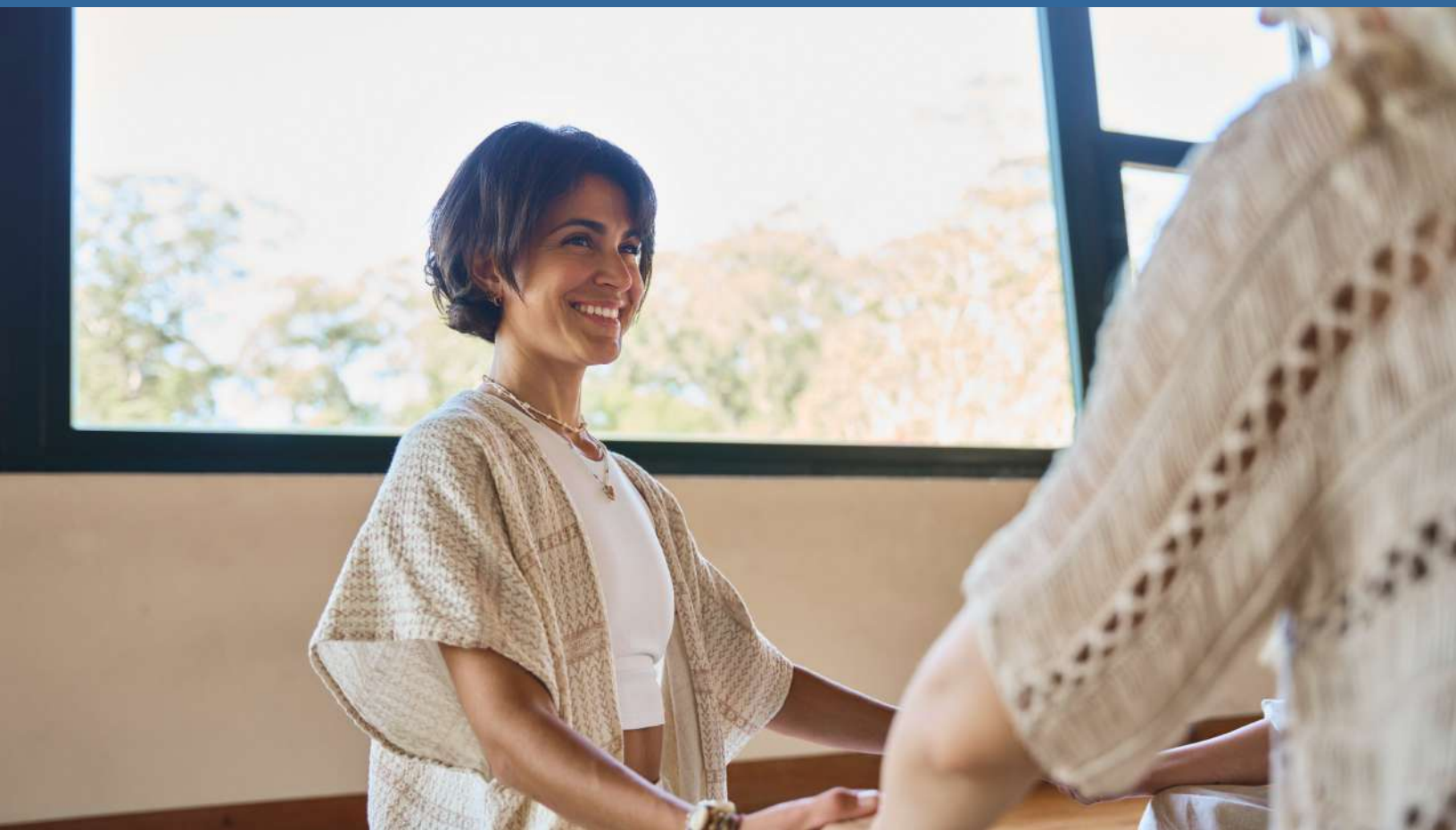
Mindful
Continuing Education

The Journey to Self-Compassion:
A Therapeutic Approach to Women's Wellness



Section 1: Introduction

References: 9, 11, 19

In Latin, the term compassion means “with suffering” (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025c). Compassion for others involves three things: the recognition and clear seeing of suffering; acknowledging our shared human condition, as flawed and fragile as it may be; and feelings of kindness for people who are suffering, so that the desire to help them emerges (Neff, 2011, p. 10).

Self-compassion involves the same three things, except that, rather than recognizing suffering in others, feeling kindness towards and desiring to help them, these are directed inward toward the self. To practice self-compassion, an individual must recognize their own suffering. This practice requires taking time to step back from a situation and acknowledge the difficulty experienced in the moment and the pain connected to it. An individual also recognizes that no one is perfect, that everyone makes mistakes, and that everyone deserves compassion and care. Then, rather than feeling angry, frustrated, ashamed, or judging oneself, an individual cultivates kindness and a desire to support themself.

This course will examine self-compassion from theoretical and practical perspectives, helping mental health professionals cultivate skills and strategies for its application in their personal and professional lives. A special focus will be placed on addressing the societal and personal narratives that particularly affect wellness.

Section 1 Key Term

Self-compassion - “being supportive toward oneself when experiencing suffering or pain, be it caused by personal mistakes and inadequacies or external life challenges” (Neff, 2023, p. 193).

Section 2: Self-Compassion Theory

References: 1, 3, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 18

Dr. Kristin Neff (2023) initially developed a construct of self-compassion, drawing on Buddhist philosophy, which holds that an individual can distribute compassion equally to oneself and others. Compassion (as defined by Goetz, 2010, p. 351, as cited in Neff, 2023) is "the feeling that arises when witnessing another's suffering that motivates a subsequent desire to help" (p. 195). Compassion often encompasses feelings of concern, connection, and a desire to help, rather than passing judgment, isolating oneself, or causing harm to another person.

When relating compassion to self-compassion, Neff (2023) states,

> *"The experience of compassion is similar when applied to our own suffering, whether it stems from failure, feelings of personal inadequacy, or life challenges more generally. It involves being present with our own pain, feeling connected to others who are also suffering, and understanding and supporting ourselves through the difficult moments"* (p. 195).

Neff's theory of self-compassion includes distinct elements in three broad categories that impact one another, including:

- The emotional response to suffering (kindness vs. judgment).
- The cognitive understanding of the predicament (human experience vs. isolation).
- The way suffering is attended to (mindfully vs. overly identified).

Of note, the theory is conceptualized as a continuum, with one end representing an uncompassionate self-responding and the other representing a compassionate self-responding in times of distress.

One standard self-report measure used in numerous studies is the Self-Compassion Scale, which assesses how people engage with thoughts, emotions, and behaviors aligned with the core elements of self-compassion (Neff, 2023).

The Core Elements of Self-Compassion

The three core elements of self-compassion are self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. All three must be achieved and combined to be truly self-compassionate (Neff, 2011, p. 41).

Self-Kindness versus Self-Judgment

When a person feels bad about themselves or is going through something difficult in their life, it is common for them to be hard on themselves or to make unkind, judgmental statements. These behaviors often differ from how the same person would treat a family member or friend in a similar situation. Usually, people offer their family and friends kindness and support in difficult situations. They often communicate that they care through their words and actions (Neff, 2023).

Self-kindness is the motivational aspect of self-compassion, as it involves the desire to help and alleviate internal suffering. It entails approaching oneself with a warm, supportive attitude and treating oneself with the same gentleness one would extend to others, rather than acting harshly.

When a person practices self-kindness after receiving bad news or encountering problems, they can open their heart and allow themself to be moved by their own pain and suffering. Self-kindness can also help them cope with these hardships.

When a person practices self-kindness after making a mistake, they become more understanding and accepting of themselves and, with self-encouragement, are more likely to do better next time in a similar situation. They can acknowledge

their shortcomings and recognize their failures and weaknesses, rather than punishing themselves. They can also cease self-criticism and intentionally end the negative internal commentary that accompanies their suffering (Neff, 2011; Neff, 2021; Neff, 2023).

Self-kindness is not only about ending self-criticism. It also "involves actively showing concern for our distress. We try to ease our discomfort if we can, not because we're inadequate as we are, but because we care" (Neff, 2023, p. 195).

Caring actions can lead a person to feel validated, supported, and encouraged, just as they do when another person is kind to them, except that these feelings arise solely from self-directed actions. Being kind to oneself can also lead to increased feelings of self-worth (Neff, 2023).

Common Humanity versus Isolation

When a person makes a mistake or experiences difficulty, it is common for them to feel that they are the only person suffering. They may feel helpless, frustrated, and out of control, and may become focused on how things should be rather than on how they are. This emotional reaction limits understanding and distorts reality.

When suffering arises from a difficult life circumstance that a person does not attribute to themselves, such as being part of a mass layoff at their job, it is common to compare oneself to others and believe that many others are living their lives with ease. This irrational perspective can lead to self-loathing and a narrow view of certain situations.

Comparison is common among many people. They compare themselves to others and to groups, which can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness, particularly when they view themselves negatively and others positively.

All of these things, in turn, can make a person feel disconnected and isolated from others, especially when they are preoccupied with their own shame or shortcomings.

Recognition of common humanity is central to self-compassion. It is the idea that making mistakes and difficult life experiences are part of being human and that everyone experiences them. Practicing common humanity entails acknowledging that being human is an imperfect experience and that others have likely faced similar hardships or disappointments, or made the same mistakes, at some point in their lives. It involves comparing oneself in ways that foster a sense of connection with others. For example, saying something like, “Just like other people, I’m human, and I’m not alone in this situation.”

Compassion is relational, meaning that there is mutuality in the experience of suffering (Neff, 2011; Neff, 2023). According to Neff (2023), “when we’re in touch with our humanity, we remember that everyone experiences suffering. The triggers are different, the circumstances are different, the degree of pain is different, but the experience of imperfection is shared” (p. 196). Compassion also holds the idea that all human beings should be treated humanely. If a person denies compassion to themself, but extends it to others, or if they value other’s needs more than their own, both undermine the idea that humans are a part of a larger whole, and how they treat themselves and others ultimately affects their interactions.

Acknowledging these aspects of compassion can help people feel less isolated and remind them that they are connected to other human beings. As noted above, connection differentiates self-compassion from self-pity by acknowledging the shared nature of suffering (Neff, 2021).

Mindfulness versus Overidentification

One definition of mindfulness is “the practice of being fully present and aware of your current experience - without overreacting or getting lost in thoughts” (Mindful Staff, 2025, para. 1). Self-compassion requires mindfully turning towards pain and acknowledging it, which means not resisting the pain and not focusing a lot of energy on it either. It entails recognizing negative thoughts and feelings for what they are, rather than becoming absorbed in or overidentifying with them (Neff, 2023). As stated by Neff (2021), “if we ignore our pain or are completely lost in it, we can’t step outside ourselves to say, ‘Wow, this is stressful, I need a little support’” (p. 21).

Overidentification is a process in which one’s sense of self becomes lost as they are consumed by emotional reactions, making it difficult to perceive reality clearly. People can become absorbed in their thoughts and feelings, making it challenging to step back and objectively observe what is happening. It is common for people to overreact in certain situations, especially when their sense of self is threatened, as they do not want to be seen as flawed.

When mindfulness is being practiced, individuals have opportunities to respond rather than react. It provides them with space to process their thoughts and feelings and to consider how they want to respond. They can view their situation more clearly, thereby limiting undue suffering and the likelihood of regrettable reactions (Neff, 2011).

Benefits of Self-Compassion

Some of the benefits of self-compassion have been outlined in this section, including increased feelings of self-worth, which, over time, can lead to greater stability in these feelings and unconditional self-acceptance; decreased isolation; and greater clarity and thoughtfulness under challenging situations.

Research has shown numerous benefits to practicing self-compassion. Self-compassionate people are more likely to:

- Feel happy and optimistic.
- Have their emotional well-being supported.
- Be satisfied with their lives.
- Embrace the human experience over destructive patterns.
- Cultivate a positive mindset rather than succumbing to negativity.
- Cope more effectively with life's challenges, demonstrating strength and resiliency.
- Exhibit higher levels of emotional intelligence.
- Prioritize personal growth and possess the motivation and determination to change.
- Forgive and show compassion to others.
- Have more authenticity and connection in their relationships.
- Take personal responsibility in situations.
- Effectively deal with work challenges and feel more competent and effective at work.
- Maintain a healthy work-life balance.
- Establish boundaries and say no.
- Compromise in conflict.
- Display healthy behaviors such as eating well, exercising, and getting regular medical care.

Self-compassion also fosters gratitude and helps individuals orient themselves toward what brings them joy (Neff, 2011; Self-Compassion Institute, 2025b).

For mental health professionals specifically, self-compassion may be protective against some of the psychosocial risks and challenges of therapeutic work, including burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress. It helps mental health professionals experience the positive effects of their work, recognize the importance of self-care, and enhance their ability to be authentic, empathetic, responsive, and present. Additionally, self-compassion has positive effects on the therapeutic relationship and the client. For example, it is associated with compassion towards clients, therapeutic efficacy, and practitioner competence.

To further connect the benefits outlined in the list above with working as a mental health professional, self-compassion has been shown to:

- Increase self-awareness and sensitivity to limitations or difficulties experienced as a clinician.
- Provide more encouragement and distance from self-critical thoughts.
- Build resilience to occupational stress.
- Enhance tolerance for the suffering of others and lessen pressure to offer a "quick fix" to alleviate it.
- Change positive internal dialogue into a mindset.
- Mediate the relationship between work-life balance and emotional exhaustion.
- Allow oneself to be open to and engaged in self-care practices (Crego et al., 2022).

While there are many benefits of self-compassion, some people may view it negatively or hold misconceptions about it. These myths and the research that refutes them are reviewed next.

Self-Compassion Myths

Several myths exist about the construct of self-compassion, including that it involves:

- Selfishness
- Self-pity
- Self-indulgence
- Softness or weakness
- Being complacent
- Avoiding taking responsibility
- Having high self-esteem

Selfishness

Some people and cultures believe that meeting one's personal needs is selfish. Instead, they believe they should sacrifice themselves and their needs for the sake of others. However, research has shown that individuals who practice self-compassion have greater energy and resources for their relationships and are more generous and supportive toward others. Among professional and family caregivers, self-compassion has been associated with greater capacity to care for others without experiencing burnout (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025a).

Self-pity

Self-compassion can be mistaken for self-pity when it is understood as complaining about how difficult life is and getting stuck in that line of thinking. When people pity themselves, they often ask, “Why me?” and become self-focused. When people practice self-compassion, they focus on common humanity and the imperfect nature of life that everyone experiences. They are less self-focused and feel more connected to others. They also have a different perspective on life that normalizes mistakes and difficult life experiences (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025a).

Self-indulgence

Some people may think that being kind to oneself means taking the easy path in life or doing what feels good in the moment, which is also known as self-indulgence. Another aspect of this concept is that self-indulgent actions often have long-term consequences. For example, a person may make poor food choices because certain foods taste good, but in the long run, they will likely develop health problems. With self-compassion, people are willing to lean into pain and discomfort for their own well-being, without long-term consequences. Studies have shown that self-compassionate individuals are more likely to take care of their health, attend regular medical appointments, eat well, and engage in other healthy behaviors (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025a).

Softness or weakness

By supporting oneself through self-compassion, emotional resilience and strength are built, which can be helpful when dealing with life's difficulties. Research has shown that people who practice self-compassion are better able to cope with some of life’s most challenging experiences, such as divorce, raising a child with

special needs, facing a health challenge, and serving in military combat (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025a).

Being complacent

Self-compassion positively affects motivation by fostering productive learning from mistakes and failures (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025a). When people are self-critical, their motivation is undermined, and they may live in fear of failure, using it as a prompt to work harder, which in turn causes more anxiety about performing at their best. Self-criticism also leads individuals to feel less self-confident, more defeated, and more likely to give up (Neff, 2025a).

Avoiding taking responsibility

Rather than avoiding ownership of mistakes or harmful actions, self-compassionate individuals are more likely to take personal responsibility and make efforts to repair the situation. These behaviors are likely due to the sense of safety that self-compassion provides when a person acknowledges having done something they regret (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025a). They can respond to the situation with mindfulness, self-compassion, and common humanity, rather than avoiding it or engaging in self-criticism.

Having high self-esteem

The American Psychological Association (2023) defines self-esteem as:

> *"The degree to which the qualities and characteristics contained in one's self-concept are perceived to be positive. It reflects a person's physical self-image, view of their accomplishments and capabilities, and values, and perceived success in living up to them, as well as the ways in which others view and respond to that person. The more positive the cumulative perception of these qualities and characteristics, the higher one's self-esteem. A reasonably high*

> *degree of self-esteem is considered an important ingredient of mental health, whereas low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness are common depressive symptoms*" (para. 1).

Self-esteem also involves setting personal standards, making comparisons, and evaluating oneself, which can be inconsistent across situations.

Self-compassion differs from self-esteem in that it does not involve evaluations or judgments and is not situation-dependent. Self-compassion is a consistent way of relating to oneself with kindness and acceptance, regardless of internal and external changes. It allows people to stand on equal ground, sharing an imperfect human condition, rather than engaging in comparisons and being viewed as better or worse than one another.

Research comparing self-compassion and self-esteem found that self-compassion provides greater stability in self-worth and that individuals who practice it are less focused on self-judgment and less likely to feel less than others, to defend their viewpoints, or to respond with anger when others disagree with them. Self-compassion has also been shown to confer a greater capacity to cope with stress than self-esteem (Neff, 2023).

Section 2 Key Terms

Self-kindness - approaching oneself with a warm, friendly, and supportive attitude when a mistake has been made or when other life challenges arise. It is understanding, accepting, and encouraging oneself, and responding to emotions with care (Neff, 2023).

Common humanity - recognizes that people are human and that pain, suffering, and imperfection are integral to the human experience. It also serves as a reminder that we are all interconnected (Neff, 2023).

Mindfulness - the ability to turn towards discomfort and acknowledge it. It allows people not to suppress their pain while also avoiding a dramatic narrative about it. The practice of mindfulness enables clear perception and the capacity to respond with kindness (Neff, 2023).

Section 3: Self-Compassion Strategies

References: 11, 14, 21, 22

Many strategies exist for integrating self-compassion into one's personal life and professional work as a mental health professional. As reviewed above, research has shown numerous benefits of practicing self-compassion, including personal and, in some cases, professional benefits. This section outlines some practical exercises grouped by the core elements to support a self-compassion practice.

Before sharing some exercises, it is important to acknowledge that self-compassion may represent a novel way of relating to oneself. However, the more strategies or formal meditation practices are used, the greater the increase in self-compassion. Dr. Neff shares a few tips for practicing it.

- First, she states, "Self-compassion is a practice of goodwill, not good feelings. In other words, even though the friendly, supportive stance of self-compassion is aimed at the alleviation of suffering, we can't always control the way things are" (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025e, para. 2). Dr. Neff acknowledges that practicing the three core elements of self-compassion allows us to hold ourselves in connection and love, give ourselves the support and comfort needed to get through the pain, while being the optimal space for change and growth.
- Next, Dr. Neff notes that emotional pain may initially increase when practicing self-compassion. People may begin to experience past-buried

pain as they bring love and care into their present lives. They can learn to meet their pain with self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, all of which will help it heal. However, if you are feeling overwhelmed by difficult emotions, you can reduce your self-compassion practice and focus on self-care, breathing, and grounding. Providing yourself with what you need in the moment remains beneficial as you learn the full practice of self-compassion (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025e).

Exercises including the Three Core Elements of Self-Compassion

Some exercises encompass all three core elements of self-compassion simultaneously.

- Start and maintain a self-compassion journal. Journaling has many proven benefits, including providing a space to process thoughts and feelings.
    - When you have some time at the end of the day, review the day's events.
    - As a prompt, you can write about something that you felt bad about, something you judged yourself for, or any challenging experience that caused you pain.
    - Then approach it from the perspective of practicing self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.
    - Additional instructions and examples are provided in the sections below.
- Take a self-compassion break at any time, in any situation.
    - During this exercise, you will think of a challenging situation that is causing you stress.

    - When you call it to your mind, see if you can feel the emotional discomfort in your body.
    - Then, say one thing from the following bullet points to yourself that feels comforting.
        - This is a moment of suffering; this hurts; or this is stress (mindfulness).
        - Suffering is part of life; I am not alone; we all struggle, or others feel this way (common humanity).
            - Use a soothing touch, such as a hand over your heart.
        - May I be kind to myself; may I learn to accept myself as I am; may I forgive myself, may I be strong, or may I be patient (self-kindness).

- Further explore self-compassion through writing.
    - The first step is to write about an issue that typically makes you feel bad about yourself or inadequate compared to others (e.g., issues in your relationships or at work, or your physical appearance).
    - Then, spend time feeling the emotions that arise when you think about this issue, and write about them.
    - The next step is to write a letter to yourself about this issue, from the perspective of someone in your life who provides unconditional love and acceptance. What would they say to you? How would they show you the compassion they feel towards you, especially when you are hard on yourself? What would they do to remind you that you are only human? Try to incorporate kindness, caring, and a desire for your own health and happiness.

- Finally, revisit the letter periodically and allow the words to sink in. Feelings of comfort and compassion will likely arise when you read it (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025e).

Self-Kindness Exercises

- In your self-compassion journal, after you have identified an event from the day:
    - Practice self-kindness by writing yourself some kind, understanding words that you would share with a friend in a similar situation.
    - Remind yourself of your commitment to your well-being in a gentle, reassuring tone (Neff & Germer, 2018, pp. 29-30).
- Write about “how you would treat a friend” who is going through a difficult situation.
    - Think about a time when a friend was struggling or feeling bad about themself.
    - Write down what you typically say to them or do to support them.
    - Then, think about a time when you were struggling or feeling bad about yourself.
    - Write down how you typically respond to yourself.
    - Take some time to ask yourself: Did you notice a difference? If so, why? What factors impact you to treat yourself one way and others another way?

    - Write down how you think things in your life may change if you respond to your suffering in the same way that you respond to a friend (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025e).

- When something happens that causes you to feel bad about yourself, to judge yourself, or when you are facing a challenge in your life, you can practice self-kindness by doing the following:
    - Slow down and make yourself available to feel your emotions.
    - Acknowledge any pain, discomfort, or complicated feelings you may be experiencing.
    - Say to yourself, “This is really hard right now. How can I care for myself at this moment?”
    - Put self-care into action (Neff, 2023).
- In the same situation, you can also:
    - Take some deep breaths.
    - Adjust your body to feel more comfortable.
    - Stretch or move your body gently.
    - Take a soothing action, such as:
        - Offer yourself a comforting touch - putting a hand on your heart, belly breathing, etc.
        - Say words of affirmation to yourself.
        - Ask for help and support.

        - Eat a meal that will help you feel good, drink some tea, etc. (Whitlock et al., 2021).

- One additional act of self-compassion, focused on self-kindness (with some common humanity), is changing critical self-talk (the inner critic). This process can take time because it can change how you relate to yourself over the long term. Consider using a journal or internal dialogue. For some, it is helpful to speak outloud, while others think silently.
    - The first step is to build awareness. The self-critical voice may be so familiar to you that you may not notice it. When you feel bad about yourself or a situation, pause and reflect on what you are telling yourself. Use as many of the exact words as possible.
    - Then, ask yourself, what words am I using? Do certain ones come up repeatedly? What is the tone of the voice that you hear? Does it remind you of anyone?
    - The next step is to soften the self-critical voice through compassionate statements.
    - Finally, reframe your observations of the self-critical voice in a kind, constructive way. You can also incorporate soothing touch if that feels comfortable for you,
- Another writing exercise is identifying what you really want.
    - The first step is to think about how self-criticism motivates you. Is there something you criticize yourself for because you think it will help you change, such as being lazy? Once you identify this personal trait, try to get in touch with the feeling that self-criticism causes and give yourself compassion for judging yourself.

- Next, think of a kinder way to motivate yourself to make a needed or wanted change. What would someone who cares about you say when pointing out that your behavior does not seem to be helping you, while also encouraging you to take a different path? What supportive message can you send yourself related to wanting to be happy and healthy?
- Finally, when you catch yourself being critical about your unwanted trait, notice the pain and give yourself compassion. Then, reframe your internal dialogue to be more encouraging and supportive (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025e).

Common Humanity Exercises

- In your self-compassion journal, after you have identified an event from the day:
  - Write down the ways your experience was part of being human. This might include the sentiment that being human is imperfect and that everyone experiences some form of suffering.
  - You may also want to write about what caused the event to happen and/or what conditions were underlying during it (Neff & Germer, 2018, p. 29).
- When you are suffering, you can say any of the following phrases to yourself:
  - “This is part of being human.”
  - “I’m not alone in how I feel.”
  - “I am human too; I am not perfect.”

- “Life is not perfect.”
- “Other people get stuck sometimes.” (Whitlock et al., 2021)

Mindfulness Exercises

- In your self-compassion journal, after you have identified an event from the day, write down your emotions. Try to be nonjudgmental and accepting, without diminishing your feelings or being overly dramatic (Neff & Germer, 2018, p. 29).
- Complete a mindfulness meditation exercise. Many free resources are available online, including those from the Self-Compassion Institute (https://www.self-compassion.org).
- Take a few minutes and scan your body for any pain or tension. Then, label the emotion and articulate the feeling (Whitlock et al., 2021).

Care for the Caregiver Exercise

Regardless of whether you work in a caregiving profession, are caring for a loved one, or both, taking time to meet your needs is critical to continuing to give to others. Time is often limited as a caregiver, so it is important not to save self-care for when you are “off the job.” A self-compassion break is an effective way to give yourself support when you feel stressed or overwhelmed. It only takes a few minutes and can be done throughout the day. If you are “off the job,” you may have more opportunities to engage in self-care, such as exercising, getting a massage, or meeting a friend (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025e).

Section 3 Reflection Question

After you try one or a few of the self-compassion strategies, consider which one feels easy and which one feels more challenging (if any). Why do you think there is a difference in your experience with one exercise compared to another?

Section 4: Case Study

Meredith is a clinical social worker who primarily works with clients who have experienced abuse and trauma in their partnered relationships. The intensity of her clients' issues has been increasing over the last year, and Meredith has noticed that the prolonged stress from her work is taking a toll on her overall well-being. She constantly feels physically and emotionally exhausted, overwhelmed by her work, and detached from her clients. She is often critical of herself for experiencing these feelings. She has also been isolating herself from others.

Meredith is in private practice and has little contact with other social workers beyond a monthly dinner where she and a few colleagues and friends get together. On the day of the dinner, Meredith does not want to go, but in the afternoon, one of her colleagues reaches out and asks to go together, to which Meredith reluctantly agrees.

While at dinner, Meredith opens up and shares that she has been struggling emotionally in her work. One of her colleagues tells her about self-compassion practices she has integrated into her life and the benefits she has noticed, both personally and professionally. Meredith is initially skeptical and feels it would be selfish to care for herself during the day when she is supposed to be caring for clients. However, the next day, Meredith reads as much as she can about self-compassion and finds the benefits intriguing. She feels overwhelmed about how to start integrating practices into her daily life, as her schedule is often already

full. She decides to start with a self-compassion break before and after work, as she feels this will work best for her.

As time passes, Meredith incorporates a self-compassion break in between many of her client sessions. After a few months, she also decides to start a self-compassion journal and writes an entry that incorporates self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness a few times a week.

With continued practice of these strategies and others, Meredith notices that she feels more energized, engaged in her work, connected to her clients, and better able to empathize with the suffering they have experienced. She has also been staying more connected to colleagues and friends, rather than isolating herself. Overall, she can better cope with the challenges she faces in her personal and professional life.

Section 5: Case Study Review

Meredith is experiencing work-related burnout, as evidenced by her symptoms. Fortunately, she has a support system she feels comfortable with, and by sharing her experiences, she learns about self-compassion and begins to implement strategies in her life. By practicing self-compassion breaks throughout her workday, she learns a new habit of responding to herself kindly (self-kindness) rather than negatively. She also learns how to be more connected to herself (mindfulness) and to others by reinforcing that she is not the only mental health professional who struggles in their work with clients (common humanity). Additionally, through journaling, she has more opportunities for reflection and supporting herself through difficult or painful events. She sees the benefits of self-compassion in her own life and wants to start teaching her clients strategies to practice it as well.

Section 6: Fostering Self-Compassion in Clients

References: 5, 11, 13, 15

Several studies have examined self-compassion in psychotherapy. One consistent finding is that greater self-compassion is linked to less psychopathology, including relieving symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, personality disorders, and suicidal ideation (Neff & Germer, 2022). Self-compassion can reduce psychopathology by lessening shame, negative thinking, avoidance of negative emotions, and entanglement with them, while enhancing emotional regulation skills and positive mind states (Neff, 2023).

In addition to self-compassion being effective with various conditions, mental health professionals can use it across different types of therapies, including cognitive-behavioral therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy (Neff, 2025b). Research has also shown that, as individuals go through therapy, use self-compassion strategies, and experience improvement, a significant component of their symptom reduction is the practice of self-compassion (Neff, 2025b).

While mental health professionals can teach themselves self-compassion, with appropriate knowledge and training, they can also teach it to their clients. Dr. Christopher Germer has proposed that mental health professionals can integrate self-compassion into their therapeutic practice in three different ways.

Three Levels of Integrating Self-Compassion into Therapy

The three levels of integrating self-compassion into clinical practice are:

- **Compassionate presence** - the ways a mental health professional relates to how they experience themselves and their clients, mainly non-verbally.

- **Compassionate alliance** - the ways a mental health professional engages with their clients, both non-verbally and verbally.
- **Compassionate interventions** - the ways clients relate to themselves, especially outside of sessions (Germer, 2023).

Compassionate Presence: Level 1

One definition of presence is "being with our moment-to-moment experience in a clear, open, and direct way without thoughts or words" (Germer, 2023, p. 384). Mindfulness is a closely related concept, as it refers to "spacious, non-judgmental awareness of what is occurring in the present moment" (Germer, 2023, p. 384). Therefore, to be mindful, an individual needs to be present.

Mindfulness is one element of self-compassion. When a mental health professional practices self-compassion in their own life, they are more mindful and better understand their own experience and that of the client in the therapeutic relationship. Then, when they are compassionate towards themself and the client, they can enhance their compassionate presence in psychotherapy (Germer, 2023). As stated by Neff and Germer (2022),

> *"If therapists are compassionate towards their own empathic pain, not only will they be less distressed, but their compassion will be felt by clients through emotional attunement. Over time, exposure to a therapist with a self-compassionate presence is likely to change how clients think and feel about themselves. Therefore, if therapists want their clients to become more self-compassionate, the first step is for them to cultivate self-compassion"* (p. 58).

Therefore, cultivating your own warm, open, spacious, and compassionate presence as a mental health professional can foster trust and create a safe, healing environment for your clients.

Compassionate Alliance: Level 2

Compassionate alliance, which is similar to a therapeutic alliance or relationship, involves engagement and verbal interaction. A therapeutic alliance has three factors, including the bond between the mental health professional and client (rapport and mutual regard), their agreement on therapy goals, and consensus on what clients will do to achieve these goals (e.g., tasks). Research shows that the nature of the therapeutic alliance or bond is a significant predictor of therapy outcomes.

Three factors also exist in a compassionate alliance, including radical acceptance, resonance, and resource-building.

- Radical acceptance "is the overall attitude of the treatment process" (Germer, 2023, p. 388). For a mental health professional, this can mean holding space for the client and their pain in a compassionate way, especially when it is difficult to do so, without rushing to fix things. It can also mean accepting clients just as they are without any judgment or an obligation to change (Germer, 2023, p. 388).
- Resonance is "the primary mode of engagement in a compassionate therapeutic relationship. It refers to affective attunement between the therapist and client - a sense of 'feeling felt'" (Germer, 2023, p. 388).
    - Resonance considers how the mental health professional responds to their clients; what they say, how they say it, and how they react. When they respond compassionately, they teach their clients compassion by modeling warmth, support, and a sense of not being alone in their suffering. This modeling creates a sense of safety where people can be themselves and live in the truth of their experience. In return, when people feel safe, they can be more honest with

themselves and make more authentic decisions about their lives (Neff, 2025b).

- Resource building is “the desired outcome of psychotherapy” (Germer, 2023, p. 390). One outcome of compassion-focused psychotherapy is enhanced emotional regulation through the cultivation of self-compassion. In sessions, clients can discuss challenges they are experiencing, learn more about their experiences and responses through the mental health professional’s reflection and questioning, and then learn how to respond to themselves compassionately. This process can open opportunities for clients to practice and implement self-compassion strategies in their daily lives.

Compassionate Interventions: Level 3

After mental health professionals have established their compassionate presence and alliance with their clients, the next step is for clients to implement self-compassionate practices in their lives, primarily outside of sessions. However, this can also occur within sessions. While clients can use any of the practices outlined in section three of this course, the mental health professional should tailor these practices to each client's life, collaboratively working with them to identify what works and feels most comfortable for each client.

Mental health professionals need to be aware that when their clients start practicing self-compassion strategies, backdraft can occur. Backdraft is the distress that arises when clients stir up painful things from their past and discover parts of themselves that do not think they deserve self-compassion. Mental health professionals must know how to manage backdraft to facilitate their clients’ healing process safely (Neff, 2025b).

Summary

Mental health professionals can integrate self-compassion into psychotherapy by practicing the components of each of these three levels. It is ideal to blend the levels when working with clients, as this provides comprehensive self-compassion-based therapy. Monitoring the work done at all three levels helps clients foster self-compassion, leading to more effective therapeutic processes (Germer, 2023).

Section 6 Key Terms

Backdraft is "the distress that arises when people give compassion to themselves or receive compassion from others. Backdraft can take the form of thoughts and beliefs, such as 'I'm unlovable,' emotions, such as grief or shame, body aches and pains, and automatic behaviors, such as withdrawal or aggression. Backdraft is an intrinsic part of the transformation process of compassion-based therapy. Compassion activates old memories and makes them available for reprocessing—it provides an opportunity to receive the kindness and understanding that were probably lacking when the painful experiences originally occurred. This is a delicate process, and therapists need to make sure that their clients remain within the 'window of tolerance,' especially when backdraft consists of traumatic memories" (Germer, 2023, p. 397).

Section 6 Reflection Question

What are your thoughts on self-compassion-focused therapy? What do you see as the benefits and the challenges of it?

Section 7: Addressing Societal Expectations and Personal Narratives on Wellness

References: 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 17, 21

Societal expectations are the “set of standards and norms that a society collectively holds, guiding how individuals, particularly women, are supposed to behave, appear, and live their lives. These expectations are deeply ingrained in cultural, social, and historical contexts” (Ding, 2024, p. 2). For example, women can be expected to take care of others and to exhibit polite, accommodating, and nurturing behavior. They are often expected to be productive, “do it all,” and conform to specific societal roles, including those of wives or partners, mothers, daughters, friends, and working professionals, and to transition between these roles with ease. They often face unattainable expectations regarding their physical appearance, attractiveness, and overall wellness (Grand Rising Behavioral Health, n.d.; Popescu, n.d.). Every day, there are messages in the media and on social media about wellness and self-care, becoming the best version of oneself, and getting back on track after a significant life event, such as having a child or going through menopause (Mosley, 2025). These messages put additional pressure on women to maintain a positive state of physical, mental, and emotional health while functioning in specific roles, behaving in certain ways, and looking a certain way.

Societal expectations, whether met or not, can impact personal narratives and mental health. Personal narratives are the stories of an individual’s life, including their experiences and the thoughts and feelings associated with them. Personal narratives are unique to each individual and differ according to how people think about and make meaning of their life experiences (Booker, 2024).

Societal expectations can create internal conflict when they differ from how women tell or imagine their personal narratives. For example, women may feel conflicted when they do not want to pursue traditional roles and behaviors, but feel pressured by society to do so. They may also feel inadequate if they are trying to meet expectations but are falling short. Both experiences can negatively affect their personal narratives. If women are from a marginalized group, there can be additional pressures and impact, especially on mental health. Research has shown that societal expectations can negatively impact mental health, leading to anxiety and depression, as well as feelings of low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, heightened stress, and inadequacy when expectations are not met (Grand Rising Behavioral Health, n.d).

Some women may feel they do not own their personal narratives, that they are beyond their control, or that they are negatively affecting them. Practicing self-compassion can help women take control of their narrative by fostering agency and self-acceptance (Popescu, n.d). This practice can also change the impact of societal expectations and personal narratives in their lives. Self-compassion can help women turn towards any pain, distress, or pressure they are experiencing and be present with it. It can help them be kind to themselves and say yes to their needs, rather than putting themselves last. Self-compassion also supports acknowledging common humanity: that many women may be experiencing the same things because life and people are imperfect. Furthermore, as noted above, self-compassion can help lessen mental health conditions by decreasing shame, negative thinking, avoidance of negative emotions, and entanglement with them, while enhancing emotional regulation skills and positive mind states (Self-Compassion Institute, 2025d).

Section 7 Reflection Questions

What are the expectations placed on you? How do they impact you and your personal narratives? If you are interested in changing your personal narrative, can self-compassion help you do so? If so, in what ways?

Section 8: Case Study (continued)

Meredith completes the continuing education she needs to begin incorporating self-compassion into her therapeutic practice with clients who have experienced trauma. She strengthens her compassionate presence and alliances with her clients by continuing to practice self-compassion in her own life. She is also more mindful of how she responds to her clients, modeling compassionate behavior, which comes more naturally to her as she personally practices self-compassion. She then begins implementing tailored self-compassion interventions for her clients, doing so safely with her support and minimizing backdraft. She refers clients to self-compassion training programs when appropriate. Over time, she sees positive changes in her clients who have integrated self-compassion practices into their lives.

Section 9: Case Study Review

Meredith recognizes the importance of obtaining the proper training for compassion-focused therapy, which is an ethical obligation for mental health professionals. Also, by creating a compassionate presence and building alliances with her clients, she feels comfortable with them practicing compassionate interventions, guided by her therapy guidance and formal training programs. All of these efforts have supported Meredith and her clients, showing the many benefits of self-compassion.

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