



How Would You Treat a Friend?

Compassion

Exercise

10-15 min

Client

No

Self-compassion is simply compassion directed inwards. Kristin Neff, a pioneer in compassion research, suggests that self-compassion consists of three main elements: kindness, a sense of common humanity, and mindfulness. According to Neff, these three elements combined facilitate a self-compassionate mindset.

The kindness element of self-compassion involves being warm and understanding toward ourselves rather than self-critical when we are suffering. In this way, our inner dialogue is gentle and encouraging, and we acknowledge our problems and shortcomings with openness and without judgment. Unfortunately, most of us tend to use harsh, critical language when we are going through a difficult time, such as, “Wow, that was dumb,” or “I’m a failure.”

Consider for a moment, would you say such things to a close friend or even a stranger for that matter?

Research has shown that most people are kinder to others than they are to themselves (Neff, 2003). This is even true for events or situations that are beyond our control, such as getting in a car accident (Germer & Neff, 2013).



Author

This tool was adapted from K. Neff’s ‘How would you treat a friend?’ exercise by Lucinda Poole.



Goal

The goal of this exercise is twofold. First, it aims to highlight the discrepancy between how one treats oneself versus how one treats a friend when life is difficult. Second, it aims to help individuals practice cultivating self-compassion.



Advice

- This tool can be used to practice cultivating self-compassion by tapping into one's current situation, or, more generally, by using past or imagined situation (see Step 2).
- Clients may feel worse after beginning to practice self-compassion. Neff advises sharing the following metaphor with clients in such circumstances: When a door in a burning house is opened, oxygen goes in, and flames rush out. A similar process may occur when we practice self-compassion, love goes in, and old pain comes out. The practitioner may help clients accept this pain mindfully (see the acceptance of emotions exercise), stressing the fact that pain can be a natural byproduct of self-compassion practice.



References

- Germer, C. K., & Neff, K. D. (2013). Self-compassion in clinical practice. *Journal of clinical psychology, 69*(8), 856-867.
- Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 2*, 223-250.
- Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion*. Hachette UK.
- Neff, K. (n.d.). *Self-compassion: Tips for practice*. <http://self-compassion.org/tips-for-practice/>



How Would You Treat a Friend?

Instructions

Complete these four steps to practice cultivating self-compassion.

Step 1

Recall a time when a close friend suffered in some way or felt bad about him/herself. Write down what you would do and say to your friend and note the tone of voice you would use.

Friend's situation:

My response:

Step 2

Now think about a time when you were struggling. Perhaps you feel bad about something in your life right now. Write down what you would do and say and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.

My situation:



My response:

Step 3

Was there a difference between how you would respond to a friend versus how you would respond to yourself? If so, ask yourself why this may be so, and write down what might lead you to treat yourself and others so differently:

Step 4

Now, write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you would respond to a close friend when you are suffering:

When things in your life do not go as planned, treat yourself as you would a good friend and see what happens. The more you practice being compassionate towards yourself, the more natural and habitual it will become.