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# The Role of Self-Compassion in Development: A Healthier Way to Relate to Oneself

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The idea that people need high self-esteem in order to be psychologically healthy is almost a truism in Western developmental psychology. Parents are told that one of their most important tasks is to nurture their children's self-esteem. Teachers are encouraged to give all their students gold stars so that each can feel proud and special. Psychologists worry about the dangerous drop in self-esteem experienced by adolescents as they transition out of childhood and try to find ways to give teens a self-esteem boost. The assumption that high self-esteem is synonymous with well-being applies throughout the lifespan. The elderly benefit from high self-esteem as much as anyone, don't they? The issue is not so simple. In the field of social psychology, scholars are starting to fall out of love with self-esteem. Yes, it is true that high self-esteem is associated with less depression and anxiety, as well as with greater happiness and life satisfaction. However, there are also some dark sides to high self-esteem.

For instance, high self-esteem is strongly correlated with narcissism. Twenge [2006] argued that the emphasis placed on self-esteem in American schools and culture at large is responsible for the creation of 'generation me', so named because of the steady and consistent rise in narcissism levels among American college students documented since the mid 1960s. Self-esteem is also associated with the *better-than-average* effect, the need to feel superior to others just to feel okay about oneself. Research shows that most people think they are funnier, more logical, more popular, better looking, nicer, more trustworthy, wiser and more intelligent than others [Alicke & Govorun, 2005]. To be average is unacceptable in Western society, so pretty much everyone walks around wearing rose-colored glasses (at least when they are looking in the mirror). This comparative dynamic, however, the tendency to puff ourselves up and put others down, creates interpersonal distance and separation that undermines connectedness.

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Recent reviews of the research literature, moreover, have suggested that high self-esteem is not all it is cracked up to be [e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003]. Self-esteem does not appear to improve academic or job performance, to improve leadership skills or to prevent children from smoking, drinking, taking drugs and engaging in early sex. Bullies are as likely to have high self-esteem as others, and in fact, hassling other people and putting them down is one way that bullies feel good about themselves. People with high self-esteem are just as prejudiced if not more so than those who dislike themselves. They are also just as aggressive and engage in antisocial behavior like cheating, as often as people with low self-esteem do. Still, we know that low self-esteem can be problematic and in extreme cases leads to suicidal ideation. So what is the alternative?

There is another way of positively relating to oneself that does not involve self-evaluations or social comparisons but, rather, involves compassion. While the concept of self-compassion has existed in Eastern philosophical thought for centuries, it is relatively new in the West. The past decade has seen an increasing interchange of ideas between Buddhism and Western psychology, especially in terms of how mindfulness relates to mental health [e.g., Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007]. Research on self-compassion that my colleagues and I have conducted over the past several years [e.g., Gilbert, 2009; Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, 2009] is part of this exchange. In general, the research suggests that self-compassion offers most of the benefits of high self-esteem, with fewer downsides.

Drawing on the writings of Buddhist scholars, I have defined self-compassion as having 3 main components: (a) self-kindness versus self-judgment, (b) a sense of common humanity versus isolation, and (c) mindfulness versus overidentification [Neff, 2003]. These components combine and mutually interact to create a self-compassionate frame of mind. Self-kindness refers to the tendency to be caring and understanding with oneself rather than being harshly critical or judgmental. Instead of taking a cold 'stiff-upper-lip' approach in times of suffering, self-kindness offers soothing and comfort to the self. Common humanity involves recognizing that all humans are imperfect, fail and make mistakes. It connects one's own flawed condition to the shared human condition so that greater perspective is taken towards personal shortcomings and difficulties. Mindfulness, the third component of self-compassion, involves being aware of one's present moment experience in a clear and balanced manner so that one neither ignores nor ruminates on disliked aspects of oneself or one's life. Compassion can be extended towards the self when suffering occurs through no fault of one's own – when the external circumstances of life are simply painful or difficult to bear. Self-compassion is equally relevant, however, when suffering stems from one's own foolish actions, failures or personal inadequacies.

Much of the research conducted on self-compassion has used the Self-Compassion Scale [Neff, 2003], which measures self-compassion as a stable trait, although researchers are also starting to use mood inductions to examine self-compassionate states [e.g., Leary et al., 2007]. Research indicates that self-compassion is strongly associated with psychological well-being [Neff, 2009]. Higher levels of self-compassion are linked to increased feelings of happiness, optimism, curiosity and connectedness, as well as decreased anxiety, depression, rumination and fear of failure. While lay people often express the worry that if they are too self-compassionate, they will undermine their motivation or become self-indulgent, this does not appear to be the

case. Self-compassion involves the desire for the self's health and well-being, and is associated with greater personal initiative to make needed changes in one's life. Because self-compassionate individuals do not berate themselves when they fail, they are more able to admit mistakes, modify unproductive behaviors and take on new challenges. In a study of self-compassion in classroom settings, for instance, we found that self-compassion was positively associated with mastery goals for learning and negatively associated with performance goals [Neff, Hseih, & Dejitthirat, 2005]. Thus, self-compassionate individuals are motivated to learn and grow, but for intrinsic reasons – not because they want to garner social approval.

Moreover, self-compassion appears to produce psychological benefits without generating the negative effects associated with enhanced self-esteem. For example, Neff and Vonk [2009] found that when compared to trait levels of self-esteem, self-compassion was associated with more noncontingent and stable feelings of self-worth over time, while also offering stronger protection against social comparison, public self-consciousness, self-rumination, anger and closed-mindedness. Furthermore, in direct contrast to self-esteem, self-compassion was found to have no association with narcissism.

While most of the research on self-compassion has been published in social psychology journals, there are reasons to believe that self-compassion could be a useful construct for developmental psychologists. For instance, parenting behaviors appear to contribute to the development of self-compassion. A recent study [Neff & McGehee, in press] found that maternal support, harmonious family functioning and secure attachment all predicted higher levels of self-compassion among teens. Similarly, developmental factors such as adolescent egocentrism – specifically the personal fable – negatively predicted self-compassion. The study also showed that self-compassion partially mediated the link between family factors, adolescent egocentrism and well-being (measured in terms of depression, anxiety and connectedness). This suggests that one way family and cognitive-developmental factors influence adolescent functioning is by fostering self-compassionate versus self-critical inner dialogues.

Self-compassion may also be an important aspect of maturity. Research has shown that self-compassion has a small but significant association with age [Neff & Vonk, 2009]. Perhaps more importantly, self-compassion is strongly associated with emotional intelligence and wisdom [Neff, 2009]. In *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Maslow [1968] argued that emotional maturity entails fostering nonjudgmental, forgiving, loving acceptance of oneself as well as others. Self-compassion epitomizes this way of being, and may help developmental psychologists understand and foster healthy forms of self-relating throughout the lifespan.

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