Training Self-Compassion

If we need empathy before we can offer compassion, the research we highlighted earlier seems discouraging. How can we ever offer compassion for everyone if we automatically stereotype people and feel or don't feel empathetic? Is it possible to cultivate compassion for people in our outgroups or with people with whom we don’t identify? How could we teach students like Jessica to see all people as people? Is it even possible to train our minds to see everyone as “just like me”?

I’m happy to report that it appears to be possible to cultivate (in essence, train) compassion for everyone. But first, you need to start practicing compassion for the most important person - yourself. As we discussed, compassion is something we feel for others. When someone we know is suffering, we can feel that person’s pain and we have a desire to alleviate that pain. What about if we are suffering? How should we react toward ourselves?

I believe one of the most important skills a college student can learn is how to practice self-compassion. Think of Jessica. Does she take the time to notice when she’s stressed
and overwhelmed? Does she take time to care for herself? No. She pushes on through her own suffering and it manifests in overwhelm, illness, and exhaustion. Self-compassion is a hot topic for psychology researchers, and more and more evidence indicates numerous benefits of self-compassion.

A study out of Duke University (Terry et al, 2012) showed that students entering college with high self-compassion levels experienced less difficulty with their transitions to college than those with low levels of self-compassion. These students who rated high in self-compassion experienced less homesickness, less depression, and higher satisfaction with their collegiate experiences.

Kristen Neff, a pioneer of self-compassion research and associate professor of Human Development, Culture, and Learning Sciences at the University of Texas at Austin, has been researching self-compassion for several years. Neff (2003; 2011) defines self-compassion with three components. The first is self-kindness; self-compassionate people are kind to themselves and accept their faults and failures without judgment. In Jessica’s case, she might take a moment to breathe deeply and say kind words to herself instead of resorting to her usual negative self-talk.

Second, common humanity; self-compassionate people understand that no one is perfect and that everyone on the planet has faults and experiences suffering (Neff, 2003; 2011). Jessica could take time to remind herself that there are thousands of college students
around the world who are working, taking classes, and feeling overwhelmed. This may comfort Jessica and remind her that she is not alone.

Third, mindfulness; self-compassionate people take an observatory and non-judgmental approach to their thoughts instead of ruminating and obsessing over them (Neff, 2003; 2011). They also notice when they are suffering instead of blindly living through each day without noticing their own thoughts and feelings. Jessica would observe her physical and mental state-of-being and notice when she is feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Instead of pushing through that pain, she would be able to offer kindness to herself.

It’s important to note that self-compassion differs from self-esteem. Research indicates that people with high self-compassion do not have narcissism, whereas high self-esteem positively correlates with narcissism (Neff, 2003; 2011). Let’s take a step back and consider the self-esteem phenomenon. We can’t really blame college students for having high self-esteem, can we? Parents have been taught to cultivate high self-esteem within their children. If you search “self-esteem and parenting” online, you’ll get article upon article about how parents can develop their children’s self-esteem. But there maybe a problem with that; high self-esteem often creates an “I’m-better-than-you” attitude and can even foster aggression (Papps & O’Carroll, 1998).

Sure, high self-esteem may help Jessica feel confident and capable. It seemed great when she was student body president in high school and a straight-A student. But, when Jessica started college and wasn’t at the top of her class, her self-worth tumbled. She felt discouraged. She beat herself up about it. Jessica believed she was a failure.
Researchers out of Duke, Wake Forest, and Louisiana State University (Neff, 2011) designed five different studies to learn more about the relationship between self-compassion and self-esteem, and they wanted to evaluate how self-compassionate people would react to unpleasant situations. For each study, undergraduates first took Kristen Neff’s Self-Compassion Scale (2003), which determined whether or not the participant had high or low levels of self-compassion. For some of the studies, participants also took the Self-Esteem Inventory and/or Narcissistic Personality Inventory to evaluate their levels of self-esteem and/or narcissism.

In the first study, participants kept a log of the best or worst things that happened throughout their weeks. They rated how bad the events were and logged their reactions to the events. The second study looked at narcissism, self-esteem, and self-compassion levels to compare participants’ reactions to the following hypothetical situations: 1) getting a bad grade, 2) not performing well at an athletic event and causing his/her team to lose, and 3) forgetting a line while performing on stage, which brought the entire show to a halt.

The third study asked students to introduce themselves into a video camera. The students were told that their introduction was going to be evaluated by someone in another room. They were then handed the feedback in an envelope, which was randomly assigned as either positive or neutral. Students rated their feelings after they received the feedback. For the fourth study, participants had to finish the story, “Once upon a time there was a
little bear…” Their stories were videotaped, and then the participants either rated their own videos or rated another’s. Researchers wanted to see if levels of self-compassion affected how people rated themselves and others.

For all of those studies, the findings were consistent. No matter whether or not they had high self-esteem, people with self-compassion displayed more stable reactions to both positive and negative circumstances. They didn’t harshly judge themselves. They took ownership for their mistakes and did not beat themselves up about them.

For the fifth and final study, researchers wanted to see if they could manipulate people into having self-compassion. They divided participants into four groups, and asked each participant to write about a negative event in their lives that involved failure, humiliation, and rejection. Researchers gave a self-compassion intervention to the first group by prompting them to list ways that others have experienced a similar event (which highlights their shared common humanity). Then they asked participants to write a kind paragraph to themselves (an example of self-kindness or self-mentoring). Researchers induced the second group’s participants with self-esteem by prompting them to write out all of their positive attributes and describe why the negative events were not their faults. The third group simply wrote out their feelings, and participants of the fourth group wrote about their negative events. At the end, researchers asked all participants to fill out surveys that rated their emotions, and they were asked to indicate whether or not they took ownership of the negative event.
The findings revealed that the students conditioned with self-compassion reported less negative feelings than the ones who did not receive the self-compassion intervention, even if they took responsibility for the failure. What I found most interesting and encouraging from this study was that the self-compassion intervention greatly affected those who had been rated with low self-compassion prior to the study. This shows that a very simple exercise can create major changes.

When I teach self-compassion in my classes and workshops, a common concern arises with my students. They believe that if they don’t beat themselves up for failures, they won’t learn from their mistakes and will be unproductive or unmotivated to perform. Research, however, indicates quite the opposite. One study (Sirois, 2013) found that self-compassion was negatively associated with procrastination. In other words, low levels of self-compassion correlated to more procrastination and high levels of self-compassion correlated to less procrastination.

I bet Jessica’s college experience would have been much less stressful and turbulent if she had learned how to develop self-compassion during her freshman year. She would have felt comfort in knowing that she’s surrounded by fellow students who are going through stressful experiences. Jessica could have noticed when she’s feeling tired or anxious, and she could have countered those feelings with self-compassion. Jessica would have procrastinated less and would have been more productive.
Research shows that simple self-compassion interventions can positively impact our lives, but what about widening our circle to include acts of compassion for others? How can we cultivate compassion so that it extends to everyone around us?