in times of distress (e.g., talking to a parent, going for a walk, taking a bath), and use those strategies when distress arises.



PAUSE

Take a self-compassion break on a regular basis, and when needed.



LISTEN

Listen to your self-critical voice, and respond to it with compassion and understanding (i.e., from your compassionate self).

Writing a Letter to Yourself

Step 1: What are some things that are stressing you out or upsetting you? This may include things related to school, your friends, your relationships, your future, etc.

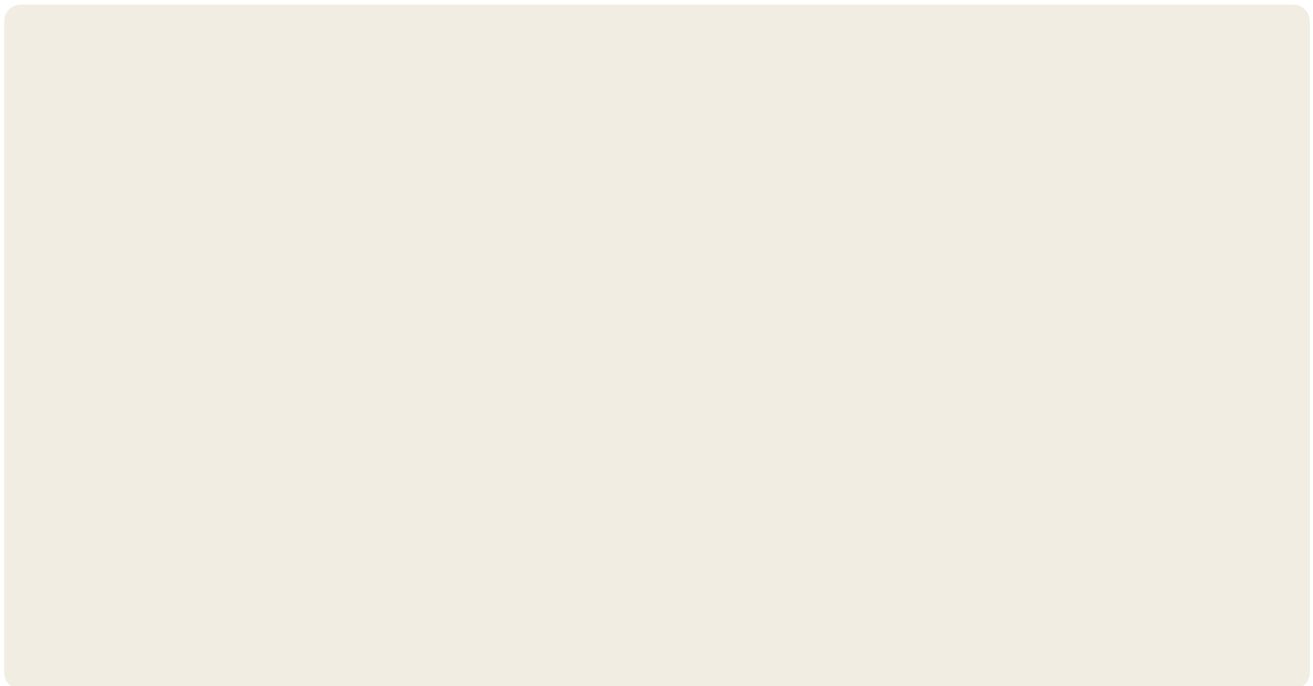
Choose one thing that you would like to write about.

- Pick something that is only “medium” stressful, i.e. not too overwhelming. Try to write about this from the “I” perspective.

Here is an example of Sam’s response:

"Yesterday I got a test back that I didn't do too well on. I felt upset when I saw my mark. I feel like a failure and like I disappointed my parents. I am also mad at myself for not doing as well as I should have. I worry that my teacher may think I am not smart and that I should have tried harder."

Please write or type about some things that are upsetting you here:



Writing a Letter to Yourself Cont'd

Step 2: Get in touch with your self-critical voice.

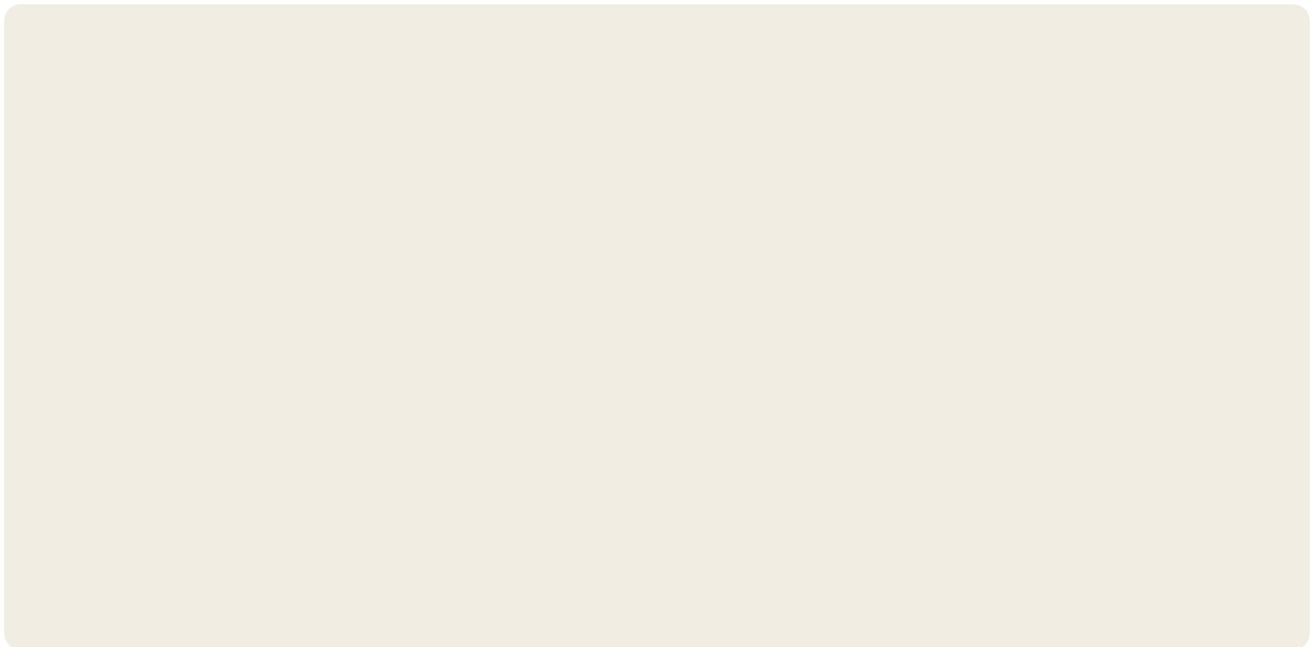
Thinking about the stressor(s) you just wrote about, get in touch with the part of yourself that's feeling angry or upset at yourself about what is going on. Try to "become" that part of yourself.

Really try to focus on the **feelings** that part of yourself has, and what that part of yourself **wants**.

For example, this is what Sam wrote:

"You really need to study more next time. I'm worried that if you don't study harder, you will be really upset when your parents ground you and you can't go out with your friends. I really want you to be happy because you just feel so much better about yourself when you're getting good grades in school."

Please write or type your response below:



Writing a Letter to Yourself Cont'd

Step 3: Get in touch with the compassionate part of yourself.

Now, imagine how your ideal compassionate image would respond to you and, using the support of the image, try to convey compassion for yourself.

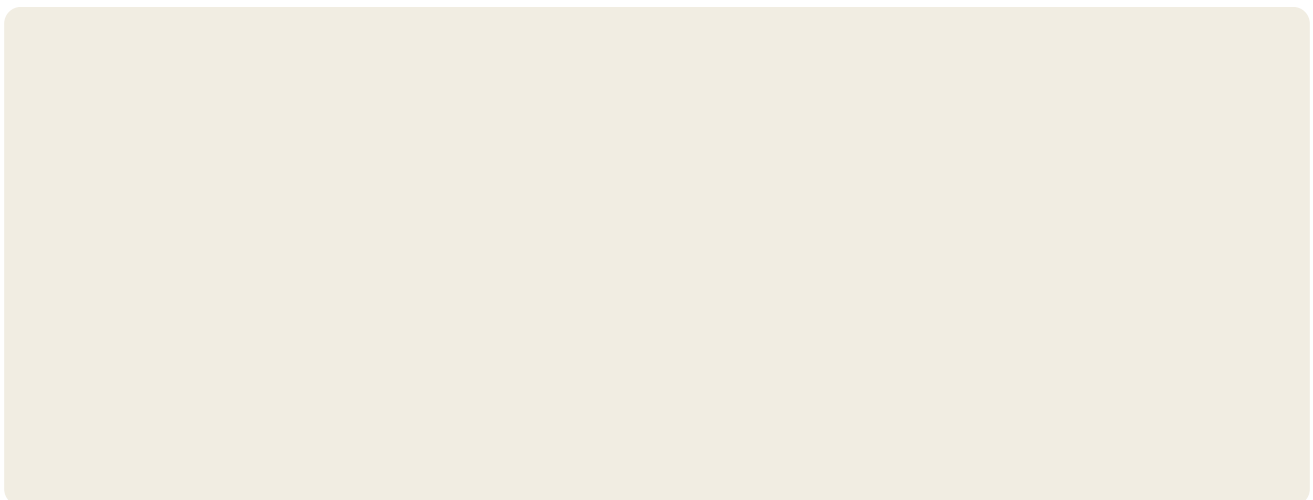
Here are some prompts to help you get started:

- Indicate your understanding and empathy for your difficulty
- Focus more on your feelings than the events themselves
- Show genuine support and caring
- Try to focus on your courage and your strengths
- Notice opportunities for supports or anything helpful
- Do not offer instructions or should's that are unhelpful (e.g., you should have been better...)

As an example, this was Sam's response:

"It makes sense that you feel upset when you studied for the test. While you feel disappointed right now, this feeling will pass with patience and time and you will feel better again. Right now, I want you to know that I care about you, and I want to help you focus on things that would be most helpful to you during this difficult time – like going for a walk with your dog or talking to your friends about this."

Please write or type a brief letter to yourself from a self-compassionate place:



Writing a Letter to Yourself Cont'd

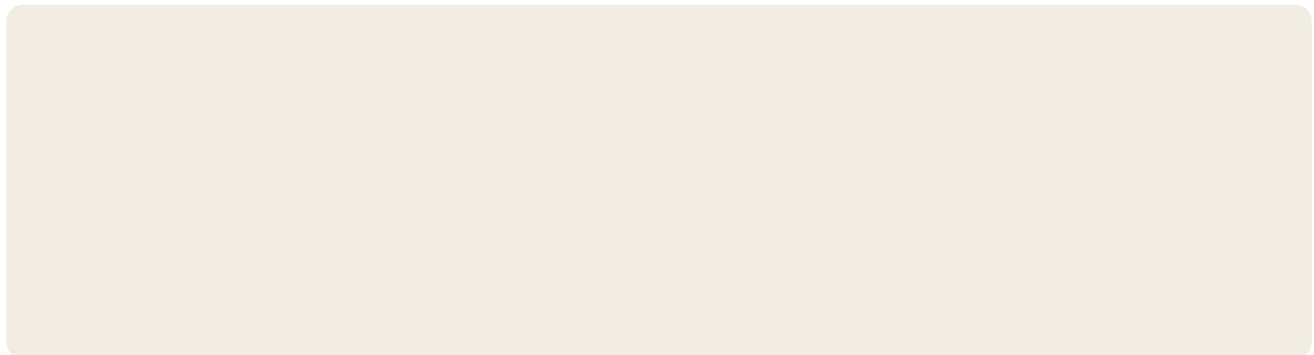
Step 4: Read your self-compassionate letter back to yourself.

Read your letter back to yourself with a warm tone of voice, a slow pace, and try to be connected with your breath while you read it.

Step 5: Reflect.

Take a moment to reflect on the experience of reading your self-compassionate letter back to yourself. How did it feel to let your compassionate words sink in? Did you notice any physical sensations in your body? If so, where in your body were you feeling those sensations? Are there any words to describe the emotions you felt?

Use the space below to describe what you noticed while reading your self-compassionate letter back to yourself:

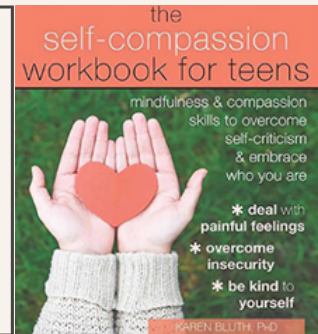


If you found this exercise to be challenging, that is okay too. Remember, you are using a part of your mind that needs time, patience, and practice to develop! Some people find that they are better able to connect with their compassionate self after taking a little time away from their letter, and then coming back to read it again at a later time. Others find that they can rework their letters the next day so they can think through things in a different way. Take some time to experiment with this exercise to find what may be most helpful to you!

07 Additional Resources

THE SELF-COMPASSION WORKBOOK FOR TEENS BY DR. KAREN BLUTH

A workbook that offers mindfulness and self-compassion practices for teens to help cope more effectively with day-to-day challenges



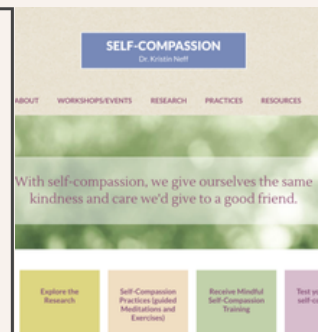
WWW.COMPASSIONATEMIND.CO.UK/RESOURCES

A website with lots of videos, audio recordings, and articles about self-compassion



WWW.SELFCOMPASSION.ORG

A website with even more self-compassion practices and articles



WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=IVTZBUSPLR4

Dr. Kristin Neff's well-known Ted Talk on self-compassion



Want More Self-Compassion Practices? Try These!



A COMPASSIONATE
BODY SCAN
MEDITATION FOR TEENS



COMPASSIONATE
FRIEND MEDITATION FOR
TEENS



A VIDEO ABOUT BEING
WITH ALL OF YOUR
EXPERIENCES



A VIDEO ON SOOTHING
RHYTHM BREATHING (A
WAY TO ACTIVATE YOUR
COMPASSIONATE SELF).



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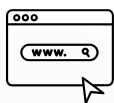
About the Project

Only 20% of postsecondary students with mental health difficulties seek help. Untreated mental health problems can lead to long-term disability and too often suicide. To increase treatment-seeking, campuses have focused on raising students' awareness of mental health services. However, this approach has had limited success because it fails to target one of the strongest barriers to treatment-seeking - shame. Dr. Kelly and her research team have found that one of the most powerful antidotes to shame is self-compassion. She and her group received funds through the Ontario government's Early Researcher Award program to examine whether distressed university students who are taught to cultivate self-compassion can grow to feel less ashamed and thereby more likely to seek help for their mental health difficulties over time. Youth outreach is an integral part of this program, hence the current resource we put together on self-compassion. The hope is for this project to improve young people's quality of life and potentially revolutionize the way schools, campuses and communities across the world promote mental health treatment-seeking.

GET IN TOUCH WITH US!



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WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Your feedback is important to us. Please take 5 minutes to complete the survey below to let us know what you thought of this self-compassion guide! All responses are anonymous.

https://uwaterloo.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9GfpHwsav4TUiFg

