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STOP BEATING
YOURSELF UP AND
LEAVE INSECURITY
BEHIND

Self- Compassion



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Self-Compassion

Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind

Kristin Neff, Ph.D.

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

*To Rupert and Rowan
For the joy, wonder, love, and inspiration they give me*

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Part One](#) Why Self-Compassion?

[1](#) Discovering Self-Compassion

[2](#) Ending the Madness

[Part Two](#) The Core Components of Self-Compassion

[3](#) Being Kind to Ourselves

[4](#) We're All in This Together

[5](#) Being Mindful of What Is

[Part Three](#) The Benefits of Self-Compassion

[6](#) Emotional Resilience

[7](#) Opting Out of the Self-Esteem Game

[8](#) Motivation and Personal Growth

[Part Four](#) Self-Compassion in Relation to Others

[9](#) Compassion for Others

[10](#) Self-Compassionate Parenting

[11](#) Love and Sex

[Part Five](#) The Joy of Self-Compassion

[12](#) The Butterfly Emerges

[13](#) Self-Appreciation

[Searchable Terms](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Notes](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

WHY SELF-COMPASSION?

DISCOVERING SELF-COMPASSION

This kind of compulsive concern with “I, me, and mine” isn’t the same as loving ourselves... Loving ourselves points us to capacities of resilience, compassion, and understanding within that are simply part of being alive.

—SHARON SALZBERG, *The Force of Kindness*

IN THIS INCREDIBLY COMPETITIVE SOCIETY OF OURS, HOW MANY OF us truly feel good about ourselves? It seems such a fleeting thing—feeling good—especially as we need to feel *special and above average* to feel worthy. Anything less seems like a failure. I remember once as a freshman in college, after spending hours getting ready for a big party, I complained to my boyfriend that my hair, makeup, and outfit were woefully inadequate. He tried to reassure me by saying, “Don’t worry, you look fine.”

“Fine? Oh great, I always wanted to look fine...”

The desire to feel special is understandable. The problem is that by definition, it’s impossible for *everyone* to be above average at the same time. Although there are some ways in which we excel, there is always someone smarter, prettier, more successful. How do we cope with this? Not very well. To see ourselves positively, we tend to inflate our own egos and put others down so that we can feel good in comparison. But this strategy comes at a price—it holds us back from reaching our full potential in life.

Distorting Mirrors

If I have to feel better than you to feel good about myself, then how clearly am I really going to see you, or myself for that matter? Let’s say I had a stressful day at work and am grumpy and irritable with my husband when he gets home later that evening (purely hypothetical, of course). If I’m highly invested in having a positive self-image and don’t want to risk viewing myself in a negative light, I’m going to slant my interpretation of what transpires to make sure that any friction between us is seen as my husband’s fault, not my own.

“GOOD, YOU’RE HOME. DID YOU PICK UP THE GROCERIES LIKE I ASKED?”

“I JUST WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR, HOW ABOUT ‘NICE TO SEE YOU, DEAR, HOW WAS YOUR DAY?’”

“WELL, IF *you* WEREN’T SO FORGETFUL, MAYBE I WOULDN’T HAVE TO ALWAYS HOUND YOU.”

“AS A MATTER OF FACT, I DID PICK UP THE GROCERIES.”

“OH... WELL, UM... IT’S THE EXCEPTION THAT PROVES THE RULE. I WISH YOU WEREN’T SO UNRELIABLE.”

Not exactly a recipe for happiness.

Why is it so hard to admit when we step out of line, are rude, or act impatient? Because our ego feels so much better when we project our flaws and shortcomings on to someone else. *It’s your fault, not mine.* Just think about all the arguments and fights that grow out of this simple dynamic. Each

person blames the other for saying or doing something wrong, justifying their own actions as if their life depended on it, while both know, in their heart of hearts, that it takes two to tango. How much time do we waste like this? Wouldn't it be so much better if we could just fess up and play fair?

But change is easier said than done. It's almost impossible to notice those aspects of ourselves that cause problems relating to others, or that keep us from reaching our full potential, if we can't see ourselves clearly. How can we grow if we can't acknowledge our own weaknesses? We might *temporarily* feel better about ourselves by ignoring our flaws, or by believing our issues and difficulties are somebody else's fault, but in the long run we only harm ourselves by getting stuck in endless cycles of stagnation and conflict.

The Costs of Self-Judgment

Continually feeding our need for positive self-evaluation is a bit like stuffing ourselves with candy. We get a brief sugar high, then a crash. And right after the crash comes a pendulum swing to despair as we realize that—however much we'd like to—we can't always blame our problems on someone else. We can't always feel special and above average. The result is often devastating. We look in the mirror and don't like what we see (both literally and figuratively), and the shame starts to set in. Most of us are incredibly hard on ourselves when we finally admit some flaw or shortcoming. "I'm not good enough. I'm worthless." It's not surprising that we hide the truth from ourselves when honesty is met with such harsh condemnation.

In areas where it is hard to fool ourselves—when comparing our weight to those of magazine models, for instance, or our bank accounts to those of the rich and successful—we cause ourselves incredible amounts of emotional pain. We lose faith in ourselves, start doubting our potential, and become hopeless. Of course, this sorry state just yields more self-condemnation for being such a do-nothing loser, and down, down we go.

Even if we do manage to get our act together, the goalposts for what counts as "good enough" seem always to remain frustratingly out of reach. We must be smart *and* fit *and* fashionable *and* interesting *and* successful *and* sexy. Oh, and spiritual, too. And no matter how well we do, someone else always seems to be doing it better. The result of this line of thinking is sobering: millions of people need to take pharmaceuticals every day just to cope with daily life. Insecurity, anxiety, and depression are incredibly common in our society, and much of this is due to self-judgment, to beating ourselves up when we feel we aren't winning in the game of life.

Another Way

So what's the answer? *To stop judging and evaluating ourselves altogether.* To stop trying to label ourselves as "good" or "bad" and simply accept ourselves with an open heart. To treat ourselves with the same kindness, caring, and compassion we would show to a good friend, or even a stranger for that matter. Sadly, however, there's almost no one whom we treat as badly as ourselves.

When I first came across the idea of self-compassion, it changed my life almost immediately. It was during my last year in the Human Development doctoral program at the University of California at Berkeley, as I was putting the finishing touches on my dissertation. I was going through a really difficult time following the breakup of my first marriage, and I was full of shame and self-loathing. I thought signing up for meditation classes at a local Buddhist center might help. I had been interested in Eastern spirituality from the time I was a small child, having been raised by an open-minded mother just outside of Los Angeles. But I had never taken meditation seriously. I had also never

examined Buddhist philosophy, as my exposure to Eastern thought had been more along California New Age lines. As part of my exploration, I read Sharon Salzberg's classic book *Lovingkindness* and was never the same again.

I had known that Buddhists talk a lot about the importance of compassion, but I had never considered that having compassion for *yourself* might be as important as having compassion for others. From the Buddhist point of view, you have to care about yourself before you can really care about other people. If you are continually judging and criticizing yourself while trying to be kind to others, you are drawing artificial boundaries and distinctions that only lead to feelings of separation and isolation. This is the opposite of oneness, interconnection, and universal love—the ultimate goal of most spiritual paths, no matter which tradition.

I remember talking to my new fiancé, Rupert, who joined me for the weekly Buddhist group meetings, and shaking my head in amazement. “You mean you’re actually allowed to be *nice* to yourself, to have compassion for yourself when you mess up or are going through a really hard time? don’t know...If I’m too self-compassionate, won’t I just be lazy and selfish?” It took me a while to get my head around it. But I slowly came to realize that self-criticism—despite being socially sanctioned—was not at all helpful, and in fact only made things worse. I wasn’t making myself a better person by beating myself up all the time. Instead, I was causing myself to feel inadequate and insecure, then taking out my frustration on the people closest to me. More than that, I wasn’t owning up to many things because I was so afraid of the self-hate that would follow if I admitted the truth.

What Rupert and I both came to learn was that instead of relying on our relationship to meet all our needs for love, acceptance, and security, we could actually provide some of these feelings for *ourselves*. And this would mean that we had even more in our hearts to give to each other. We were both so moved by the concept of self-compassion that in our marriage ceremony later that year, each of us ended our vows by saying “Most of all, I promise to help you have compassion for yourself, so that you can thrive and be happy.”

After getting my Ph.D., I did two years of postdoctoral training with a leading self-esteem researcher. I wanted to know more about how people determine their sense of self-worth. I quickly learned that the field of psychology was falling out of love with self-esteem as the ultimate marker of positive mental health. Although thousands of articles had been written on the importance of self-esteem, researchers were now starting to point out all the traps that people can fall into when they try to get and keep a sense of high self-esteem: narcissism, self-absorption, self-righteous anger, prejudice, discrimination, and so on. I realized that self-compassion was the perfect alternative to the relentless pursuit of self-esteem. Why? Because it offers the same protection against harsh self-criticism as self-esteem, but without the need to see ourselves as perfect or as better than others. *In other words, self-compassion provides the same benefits as high self-esteem without its drawbacks.*

When I got a job as an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin, I decided that as soon as I got settled I would conduct research on self-compassion. Although no one had yet defined self-compassion from an academic perspective—let alone done any research on it—I knew that this would be my life’s work.

So what is self-compassion? What does it mean exactly? I usually find that the best way to describe self-compassion is to start with a more familiar experience—compassion for others. After all, compassion is the same whether we direct it to ourselves or to other people.

Compassion for Others

Imagine you’re stuck in traffic on the way to work, and a homeless man tries to get you to pay him a

buck for washing your car windows. *He's so pushy!* you think to yourself. *He'll make me miss the light and be late. He probably just wants the money for booze or drugs anyway. Maybe if I ignore him, he'll just leave me alone.* But he doesn't ignore you, and you sit there hating him while he washes your window, feeling guilty if you don't toss him some money, resentful if you do.

Then one day, you're struck as if by lightning. There you are in the same commuter traffic, at the same light, at the same time, and there's the homeless man, with his bucket and squeegee as usual. Yet for some unknown reason, today you see him differently. You see him as a *person* rather than just a mere annoyance. You notice his suffering. *How does he survive? Most people just shoo him away. He's out here in the traffic and fumes all day and certainly isn't earning much. At least he's trying to offer something in return for the cash. It must be really tough to have people be so irritated with you all the time. I wonder what his story is? How he ended up on the streets?* The moment you see the man as an actual human being who is suffering, your heart connects with him. Instead of ignoring him, you find—to your amazement—that you're taking a moment to think about how difficult his life is. You are moved by his pain and feel the urge to help him in some way. Importantly, if what you feel is true compassion rather than mere pity, you say to yourself, *There but for the grace of God go I. If I'd been born in different circumstances, or maybe had just been unlucky, I might also be struggling to survive like that. We're all vulnerable.*

Of course, that might be the moment when you harden your heart completely—your own fear of ending up on the street causing you to dehumanize this horrid heap of rags and beard. Many people do. But it doesn't make them happy; it doesn't help them deal with the stresses of their work, their spouse, or their child when they get home. It doesn't help them face their own fears. If anything, this hardening of the heart, which involves feeling *better* than the homeless man, just makes the whole thing that little bit worse.

But let's say you don't close up. Let's say you really do experience compassion for the homeless man's misfortune. How does it feel? Actually, it feels pretty good. It's wonderful when your heart opens—you immediately feel more connected, alive, present.

Now, let's say the man wasn't trying to wash windows in return for some cash. Maybe he was just begging for money to buy alcohol or drugs—should you still feel compassion for him? Yes. You don't have to invite him home. You don't even have to give him a buck. You may decide to give him a kind smile or a sandwich rather than money if you feel that's the more responsible thing to do. But yes, he is still worthy of compassion—all of us are. Compassion is not only relevant to those who are blameless victims, but also to those whose suffering stems from failures, personal weakness, or bad decisions. You know, the kind you and I make every day.

Compassion, then, involves the recognition and clear seeing of suffering. It also involves feeling of kindness for people who are suffering, so that the desire to help—to *ameliorate suffering*—emerges. Finally, compassion involves recognizing our shared human condition, flawed and fragile as it is.

Compassion for Ourselves

Self-compassion, by definition, involves the same qualities. First, it requires that we stop to recognize our own suffering. We can't be moved by our own pain if we don't even acknowledge that it exists in the first place. Of course, sometimes the fact that we're in pain is blindingly obvious and we can think of nothing else. More often than you might think, however, we *don't* recognize when we are suffering. Much of Western culture has a strong “stiff-upper-lip” tradition. We are taught that we shouldn't complain, that we should just *carry on* (to be read in a clipped British accent while giving a smart

salute). If we're in a difficult or stressful situation, we rarely take the time to step back and recognize how hard it is for us in the moment.

And when our pain comes from self-judgment—if you're angry at yourself for mistreating someone, or for making some stupid remark at a party—it's even harder to see these as moments of suffering. Like the time I asked a friend I hadn't seen in a while, eyeing the bump of her belly, "Are we expecting?" "Er, no," she answered, "I've just put on some weight lately." "Oh..." I said as my face turned beet red. We typically don't recognize such moments as a type of pain that is worthy of a compassionate response. After all, I messed up, doesn't that mean I should be punished? Well, do you punish your friends or your family when they mess up? Okay, maybe sometimes a little, but do you feel good about it?

Everybody makes mistakes at one time or another, it's a fact of life. And if you think about it, why should you expect anything different? Where is that written contract you signed before birth promising that you'd be perfect, that you'd never fail, and that your life would go absolutely the way you want it to? *Uh, excuse me. There must be some error. I signed up for the "everything will go swimmingly until the day I die" plan. Can I speak to the management, please?* It's absurd, and yet most of us act as if something has gone terribly awry when we fall down or life takes an unwanted or unexpected turn.

One of the downsides of living in a culture that stresses the ethic of independence and individual achievement is that if we don't continually reach our ideal goals, we feel that we only have ourselves to blame. And if we're at fault, that means we don't deserve compassion, right? The truth is, *everyone* is worthy of compassion. The very fact that we are conscious human beings experiencing life on the planet means that we are intrinsically valuable and deserving of care. According to the Dalai Lama, "Human beings by nature want happiness and do not want suffering. With that feeling everyone tries to achieve happiness and tries to get rid of suffering, and everyone has the basic right to do this.... Basically, from the viewpoint of real human value we are all the same." This is the same sentiment, of course, that inspired the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." We don't have to earn the right to compassion; it is our birthright. We are human, and our ability to think and feel, combined with our desire to be happy rather than to suffer, warrants compassion for its own sake.

Many people are resistant to the idea of self-compassion, however. Isn't it really just a form of self-pity? Or a dressed-up word for self-indulgence? I will show throughout this book that these assumptions are false and run directly counter to the actual meaning of self-compassion. As you'll come to see, self-compassion involves wanting health and well-being for oneself and leads to proactive behavior to better one's situation, rather than passivity. And self-compassion doesn't mean that I think my problems are more important than yours, it just means I think that my problems are *also* important and worthy of being attended to.

Rather than condemning yourself for your mistakes and failures, therefore, you can use the experience of suffering to soften your heart. You can let go of those unrealistic expectations of perfection that make you so dissatisfied, and open the door to real and lasting satisfaction. All by giving yourself the compassion you need in the moment.

The research that my colleagues and I have conducted over the past decade shows that self-compassion is a powerful way to achieve emotional well-being and contentment in our lives. By giving ourselves unconditional kindness and comfort while embracing the human experience, difficult as it is, we avoid destructive patterns of fear, negativity, and isolation. At the same time, self-compassion fosters positive mind-states such as happiness and optimism. The nurturing quality of self-compassion allows us to flourish, to appreciate the beauty and richness of life, even in hard times.

When we soothe our agitated minds with self-compassion, we're better able to notice what's right as well as what's wrong, so that we can orient ourselves toward that which gives us joy.

Self-compassion provides an island of calm, a refuge from the stormy seas of endless positive and negative self-judgment, so that we can finally stop asking, "Am I as good as they are? Am I good enough?" Right here at our fingertips we have the means to provide ourselves with the warm, supportive care we deeply yearn for. By tapping into our inner well-springs of kindness, acknowledging the shared nature of our imperfect human condition, we can start to feel more secure, accepted, and alive.

In many ways self-compassion is like magic, because it has the power to transform suffering into joy. In her book *Emotional Alchemy: How the Mind Can Heal the Heart*, Tara Bennett-Goleman uses the metaphor of alchemy to symbolize the spiritual and emotional transformation that's possible when we embrace our pain with caring concern. When we give ourselves compassion, the tight knot of negative self-judgment starts to dissolve, replaced by a feeling of peaceful, connected acceptance—a sparkling diamond that emerges from the coal.

Exercise One

How Do You React to Yourself and Your Life?

HOW DO YOU TYPICALLY REACT TO YOURSELF?

- What types of things do you typically judge and criticize yourself for—appearance, career, relationships, parenting, and so on?
- What type of language do you use with yourself when you notice some flaw or make a mistake—do you insult yourself, or do you take a more kind and understanding tone?
- If you are highly self-critical, how does this make you feel inside?
- What are the consequences of being so hard on yourself? Does it make you more motivated, or does it tend to make you discouraged and depressed?
- How do you think you would feel if you could truly accept yourself exactly as you are? Does this possibility scare you, give you hope, or both?

HOW DO YOU TYPICALLY REACT TO LIFE DIFFICULTIES?

- How do you treat yourself when you run into challenges in your life? Do you tend to ignore the fact that you're suffering and focus exclusively on fixing the problem, or do you stop to give yourself care and comfort?
- Do you tend to get carried away by the drama of difficult situations, so that you make a bigger deal out of them than you need to, or do you tend to keep things in balanced perspective?
- Do you tend to feel cut off from others when things go wrong, with the irrational feeling that everyone else is having a better time of it than you are, or do you try to remember that all people experience hardship in their lives?

If you feel that you lack sufficient self-compassion, check in with yourself—are you criticizing yourself for this, too? If so, stop right there. Try to feel compassion for how difficult it is to be an imperfect human being in this extremely competitive society of ours. Our culture does not emphasize self-compassion, quite the opposite. We're told that no

matter how hard we try, our best just isn't good enough. It's time for something different. ~~We can all benefit by learning to be more self-compassionate, and now is the perfect time to start.~~

So how is all this relevant to you, the reader? This and every chapter contain exercises that will help you understand how your continual self-judgment is harming you. There are also exercises to help you develop greater self-compassion so that it becomes a habit in daily life, allowing you to establish a healthier way of relating to yourself. You can determine your precise level of self-compassion using the self-compassion scale I developed for my research. Go to my website—www.self-compassion.org—and click on the “How Self-Compassionate Are You?” link. After filling out a series of questions, your level of self-compassion will be calculated for you. You may want to record your score and take the test again after reading the book, to determine if you've increased your level of self-compassion with practice.

You can't always have high self-esteem and your life will continue to be flawed and imperfect—but self-compassion will always be there, waiting for you, a safe haven. In good times and bad, whether you're on top of the world or at the bottom of the heap, self-compassion will keep you going, helping you move to a better place. It does take work to break the self-criticizing habits of a lifetime, but at the end of the day, you are only being asked to relax, allow life to be as it is, and open your heart to yourself. It's easier than you might think, and it could change your life.

Exercise Two

Exploring Self-Compassion Through Letter Writing

PART ONE

Everybody has something about themselves that they don't like; something that causes them to feel shame, to feel insecure or not “good enough.” It is the human condition to be imperfect, and feelings of failure and inadequacy are part of the experience of living. Try thinking about an issue that tends to make you feel inadequate or bad about yourself (physical appearance, work or relationship issues, etc.). How does this aspect of yourself make you feel inside—scared, sad, depressed, insecure, angry? What emotions come up for you when you think about this aspect of yourself? Please try to be as emotionally honest as possible and to avoid repressing any feelings, while at the same time not being melodramatic. Try to just feel your emotions exactly as they are—no more, no less.

PART TWO

Now think about an imaginary friend who is unconditionally loving, accepting, kind, and compassionate. Imagine that this friend can see all your strengths and all your weaknesses, including the aspect of yourself you have just been thinking about. Reflect upon what this friend feels toward you, and how you are loved and accepted exactly as you are, with all your very human imperfections. This friend recognizes the limits of human nature and is kind and forgiving toward you. In his/her great wisdom this friend understands your life history and the millions of things that have happened in your life to create you as you are in this moment. Your particular inadequacy is connected to so many things you didn't

necessarily choose: your genes, your family history, life circumstances—things that were outside of your control.

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend—focusing on the perceived inadequacy you tend to judge yourself for. What would this friend say to you about your “flaw” from the perspective of unlimited compassion? How would this friend convey the deep compassion he/she feels for you, especially for the discomfort you feel when you judge yourself so harshly? What would this friend write in order to remind you that you are only human, that all people have both strengths and weaknesses? And if you think this friend would suggest possible changes you should make, how would these suggestions embody feelings of unconditional understanding and compassion? As you write to yourself from the perspective of this imaginary friend, try to infuse your letter with a strong sense of the person’s acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness.

After writing the letter, put it down for a little while. Then come back and read it again, really letting the words sink in. Feel the compassion as it pours into you, soothing and comforting you like a cool breeze on a hot day. Love, connection, and acceptance are your birthright. To claim them you need only look within yourself.

ENDING THE MADNESS

*What is this self inside us, this silent observer,
Severe and speechless critic, who can terrorize us
And urge us on to futile activity
And in the end, judge us still more severely
For the errors into which his own reproaches drove us?*
—T. S. ELIOT, *The Elder Statesman*

BEFORE EXAMINING SELF-COMPASSION IN MORE DETAIL, IT'S WORTH considering what our more habitual, unhealthy states of mind look like. As we begin to see the workings of our psyches more clearly, we start to recognize how much we skew our perceptions of the world in order to feel better about ourselves. It's as if we're continually airbrushing our self-image to try to make it more to our liking, even if it radically distorts reality. At the same time, we mercilessly criticize ourselves when we fall short of our ideals, reacting so harshly that reality is equally distorted in the opposite direction. The result can look like a Salvador Dalí picture (extra warped). As we first start to learn about self-compassion as a viable alternative to this madness, it's easy for us to end up judging our ego dysfunctions themselves. "I'm so full of myself, I should be more humble!" Or else, "I get so down on myself, I should be more kind and self-accepting!" It's very important to stop condemning yourself for these patterns, fruitless as they may be. The only way to truly have compassion for yourself is to realize that these neurotic ego cycles are not of your own choosing, they are natural and universal. Put simply, we come by our dysfunctions honestly—they are part of our human inheritance.

So why do we vacillate between self-serving distortions and ruthless self-criticism? Because we want to be safe. Our development, both as a species and as individuals, is predicated on basic survival instincts. Because human beings tend to live in hierarchical social groups, those who are dominant within their group are less likely to be rejected and have more access to valued resources. In the same way, those who accept their subordinate status also have a secure place in the social order. We can't take the risk of being outcast by the people who keep us out of harm's way. Not if we want to stay alive. Surely this behavior need not be judged—how could the desire to be safe and secure be anything other than normal and natural for any living organism?

The Need to Feel Better Than Others

Garrison Keillor famously describes the fictional town of Lake Wobegon as a place where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." For this reason, psychologists sometimes use the phrase "Lake Wobegon effect" to describe the common tendency to think of oneself as superior to others on a long list of desirable personality traits. Research has shown that fully 85 percent of students think that they're above average in terms of getting along with others, for instance. Ninety-four percent of college faculty members think they're better teachers than their colleagues, and 90 percent of drivers think they're more skilled than their road mates. Ever

people who've recently caused a car accident think they're superior drivers! Research shows that people tend to think they're funnier, more logical, more popular, better looking, nicer, more trustworthy, wiser, and more intelligent than others. Ironically, most people also think they're above average in the ability to view themselves objectively. Logically speaking, of course, if our self-perceptions were accurate, only half of all people would say they're above average on any particular trait, the other half admitting they were below average. But this almost never happens. It's unacceptable to be average in our society, so pretty much everyone wears a pair of rose-colored glasses, at least when they're looking in the mirror. How else can we explain all those *American Idol* contestants with marginal talent who seem so genuinely shocked when they're booted off the show?

One might assume that the tendency to see oneself as better than and superior to other people is primarily found in individualistic cultures such as the United States, where self-promotion is a way of life. Where else could Muhammad Ali have gotten away with the line, "I'm not the greatest; I'm the *double* greatest"? In more collectivistic Asian cultures, where conceit is frowned upon, aren't people more modest? The answer is yes, most Asians think they're more modest than others. Research suggests that all people self-enhance, but only on those traits valued by their culture. Whereas Americans tend to think they're more independent, self-reliant, original, and leader-like than the average American, Asians tend to think they're more cooperative, self-sacrificing, respectful, and humble than their peers. *I'm more modest than you are!* It's the same almost everywhere.

And we don't just see ourselves as "better," we also see others as "worse." Psychologists use the term "downward social comparison" to describe our tendency to see others in a negative light so that we can feel superior by contrast. If I'm trying to gild my own ego, you can be damn sure I'll try to tarnish yours. "Sure you're rich, but look at that bald spot!" This tendency was brilliantly illustrated in the film *Mean Girls*. The movie was actually based on the nonfiction book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* by Rosalind Wiseman, which describes how female cliques in high school maintain their social status. *Mean Girls* tells the story of three beautiful, rich, and well-dressed girls who seem to have it all. Certainly they think so. As one says, "I'm sorry that people are so jealous of me...I can't help it that I'm so popular." The girls, however, are hated despite their popularity. The clique keeps something called the "Burn Book"—a top secret notebook filled with rumors, secrets, and gossip about the other girls in school. "See," says one, "we cut out girls' pictures from the yearbook, and then we wrote comments. 'Trang Pak is a grotsky little byotch.' Still true. 'Dawn Schweitzer is a fat virgin.' Still half true." When the existence of the book is revealed to the school body at large, it ends up causing a riot. The film was a blockbuster hit in the United States and struck a huge chord with audiences. While exaggerated for comedic effect, the mean girl (or boy) phenomenon is something we're all too familiar with.

Although most of us don't go to the lengths of keeping a "Burn Book," it's very common to look for flaws and shortcomings in others as a way to feel better about ourselves. Why else do we love pictures of stars spilling out of their swimsuits, making fashion flubs, or having a bad hair day? This approach, while ego gratifying for a few moments, has some serious drawbacks. When we are always seeing the worst in others, our perception becomes obscured by a dark cloud of negativity. Our thoughts become malevolent, and this is the mental world we then inhabit. Downward social comparisons actually harm rather than help us. By putting others down to puff ourselves up, we are cutting off our nose to spite our face, creating and maintaining the state of disconnection and isolation we actually want to avoid.

Exercise One

Seeing Yourself as You Are

Many people think they're above average on personal traits that society values—like being friendlier, smarter, more attractive than average. This tendency helps us to feel good about ourselves, but it also can lead us to feel more separate and cut off from others. This exercise is designed to help us see ourselves clearly and accept ourselves exactly as we are. All people have culturally valued traits that might be considered “better” than average, some traits that are just average, and some that are “below” average. Can we accept this reality with kindness and equanimity?

A. List five culturally valued traits for which you're *above average*:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

B. List five culturally valued traits for which you're *just average*:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

C. List five culturally valued traits for which you're *below average*:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

D. Consider the full range of traits listed above. Can you accept all these facets of yourself? Being human does not mean being better than others. Being human means you encompass the full range of human experience, the positive, the negative, and the neutral. Being human means you *are* average in many ways. Can you celebrate the experience of being alive on this planet in all your complexity and wonder?

Why Is It So Hard to Stop Beating Ourselves Up?

Perhaps more perplexing than the desire to think well of ourselves is our equally strong tendency toward self-criticism. As British novelist Anthony Powell noted, “Self-love seems so often unrequited.” When we don't succeed in reinterpreting reality so that we feel better than others, when we're forced to finally face up to the fact that our self-image is more blemished than we would like it to be, what happens? All too often, Cruella De Vil or Mr. Hyde emerges from the shadows, attacking

our imperfect selves with a surprising viciousness. And the language of self-criticism cuts like a knife. ~~Most of our self-critical thoughts take the form of an inner dialogue, a constant commentary and evaluation of what we are experiencing.~~ Because there is no social censure when our inner dialogue is harsh or callous, we often talk to ourselves in an especially brutal way. “You’re so fat and disgusting.” “That was a totally stupid thing to say.” “You’re such a loser. No wonder nobody wants you.” Ouch! Yet such self-abuse is incredibly common. *Floccinaucinihilipilification*, defined as the habit of estimating something as worthless, is one of the longest words in the English language. The mystery of why we do it is as baffling as how to pronounce it.

Perhaps our behavior becomes more understandable, however, when we remember that just like self-aggrandizement, self-criticism is a type of safety behavior designed to ensure acceptance within the larger social group. Even though the alpha dog gets to eat first, the dog that shows his belly when snarled at still gets his share. He’s given a safe place in the pack even if it’s at the bottom of the pecking order. Self-criticism serves as a submissive behavior because it allows us to abase ourselves before imaginary others who pronounce judgment over us—then reward our submission with a few crumbs from the table. When we are forced to admit our failings, we can appease our mental judges by acquiescing to their negative opinions of us.

Consider, for example, how people often criticize themselves in front of others: “I look like a cow in this dress,” “I’m hopelessly inept with computers,” “I have the worst sense of direction of anyone I know!” (I’m prone to spouting this last line, especially when I’m driving friends somewhere and have gotten lost for the umpteenth time.) It’s as if we’re saying, “I’m going to beat you to the punch and criticize myself before you can. I recognize how flawed and imperfect I am so you don’t have to cut me down and tell me what I already know. Hopefully you will then have sympathy for me instead of judging me and assure me that I’m not as bad as I think I am.” This defensive posture stems from the natural desire not to be rejected and abandoned and makes sense in terms of our most basic survival instincts.

The Role of Parents

The social group that is most important for survival, of course, is the immediate family. Children rely on their parents to provide food, comfort, warmth, and shelter. They instinctively trust parents to interpret the meaning of things, to help deal with scary new challenges, to keep them safe from harm any way. Children have no choice but to rely on parents in order to get by in the world. Sadly, however, many parents don’t provide comfort and support, but rather try to control their children through constant criticism. Many of you have grown up this way.

When mothers or fathers use harsh criticism as a means to keep their kids out of trouble (“don’t be so stupid or you’ll get run over by a car”), or to improve their behavior (“you’ll never get into college if you keep getting such pathetic grades”), children assume that criticism is a useful and necessary motivational tool. As comedian Phyllis Diller notes, “We spend the first twelve months of our children’s lives teaching them to walk and talk and the next twelve telling them to sit down and shut up.” Unsurprisingly, research shows that individuals who grow up with highly critical parents in childhood are much more likely to be critical toward themselves as adults.

People deeply internalize their parents’ criticisms, meaning that the disparaging running commentary they hear inside their own head is often a reflection of parental voices—sometimes passed down and replicated throughout generations. As one man told me, “I just can’t shut the voice up. My mom used to pick on me no matter what I did—for eating my dinner like a pig, wearing the wrong clothes to church, watching too much TV, whatever. ‘You’re never going to amount to

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