

It's very common to respond harshly to ourselves when we're experiencing hardship. Ironically, this is when we need an ally and support the most. We do this for many reasons. Sometimes we think that tough love will make us better or stronger people. Other times we might have shame about our struggles.

Because we don't see others experiencing them. Often, we've learned these habits from authority figures when we're young. While I was privileged to grow up in a supportive environment where I wasn't talked to disparagingly by authority figures, I still have picked up on a lot of these habits. Even though they did not talk to me this way, I did hear them talk to themselves this way. I would say learning negative self-talk is a pretty unavoidable experience. It's deeply embedded in our culture. Unfortunately, speaking unkindly to ourselves often has the opposite result of the one we intended. The Buddha add a teaching, which is referred to as the Second Arrow.

The First Arrow represents suffering that we've experienced in life that is unavoidable. Chronic pain, illness and disability are great examples of this. The Second Arrow represents when we respond harshly to the first. The Buddha said it's as if we have struck ourselves with the Second Arrow in the exact same spot as the first. It doubles the unavoidable pain, if not more.

Self-Compassion is an alternative to the Second Arrow. Instead of attacking ourselves for what we cannot prevent, we are removing the First Arrow and applying salve to the wound. We don't just ignore our pain, but acknowledge it, affirm that pain is part of life and soothe the hurt.

We don't have much control over how our lives play out, but we do have control over how we respond to life struggles. Responding wisely to our hardships gives us the spaciousness to discover that joy can exist alongside suffering.

As disabled people, we can often feel very alone in our experience. What we live with can seem so unique and that's very isolating. One reason why Self-Compassion is so powerful is that no one is more qualified to be understanding and caring of our experience than we are ourselves. We know our own pains and sorrows intimately.

In the rest of my talk, I'd like to outline some parts of the Self-Compassion practice. It's not necessarily important that you do all of them or that you do them in the exact order that I describe. Eventually, you'll learn what's most supportive to you and you can focus on that. Part of this practice is realizing it takes time to unlearn old instincts, so allow yourself to make mistakes and to get off track, it happens to the best of us. This exercise is based on Kristen Neff's Self-Compassion Break.

The first step in the Self-Compassion break is to become aware of what you're experiencing and apply a label to it. Are you sad? Lonely? In pain? Or maybe frustrated? Just tap into what's there. So why is this important? The part of our brain that controls logic and reasoning is separate from the part of our brain that controls stress, fear, and emotional reactivity.

When we are feeling a surge of emotion and we take a step back to assess the situation with a logical part of our brain, it disrupts the emotional experience. This doesn't make it go away, but it can make our emotions a little less overwhelming, which helped us to respond rather than react. Because we're trying to disrupt the emotional parts of our brain from taking the driver's seat, it helps to take a little time with this step and to be as specific as possible. We want to label what our emotion is, not what our thoughts are. We are not trying to rationalize why we're feeling what we're feeling. Just to put a name to it. Generally there is just one word that follows this statement. "I feel". Such as, "I feel stressed". In some cases you might choose two emotions. "I feel angry and sad."

You could also try saying something like, "This is a moment of suffering", or "This is what loneliness feels like". This method, called "name it to tame it", was developed by Neuropsychiatrist Dan Siegel. Although Dan's focus for this technique was on emotion, I sometimes find it helpful to remind myself, "This is what pain or illness feels like".

Once you've settled on a label for your emotion, bring your attention to how you're relating to yourself during this challenge. It's okay to realize that you're relating to yourself unkindly. This is very common, especially if you've never worked with Self-Compassion.

Self-Compassion is a judgment free zone. No matter how irrational you may feel in this moment, whatever you're experiencing is simply what you're experiencing. It's all valid. While it's all valid, that doesn't mean it's okay to strike yourself with a Second Arrow. It simply means you don't wanna throw a Third Arrow at yourself for doing so.

For me, when I notice myself being unkind, I think to myself something like, "Wow, those are some really harsh words," and try and rephrase how I'm reacting to the situation in a kinder way. Sometimes I feel like catching myself in the moments of anger can be really helpful. Recognizing Self-Meanness is a great signal that I need to take a little time to be compassionate towards myself.

The next step is Self-Kindness. Self-Kindness takes two main forms. The first is through how we talk to ourselves. Our goal is to shift away from the harsh speech that we tend to use towards ourselves and talk to ourselves in soothing and compassionate ways. Think about how you'd talk to someone who you care about if they were experiencing what you are.

Kristen recommends that we refer to ourselves using terms like "Sweetheart" and "My Dear". "Sweetheart, I'm sorry you're experiencing this fear right now." I think a lot of people feel uncomfortable talking to themselves in this way. I like such terms, such as "My friend" or even "Buddy", because they feel more natural to me.

What's most important is not the exact words, but something neuroscientist Ethan Cross calls "distanced self-talk". The idea here is that we are much kinder to other people than we are to ourselves, and by speaking to ourselves in the third person, we feel more like we're talking to another person. Ethan recommends simply using your name, "Zac, what you're dealing with is very hard, and I'm so sorry you're going through this.

I also like to tell myself "It's okay to feel these things". Feelings are always valid. Sometimes they can cause us to react in unwise ways, but the feelings themselves are not the issue. Self-Kindness is not just about the words we use, but the tone of compassion we hold them with. We want to be gentle and caring with ourselves.

Sometimes I focus more on sending myself supportive energy. Then finding the right words I need to hear in that moment. A quick note on the word, "Sorry". This is not about pity, but rather empathy. Pity is related to aversion, a sort of, "Wow, that sucks. I'm glad it's not me". Pity is a contractive experience. Empathy on the other hand is opening your heart to another person's, or your own experience. So use sorry as a way of communicating, understanding and support, and not wallowing in your struggle.

The second form of Self-Kindness is soothing touch. Our brains and bodies aren't able to differentiate between receiving supportive touch from someone else or from ourselves. It's important to do this with intention. You don't wanna just place your hand on your heart, but you wanna do so in a loving and caring manner. Generally soothing touch is where I start when I recognize I need Self-Compassion, and sometimes it's the only thing I do. As I said, though, all these steps can be done in any order.

I'd like to take you through some of the many options for supportive touch to see if any one in particular stands out to you.

Start by pressing your palms together.

Now try cupping one hand in the other.

Now place one hand over your heart.

Two hands over your heart.

One hand over your heart while stroking in circles.

Leave one hand on your heart and place the second on your belly.

Now try two hands on your belly.

Place one hand on your cheek.

Now try stroking the middle of your forehead with one or two fingers. Right above the bridge of your nose going up to your hairline.

You can also try crossing your arms and giving yourself a gentle hug.

Or gently stroking your arms with your hands.

Try rubbing an ear lobe with between your thumb and forefinger.

Did one of these stick out to you as the most supportive? If you'd like, try returning to it for a while.

If none of these are accessible to you, the Self-Compassion break is still effective. You could also try having someone else help you with compassionate touch. Or you can imagine receiving a warm and embrace from someone who cares about you.

The final step in the Self-Compassion break is common humanity. It's important to emphasize to yourself that you're not alone in any of your struggles. One in four people in the United States of America have some sort of disability. You may not know other people who struggle like you do, but you can be assured that you're not the only one living your experience.

It's helpful to just remind yourself of this, saying something like, "You're not alone. So many people struggle like you do". I'd like to take this even a step further and try and send compassion to all the people who are dealing with what

I'm dealing with. I often find that it's easier to be compassionate for myself when I'm able to access compassion for others.

I also highly recommend developing community with others, living with chronic illness and disability. Self-Compassion is a journey, not a destination. Just because I'm teaching you how to do it does not mean I'm a master. I stumble all the time. I hope you will try planting some seeds of Self-Compassion and see what grows.

Don't forget, it's a practice that needs constant restarting and refreshing. So be patient with yourself along the path.