

Silencing Our Inner Critic: Self-Compassion in Action

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Young people navigate a multitude of challenges every day that can affect their sense of self including social media, evolving and complex relationships, and increasingly high academic expectations and pressure. In Canada, self-reported positive mental health of youth has declined in recent years. Low self-esteem can contribute to lower overall psychological wellbeing and is not uncommon in young people. Notably, studies have shown that youth with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and/or Learning Disabilities (LDs) are especially vulnerable to low self-esteem. For children with ADHD and/or LDs, criticism from both self and others is an unfortunately frequent experience, resulting in low self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy.

So, how can parents, educators, and other adults supporting and mentoring youth help them to develop more positive views of themselves? Another important question is how can individuals (older and younger) inspire positive thoughts within themselves? One possibility: bolster self-compassion. The following article offers important insights into developing, practicing, and bolstering self-compassion for young people and adults alike who find it difficult to silence their inner critic.

What is Self-Compassion?

Self-esteem is easily confused with self-compassion. As such, it is important to highlight how they differ. Whereas self-esteem is considered the overall opinion a person has about themselves, self-compassion involves:

- mindful awareness and acceptance of one's painful feelings,
- recognition that painful experiences are a part of being human, and
- showing kindness to oneself by taking active steps towards supporting yourself when struggling.

For students with LDs and ADHD, many studies have shown links between self-compassion and positive outcomes across social, emotional, and academic domains. Self-compassion is related to lower levels of anxiety and depression in students with LDs. Moreover, self-compassion can decrease feelings of isolation for young people with LDs as well as increase their ability to effectively confront challenging situations.

Critically, resilience has been found to grow from self-compassion, and resilience is central to managing ADHD symptoms. Many young people with ADHD are misunderstood as unmotivated or defiant. Key to fighting this narrative is having an accurate picture of how ADHD works. Self-compassion relies on reality-based, non-judgemental evaluations of mistakes

and flaws that make us human. A self-compassionate perspective sustains motivation and fosters resiliency, which can be transformative for a young person with ADHD.

Self-compassion is one route through which self-esteem can be increased. While this may seem intuitive, it is not always easy. Viewing others through a compassionate lens is easier for many of us than offering compassion to ourselves. Why is this?

- For some, emotional vulnerability has negative associations. Growing up in families where emotional restraint in difficult situations was encouraged or praised can create the common perception that self-compassion signals weakness or self-pity.
- For those with “people-pleasing tendencies”, they may fear opening the emotional floodgates by turning the mirror away from others and onto themselves. Moreover, they may worry that they are lowering their standards for themselves.
- For others, shame and self-criticism are barriers to self-compassion. These individuals are typically blaming, judgemental and harsh with themselves, perceiving themselves as undeserving of self-compassion.

These reactions to self-compassion are very common. The good news is, studies have found that self-compassion can be learned!

What Does Self-Compassion Look Like?

Most young people are taught to show kindness to others but learn to be self-critical towards themselves in the pursuit of achievement and praise. Therefore, engaging in self-compassion requires deliberate and at times uncomfortable effort.

Components of Self-Compassion In Action:

- **Mindfulness:** This is the process of recognizing and bringing awareness to painful emotions. We must observe our emotions from a place of curiosity rather than judgement. This can be done through noticing where the pain is located in our body and engaging in mindfulness exercises to ease the discomfort.
- **Common humanity:** Many people are able to empathize and show care to their loved ones when they are going through times of struggle. This means that we all have the capacity to recognize that suffering, loneliness, and despair are a normal and expected part of the human experience. Common humanity in relation to self-compassion challenges us to normalize our own experiences of struggle, acknowledging that painful emotions occur for everyone and do not mean that there is anything *wrong* with us.
- **Showing ourselves kindness:** This is the doing part! There are many ways to stop ourselves from being pulled into cycles of negative self-talk and building ourselves up instead. Let's take a look:

Putting Self-Compassion into Action

Modeling

This one is for the parents out there. Kids learn how to treat themselves by noticing and picking up on how you treat yourself. If you model self-criticism, you are likely to notice similar patterns in your child. By giving yourself grace, you teach your kids that it is important to do the same.

Humanize

This is all about remembering common humanity- we are human, and we are going to make mistakes and get things wrong- that is life! Many people find it easier to offer self-compassion to loved ones or even strangers than to themselves. For those of you finding it particularly daunting to engage in self-compassion, ask yourself what you would say to a family member or friend in your situation. Try adopting the answer to that question as a mantra and using it to challenge self-criticism when it arises.

For example, if a friend makes a mistake, you might tell them “Hey, I know this is hard for you. Just remember that we learn from our mistakes and can use them to move us forward in a positive direction.” Now, try repeating that back to yourself. The more you practice a mantra, the more you start to believe it!

Be curious instead of judgemental

When you feel like you have missed the mark or made a mistake, try to refrain from judging yourself for it. Instead, be curious about what is going on and how you could respond differently next time.

For individuals with ADHD and/or LDs, it is especially important to question internalized societal messages about what is “normal”. Neurodiverse individuals can struggle with negative views of self due to a reported belief that they are “different from others” and the self-judgement that comes with this belief. Ask yourself, what even is “normal?” I guarantee many people, neurodiverse or not, don’t feel they meet this definition. Questioning the idea of “normalcy” can help us to break down harsh judgements we make about ourselves.

Name it to tame it

Shame often keeps us in a cycle of negative self-talk and makes it very challenging to engage in self-compassion. I encourage you to name the shame and reframe the kind of relationship you want to have with it. You can make friends with shame, or talk back to it, or send it on a

vacation. Imagine what it looks like- if it is big, can you shrink it down? Maybe give it a goofy name which can make it easier to decrease the weight of its impact on your life.

Hug yourself!

A quick and easy way to invite self-compassion in your life is to give yourself a great big hug! Our bodies respond to physical signals of warmth even if it is coming from ourselves. This can be a quick and easy way to offer ourselves self-compassion and signal to our body that we are responding to distress reactions with kindness.

What Self-Compassion is Not

Those who are critical of self-compassion have said things like self-compassion are “giving yourself a pass” or “letting yourself off the hook”. It is critical to note that this is simply not the case. The research shows that self-compassionate people are better able to hold themselves accountable as they recognize that making mistakes is a part of being human. Furthermore, self-compassion has been shown to motivate personal growth and is considered less outcome dependent than self-esteem. This means that those with high levels of self-compassion are more likely to have a growth mindset, undeterred by unsuccessful attempts and less susceptible to social comparison and instability in self-image. Young people with ADHD who adopt a growth mindset are less likely to experience negative affect and more likely to feel a sense of efficacy. Similarly, for youth with LDs, a belief that effort can enhance ability and a willingness to take on new challenges have been found to be related to positive mental health outcomes. Therefore, bolstering self-esteem in young people is a strong avenue through which to improve overall well-being.

Conclusion

Self-compassionate young people have been shown to be more motivated, more likely to step outside of their comfort zones, and more likely to take accountability for mistakes in life. These qualities are all important characteristics of resilient youth. Consequently, offering ourselves self-compassion is a great way to set oneself up for success. As human beings, we have the capacity for constant growth and learning; self-compassion can be a key part of growing into the person you want to be.

For more information on self-compassion check out these resources:

[Cultivating Self-Compassion in Teens](#)

[The Self-Compassion Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness and Compassion Skills to Overcome Self-Criticism and Embrace Who You Are](#)

[The Self-Compassion Workbook for Kids: Fun Mindfulness Activities to Build Emotional Strength and Make Kindness Your Superpower](#)

[ADHD and Self-Compassion](#)

[An Alternative to Self-Esteem: Fostering Self-Compassion in Youth](#)