



# chapter 3

## Self-compassion

**There is growing evidence that self-compassion is an important predictor of well-being and resilience This proposes that self-compassion involves treating yourself with care and concern when considering personal inadequacies, mistakes, failures, and painful life situations.**

**It comprises three interacting components:**

- self-kindness versus self-judgment,
- a sense of common humanity versus isolation,
- and mindfulness versus over-identification.

**Self-kindness** refers to the tendency to be caring and understanding with oneself rather than being harshly critical. Rather than attacking and berating oneself for personal shortcomings, the self is offered warmth and unconditional acceptance (even though particular behaviours may be identified as unproductive and in need of change). Similarly, when life circumstances are stressful, instead of immediately trying to control or fix the problem, a self-compassionate response might entail pausing first to offer oneself soothing and comfort.

**The sense of common humanity** in self-compassion involves recognizing that humans are imperfect, that all people fail, make mistakes, and have serious life challenges. Self-compassion connects one's own flawed condition to the shared human condition, so that features of the self are considered from a broad, inclusive perspective.

**Mindfulness** in the context of self-compassion involves being aware of one's painful experiences in a balanced way that neither ignores and avoids nor amplifies painful thoughts and emotions. It is necessary to be mindfully aware of personal suffering to be able to extend compassion towards the self. At the same time, it is important to pay attention in an equilibrated way that prevents being carried away by a dramatic storyline, a process that is termed "over-identification." This type of thinking narrows one's focus and exaggerates implications for self-worth.

Numerous studies have found that treating oneself compassionately when confronting personal suffering promotes mental health.

For instance, greater self-compassion has consistently been associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety. These findings were supported by a recent study that documented a large effect size ( $r = -0.54$ ) for the relationship between self-compassion and common expressions of psychopathology, such as depression, anxiety, and stress.

In addition, a number of studies have found associations between self-compassion and positive psychological qualities, such as happiness, optimism, wisdom, curiosity and exploration, personal initiative, and emotional intelligence.



## Exercise: Compassionate Chair Work

*An effective way to deal with a low amount of self-compassion is by finding a way to relate differently to the inner critical voice.*

### Goal

The goal of the exercise is to access disparate facets of the self, in order to understand how they work together, conflict, and how they feel in when experienced in the present.

### Advice

The present exercise works best if three empty chairs are used, preferably in a tri-angular arrangement.

### Instruction:

Think of something that has recently caused you to criticize yourself. Each chair in front of your represents a different perspective to help you understand your self-criticism.

The first chair represents a voice of self-criticism.

The second chair represents the emotionality or sensation of feeling judged.

The last chair takes the perspective of a supportive friend or wise councilor.

Your job is to play the role of each voice represented by the respective chairs. Try to avoid feeling silly and learn from letting you access different perspectives.

### Part 1

First, sit in the perspective of the inner critic. Now, vocally express how you think about the issue that you have been dwelling on (out loud). For example "I hate that I am so lazy and can't seem to get anything done." Try to understand the tone you use. Notice the emotions your words evoke. Even notice your posture or general demeanor.

### Part 2

Now move to the chair that represents the sensation of being judged (by yourself). Vocally express how it feels to encounter criticism (out loud). For example "I feel hurt" or "I do not feel supported." Notice the same things you did before (your tone, emotions, posture, ect.).

### Part 3

Now, engage with yourself in a dialogue between the last two perspectives the (the critical voice and the emotion voice). Try to understand how each perspective feels.

### Part 4

Next, move to the chair that represents the friend or wise councilor. Drawing on a sincere sense of compassion, confront the critical voice and the critiqued voice. Address both perspectives vocally. What do you say? What advice do you give? How do you relate to each perspective from a more detached point of view? Notice your tone and demeanor.

Allow yourself enough time to express everything you need to from each perspective. Make sure you leave time to reflect on the experience. Try to understand how you think, and how you could benefit from the perspectives you explored. How does that inform your inner critic and your experience with self-compassion? Ultimately, you are already capable of using a more supportive voice. Next time you find yourself being negative and self-critical, try to locate the compassionate voice.