

The Proof is in the Pudding: The Healing Power of Self-Compassion (Part 1)

Continuing Step 11: Changing Behaviors

Pursuing Podcast Episode 14

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Notes	
Main Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Step 11: <i>We commit to behaviors that are consistent with our healthier emotions, thoughts, and beliefs.</i> ● As we work on changing our emotions, thoughts, and beliefs, behavior change will follow. ● This being a circular feedback process, as we implement behavior change, our emotions, thoughts, and beliefs are reinforced in a positive way. ● Some critical positive behavior changes are self-parenting, self-care, and showing up with self-compassion. Research is clear that for behavior change to be positive and lasting, self-compassion is far more effective than self-punishment. ● As we consciously change behavior, we can take advantage of the brain's design for efficiency to automate the process. By consciously repeating these behaviors through evidence-based methods, we create unconscious action programming, or habits.
Why self-compassion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Human beings tend to be very adept at self-criticism. This is driven by three main desires or needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The need for approval ○ The need for control ○ The need to be safe ● These needs have been found to be the main reasons why we fluctuate between self-serving distortions and harsh self-criticism. ● The way we stop this toxic cycle is with <i>self-compassion</i>.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In order to be able to apply self-compassion in our lives, we have to do four things: (1) Examine our beliefs about self-compassion; (2) understand what self-compassion really is; (3) learn how to apply it in our lives, and (4) know what the benefits of doing so are.
<p>Examine our beliefs about self-compassion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● First, we need to examine our beliefs about self-criticism and self-judgment. ● There are three main ways our beliefs are created: (1) through our experiences; (2) we are taught them or have them projected onto us by others; or (3) they are thoughts tied to strong emotions that are repeated and supported by our experience (consequence), so the entire cycle (thoughts, emotions, and behaviors) they are automatized (become unconscious). ● As children, we often experience criticism from the adults in our life in an attempt to improve our behavior (e.g., <i>You'll never get into college if you keep getting such pathetic grades.</i>). This experience teaches us that criticism is a useful and necessary motivational tool. This becomes our belief, and our thoughts and behaviors will follow suit. ● Criticism and punishment are really a cover for the desire or need for control. It is vital for us to acknowledge the reality that these core desire or needs are actually the man behind the curtain, manipulating our lives in more ways than we can imagine. ● Dr. Juliana Breines (Brinis) in her article, "No Pain, No Gain: Why We Punish Ourselves," identified three common beliefs we hold that have been validated through research explaining why we engage in self-punishing behaviors: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I deserve to suffer. 2. Suffering will make me a better person. 3. I'm supposed to suffer. ● 1. "I deserve to suffer." As humans, we will actually work to maintain or even increase bad feelings if we have low self-esteem and/or negative self-perception (found in research conducted by Joanne Wood and colleagues). This supports what is known as self-verification theory, which basically says that we are comfortable with treatment that is familiar and consistent with our self-views. It was found that if people have negative self-views they "were less motivated to feel good because feeling good was inconsistent with their

negative self-views, and because they didn't feel they *deserved* to feel good" (Breines, 2010).

- 2. "Suffering will make me a better person." This belief holds deep significance in numerous cultural and religious traditions as a way to purify or cleanse any undesirable or "bad" aspects of the self. There is the conception that if we suffer, we can receive absolution. When this belief is held, self-punishment can seemingly reduce feelings of guilt, but self-punishment has not been shown to create actual behavior change and can in fact take a serious toll on mental health and lead to mental illnesses such as depression and eating disorders (Breines, 2012).
- 3. "I'm supposed to suffer." This belief stems from a view that we either deserve to suffer or that we are being tested to show our ability to endure it. There was a study sighted to support this belief as well. Our brains are wired to do three things: be efficient, seek pleasure, and avoid pain. When pain introduces itself in our lives, we must create a story to justify it (we are wired to do this as a way to process the pain). The stories we narrate either use pain to demonstrate our strength and support the easier handled belief that things happen for a reason, or we begin to narrate our story in a way that makes us out to be the victim, which usually has these core beliefs of deserving to suffer at the base. Breines (2012) clarified that "believing that things happen for a reason can be comforting, but at times this belief may impede efforts to reduce controllable forms of suffering."
- These toxic beliefs wreak havoc in our lives beyond what we can imagine. Research has even shown that we will create behaviors and attract certain people in our lives to maintain those beliefs. Our life becomes anchored in suffering, so we create a story that makes it appear to be a good thing, when in reality it keeps us stuck and in pain.
- Self-criticism must be somewhat effective as a motivator, otherwise we wouldn't do it. But if it does work at all, it's for one reason only: *fear*. Neff (2011) said, "Because it is so unpleasant to be harshly criticized by ourselves when we fail, we become motivated by the desire to escape our own self-judgment. It's like we're putting our own heads on the chopping block, constantly threatening the worst, knowing that the terror of our own harsh self-criticism will prevent us from being complacent" (p. 162).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Whatever payoff we think we might be getting by functioning from fear, it does not compensate for the far greater negative effects. There are two main drawbacks to this approach: (1) fear causes anxiety, and anxiety itself can undermine performance; and (2) it can lead to psychological tricks designed to prevent self-blame in the case of failure, which ironically, makes failure more likely. ● The truth is that what we do, think, or feel is not always a perfect reflection of <i>who</i> we are, but rather a reflection of <i>where</i> we are on our journey. ● Self-criticism undermines our motivation because it is fear-based, whereas self-compassion is a strong motivator because it is based on love. ● Neff (2011) found that “the number one reason people give for why they aren’t more compassionate with themselves is fear of laziness and self-indulgence” (p. 160). ● Self-compassion is a far more effective motivator for positive behaviour change. Neff (2011) found in her research that, “It involves wanting health and wellbeing for oneself and leads to proactive behavior to better one’s situation, rather than passivity” (p. 12).
<p>Understand what self-compassion really is (and what it is not)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Neff’s (2011) research 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” (p. 13). ● Many people assume that self-compassion is just a nice warm-fuzzy type of feeling and nothing more. But healing and growth are not served by such superficial treatment. Neff (2011) said, “Unlike self-criticism, which asks if you’re good enough, self-compassion asks <i>what’s good for you?</i> Self-compassion taps into your inner desire to be healthy and happy” (p. 165).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It is best in understanding self-compassion, to talk first about compassion for others. Compassion for others comes when we see another as a fellow human being and we are moved by their pain and feel the urge to help in some way (Neff, 2011, p.9). But compassion even runs deeper than extending it to those we judge deserving of compassion—because everyone is deserving of compassion. ● Self-compassion then requires us to first recognize our own suffering. As Neff (2011) said, “We can’t be moved by our own pain if we don’t even acknowledge that it exists in the first place” (p. 10). ● The way that Neff (2011) defines it, self-compassion entails three core components: “First, it requires <i>self-kindness</i>, that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental. Second, it requires recognition of our <i>common humanity</i>, feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering. Third, it requires <i>mindfulness</i>—that we hold our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it” (p. 41).
<p>Three Action Items</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Begin to explore your beliefs about and your behaviours of self-criticism, self-judgement, and self-punishment. Work to identify driving needs and unhealthy pay-offs. ● Explore your beliefs about self-compassion. Identify any resistance you may have towards it by working on changing any distorted beliefs you may have. ● Choose to take on the challenge of applying it in your life. Remember, the proof is in the pudding. (Remember from Steps 3 and 7 that choosing and committing to healing behaviors in the work is critical for success.)
<p>Sources:</p>	<p>Braun, T.D., Park, C.L., and Gorin, A. Self-compassion, body image, and disordered eating: A review of the literature. <i>Body Image</i> (17), pp. 117-131.</p> <p>Breines, J. (2012, April 23). <i>No Pain, No Gain: Why We Punish Ourselves</i>. Retrieved from https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-love-and-war/201204/no-pain-no-gain-why-we-punish-ourselves</p>

	<p>Neff, K. D. (2011). <i>Self-Compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself</i>. New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers.</p>
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