

# Meeting Yourself with Kindness

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*An introduction to self-compassion  
you can start using right away*

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## INTRODUCTION

# A word from Mila

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My name is Mila de Koning. I am the founder of the Self-Compassion Academy and De Mindfulness Academie, and for over fifteen years I have been teaching mindfulness and self-compassion, to the general public and to teachers in training.

This short guide is an introduction to self-compassion. In five chapters, I will walk you through the core principles: what self-compassion actually is, what gets in the way of it, how it works in practice, and how to bring it into your daily life. Gently, without turning it into yet another thing to work hard at.

This guide is based on the work of Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer, who together developed the evidence-based Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) programme. Kristin Neff has spent over two decades researching self-compassion, and her findings underpin everything in these pages.

*"A single moment of self-compassion can change your entire day. A string of such moments can change your entire life."*

Christopher Germer

I hope this guide gives you a genuine sense of what self-compassion is, and what it is not, and that it encourages you to treat yourself with a little more of the kindness you so readily offer to others.

# What Is Self-Compassion and How Do You Practise It?

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There are quite a few misconceptions about self-compassion. People often confuse it with self-pity, weakness, selfishness, or simply letting yourself off the hook. I will address each of those in the next chapter, but for now the most important thing to know is this: none of them are true.

Research consistently shows that self-compassion helps us face difficult situations more clearly and gives us the inner resources to do what needs to be done. It builds resilience, increases our capacity to recover from setbacks, and motivates us to bring out the best in ourselves.

That said, some people need it more urgently than others. If you tend to hold yourself to very high standards, if you are afraid of making mistakes, if you find it easy to care for others but often forget yourself, or if you frequently put other people's needs ahead of your own, then self-compassion is something you genuinely need.

People sometimes come to a self-compassion training with a quiet, secret hope: to become a better person. Deep down, they feel they are not quite good enough. They hope for more confidence, fewer mistakes, more people pleased with them.

But self-compassion is not the same as self-confidence. Self-confidence is about how you think about yourself. Self-compassion is about how you treat yourself. It means accepting that you are human, which means you make mistakes, struggle, and sometimes fail. And it means not tearing yourself apart for it.

Self-compassion improves your relationship with yourself. That brings resilience and inner calm. And that changes everything.

## A reflection to try

Think about how you treat a close friend when they are going through something difficult. What do you say? How do you show up for them?

Now think about how you treat yourself when you are struggling.

Are the two the same? Most likely not. Research shows that around 78% of people are more compassionate and kinder to others than they are to themselves. Even people who consider themselves fairly gentle with themselves tend to discover, when they look closely, that they are still a little warmer, more supportive, and less judgmental toward someone they love.

Imagine treating that struggling friend the way you treat yourself. Most people find that thought quite confronting. "If I treated my friends the way I treat myself," one participant once told me, "I would not have any left."

So what would it be like to turn that around? To treat yourself with exactly the same warmth, care, and understanding you give to someone you love? That is precisely what self-compassion is.

### Where to begin

When you notice you are struggling, see if you can respond to yourself the way you would respond to a dear friend in the same situation. If that feels difficult in the moment, ask yourself: what would I say to a friend going through this right now? Something like: "I know this is hard. I am here for you. I believe in you." And then, can you say that to yourself?

Self-compassion also shows up in small, daily choices. Do you make time for what you need? When you are busy, do you still sit down properly for lunch, or do you eat on the go or in front of your screen? Over the coming days, try choosing a few small acts of care for yourself, especially the ones you tend to skip.

# Overcoming the Obstacles

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What stops us from being kinder to ourselves? Why is it so much easier to reach out to someone else than to turn that same care inward?

One of the biggest barriers is the misconceptions we carry about self-compassion, often without realising it. These quiet beliefs steer us away from self-care. It helps to name them clearly.

## **Misconception 1: Self-compassion is self-pity**

This is one of the most common misunderstandings. The idea that being compassionate toward yourself means feeling sorry for yourself, wallowing, or getting stuck.

In reality, self-compassion does the opposite. It helps you acknowledge what is difficult, see it clearly, and work out what to do about it. It gives you the support to take action. Self-pity paralyses. Self-compassion gives you the energy to move.

## **Misconception 2: Self-compassion is weak**

We often associate self-compassion with softness, and softness with weakness. When the going gets tough, the tough gets going. Many of us learned that early, and it is not entirely wrong. A certain toughness has its place.

But that fighting spirit, useful as it is in some situations, is not what helps us respond well to the real difficulties of life. What we need in those moments is warmth and support, and that is a genuine source of strength. Research consistently shows that self-compassion is one of the most powerful foundations of resilience. Gritting your teeth indefinitely takes a toll on your physical and mental health. Taking care of yourself does not.

## **Misconception 3: Self-compassion makes you lazy**

This is a deeply held fear: if I am kind to myself, I will stop trying. I will lose my edge. I will settle for less and never improve.

But the harsh inner critic does not truly motivate. It operates through fear, the fear of not being good enough, of being judged, of failure. And while fear can get you moving, it is exhausting, and over time it undermines rather than builds.

Encouragement is far more effective. When you meet yourself with understanding and genuine support, you are motivated by self-respect rather than anxiety. That is a much more sustainable engine.

### **Misconception 4: Self-compassion is selfish**

There is a persistent idea that compassion for yourself comes at the expense of compassion for others, that if you put yourself first someone else loses out.

But compassion is not a finite resource. And here is what actually happens when you keep overriding your own limits out of care for others: it stops being real compassion. You exhaust yourself and ultimately have less to give.

Compassion is inclusive. It must include you. Self-compassion does not mean "me first." It means "me too."

### **Two practices for this week**

#### **PRACTICE 1: NOTICE YOUR INNER CRITIC**

*Start paying attention to the words your inner critic uses. It can feel so familiar that it barely registers as criticism, more like just the truth. But it is a learned pattern of self-judgement. Is it unkind? Dismissive? Harsh? Sometimes it is not a voice at all, but an image or a physical sensation. Noticing it is the first step toward responding differently.*

#### **PRACTICE 2: CHECK IN WITH YOUR BODY**

*Even, and especially, when you are very busy, pause occasionally to notice how your body feels. Does it need to stretch, rest, or breathe? Treat your body with the same care you would offer a friend who was exhausted.*

# The Three Components of Self-Compassion

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In this chapter, we go a little deeper and look at how to practise self-compassion in concrete, everyday terms.

The foundations of self-compassion are: being as warm and caring toward yourself as you would be toward someone you love; recognising that you are human and therefore imperfect; and not being swept entirely away by self-critical thoughts and feelings.

Self-compassion has three interconnected components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

## Self-kindness

Self-kindness means responding to yourself with warmth rather than harsh judgement when things do not go as you had hoped. It means acknowledging that nobody leads a perfect life, not one person.

When something goes wrong, do you take it very personally? Do you find yourself thinking you are fundamentally not okay? That is your inner critic at work, and it causes you to suffer more than the situation itself warrants. You are not just dealing with what happened. You are also absorbing a second blow from yourself.

Self-kindness means responding to yourself the way you would respond to a friend who had made the same mistake: with understanding, encouragement, and support.

## Common humanity

Even though we all understand intellectually that humans are imperfect, we seem to forget this the moment we look at our own lives. When we make bad decisions, say something we regret, or feel anxious or low, we tend to blame ourselves, as if we alone were responsible for everything, as if everyone else has it figured out.

But struggle, imperfection, and pain are not signs that something is wrong with you. They are part of what it means to be human. Everyone experiences them. You are not alone in yours.

Recognising this is genuinely freeing. It does not mean you stop trying to live well. It means you stop treating your difficulties as evidence that you are broken. It connects you to others through your imperfections rather than isolating you, and it opens the door to growth that self-criticism quietly closes.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness means being aware of your experience as it actually is, including the uncomfortable parts. Most of us are skilled at avoiding unpleasant feelings, or hurrying past them to find a solution. But if we do not allow ourselves to acknowledge what is actually there, we cannot respond to it wisely.

Mindfulness is not passive. Once you notice what is present, the natural next question is: what do I need right now? Sometimes the answer is simply to be kind to yourself, because not everything can be fixed. Sometimes it means protecting yourself, setting a boundary, or gently encouraging yourself to do something you have been putting off.

Mindfulness also helps you recognise your inner critic, to see it as a pattern of thinking rather than the truth about you. Only when you can notice the critic can you begin to respond to it with compassion instead of simply believing it.

## Bringing it together: a practice for difficult moments

### MINDFULNESS

*Acknowledge that this is a hard moment. Hard moments are part of life and they are not a personal failing. Notice any self-critical thoughts without treating them as facts. They are triggered by the situation. They are not the truth about who you are.*

### COMMON HUMANITY

*Remind yourself that what you are feeling right now is something many others would feel in the same situation. You are not alone in this. Suffering*

*of all kinds is part of our shared human experience.*

### **SELF-KINDNESS**

*If your inner dialogue is unkind, pause. Take a breath. Think about what you would say to a close friend in this exact situation, and then say it to yourself. That you are here. That you understand. That you believe in them.*

### **THE ACTION STEP**

*Ask yourself: what do I need right now? What does this situation call for? Self-compassion is not passive, it leads somewhere. Sometimes toward gentleness. Sometimes toward standing up for yourself, drawing a boundary, or asking yourself with kindness to do something that matters.*

# Paying Attention to What Truly Matters

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Self-compassion also means living in a way that is aligned with what genuinely matters to you. It means valuing yourself enough to make time for what actually makes your life feel meaningful.

That sounds simple. It is not. We all have obligations, people who need us, and a daily pace that seems designed to crowd out everything we care about most. Or perhaps we have every reason to feel content, and yet there is that persistent low hum of dissatisfaction we cannot quite name.

We often do not know, precisely, what makes us happy. And what makes us happy changes as we accumulate experience. There is no single thing that will make you happy forever. Living well is more complicated than it sounds.

But it is worth reflecting on. Because lasting fulfillment is not built on circumstances, achievements, or possessions. It is rooted in something deeper, what we might call core values.

A holiday can make us happy, but the deeper value might be freedom, adventure, or real connection with people we love. A fulfilling job might carry the deeper values of meaningful work, helping others, or simply feeling genuinely useful. When you know your core values, you can actively create the conditions for them, even when the surface circumstances are not ideal.

## A reflection exercise

Find a quiet moment, with something to write with nearby. Before you begin, take a few breaths and let yourself settle.

Imagine you can jump forward in time, five, ten, or twenty years. You are sitting somewhere comfortable, looking back at the years in between. What would give you a deep sense of satisfaction and meaning, looking back? What values would you have lived by? What would you have made room for?

Write down whatever comes. Do not force it. If nothing comes straight away, sit with the question for a few days and return to it. The answers tend to surface on their own.

Once you know what matters to you, you can take deliberate steps toward it, even within the constraints of your current life. Happiness is arranging the flowers you actually have.

### **What people regret most**

A nurse who cared for people in the final stages of their lives spent eight years asking them what they wished they had done differently. These were the five most common answers:

1. I wish I had had the courage to live a life true to myself, rather than the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I had not worked so hard. I missed too much time with the people who mattered.
3. I wish I had had the courage to express my feelings more honestly.
4. I wish I had stayed in closer touch with my friends.
5. I wish I had allowed myself to be happier, and not let other people's opinions or the busyness of life get in the way.

Remarkably ordinary things. Not grand failures or dramatic wrong turns, just the quiet, gradual drift away from what actually mattered, day by day.

I hope this gives you the nudge to make space, now, for what makes your life feel worth living.

# Working With Your Heart, Not Just Your Head

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In this final chapter, we look at how to bring self-compassion into daily life, gently, without making it yet another item on your to-do list.

When we decide to learn something new, most of us approach it the way we approach everything else: we work hard at it. In a results-oriented world, that habit serves us well in many areas.

But when it comes to our inner lives, our feelings, our patterns, the things that happen to us, effort alone is not the answer. The harder you push against an uncomfortable feeling, the more firmly it tends to stay. The more desperately you try to think your way through something painful, the more tangled it can become.

The same trap appears when we begin practising self-compassion. We try very hard to be kind to ourselves, and then quietly criticise ourselves for not doing it well enough. The inner critic is nothing if not adaptable.

## The key principle

*"If it feels like a struggle, it is not self-compassion."*

Any time you notice you are straining or pushing to be self-compassionate, that is the signal to stop. Take a breath. Notice any tension in your body. Let it soften a little.

Then ask: what do I actually need right now? What would feel like genuine care?

Sometimes the most compassionate thing is to stop practising entirely and simply do something kind for yourself. That is the practice.

## Small acts of care

Self-compassion does not require grand gestures. It lives in small things, done with real attention and genuine intention.

When you do something kind for a friend, it is often not the gesture itself that matters most. It is the quality of attention behind it. Something offered without real care tends to land as hollow. The same is true for how you treat yourself.

So when you choose a small act of self-care, sitting down properly for a meal, stepping outside for ten minutes, saying no to something that drains you, do it as a genuine gesture. Not because it makes you more productive. Not because it is on a wellness checklist. Simply because you matter.

Let us trade working hard for working with heart.

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#### A FINAL WORD

This is the end of this introduction to self-compassion. I hope it has given you something real, not just ideas to think about, but a genuine feel for what it means to meet yourself with care.

If you would like to go further, the Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) programme is a structured eight-week course that builds on everything in this guide, with support from an experienced teacher. We offer it as a weekly programme and as a four or five-day intensive, same content, different rhythm.

*With warmth,*

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#### GET IN TOUCH

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