The Science of Self-Compassion

We all suffer. The practice of self-compassion invites care and concern for oneself when faced with the experience of suffering (Neff, 2003). It means treating yourself with the same kindness that you would a friend or loved one. Practicing self-compassion can easily be incorporated into any yoga practice and, as you will read here, there are compelling reasons to do so.

Dr. Kristin Neff, a psychologist at the University of Texas in Austin, pioneered the scientific study of self-compassion. She defined the construct as having three primary components that interact to engender a self-compassionate state of mind. The three components are: 1) mindfulness, 2) self-kindness, and 3) common humanity.

Mindfulness, or nonjudgmental present moment awareness, is a core component of self-compassion. You must be able to notice how you are feeling in order respond in a gentler and kinder way. Mindfulness is also essential for recognizing one’s inner dialogue and habitual ways of relating to oneself.

Self-compassion is broader than mindfulness, though, because it includes the added components of self-kindness and common humanity. Self-kindness means actively comforting and caring for oneself when painful or stressful experiences arise; being kind and supportive rather than harsh and judgmental. This is no simple task, especially because many people hold themselves to unbelievably high standards. Those low in self-compassion find it difficult to accept themselves when they fall short of their goals and are unreasonably hard on themselves when they make mistakes. Cultivating self-kindness partly means putting an end to punishing ourselves for not doing enough and, instead, acknowledging we’re doing our best.

The last component, common humanity, involves remembering that difficult experiences are part of the human experience. We all fail. We all make mistakes. Failing is part of being human and the way to increase our self-compassion is to remember this fact. We are not alone in our painful experiences and daily mistakes. By recognizing that everyone struggles—that everyone is imperfect—we can see that we our experiences are quite normal. Remember this the next time you are scrolling through someone’s highlight reels on social media.

Science has shown that there are a number of benefits to cultivating mindfulness, self-kindness, and feelings of common humanity. Self-compassion is related to lower anxiety and increased resilience during stressful situations (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). In a 2012 study, Sbarra and colleagues found that those going through a divorce had less emotional intrusion in their daily lives when they were more self-compassionate. Research with war veterans has shown that those who were more self-compassionate showed less symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. This relationship
remained even when controlling for the level of combat exposure. Dr. Neff was quoted recently as saying, “It’s a powerful testament to the idea that it’s not what you face life, it’s how you relate to yourself when you face very hard times”[1] (p. 68).

Other research shows that self-compassion can lead to greater motivation. In four experimental studies, scientists induced feelings of self-compassion for personal shortcomings and past failures in one group of people. In another group, the researchers induced feelings of self-esteem by having the participants think about their positive qualities. They included a third group where participants were instructed to think about hobbies they enjoyed (i.e., a positive mood control group). Results showed that self-compassion led to greater motivation to change for the better, avoid repeating mistakes, and to try harder. Other research on self-compassion has shown the people higher in self-compassion do not fear failure as much as those low in self-compassion and, moreover, self-compassionate people are more likely to try again when they do fail. Self-compassion is also related to engaging in healthier behaviors like smoking less, exercising, and sticking to one’s diet.

There are a variety of practices available for becoming more self-compassionate. You can find many of them on Dr. Neff’s website at http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises. Hear more about self-compassion from Dr. Neff herself in the guest interview this week where she provides more information on self-compassion and leads us in a short practice.