

Self-Compassion: Does It Help or Hinder Performance?

Description

You know when you get into a heated disagreement with a partner, child, or roommate, and accidentally let loose one of those generalizations that is the conversational equivalent of throwing gasoline on a fire?

Like “Why do you *always* have to be late? It’s not like all that extra time in front of a mirror is going to change anything.” or “Why are you so lazy? Is it really that hard to pick up the wet towels off the floor?”

Remember how that worked out for you?

Yeah...we generally do a pretty good job of steering clear of these obvious land mines. Yet for some reason, we find it totally acceptable to talk to ourselves in a way that would get us slapped in regular life.

Psychologists have recently begun to emphasize the virtues of a skill called *self-compassion* – where we treat *ourselves* with more understanding and kindness. It’s sort of like the [Golden Rule](#) in reverse.

But for many high-achievers, it’s a strategy that feels wrong. Perhaps because it sounds vaguely like giving ourselves an easy out for mistakes, and thereby lowering our standards.

So does self-compassion apply to high-achievers? Or is it something that might lead to better psychological well-being, but ultimately keep us from realizing our full potential?

What is self-compassion, anyway?

Self-compassion refers to the practice of approaching your setbacks, failures, and shortcomings from a more non-judgmental and warmer perspective. The alternative being impatience, harsh self-deprecating criticism, and a zero tolerance policy for anything short of perfection.

At first glance it might sound like self-compassion is about letting ourselves off the hook for our screwups, but I don’t think that’s quite it.

Self-compassion is about cultivating a more constructive response to challenging times, where rather than blaming/judging/deciding that we suck (or trying to massage our ego by telling ourselves we are wonderful), we simply accept our results for what they are and see them as inevitable speed bumps on the path to our destination.

It’s about acknowledging we didn’t get the result we wanted, but that these blunders aren’t signs from the universe suggesting we are worthless, good-for-nothing, scum-of-the-earth dingbats. But simply that our work is not done.

As research has begun to highlight the benefits of self-compassion, which include more positive mood/emotion, greater optimism and happiness, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and even better romantic relationship behavior (i.e. self-compassionate partners are more caring and supportive vs. controlling and aggressive), more folks are finding ways to incorporate this ethic into their lives.

However, high-level athletes and other high-achieving types are understandably a little wary. Afraid of losing their competitive edge – that extra something which helps them stay one step ahead of everyone else.

Might a daily dose of self-criticism and internal verbal abuse be the price we have to pay for extraordinary achievement?

Self-compassion and resilience

[Researchers](#) at UC Berkeley wanted to see how self-compassion would affect students' behaviors after doing poorly on a test.

Would they study more? Or less?

86 students took a 10-item GRE-style antonyms test that was designed to be difficult (BTW, want a quick and horrifying reminder of just how much fun the GRE's were? [Try these sample antonyms.](#)).

On average, the students got 4 out of 10 correct on this first test, but were given an opportunity to redeem themselves on a second test, for which they were provided a list of words and definitions to study.

Each student was allowed to study as long as they wanted, but before given the study material, one group of students was given a specific message designed to activate a self-compassion mentality:

"If you had difficulty with the test you just took, you're not alone. It's common for students to have difficulty with tests like this. If you feel bad about how you did, try not to be too hard on yourself."

Another group of students was given a slightly different message, to activate a self-esteem-based mentality:

"If you had difficulty with the test you just took, try not to feel bad about yourself – you must be intelligent if you got into Berkeley."

A third group served as a control, and received no messages; just the study words and definitions.

The results

As predicted, there were significant differences between the three groups in terms of how much time they spent studying for the next test.

The self-compassion group studied longer, on average, than either of the other groups. **33.32% longer** than the self-esteem group, and **50.84% longer** than the control group.

Though the self-compassion group didn't outperform the other two groups by all that much (it was slightly higher, but not a statistically significant difference), **study time was significantly related to increased performance**. Meaning, those who studied longer got higher scores on the second test.

Does self-compassion enhance performance?

The area of research is still pretty new, so there isn't a ton of data explicitly linking self-compassion to greater elite performance quite yet. Nevertheless, this study and a growing number of others do provide important pieces of the puzzle. Puzzle pieces which actually seem to represent many of the key ingredients that are important for maximizing and fulfilling our potential.

Does self-compassion increase our belief that a shortcoming can be changed with hard work (a.k.a. the ["growth" mindset](#))? Seems to, yup.

Might self-compassion increase our motivation to honestly confront our weaknesses and take steps to strengthen them? Yesiree.

Could self-compassion help us get through the mopey defeated stage more quickly so we can get back to work and do what we need to do to make our next effort more successful? [Yeppers](#) .

At the end of the day, self-compassion seems to help us be more resilient and motivated in the face of setbacks, and leads to greater positive efforts than when we beat ourselves up for failure. So it does *not* have to mean becoming complacent and lazy. After all, I think there *is* a fundamental difference between telling yourself it's no biggie to mess up (complacency), and telling yourself that it's ok to make mistakes in the sense that mistakes are a normal part of learning and growth, expected of everyone, and don't make you a worthless person no matter how frustrating or mortifying they can be (self-compassion).

Take action

Want to find out how self-compassionate you are?

Take Dr. Kristin Neff's official self-compassion assessment online. Just remember to view your test results from a self-compassionate perspective (ha. how meta, eh?).

[Take the self-compassion assessment](#)

And if you want to know more about the subscales (self-kindness vs. self-judgment, common humanity vs.

isolation, and mindfulness vs. over-identification), here's a [short explanation](#).

You don't have to post your scores if you don't want to, but I'm curious if there's any sort of theme amongst musicians. Which area of self-compassion needs the most work for you?

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