

### INTRODUCTION TO SELF-COMPASSION

Self-compassion can be broadly defined as the ability to treat one's self with the same care and kindness that one would naturally show a beloved friend or family member. In the past decade, there has been a rapid blossoming of interest amongst psychologists in the field of self-compassion. There is now a great deal of research which suggests that self-compassion has many benefits for our health and can help us to be happier and more resilient.

To understand what we mean by self-compassion, it is helpful to draw a distinction between self-compassion and self-esteem.

Self-esteem involves evaluating oneself in relation to others. It is dependent upon us doing well and succeeding. In order to maintain high self-esteem, we must see ourselves as above average. Of course, not everyone can be above average all the time. If our self-esteem rests upon us being more 'successful' than others, we struggle when we find ourselves falling short of our own expectations.

Self-compassion, on the other hand, allows us to recognise our own value and to care for ourselves whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. With self-compassion, we feel kindness towards ourselves at times we are 'successful' and times we are 'unsuccessful'; when things are going 'well' and when things are going less well. Self-compassion helps us to be more resilient and prevents us falling into negative thought patterns at the inevitable times when things don't go to plan.

One might assume that if we are simply kind to ourselves all the time, we might become self-indulgent and lazy. However, the opposite is true. When we have self-compassion, we still want ourselves to do well but for the right reasons. For example, somebody who is motivated by self-compassion might challenge themselves to try something new because they want to learn and grow. Whereas someone who is motivated by the need to maintain high self-esteem, might try to learn a new skill in order to make sure that they are 'the best' and because they are afraid of falling behind. When it comes to motivation, self-compassion is the carrot not the stick. Self-compassion provides a more balanced, sustainable and healthy way of relating to the self.

When we give ourselves self-compassion, it triggers the release of oxytocin. Oxytocin is often known as the bonding hormone. It is released in response to pro-social behaviours such as having warm interactions or sharing a hug. But researchers have now discovered that oxytocin is also released when we are kind to ourselves. Oxytocin has many positive effects on the body. Self-compassion is also thought to reduce activity in the amygdala, reducing levels of adrenaline and cortisol and reducing heart rate. In other words, self-compassion, has a physiological effect on the body, helping us to feel calmer, less stressed and better able to respond to whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

Giving ourselves self-compassion can be helpful when we are going through a difficult time. This might be anything from low-level stress, right through to larger life experiences such as a relationship break up or illness. Self-compassion doesn't take these events away or immunise us from suffering but it can help us to manage our reactions and to frame our experience in a way that does not cause further suffering. It can help us to develop a sense of peace, balance and clarity.

A key component of self-compassion is understanding that difficult events and difficult emotions are a normal part of the human experience. Often, when we make a mistake or we go through a difficult time, we think, 'this shouldn't have happened' or, 'this is not the way things are supposed to go'. We feel pain and our response is something along the lines of 'this is wrong... this is not what I signed up for'. Responses such as these can actually add an extra layer of suffering. As we struggle to find an explanation as to why a negative experience has happened to us, we may begin to judge and blame ourselves. This can give us a temporary sense of control (if we can just work out what we did wrong, we can make sure we get it right next time); however, it can ultimately leave us feeling alone, ashamed and isolated.

Self-compassion teaches us that going through difficult times is a normal part of the human experience. We can't control every aspect of our lives. Nobody gets through life without experiencing difficult periods. It is completely normal to go through tough times, to make mistakes and to feel big emotions. It happens to us all. Rather than shutting us off from others, our experience of suffering can connect us to others, and we can feel compassion for ourselves in the same way that we would feel compassion for others going through a similar experience.

With self-compassion, when we have a difficult experience, we can say to ourselves, 'this is tough, I'm having a difficult time'. We can remind ourselves that we are not alone. We can activate feelings of compassion towards ourselves and make sure that our inner voice is kind and supportive rather than critical. We can use calming compassionate meditations and visualisations if we find that helpful. Directing compassion towards ourselves is restorative, soothing and calming for the body and mind. Having given ourselves compassion, we are able to see things more clearly and make more balanced decisions. We are better equipped to learn from our experience and move forward.

Self-compassion can be difficult at first but there are several practices which can help, such as loving kindness meditations and guided relaxations. These sorts of practices can be useful because they give us a bit of time and space to really allow the feeling of self-compassion to land. Self-compassion can involve changing your attitude towards yourself. It can involve replacing negative thoughts with kinder ones. It is also an embodied practice in which we really allow ourselves to feel a sense of kindness spread through the body. With practice, self-compassion gets easier until it becomes second nature to treat yourself with kindness rather than self-criticism.

Dr Kristen Neff, Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin and author of the book **'Self Compassion'** published in 2011, has been researching self-compassion for many years. Her research has helped demonstrate the many positive benefits of self-compassion. The information in this introduction to self-compassion is largely based upon her work.

Kristen Neff breaks self-compassion down into three parts:

1. Mindfulness – Recognizing the emotions that are present within us at any time, including any difficult emotions. Being able to recognise emotions with a degree of non-attachment and non-judgement so that we can acknowledge their presence without getting entirely swept up and carried away by them.
2. Shared human experience – Seeing our experience as part of the wider human experience rather than separate and isolating.
3. Kindness – Directing love and kindness to oneself as opposed to judgement and criticism.

For more information about self-compassion for adults, we recommend visiting Kristen Neff's website: <https://self-compassion.org/>.

### SELF-COMPASSION FOR CHILDREN

We believe that self-compassion is an important foundation in life and is something that can be nurtured and developed in children from an early age.

We live in a society which, in many ways, actively encourages us to measure our own self-worth using external referents such as the grades we get or the 'likes' we get on social media. We believe that teaching self-compassion can help to mediate against such influences.

People who are compassionate to themselves know that they are worthy of love and kindness all the time and they have a consistent awareness of their own intrinsic value as a human being. As a result, they are not afraid of failure and are often much more willing to 'have a go' and try something new. When things don't go to plan, they are resilient and able to bounce back with a positive and practical mindset. In addition, those who are compassionate to themselves find it easier to be compassionate to others. We hope that by teaching children self-compassion, we are helping them to develop all of these positive attitudes and giving them the tools to be healthy, happy, resilient and kind.

The accompanying lesson plan gives children a practical self-compassion strategy that they can use when they feel frustrated or upset. We have incorporated the key components of self-compassion and developed a practice with 3 steps. The steps help children relax their body, release any tension they are feeling and then speak kindly to themselves.

The strategy provided might be useful when a child is feeling a little upset or frustrated, perhaps if they feel they are struggling with something in a lesson or missed a goal in football. Children will often judge themselves harshly and criticize themselves if they feel that they have made a mistake or failed at something. Perceived failure can lead to thought patterns such as 'I'm terrible at this', 'I'm the only one who can't do it', 'I'm stupid', 'I don't want others to know I've made a mistake' and feelings of shame. When this happens, the child becomes increasingly anxious and stressed. It can be difficult for them to think clearly. This strategy helps children discover how to recognise difficult feelings, and soothe and calm themselves so they can then see the situation more clearly and think about next steps from a place of balance and calm.

### *SELF-COMPASSION AND SAFE-GUARDING*

The strategy taught in this lesson is one that can be used in a relatively low-level scenario when the child is experiencing a difficult feeling such as frustration. It is, of course, important to bear in mind that some children could be experiencing more serious difficulties which require adult intervention. This is why we have emphasised that the next steps for a child might be to talk to a trusted friend or family member. It should go without saying that self-compassion is not a way to place responsibility on the individual to solve all their own problems. It is a fundamentally loving way to relate to the self and provides healthy strategies to manage the normal range of emotions.

Self-compassion can be a valuable addition to safe-guarding provision within the curriculum as it helps children understand that they are not alone, that it is ok to feel difficult feelings and that they deserve love and kindness whatever circumstances they are in. It helps children develop a sense of self-worth and self-value which is helpful when it comes to asserting themselves and asking for help.

### *SELF-COMPASSION AND LEARNING*

As well as having a positive effect on children's mental health and wellbeing, we believe that teaching kindness and self-compassion can result in more effective learning across the curriculum. Most importantly, we believe that teaching self-compassion can help children to really enjoy their learning journey as they move through school.

Self-compassion can help children develop a healthy motivation to learn. According to Dr Kristen Neff, “Self-compassion leads to learning goals instead of performance goals. It’s a better academic motivator than self-criticism. It’s a motivation of care instead of a motivation of fear.”<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the concept of ‘growth mindset’ has become popular within education. ‘Growth mindset’ is a term used to describe the belief that an individual’s abilities and personality traits are malleable and can be changed. Growth mindset is the opposite of ‘fixed mindset’ which is a belief that talents and intelligence are fixed and can’t be developed. People with a growth mindset feel that if they put in effort they can improve. Teaching children how to develop a growth mindset is thought to lead to positive learning outcomes.

There is research to suggest that self-compassion compliments growth mindset. Psychology Professor Serena Chen has carried out a study which shows that, “self-compassion triggers people to adopt a growth mindset”.<sup>2</sup>

Adding specific self-compassion teaching into your curriculum may well compliment any work you already do in your classroom around growth mindset.

As adults, we know that if our sense of self-worth is entirely dependent upon the results we produce, we can end up feeling very stressed and afraid of failure. Although a small amount of stress can sometimes help us to produce good results, it is not a sustainable or stable motivator. Over the long term, fear of failure and the stress it brings can inhibit creativity and lead to burn-out. We rarely do our best work when we are suffering from long-term stress. Self-compassion can free us from the fear of failure and ease stress. It can therefore help us to be more creative, self-assess our own work more freely and collaborate more successfully.

Teaching self-compassion may help children to be self-motivated, reflective, curious, creative and open to collaboration with others. It may help them feel free to ask questions, take risks and approach new experiences with confidence.

### *SELF-COMPASSION AND THE PSHE CURRICULUM*

The curriculum for teaching relationships and health education in primary schools published by the DfE in 2019 specifically refers to the importance of helping children to develop ‘resilience’, ‘self-worth’, and ‘self-respect’.<sup>3</sup> It says that schools should help pupils “believe they can achieve, persevere with tasks, work towards long-term rewards and continue despite setbacks” (page 20). The guidance also sets out objectives for mental well-being:

### Pupils should know:

- how to recognise and talk about their emotions, including having a varied vocabulary of words to use when talking about their own and others' feelings.
- that there is a normal range of emotions (e.g. happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, nervousness) and scale of emotions that all humans experience in relation to different experiences and situations.
- simple self-care techniques, including the importance of rest, time spent with friends and family, and the benefits of hobbies and interests.

These 3 objectives actually fit very well with the 3 components of self-compassion which we listed earlier. We believe that teaching self-compassion contributes to good relationships and health education as described by the DfE's statutory guidelines.

### References:

1. <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/52854/how-self-compassion-supports-academic-motivation-and-emotional-wellness>
2. <https://hbr.org/2018/09/give-yourself-a-break-the-power-of-self-compassion>
3. Statutory guidance on relationships and health education: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex->

### FURTHER ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM:

If we look at the 3 elements of self-compassion set out by Neff, we can see that activities that support any of these skills can help children develop self-compassion. Here are some ideas of ways that you can embed the 3 aspects of self-compassion in your classroom:

1. Mindfulness
  - Include plenty of activities that support emotional literacy: discuss feelings, provide children with the vocabulary to name their emotions, display emotions words in the classroom, explore how emotions are felt in the body.
  - Incorporate mindfulness-based activities into the day (you may like to include our mindful breathing guided meditation).
2. Common Human Experience
  - Include activities that help to develop empathy.
  - Help children to understand that everyone experiences a range of emotions (literature and poetry can provide excellent opportunities to do this).



- Through history, geography, RE and PSHE lessons, encourage children to recognise the many things that we all have in common despite any differences we might also have. Emphasise our shared experiences as human beings.
- Help children to understand that 'perfect' does not exist and we are all 'works in progress'.
- Normalise mistakes; have discussions about how 'mistakes' help us to learn. When you study the lives of people who have achieved success also look at the 'failures' they experienced on the way.

### 3. Kindness

Self-compassion is really just about learning to direct the same warmth and kindness we feel towards others to ourselves. Any activities that encourage kindness are helpful in developing the ability to think, feel and act with compassion towards anyone – self or other.

- Model self-compassion
- Make reference to self-compassion often eg. If you make a mistake when writing on the board model telling yourself 'it's ok, everyone makes mistakes sometimes!' Model learning from different 'failed' attempts to solve a problem eg. in maths investigations.
- Provide time for the children to use the guided kindness meditations.
- Place an emphasis on learning rather than achieving - on assessment for learning, including self-assessment, rather than judgement by testing.

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS TO USE IN THE CLASSROOM

Books that help children understand their feelings include:

*Ruby's Worry* by Tom Percival – Ruby is happily playing when a worry begins in her mind. The worry goes round and round her head and gets bigger and bigger. Then she notices other people have worries too. She starts to talk about her worry and finds that makes it smaller. Moral of the story: everyone worries sometimes, talking about it helps!

*All about feelings* by Felicity Brooks and Frankie Allen published by Usborne – a non-fiction book that explores different feelings.

*Anh's Anger* by Gail Silver – Anh is building a tower with blocks when his grandfather tells him to stop for dinner. Anh feels cross; he shouts and knocks down his tower. Grandfather tells him to go to his room to calm down. Anh meets his anger in monster form and makes friends with it. Together they dance and practise sitting and breathing. Eventually anger gets smaller and smaller and Anh and his grandfather have dinner together. Grandfather tells Anh about how he used to get angry too when he was younger. This is a book about accepting all of your emotions and being kind to yourself when you are having a difficult time.

*Steps and Stones* by Gail Silfer – The follow up to Anh's anger, this time Anh puts his anger to sleep by breathing in and out and counting his steps on a slow walk.

*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst – Alexander has a day where everything goes wrong. He decides he wants to move to Australia. At the end, he realises that everybody has bad days sometimes, even in Australia!

*Mean Soup* by Betsy Everitt – Horace has a rubbish day and is feeling cross and angry. He and his mum stir all the bad feelings into a 'mean soup' and he starts to feel better. This book can be used to emphasise that everybody has bad days sometimes and that working through your feelings with somebody else can help.

*Scaredy Squirrel goes to the beach* – This is part of a lovely humorous series of books about a very anxious squirrel who struggles with anxiety but eventually manages to overcome his fears. In this book, Scaredy Squirrel is worried about going to the beach but in the end enjoys his trip.

*Under the Same Sky* by Britta Teckentrup – A beautifully illustrated book about the things that we have in common. The illustrations are of animals but the words and sentiment can be applied to humans too. This book shows that wherever we are in the world, we all have similar emotions and feelings – we dream the same dreams, play the same games and “feel the same love”.

*Beautiful Oops* by Barney Saltzberg – A lovely flap books which shows how mistakes can be part of the creative process.

### SELF-COMPASSION FOR TEACHERS

As a teacher, you work hard to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment for the children you work with. You care about every child in your class and give a huge amount of your time and energy to supporting them. Teaching can be a very demanding and stressful job, despite all its many rewards, and it's important that you look after yourself too.

To begin practising self-compassion, see if you can simply widen the circle of kindness you create for others to include yourself. Try to treat yourself with the same patience and care that you offer to the children. Every day, check in with yourself and allow your feelings and emotions space whilst holding your experience with acceptance, love and kindness.



## LESSON 8: TEACHER'S NOTES

You wouldn't speak harshly and critically to a child or colleague so try not to be harsh and unkind to yourself. If you notice self-critical thoughts, take a moment to breathe, comfort yourself and give yourself kindness. Try to speak to yourself in the way that you would speak to someone you care about.

Remember, there will be times when you make mistakes and when things don't go to plan. This is inevitable. We are all works in progress, learning as we go. It is through mistakes that we grow and evolve. Nobody is perfect. Imperfection is a part of being a human being. You are doing your best and that is good enough.

If you are struggling with stress or perfectionism this article and self-compassion practices might be helpful:

<https://ferntaylormindfulness.com/2018/06/26/struggling-with-perfectionism-heres-how-self-compassion-and-meditation-can-help/>