

RECOVERY SESSION:

# SELF-COMPASSION IN EATING DISORDERS



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## DISCLAIMER

*This resource is a living document and is open to change. It was created by students from within the **Body Brave** community and may not be fully representative of the spectrum of experience. If you have any suggestions to improve this resource or lived experiences that you don't see represented here, please email us at [info@bodybrave.ca](mailto:info@bodybrave.ca).*

## WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION?

Recently, within eating disorder recovery, a new intervention of showing self-compassion has become quite popular, though what does this mean exactly? Many people think of self-compassion at first glance as sayings like “I need to do better” or “I can't fail again”, when in fact it is the exact opposite. According to Dr. Kristin Neff, founder of the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, is the ability to be kind to yourself in the face of failure, and to treat yourself how you would another person in times of suffering. In the simplest terms, the basic definition of compassion means to “suffer with.” Instead of ignoring the pain, refusing to acknowledge it or flagging ourselves with criticism, self-compassion involves being kind and caring to ourselves when we may feel shameful, inadequate or discouraged.

When you are compassionate towards another individual, there are several components involved:

You notice that they are suffering;

- Feeling for them, being moved by their experiences, expressing empathy and
- wanting to help; and
- Offering support and understanding rather than judgement, and recognizing that suffering is a universal human experience, that no one is alone in that.

Now if we are so willing to be compassionate towards others and show them support in times of suffering, why aren't we able to be compassionate towards ourselves?

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Neff, K. D. Definition of Self Compassion. Self-Compassion. <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>

Center for Mindful Self-Compassion. What is Self-Compassion?. Center for Mindful Self-Compassion. <https://centerformsc.org/learn-msc/>

**JUST BECAUSE  
YOU ARE  
STRUGGLING WITH  
RECOVERY DOES  
NOT MEAN YOU  
ARE FAILING AT  
RECOVERY.**

@bodybravecanada

## WHAT DOES SELF-COMPASSION DO?

Just like being kind to others can promote feelings of warmth and satisfaction, so can being kind to yourself. It can help to acknowledge and fully process your negative thoughts though choosing to respond in kindness and accept them as part of your human journey. Within the literature, self-compassion has been linked to many positive factors in regards to mental health and well-being, especially in those who are dealing with disordered eating and other mental health conditions. In fact, practicing the act of self-compassion has been found consistently to lower the risk of and act as a buffer towards developing depression, anxiety, body image criticism and disordered eating (Neff & Dahm, 2015).

*"Self-compassion is simply giving  
the same kindness to ourselves  
that we would give to others"*

- Christopher Germer

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Bluth, K. & Neff, K. (2018). New frontiers in understanding the benefits of self-compassion, *Self and Identity*, 17(6), 605-608.

Neff K.D., Knox M.C. (2017). Self-compassion. In: Zeigler-Hill V., Shackelford T.K., editors. *Encyclopedia of personality and individual differences*. Springer; Cham. pp. 1-8.

Neff, K. D., & Dahm, K. A. (2015). Self-compassion: What it is, what it does, and how it relates to mindfulness. In B. D. Ostafin, M. D. Robinson, & B. P. Meier (Eds.), *Handbook of mindfulness and self-regulation* (pp. 121-137).



## SELF-COMPASSION AND DISORDERED EATING

So far in recent years, there has been a big increase in research on self-compassion and disordered eating specifically. Multiple research studies have found that practicing self-compassion can act as a buffer of protection towards body image concerns, feelings of shame and failure associated with disordered eating (Braun, Park, & Gorin, 2016; Breines, Toole, Tu, & Chen, 2013).

### Body Shame

- One major theme within research studies is the impact of **body shame** felt from individuals in regards to their own body image.
- Body shame can stem from many different factors including unattainable beauty ideals, dieting culture, social comparison, the need for perfection and scarcity of failure (Breines, Toole, Tu, & Chen, 2013)
- Many individuals claim that their body shame or concern over body image is major contributor to their eating patterns and desire to change

### Self-Compassion

- Being more self-compassionate can help to promote a healthier body image because individuals are more accepting of themselves even when they may not be perfect or "slip up" in their recovery
- Especially within emotional-driven behaviours, self-compassion can help to alleviate feelings of failure and mediate the need to compensate for failure



## **Main Takeaways**

- Higher self-compassion can lower the risk for eating pathology.
- Lower self-compassion can increase the prevalence of body shame and body image concerns.
- Self-compassion has been linked to higher self esteem in female individuals.
- Self-compassion can help mediate the risk of societal pressure to look perfect: the concept of thinness = beauty in women, muscularity = beauty for men, androgynousness = beauty for non-binary/gender non-conforming folks.
- Self-compassion can lower the prevalence of negative thoughts regarding self- appearance.
- Practicing self-compassion can act as protective shield against negative body thoughts, body shame or guilt, and disordered eating practices.

## **SELF-COMPASSION EXERCISES**

### **Self-Awareness**

One of the first steps to building self-compassion is acknowledging and accepting all of your thoughts and feelings; the good and the bad. It is quite common for us to internalize failure or put the blame on ourselves, but recognizing these internalized thoughts can help to make a start at changing them. A great way to start practicing this is by recognizing when negative self-talk thoughts start to arise and intrude. Start to learn about when these thoughts come up and any patterns you notice.

In response to these thoughts, a great tool to use is "releasing statements" in which you acknowledge your feelings, but releasing yourself from the thought and changing the thought from negative to neutral and supportive. For example, instead of thinking "I'm such a failure for messing up my recovery" turn it around and say "I'm allowed to make mistakes and I can learn from them going forward in my recovery."

## **Treat Yourself Like a Friend**

One of the most effective exercises to help build and practice self-compassion is to think about how you would treat a friend if they were struggling in a similar situation. Think about how you might comfort them, what you might say, how you treat them, what type of language you use with them, and what's the tone of our your language.

Then think about how you would treat yourself in the same situation, and reflect on the ways you would treat yourself, how you would talk to yourself, and how you would respond to try and comfort yourself. Compare your reflections from the two situations. Did you respond differently when it was a close friend in crisis? Why do you think you responded to yourself so differently? What is stopping you from comforting yourself like you would a friend?

## **Self Compassion Supportive Touch**

Supportive touch is known to be extremely comforting and can offer a feeling of warmth and grounding of the individual. In moments of stress or negative thoughts, try putting your hand over your heart, take 3 deep breaths, and focus on the feeling of your hands over your heart, the steady rise and fall of your chest, possibly making small circles. If you prefer other ways, you could also try stroking your arm, hand on your cheek, or clasping your hands together over your lap. The main effects of supportive touch is to help ground yourself when feeling overwhelmed or down, to help soothe emotions and provide a feeling of security.

### **★ Let's set a goal!**

***Think about the exercises and tips that you have learned so far about supportive touch and reflect on what self-compassionate exercise might be best for you when you need a self-compassion break.***

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## *Self-Compassion Affirmations*

***"I can watch my negative thoughts and replace them with positive thoughts of love and compassion".***

***"I am not defined by my eating disorder."***

***"I deserve to treat my body with kindness, respect, and compassion".***

***"I will not demand perfection from myself, but rather accept that I am a person worthy of love, even when I make mistakes".***

***"I am not a failure if I slip into old habits."***

***"I will be patient with myself, even during hard times."***

***"What I do or do not eat does not influence how I feel about myself."***

***"I accept all of my feelings, the good and the bad."***

**TAKE CARE OF  
YOURSELF WITH THE  
SAME CONSISTENCY  
YOU LOOK AFTER  
YOUR FAVOURITE  
LEGGINGS, YOU  
KNOW THE ONES.**

## FURTHER LEARNING

### Podcasts

- [The Role of Self-Compassion in Eating Disorders ft. Dr. Neff Mindful Self](#)
- [Compassion: The Eating Disorder Trap Self-Compassion: The Missing](#)
- [Piece in Your Weight Loss Puzzle](#)

### TED Talks

- [The space between self-esteem and self-compassion](#)
- [It's time to do eating disorders recovery differently: Here's how. Dare to rewire your brain for Self-Compassion](#)

### Reading

- [Self-Compassion is an art in Eating Disorder Recovery](#)
- [Self-Compassion in Eating Disorder Recovery](#)
- [Self-Compassion in Eating Disorder Treatment](#)
- [Utilizing self-compassion in therapy for eating disorders](#)

### People to follow:

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