

A Letter of Self-Compassion

Compassion

Exercise

5-10 min.

Client

Yes

Self-compassion can be cultivated in many different ways. Research has shown that writing a letter to yourself from the perspective of a compassionate other can help to increase self-compassion and improve well-being. For instance, a study by Breines and Chen (2012) revealed that participants who wrote a compassionate paragraph to themselves regarding a personal weakness reported greater feelings of self-compassion afterwards. Interestingly, these participants also experienced greater motivation for self-improvement. Writing a self-compassionate letter has also been found to influence happiness. In a study by Shapira and Mongrain (2010), writing a self-compassionate letter every day for a week was found to result in a decrease of depressive symptoms and increased happiness three months later (see also Neff & Germer, 2013).

Author

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Goal

The goal of this exercise is to cultivate and promote self-compassion through writing. Writing this letter can help clients realize that the support that they need is within them at all times.

Advice

- It is advisable to do this practice weekly, or at least once per month, in order to achieve sustainable effects.
- Clients should be informed that it is normal that they will not immediately feel self-compassion after writing this letter. Cultivating self-compassion is not a quick fix and it can take a considerable amount of time to change the relationship with the self in a positive way.
- Instead of writing from the perspective of an imaginary friend, if it feels more comfortable, clients may also choose to write from the perspective of a loved one, a best friend, or a mentor who deeply cares about them. Clients should feel free to substitute one of the above three alternatives if that feels better.

This tool was adapted from Kristen Neff's self-compassion exercise called Exploring Self-Compassion Through Writing. More information on this tool can be found through an internet search using this original title.



Suggested Readings

Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2012). Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 18*, 1133-1143.

Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). A pilot study and randomized controlled trial of the mindful self-compassion program. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 69*, 28-44.

Shapira, L. B., & Mongrain, M. (2010). The benefits of self-compassion and optimism exercises for individuals vulnerable to depression. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*, 377-389.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1

Choose an aspect of yourself or your life that you dislike and criticize. It can be something that makes you feel ashamed, unworthy, inadequate, or self-conscious. Examples may include appearance, career, relationships, health, etc.

- Write in detail about how this perceived inadequacy makes you feel. What thoughts, images, emotions, or stories arise when you think about it?

Step 2

Now, imagine someone who is unconditionally loving, accepting, and supportive. In a gentle and loving manner, this friend sees your strengths and opportunities for growth, including the negative aspects about you. The friend accepts and forgives, embracing you kindly just as you are.

- Now write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this kind friend. What does this friend say to you? How is compassion demonstrated? How does this friend encourage and support you in taking steps to change? Let the words flow from you: do not think too hard about your phrasing or structure. Just write from the perspective of deep kindness, understanding and non-judgmental acceptance.

Step 3

After fully drafting the letter, put it aside for at least fifteen minutes or more if you wish.

- When some time has passed, return to the letter and reread it. Let the words fully sink in. Feel the encouragement, support, compassion, acceptance, and let every positive word rush into you.
- Review the letter whenever you are feeling down about this aspect of yourself that you feel is not favourable. Providing self-acceptance and self-support is the first step to change.