

# THE SCIENCE OF SELF-COMPASSION

## **The three components of self-compassion**

(Neff, 2003b)

- ▶ Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
  - Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
  - Actively soothing and comforting oneself
- ▶ Common humanity vs. Isolation
  - Seeing own experience as part of larger human experience not isolating or abnormal
  - Recognizing that life is imperfect (us too!)
- ▶ Mindfulness vs. Over-identification
  - Allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they are
  - Avoids extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings

## **Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion**

- ▶ YIN - “being with” ourselves in a compassionate way—comforting, soothing, validating
- ▶ YANG - “acting in the world” in a compassionate way—protecting, providing, and motivating

## **Physiological underpinnings** (Gilbert, 2009)

- ▶ Physiological underpinnings of self-criticism
  - Threat defense system
  - Cortisol and adrenaline
- ▶ Physiological underpinnings of self-compassion
  - Mammalian care-giving system
  - Oxytocin and opiates

## **Research on self-compassion**

- ▶ Explosion of research into self-compassion over the past decade
- ▶ Most research conducted with the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a)

## **Self-compassion linked to wellbeing**

(Zessin, Dickhauser & Garbadee, 2015)

- ▶ Reductions in negative mind-states: Anxiety, depression, stress, rumination, thought suppression, perfectionism, shame
- ▶ Increases in positive mind-states: Life satisfaction, happiness, connectedness, self-confidence, optimism, curiosity, gratitude
- ▶ Self-compassion leads to wellbeing by holding negative thoughts and emotions in loving, connected, presence

## **Self-compassion vs. self-esteem**

(Neff & Vonk, 2009)

- ▶ Offers same wellbeing benefits without pitfalls
- ▶ Fewer social comparisons
- ▶ Less contingent self-worth
- ▶ No association with narcissism

## **Five main misgivings about self-compassion**

- ▶ Is a form of self-pity
- ▶ Means weakness
- ▶ Will undermine motivation
- ▶ Will lead to self-indulgence
- ▶ Is selfish



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## **Is less self-focused**

- ▶ Linked to less rumination and self-consciousness (Raes, 2010; Neff & Vonk, 2003a)
- ▶ Linked to more connectedness (Neff, 2003a)

## **Linked to coping and resilience**

- ▶ More effective coping with divorce (Sbarra et al., 2012)
- ▶ Less likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma (Hiraoka et al., 2015)
- ▶ Better coping with chronic health conditions (Sirois, 2015)

## **Linked to motivation** (Breines & Chen, 2012)

- ▶ Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after failure
- ▶ More personal responsibility and motivation to repair past mistakes

## **Linked to healthier behaviors** (Terry & Leary, 2011)

- ▶ More exercise, more doctors visits, safer sex, less alcohol use

## **Linked to more other-focused concern**

- ▶ More caring and supportive relationship behavior (Neff & Beretvas, 2013)
- ▶ Less controlling and verbally aggressive
- ▶ More forgiveness and perspective taking (Neff & Pommier, 2013)

## **Early influences on self-compassion**

- ▶ Secure versus insecure attachment (Wei, Liao, Ku & Shaffer, 2011)
- ▶ Parental criticism and family conflict (Neff & McGehee, 2010)
- ▶ History of sexual, emotional, physical abuse (Vetesse et al., 2011)

## **Mindful Self-Compassion**

(MSC; Neff & Germer, 2013)

- ▶ 8-week workshop (2.5 hours each session) designed to explicitly teach self-compassion
- ▶ Empirically demonstrated to increase self-compassion, mindfulness, wellbeing
- ▶ An empirically supported teen adaptation exists called Making Friends with Yourself (Bluth et al., 2015)



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