

An Intro to Mindful Self Compassion¹

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” – Viktor E. Frankl

What is Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC)?

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) is an empirically-supported, 8-week training program designed to cultivate the skill of self-compassion. Based on the groundbreaking research of Kristin Neff and the clinical expertise of Christopher Germer, MSC teaches core principles and practices enabling participants to respond to difficult moments in their lives with kindness, care and understanding. MSC can be learned by anyone.

The three key components of self-compassion are self-kindness, a sense of common humanity, and balanced, mindful awareness. Kindness opens our hearts to suffering so we can give ourselves what we need. Common humanity opens us to our essential interrelatedness so we know we aren't alone. Mindfulness opens us to the present moment, so we can accept our experience with greater ease. Together they comprise a state of warm-hearted, connected presence.

Rapidly expanding research demonstrates self-compassion is strongly associated with emotional wellbeing, less anxiety, depression and stress, maintenance of healthy habits such as diet and exercise, and satisfying personal relationships. Being self-compassionate is also a proven antidote to interrupt negative and judgmental thinking.

MSC is primarily a compassion training program rather than a mindfulness training like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), although mindfulness is the foundation of self-compassion. MSC is also not psychotherapy insofar as the emphasis of MSC is on building emotional resources rather than addressing old wounds. Positive change occurs naturally as we develop the capacity to be with ourselves in a kinder, more compassionate way. For further information, you may wish to read:

Self-Compassion: The proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself, by Kristen Neff

The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion, by Christopher Germer

One important note: self-compassion is not weakness. A kinder, more compassionate relationship with one's self does not translate into being weak, self-pitying, playing the victim or other such dysfunctional behaviors. On the contrary, self-compassionate individuals exhibit

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strength and resiliency in the face of adversity.

Self-compassionate individuals tend to have better boundaries in interpersonal relationships because they believe they or their loved ones are worth the effort. For example, we all love our children. Most children love candy. Does this mean if we are compassionate we allow them to eat candy all the time? Of course not. Compassion in this situation is doing what is best for the child regardless of the child's immediate demand for gratification. We just say "no" kindly instead of in a critical, blaming or judgmental way.

How the brain reacts to stress and threats²

Processing fear is a chain reaction in the brain triggered by an event which we perceive as threatening and which results in the fight or flight response. The fight or flight response results in rapid heart beat, increased adrenaline and quickened breathing. Specific areas in the brain play major roles in the automatic fight or flight response.

Amygdala

The amygdala determines possible threats, based on stored memories of frightening situations and prior knowledge of received data, and analyzes any emotional significance attached to the received information. Defensive and aggressive behavior is initially mediated by the amygdala, as its role is to receive information about stimuli, then alert the hypothalamus via neural impulses to initiate the fight or flight response, which may save your life in a dangerous situation.

Hippocampus

The hippocampus stores and retrieves conscious memories; it uses this information to process sets of stimuli to determine if there is a threat and whether the fight or flight response will be initiated. Once the hippocampus establishes a context to process the stimuli, which includes determining if you've encountered the same stimulus before and what it meant that time, it signals the amygdala if there is immediate danger.

Hypothalamus

The hypothalamus activates the age-old survival reaction to fear, known today as the fight or flight response. To achieve this response, the hypothalamus triggers both the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which initiates body reactions via nerve pathways, and the adrenal-cortical system, which sends information through the bloodstream. During the fight or flight response, your body tenses and becomes alert. As adrenaline flows into the bloodstream, you

² Warning! I am not a neurologist. This is a very simplified explanation and any errors are my own.

become capable of quicker actions. These physical responses, triggered by the hypothalamus, also include increased blood pressure, dilated pupils and skin covered in goosebumps. They are the tools given by nature to help you survive threatening situations and decide whether to run or fight for your life.

Sensory Cortex

The sensory cortex receives and analyzes information about potentially threatening visual stimuli and dangerous situations from the thalamus. This brain area recognizes there are several possibilities associated with any set of stimuli; it passes the sensory data along to the hippocampus to examine further and decide whether to signal the amygdala there is danger and initiate the fight or flight response.

Thalamus

The thalamus area of the human brain decides where to send incoming sensory data from the skin, mouth, eyes, nose and ears. Once it receives this sensory information, the thalamus determines if any of it meets the criteria for danger. If so, it alerts the amygdala and sensory cortex simultaneously to a potential threat. Therefore, the thalamus is the first brain area involved in the fight or flight response, as it brings the possibility of danger to the attention of your brain.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

- A threat is perceived
- The autonomic nervous system automatically puts the body on alert
- The adrenal cortex automatically releases stress hormones
- The heart automatically beats harder and more rapidly
- Breathing automatically becomes more rapid
- The thyroid gland automatically stimulates the metabolism
- Larger muscles automatically receive more oxygenated blood

Because our nervous system evolved to help us survive, it will stimulate this response based on a “better safe than sorry” policy (as Gilbert notes, see below). This means that there will be many times (most of the time) when it is stimulated even though there is no threat to survival. The amygdala can't distinguish between a real threat and a perceived threat and it doesn't stop to distinguish between them. Its job is to save your life by triggering you to respond to potential threats in your environment.

Sometimes the perceived threat is so intense it triggers a "freeze" response because we are overwhelmed by the threat, or it could also be an adaptive response to a threat. It probably evolved in humans and animals as a way of "keeping still" so a predator's attention would not be triggered by movement. The freeze response means the muscles remain tensed and poised for action which is never really initiated. That's why we often get knots in our backs, shoulders, neck, and arms - because we have not discharged the tension.

Introduction to our emotional regulation systems

Today we also know that *psychological threats* can also trigger the fight or flight reaction. Someone says or does something to threaten our sense of self— like challenging our competence, intruding on a psychological boundary or calling us out in a meeting, and we can go into fight or flight. We have almost no control over this because it is an automatic process, hard-wired into our nervous systems over millennia.

The problem with this response is that it “hijacks” our brain, deprives our prefrontal cortex of blood and leaves us with few resources to respond appropriately to what is happening. Since the prefrontal cortex is responsible for higher order brain functions like awareness, concentration and decision-making, we are reduced to a basic level of functioning just when we need our higher order executive functioning the most.

In response to the acute stress generated in the fight or flight response, the body's sympathetic nervous system is activated due to the sudden release of hormones. The sympathetic nervous systems stimulates the adrenal glands triggering the release of catecholamines, which include adrenaline and noradrenaline. This results in an increase in heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate. After the threat is gone, it takes between 20 to 60 minutes for the body to return to its pre-arousal levels.

Paul Gilbert³ explains the three basic emotional regulation systems which all animals have in common: threat and protection systems (fight or flight); drive, resource-seeking and excitement systems; and contentment, soothing and safeness systems.

THREAT PROTECTION SYSTEMS

- All living things have evolved threat-detection and protection systems.
- Our threat protection system evolved to identify and deal with potential threats.

³Paul Gilbert is Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Derby, consultant psychologist at Derbyshire Mental Health Services NHS Trust and a Fellow of the British Psychological Society. Dr. Gilbert is also the founder of Compassion Focused Therapy. This explanation is based on Dr. Gilbert's article "Introducing Compassion Focused Therapy" in *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* (2009), vol. 15, 199–208 doi: 10.1192/apt.bp.107.005264 (<http://apt.rcpsych.org/content/aptrpsych/15/3/199.full.pdf>).

- Mammalian defenses include a menu of emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, disgust), behaviors (e.g., fight, flight, freeze, submission) and cognitive biases (e.g., ‘better safe than sorry’, ‘jumping to conclusions’).
- Threat protection systems have evolved to be attuned to certain kinds of threats and operate a “better safe than sorry” policy. In other words, we are prompted to act without taking time to think things through.
- Sensitivity and response to specific threats are the result of an interaction between genes and learning.
- Response options within the threat protection system can conflict, creating confusion
- Brain states choreographed from the threat protection system can bias other processing systems
- Over- and underdevelopment of sensitivities in threat-protection underpin many psychopathologies

In addition, we have another emotional regulation system, called the “drive” system.

THE DRIVE SYSTEM

- This system motivates and directs us to important resources. This is the system that makes us want to achieve our goals and win cases!
- It is a source of anticipation and pleasure.
- It underpins the development of desires and some goals – both material and those linked to self-esteem (e.g., seeking status or fame).
- It is an activating system highly stimulated by certain drugs (people who use cocaine are stimulating this system).
- The positive emotions flowing from this system are often the focus of Western psychology and materialistic cultures.

THE CONTENTMENT SYSTEM⁴

- When animals are not threatened and not seeking resources they can become content.
- Contentment is associated with a positive ‘calm’, positive affects and sense of well-being; contentment is not just the absence of threat.

⁴ To see the contentment system in action, please see <http://viralvideoplanet.com/wild-sea-otter-mom-and-newborn-pup-in-the-great-tide-pool/>.

- The evolution of attachment behavior utilized the contentment system, and enabled signals of caring and kindness to have soothing qualities that activate positive affects linked to feelings of well-being, safeness and social-connectedness. This aspect of the system may be called 'social safeness'. Mammals needed this system to survive.
- The contentment/social safeness system is internally wired to act as a regulator of the threat protection and drive systems.
- Compassionate mind training is directed at facilitating development of the soothing and social safeness system.

How does self-compassion interact with these systems?

Self-compassion practice is an antidote to the stress generated in our bodies and minds as a result of these physical and emotional systems.⁵ In today's world, we don't need to run from a saber toothed tiger anymore — but our nervous systems still act as if we do, flooding us with hormones which can cause harmful outcomes for our bodies, our minds and our interactions with others.

Psychologically, we take threats and failures and turn them inwards upon ourselves often blaming ourselves or others for our inability to control our lives, handle problems or achieve the outcomes we want.

Stress Response	Stress Response Turned Inward	Mindful Self-Compassion Response
Fight	Self-Criticism - the tendency to blame ourselves in a harsh or critical manner.	Self-Kindness - responding to feelings of pain with kindness and soothing
Flight	Self-Isolation - the tendency to see our problems as unique; "no one else ever has this happen to them." In this way, we see ourselves as abnormal and problematic.	Common Humanity - remembering we are neither alone nor abnormal and that all people have similar worries and problems

⁵ For an artistic representation of self-compassion, please see Japanese Bowls, Peter Meyer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOAzobTIGr8>.

Stress Response	Stress Response Turned Inward	Mindful Self-Compassion Response
Freeze	Self-Absorption leading to over-Identification - Self-absorption is obsessing on our own actions. Over-identification is when we become so wrapped up in emotional reactions that reality is left far, far behind.	Mindfulness - noticing without judging or attaching to what our mind is doing

The emotional regulation system of contentment is activated by the practice of self-compassion (we have to be *mindful* to notice that we need to use the skill of *self-compassion*). This practice stimulates the biological reactions in our body associated with the contentment system, calming the fight or flight and releasing hormones conducive to relaxation, calm and connection. For example, Gilbert and Irons proposed that engaging in self-compassionate behavior could exert an influence on physical well-being by activating the oxytocin–opiate system and reducing the body’s threat system.⁶ In addition, many other studies have found a positive correlation between self-compassion meditation and enhanced immune systems and responses to stress.⁷

⁶ Gilbert, P., & Irons, C. (2005). Therapies for shame and self-attacking using cognitive behavioral, emotional imagery and compassionate mind training. In P. Gilbert (Ed.), *Compassion, conceptualizations, research and use in psychotherapy* (pp. 263–325). London, UK: Routledge.

⁷See, e.g., Pace, T. W., Negi, L., Adame, D. D., Cole, S. P., Sivilli, T. I., Brown, T. D., & ... Raison, C. L. (2009). Effect of compassion meditation on neuroendocrine, innate immune and behavioral responses to psychosocial stress. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 34(1), 87-98. doi:10.1016/j.psyneuen.2008.08.011.

Appendix

This appendix summarizes a sample of the research literature on self-compassion. For a more extensive list, please see Kristen Neff's research web page: <http://self-compassion.org/the-research/>

Apologizing. Andrew J. Howell, Raelyne L. Dopko, Jessica B. Turowski, Karen Buro, "The disposition to apologize." *Personality and Individual Differences Journal* (2011) (in two studies, proclivity to apologize correlated positively with seeking forgiveness, self-esteem, care as a moral foundation, with compassion, autonomy and competence).

Body Image and Disordered Eating. Juliana Breines, Aubrey Toole, Clarissa Tu, and Serena Chen. "Self-compassion, Body Image, and Self-reported Disordered Eating." *Self and Identity*, 2014, Vol. 13, No. 4, 432–448 (Results of Study 1 indicated that on days when participants reported higher levels of appearance-related self-compassion, they also reported lower levels of disordered eating. Results of Study 2 indicated that participants who responded to a perceived body flaw in a self-compassionate way were significantly lower in subsequent self-reported body shame and anticipated disordered eating).

Burnout. Laura K. Barnard & John F. Curry, "The Relationship of Clergy Burnout to Self-Compassion and Other Personality Dimensions." *Pastoral Psychology* (2012) 61:149–163 DOI 10.1007/s11089-011-0377-0 (Religious leaders often experience burnout, which is characterized by emotional exhaustion and/or low satisfaction. Clergy with high emotional exhaustion feel drained and discouraged. Clergy with high satisfaction report that the ministry gives purpose and meaning to their lives. Hierarchical regression was used to examine if current clergy's desire to please others, guilt or shame orientation, ability to be self-compassionate, and ability to differentiate self from role uniquely predicted variation in burnout. Although all personality dimensions explained significant variation in emotional satisfaction when examined individually, due to inter-correlations among predictors only self-compassion was significant in the full model. Higher self-compassion was also related to increased satisfaction in ministry. Increasing self-compassion may prevent clergy burnout).

Cognitive Flexibility. Matthew M. Martin, Sydney M. Staggers, Carolyn M. Anderson, "The Relationship between Cognitive Flexibility with Dogmatism, Intellectual Flexibility, Preference for Consistency and Self-Compassion." *Communication Research Reports*, Vol. 28, No. 3, July-September 2011, pp 275-280 (self-compassion positively correlated to cognitive flexibility).

Conflict. Lisa M. Yarnell & Kristin D. Neff, "Self-compassion, Interpersonal Conflict Resolutions, and Well-being," *Self and Identity*, (2013) 12:2, 146-159, DOI: 10.1080/15298868.2011.649545 (Across contexts, higher levels of self-compassion were related to greater likelihood to compromise and lesser likelihood to self-subordinate needs, as well as greater authenticity, lower levels of emotional turmoil, and higher levels of relational well-

being. With fathers and romantic partners, the link between self-compassion and well-being was mediated by greater likelihood to make compromise decisions).

Creativity. Zabelina, Darya L. and Robinson, Michael D.(2010) “Don’t Be So Hard on Yourself: Self-Compassion Facilitates Creative Originality Among Self-Judgmental Individuals,” *Creativity Research Journal*, 22: 3, 288 — 293 (Self-compassion appeared to increase creative output in self-judgmental individuals).

Emotional Intelligence. Heffernan M, Quinn Griffin MT, McNulty SR, Fitzpatrick JJ. “Self-compassion and emotional intelligence in nurses.” *International Journal of Nursing Practice* 2010; **16**: 366–373 (Results indicated a positive correlation between self-compassion and emotional intelligence).

Goal Pursuit. Nora Hope, Richard Koestner & Marina Milyavskaya, “The Role of Self-Compassion in Goal Pursuit and Well-Being Among University Freshmen.” *Self and Identity*, DOI: 10.1080/15298868.2014.889032 (individuals high in self-compassion appeared to be less vulnerable to the affective consequences of thwarted goal progress).

Interpersonal relationships with challenging students. Patricia A. Jennings, “Early Childhood Teachers’ Well-Being, Mindfulness, and Self-Compassion in Relation to Classroom Quality and Attitudes Towards Challenging Students,” *Mindfulness*, DOI 10.1007/s12671-014-0312-4 (self compassion and mindfulness make important contributions to teachers’ ability to establish and sustain a classroom climate conducive to learning and to build and maintain supportive relationships with the children for whom they care, especially those whose behavior they find challenging).

Learning from Project Failure. Dean A. Shepherd and Melissa S. Cardon, “Negative Emotional Reactions to Project Failure and the Self-Compassion to Learn from the Experience.” *Journal of Management Studies* 46:6 September 2009 doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2009.00821.x (Although project failure is likely to generate a negative emotional response for those involved in the project, not all react this way. Self-Compassionate individuals showed higher ability to learn from project failure, with important implications for entrepreneurial and innovative organizations, employees’ psychological ownership, and personal engagement at work).

Perfectionism. Kirsty James, Bas Verplanken, Katharine A. Rimes, “Self-criticism as a mediator in the relationship between unhealthy perfectionism and distress.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 79 (2015) 123–128 (“The present findings may indicate that if mindfulness interventions are used with perfectionist individuals, the self-compassion components may be more important than training people to improve their skills in observing, describing and non-reacting to their moment-by-moment experience”).

Procrastination. Jeannetta G. Williams, Shannon K. Stark, and Erica E. Foster (2008) “Start Today or the Very Last Day? The Relationships Among Self-Compassion, Motivation, and Procrastination.” *American Journal Of Psychological Research*, Volume 4, Number 1 (Data analyses revealed that individuals with high self-compassion reported dramatically less motivation anxiety and procrastination tendency than those with low or moderate self-compassion).

Shame. Edward A. Johnson and Karen A. O’Brien, “Self-Compassion Soothes The Savage Ego-Threat System: Effects On Negative Affect, Shame, Rumination, And Depressive Symptoms.” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 32, No. 9, 2013, pp. 939-963 (“It appears that self-compassion promotes soothing, “hypo-egoic” (Leary, 2012) responses to negative outcomes that reduce threat system activation and depressive symptoms”).

Stress and Coping. Ashley Batts Allen and Mark R. Leary “Self-Compassion, Stress, and Coping.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4/2 (2010): 107–118, 10.1111/j.1751-9004.2009.00246.x (the degree to which people cope effectively with stressful life events is a primary determinant of their subjective well-being. People who are high in self-compassion treat themselves with kindness and concern when they experience negative events. Self-compassionate people tend to rely heavily on positive cognitive restructuring and less so on avoidance and escape but do not appear to differ from less self-compassionate people in the degree to which they cope through problem-solving or distraction).

Sandbagging and Self-Handicapping. Lars-Eric Petersen, “Self-compassion and self-protection strategies: The impact of self-compassion on the use of self-handicapping and sandbagging.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 56 (2014) 133–138 (self-compassion is negatively correlated with the self-protection strategies of sandbagging and self handicapping).