



Yoga and Mindfulness for Mamas

## What is Self-Compassion?

Compassion is a 'state of mind' in which you wish that yourself and others may be free from suffering. With compassion you cultivate a sense of common humanity. Self-compassion is not much different than having compassion for others. Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself as you would to others when you are having a difficult time, fail, or notice something you don't like about yourself. Instead of ignoring your pain with a 'stiff upper lip', you stop to tell yourself, "This is really difficult right now, how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment?"

It helps to understand what compassion and self-compassion **are not**. By understanding what *doesn't* fit into the definition of compassion, we come closer to an understanding of what it is.

Compassion does not describe behavior, such as running around taking care of others, solving others' problems, or donating money and resources. These are actions, whereas compassion has to do with cultivating a state of mind. Compassion includes acknowledging suffering and does not include trying to fix it. With compassion you are not focusing on being helpful to others and you also do not focus on what others think of you or on praise or approval from others. We do not try to live up to an 'ideal' image of a compassionate person that we have generated in our minds. This could leave us feeling disappointed, exhausted and/or inadequate

Compassion *is not* an emotional state. For example, compassion is not thinking about someone else's suffering and feeling sorry for them. Similarly, self-compassion *is not* self-pity. With self-pity you cannot observe the situation objectively, while with self-compassion you notice how your experience relates to the experience of others. Self-compassion is not self-indulgence, for example eating ice-cream and watching T.V. all day. Self-compassion includes taking care of yourself to be well and healthy for the long term.

Self-compassion is also not the same as self esteem. Self-esteem is often something that is earned and tied to external attributes. Self-esteem is how we think of ourselves, our self worth. The need for high self-esteem may lead us to focus on what we are good at and ignore our shortcomings, whereas self-compassion is not based on self-evaluation.



## **Why do we start with compassion for ourselves?**

When you feel stressed or overwhelmed, you cannot generate healthy compassion. You are in fight and flight mode and when you are in fight and flight you cannot connect to others or to yourself. As Lorne Ladner describes in *The Lost Art of Compassion*, “When we’re stressed, it means that our ego’s regular coping mechanisms aren’t working well. So we don’t know what to do, and a sense of pressure, frustration, and fatigue builds up from within. Unable to find an inner balance, we may pull away from others or become moody, gruff, and demanding. We may feel agitated, frustrated, angry, or exhausted... feeling stressed or overwhelmed blocks a person from developing genuine compassion.” (p. 16-17)

Self-compassion reduces the symptoms of stress created by self-criticism. Self-criticism activates our stress response. In this case, the source of stress or threat is ourselves when we engage in self-criticism. Self-compassion can reduce this state of self-inflicted stress. In fact, making time to take care of ourselves is essential for our physical and our psychological health. This is being responsible. Not taking care of ourselves affects our own happiness and our ability to present for our families and others. You cannot give others what you don’t have yourself.

## **Why is self-compassion important for parents?**

When we become parents, we bring with us issues from our own past that influence the way we parent our children. Experiences that are not fully processed may leave us with unresolved issues that influence how we react to our children. These issues can get easily triggered in the parent-child relationship. When this happens, our responses toward our children often take the form of strong emotional reactions, impulsive behaviors, and distortion in our perceptions or sensations in our bodies. These intense states of mind impair our ability to think clearly and remain flexible and affect our interactions and relationship with our children. At these times, we are not acting according to our own values as parents and often wonder why parenting can bring out the worst in us.

When you don’t act, think or feel in ways that are in alignment with your authentic values, with the kind of parent you want to be, compassion can help you see what is underneath those responses. It allows the more mature parts of



you to craft a response that is nurturing, even toward an experience that is hard to except. As a parent you are going to make lots and lots of mistakes. Countless mistakes. So cultivating compassion for yourself is essential.

Many of us have become accustomed to using self-criticism as a way to motivate ourselves to improve our performance. Often, as parents, we revert to harsh self-criticism when we make parenting mistakes. However, research has shown that self-compassionate parents may be more able to reduce their own self-criticism about their parenting skills. As parents cultivate compassion, they also better understand their child's behavior. As a result, self-compassionate parents learn to accept both themselves and their children as imperfect individuals worthy of compassion. Self-compassion also helps parents to successfully manage parenting stress, which, in turn, results in a better quality of life for their children.

Self-punishment or operating with stress, on the other hand, results in greater constriction, fear and distress often leaving you with a need to medicate that awful feeling with something external. That can be food, shopping, drinking, watching too much TV or other less adaptive self-soothing. Ask yourself: Have you ever really changed something for the better by being negative towards yourself? Does it help to be aggressive towards other people to get them to change? Research has shown that being aggressive towards yourself does not help you. Rather it generates a fear of failure and the fear to try again. In contrast, when you feel safe, you are more effective and confident as a parent

Self-compassion helps you develop the ability to hold difficult negative emotions in nonjudgmental awareness without having to suppress or deny negative aspects of your experience. When you fail, you learn and take on a new challenge. Self-compassion and mindfulness do not take away the pain, but they alter your relationship with the pain. When the experience is not having you, but you are having the experience, that gives you room to move, to breathe and to make productive decisions.