

INTRODUCTION

The belief that “it is better to give than to receive” is a cornerstone of most major religions and an axiom that most of us learned at a young age and never questioned. Certainly, one of the most important things we can do with our lives is help others and treat them with caring and sensitivity.

However, our ability to consistently meet the needs of others is largely contingent on our ability to treat *ourselves* with compassion. Our subsequent sense of happiness, inner and wholeness frees us to give to other people without depleting ourselves. Fortunately, we don't have to choose between being compassionate toward ourselves or others. We can do both at the same time and enjoy the rich fruits that both have to offer.

After reading earlier drafts of this book, a number of people have asked me if it's possible to have too much self-compassion. I respond that self-compassion is like love, kindness and good health - there is never too much. In fact, there is always room for more, just as with most of the best things in life.

Imagine that you have a very limited amount of food in your pantry. Now, visualize that your starving neighbor asks you for it. How can you give her some of your food without being unfair to yourself? Not only will you deplete your own dwindling supply, but you might build up some resentment towards her in the bargain.

In contrast, visualize that you have so much food it's spilling out your doors and windows. Fruits, bread, vegetables and desserts - you've got an abundance of everything. Moreover, you have the resources to go back to the market anytime to buy more. Now, you can give away a substantial amount of food to your neighbor without hurting yourself. In addition, you'll feel terrific about sharing what you have.

Compassion works the same way. When we fill ourselves up with it, we have plenty for others. In fact, the most generous people I know take such effective care of themselves that they no longer experience an inner sense of scarcity. They are free to dedicate their lives to serving others while simultaneously practicing self-compassion and attentiveness to their own needs.

I wrote this book to enable you to experience the happiness and peace of mind that come from self-compassion and consequently expand your ability to a resource to others. I have developed and tested the strategies I discuss during my many years of experience as a therapist and my own quest to give myself the gift of self-compassion.

Chapter 1 offers a simple, vital strategy for achieving self-compassion that you can start practicing today. In chapter 2, we explore commonly held beliefs that prevent you from experiencing happiness and how to change them. Chapter 3 discusses the fact that you are

inherently worthy, regardless of how others perceive you or your faults. In chapter 4, we focus on the importance of not projecting your needs onto others. Chapter 5 describes how a former client of mine overcame her depression and low self-worth by learning how to be more self-compassionate.

Chapter 6 focuses on how you can choose the gifts of happiness and peace of mind, regardless of the challenges you face. Chapter 7 is all about taking great care of yourself. In chapter 8, you will learn how to get “out of your head” and “tune into” your deeper authentic self. Chapter 9 shows you how you can eliminate negative reactions to difficult situations.

Chapter 10 encourages you to appreciate what you have so you can live your life with a sense of fulfillment rather than scarcity. In chapter 11, you will discover a variety of portals to enjoy the wonders of the present moment. Finally, chapter 12 concentrates on how your self-compassion enables you to experience an abundance of positive energy and caring that you can pass onto others.

My Evolution to Self-Compassion

My ability to treat myself with self-compassion has profoundly changed my life and enabled me to be more giving as a father, husband, friend, therapist, trainer, professor and citizen of this world. Now that I feel whole within myself, I do not project my needs onto others or live my life with a sense of inadequacy or lack. I also follow my inner voice that knows what I need to do at any moment to take the best care of myself. Finally, I experience boundless inner peace as I “tune into” my authentic self, appreciate all I have and enjoy what each present moment has to offer.

I didn’t start out this way. I grew up in a Quaker family in which my parents continuously prioritized and modeled the importance of helping others and working hard to help create a better world. I vividly remember going with my mother to take clothes to the migrant farm workers who worked in the fields near our house in upstate New York, marching in Civil Rights demonstrations before I even understood why, receiving cash at Christmas that my father expected me to give away to some worthy cause and trying to help all of my friends solve their problems.

The underlying message was clear: the purpose of my life was to serve others. Not surprisingly, I received a Masters Degree in Social Work and began a 34-year career helping others, which has brought significant meaning into my life and taught me invaluable lessons about how we can overcome challenges and achieve happiness in our lives. Until recently, however, I didn’t focus nearly as much energy on being as good to myself as I did being good to others.

There were a number of reasons for this. First was my core belief that other people’s

needs were more important than my own, and that I was responsible for meeting them. Related to this, I've always harbored a deep fear of appearing to be selfish or self-centered. Finally, I have a completely irrational need for everyone to like me, which I worried might not happen if I focused on my own needs rather than the needs of others.

Although I take pride in my efforts to be helpful to others, the downside of this worldview is that I've often tried to do things for others that they did not want or need me to do. An excellent example of this concerns my 17-year-old son, Darqui, who experienced severe neglect and abuse before we adopted him at the age of nine. Although he is a "deep soul" who is generally very loving and positive, he was prone to dark, angry moods when he first joined our family. Whenever he was in a negative frame of mind, I felt compelled to hover around him, trying desperately to help him exorcise his inner demons and find happiness.

During a very difficult time in our relationship, Darqui informed me that he hated me for assuming that I knew how he should feel, that he had the right to have a dark side and that there was nothing I could ever do or say to help him feel any better. Jolted, I asked my son, "What can I do to help you?" "Nothing," he snapped, "Worry about your own life."

He was so definitive that I had no choice but to respect his request. Although it was difficult, I ceased my efforts to change Darqui and reluctantly gave him the space he demanded. It was his life and I couldn't take away his pain and "make him" feel happy regardless of how much I wanted to or loved him. In fact, I was contributing to his angst by acting like I could rescue him from himself.

After barely speaking to me for three months, he finally began to talk to me again. This time, I simply listened. When he again voiced his negative feelings about himself and his life, I nodded supportively and didn't try to change his perspective. As he talked, I was also finally able to observe how effective he was at getting to a better place all by himself, without any meddling on my part.

I now realize that it was grandiose for me to believe that I had the wisdom to recognize and meet all the needs of Darqui - or anyone else, for that matter. Sure, I can listen carefully to others as they discuss their problems, offer whatever support and guidance I can muster and treat them with caring and sensitivity. However, I am completely responsible for just one person's happiness - my own. This works out well because only I know on a deep level what I need to do to experience fulfillment, meaning, fun and all the other aspects of life that make it worth living. In fact, how can it possibly be otherwise? How does anyone else know what I need to do in any given moment to feel good about myself or live the life I want?

The person who comes the closest to knowing is my wife, Anita. Although she has experienced me at my best and worst over the course of our long marriage and will do anything in her power to help me become my best self, there is simply no way she can ever identify more than a small fraction of my needs, much less figure out how to respond to them on a consistent

basis. She can certainly listen to me when I am upset, encourage me to do the things that she knows bring me meaning and pleasure, provide me with useful feedback and leave me alone on Sunday afternoons in the fall to indulge my addiction to professional football. However, she can't make me happy even though I used to unfairly long for her to do so. This is my task alone and one that I now heartily embrace.

Along with what I have learned experientially about achieving self-compassion, the privilege of helping my clients has also taught me a great deal about the most effective portals to self-compassion. Although I certainly focus on many other issues with clients, I have found that their deepest emotional pain is often caused by the harsh ways in which they speak to and judge themselves, their lack of self-worth and their inability to take adequate care of themselves. I am honored to be their guide as they heal themselves by becoming more self-compassionate.

The power of self-compassion that I frequently observe within my clients has been validated through the research conducted by Dr. Kristin Neff, Associate Professor at the University of Texas, Austin. She and her colleague, Chris Germer (2013), found that study participants who were taught self-compassion techniques had less depression, anxiety, stress and emotional avoidance compared with a control group which did not receive the same training. They also had significantly higher levels of compassion for others and overall life satisfaction. Dr. Neff's groundbreaking research and writing is at the forefront of the growing self-compassion movement within the therapeutic community.

Without a doubt, self-compassion does not magically erase the pain of highly traumatic events or change difficult life circumstances. However, it does provide us with the positive energy we need to successfully weather the storms in our lives and empowers us to change how we view and treat ourselves even if we can't change the world around us.

In fact, my clients always feel better about themselves and their lives as they let go of trying to govern what is beyond their domain and focus instead on becoming more self-compassionate, an act over which they have total control. This gives them the resilience they need to do what they can to resolve their problems and face their futures with a greater sense of hope and possibility.

I invite you to also experience the many benefits of self-compassion as you experiment with the strategies summarized at the end of each chapter to determine which ones work best for you.