

Self-Compassion: The Often Missing Ingredient in Healthy Eating



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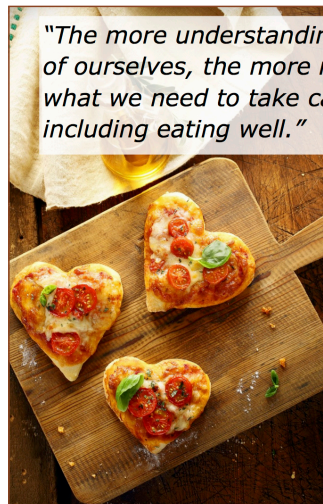
During another tough day at work, Mary realizes she forgot to eat lunch. She's starving. The salad she brought that day doesn't appeal, especially when her office mate offers to share the pizza he ordered. Mary loves pizza so she takes a piece, eating it quickly because she is hungry but also feeling guilty over her choice. She takes another slice. And another. She finishes the meal feeling too full and starts berating herself for her lack of willpower. "I shouldn't have eaten that. What's wrong with me? Why do I always choose foods that I know I shouldn't eat?"

Does this scenario sound familiar? It's one that's repeated frequently by many who repeatedly try without success to eat more healthfully. What they don't realize is that they're missing a key ingredient in healthy eating. It's self-compassion. And it has the power to make or break your success at eating well.

Self-Compassion Defined

According to researcher Kristin Neff, PhD, self-compassion consists of three main components:

- **Self-kindness** – Being kind and understanding toward yourself in instances of pain or failure as opposed to



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harshly criticizing yourself.

- **Common humanity** – Recognizing your experiences are part of the larger human experience. You are not alone.
- **Mindfulness** – Holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than overidentifying with them or trying to ignore them.

Research shows the more understanding and forgiving we are of ourselves, the more motivated we are to do what we need to take care of ourselves, including eating well. It also helps guard against emotional overeating, which often occurs when we feel as if we have failed in our efforts to eat well.

A lack of self-compassion closes the door to learning about our habits, patterns, triggers and needs when it comes to food. By adopting a forgiving and curious attitude instead, you can foster a healthy relationship with eating and food and yourself that can open the door to improved health and happiness.

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How to Add a Healthy Dose of Self-Compassion to Your Meals

Step 1: Give up black-and-white thinking. Embrace the fact that healthy eating is flexible and can include a wide variety of foods, some of which are richer than others, such as a pizza. And sometimes the healthier choice may be the richer choice.

For example, which would be a healthier choice at a party: Pizza or salad? The salad is only healthier if that's what you really want. Otherwise, you might feel deprived and end up overeating later. Enjoying pizza mindfully as part of a celebration allows for the many roles that food plays in our lives. We can often end up feeling satisfied with less when it does.

Step 2: Become aware of how you talk to yourself when eating. Does a tape start running in your head that admonishes you not to eat too much or not to eat certain types of foods? Or that you're a failure if you do? Write down what you say to yourself.

Step 3: Write down responses to those thoughts that you can "turn on" when you hear yourself starting to go down the familiar road of negative self-talk.

Step 4: Practice those responses every time you hear yourself talking negatively to yourself about your eating. Try carrying around a small notebook with your new messages to refer to. Remember, the first time you do something differently is the hardest. Every time you do it thereafter, it gets easier.

COMMUNITY WISDOM:

We asked our members to share their experiences, challenges and insights on the theme of self-compassion - both professionally and personally:

What obstacles arise as you try to practice self-compassion?

“Doubt arises, as if compassion to myself might hinder me back from attaining my objectives.” ~ *Ainhoa Campo, ICF and Newfield Certified Coach (Pamplona Area, Spain)*

“As the pace of life gets more and more fast, sometimes I forget about myself as a being and enter in this automatic mode, a mode that is aggressive against myself. I need to ‘come back to me’ to have more self-compassion.” ~ *Claudia Correia, Dietitian (Singapore)*

“Because my ‘younger self’ was energetic, strong and vital, I find that practicing not only mindfulness but self-compassion on a daily basis has been very important in living with grace and more ease with two challenging medical conditions.” ~ *Jan Hempstead, RN, BCC (Albany, N.Y.)*

“I remind myself about changing my self-talk to be more compassionate. I have suffered chronic headaches for more than 30 years. One day my acupuncturist said, ‘If you were a little child, you wouldn’t be yelling at them about why they had another headache, would you?’ That was a very clear sign that maybe I should change my self-talk.” ~ *Jane Joseph, RD, Certified Health/Wellness Coach, Am I Hungry? Mindful Eating Program facilitator (Spokane, Wash.)*

“Having been raised by a very critical parent, it is almost second nature to first criticize. What I’ve done is install a loving parent who immediately kicks in with love and compassion.” ~ *Linda L Lawless, MA, LMFT, LMHC (Vallejo, Calif.)*

“I think it’s hard for all people to truly believe that if we are kind to ourselves, we can still change. We tend to think that we have to be critical in order to be motivated.” ~ *Catherine Wilson Gillespie, PhD (Des Moines, Iowa)*

What challenges arise when you invite your clients to be kind to themselves?

“The resistance I see usually comes from guilt feelings and negative self-talk.” ~ *Ann Asher, FNP (Georgia, U.S.)*

“The main obstacle we all face is learning to retrain our minds to value our lives as individuals and make the effort necessary to be kind to ourselves.” ~ *Angela Bewick, RHN (Calgary, Canada)*

“Clients are afraid that if they stop beating themselves up and start treating themselves kindly, they’ll start eating and never stop.” ~ *Jean Fain, a Harvard Medical School-affiliated psychotherapist (Concord, Mass.)*

“My clients say, ‘I’m good to myself; I get my hair done, have a housekeeping service,’ etc. The challenge is to help them see that doing for themselves is not always the same as being kind to themselves.” ~ *Michele Paiva CHt, MBSR, ERYT (Downingtown, Pa.)*

“Being self-critical and feeling undeserving are challenges.” ~ *Camerin Ross, PhD (Tiburon, Calif.)*

How do you help your clients shift their self-talk from critical to compassionate?

“Working with Kristin Neff’s teachings helps them realize that they are allowed to talk to themselves differently: loving kindness, common humanity, mindfulness.” ~ *Cuca Azinovic, Wellness Coach and Mindfulness Expert (Alcobendas, Spain)*

“Matrix Reimprinting, an advanced form of EFT, appears to be the most effective in learning self-love and compassion. We often do amazing intergenerational work that simply changes the hearts and minds of my clients in astonishing ways.” ~ *Ruthi Cohen-Joyner, MPH, RD, LDN (Locust, N.C.)*

“I try to provide clients with unconditional regard to model how they might care for themselves.” ~ *Karen R. Koenig, LCSW, MEd (Sarasota, Fla.)*



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