

SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

SELF- COMPASSION

BY KRISTIN NEFF



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Summary of “Self-Compassion” by Kristin Neff

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn to go beyond self-love with a new form of radical compassion.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
The Stories we Tell Ourselves.....	6
The Power of Self-Criticism.....	8
Self-Assessment Leads to Self-Compassion	10
Final Summary	12



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Introduction

Have you ever taken a perfect selfie for Instagram, only to stare at it until it seems to turn ugly before your very eyes? Have you ever planned the perfect outfit, only to put it on and wonder why nobody told you how fat you are? As repugnant as they sound, these are common thoughts that often pass through our minds. And they're indicative of the fact that even though people today seem incredibly self-centered, that introspective focus also means we're incredibly hard on ourselves. Kristin Neff recognizes this and that's why she argues that we need to return to the basics of developing a healthy self-esteem. By realigning our priorities and dismantling the negative narratives we tell ourselves, Neff argues that we can unlock true peace. So, over the course of this summary, we're going to learn about the radical practice that Neff calls self-compassion.



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The Stories we Tell Ourselves

What stories do you tell yourself? I'm not talking about the pleasant day-dreams we indulge in or our fantasies of what we'll do this weekend. Instead, I'm talking about the narratives that inform our sense of self. These narratives can be driven by positive or negative themes, and for the most part, they're a mix of the two. There may be things we like about ourselves, but there are also plenty of qualities we dislike and we often communicate this to ourselves by reiterating things like, "You're so stupid," "You're unlucky," or "Everything you do goes wrong." But most of these narratives didn't originate with us. Rather, the core themes we use to define ourselves are often passed down to us in early childhood in the form of messages sent by authority figures. For example, we may have had a parent, a sibling, or a teacher who literally told us, "You're stupid!" or "You'll never amount to anything!" And as young and impressionable children, we internalized these messages before we even had the self-awareness to realize what was happening.

But even if you didn't have an authority figure who was blatant in their verbal abuse, you may have internalized subtle cues that were equally harmful. For example, maybe your parents constantly corrected you. Perhaps they had the best intentions in the world. Perhaps they simply wanted everything to go well for you and you to be successful at everything you did. So, in their efforts to help, they corrected you on absolutely everything, believing that your life would be better if you just knew all the right things. Unfortunately, however, this can also have harmful effects. Because small children are incapable of understanding the finer nuances a parent is trying to convey. Instead, what a kid internalizes is, "Everything I do is wrong. Why can't I do anything right?"

These thought patterns may continue to manifest in your adult life even if you're not aware of them. As a result, you may become overly critical of yourself and others. You may feel inadequate, insecure, or overly competitive without even recognizing these feelings are the source of your unhappiness.

And unfortunately, those feelings are unlikely to be mitigated as you age. Rather than growing into a confident and self-assured adult, you may find that the society in which we live exacerbates these feelings. For example, you have only to take a quick look on Instagram to see that social media stokes the fires of competition and inadequacy. Indeed, the pressure to be special, to be noticed, to be better than everyone else is all around us. And because social media personalizes this pressure and puts it right in our back pockets, it's even harder to escape.

It is therefore unsurprising that you might develop bullying or self-deprecating tendencies. Social pressure often manifests in one of those two ways, prompting either a downward spiral into depression (triggered by feelings that you'll never be good enough) or a desire to belittle others. This is generally motivated by the feeling that you have to be special and that you can only succeed if everyone around you is failing. As you can see, both of these attitudes are toxic; in addition to making us unhappy, they're likely to make us unpleasant to be around as well. And as if these consequences aren't negative enough, we also have to consider the fact that if you don't have a healthy self-image to begin with, your identity may crumble under the weight of social pressure. So, what can we do? How can we overcome these negative sensations and break free of the toxic cycle? Keep reading because we're going to explore strategies for positive change in the next chapter!



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The Power of Self-Criticism

Let's say you recognize that these attitudes are toxic. Perhaps you're now conducting a mental review of the unhealthy narratives that have been passed down to you and wondering how you can write a happy ending for yourself. But even if you're doing this, there's a possibility that you may be mistaking the signals your inner critic is sending you. Even if you know they're toxic, you might think these signals are helpful because they enable you to maintain a competitive edge. You might wonder how you're supposed to be successful if you aren't driven by a crippling fear of failure.

If this describes you, the author wants you to know that this is a common problem. And thankfully, it's also one that can be easily solved! Because the truth is that self-criticism can sometimes be helpful. It's good to acknowledge when we're not doing our best and call ourselves out on it. It's good to recognize when we can and should do better. But when it comes to self-criticism, there's a very fine line between help and harm, and your inner critic rarely knows the difference. So, although you may see some occasional positive results from your criticism, the truth is that you're much more likely to be engaging in self-abuse. (Pro tip: if your 'helpful' statements include things like 'You're stupid!' or 'Why can't you do anything right?!' that's just abuse and it isn't motivating you at all). In fact, the more you abuse yourself, the more likely you are to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For example, if you repeatedly tell yourself that you never do anything right, eventually your brain will latch onto those signals. And instead of fighting back with positive behavior to prove you wrong, one day, it will give in. You may succumb to anxiety, depression, and procrastination in an effort to avoid the castigation of your inner critic. And that will never bring about the constructive results you want. So, if you want to counteract the vicious cycle, the author suggests an exercise that may help. The next time you're confronted with the opportunity to engage in negative self-talk, imagine you're talking to your best friend. If your friend lost her job, what would you

tell her? Chances are, you wouldn't say, "You're so stupid! It must have been your fault!"

Instead, you would respond in comfort before you did anything else. You would tell her that you're here for her and ask if she's okay. You would ask what happened and how you can help. And as the two of you talked through the problem together, you would try to help her focus on the bright side or remind her of her good qualities. Even if it became apparent that your friend was in the wrong or had acted inappropriately, you would likely handle the issue in love and gently encourage her to see how she could improve in the future. Unless you're a pretty lousy friend, there's a strong chance that you would be much kinder to your friend than you ever are to yourself. The author points out that engaging in this practice is your first step on the road to self-compassion. And as you've probably inferred from this example, we need self-compassion because it advocates a kinder, more positive, and more productive way of responding to life's challenges. However, practicing self-compassion also requires unlearning some negative habits because self-compassion is rarely our default.

Although we can be very self-centered creatures, we typically tend to look for the best in others and the worst in ourselves. So, training yourself out of this mentality is the next vital step in practicing self-compassion. The author observes that self-compassion begins when we start by recognizing and validating our own suffering. We often forget to do this because we're taught to keep going or to minimize our own pain. But this attitude fuels self-abuse and encourages us to repress our negative feelings. (As you've probably already noticed, that's the opposite of self-compassion!) So, start by giving yourself permission to be hurt, even if it's over something minor. It's okay if the source of pain is something petty or silly that you think shouldn't bother you. Just ask yourself how you're feeling right now and don't be afraid to sit with those feelings.



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Self-Assessment Leads to Self-Compassion

Once you've conducted an inventory of your emotional state, you can dive into the next step of self-compassion: replacing your negative coping mechanisms with positive ones. Just as we discussed in the example about your friend, it's important to apply those same practices when you're conducting your self-assessment. If it helps, you can again imagine that you're talking with a friend. Maybe your friend has told you that she's sad or struggling. Would you tell her to suck it up and stop being such a baby? Or would you tell her that her feelings are valid and that you're sorry she's dealing with this? Hopefully, you'd go for the latter route, so that's what you should do for yourself!

The author acknowledges that, at first, being kind to yourself might make you feel silly. Because society conditions us to prioritize other people's problems ahead of our own, you might feel overly self-indulgent or want to laugh at yourself. This is because Western society overvalues personal responsibility. Believing that you control your own destiny might sound empowering at first, but it also leads to the impression that you are responsible for everything that happens to you. And as a result, it's easy to convert that feeling to self-blame. This, of course, feeds your inner critic and you might have a history of asking yourself questions like, "Why did you let yourself get fired? Why did you believe they liked you anyway? Why are you letting yourself be sad about that?" None of these questions are constructive. In fact, they are gross distortions of your sense of personal responsibility and they invite self-abuse. So, recognize that if you're responsible for anything, it's unlearning these thought patterns.

That's why your next step is leaning into that self-compassion-- especially when it seems silly-- and carrying on even when you want to laugh at yourself. As you make a habit of engaging in this practice, you'll slowly convert your self-criticism into self-comfort and learn to be at peace with mentally giving yourself a hug. You might even start to re-write your negative coping statements (those "You're an idiot!" or "What's wrong with you?")

messages into something positive. Instead of engaging in those harmful criticisms, you can replace them with statements like, “I’m sorry you’re going through this,” or “It’s okay if you’re frustrated; you’re trying really hard.”

As you can see, the difference between these statements is obvious. For where one type of self-talk is abusive and demoralizing, the other advocates a kinder and more sensitive approach. Rather than wallowing in harmful attitudes that will drive you to give up, you can practice statements rooted in self-compassion that will motivate you to achieve positive change. The author asserts that part of that positive change is creating some space between yourself and your pain. We often forget to do this as well because negative self-talk invites us to dwell in the pain. This can make us feel as though we are lost, awash in the suffering. But when we practice self-compassion, we achieve a new perspective. By comforting ourselves as we would a friend, we are able to see clearly and acknowledge things like, “I’m hurting right now,” or “I feel worthless right now.” But by contrast, you also recognize that you are more than your feelings and that there is more to life than your pain. In this respect, comforting yourself can also be empowering because it serves as a reminder that, no matter what you feel you have done wrong, no matter what you dislike about yourself, you are also an agent of positive change.



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Final Summary

Everyone tells themselves stories about their identity. As children, we receive these stories second-hand from authority figures whose approval we seek. And although we may not recognize it, we carry their disapproval or criticism with us into adulthood, where it manifests in the form of negative self-talk and self-abuse. These struggles are often exacerbated by a competitive and self-centered society, and if we're not careful, these pressures can drive us over the edge.

That's why the author advocates practicing self-compassion. As the opposite of self-criticism, self-abuse, and negative self-talk, self-compassion invites us to unlearn toxic habits and replace them with positive coping statements. Although we might feel a little silly at first, if we stick with it, self-compassion will help us motivate ourselves, rewire our self-esteem, and achieve positive change.



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