

Simple Steps to Self-Compassion

LEARN SIMPLE STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU
CULTIVATE SELF-COMPASSION

By Dr. Russ Harris





WHICH COMPANION WOULD YOU PREFER?

Imagine you're going through a rough patch, one of the toughest ordeals you've ever had to cope with in life. You're facing all sorts of challenges, obstacles, difficulties. It's painful and stressful, and there's no quick fix or easy solution.

Now as you go through this, what kind of companion would you like by your side? The kind of companion who says, with a cold, uncaring voice, "Suck it up, princess. I don't want to hear your whingeing and whining. What have you got to complain about? There are starving kids in Africa, this is trivial. What's wrong with you? Why are you so weak? Just shut up and get on with it."?

Or the kind of companion who says, with a kind and caring voice, "This is really tough. And I want you to know, I've got your back. I'm going to help you get through this. I'm with you every step of the way."?

It's a no-brainer, right? All of us would choose the second companion over the first. What this second companion demonstrates is a quality called "compassion", which means acknowledging the suffering of others and responding with kindness and caring. Sadly, the truth is, most of us are a lot better at being compassionate to others than we are to ourselves. When we are in pain, we often treat ourselves a lot more like the first companion than the second.

EVERYONE HURTS

As the great R.E.M. song goes, “Everybody hurts sometimes”. Life dishes up pain for all of us. We all get to repeatedly experience disappointment, frustration, failure, rejection, illness, injury, conflict, hostility, grief, fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, loss, loneliness, health issues, financial issues, relationship issues, work issues, and so on. And unfortunately, when we experience great pain, we often don’t treat ourselves very well. We often treat ourselves a lot like the first companion I described previously - with a cold, uncaring attitude and a lot of harsh judgment and criticism.

Self-compassion means learning to treat ourselves like the second companion, acknowledging our own suffering and responding to ourselves with kindness and caring. In other words, self-compassion means treating ourselves with the same warmth, caring and kindness that we’d extend to someone we love or deeply care about, if they were in similar pain.



FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS

For thousands of years, self-compassion has played a central role in many religious and spiritual practices, and now it is becoming increasingly important in many science-based models of therapy, coaching and counselling. It is certainly implicit in every aspect of the evidence-based Acceptance & Commitment Therapy model, upon which [The Happiness Trap Online Program](#) is based.

A wealth of research shows the many benefits of self-compassion with everything from depression and anxiety disorders to grief, trauma and addiction, to dealing with stress and pressure in the workplace. Self-compassion helps you to cope better with stress, anxiety and pressure, to bounce back from failures and setbacks, to cope better with grief and loss, and to handle any type of emotional or physical pain more effectively. So it's well worth knowing how to develop it in yourself. And if you're worried that it's going to involve meditation or a religious practice of some sort, rest assured: it doesn't. Although there are all sorts of meditative and religious practices that can be used to develop self-compassion, there are also many other ways that are arguably a lot simpler.



STEP 1:

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR SUFFERING

There are two basic steps to self-compassion:

Let's start with step 1.

For most of us, our *'default mode'* when we are suffering is to turn away from our pain as fast as possible; we try to suppress it, avoid it, deny it, escape it, or distract from it. And all too often, the things we do to escape our suffering are not kind and caring (drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, junk food being a few obvious examples).

Think about it: if you wanted to be compassionate to someone you love, who comes to you in great pain, tells you how much they are suffering – then you wouldn't immediately try to distract them:

*"Oh look – there's a shiny thing!",
"Hey, didja see that new show on Netflix?",
"Hey, did I tell you about this great new book I'm reading?"*

If this was your first response, you'd come across as uncaring and inconsiderate. If you wanted to come across as compassionate, your first response would be to acknowledge, in a kind and caring voice, how difficult, tough and painful this is.



This doesn't have to be done in flowery or poetic language. When I was going through a really rough patch in my life - my 2-year old son had just been diagnosed with a serious condition - my best mate Johnny said to me "That is really f***ing shit, mate." Now that kind of language sure ain't flowery; it's about as "blokey" as it gets. But Johnny's face and his voice were so full of kindness as he said it, my heart just melted.

I tell this story, because when it comes to self-compassion, that quality of kindness and caring is essential. Our aim is to treat ourselves like the second companion I mentioned earlier. So if we acknowledge our suffering with a harsh, critical, judgmental quality to our inner voice - "Yeah. It's f***ing hard. So big deal, suck it up!" - it will not have the desired effect.

So our first step in being compassionate to ourselves, is to acknowledge – with genuine kindness and caring – our suffering, our difficulties, our challenges; and just how tough and painful it is right now.

A good guide for this is to ask yourself "What would I say to someone I love, if they were suffering in a similar way, and I wanted to acknowledge that with genuine kindness?"



NO RIGHT OR WRONG

There's no right or wrong way of doing this, as long as it's coming from a place of genuine kindness.

So for example, if you like very basic “no-frills” self-talk, you might say to yourself, “This is really painful” or “This is really difficult” or “This hurts” (or even, “This is really f***ing shit!”). Most people find it useful also to name the emotion that they are feeling: anger or sadness or fear or loneliness or guilt.

If you prefer a more poetic type of self-talk you might say to yourself, “This is a moment of suffering”, or, “This is a moment of great hurt”. And if you like the idea of acknowledging your emotional pain mindfully, you could say, “I’m noticing sadness” or, “Here’s anger showing up”, or “I’m having a feeling of anxiety”, or, “Here’s a painful memory”, or, “I’m noticing painful feelings of rejection”, or “I’m having thoughts about being a loser”, and so on.

This process plays an essential first step in self-compassion; we consciously and intentionally notice and acknowledge our own pain and suffering. We notice, with openness and curiosity, the painful thoughts, feelings, emotions, images, sensations, urges, memories etc., that are present within us in this moment, and we acknowledge with a kind inner voice that what we are going through is tough, difficult, painful, etc.



STEP 2:

RESPOND WITH KINDNESS

Step 2 is to respond to yourself in a way that conveys caring and kindness. One simple way to do this is through developing the skill of kind self-talk.

Most of us know all too well just how quick our minds are to judge and criticise us. Our minds seem to relish any opportunity to pull out a big stick and give us a hiding; to point out our flaws and failures; to label us as “not good enough” in a hundred different ways.

So one essential aspect of self-compassion is learning how to take the power out of all that harsh self-talk. We can't magically train our minds to stop speaking to us that way. If you've ever tried, you know what I'm talking about. (Sure, you can learn to think more positively - but that won't stop your mind from judging and criticising you.)

But we can learn to “unhook” ourselves from those harsh self-judgments and “not good enough” stories when they show up. We can learn how to take the power out of them, and let them come and stay and go, without getting caught up in them or pushed around by them. My [Happiness Trap Online Program](#) teaches some really effective ‘unhooking’ skills that you can easily introduce into your life. And at the same time as unhooking from our harsh self-critical thoughts, we can also learn to talk to ourselves in a kind way. In step 1, you already started to do this. In step 2, you can go further.



WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO A LOVED ONE?

If you wanted to be compassionate to someone you love, someone who is suffering greatly - then after you had acknowledged how painful or difficult this is for them, what else would you say?

Presumably something that conveys “I care about you”, “I’m here for you”, “I want to help” Whatever you’d say to another, try saying something similar to yourself..

For example, if you’ve screwed up in some way, perhaps remind yourself that you are human, that you are fallible, that everyone makes mistakes, that no one is perfect; that you can learn and grow from this, and do better in future.

Alternatively, you may like to tell yourself something such as “Go easy on yourself”, “Be kind to yourself”, “Give yourself a break”, or something more poetic like, “May I treat myself kindly”, or maybe even just slowly repeat a single word, such as “Easy”, “Gentle” or “Kindness”.



TO HURT IS HUMAN

All too often, when we are in great pain, we invalidate our own emotional experience - we judge our pain as abnormal or unnatural, or a sign there is something wrong with us. Our minds tell us that we shouldn't feel like this, we shouldn't react like this, we should be able to handle it better, we shouldn't have these thoughts and feelings. Often, our minds belittle us and tell us that we are over-reacting, or we're weak, or we have nothing to complain about because "there are starving kids in Africa", and these are merely "first world worries". Our minds may even tell us to toughen up, suck it up, stop being a cry-baby, or to "be a real man".

Obviously, this type of harsh, critical, "suck it up" attitude is the very opposite of kindness. Kind self-talk involves doing the very opposite, we remind ourselves – (in a warm, caring inner voice) that it is normal and natural for humans to have painful thoughts and feelings when life is difficult, when we make mistakes, when we get rejected, or when we experience any kind of 'reality gap' (a gap between the reality you want and the reality you've got).

And if our minds compare our emotional reactions unfavourably to those of others ("Why do they handle it better than me?"), we can remind ourselves that we are unique. After all, if anybody else on the planet had your unique DNA, your unique childhood, your unique life history, your unique physical body, they would respond exactly the same way that you respond - because they would, in fact, be you!

It's often helpful to actively think about how your pain is something you have in common with all human beings. Your pain tells you that you have a heart, that you care deeply, that some things really matter to you. Your pain tells you that you are facing a 'reality gap'. Pain is what every living, caring human being feels, whenever they meet a reality gap. And the bigger that reality gap, the greater the pain that arises. So your pain is not a sign of weakness or defectiveness or mental illness, it's a sign you are a living, caring human being. It's something you have in common with every living, caring human on the planet.

THAT'S NOT ALL, FOLKS!

There's a lot more to self-compassion than this, but what we've covered here is a good place to start. Get into the habit of acknowledging your suffering and saying something kind and supportive to yourself, and over time this can make a big difference in helping you to cope better with life's many challenges.

In [The Happiness Trap Online Program](#) you'll learn many additional strategies to develop and strengthen self-compassion, and also how to overcome common barriers to it, such as:

A sense of unworthiness

We may get hooked by stories such as, "I'm unworthy" or, "I don't deserve kindness"

Overwhelming emotions

When we try to be kind to ourselves, we may get overwhelmed by emotions such as anxiety, sadness, guilt, or shame.

Prejudice

Our mind may judge self-compassion harshly - as something 'wishy-washy' or 'new age', as something 'religious', as a sign of weakness, or in men, as something effeminate.

In the program, you'll discover how to overcome such barriers (if you have them), and actually convert them into opportunities to build more self-compassion.



I'll finish up now by asking you to reflect on this final quote, and consider how it is relevant to you:

"The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen."

- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

See you online soon.

All the best,

Russ Harris

