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How Self-Compassion Can Help You Cope With Adversity: 3 Steps To Improve Your Resilience



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Innovators talk about the importance of being willing to “fail fast and iterate.” Like coaches, they espouse a [growth mindset](#) that embraces failure as part of the learning process. I am a big proponent of the growth mindset, but I know that it’s easy to talk in intellectual terms about failure and it is a lot harder to *actually fail*. Moving on and learning from failures requires [resilience](#)—the capacity to recover quickly from or adapt to adversity,

trauma or stress. One component of resilience is “grit,” a species of toughness, passion and perseverance in the face of adversity. It’s “the drive that keeps you on a difficult task over a sustained period of time.” Think of Mattie Ross in *True Grit*, a 14-year old girl who travels long distances on horseback and endures many trials along the way to avenge her father’s death.

It only we could just pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and move on! But the truth is that failure hurts. When you don’t get the job or the promotion or when something you worked on fails, you are likely to feel disappointed, frustrated, sad, embarrassed and maybe scared. And if you are like many driven professionals, you are probably pretty hard on yourself—self-critical, focusing on your flaws and mistakes. You may even have found that this self-critique helps you to push yourself to excel. But maybe you are paying a price inside. Perhaps your inner voice is judgmental and harsh: “How could I have done/said that?” Your confidence and self-esteem get be bruised. Your thoughts spiral around what you should have done differently or you may beat yourself up about your mistakes. When you are in such a state of self-judgment, it is hard to learn or move on. Grit alone may not be enough.

Self-compassion offers another path to resilience and to finding your growth mindset.

Self-compassion is an antidote to self-judgment, just as curiosity is an antidote to fear. According to psychologist and researcher Kristin Neff, it involves “treating ourselves kindly, like we would a close friend we cared about. Rather than making global evaluations of ourselves as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ self-compassion involves generating kindness toward ourselves as imperfect humans, and learning to be present with the inevitable struggles of life with greater ease. It motivates us to make needed changes in our lives not because we’re worthless or inadequate, but because we care about ourselves and want to lessen our suffering.”

Neff's early [research](#) compared self-compassion to self-esteem as a source of resilience. Self-esteem relates to one's feeling of self-worth and is often built upon accomplishment or comparison to others. Unfortunately, because self-esteem is based on an external assessment of our worth, it can desert us when we most need it—when we fail. We are left with feelings of inadequacy and self-judgment. Self-compassion is there for us. As director of the Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, [Emma Seppälä](#) notes, “With self-compassion, you value yourself not because you've judged yourself positively and others negatively but because you're intrinsically deserving of care and concern like everyone else. Where self-esteem leaves us powerless and distraught, self-compassion is at the heart of empowerment, learning, and inner strength.” Self-compassion has also been [linked to resilience in adolescents and young adults](#) and to [reduced effects of trauma](#) among Iraq war veterans.

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There are three main elements to self-compassion:

Self-kindness instead of self-judgment. Rather than judging ourselves to be less inadequate and beating ourselves up inside, we treat ourselves with kindness.

Common humanity instead of isolation. When we suffer, it is easy to feel alone, but through self-compassion, we connect to the fact that all people suffer, and all people are imperfect.

Mindfulness instead of over-identification. It is easy to get so caught in the grip of our emotions that we over-identify with them and become

overwhelmed by our suffering. Mindfulness invites us to observe our emotions and thoughts with curiosity and non-judgment.

Self-compassion is not self-pity or self-indulgence. It is a mindful practice that acknowledges experience and supports individuals in moving through suffering to healthy change.

Here's how to practice self-compassion:

Step 1. Observe and acknowledge your experience. You might say something like, “This is a moment of suffering” or “I am having a hard time.” Being able to observe your experience offers you the ability to step back slightly from it, even just momentarily and not be caught up in it.

Step 2. Connect to our common humanity. Remind yourself that you are not alone by saying, “Suffering is part of life” or “This is not abnormal, everybody suffers” or “other people face similar problems.” You are human and imperfect like all the rest of us.

Step 3. Offer yourself kindness. Imagine you are speaking to a beloved friend and adopt a gentle tone with yourself: “May I be kind to myself” or “I wish myself well.” Try placing your hand on your heart, chest or cheek if you find it soothing or grounding. After offering kindness, you might ask, “What can I do for myself now? What would help me move on?”

These three simple steps will help you navigate the suffering that can accompany failure or disappointment. People often say, “I’m my own worst critic.” Instead, try self-compassion practice as a way of being your own friend.

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