

CHAPTER 1

BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND

In this book, you will learn many strategies and exercises to enable you to achieve self-compassion. But in my experience, the quickest and easiest way to succeed in this compelling endeavor is simply to change the way you talk to yourself.

Unfortunately, many people beat themselves up in a harsh, judgmental manner that drains their spirit and creates self-doubt. For instance, when they make a mistake, they might say to themselves, “You never do anything right” or “You are such a loser.” In fact, self-torment is a major cause of depression and even despair.

In stark contrast, it is highly self-compassionate to speak to yourself inside your head or out loud in a calm, caring and helpful manner, just like you are your own best friend. For instance, you might say to yourself during a hard time, “Hang in there. I am behind you all the way,” or “Just do the best you can.” You can begin this practice immediately and carry out this simple strategy anywhere and at any time, entirely free of charge.

The beauty of this portal into self-compassion is that only *we* know exactly what we need to hear to feel better about ourselves in a low moment or to gather the courage we need to face a difficult challenge. Rather than spending our lives searching for people who are able to tell us exactly what we need to hear to feel good about ourselves or to fill up our internal holes, we can accomplish these things simply through the loving and supportive messages we give ourselves. As a result, we can enjoy our relationships with others without the erroneous expectation that they are responsible for making us happy or healing our emotional wounds.

I prefer to talk to myself out loud because it adds validity and emphasis to what I am saying. My favorite place for this activity is in the car, where I have privacy and little else to do besides driving safely. I also often talk to myself in the shower as I gear up for each day, which provides me with uncanny wisdom and problem-solving ability. Perhaps I am trying to cleanse my psyche as well as my body.

One of the most important times to be my own best friend is when I fail to live up to my own - or other people's - expectations. Rather than beat myself up with critical naysaying, I will say something out loud to myself, such as, “OK buddy, you messed up, but I love you anyway. Just make sure that you never do it again.” This does not prevent me from doing whatever I need to do to fix a problem or repairing a relationship tear I have caused. In fact, my ability to be gentle with myself helps me think clearly through my options and arrive at the best one rather than wallowing in self-criticism.

I also talk to myself like I am my own best friend about painful past experiences and aspects of myself that I'm not comfortable discussing with others. My own soothing words reassure me that I can have compassion for myself even in the midst of feelings of regret or shame. Only I know the darkest corners of my soul and can free myself from the power they have over me through self-love and forgiveness. These corners grow bigger and more toxic when we allow them to fester; they dissipate when exposed to the light of self-compassion.

Finally, I talk to myself supportively about new things I want to try, changes I want to make, aspects of myself I feel good about, pleasant memories and anything else that enables me to feel happy and vital about my life. When I am doing something alone, I will often comment to myself how much I am enjoying it. In fact, I sometimes provide myself with ongoing commentary throughout the day, complete with astute observations, inside jokes and encouraging remarks. I also write friendly e-mails to myself or leave positive messages on my desk that I will see when I get home after a hectic day.

My ability to be my own best friend allows me to enjoy dates with myself. For example, every Thursday I take myself out to lunch between the classes on Interpersonal Communication that I teach at Temple University. The serenity I experience as I relish my food and roam around in my inner world is a welcome respite from the intensity of classroom teaching and helps me maintain my peaceful center. When my date goes well, as it always does, I never forget to say to myself, "Thanks, buddy, I had a great time."

I have learned experientially that a major key to happiness is to take advantage of every possible opportunity to be my own best friend. As I have focused intently on this goal in the last couple of years, it has become more than a compelling habit - it's a way of being. This provides me with a protective balm against the unpredictable shifts of life and enables me to respond with an internal sense of perspective and calm.

One of the key benefits of talking to ourselves in a compassionate manner is the power it gives us to respond effectively to significant challenges. Clearly, when we are faced with a dangerous or highly traumatic situation, the fight-or-flight part of our brain, called the amygdala, activates our limbic system and usually causes us to experience some level of stress. However, I have found that even in the most difficult circumstances, it's possible to talk to myself in a way that brings me greater emotional balance.

For example, on a hot summer evening a few years ago, I received a phone call from a nurse who told me that my mother had experienced a serious stroke at the facility where she lived. Initially, I felt a sense of panic as my thoughts raced to whether I would ever see her alive again. Fortunately, I remembered to consult my "best friend" and began to

talk to myself in such a caring and soothing way on the drive to the hospital that I experienced an almost eerie sense of calm. When I arrived, I was able to keep my fear and worry at bay and be totally emotionally present with my mother. I sat by her bedside all night holding her hand, talking about happy family memories and telling her how much I loved her.

Think about it: we spend all of our time inside of ourselves. The contrast between the quality of life of people who are their own best friend and those who constantly beat themselves up is immeasurable over the course of a lifetime. Although we generally don't have control over what happens around us, we alone regulate how we talk to ourselves and this choice largely determines our level of happiness and well-being.

Imagine if everyone was their own best friend and therefore happy within themselves. Since most destructive behaviors are caused by unhappiness, the world would be a much more peaceful community and we would all treat each other with greater kindness and caring. Each of us can begin to create this world of goodwill - one self-compassionate statement at a time.

Try These Strategies on for Size

- Talk to yourself inside your head or out loud in a caring, calm and helpful manner, just like you are your own best friend.
- If you do not feel good about yourself, focus particularly on what you need to say to yourself to feel better and counter negative messages you give to yourself and/or receive from others.
- Recognize that only you know what you want to hear at any given moment.
- Talk with yourself in a compassionate and understanding manner about aspects of yourself or your life that you aren't comfortable sharing with others.
- Go out on dates with just yourself to do the things you most enjoy in the company of someone you love (hopefully). Without any social responsibilities, you are free to focus on simply basking in the pleasures and meaning each moment brings.
- Know that you have the ability to respond more effectively to difficult situations by changing how you talk to yourself.