# Give Yourself a Break: The Power of Self-Compassion

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***Harvard Business Review***
*From the September–October 2018 Issue*

When people experience a setback at work—whether it's a bad sales quarter, being overlooked for a promotion, or an interpersonal conflict with a colleague—it's common to respond in one of two ways. Either we become defensive and blame others, or we berate ourselves. Unfortunately, neither response is especially helpful. Shirking responsibility by getting defensive may alleviate the sting of failure, but it comes at the expense of learning. Self-flagellation, on the other hand, may feel warranted in the moment, but it can lead to an inaccurately gloomy assessment of one's potential, which undermines personal development.

What if instead we were to treat ourselves as we would a friend in a similar situation? More likely than not, we'd be kind, understanding, and encouraging. Directing that type of response internally, toward ourselves, is known as self-compassion, and it's been the focus of a good deal of research in recent years. Psychologists are discovering that self-compassion is a useful tool for enhancing performance in a variety of settings, from healthy aging to athletics. I and other researchers have begun focusing on how self-compassion also enhances professional growth.

For nonacademics, self-compassion is a less familiar concept than self-esteem or self-confidence. Although it's true that people who engage in self-compassion tend to have higher self-esteem, the two concepts are distinct. Self-esteem tends to involve evaluating oneself in comparison with others. Self-compassion, on the other hand, doesn't involve judging the self or others. Instead, it creates a sense of self-worth because it leads people to genuinely care about their own well-being and recovery after a setback.

People with high levels of self-compassion demonstrate three behaviors: First, they are kind rather than judgmental about their own failures and mistakes; second, they recognize that failures are a shared human experience; and third, they take a balanced approach to negative emotions when they stumble or fall short—they allow themselves to feel bad, but they don't let negative emotions take over.

Kristin Neff, a professor at the University of Texas, Austin, has developed a survey tool that assesses the three components of self-compassion. Researchers and practitioners have used the tool to shed light on what personality traits and behaviors are associated with self-compassion and have found, among other things, that people who score high typically have greater motivation to improve themselves and are more likely to report strong feelings of authenticity—the sense of being true to the self. Both are important contributors to a successful career. The good news is that both of these traits can be cultivated and enhanced through self-compassion.

## A Growth Mindset

Most organizations and people want to improve—and self-compassion is crucial for that. We tend to associate personal growth with determination, persistence, and hard work, but the process often starts with reflection. One of the key requirements for self-improvement is having a realistic assessment of where we stand—of our strengths and our limitations. Convincing ourselves that we are better than we are leads to complacency, and thinking we're worse than we are leads to defeatism. When people treat themselves with compassion, they are better able to arrive at realistic self-appraisals, which is the foundation for improvement. They are also more motivated to work on their weaknesses rather than think "What's the point?" and to summon the grit required to enhance skills and change bad habits.

*"Self-compassion triggers people to adopt a growth mindset."*

My colleagues Juliana Breines (at the University of Rhode Island) and Jia Wei Zhang (at the University of Memphis) and I demonstrated this in a series of studies in which participants were nudged to treat themselves either with self-compassion or in a self-esteem-boosting manner. Then we assessed their desire for self-improvement. In one study, we asked participants to recall a time when they did something they felt was wrong and as a result experienced guilt, remorse, and regret. The majority of participants' transgressions involved romantic infidelity, academic misconduct, dishonesty, betrayal of trust, or hurting someone they cared about. We then randomly assigned them to one of three conditions: self-compassion, self-esteem, or a control group. The self-compassion participants were asked to write a paragraph to themselves expressing kindness and understanding regarding the transgression. The self-esteem people were asked to write a paragraph describing their positive qualities. Participants in the control group were asked to write about a hobby they enjoyed. All participants then filled out a questionnaire assessing their desire to make amends and their commitment not to repeat the transgression in the future. We found that those who were encouraged

to treat themselves with compassion reported being more motivated to make amends and to never repeat the transgression than participants who were encouraged to respond to the transgression in a self-esteem-boosting manner and those in the control group. In other research, we found that self-compassion increased the resolve of people who said they had been responsible for a romantic breakup to be better partners in future relationships, compared with participants in the other two conditions.

Self-compassion does more than help people recover from failure or setbacks. It also supports what Carol Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford University, has called a "growth mindset." Dweck has documented the benefits of adopting a growth rather than "fixed" approach to performance, whether it be in launching a successful start-up, parenting, or running a marathon. People with a fixed mindset see personality traits and abilities, including their own, as set in stone. They believe that who we are today is essentially who we'll be five years from now. People who have a growth mindset, in contrast, view personality traits and abilities as malleable. They see the potential for growth and thus are more likely to try to improve—to put in effort and practice and to stay positive and optimistic.

My research suggests that self-compassion triggers people to adopt a growth mindset. In one study I conducted with Juliana Breines, participants were asked to identify what they considered to be their biggest weakness—most involved social difficulties such as lack of confidence, anxiety, shyness, and insecurity in relationships—after which they were randomly assigned to one of three groups. Participants in the self-compassion group were asked to write a response to this prompt: "Imagine that you are talking to yourself about this weakness from a compassionate and understanding perspective. What would you say?" People in the self-esteem group were asked to write in response to: "Imagine that you are talking to yourself about this weakness from a perspective of validating your positive (rather than negative) qualities." The final group was not asked to write anything.

Next, participants completed a set of measures about whether they felt content, sad, or upset and then were asked to spend five minutes describing whether they've ever done anything to change their weakness and where they thought their weakness came from. Independent coders rated participants' responses based on the degree to which they conveyed a growth or a fixed mindset ("It's just inborn—there's nothing I can do" versus "With hard work I know I can change"). Participants in the self-compassion condition expressed significantly more thoughts associated with a growth mindset than participants in the other two conditions.

But what about actual behavior? How do we know that self-compassion—and the resulting growth mindset—will lead people to work harder to improve themselves? According to the scientific literature on fixed and growth mindsets, one of the most compelling signs that a person has a growth mindset is his or her willingness to keep trying to do better after receiving negative feedback. After all, if you believe your abilities are fixed, there's no point in making the effort. But if you view abilities as changeable, getting negative feedback shouldn't deter you in trying to improve.

We tested this reasoning in a study in which participants (all students at a highly ranked university) first took a very difficult vocabulary test and received feedback that they had performed poorly. The participants were then randomly assigned to two groups. The experimenter remarked to the first group—the self-compassion condition—"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." To the other group of participants, the experimenter instead said: "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 this university."

Afterward, all participants were told they had to take another vocabulary test. They were given a chance to study a list of words and definitions and were advised that they could review the words as long they wanted before taking the test. We found that participants who were nudged to treat their initial failure with compassion were more likely to adopt a growth mindset about their vocabulary abilities and put in more time studying than their counterparts in the self-esteem condition were. It seems that self-compassion paved the way for self-improvement by revving up their desire to do better, encouraging the belief that improvement is possible, and motivating them to work harder.

## Being True to the Self

Self-compassion has benefits for the workplace beyond boosting employees' drive to improve. Over time, it can help people gravitate to roles that better fit their personality and values. Living in accord with one's true self—what psychologists term "authenticity"—results in increased motivation and drive (along with a host of other mental health benefits). Unfortunately, authenticity remains elusive for many in the workplace. People may feel stuck in jobs where they have to suppress their true self because of incongruent workplace norms around behavior, doubts about what they have to contribute, or fears about being judged negatively by colleagues and superiors. But self-compassion can help people assess their professional and personal trajectories and make course corrections

when and where necessary. A self-compassionate sales executive who misses a quarterly target, for example, not only will focus on how she can make her numbers next quarter but also will be more likely to take stock of whether she is in the right sort of job for her temperament and disposition.

In recent research spearheaded by Jia Wei Zhang, we discovered that self-compassion cultivates authenticity by minimizing negative thoughts and self-doubts. In an initial study, participants completed a short survey on a daily basis for one week. They were asked to rate their levels of self-compassion ("Today, I showed caring, understanding, and kindness toward myself") and authenticity ("Today, I felt authentic and genuine in my interactions with others") each day. We found that daily variations in levels of self-compassion were closely linked to variations in feelings of authenticity. On days when participants reported being more compassionate toward themselves relative to their average level, they also reported greater feelings of authenticity.

These correlational findings were strengthened by experimental evidence from another study in which we randomly assigned participants to respond to a personal weakness from a self-compassionate perspective, a self-esteem-boosting perspective, or neither. Immediately afterward, they completed questionnaires that measured how authentic they felt. Participants who were instructed to be self-compassionate about their weakness reported significantly higher feelings of authenticity than participants in the other two conditions did.

*"Self-compassion can help people gravitate to roles that better fit their personality."*

What's happening here? Treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and without judgment alleviates fears about social disapproval, paving the way for authenticity. Optimism also seems to play a role. Having a positive outlook on life makes people more willing to take chances—such as revealing their true selves. In fact, research shows that optimistic people are more likely to reveal negative things about themselves—such as distressing experiences they've endured or difficult medical challenges they face. In effect, optimism increases people's inclination to be authentic, despite the potential risks involved. I believe that the relative emotional calm and the balanced perspective that come with being self-compassionate can help people approach difficult experiences with a positive attitude.

## Turbocharged Leadership

A self-compassionate mindset produces benefits that spread to others, too. This is especially the case for people in leadership roles. That's because self-compassion and compassion for others are linked: Practicing one boosts the other. Being kind and nonjudgmental toward the self is good practice for treating others compassionately, just as compassion for others can increase how compassionate people are toward themselves, creating an upward cycle of compassion—and an antidote to "incivility spirals" that too often plague work environments.

The fact that self-compassion encourages a growth mindset is also relevant here. Research shows that when leaders adopt a growth mindset (that is, believe that change is possible), they're more likely to pay attention to changes in subordinates' performance and to give useful feedback on how to improve. Subordinates, in turn, can discern when their leaders have growth mindsets, which makes them more motivated and satisfied, not to mention more likely to adopt growth mindsets themselves. The old adage "lead by example" applies to self-compassion and the growth mindset it encourages.

A similar link between leader and subordinates exists for authenticity, too. People can sense authenticity in others, and when leaders are seen as being true to themselves, it creates an atmosphere of authenticity throughout the workplace. There's also substantial evidence that stronger relationships are forged when people feel authentic in their interactions with others.

When leaders respond to failures and setbacks with a self-compassionate attitude, they themselves benefit, being more likely to exhibit psychological and behavioral tendencies that bode well for their own professional development and success. And the benefits can trickle down to subordinates, making the practice of self-compassion a win-win for leaders and those they lead.

## Fostering Self-Compassion

Fostering self-compassion is not complicated or difficult. It's a skill that can be learned and enhanced. For the analytically minded, I suggest using psychologists' definition of self-compassion as a three-point checklist: Am I being kind and understanding to myself? Do I acknowledge shortcomings and failure as experiences shared by everyone? Am I keeping my negative feelings in perspective? If this doesn't work, a simple "trick" can also help: Sit down and write yourself a letter in the third person, as if you were a friend or loved one. Many of us are better at being a good friend to other people than to ourselves, so this can help avoid spirals of defensiveness or self-flagellation.

The business community at large has done a good job of removing the stigma around failure in recent years at the organizational level—it's a natural byproduct of experimentation and, ultimately, innovation. But too many of us are not harnessing the redemptive power of failure in our own work lives. As more and more industries are disrupted and people's work lives are thrown into upheaval, this skill will become more important.

If you're struggling to foster self-compassion in your professional and personal life, don't beat yourself up about it. With a little practice, you can do better.

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*A version of this article appeared in the September–October 2018 issue (pp.116–123) of Harvard Business Review.*