

Words about Wellness

UNC DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICAL MEDICINE AND REHABILITATION

Mindful Self-Compassion



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Soft Eyes

If you would have told me 10 years ago that one day I would be a *self-compassion* researcher, I would not have believed it. In fact, I likely would have been mildly curious but mostly amused at the strange word. Really? Self-compassion? What the heck does that even mean?

Back then, I had a 5-year-old and a newborn. Things seemed to be going off the rails for my oldest child. I could list the many ways his behavior was challenging and double the list with reasons why my parenting was at the root of it. Although I am not sure I was fully aware of it at the time, I was feeling ashamed—of both myself and of him. It was as if each ‘misbehavior’ was confirmation that I was not up for the task of being his mom. It was a hopeless feeling, causing our relationship to be tumultuous.

Today, I have deep appreciation for self-compassion and how it can help in situations like these. According to psychologist Kristin Neff, self-compassion entails 3 positive components that can be cultivated through practice: *mindfulness, common humanity and self-kindness*. These components are below, with my perspective on how each can help us through life’s inevitable difficulties.

Mindfulness is backbone to the practice. In this context, it means balanced awareness of our difficult emotions. Sometimes, amid something hard, we avoid it or become so overwhelmed that we can’t think of much else. Mindfulness helps us gently acknowledge what is happening: *Things are tough right now, and I’m feeling (insert word here)*.

Common humanity means accepting difficult emotions as part of life’s journey, rather than a sign that we’re ‘doing it wrong’. By framing the experience of emotional pain as simply human, we remember that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves. In the moment, it may sound like: *It makes sense to feel this way; others might feel similarly in this situation*.

Self-kindness can be a self-reflective and personal process. We ask ourselves “what do I need?” Then, without harsh judgement or blame, we listen for the words or actions that could bring comfort. For my 10 years younger self, these comforting words may have been: You’re not a bad parent, and you don’t have a bad child. *You are good enough for him, rough spots and all*.

Together, these three components help us to see our rough spots with soft eyes. Contrary to popular belief, self-compassion can help us own up to mistakes, seek needed support, stand up for what we believe, and ultimately emerge from difficulties stronger than before. And, amazingly, magically even, that soft gaze towards ourselves naturally extends to include others in our lives.

That 5-year-old child is now a beautiful, messy 15-year-old with a way less than perfect mom. Self-compassion practice has helped me to listen to myself and reach out for support when I need it. My relationship with my son is different now, too. I like to think that by seeing him with soft eyes, he has better capacity to listen supportively to *himself* in difficult moments. Perhaps, at these moments, he is hearing the words I longed to communicate all those years ago: *You are loved, rough spots and all*.