

SELF-COMPASSION

Can you be as caring to yourself as you are to patients?

BY LINDA PICONE

Long before the COVID pandemic, Kristin Neff, PhD, was researching, writing and talking about self-compassion: treating yourself the same when you fail, have a bad experience or are in pain as you would treat others—with understanding, warmth and help.

“We need compassion generally, but if you just aim compassion outward, you’re going to get burned out and won’t be able to help anyone else,” says Neff, associate professor in educational psychology at the University of Texas and co-founder of the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion.

Health care providers, in particular, care for others but too often don’t care for themselves. “When you care for others and you’re in contact with people who are suffering, you suffer as well,” she says. “You’re overworked and stressed. People often recommend self-care, but that’s insufficient.”

There are three elements of self-compassion, according to Neff:

- **Self-kindness vs. self-judgment.** Being gentle with yourself, rather than beating yourself up over mistakes or failings.
- **Common humanity vs. isolation.** Remembering that you are not alone; like other people, you will make mistakes and suffer hardships.



Kristin Neff, PhD

- **Mindfulness vs. overidentification.**

Putting your feelings in perspective.

Self-compassion does not mean doing yoga or taking a long, hot bath or finding joy in music—although any and all of those may be good ways of reducing stress. And it’s neither self-indulgence nor enhanced self-esteem, according to the explanation of self-compassion on Neff’s website (<https://self-compassion.org>). It is a mindset, an internal practice. Although there are courses and specific exercises, self-compassion can be as simple to do as taking a 3-minute self-compassion break.

“You remind yourself of the three parts of self-compassion and say some kind words internally,” Neff says. “It really seems to be very, very effective.”

Neff’s research indicates that practicing self-compassion has a physiological effect: “It deactivates the sympathetic nervous system and taps into the parasymp-

athetic nervous system, reduces cortisol and helps you feel more calm, relaxed and flexible. It actually reduces burnout.”

With patients

What we cultivate internally also impacts other people, Neff says. “When you’re in the presence of someone who is suffering, you actually share their suffering. Your pain centers are being activated in their presence.”

That suffering cycle works both ways—if you are suffering, others feel that as well. Neff, whose son is autistic, says she discovered this working with him. “When you’re burned out and overwhelmed and stressed, they feel it,” she says. “If you cultivate a sense of warmth and stability, other people can pick up on it.”

Self-compassion is uniquely helpful when caring for others, because you can give yourself in the moment, Neff says. “You give yourself compassion for how hard it is in the moment. Breathe in compassion for yourself and breathe out compassion for the person you’re caring for.”



Neff says she doesn't yet have data that physicians practicing self-compassion can increase patient satisfaction, but it's one of the areas she's interested in.

Habits of resilience

"Self-compassion is an incredibly important habit to develop because it influences so many aspects of our lives," says Michael Maddaus, MD, "It means caring about yourself and recognizing and accepting the feelings that you're having. Instead of thinking there's something wrong with you, you recognize that you're struggling and then figuring out ways to deal with it."

Maddaus, once professor and vice chair of the Department of Surgery at the University of Minnesota Medical School, identifies eight habits that he has found to be life-changing. He includes them in what he calls "The Resilience Bank Account."

Self-compassion is one of the eight habits he identifies but, he says, "It's no magic

bullet; it's one element of the mix." The other habits are:

- Sleep.
- Nutrition.
- Exercise.
- Meditation.
- Gratitude.
- Connection.
- Saying "no."

"It's like a beautiful stew of habits that really make the difference," he says. "All of these things feed into an upward spiral. You do one thing, like practicing gratitude, which leads to better relations with others, which feeds into being connected with others."

Maddaus developed his ideas on the resilience bank account after his very successful career as a surgeon—which followed a difficult upbringing, juvenile arrests, dropping out of high school and a stint in the U.S. Navy—faded. He became addicted to narcotics after surgery on his back and hip and spent three months in in-patient treatment. From that, he became interested in finding ways to be more resilient and began to identify and research habits that help.

Everyone makes mistakes, Maddaus says, and we often beat ourselves up over them, but mistakes as a physician can have much more weight. "So many of us are hard on ourselves for the tiniest things and we hypercriticize ourselves inside our heads," he says. "But then elevate that up to the level of taking care of a patient, where the mistake can be on the scale of having a bad interaction while talking to them to making a critical error in the operating room."

Medicine should be one long, continuous quality improvement program, Maddaus says: "The keys are curiosity, a desire to learn and psychological safety." That last is essential to being able to improve. If you are afraid to talk about your mistakes, you don't have the opportunity to correct them.

Psychological safety is "a big deal" in many organizations today, including medical institutions, Maddaus says. If a resident, a nurse or another physician thinks an attending physician's order for a patient

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is wrong, but doesn't feel safe bringing it up, there is a lack of psychological safety—and that takes away the chance of catching and correcting error.

"I translate that psychological safety to myself," Maddaus says. "It's the same thing in the internal milieu in our heads. When we are harsh with ourselves and hyper-judgmental, it leads us to try to avoid making that mistake again, but it shuts down our ability to learn. By being self-compassionate, you recognize and own the mistake and you realize that you are human and not alone in making mistakes. In that wider mental and emotional space, you create the opportunity to learn from the mistake, rather than just trying to avoid it again." MM

Linda Picone is editor of *Minnesota Medicine*.



'Reclaim the Joy of Medicine' Virtual Conference

Kristin Neff, PhD, and Michael Maddaus, MD, will be part of the MMA Reclaim the Joy of Medicine: The 5th Annual Bounce Back Clinician Resilience Conference, Monday, January 28. For more information about the one-day, virtual conference and to register, go to <https://www.mnmed.org/education-and-events/Reclaim-the-Joy-of-Medicine>.

For more information

Self-compassion.org with links to research, guided meditations, exercises and tips for practicing self-compassion by Kristin Neff, PhD.

Michaelmaddaus.com with links to a blog and a free download of *The Resilience Bank Account Skills for Optimal Living*.