**Self-Compassion Can Change Your Life**

Do you want to feel more joyful? More relaxed? More peaceful? Studies show that

self-compassion increases well-being, and decreases anxiety and depression.

***What is self-compassion?***

If compassion is showing a sensitivity and concern for the pain of others, then ***self-*** compassion means extending that same concern you have for others to ***yourself*** . Rather than judging yourself when you are going through a difficult time, you show understanding and support to yourself. It means the kind words you might say to others like “I’m sorry that you had a setback” you will also say to yourself. Self-compassion is strongly encouraged when experiencing personal inadequacies, mistakes, and life challenges.

***What does it look like?***

*Firstly,* self-compassion involves noticing the harsh thoughts you’re feeling towards yourself. Many of us judge ourselves harshly when we make a mistake or do not complete a task perfectly. We may say to ourselves: “I’m so stupid” or “I can’t do anything right”--things we would not usually say to anyone else.

*Secondly*, it gently invites more positive thoughts. It is important to be aware of the feeling, feel it and then begin challenging these negative thoughts. It may mean questioning unrealistic, perfectionistic expectations, and learning to feel content with well-intentioned, reasonable work. In other words: give yourself a break!

Perhaps you’re in the habit of saying: ”I should have gotten more done today”. Instead, give yourself a pat on the back for working hard, for consistently moving towards achieving goals--even if you’re getting there slower or with more bumps than you’d hoped. If you fail, you warmly say to yourself: ”are you okay?” versus “how stupid I must look for failing”. You would most likely extend this courtesy to friends, perhaps even a stranger. Why not to yourself? Imagine how much better it feels to hear, “I am sorry you did not get the promotion”, versus, “how dumb to even think I could get the job”.

Self-compassion involves a different approach to life. It means that you are allowed to take breaks, and make mistakes. What if instead of berating ourselves we soothed ourselves with kind words? Perhaps it comes down to the simple belief that you ***are*** worthy of compassion. With self-compassion we recognize that everyone (including you) is human and therefore imperfect. We all have edges that could be softened a little. Life has challenges. Sometimes facing an obstacle makes us feel alone or isolated like we do not belong, like no one can relate. But the truth is that everyone is facing challenges and everyone goes through difficult times. We have all faced failures and disappointments. In this way, we are not alone.

***Release the oxytocin!***

Self-compassion has a positive physiological effect. It releases oxytocin, which is the hormone involved in feelings of love and bonding between parent and child. Oxytocin is related to higher levels of trust, calm, safety, generosity and connectedness, and reduces fear and anxiety. Self-criticism, alternatively, stimulates the amygdala--triggering the fight-or-flight response for an attack. The amygdala sends signals to increase blood pressure, adrenaline and the hormone cortisol to confront this threat. When you criticize yourself you are basically threatening yourself! Over time this increase in cortisol has an impact: decreased energy, depression, and other ill effects on health. The negative words and thoughts that you think about yourself are hormonally inhibiting the positive mood that energizes success. Self-criticism is a predictor of anxiety and depression, whereas, self-compassionate people tend to be happier, more optimistic, curious, creative, enthusiastic, inspired and more excited than those who are self-critical.

***What self-compassion is not***

Self-compassion does ***not*** involve feeling better than others. It does ***not*** need to criticize or find fault with others. Self-compassion enables people to be non-judgmental and accept their weaknesses and strengths. Self-compassion is more enduring than self-esteem since it does not rely on having to be successful. Instead it means you have worth because you are human, and like all humans you have strengths and weaknesses. Continually striving for perfection can be so anxiety provoking that it becomes debilitating. On the other hand...

***Self-compassion is motivating***

Perhaps you have convinced yourself that your negative self-talk will motivate you to in the future. Can you imagine an olympic sprinter telling herself at the start line, “I can’t do this, I’m too slow”? Berating oneself isn’t a motivation, for anyone. A sprinter will be getting focused on the line, saying, “You can do this, you are fast, you are strong.” Self-compassion is enabling, actually motivating. Self-compassion helps us to pursue our passions in a positive more fulfilling way-- and this leads us to feel better and happier. Who couldn’t use a dose of that? Self-compassion also motivates healthy behaviours. For example, exercising out of enjoyment versus guilt. When you see yourself becoming self-critical, see the challenges you face as insurmountable or start to feel inferior, you are in dire need of self-compassion. Start by asking yourself how you would respond to a *friend* in a similar situation. Talk to yourself in the same compassionate way remembering that you are not alone in these feelings.

***A present with your name on it***

So why not give kindness, compassion and love to yourself . Write yourself a love note, send yourself a gift card, talk to yourself with kind words, focus on your strengths rather than your weaknesses! It rubs off too. When you are kinder to yourself you feel happier, have more positive energy and will naturally share this joy with others. Indulge.

by **Nancy Hurst PhD**

**Compassionate Counselling Inc. 780-482-1847**