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## Survival of the Kindest

by Paul Ekman

*Psychologist Paul Ekman reveals Charles Darwin's real view of compassion—and it's not what you might think. His belief that altruism is a vital part of human and even animal life is being confirmed by modern science.*

In 1871, eleven years before his death, Charles Darwin published what has been called his “greatest unread book,” *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. His little-known discussion of sympathy in this book reveals a facet of Darwin’s thinking that is contrary to the competitive, ruthless, and selfish view of human nature that has been mistakenly attributed to the Darwinian perspective.

In the fourth chapter, entitled “Comparison of the Mental Powers of Man and the Lower Animals,” Darwin explained the origin of what he called “sympathy” (which today would be termed empathy, altruism, or compassion), describing how humans and other animals come to the aid of others in distress. While he acknowledged that such actions were most likely to occur within the family group, he wrote that the highest moral achievement is concern for the welfare of all living beings, both human and nonhuman.

It should be no surprise, given Charles Darwin’s commitment to the continuity of species, that he claimed that concern for the welfare of others is not a uniquely human characteristic. Darwin tells the following story: “Several years ago a keeper at the Zoological Gardens showed me some deep and scarcely healed wounds on the nape of his own neck, inflicted on him whilst kneeling on the floor, by a fierce baboon. The little American monkey who was a warm friend of this keeper, lived in the same

compartment, and was dreadfully afraid of the great baboon. Nevertheless, as soon as he saw his friend in peril, he rushed to the rescue, and by screams and bites so distracted the baboon that the man was able to escape.” This incident is consistent with F.B.M. de Waal’s 2004 study, “On the Possibility of Animal Empathy.”

The likelihood of such actions, Darwin said, is greatest when the helper is related to the person needing help. “It is evident in the first place,” he wrote in *The Descent of Man*, “that with mankind the instinctive impulses have different degrees of strength; a savage will risk his own life to save that of a member of the same community, but will be wholly indifferent about a stranger; a young and timid mother urged by the maternal instinct will, without a moment’s hesitation, run the greatest danger for her own infant...”

Darwin recognized, however, that exceptional people will help total strangers in distress, not just kin or loved ones. “Nevertheless many a civilized man who never before risked his life for another, but full of courage and sympathy, has disregarded the instinct of self-preservation and plunged at once into a torrent to save a drowning man, though a stranger. In this case man is impelled by the same instinctive motive, which made the heroic little American monkey, formerly described, save his keeper by attacking the great and dreadful baboon.” Darwin’s line of thinking has been borne out by K.R. Munroe’s 1996 study of exceptional individuals who rescue strangers at risk of their own life, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of A Common Humanity*.

Darwin did not consider why compassion toward strangers, even at the risk of one's life, is present in only some people. Is there a genetic predisposition for such concerns, or does it result solely from upbringing, or from some mix of nature and nurture? Nor did Darwin write about whether it is possible to cultivate such stranger-compassion in those who do not have it.

Today these questions are the focus of theory (see P. Gilbert, ed., *Compassion*, Routledge, 2005) and empirical investigation (D. Mobbs, et. al., "A Key Role for Similarity in Vicarious Reward," *Science*, 2009). In "Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review," in *Psychological Bulletin*, Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas analyze the psychological literature on empathy, altruism, and compassion, integrating new evidence that they believe suggests compassion should be considered an emotion. In a forthcoming paper, "Compassion and Altruism: A Reformulation and Research Agenda," Erika Rosenberg and I consider what we call familial compassion to be an emotion, albeit with a restricted target, but argue that it is not useful to classify other forms of compassion as emotions.

Darwin did offer an explanation of the origin of compassion: "We are," he wrote, "impelled to relieve the sufferings of another, in order that our own painful feelings may be at the same time relieved..." However, as Buddhist scholar B. Alan Wallace points out, not all people respond to suffering in this way. He notes that a person might, for instance, reflect, "How fortunate I am that I'm not that other person." Many years ago in my own research I found that about a third of the people who witnessed a film of a person suffering showed suffering on their own faces, but that an equal number manifested disgust at the sight of suffering. These proportions were the same among Japanese in Tokyo and Americans in California, indicating that the reactions were not affected by culture.

Darwin also described how natural selection favored the evolution of compassion, regardless of what originally motivated such behavior: "In however complex a manner this feeling may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend one another, it will have been increased through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would

flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring."

However, contrary to Darwin's expectation, there are no countries today, or in the known past, in which compassion and altruism toward strangers are shown by the majority of the population, and later in this chapter Darwin wrote more realistically about the extent of compassion.

Darwin concluded the discussion of the origin and nature of compassion and altruism by describing what he considered the highest moral virtue. He wrote: "As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races. [If they appear different] experience unfortunately shews [sic] us how long it is before we look at them as our fellow creatures. Sympathy beyond the confines of man, that is humanity to the lower animals, seems to be one of the latest moral acquisitions... This virtue [concern for lower animals], one of the noblest with which man is endowed, seems to arise incidentally from our sympathies becoming more tender and more widely diffused, until they extend to all sentient beings."

During discussions I held with the Dalai Lama about emotions and compassion, on which our book *Emotional Awareness* was based, I read this last Darwin quote to him. The Dalai Lama's translator, Thupten Jinpa, exclaimed, "Did he use that phrase 'all sentient beings'?" Jinpa was surprised because this phrase is the exact English translation of the Buddhist description of the all-encompassing compassion of a bodhisattva.

Charles Darwin was rare among thinkers of his time in taking this view, and only in the latter part of the twentieth century did such a concern for compassion toward nonhuman beings become more popular. Darwin was far ahead of his time.

This remarkable similarity between the Buddhist view of virtue and Darwin's raises the tantalizing possibility that Darwin might have derived his views from Buddhist writings. Darwin did know at least something about Buddhism by the time he wrote *The Descent of Man*. J.D. Hooker, Darwin's closest

friend, spent many years in the Himalayas. Leading Darwin scholar Janet Browne told me, “Darwin might easily have discussed such matters with J.D. Hooker after Hooker’s travels in Sikkim and elsewhere in India,” and Alison Pearne, coeditor of *Evolution: The Selected Letters of Charles Darwin*, notes that Hooker mentioned Buddhism in his letters to Darwin from India. Nonetheless, the nub of Darwin’s ideas on morality and compassion appear in his 1838 notebooks, two years after his return from the voyage of the *Beagle*, when Darwin was twenty-nine. This was five years before he met Hooker.

Randal Keynes, Darwin’s great-great-grandson, described Darwin’s thinking about these issues in the notebooks as follows: “His comments were carelessly worded, but he was in no doubt about his underlying aim. [Darwin wrote:] ‘Might not our sense of right and wrong stem from reflection with our growing mental powers on our actions as they were bound up with our instinctive feeling of love and concern for others? If any animal with social instincts developed the power of reflection, it must have a conscience.’”

Darwin noted in his notebook: “Without regarding the origin...the individual forgets itself, & aids & defends & acts for others at its own expense.” Darwin was also interested at this early point in his life in the origins of morality: “What *has* produced the greatest good (or rather what is necessary for good at all) is the (instinctive) moral senses... In Judging of the rule of happiness we must look far forward (& to the general action)—certainly because it is the result of what has generally been best for our good far back... society could not go on except for the moral sense.”

Darwin noted his debt to David Hume. In 1838 Darwin read Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* and thought it important for developing a theory divorced from divine instruction. As Randal Keynes remarks in *Darwin, His Daughter & Human Evolution*:

David Hume had put sympathy at the center of his thinking about the natural sources of moral principles. He saw it as a natural feeling rather than an attitude based on reasoning from some abstract

notion. “There is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for humankind; some particle of the dove kneaded in our frame, along with the element of the wolf and the serpent.” Charles now developed this idea and speculated how our moral sense might also grow naturally from that feeling. [Darwin wrote:] “Looking at Man, as a Naturalist would at any other mammiferous animal, it may be concluded that he has parental, conjugal and social instincts... these instincts consist of a feeling of love or benevolence to the object in question... such active sympathy that the individual forgets itself, and aids and defends and acts for others at his own expense.”

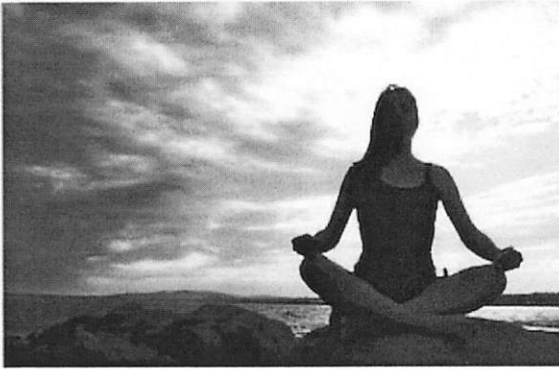
In concluding the introduction to their edition of *Descent of Man*, James Moore and Adrian Desmond wrote that some of Darwin’s contemporaries who studied this book emphasized the “humane aspects of Darwin’s Victorian values: duty, selflessness and compassion... Frances Cobbe [a feminist theorist and pioneer animal rights activist] excused readers who could picture ‘the author as a man who has...unconsciously attributed his own abnormally generous and placable nature to the rest of his species, and then theorized as if the world were made of Darwins.’ ”

Darwin’s thinking about compassion, altruism, and morality certainly reveals a different picture of this great thinker’s concerns than the one portrayed by those who focus on the catchphrase “the survival of the fittest” (in fact a quote from Spencer, not Darwin). Those unacquainted with his writings, and even some scientists, are unaware of Darwin’s commitment to the unity of mankind, his abolitionist convictions, and his intense interest in moral principles and human and animal welfare.

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## Does Mindfulness Make You More Compassionate?

by Shauna Shapiro



*Mindfulness is more than just moment-to-moment awareness, says Shauna Shapiro. It is a kind, curious awareness that helps us relate to ourselves and others with compassion.*

I attended my first meditation retreat in Thailand 17 years ago. When I arrived, I didn't know very much about mindfulness and I certainly didn't speak any Thai.

At the monastery, I vaguely understood the teachings of the beautiful Thai monk who instructed me to pay attention to the breath coming in and out of my nostrils. It sounded easy enough. So I sat down and attempted to pay attention, 16 hours a day, and very quickly I had my first big realization: *I was not in control of my mind.*

I was humbled and somewhat distraught by how much my mind wandered. I would attend to one breath, two breaths, maybe three—and then my mind was gone, lost in thoughts, leaving my body sitting there, an empty shell. Frustrated and impatient, I began to wonder, “Why can't I do this? Everyone else looks like they're sitting so peacefully. What's wrong with me?”

On the fourth day, I met with a monk from London, who asked how I was doing. It was the first time I had spoken in four days, and out of my mouth came a deluge of the anxieties I had been carrying around with me. “I'm a terrible meditator. I can't do it. I am trying so hard, and every time I try harder, I get even more tangled up. Meditation must be for

other, more spiritual, calmer kinds of people. I don't think this is not the right path for me.”

He looked at me with compassion and a humorous twinkle in his eye. “Oh dear, you're not practicing mindfulness,” he told me. “You are practicing impatience, judgment, frustration, and striving.” Then he said five words that profoundly affected my life: “*What you practice becomes stronger.*” This wisdom has now been well documented by the science of neuroplasticity, which shows that our repeated experiences shape our brains.

The monk explained to me that mindfulness is not just about paying attention, but also about *how* you pay attention. He described a compassionate, kind attention, where instead of becoming frustrated when my mind wandered, I could actually become curious about my mind meandering about, holding this experience in compassionate awareness. Instead of being angry at my mind, or impatient with myself, I could inquire gently and benevolently into what it felt like to be frustrated or impatient.

In this way, I began to cultivate kindness toward myself, as well as a sense of interest and curiosity for my lived experience. I started to practice infusing my attention with care and compassion, similar to a parent attending to a young child, saying to myself, “I care about you. I'm interested. Tell me about your experience.”

Understanding this connection between mindfulness and compassion has been transformational, helping me embrace myself and my experience with greater kindness and care. It has also deeply informed my clinical and academic work. In my writing and research, I've explicitly articulated a model of mindfulness that includes the attitudes of how we pay attention. Instead of trying to control or judge our experience, we take an interest in it with attitudes of compassion and openness. We are cultivating awareness, yes, but it is important to acknowledge the human dimension of that awareness. It is not a sterile, mechanical awareness. Rather, it is a kind, curious, and compassionate awareness.

Research has started to document empirical evidence of this connection between mindfulness and compassion, consistently finding over the past two decades that mindfulness increases empathy and compassion for others and for oneself.

For example, in my first research publication, published in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* in 1998, we found that Jon Kabat-Zinn's eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program significantly increased empathy in medical students.

Another study that my colleagues and I conducted, published in the *International Journal of Stress Management* in 2005, concluded that MBSR training increased self-compassion in health care professionals. More recently, we examined the impact of mindfulness training on counseling psychology students and discovered that it significantly increased self-compassion—which, in turn, led to declines in stress and negative emotion and increases in positive emotion.

Basically, the research shows that mindfulness increases empathy and compassion for others and for oneself, and that such attitudes are good for you. To me, that affirms that when we practice mindfulness, we are simultaneously strengthening our skills of compassion—evidence that mindfulness isn't simply about sharpening attention.

Yet what we don't know is precisely *how* mindfulness produces these positive effects. Answering this question is an important next step for future research and exploration, so that we can better understand the precise elements and active ingredients essential to mindfulness training.

Although there is not much research focused specifically on how mindfulness helps us cultivate compassion and empathy, I can offer some ideas, based on my years of research and practice and discussions with other experienced meditators.

First, as I explain above, I believe truly practicing mindfulness helps us learn how to become more compassionate toward ourselves—which, evidence suggests, is intertwined with being more compassionate toward others. One study I often cite, especially when teaching psychotherapists and students who are training to become therapists, demonstrates that how we treat ourselves is highly correlated with how we treat others: When therapists rated how compassionate they were with themselves versus how critical and self-blaming, their ratings

correlated highly with how they related to their patients.

It's just as the wise monk from London taught me years ago: *What we practice becomes stronger*. If you think about it, we are relating to ourselves 24 hours a day—we are practicing this way of relating constantly. So if mindfulness truly does, as I believe, involve a kind, open, curious attitude toward yourself, it builds the self-compassion that helps foster compassion toward others. That's why I tell my students, "Cultivate self-compassion—do it for your future patients!"

I think it is important to clarify, however, that self-compassion doesn't mean we are always filled with happiness and lovingkindness. Simply put, what it means is that our awareness of what's happening is always kind, always compassionate. So even if I'm feeling angry or frustrated, I am embracing my experience with a compassionate awareness. When we begin to welcome our experience in this way, we are better able to be with it, see it clearly, and respond appropriately to it—and, research suggests, we'll be strengthening the skills that help us extend compassion toward others.

In this way, I like to think of mindfulness as a big cooking pot. I put all of my experiences into this pot. This pot is always kind, always welcoming, even if the stuff I put into it is not (e.g., anger, sadness, confusion). I cook all of it—the pain, the confusion, the anger, the joy—steadily, consistently holding it in this kind, compassionate pot of mindfulness. By relating to my experiences in this way, I am better able to digest and receive nourishment from them, just as when you put a raw potato in a pot and cook it for many hours, it becomes tasty and nourishing.

Another way that mindfulness cultivates compassion is that it helps us see our interconnectedness. For example, let's say that the left hand has a splinter in it. The right hand would naturally pull out the splinter, right? The left hand wouldn't say to the right hand, "Oh, thank you so much! You're so compassionate and generous!" The right hand removing the splinter is simply the appropriate response—it's just what the right hand does, because the two hands are part of the same body.

The more you practice mindfulness, the more you begin to see that we're all part of the same body—that I as the right hand actually feel you, the left hand's pain, and I naturally want to help.

Mindfulness cultivates this interconnectedness and clear seeing, which leads to greater compassion and understanding of the mysterious web in which we all are woven.

A third reason mindfulness appears to cultivate empathy and compassion is that it guards against the feelings of stress and busyness that make us focus more on ourselves and less on the needs of other people.

This was famously demonstrated in the classic Good Samaritan experiments conducted by John Darley and Daniel Batson in the 1970s. Darley and Batson assigned seminary students at Princeton University to deliver a talk on the Good Samaritan. While on their way to their presentation, the students passed someone (working with the researchers) who was slumped over and groaning. The researchers tested all kinds of variables to see what might make the students stop to help, but only one variable mattered: whether or not the students were late for their talk. Only 10 percent of the students stopped to help when they were late; more than six times as many helped when they were not in a hurry.

This study suggests that people are not inherently morally insensitive, but when we're stressed, scared, hurried, it's easy to lose touch with our deepest values. By helping us stay attuned to what's

happening around us in the present moment, regardless of the time, mindfulness helps us stay connected to what is most important. As the Zen monk Suzuki Roshi teaches, "The most important thing is to remember the most important thing."

For me, the most important thing is to continue to explore, with an open heart and mind, what mindfulness truly is, and help illuminate how it can be of greatest benefit. We clearly do not have all the answers yet; I think what is most interesting is to ask the questions. As Rilke said, "Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves."

The exploration of mindfulness requires great sensitivity and a range of methodological glasses. Our science—and our lives—will benefit by looking through all of them, illuminating the richness and complexity of mindfulness.

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# The Five Myths of Self-Compassion

## *What Keeps Us from Being Kinder to Ourselves?*

by Kristin Neff

Most people don't have any problem with seeing compassion as a thoroughly commendable quality. It seems to refer to an amalgam of unquestionably good qualities: kindness, mercy, tenderness, benevolence, understanding, empathy, sympathy, and fellow-feeling, along with an impulse to help other living creatures, human or animal, in distress.

But we seem less sure about self-compassion. For many, it carries the whiff of all those other bad "self" terms: self-pity, self-serving, self-indulgent, self-centered, just plain selfish. Even many generations removed from our culture's Puritan origins, we still seem to believe that if we aren't blaming and punishing ourselves for something, we risk moral complacency, runaway egotism, and the sin of false pride.

Consider Rachel, a 39-year-old marketing executive with two kids and a loving husband. A deeply kind person, devoted wife, involved parent, supportive friend, and hard worker, she also finds time to volunteer for two local charities. In short, she appears to be an ideal role model.

But Rachel's in therapy because her levels of stress are so high. She's tired all the time, depressed, unable to sleep. She experiences chronic low-level digestive problems and sometimes—to her horror—snaps at her husband and kids. Through all this, she's incredibly hard on herself, always feeling that whatever she's done isn't good enough. Yet she'd never consider trying to be compassionate to herself. In fact, the very idea of letting up on her self-attack, giving herself some kindness and understanding, strikes her as somehow childish and irresponsible.

And Rachel isn't alone. Many people in our culture have misgivings about the idea of self-compassion, perhaps because they don't really know what it looks like, much less how to practice it. Often the practice of self-compassion is identified with the practice of mindfulness, now as ubiquitous as sushi in the West. But while mindfulness—with its emphasis on being experientially open to and aware of our own suffering without being caught up in it and swept away by aversive reactivity—is necessary for

self-compassion, it leaves out an essential ingredient. What distinguishes self-compassion is that it goes beyond accepting our experience as it is and adds something more—embracing the experiencer (i.e., ourselves) with warmth and tenderness when our experience is painful.

Self-compassion also includes an element of wisdom—recognition of our common humanity. This means accepting the fact that, along with everyone else on the planet, we're flawed and imperfect individuals, just as likely as anyone else to be hit by the slings and arrows of outrageous (but perfectly normal) misfortune. This sounds obvious, but it's funny how easily we forget. We fall into the trap of believing that things are "supposed" to go well and that when we make a mistake or some difficulty comes along, something must have gone terribly wrong. (Uh, excuse me. There must be some error. I signed up for the everything-will-go-swimmingly-until-the-day-I-die plan. Can I speak to the management please?) The feeling that certain things "shouldn't" be happening makes us feel both shamed and isolated. At those times, remembering that we aren't really alone in our suffering—that hardship and struggle are deeply embedded in the human condition—can make a radical difference.

I remember being at the park with my son, Rowan, when he was about four years old, at the peak of his autism. I was sitting on the bench, watching all the happy children playing on the swings, chasing each other, and having fun while Rowan was just sitting on the top of the slide repeatedly banging his hand (something known as stimming). Admittedly, I started to go down the path of self-pity: "Why can't I have a 'normal' child like everyone else? Why am I the only one who's having such a hard time?" But years of self-compassion practice gave me enough presence of mind to catch myself, pause, take a deep breath, and become aware of the trap I was falling into.

With a little distance from my negative thoughts and feelings, I looked out at the other mothers and their children and thought to myself, "I'm assuming that these kids are going to grow up with carefree,

unproblematic lives, that none of these mothers will have to struggle as they raise their children. But for all I know, some of these kids could grow up to develop serious mental or physical health issues, or just turn out to be not very nice people! There's no child who's perfect, and no parent who doesn't go through some form of hardship or challenge with their children at one time or another."

And at that moment, my feelings of intense isolation turned into feelings of deep connection with the other mothers at the park, and with all parents everywhere. We love our kids, but damn—it's tough sometimes! As odd as it may sound, by practicing self-compassion as we muddle through, we don't feel so alone.

Fortunately, this isn't just wishful thinking about another self-help approach. In fact, there's now an impressive and growing body of research demonstrating that relating to ourselves in a kind, friendly manner is essential for emotional wellbeing. Not only does it help us avoid the inevitable consequences of harsh self-judgment—depression, anxiety, and stress—it also engenders a happier and more hopeful approach to life. More pointedly, research proves false many of the common myths about self-compassion that keep us trapped in the prison of relentless self-criticism. Here are five of them.

### 1. Self-compassion is a form of self-pity



One of the biggest myths about self-compassion is that it means feeling sorry for yourself. In fact, as my own experience on the playground exemplifies, self-compassion is an antidote to self-pity and the tendency to whine about our bad luck.

This isn't because self-compassion allows you to tune out the bad stuff; in fact, it makes us more willing to accept, experience, and acknowledge difficult feelings with kindness—which paradoxically helps us process and let go of them more fully. Research shows that self-compassionate people are less likely to get swallowed up by self-pitying thoughts about how bad things are. That's one of the reasons self-compassionate people have better mental health.

A study by Filip Raes at the University of Leuven examined the association of self-compassion with ruminative thinking and mental health among undergraduates at his university. He first assessed

how participants were using the self-report Self-Compassion Scale I developed in 2003, which asks respondents to indicate how often they engage in behaviors corresponding to the main elements of self-compassion. Examples include statements such as "I try to be understanding and patient toward aspects of my personality I don't like"; "When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through"; and "When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation."

Raes found that participants with higher levels of self-compassion tended to brood less about their misfortune. Moreover, he found that their reduced tendency to ruminate helped explain why self-compassionate participants reported fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression.

### 2. Self-compassion means weakness



John had always considered himself a pillar of strength—an ideal husband and provider. So he was devastated when his wife left him for another man.

Secretly racked with guilt for not doing more to meet her emotional needs before she sought comfort in someone else's arms, he didn't want to admit how hurt he still felt and how hard it was for him to move on with his life.

When his colleague suggested that he try being compassionate to himself about his divorce, his reaction was swift: "Don't give me that hearts-and-flowers stuff! Self-compassion is for sissies. I had to be hard as nails to get through the divorce with some semblance of self-respect, and I'm not about to let my guard down now."

What John didn't know is that instead of being a weakness, researchers are discovering that self-compassion is one of the most powerful sources of coping and resilience available to us. When we go through major life crises, self-compassion appears to make all the difference in our ability to survive and even thrive. John assumed that being a tough guy during his divorce—stuffing down his feelings and not admitting how much pain he was in—is what got him through. But he wasn't "through": he was stuck, and self-compassion was the missing piece that would probably have helped him to move on.

David Sbarra and his colleagues at the University of Arizona examined whether self-compassion helps



determine how well people adjust to a divorce. The researchers invited more than 100 people recently separated from their spouses to come into the lab and make a four-minute stream-of-consciousness recording of their thoughts and feelings about the separation experience. Four trained judges later coded how self-compassionate these discussions were, using a modified version of the Self-Compassion Scale. They gave low scores to participants who said things like “I don’t know how I managed to do this. It was all my fault. I pushed him away for some reason. I needed him so much, still need him. What did I do? I know I did it all wrong.” High scores were given to people who said things like “Looking back, you have to take the best out of it and move on from there. Just forgive yourself and your ex for everything you both did or didn’t do.”

The researchers found that participants who displayed more self-compassion when talking about their breakup evidenced better psychological adjustment to the divorce at the time, and that this effect persisted nine months later. Results held even when controlling for other possible explanations, such as participants’ initial levels of self-esteem, optimism, depression, or secure attachment. Studies like this one suggest that it’s not just what you face in life, but how you relate to yourself when the going gets tough—as an inner ally or enemy—that determines your ability to cope successfully.

### 3. Self-compassion will make me complacent



Perhaps the biggest block to self-compassion is the belief that it’ll undermine our motivation to push ourselves to do better.

The idea is that if we don’t criticize ourselves for failing to live up to our standards, we’ll automatically succumb to slothful defeatism. But let’s think for a moment how parents successfully motivate their children. When Rachel’s teenage son comes home one day with a failing English grade, she could look disgusted and hiss, “Stupid boy! You’ll never amount to anything. I’m ashamed of you!” (Makes you cringe, doesn’t it? Yet that’s exactly the type of thing Rachel tells herself when she fails to meet her own high expectations.) But most likely, rather than motivating her son, this torrent of shame will just make him lose faith in himself, and eventually he’ll stop trying altogether.

Alternatively, Rachel could adopt a compassionate approach by saying, “Oh sweetheart, you must be so upset. Hey, give me a hug. It happens to all of us. But we need to get your English grades up because I know you want to get into a good college. What can I do to help and support you? I believe in you.” Notice that there’s honest recognition of the failure, sympathy for her son’s unhappiness, and encouragement to go beyond or around this momentary bump in the road. This type of caring response helps us maintain our self-confidence and feel emotionally supported. Ironically, even though Rachel wouldn’t even dream of taking the former approach with her son, she unquestionably believes that self-flagellation is necessary for her to achieve her goals. She assumes that her anxiety, depression, and stress are a result of her not trying hard enough.

But there’s now a good deal of research clearly showing that self-compassion is a far more effective force for personal motivation than self-punishment.

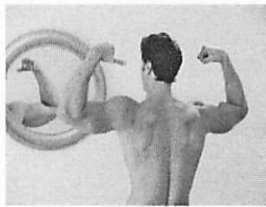
For instance, a series of research experiments by Juliana Breines and Serena Chen of the University of California at Berkeley examined whether helping undergraduate students to be more self-compassionate would motivate them to engage in positive change. In one study, participants were asked to recall a recent action they felt guilty about—such as cheating on an exam, lying to a romantic partner, saying something harmful—that still made them feel bad about themselves when they thought about it. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the self-compassion condition, participants were instructed to write to themselves for three minutes from the perspective of a compassionate and understanding friend. In the second condition, participants were instructed to write about their own positive qualities; and in the third, they wrote about a hobby they enjoyed. These two control conditions helped differentiate self-compassion from positive self-talk and positive mood in general.

The researchers found that participants who were helped to be self-compassionate about their recent transgression reported being more motivated to apologize for the harm done and more committed to not repeating the behavior again than those in the control conditions. Self-compassion, far from being a way to evade personal accountability, actually strengthens it.

If we can acknowledge our failures and misdeeds with kindness—“I really messed up when I got so

mad at her, but I was stressed, and I guess all people overreact sometimes”—rather than judgment—“I can’t believe I said that; I’m such a horrible, mean person”—it’s much safer to see ourselves clearly. When we can see beyond the distorting lens of harsh self-judgment, we get in touch with other parts of ourselves, the parts that care and want everyone, including ourselves, to be as healthy and happy as possible. This provides the encouragement and support needed to do our best and try again.

#### 4. Self-compassion is narcissistic



In American culture, high self-esteem requires standing out in a crowd—being special and above average. How do you feel when someone calls your work performance, or parenting skills, or intelligence level average? Ouch! The problem, of course, is that, Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegone notwithstanding, it’s impossible for everyone to be above average at the same time. We may excel in some areas, but there’s always someone more attractive, successful, and intelligent than we are—meaning we feel like failures whenever we compare ourselves to those “better” than us.

The desire to see ourselves as better than average, however, to get and keep that elusive feeling of high self-esteem, can lead to downright nasty behavior. Why do early adolescents begin to bully others? If I can be seen as the cool, tough kid in contrast to the wimpy nerd I just picked on, I get a self-esteem boost. Why are we so prejudiced? If I believe that my ethnic, gender, national, political group is better than yours, I get a self-esteem boost.

Indeed, the emphasis placed on self-esteem in American society has led to a worrying trend: researchers Jean Twenge of San Diego State University and Keith Campbell of the University of Georgia, who’ve tracked the narcissism scores of college students since 1987, find that the narcissism of modern-day students is at the highest level ever recorded. They attribute the rise in narcissism to well-meaning but misguided parents and teachers, who tell kids how special and great they are in an attempt to raise their self-esteem.

But self-compassion is different from self-esteem. Although they’re both strongly linked to psychological wellbeing, self-esteem is a positive evaluation of self-worth, while self-compassion isn’t a judgment or an evaluation at all. Instead, self-

compassion is way of relating to the ever-changing landscape of who we are with kindness and acceptance—especially when we fail or feel inadequate. In other words, self-esteem requires feeling better than others, whereas self-compassion requires acknowledging that we share the human condition of imperfection.

Self-esteem is also inherently fragile, bouncing up and down according to our latest success or failure. I remember a time my self-esteem soared and then crashed within about five seconds. I was visiting an equestrian stable with friends, and the old Spanish riding instructor there apparently liked my Mediterranean looks. “You are veerrrry beautiful,” he told me, as I felt myself glow with pleasure. Then he added, “Don’t ever shave your mooostache.” Self-esteem is a fair-weather friend, there for us in good times, deserting us when our luck heads south. But self-compassion is always there for us, a reliable source of support, even when our worldly stock has crashed. It still hurts when our pride is dashed, but we can be kind to ourselves precisely because it hurts. “Wow, that was pretty humiliating, I’m so sorry. It’s okay though, these things happen.”

There’s solid research for the idea that self-compassion helps us in good times and bad. Mark Leary and colleagues at Wake Forest University conducted a study that asked participants to make a video that introduced and described themselves. For instance, “Hi, I’m John, an environmental sciences major. I love to go fishing and spend time in nature. I want to work for the National Park Service when I graduate,” and so on. They were told that someone would watch their tape and then rate them on a seven-point scale in terms of how warm, friendly, intelligent, likeable, and mature they appeared. (The feedback was bogus, of course, given by a study confederate.) Half the participants received positive ratings and the others neutral ratings. The researchers wanted to examine if participants’ levels of self-compassion (as measured by scores on the Self-Compassion Scale), would predict reactions to the feedback differently from their levels of self-esteem (as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale).

They found that self-compassionate people reported similar emotional reactions in terms of how happy, sad, angry, or tense they were feeling, regardless of whether the feedback was positive or neutral. People with high levels of self-esteem, however, tended to get upset when they received neutral feedback (What, I’m just average?). They were likelier to deny that the feedback was due to

their own personality and blamed it on external factors, such as the observer's being in a bad mood. This suggests that self-compassionate people are better able to remain emotionally stable, regardless of the degree of praise they receive from others. Self-esteem, in contrast, thrives only when the reviews are good, and it may lead to evasive tactics when there's a possibility of facing unpleasant truths about oneself.

### 5. Self-compassion is selfish



Many people are suspicious of self-compassion because they conflate it with selfishness. Rachel, for instance, spends a large portion of her days caring for her family and many of her nights and weekends volunteering for the charities she supports. Raised in a family that emphasized the importance of service to others, she assumes that spending time and energy being kind and caring toward herself automatically means she must be neglecting everybody else for her own selfish ends. Indeed, many people are like Rachel in this sense—good, generous, altruistic souls, who are perfectly awful to themselves while thinking this is necessary to their general goodness.

But is compassion really a zero-sum game? Think about the times you've been lost in the throes of self-criticism. Are you self-focused or other-focused in the moment? Do you have more or fewer resources to give to others? Most people find that when they're absorbed in self-judgment, they actually have little bandwidth left over to think about anything other than their inadequate, worthless selves. In fact, beating yourself up can be a paradoxical form of self-centeredness. When we can be kind and nurturing to ourselves, however, many of our emotional needs are met, leaving us in a better position to focus on others.

Unfortunately, the ideal of being modest, self-effacing, and caring for the welfare of others often comes with the corollary that we must treat ourselves badly. This is especially true for women, who, research indicates, tend to have slightly lower levels of self-compassion than men, even while they tend to be more caring, empathetic, and giving toward others. Perhaps this isn't so surprising, given that women are socialized to be caregivers—selflessly to open their hearts to their husbands, children, friends, and elderly parents—but aren't taught to care for

themselves. While the feminist revolution helped expand the roles available to women, and we now see more female leaders in business and politics than ever before, the idea that women should be selfless caregivers hasn't really gone away. It's just that women are now supposed to be successful at their careers in addition to being ultimate nurturers at home.

The irony is that being good to yourself actually helps you be good to others, while being bad to yourself only gets in the way. In fact, I recently conducted a study with my colleague Tasha Beretvas at the University of Texas at Austin that explored whether self-compassionate people were more giving relationship partners. We recruited more than 100 couples who'd been in a romantic relationship for a year or longer. Participants rated their own level of self-compassion using the Self-Compassion Scale. They then described their partner's behavior in the relationship on a series of self-report measures, also indicating how satisfied they were with their partners. We found that self-compassionate individuals were described by their partners as being more caring (e.g., "gentle and kind toward me"), accepting (e.g., "respects my opinions"), and autonomy-supporting (e.g., "gives me as much freedom as I want") than their self-critical counterparts, who were described as being more detached (e.g., "doesn't think about me very much"), aggressive (e.g., "yells, stomps out of the room"), and controlling (e.g., "expects me to do everything his/her way").

Participants also reported being more satisfied and securely attached in their relationship with self-compassionate partners—which makes sense. If I'm withholding toward myself and relying on my partner to meet my emotional needs, I'm going to behave badly when they're not met. But if I can give myself care and support, to meet many of my own needs directly, I'll have more emotional resources available to give to my partner.

The research literature is unclear about whether self-compassion is actually necessary to be compassionate to others, given that many people do a pretty good job of caring for others while shortchanging themselves. However, a growing body of research indicates that self-compassion helps people sustain the act of caring for others. For instance, it appears that counselors and therapists who are self-compassionate are less likely to experience stress and caregiver burnout; they're more satisfied with their careers and feel more energized,

happy, and grateful for being able to make a difference in the world.

Because we evolved as social beings, exposure to other people's tales of suffering activates the pain centers of our own brains through a process of empathetic resonance. When we witness the suffering of others on a daily basis, we can experience personal distress to the point of burning out, and caregivers who are especially sensitive and empathetic may be most at risk. At the same time, when we give ourselves compassion, we create a protective buffer, allowing us to understand and feel for the suffering person without being drained by his or her suffering. The people we care for then pick up our compassion through their own process of empathetic resonance. In other words, the compassion we cultivate for ourselves directly transmits itself to others.

I know this firsthand through my experience of raising an autistic child. Rowan is now 13, and although he can be a grumpy adolescent, he's a loving kid, who poses few parenting challenges. But it wasn't always so. I often faced situations that I thought were beyond my ability to cope and sometimes had to rely on the power of self-compassion to get me through.

Once, when Rowan was five, I took him to England to see his grandparents. In the middle of the transatlantic flight, he threw an almighty tantrum. I have no idea what set him off, but I suddenly found myself with a flailing, screaming child and a plane full of people looking at us with dagger eyes. What to do? I tried taking him to the bathroom in hopes that the closed door would muffle his screams. But after I'd shuffled down the aisle, trying to keep him from accidentally hitting passengers along the way, I found the toilet was occupied.

Huddled with Rowan in the tiny space outside the toilet, I felt helpless and hopeless. But then I remembered self-compassion. This is so hard for you, darling, I said to myself. I'm sorry this is happening.

I'm here for you. While making sure that Rowan was safe, 90 percent of my attention was on soothing and comforting myself. My mind became flooded with compassion, to the point that it dominated my experience—far more than my screaming child. Furthermore, as I'd already discovered, when I was in a more peaceful and loving frame of mind, Rowan also calmed down. As I soothed myself, he was soothed as well.

When we care tenderly for ourselves in response to suffering, our heart opens. Compassion engages our capacity for love, wisdom, courage, and generosity. It's a mental and emotional state that's boundless and directionless, grounded in the great spiritual traditions of the world but available to every person simply by virtue of our being human. In a surprising twist, the nurturing power of self-compassion is now being illuminated by the matter-of-fact, tough-minded methods of empirical science, and a growing body of research literature is demonstrating conclusively that self-compassion is not only central to mental health, but can be enriched through learning and practice, just like so many other good habits.

Therapists have known for a long time that being kind to ourselves isn't—as is too often believed—a selfish luxury, but the exercise of a gift that makes us happier. Now, finally, science is proving the point.

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# Walking Meditation Instructions

by [Tara Brach](#)

[ for audio guidance, go to [Walking Meditation](#) ]

Meditation is a practice of presence that you can bring alive in all settings and activities. The formal training in walking meditation can be particularly valuable for helping you to cultivate an awareness of your embodied experience in each moment, allowing you to bring your body, heart, and mind together as you move through life.

Begin by choosing a place - an indoor or outside walking path about 10-30 paces long. Start by standing still and sensing the weight of your body at your feet, feeling your muscles supporting and stabilizing you. Your hands can be in whatever position is most comfortable - resting easily at your sides, folded gently in front of you, or at your back. In the stillness, remain relaxed and alert.

As you begin walking, start at a slower pace than usual, paying particular attention to the sensations in your feet and legs: heaviness, lightness, pressure, tingling, energy, even pain if it's present. For the walking practice, this play of sensations - rather than the breath or another anchor - is often the home base for our attention.

Be mindful of the sensations of lifting your feet and of placing them back down on the floor or earth. Sense each step fully as you walk in a relaxed and natural way to the end of your chosen path. When you arrive, stop and pause for a moment. Feel your whole body standing, allowing all your senses be awake, then slowly and mindfully - with intention - turn to face in the other direction. Before you begin walking, pause again to collect and center yourself. If it helps, you can even close your eyes during these standing pauses, often called "standing meditation."

As you're walking, it's quite natural for your mind to wander. Whenever it does, you might mentally pause, perhaps noting inwardly the fact of thinking, or even where your mind went: planning, worrying, fantasizing, judging. Then, gently return your attention to the sensations of the next step. No matter how long you've spent lost in thought, you can always arrive right here, bringing presence and care to the moment-to-moment sensations of walking.

During the walking period you might alter your pace, seeking a speed that allows you to be most mindful of your experience. In this way, you'll move back and forth on your pathway, discovering that you are not really going anywhere, but are arriving again and again in the aliveness that is right here. As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, "The miracle is not to walk on water. It is to walk on this earth with awareness."

### **Common questions:**

***What do I do if a strong experience arises – the grip of fear, awe or wonder in natural beauty, a wave of grief?***

It's good to pause in these moments and acknowledge the experience that is calling your attention. Stand still and bring the wings of awareness - mindful presence and a gentle, kind heart - to whatever is here. You might mentally note with a soft whisper—fear, awe, sorrow. When the experience is no longer compelling, resume your walking practice with a clear, present attentiveness.

***Can I follow my breath as I walk? What about listening to the sounds around me? Taking in the sights?***

Ultimately, the purpose of walking meditation is to calm the mind and cultivate an embodied awareness as you move. There are many styles or ways to practice. If coordinating the breath with your steps helps you to feel more collected, that's fine. If opening all your senses—including sounds, images, sensations throughout the body—allows you to be full present as you move, then that too is skillful.

Even if your primary anchor is sensations in the feet and legs, when other strong experiences arise—sounds, images, feelings—include them in mindfulness. If they are strong, allow them to be in the foreground until they are no longer compelling, then resume by again resting your attention on the sensations in the feet and legs.

***My mind is so distracted, I can't keep my attention on sensations. What do I do?***

Just as with sitting meditation, we have strong conditioning to be lost in thought. Most importantly, please don't judge. If you've wandered and returned to bodily sensations 1,000 times, you will have engaged in a significant training of presence! Each time you return, try to notice the difference between being in thoughts, and being aware of the experience of walking.

That being said, there are ways to support quieting the mind. Some people find that mentally noting “lifting, placing” with their steps helps collect their attention. It's fine to experiment with this - with the breath, with opening all the senses. Discover whatever allows you to be most embodied, relaxed, and awake as you walk.

***What if I want to go for a walk, rather than go back and forth on a short pathway?***

The purpose of walking a short pathway during formal practice is that it helps free you from the notion that you're trying to get somewhere else. But this doesn't mean you can't take this practice anywhere! When you go for a walk, begin with the intention to be awake in your senses rather than lost in thought. Choose an anchor you feel will best support you – sensations in the feet and legs, sensations through the whole body, sounds, or some combination. Then, when the mind wanders, gently come back again and again to the world of your senses. Enjoy!

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