What is self-compassion?

Treating yourself the way you would treat someone you care about.

Compassion is noticing suffering and wanting to help. Self-compassion is turning that same attitude towards yourself when you are struggling, have failed, or do not like something about yourself.

Three parts

Kindness, not judgement
Being warm and understanding with yourself when things go wrong, instead of attacking.

Common humanity, not isolation
Remembering that struggling, failing and feeling inadequate are part of being human. You are not the only one.

Mindful awareness, not over-identifying
Seeing your pain clearly, without ignoring it and without being swept away by it.

What it is not

The worry	What the evidence suggests
"It is self-pity."	Self-pity says "poor me, nobody suffers like I do". Self-compassion says "this is hard, and everyone has hard times".
"It is letting myself off the hook."	People who are kinder to themselves are more able to admit mistakes and put them right, because they can bear to look.
"I will lose my drive."	Self-compassionate people are just as motivated. They are less afraid of failing, so they try more and bounce back faster.
"It is selfish."	It leaves you with more to give to other people.
"It is weak."	Facing your own pain with kindness takes courage.

Starting small

- Notice when you are having a hard time, and say so: "This is difficult."
- Ask: "What would I say to a friend in this exact position?"
- Put a hand on your chest and slow your breathing.
- Ask: "What do I need right now?"

If it feels strange or upsetting
That is common, especially if kindness was scarce when you were growing up. Go gently. It gets easier with practice.

The three elements of self-compassion were described by Kristin Neff.

My notes and questions

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.