Don't Fall into the Self-Esteem Trap: Try a Little Self-Kindness

Striving for self-esteem is about trying hard to feel special, above average. It's absurd. We don't need to feel extra-special or over the top. We need to touch who we really are in any given moment.

By Kristin Neff | February 17, 2016

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The great angst of modern life is this: No matter how hard we try, no matter how successful we are, no matter how good a parent, worker, or spouse we are—it's never enough. There is always someone richer, thinner, smarter, or more powerful than we are, someone who makes us feel like a failure in comparison. And failure of any kind is unacceptable. What to do?

One response has come in the form of the self-esteem movement. Over the years there have been thousands of books and magazine articles promoting self-esteem—how to get it, how to raise it, and how to keep it. It has almost become a truism in our culture that we need to have high self-esteem in order to be happy and healthy. We are told to think positively of ourselves at all costs, like Al Franken's *Saturday Night Live* character Stuart Smalley who proclaims, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!"

But the need to continually evaluate ourselves positively comes at a high price. For instance, high self-esteem usually requires feeling special and above average. To be called *average* is considered an insult. ("How did you like my performance last night?" "It was average." Ouch!) Of course, it's logically impossible for every human being on the planet to be above average at the same time, putting us in a bit of a bind. One way we try to deal with this is through a process of social comparison in which we continually try to puff ourselves up and put others down (just think of the film *Mean Girls* and you'll know what I'm talking about).

The quest to raise one's esteem at the expense of others is a phenomenon that underlies many societal problems, such as prejudice, social inequality, and bullying. Bullies generally have high self-esteem, since picking on people weaker than themselves is an easy way to boost their sense of self-worth.

One of the most insidious consequences of the self-esteem movement over the last couple of decades is the narcissism epidemic. Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me*, examined the narcissism levels of over 15,000 U.S. college students between 1987 and 2006. During that 20-year period narcissism scores went through the roof, with 65% of modern-day students scoring higher in narcissism than previous generations. Not coincidentally, students' average self-esteem levels rose by an even greater margin over the same period.

Even when you have high self-esteem, however, you can't necessarily keep it. Your self-esteem is likely to fly out the window the next time you blow a big work assignment, can't zip up your pants anymore, or don't get invited to that big party. Self-esteem is an emotional roller-coaster ride: Our sense of self-worth rises and falls in step with our latest success or failure. Yet we don't want to suffer from low self-esteem either. What's the alternative?

There is another way to feel good about ourselves that does not involve evaluating how good or worthy we are: *self-compassion*. Self-compassion is not based on positive evaluations of ourselves. Rather, it is a way of relating to ourselves. It involves being caring and supportive to ourselves when we fail, feel inadequate, or struggle in life—extending the same feelings of compassion to ourselves that we typically extend to others. People are compassionate to themselves because they're human beings who suffer, not because they're special and above average. Unlike self-esteem, therefore, self-compassion emphasizes interconnection rather than separateness. It also offers more emotional stability, because it is always there for you—when you're on top of the world and when you fall flat on your face.

A huge body of research now supports the mental health benefits of self-compassion, and programs—such as Mindful Self-Compassion, which my colleague from Harvard, Chris Germer, and I developed—are now being taught all over the world.

But what is self-compassion exactly?

As I define it, it involves three key components—being kind to ourselves when we suffer, framing our experience of imperfection in light of the shared human experience, and being mindfully aware of our negative thoughts and emotions.

Three Components of Self-Compassion

1. Self-Kindness

When we are self-compassionate we're kind to ourselves rather than harshly self-critical, or to put it more simply, we treat ourselves in the same way we would treat a good friend. The golden rule tells us "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That's all well and good, but hopefully we won't treat others even half as badly as we treat ourselves. Listen to our self-talk: "You're such an idiot! You're disgusting!" Would you talk this way to a friend?

It's natural for us to try to be kind to the people we care about in our lives. We let them know it's okay to be human when they fail. We reassure them of our respect and support when they're feeling bad about themselves. We comfort them when they're going through hard times. In other words, most of us are very good at being kind and understanding toward others, but *not toward ourselves*. Think of all the generous, caring people you know who constantly beat themselves up (this may even be you). For some strange reason our culture tells us that's the way we should be—women especially—or we'll become self-centered and selfish. But is it true?

All harsh self-criticism does is make us feel depressed, insecure, and afraid to take on new challenges because we're afraid of the self-flagellation that will come if we fail. When our inner voice continually criticizes and berates us for not being good enough, we often end up in negative cycles of self-sabotage and self-harm—and these are incredibly self-focused states of mind.

When we are self-compassionate, however, we are kind, nurturing, and understanding toward ourselves when we fail. Self-kindness is expressed in internal dialogues that are benevolent and encouraging rather than cruel or disparaging. Instead of attacking and berating ourselves for being inadequate, we offer ourselves warmth and unconditional acceptance. Similarly, when external life circumstances are challenging and difficult to bear, self-compassion involves active self-soothing and support. This means that when our emotional cup is full, we have more resources available to give to others.

Self-kindness helps us take the perspective of an "other" toward ourselves, so we see our pain from a different point of view. It lets in a breath of fresh air, so the toxicity of our pain is not so all-consuming. When we adopt the role of a kind friend to a person in need (i.e., ourselves), we're no longer totally identified with the role of the one who is suffering. Yes, I hurt. But I also feel care and concern. I am both the comforter and the one in need of comfort. There is more to me than the pain I'm feeling right now, I am also the heartfelt response to that pain. And holding our suffering with love allows us to bear our struggles in life with greater ease.

2. Common Humanity

The second essential element of self-compassion is recognition of our common humanity. Compassion means "to suffer with," indicating a basic mutuality in the experience of suffering. It honors the fact that everyone experiences pain, no matter who they are. This is what distinguishes self-compassion from self-pity. While self-pity says "poor me," self-compassion recognizes suffering is part of the shared human experience. The pain *I* feel in difficult times is the same pain that *you* feel in difficult times. The triggers are different, the circumstances are different, the degree of pain is different, but the basic experience is the same.

Sadly, however, most of us don't focus on what we have in common with others, especially when we feel ashamed or inadequate. Rather than framing our imperfection in light of the shared human experience, we're more likely to feel isolated and disconnected from others when we fail. Our perspective narrows, and we become absorbed by feelings of insufficiency and insecurity. When we're confined in the space of self-loathing, it's as if the rest of humanity doesn't exist. This isn't a logical thought process, but a type of emotional tunnel vision. Somehow it feels like I'm the only one who has failed or made a mistake, while everyone else is getting it right.

And even when we're facing a hardship that's outside our control—let's say we develop a genetically determined illness, for instance—we tend to feel like this is an abnormal state that "shouldn't" be happening. (Like the dying 84-year-old man whose final words were "why me?")

Once we fall into the trap of believing things are "supposed" to go well, we think something has gone terribly amiss when they don't. If we were to take a completely logical approach to the issue, of course, we'd consider the fact that there are thousands of things that can go wrong in life at any one time, so it's highly likely—in fact inevitable—that we'll make mistakes and experience hardships on a regular basis. But we don't tend to be rational about these matters. Instead, we suffer, and we feel all alone in our suffering. When we remember that pain is part of the shared human experience, however, every moment of suffering has the potential to be transformed into a moment of connection with others.

3. Mindfulness

To be self-compassionate, we need to be mindful, which entails being aware of present-moment experience in a clear and balanced way. It involves being open to the reality of what's happening: allowing whatever thoughts, emotions, and sensations that arise to enter awareness without resistance.

Why is mindfulness an essential component of self-compassion?

First, it's necessary to recognize you're suffering in order to give yourself compassion. Although you may think suffering is pretty obvious, it isn't always. When you look in the mirror and decide you're overweight, or that your nose is too big, do you immediately tell yourself these feelings of inadequacy are painful, and therefore deserving of a kind, caring response? When your boss calls you into your office and tells you your job performance is below par, is your first instinct to comfort yourself? Probably not. We certainly feel the pain of falling short of our ideals, but our minds tend to focus on the failure itself, rather than the pain caused by failure. There isn't much mental space left over to recognize the emotional suffering caused by feelings of inadequacy, let alone try to soothe and comfort ourselves in the midst of our suffering.

One of the reasons we engage in this pattern of responding is that *we are programmed to avoid pain*. Pain signals that something is wrong, triggering our fight or flight response. Because of our innate tendency to move away from pain, it can be difficult to turn toward it, to hold it, to be with it as it is.

Mindfulness counters the tendency to avoid painful thoughts and emotions, allowing us to hold the truth of our experience even when it's unpleasant. At the same time, being mindful means we don't "overidentify" with negative thoughts or feelings and get caught up and swept away by our aversive reactions. This type of rumination exaggerates our assessments of our self-worth. Not only did I fail, "I AM A FAILURE." Not only was I disappointed, "MY LIFE IS DISAPPOINTING."

When we observe our pain mindfully, however, we acknowledge our suffering without exaggerating it, allowing ourselves to adopt a more balanced perspective toward ourselves. We can then open our hearts and let our self-compassion flow freely.

Practice

Three doorways in

The beauty of self-compassion is that it has three distinct doorways in. Whenever you notice you are suffering, you have three potential courses of action.

1. You can give yourself kindness and understanding.
2. You can remind yourself that suffering is part of the shared human experience.
3. Or you can be mindful of your thoughts and emotions so that you find greater peace and balance.

Enhancing any one of the three components of self-compassion will make it easier to engage the other components. Sometimes you'll find it easier to enter one doorway than another depending on your mood and the current situation, but once you're in, you're in. You'll be in a state of loving, connected presence (another way of describing the three components of self-compassion) no matter what the circumstances of your life are in the moment. You will have discovered the power of self-compassion, and it could change your life for good.

Practice

The self-compassion break

The self-compassion break involves using a set of memorized phrases to soothe and comfort yourself when you're in pain.

1. Put both hands on your heart, pause, and feel their warmth. You can also put your hands on any other place on your body that feels soothing and comforting, such as your belly or your face.
2. Breathe deeply in and out.
3. Speak these words to yourself (out loud or silently) in a warm and caring tone:

This is a moment of suffering
Suffering is part of life
May I be kind to myself
May I give myself the compassion I need

The first phrase, "This is a moment of suffering" is designed to bring mindfulness to the fact that you're in pain. Other possible wordings for this phrase are "I'm having a really tough time right now," or "This hurts," and so forth. The second phrase, "Suffering is part of life" is designed to remind you that imperfection is part of the shared human experience. Other possible wordings are "Everyone feels this way sometimes," "This is part of being human," and so on.

The third phrase, "May I be kind to myself in this moment" is designed to help bring a sense of caring concern to your present moment experience. Other possible wordings are "May I love and support myself right now" or "May I accept myself as I am," and so on.

The final phrase, "May I give myself the compassion I need," firmly sets your intention to be self-compassionate. You might use other words such as "May I remember that I am worthy of compassion," or "May I give myself the same compassion I would give to a good friend," and so on.

Find the four phrases that seem most comfortable for you, and memorize them. Then, the next time you judge yourself or have a difficult experience you can use these phrases as a way of reminding yourself to be self-compassionate. It's a handy tool to help soothe and calm troubled states of mind.

Why Self-Compassion is the New Mindfulness

When we have trouble being vulnerable, "self-compassion" can seem like "self-indulgence." But fessing up to when we fall short can bring out our best, happiest, selves.

By Patricia Rockman | June 22, 2016
(an excerpt from the article)

https://www.mindful.org/self-compassion-new-mindfulness/

Did you know self-compassion is the new black? Last year it was mindfulness but this year, attending without judgment is out and compassion for you as an antidote to your perceived low self-worth, failure, or any other form of suffering is definitely in. This is perfect for those of us living in the west where we are so often sick with, as meditation teacher David Loy would say, our "sense of lack." That loathing one might argue could be a result of our tendency to privilege the individual and his or her autonomy and accomplishments over the community and our interdependence. The idea that we can do everything ourselves and should is absurd. I mean, look around you. Do you have shelter and food? Did you build the former and grow the latter? Likely not, and even if you did where did you get the building materials, the seed, and tools? Our interdependence is always staring us in the face but we so easily miss it, focused on our self-importance, negative ("I'm so horrible") or positive ("I'm so great").

I have a secret I'm going to share with you that I tell the people who come to the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy groups I lead. You are not so special or so bad. I'm sorry. You are ordinary. I find that such a relief. Trying to live up to some unrealistic standard of who I should be and what I should accomplish is ultimately exhausting and demoralizing. Whose standard is it anyway? It just becomes a metaphorical stick with which we can beat ourselves when we don't meet those expectations. On top of that, it is so easy to think that being nice to ourselves is weakness or wimpy. Pulling up our bootstraps, and maintaining a stiff upper lip are ingrained in our culture. Staying with the tough familiar is often much easier than changing the way we respond.

I once attended a self-compassion workshop and found myself critical and rejecting of the exercises, thinking, "This is a bunch of crap." The idea of hugging myself or stroking my face, saying words like, "Soften, Soothe and Allow," softening around the tense areas of body, "like around the edges of a pancake," and putting my hand on my heart while recalling a difficulty made me squirm with dis-ease. I didn't want to be like a pancake. I didn't want to practice loving-kindness to myself, the people I don't like, or all beings. An acquaintance and I were talking about it and she said she often jokingly substitutes, "May all beings be peaceful" with the phrase, "May all beings have a jelly donut."

It took a while to figure out that what was underneath all of this discomfort and cynicism was the thought, "self-compassion is self-indulgence." This was an interesting recognition and invoking curiosity about this reaction led to the awareness: I don't like to be vulnerable or weak. *Okay, so who does?* But the reality is that we are all vulnerable creatures. In the words of a psychiatrist colleague of mine, "We are just little mammals and there are some things we should stay away from." This is good advice for many situations, one of which is our harsh stance toward self. Ask yourself, "What is the impact of all that loathing, sense of lack, and self-criticism?"

So, this is where self-compassion and ultimately compassion for others comes in, because believe me, those expectations we have for ourselves usually have their counterpart in our expectations of others. Researcher and author Kristin Neff expresses self-compassion as being composed of three parts: "self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness." So mindfulness isn't exactly out—it's contained in the C word. Willem Kuyken et al (2010) found that MBCT treatment effects for depression are brought about by increased self-compassion and mindfulness as well as a separation of the link between reactive depressive thinking and bad outcomes for the illness. It then stands to reason that cultivating self-compassion may result in a happier, kinder you.

Self-Compassion Exercises

By Kristen Neff (http://self-compassion.org)

Exercise 1: How would you treat a friend?

Please take out a sheet of paper and answer the following questions:

1. First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about him or herself or is really struggling in some way. How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you typically talk to your friends.
2. Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.
3. Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?
4. Please write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.

Why not try treating yourself like a good friend and see what happens?

Exercise 2: Self-Compassion Break

Think of a situation in your life that is difficult, that is causing you stress. Call the situation to mind, and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.

Now, say to yourself:

1. This is a moment of suffering

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- This hurts.
- Ouch.
- This is stress.

2. Suffering is a part of life

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- Other people feel this way.
- I'm not alone.
- We all struggle in our lives.

Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch of your hands on your chest. Or adopt the soothing touch you discovered felt right for you.

Say to yourself:

3. May I be kind to myself

You can also ask yourself, "What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?" Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

- *May I give myself the compassion that I need*
- *May I learn to accept myself as I am*
- *May I forgive myself*
- *May I be strong.*
- *May I be patient*

This practice can be used any time of day or night, and will help you remember to evoke the three aspects of self-compassion when you need it most.

Exercise 3: Exploring self-compassion through writing

Part One: Which imperfections make you feel inadequate?

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 a human life. Try writing about an issue you have that tends to make you feel inadequate or bad about yourself (physical appearance, work or relationship issues…) What emotions come up for

you when you think about this aspect of yourself? Try to just feel your emotions exactly as they are – no more, no less – and then write about them.

Part Two: Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of an unconditionally loving imaginary friend

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 writing about. Reflect upon what this friend feels towards 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 towards 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 pain 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 his/her acceptance, kindness, caring, and desire for your health and happiness.

Part Three: Feel the compassion as it soothes and comforts you

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.

Exercise 4: The criticizer, the criticized, and the compassionate observer

This exercise is modeled on the two-chair dialogue studied by Gestalt therapist Leslie Greenberg.

In this exercise, you will sit in different chairs to help get in touch with different, often conflicting parts of yourself, experiencing how each aspect feels in the present moment.

To begin, put out three empty chairs, preferably in a triangular arrangement. Next, think about an issue that often troubles you, and that often elicits harsh self-criticism. Designate one chair as the voice of your inner self-critic, one chair as the voice of the part of you that feels judged and criticized, and one chair as the voice of a wise, compassionate observer. You are going to be role-playing all three parts of yourself – you, you, and you. It may feel a bit silly at first, but you may be surprised at what comes out once you really start letting your feelings flow freely.

1. **Think about your "issue," and then sit in the chair of the self-critic.** As you take your seat, express out loud what the self-critical part of you is thinking and feeling. For example "I hate that fact that you're such a whimp and aren't self-assertive." Notice the words and tone of voice the self-critical part of you uses, and also how it is feeling. Worried, angry, self-righteous, exasperated? Note what your body posture is like. Strong, rigid, upright? What emotions are coming up for you right now?
2. **Take the chair of the criticized aspect of yourself.** Try to get in touch with how you feel being criticized in this manner. Then verbalize how you feel, responding directly to your inner critic. For example, "I feel so hurt by you" or "I feel so unsupported." Just speak whatever comes into your mind. Again, notice the tone of your voice? Is it sad, discouraged, childlike, scared, helpless? What is your body posture like? Are you slumped, downward facing, frowning?
3. **Conduct a dialogue between these two parts of yourself for awhile, switching back and forth between the chair of the criticizer and the criticized.** Really try to experience each aspect of yourself so each knows how the other feels. Allow each to fully express its views and be heard.
4. **Now occupy the chair of the compassionate observer.** Call upon your deepest wisdom, the wells of your caring concern, and address both the critic and the criticized. What does your compassionate self say to the critic, what insight does it have? For example, "You sound very much like your mother" or, "I see that you're really scared, and you're trying to help me so I don't mess up." What does your compassionate self say to the criticized part of yourself? For example, "It must be incredibly difficult to hear such harsh judgment day after day. I see that you're really hurting" or "All you want is to be accepted for who you are." Try to relax, letting your heart soften and open. What words of compassion naturally spring forth? What is the tone of your voice? Tender, gentle, warm? What is your body posture like – balanced, centered, relaxed?

5. **After the dialogue finishes (stop whenever it feels right), reflect upon what just happened.** Do you have any new insights into how you treat yourself, where your patterns come from, new ways of thinking about the situation that are more productive and supportive? As you think about what you have learned, set your intention to relate to yourself in a kinder, healthier way in the future. A truce can be called in your inner war. Peace is possible. Your old habits of self criticism don't need to rule you forever. What you need to do is listen to the voice that's already there, even if a bit hidden – your wise, compassionate self.

Exercise 5: Changing your critical self-talk

This exercise should be done over several weeks and will eventually form the blueprint for changing how you relate to yourself long-term. Some people find it useful to work on their inner critic by writing in a journal. Others are more comfortable doing it via internal dialogues. If you are someone who likes to write things down and revisit them later, journaling can be an excellent tool for transformation. If you are someone (like me) who never manages to be consistent with a journal, then do whatever works for you. You can speak aloud to yourself, or think silently.

1. The first step towards changing the way to treat yourself is to notice when you are being self-critical. It may be that – like many of us — your self-critical voice is so common for you that you don't even notice when it is present. Whenever you're feeling bad about something, think about what you've just said to yourself. Try to be as accurate as possible, noting your inner speech verbatim. What words do you actually use when you're self-critical? Are there key phrases that come up over and over again? What is the tone of your voice – harsh, cold, angry? Does the voice remind you of any one in your past who was critical of you? You want to be able to get to know the inner self-critic very well, and to become aware of when your inner judge is active. For instance, if you've just eaten half a box of Oreo's, does your inner voice say something like "you're so disgusting," "you make me sick," and so on? Really try to get a clear sense of how you talk to yourself.
2. Make an active effort to soften the self-critical voice, but do so with compassion rather than self-judgment (i.e., don't say "you're such a bitch" to your inner critic!). Say something like "I know you're worried about me and feel unsafe, but you are causing me unnecessary pain. Could you let my inner compassionate self say a few words now?"
3. Reframe the observations made by your inner critic in a friendly, positive way. If you're having trouble thinking of what words to use, you might want to imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you in this situation. It might help to use a term of endearment that strengthens expressed feelings of warmth and care (but only if it feels natural rather than schmaltzy.) For instance, you can say something like "Darling, I know you ate that bag of cookies because you're feeling really sad right now and you thought it would cheer you up. But you feel even worse and are not feeling good in your body. I want you to be happy, so why don't you take a long walk so you feel better?" While engaging in this supportive self-talk, you might want to try gently stroking your arm, or holding your face tenderly in your hands (as long as no one's looking). Physical gestures of warmth can tap into the caregiving system even if you're having trouble calling up emotions of kindness at first, releasing oxytocin that will help change your bio-chemistry. The important thing is that you start acting kindly, and feelings of true warmth and caring will eventually follow.

Exercise 6: Self-Compassion Journal

Try keeping a daily self-compassion journal for one week (or longer if you like.) Journaling is an effective way to express emotions, and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being. At some point during the evening when you have a few quiet moments, review the day's events. In your journal, write down anything that you felt bad about, anything you judged yourself for, or any difficult experience that caused you pain. (For instance, perhaps you got angry at a waitress at lunch because she took forever to bring the check. You made a rude comment and stormed off without leaving a tip. Afterwards, you felt ashamed and embarrassed.) For each event, use mindfulness, a sense of common humanity, and kindness to process the event in a more self-compassionate way.

<u>Mindfulness</u>

This will mainly involve bring awareness to the painful emotions that arose due to your self-judgment or difficult circumstances. Write about how you felt: sad, ashamed, frightened, stressed, and so on. As you write, try to be accepting and non-judgmental of your experience, not belittling it nor making it overly dramatic. (For example, "I was frustrated because she was being so slow. I got angry, over-reacted, and felt foolish afterwards.")

<u>Common Humanity</u>

Write down the ways in which your experience was connected to the larger human experience. This might include acknowledging that being human means being imperfect, and that all people have these sorts of painful experiences. ("Everyone over-reacts sometimes, it's only human.") You might also want to think about the various causes and conditions underlying the painful event. ("My frustration was exacerbated by the fact that I was late for my doctor's

appointment across town and there was a lot of traffic that day. If the circumstances had been different my reaction probably would have been different.")

Self-Kindness

Write yourself some kind, understanding, words of comfort. Let yourself know that you care about yourself, adopting a gentle, reassuring tone. (It's okay. You messed up but it wasn't the end of the world. I understand how frustrated you were and you just lost it. Maybe you can try being extra patient and generous to any wait-staff this week…")

Practicing the three components of self-compassion with this writing exercise will help organize your thoughts and emotions, while helping to encode them in your memory. If you keep a journal regularly, your self-compassion practice will become even stronger and translate more easily into daily life.

Exercise 7: Identifying what we really want

1. **Think about the ways that you use self-criticism as a motivator.** Is there any personal trait that you criticize yourself for having (too overweight, too lazy, too impulsive, etc.) because you think being hard on yourself will help you change? If so, first try to get in touch with the emotional pain that your self-criticism causes, giving yourself compassion for the experience of feeling so judged.
2. **Next, see if you can think of a kinder, more caring way to motivate yourself to make a change if needed.** What language would a wise and nurturing friend, parent, teacher, or mentor use to gently point out how your behavior is unproductive, while simultaneously encouraging you to do something different. What is the most supportive message you can think of that's in line with your underlying wish to be healthy and happy?
3. **Every time you catch yourself being judgmental about your unwanted trait in the future,** first notice the pain of your self-judgment and give yourself compassion. Then try to reframe your inner dialogue so that it is more encouraging and supportive. Remember that if you really want to motivate yourself, love is more powerful than fear

Exercise 8: Taking care of the caregiver

If you work in a care-giving profession (and that certainly includes being a family member!), you'll need to recharge your batteries so you have enough energy available to give to others. Give yourself permission to meet your own needs, recognizing that this will not only enhance your quality of life, it will also enhance your ability to be there for those that rely on you. For instance, you might listen to relaxing music, take a yoga class, hang out with a friend for an evening, or get a massage.

Of course, sometime our time is limited and we aren't able to take care of ourselves as much as we'd like. Also, one limitation of self-care strategies is that they're "off the job," and can't be done while you're actually caregiving. Thus, it's important to also engage in "on the job" self-care. When you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed when with the person you're caring for, you might try giving yourself soothing words of support (for example "I know this is hard right now, and it's only natural you're feeling so stressed. I'm here for you."). Or else you might try using soothing touch or the self-compassion break. This will allow you to keep your heart open, and help you care for and nurture yourself at the same time you're caring for and nurturing others.