

Showing Yourself Compassion Can Have Mental and Physical Benefits

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Expressing love for your nearest and dearest is a hallmark of Valentine’s Day, but research suggests that you may want to save some of that love and compassion for yourself.

[A study published in Clinical Psychological Science](#) shows that university students who engaged in exercises focused on self-compassion had lower physiological arousal relative to peers who engaged in other exercises.

“These findings suggest that being kind to oneself switches off the threat response and puts the body in a state of safety and relaxation that is important for regeneration and healing,” says Hans Kirschner of the University of Exeter, first author on the research.

“Previous research has found that self-compassion was related to higher levels of well-being and better mental health, but we didn’t know why,” explains lead researcher Anke Karl, also of the University of Exeter.

“Our study is helping us understand the mechanism of how being kind to yourself when things go wrong could be beneficial in psychological treatments,” Karl says. “By switching off our threat response, we boost our immune systems and give ourselves the best chance of healing. We hope future research can use our method to investigate this in people with mental health problems such as recurrent depression.”

For the study, the researchers recruited 135 university students and assigned them to one of five experimental groups. Each group completed an exercise in which they listened to an 11-minute audio recording and engaged with a specific scenario.

The researchers monitored participants' physiological arousal during the exercise, measuring their heart rate and sweat response. Participants also answered questions about how safe they felt, how likely they were to be kind to themselves, and how connected they felt to others.

As expected, the two groups that engaged in self-compassion exercises — either a body scan meditation or a loving-kindness meditation — reported feeling more self-compassion and connection with others as a result of the exercises. And they also showed reduced physiological arousal, with a drop in heart rate and diminished sweat response. They also showed an increase in heart rate variability, a sign of being able to flexibly adapt to different situations.

Importantly, participants who engaged in positive thinking by focusing on an event or situation that was going well also reported increased self-compassion and decreased self-criticism, but they did not show the same physiological response.

In contrast, the group that engaged in self-critical thinking, contemplating something they hadn't managed or achieved as they had hoped, showed an increase in heart rate and sweat response — physiological signs consistent with feelings of stress.

“These findings help us to further understand some of our clinical trials research findings, where we show that individuals with recurrent depression benefit particularly from mindfulness-based cognitive therapy when they learn to become more self-compassionate,” says coauthor Willem Kuyken of the University of Oxford.

Future research will need to explore whether the one-time self-compassion exercises used in this study have similar effects for people with depression.

Overall, the findings suggest that showing yourself a little love and compassion may help you feel more connected and less stressed.

Reference

Kirschner, H., Kuyken, W., Wright, K., Roberts, H., Brejcha, & Karl, A. (2019). Soothing your heart and feeling connected: A new experimental paradigm to study the benefits of self-compassion. *Psychological Science*. doi:10.1177/2167702618812438