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The Revolutionary Force of Self-Compassion for Girls and Women

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The Revolutionary Force of Self-Compassion for Girls and Women

Abstract
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Keywords
agency, belonging, empowerment, feminism, girls, resilience, safety, self-criticism, self-compassion, self-authorship, shame, wholeness, women

Disciplines
Developmental Psychology | Gender and Sexuality | Health Psychology | Other Psychology | Psychology | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Psychology | Social Psychology and Interaction

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The Revolutionary Force of Self-Compassion

for Girls and Women

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MAPP 800: Capstone Project

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August 1, 2021
Abstract

In the early 1990’s, Gloria Steinem, a leader of the feminist movement, authored the book *A Revolution from Within: Self-Esteem* to help empower girls and women. Decades later, females continue to suffer disproportionately from higher occurrences of psychological disorders and distress, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and self-harm behaviors. While causes are likely multi-faceted, research shows that girls and women experience high levels of shame and self-criticism. In essence, we are at war with ourselves. Drawing largely from research in the field of positive psychology, and contrasting with Steinem’s theory on self-esteem, this paper illustrates how self-compassion may address this inner conflict, revolutionizing our relationship to self, others, and the world around us. The three elements of self-compassion - mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness – collectively interact, producing the stabilizing and powerful downstream effects of greater belonging, safety, wholeness, resilience, and self-authorship and agency. When women practice self-compassion, we profoundly change how we show up in the world. As we do, we are able to model self-compassion for our girls, helping to empower the next generation of women – the most revolutionary act of all.

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Self-Authorship
Agency
Self-Authorship + Agency = Empowerment

Summary

A Revolutionary Act: Modeling Self-Compassion for the Next Generation

Social Learning Theory
A Personal Story

Self-Compassion in Action
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A Call-To-Action
   Fourth-Wave Feminism: Our Opportunity

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“I am because we are” – African philosophy of Ubuntu

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Revolutionary (adj.): constituting or bringing about a major or fundamental change

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Synonyms: far-reaching, ground-breaking, complete, profound, trail-blazing

For my girls, Amelia and Maeve

May you come to know the depth of strength that resides within you.
Introduction

"Sometimes, when I enter a familiar room or street, I think I see a past self walking toward me. She can’t see me in the future, but I can see her very clearly (...) I used to feel impatient with her: Why was she wasting time? Why was she with this man? at that appointment? forgetting to say the most important thing? Why wasn’t she wiser, more productive, happier?

But lately, I’ve begun to feel a tenderness, a welling of tears in the back of my throat, when I see her. I think: She’s doing the best she can. She’s survived — and she’s trying so hard. Sometimes, I wish I could go back and put my arms around her (…) We are so many selves. It’s not just the long-ago child within us who needs tenderness and inclusion, but the person we were last year, wanted to be yesterday, tried to become in one job or in one winter, in one love affair or in one house where even now, we can close our eyes and smell the rooms.

What brings together these ever-shifting selves of infinite reactions and returnings, is this: There is always one true inner voice.

Trust it.” - Gloria Steinem, Revolution from Within

It’s 1992 – and I am sitting on my friend’s wooden trundle bed in her pale pink bedroom, reading excerpts from Gloria Steinem’s (1992) Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem. My sixteen-year-old-self clings to every word. I feel moved to rise up and claim my space in the world; and yet, I am silently suffering.

Earlier that year, I had developed an eating disorder that would linger for nearly a decade. I tried to hide my shame and pain, even as I swapped secrets with friends regarding how to make
ourselves smaller. When I left home for college that next spring, I sought counseling to “help a friend” whose mother was dying of cancer. The counselor asked if perhaps I was the one who was hurting and most needed my friendship. Perhaps, she suggested, that is why I had really come to see her. Of course, she was right.

Many years later, I began coaching women through various life and career transitions; women who were ready to rise up and claim their space in the world. Through this work, I became privy to their stories and held secrets, their longings, and their pains. Though the details of each woman’s story differed, I was struck by the commonality of our experiences. We are so hard on ourselves. We not only withhold love, but we are often downright hostile, harsh, and unforgiving. Somehow, we come to believe that something is fundamentally wrong with us; something that we must fix, hide, or somehow make go away. Psychologist and Buddhist practitioner Tara Brach (2003) calls this the ‘trance of unworthiness’. Not only does this contribute to our emotional suffering, but it holds us back from truly rising up – and expressing the fullness of who we are in the world.

Gloria Steinem taught so many of us females that the key to empowerment lies within each of us. However, I believe that she was missing a piece to the puzzle. For girls and women to have self-authority and to heed their inner wisdom, as Steinem suggests, we need a cease-fire in the war with ourselves. Once we put our weapons down, we can wrap our arms around our own shoulders, and lead ourselves towards the light.

As this capstone seeks to show, I believe that the relationship that we cultivate with ourselves is foundational to our resilience, sense of agency, and overall well-being. Drawing from research from within the field of positive psychology and psychology in general, I argue
that self-compassion is a largely untapped source of strength and power that can revolutionize how we relate to ourselves and, by extension, how we show up in the world.

**Limitations**

It is important to begin this paper by acknowledging the limitations regarding the use of the terms, ‘girl’, ‘woman’, and ‘female’. The research available and cited within this paper relies on a binary classification of gender: female or male. As such, the aforementioned terms generally refer to cisgender females - those who were both assigned female at birth and identify as female. As a cisgender female, I include myself within the audience, using the terms ‘we’ and ‘our’ throughout the paper.

I humbly acknowledge that this paper will not sufficiently address the diverse experiences of all those who identify as females, such as those who may be transgender or intersex, or those who identify as non-binary. Moreover, the experiences of girls and women may differ not only based on gender identity, but also race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, ability, etc. My intention is to address the broader demographic of girls and women while hoping that anyone who reads this paper benefits from learning more about self-compassion - and its power to transform our lives.

Lastly, as self-compassion has origins in Buddhist philosophy, I have intentionally layered this capstone with insights from well-respected teachers within the 2500-year-old tradition. Buddhism has long celebrated the human potential for compassion and is fundamentally concerned with creating freedom from suffering (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). These inclusions are intended to complement the science in which this paper is grounded - and add nuance to our understanding of self-compassion.
Why Girls and Women

While girls and women have made important strides towards greater equality and opportunity over the past few decades, we continue to suffer disproportionately as a gender group. Across the globe, we show an increased prevalence and burden of mental health and stress-related disorders (Li & Graham, 2017). We experience significantly higher levels of apathy, low self-esteem, protracted sadness, and other forms of depression as compared to our male counterparts (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990). This trend seems to begin in early adolescence with rates of depressive episodes being twice as high for girls by the age of fifteen and continuing through adulthood (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). Concerningly, depression rates appear to be rising more dramatically for females than males. In a recent study by the US Department of Health and Human Services, 23% of adolescent girls (aged 12-17) and 19.4% of young women (aged 18-25) experienced a major depressive episode within the past year (SAMHSA, 2020). It is sobering to consider that these numbers - representing a quarter of the adolescent girl population - reflect major depressive episodes only. Rates for less acute depression are likely much higher.

Similar to depression, anxiety-related problems appear to afflict girls and women at considerably higher rates. One study shows that by age six, girls are twice as likely as boys to experience an anxiety disorder (Lewinsohn et al., 1998). Once again, this trend continues throughout adolescence and into adulthood. By the time we reach our teen years, we show higher rates of eating disorders, body image issues, self-harm, and suicidal tendencies (Laye-Gindhu & Schonert-Reichi, 2005; Rey et al., 2019). Sadly, our suffering does not seem to abate with age. Research reveals that one in four (roughly 31.7 million) women in the U.S. currently suffers from a serious mental illness – a statistic that is on the rise (SAMHSA, 2020).
The apparent vulnerability of girls and women is highly concerning. In a Canadian study in which high-school girls reported more self-harming behaviors (such as cutting, biting, bone-breaking, eating disorders, and non-suicidal pill abuse) than boys, girls cited despair, self-punishment, and self-hatred as motivators for their behaviors (Laye-Gindhu & Schonert-Reichi, 2005). It is striking to read these studies and consider the deficit of self-worth and self-acceptance that seems to plague us. Not only is our well-being at risk, but a recent and significant rise in suicidal ideation and attempts for girls and women suggests that our very lives are at risk, as well (SAMHSA, 2020).

**Contributors to Psychological Distress**

*A Sociological Lens*

There are many sociological factors to consider in understanding why females seem to suffer more psychological and emotional distress than males. Gender role socialization undoubtedly plays a contributing role. From early on, girls internalize messages about the importance of being ‘nice’ and conciliatory, rather than authentically expressing their emotions or speaking the truth about their experiences (Brown & Gilligan, 1993: Underwood, 2004). A 5-year longitudinal study of girls aged 7-18 found that girls learn to silence themselves over time, rather than risk conflict (Brown & Gilligan, 1993). Gender roles also reinforce a tendency for females to put others first, while often neglecting our own emotional well-being. We are socialized to be caretakers of others, which not only adds stress and emotional strain but also limits access to opportunities that our male counterparts are freer to pursue (Umberson et al., 1996).

As females, we are also vulnerable to threats to our emotional and physical safety beginning at an early age. Alarmingly, one in nine girls (as compared to one in 53 boys)
experiences sexual assault or abuse at the hands of an adult by the age of eighteen (RAINN, 2021). As the recent #MeToo movement illustrates, sexual harassment and violence directed at women, as well, continues to be an epidemic. Thus, many of us girls and women lack a basic sense of safety within our own homes, neighborhoods, or workplaces.

As one theory, Bandura (1996) suggests that our lack of power in social status and relationships contributes to more negative events and less control in our lives. Even today, we occupy a significantly smaller number of leadership positions than men across most disciplines while getting paid less for the same work (Warner & Corley, 2017). Women earn eighty-two cents for every dollar that a man earns with the wage gap being even more significant for women of color (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Additionally, considering all the roles that women play, we work more hours than men, carry the bulk of childcare responsibilities, do the majority of housework, and also serve as the primary caretakers for ill or elderly family members (AARP, 2015; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). On a global level, females are responsible for 75% of unpaid work within their homes and communities, while, in the U.S., women are estimated to do 60% more housework than men and, for married women, 90% more childcare than married men (Bianchi et al., 2012; Moreira da Silva, 2019).

This unpaid workload amounts to what has been deemed a ‘second shift’ for women (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). No matter how many hours we log professionally, we carry the burden of responsibility within our homes. Furthermore, sociologists describe a ‘third shift’, referring to the undervalued emotional labor that we carry on top of everything else (Power, 2020). In other words, we are often left with the mental load of figuring out who and what needs tending to - and how to go about addressing those needs. With the recent COVID-19 pandemic,
the care burden placed upon women seems to have increased even more; the impact of which may have long-lasting consequences (Power, 2020).

Unsurprisingly then, women have historically reported lower levels of internal control than men (Ryff, 1989). We are more likely to attribute control to ‘powerful others’ or even chance. Seligman (2006) refers to the generalized expectation of lack of control as ‘learned helplessness’; Bandura (1977) refers to it as low self-efficacy, a lack of belief in our ability to affect desired outcomes. Either way, our relative lack of power, opportunity, and control seem to contribute to our comparatively lower morale (than males), or basic sense of satisfaction with ourselves (Ryff, 1989).

**The Role of Social Media**

Keeping with the sociological lens, it is also important to consider the impact of technology and social media use on our well-being. In an English study, persistent social media use predicted harmful, long-term effects on mental health amongst girls, largely because it enables cyberbullying and sleep disruption (Viner et al., 2019). Not only do girls show higher use of social media, but they also show higher levels of cyberbullying victimization and a heightened sensitivity to it, as well (Kim et al., 2019). Being a target of cyberbullying can have devastating consequences; it has been linked to psychological distress, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and delinquency in females (Kim et al., 2019).

Adolescent girls seem especially sensitive to the constant experiences of rejection and acceptance that social media provides (Crone & Konijn, 2018). However, women are also at risk; for example, women report higher levels of addictive use, which appears to be a predictor for and/or consequence of low self-esteem (Andreassen et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2014). Like girls, women use social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, to a greater extent than
men (Greenwood et al., 2016). For females of all ages, social media has been shown to foster unreasonable self-expectations, peer comparisons, self-judgment, and body image issues (Hogue & Mills, 2019).

**Biological Differences**

Biological differences, such as hormone fluctuations, may also explain females’ susceptibility to psychological distress and disorders, such as depression and anxiety (Brizendine, 2006; Li & Graham, 2017). These fluctuations begin in our infancy and last beyond menopause, which seems to make our internal emotional landscape less predictable and consistent than males (Brizendine, 2006). As an example, during the child-rearing years, women experience changes in oxytocin, cycling estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone levels, which seems to lead to increased activity of brain circuits for maternal aggression, stress, and worry (Brizendine, 2006). Perhaps female brains are thus wired differently from the get-go and we need to learn how to embrace and effectively respond to these ever-shifting emotional tides.

While a sociological or biological lens may help shed light on the risks we face as females, there are certain emotional and behavioral tendencies, such as shame and self-criticism, that seem to increase our vulnerability to psychological distress and disorder. Not only can self-compassion enhance well-being overall, but it also appears to increase shame-resilience and disrupts patterns of self-criticism, creating the foundation for a more empowered, agentic way of being in the world.

**Shame**

“*It’s not the difficulty that takes us out of the game, it’s the shame that takes us out of the game.*”

– Maya Angelou
The experience of shame is universal for all humans; Yet, once again, it is especially prevalent in girls and women (Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996). Brown (2013) defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” It has been described as a ‘self-conscious emotion’ that affects our self-concept since it involves a negative evaluation of ourselves (Benetti-McQuid & Bursik, 2005). If we fail or make a mistake, rather than seeing our actions as wrong or misguided, we see ourselves as an inadequate person (Warren et al., 2016).

Germer (2021) describes our first instinct around shame as a desire to “go small, go silent, or go away.” The experience of shame is thus inherently isolating. We disconnect from others based on our perceived inadequacy and unworthiness. In a study by Brown (2006), women expressed feelings of being trapped and powerless when experiencing shame, in addition to feelings of isolation. Because shame is related to how we imagine ourselves to be in the eyes of others, it is often triggered by having the less desirable parts of ourselves exposed (Lewis, 2003). In a shame state, we often believe that we embody the anti-ideal (Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995). Rather than simply falling short of some standard, we see ourselves as the very antithesis of it.

Jordan (1997) posits that women experience more shame than men partially due to our male-dominated society’s role in shaming us and silencing our voices. Additionally, she suggests that women have a stronger need for connection and are thus more vulnerable to broken connections. As such, we tend to worry about letting others down. Others attribute the prevalence of women’s shame to gender stereotypes and socially prescribed, perfectionist standards (Efthin et al., 2001; Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996). When we fail to meet those standards, we may denigrate ourselves and consequently experience shame. According to Brown (2008),
women experience shame around who, what, and how we should be based on sociocultural expectations that are expressed and imposed by individuals and groups. These expectations are then continuously reinforced by media culture (Brown, 2008).

Furthermore, Brown (2008) identifies twelve categories in which women struggle with feelings of shame: appearance and body image, motherhood, family, parenting, money and work, mental and physical health, sex, aging, religion, being stereotyped or labeled, speaking out, and surviving trauma. Even at a young age, however, girls show more shame around failure than boys, even under similar circumstances (Lewis et al., 1992). For instance, they are more likely to slump their shoulders and hang their heads when they fail at a task as compared to boys. Whether this tendency can be attributed to biological differences, discrepancies in how girls may be treated by adults, or learned through female role modeling is unclear; however, what is clear is the prevalence of shame amongst females as compared to males.

**Self-Criticism**

Shame appears to be highly fused with self-criticism. Indeed, self-criticism has been described as an internal shaming process (Gilbert & Irons, 2009). Many of the items that measure shame (such as on the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA), for example) focus on self-critical thoughts (Tangey & Dearing, 2002). Like shame, self-criticism is associated with feelings of unworthiness, inferiority, failure, guilt, and isolation (Warren et al., 2016).

Self-criticism also has significant long-term consequences. In a study with fourth-year medical students, self-criticism was the only predictor of depression two years later in females (Brewin & Firth-Cozens, 1997). Additionally, self-criticism at the age of 12 has been associated with lower involvement in high school activities as well as personal and social maladjustment.
nearly twenty years later (Zuroff et al., 1994). When we criticize ourselves, we impede our ability to function well out in the world.

Often, we believe that we need to be hard on ourselves to stay motivated or accomplish our goals. While self-criticism may motivate us in the moment, it is likely to undermine our confidence in the long run. If we tend to judge ourselves harshly for mistakes and failures, we are less likely to take risks. Neff (2021a) describes self-criticism as one of the most pervasive forms of suffering. When we launch into a self-critical mode, we become both the attacker and the attacked.

Shame and self-criticism have been associated with many psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Gilbert & Irons, 2009). Self-criticism and depression also appear to feed each other, thus perpetuating a vicious circle. The more critical and self-attacking we are, the more depressed we seem to become. And the more depressed we are, the more that we heap on self-criticism (Shaher et al., 2004). In one study, researchers found that this positive feedback loop between self-criticism and depressive symptoms existed amongst adolescent girls, but not boys (Shaher et al., 2004). Perhaps it is partially influenced by girls reporting higher levels of depression at this age. Whatever the differentiating factor may be, when we direct hostility and contempt towards ourselves, we aren’t able to generate feelings of support, reassurance, or self-liking, which is likely to feed more depressive or compromising states (Gilbert & Irons, 2009).

As the research above shows, we seem to be facing an epidemic of ill-being within our female population. How we relate to ourselves, especially in times of difficulty, appears to be the root of much of our emotional and psychological distress. Rather than simply avoiding unnecessary suffering, I want to help girls and women to be truly well; to learn how to adapt and
thrive in the face of life’s adversities and challenges. As such, this capstone draws upon the vast amount of research within the field of positive psychology to show how self-compassion can revolutionize our relationship with ourselves and, consequently, how we engage with others and the world, in general.

**Introduction to Positive Psychology**

Simply stated, positive psychology is the science of well-being. Gable and Haidt (2005) go further to define it as “the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions.” (p. 103). While the field is still in its early adult years, the search for what it means to be truly well – to live “the good life” - has endured throughout the history of humanity.

**History**

Going back to the 300s BC, Aristotle posited that true happiness, or eudaimonia, was a matter of cultivating virtues, such as wisdom, courage, and love, and living in alignment with them (Peterson, 2006). As he described it, eudaimonia was not a destination or feeling, but rather a way of life; it requires engaging our best human capacities and, in doing so, actualizing our most authentic selves and highest natures (Ryan et al., 2008). To do this, he argued, we must continuously engage in reflective practices, which today we call mindfulness, concerning our actions and aims (Ryan et al., 2008).

In the late 1800s, William James (1892/1984), one of the founding fathers of Western psychology, similarly submitted that habits are essential to our well-being as they determine our actions, which then determine our character. He famously posited that “our experience is what we choose to attend to” (p. 380). In other words, we can fundamentally change our experience – and cultivate greater well-being – through the conscious use of our attention.
Getting nearer to modern-day, in the 1950s, Abraham Maslow introduced a hierarchy of human needs to be fulfilled for individuals to truly flourish. These needs are characterized as psychological (biological requirements for human functioning and survival), safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization; the former ones needing to be fulfilled before individuals can attend to the latter (or higher) needs (McLeod, 2007). Safety, love, and belonging are thus posited to be essential and prerequisite human needs to be met before we can experience a sense of self-worth (Kunc, 1992).

**Description of Positive Psychology**

Since World War II, however, the field of psychology has focused primarily on pathology and easing the suffering of individuals with illnesses such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc. In 1998, Martin Seligman gave a keynote address to the American Psychological Association (APA) introducing positive psychology as a way of catalyzing a change in focus within the field of psychology. Ultimately, the aim was to help bring balance to the field.

While traditional psychology has focused on the languishing to neutral end of the well-being spectrum, positive psychology focuses on the neutral to flourishing end. A core tenant is that the absence of ill-being is not the same as the presence of well-being. In addition to repairing what is wrong or alleviating its symptoms, the advent of this arm of psychology is intended to help us build upon what is good and strong. The goal is not only to help prevent suffering and pathology but to help all people lead richer and fuller lives.

Positive psychology is neither self-help nor “happy-ology”; nor is it the same as positive thinking. Rather, positive psychology is grounded in modern scientific methods and studies designed to enhance individual and collective well-being. As the field has continued to evolve, a
“second wave” has emerged to address some of its initial shortcomings. Perhaps most notably, this wave acknowledges the integration of the positive and negative as fundamental to well-being (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). In other words, if we are to thrive, we must accept and embrace the darker sides of life, as well.

**A Strengths-Based Approach to Well-Being**

There are several theoretical frameworks for well-being within the field of positive psychology. Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model suggests that well-being is cultivated through the pursuit of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Carol Ryff’s (1989) model of psychological well-being (PWB), alternatively, includes self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and personal growth. Subjective well-being is another popular measure within the field, which includes individual’s cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives (Diener, 2000). Well-being is thus a dynamic, multi-faceted construct that can’t be singularly defined or unilaterally measured. In fact, Dodge and colleagues (2012) suggest that well-being is “the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and challenges faced” (p. 230).

To this end, positive psychology embraces a strengths-based, generative view of our capacity as human beings (Waters et al., 2021). As Seligman (1999) said in his keynote address:

I look to a new social and behavioral science that seeks to understand and nurture those human strengths that can prevent the tragedy of mental illness. For it is my belief that no medication or technique of therapy holds as much promise for serving as a buffer against mental illness as does human strength. (p. 537-568)

The more that I learned about self-compassion in the Master of Psychology Program (MAPP), the more that I have come to believe that self-compassion is a core strength. With
greater self-compassion, we augment our resource pool and ready ourselves for the challenges we face. Moreover, self-compassion leads to many positive downstream outcomes and benefits, making it a powerful source of both strength and well-being.

**Self-Compassion**

“When touched with a feeling of pain,
The ordinary uninstructed person
sorrows, grieves, and laments, beats his breast,
Becomes distraught.
So he feels two pains,
Physical and mental.
Just as if they were to shoot a man
With an arrow and,
Right afterward,
Were to shoot him with another one,
So that he would feel the pains of two arrows…”

– the Buddha

**What is Self-Compassion?**

Self-compassion is simply compassion directed inwards. Goetz et al. (2010) define compassion as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (p. 351). Compassion is thus allowing our hearts to be touched by pain, rather than turning away from or resisting it. Germer (2009) describes the experience of compassion as “complete abandonment of the inclination to resist personal discomfort. It’s full acceptance: of the person, of the pain, and of our own reactions to the pain.” (p.33).
In Western countries, compassion has typically been conceptualized as something that we offer to others. However, in Eastern traditions, directing compassion towards oneself has been considered essential for centuries and a prerequisite for others-focused compassion. According to the Dalai Lama (as cited in Harrington et al., 2002), “yourself first, and then in a more advanced way the aspiration will embrace others.”

Self-compassion is, however, a relatively new construct within the field of psychology. In a sense, science has caught up with ancient wisdom. Only within the last twenty years has self-compassion gained attention amongst researchers, largely due to Kristin Neff’s trailblazing efforts. Neff et al. (2018) describe self-compassion as “a healthy way of relating to oneself in times of suffering, whether suffering is caused by failure, perceived inadequacy, or general life difficulties” (p. 627). In other words, self-compassion means befriending ourselves - treating ourselves with the same tenderness, care, and understanding as we would a close friend.

Importantly, self-compassion is a skill that can be learned and a mindset that can be developed over time. Through practice, we can cultivate the ability to be kinder to and more supportive of ourselves. We have an inherent ability to be self-compassionate. If we were to fall and scrape a knee, we would naturally tend to the wound. Yet self-compassion comes less easily around emotional discomfort and struggles. Especially for girls and women, we are often kinder and more supportive to others in times of emotional distress than we are to ourselves (Yarnell et al., 2015). A meta-analysis of over seventy studies found that women were consistently less self-compassionate than men (Yarnell et al., 2015). At the same time, we tend to be more compassionate towards others, whether it's close others, strangers, or humanity on whole (Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). The issue is not our capacity to be
compassionate, but rather our tendency to treat ourselves markedly differently than we do others; to neglect to direct our compassion inwards when we need it the most.

In the story of the two arrows above, self-compassion eliminates the blow from the second arrow (the arrow of harsh judgment or criticism that we direct at ourselves) and helps us tend to our emotional wounds from the first (the initial cause of pain or sting of failure). Self-compassion is inherently non-judgmental and non-critical; when we are self-compassionate, we are open to our pain and forgive ourselves for our foibles and imperfections (Neff, 2003b). To be self-compassionate is to show unconditional acceptance of and care for our own being (Brach, 2003).

Rooted in Buddhist psychology, Neff’s (2003b) definition of self-compassion consists of three elements: mindfulness (versus over-identification), common humanity (versus isolation), and kindness (versus self-judgment). These elements mutually interact with and support each other in creating a self-compassionate mindset (Neff & Dahm, 2015). To cultivate self-compassion, we must consciously practice being mindful, offering ourselves kindness, and recognizing and appreciating our shared humanity.

The Three Components of Self-Compassion

Mindfulness

Whereas self-compassion is holding oneself with loving awareness, mindfulness is holding the moment itself in such awareness (Germer, 2020). It is foundational to any self-compassion practice because we must first notice our suffering before we can take any meaningful action. Mindfulness may be defined as “a non-judgmental, receptive mind state in which one observes thoughts and feelings as they are without trying to suppress or deny them.” (Werner et al., 2012, p. 546). Otherwise said, it is a balanced state of moment-to-moment
awareness in which we neither get caught up in our feelings nor avoid them (Neff, 2004). Smalley and Winston (2010) liken mindfulness to the mental seatbelt that protects us from the twists and turns - and unforeseen bumps and potholes - of life. Not only does mindfulness keep us grounded, but it prevents us from being hijacked by our emotions.

Especially as females, we spend an enormous amount of time and energy ruminating, worrying, grieving, replaying situations, and imagining worst-case scenarios (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994; Smalley & Winston, 2010). Mindfulness interrupts these habitual cognitive and emotional response patterns. By bringing us into the present moment, we can tune into our self-talk and notice how we might be heaping self-judgment or blame onto our already tender wounds. We may recognize that we hold standards and expectations of ourselves that cause us pain when we don’t meet them. Rather than denying or fighting against our pain or discomfort, we learn to be with it in an open and accepting manner (Cassisa & Neff, 2019). We embrace our experience as is.

Mindfulness appears to help reduce automatic negative thoughts, as well as enhance our ability to let go of those thoughts (Frewen et al., 2008). Additionally, mindfulness helps us identify what is within our control and what we need to accept. It provides perspective so that we can label our emotions and reactions, such as “this is fear” or “there I go ruminating”. Whereas we might otherwise spiral down or over-identify with the feelings or thoughts, we are able to be discerning with what gets our attention. With mindfulness, we can choose a self-compassionate response to our thoughts and feelings, rather than suppressing, exaggerating, ruminating, or fixating on them. Consequently, we are more able to regulate our emotional response; to practice emotional equanimity, as opposed to overamplifying or distorting the negative feelings we’re experiencing.
Practicing mindfulness changes our physiological state, as well. It alters our brain activity, reflecting patterns of calmer and more focused attention (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Not only does mindfulness seem to lower feelings of anxiety and depression, but it positively affects our overall sense of well-being, as well (Smalley & Winston, 2010). With mindfulness, we are able to appreciate the transience of our emotions and experiences. We may feel pain or disappointment now, but we recognize that it won’t last forever. Instead, we move towards the pain or discomfort with acknowledgment and validation. Mindfulness thus provides a pause and perspective from which we can cultivate a more self-compassionate response to our human struggles.

**Common Humanity**

"My guiding assumption was "something is fundamentally wrong with me," and I struggled to control and fix what felt like a basically flawed self... Feeling not okay went hand in hand with deep loneliness. In my early teens, I sometimes imagined that I was living inside a transparent orb that separated me from the people and life around me. When I felt good about myself and at ease with others, the bubble thinned until it was like an invisible wisp of gas. When I felt bad about myself, the walls got so thick it seemed others must be able to see them. Imprisoned within, I felt hollow and achingly alone."

- Tara Brach

Common humanity involves recognizing that suffering is part of our shared human experience. Whatever it is that we are feeling or facing, we are not alone in it. Inevitably, we all make mistakes and encounter frustrations. We fall short of our ideals and bump up against our limitations. To be human is to experience pain and discomfort; to disappoint oneself and others;
to know the experience of feeling inadequate and unlovable. No matter how much we might try, these experiences cannot be avoided or bypassed. Yet, we are not unique in our suffering. Remembering our common humanity helps us to accept that pain, adversity, and misfortune happen to all of us.

This non-judgmental understanding of our shortcomings and inadequacies as part of the larger human experience can lessen the ego-centric feelings of isolation (“it’s just me”) and over-identification (“my world is falling apart”) (Warren et al., 2016). We recognize that we all lead imperfect lives and that all suffering is worthy of compassion. We thus feel less alone, less hopelessly flawed, and less self-pitying (Neff, 2003b).

According to Smith (2017), when individuals feel isolated (as opposed to connected to others), they are also likely to experience a lack of meaning in their lives. Baumeister and Vohs (2002) assert that connection is the very essence of meaning. When we can connect our worries, failures, losses, and struggles to others’, we are more likely to find meaning within the human experience itself.

Common humanity is thus a type of wisdom. It helps us to frame adversity as common and transient. We recognize the inevitability of certain experiences and feelings, as well as the inherent resilience and strength we share as humans. Reminding ourselves of the shared human experience helps us to take a wider lens than focusing only on our own distress. Amidst our pain and discomfort, we can tap into a sense of connection with others and humanity, on whole.

**Self-Kindness**

Being kind to ourselves means treating ourselves with care and understanding, as opposed to being judgmental and harsh. When we create a warm and accepting environment for ourselves, we are practicing self-kindness. Neff (2021) refers to kindness as the motivational
engine of self-compassion; it motivates us to help ourselves and do whatever we can to alleviate our suffering. Whether we are feeling inadequacy or shame, self-kindness means responding with tenderness; it’s asking ourselves what it is that we need; what might help us move through adversity or pain.

Western culture emphasizes the importance of being kind to others but not so much ourselves (Neff & Dahm, 2015). Neff’s (2003a) findings support the theory that most people treat others with more kindness than they do themselves. Especially as girls and women, we often hold high and unrealistic expectations for ourselves and mentally beat ourselves up when we fall short (Cantor et al., 2004). We make unrealistic demands of ourselves and compare ourselves, unfavorably, to others. Our self-talk is often berating and unkind; blameful and unforgiving.

Being kind to ourselves involves tuning into our inner monologue and intentionally choosing what we say to ourselves and how we say it. On one hand, that might mean replacing our self-talk with a more soothing, supportive, or encouraging tone and messages (e.g. “you’re doing the best you can” versus “you always screw up”). Additionally, it might mean letting go of unkind (e.g. other-driven or perfectionistic) expectations that we hold of ourselves.

With self-kindness, we facilitate a nurturing response to our emotional discomfort and pain. We might ask ourselves: What do I need right now? What can I do to take care of myself? How can I support myself? We then listen to our response with a desire to act on our behalf, rather than responding with criticism and self-judgment.

Another act of self-kindness may be ensuring that our actions and choices reflect our values. Core values are not socially prescribed; rather, they are unique to us. As threads that run throughout our lives, our values reflect our principles or what we hold most central to a life well-
lived (McGehee et al., 2017). While someone might deeply value honesty or loyalty, another might hold health or adventure as most essential. Self-kindness involves a desire to orient ourselves around our values and align our actions and choices with what matters most to us, rather than what others think we should do. When we suffer, it may be that a value is not being honored or we are experiencing a conflict between two values. Being kind to ourselves involves cultivating a warm and loving response to these inner conflicts and responding with a desire and intention to provide or seek that which we most want or value.

In sum, self-kindness is about treating ourselves as we might a beloved child or friend. We recognize the impact of our words and actions and choose those that have our best interest at heart. We take care of ourselves.

**Summary**

These three elements – mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness - mutually interact to create a self-compassionate frame of mind (Neff & Dahm, 2015). With mindfulness, we open to the reality of our experiences without judgment, over-identifying, or avoiding it. Common humanity helps us to feel less isolated and alone; we recognize that everyone makes mistakes and experiences failures and misfortunes. And rather than berate ourselves for our shortcomings, we respond with self-kindness; we cultivate a supportive and encouraging inner dialogue that reminds us that we are inherently good, worthy, and capable. Together, the three components of self-compassion can help us, as girls and women, rise up under even the most challenging circumstances - and carry on with strength and resilience.

**Self-Compassion versus Self-Esteem**

In Revolution from Within, Steinem (1992) doesn’t define self-esteem; Instead, she uses stories to illustrate what self-esteem looks like. For example, it was refusing to leave a hotel
lobby back in the late sixties when asked by management, simply because she wasn’t escorted by a man. Through her words and stories, we understand self-esteem to be valuing ourselves and finding the courage to speak up, stand up, and ask for – or fight for - what we want and need. A revolution from within means that we learn to value and trust ourselves, rather than allowing others to determine our worth, limit our rights, quiet our voices, and dim our lights.

The emphasis on self-esteem can be traced back to the 1800s, where James (1890) posited that our level of self-esteem was dependent on how competent or adequate we deem ourselves to be, relative to important life domains. For example, if we value motherhood or our career and yet feel that we are missing the mark with either one, we are likely to suffer from low esteem. Furthermore, Cooley (1902) suggests that we look to others to assess our worth, a phenomenon he calls the ‘looking glass self.’ In more modern-day times, Neff (2011) defines self-esteem as “an evaluation of our worthiness as individuals, a judgment that we are good, valuable people.” (p. 1)

In each of these definitions and descriptions of self-esteem, there is an element of evaluation. We assess ourselves based on how we believe we should act, perform, or be; how we measure up in comparison to some target or standard. Our sense of worthiness is then contingent upon a self or other evaluation. When we do well, our self-esteem rises. When we fail, it plummets. Self-esteem is thus the outcome, rather than the cause, of doing well (Neff, 2011).

In recent years, there have been a plethora of self-help books and programs (especially in schools) targeted at raising our self-esteem. While feeling a sense of worthiness and pride is arguably better than feeling unworthiness and shame, research reveals several limitations to self-esteem. First, self-esteem appears to be rather resistant to change, dooming many self-esteem programs to failure (Swann, 1996). Second, it can lead to a need to feel superior (or better than
average) in order to feel good about ourselves (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Contrary to what one might think, self-esteem does not appear to improve job or academic performance, nor does it seem to enhance leadership skills (Neff, 2009). Self-esteem does, however, correlate with inflated views of one’s qualities and abilities and, in some cases, even narcissism (Baumeister et al., 2003). On the positive side, high self-esteem can enhance both pleasant feelings and initiative (Neff, 2009). However, in sum, it seems hardly an ideal target.

Self-compassion, on the other hand, promotes positive self-regard without comparisons, judgments, or self-inflation. Because we see ourselves as connected to a greater whole, it tends to soften ego-protective boundaries between us and others, rather than reinforce them (Neff, 2011). It is also available to us at times when self-esteem may not be; for example, when we are caught up in a whirlwind of shame or experiencing the sting of failure (Neff, 2011). Self-compassion seems to offer potentially greater benefits without the drawbacks of self-esteem (Neff, 2009).

In one study comparing the benefits of self-esteem to self-compassion, researchers found that individuals with high self-compassion experienced less anxiety when describing their weaknesses in a mock job interview (Neff et al., 2007). High self-esteem did not provide the same buffer. In another study, self-compassionate people showed fewer feelings of humiliation or incompetence when imagining embarrassing situations, whereas individuals with high self-esteem were just as likely to report having thoughts like “I am a loser” as compared to those with low self-esteem (Leary et al., 2007). Self-compassionate people also appear to be less flustered or affected by neutral (as opposed to positive) feedback as compared to those with high self-esteem (Leary et al., 2007). This is likely because those with high self-esteem feel a need to be better than average, whereas those with high self-compassion focus on the inherent worth of all human beings. Additionally, self-compassion leads to kinder and more supportive self-talk. In
the absence of positive feedback, those with high self-compassion are likely more apt to bolster themselves with reassuring words.

Overall, self-compassion appears to be a more stable source of self-worth than self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Unlike self-esteem, self-compassion has been shown to negatively predict contingent self-worth, which depends upon success or positive evaluations by others. Self-compassion is also less likely than self-esteem to lead to comparisons with others, anger directed at others for perceived wrong-doings, public self-consciousness, and self-rumination (Neff, 2011). Self-compassion is not dependent upon any approval or evaluation. Our belief in our worthiness is unconditional.

No matter what we do or how well things go, self-compassion is a way of showing up for ourselves with unconditional acceptance and deep care and concern. Self-compassion involves wanting what is best for us; within that desire, there is a willingness to act in a way that centers our long-term well-being.

**Self-Compassion as a Catalyzing Force**

Many people think of self-compassion as a passive way of being in the world (Neff, 2003b). Yet, self-compassion helps to awaken us - and call us into action. In other words, it becomes a catalyzing force in our lives. The Merriam-Webster definition of “catalyze” is to bring about; to inspire; to alter significantly by. With self-compassion, we are committed to taking exceptional care of ourselves, which means taking actions to soothe, protect, provide for, and motivate ourselves. We are inspired to make changes in our lives in service of our overall growth and well-being. As such, self-compassion can manifest as both gentle and fierce; soft and strong. Using the yin and yang metaphor, the impact of both sides of self-compassion has powerful downstream effects, serving to ground, support, and empower us throughout our lives.
The Yin and Yang Sides

By definition, compassion includes the desire and commitment to alleviate suffering. Thus, it often has an action-oriented component to it. Like a mother lion who gently licks her cubs’ wounds and ferociously defends them in the presence of a threat, self-compassion can be both tender and fierce. Neff (2018) uses the ancient Chinese concept of yin and yang as a metaphor to describe these two sides of self-compassion. The yin side, or tender self-compassion, manifests as “loving, connected presence”; the yang side, or fierce self-compassion, can manifest as “brave, empowered clarity” (when protecting oneself from harm), “fulfilling, balanced authenticity” (when providing for oneself), and “encouraging, wise vision” (when aimed at motivating oneself) (Neff, 2021b). While the yin is traditionally associated with feminine energy, the yang is associated with more masculine energy. Both, however, are complementary expressions of vitality, or life force energy, and are necessary for health and well-being (Neff, 2021b).

With tender self-compassion, we nurture, soothe, and comfort ourselves in the face of difficulty or pain. Neff (2021b) describes this as the foundation of self-compassion; it provides us with a sense of safety and self-trust that then enables us to take fierce or courageous action when necessary. The tender side allows us to heal and is aimed at cultivating unconditional self-acceptance. We believe that we are worthy – and enough - exactly as we are.

Fierce self-compassion, on the other hand, is what we need to stand up to injustice; to right wrongs; to repair or prevent harm in our lives - and the lives of others. As an example, the decades-long social revolution that Gloria Steinem led against the injustices and minimization of girls and women illustrates the power of fierce self-compassion. Not only was she protecting
herself from being a victim of these injustices, but her connection to all other females motivated her to take action on behalf of the rest of us.

While fierce self-compassion shares the same three elements as tender self-compassion, it may look quite different in action. Kindness shows up in the ways that we protect ourselves. It may include drawing or enforcing boundaries, rising up and taking action, or being courageous in the face of threats. Common humanity empowers us to take action. We find strength in numbers. We are more likely to step up and act if we believe that we’re not alone in the fight or in dealing with a particular challenge. Finally, mindfulness involves opening our eyes and seeing things as they are. We acknowledge and speak the truth; we become attentive to what we need to do to care for ourselves as individuals and/or members of a particular group.

Tender self-compassion is thus a way of ‘being with ourselves’ compassionately, whereas fierce self-compassion is a way of ‘acting in the world’ compassionately (Neff, 2021b). We accept ourselves as we are and we take action to show up in the world in a more empowered, effective, or self-caring way. In other words, self-compassion means we fully accept who we are, but not necessarily how we might be interacting with ourselves, others, or the world around us. Thus, fierce self-compassion is not only about addressing or avoiding harm done by others but includes the ways in which we harm ourselves, as well. Prilleltensky (2011) refers to this as intrapersonal injustice - the unjust ways in which we relate to ourselves and cause ourselves unnecessary psychological harm.

The quintessential self-compassionate question is: what do I need right now? This includes asking ourselves whether we need more tenderness and understanding or perhaps a little more fierceness in our lives. Whatever the answer is, both tender and fierce self-compassion alter our relationship with ourselves and how we show up in the world. In other words, both the yin
and yang of self-compassion are catalyzing. Together, they give rise to several consequential and far-reaching downstream effects.

**An Upstream Behavior**

There is a contemporary fable, Upstream/Downstream, about a village (Downstream) that is constantly tending to the fall-out and devastation caused by the actions in Upstream (Ardell, 2019). The story illustrates why self-compassion practices are essential – and how they can be catalyzing. The fable goes as follows:

It was many years ago that the villagers of Downstream recall spotting the first body in the river. Some old-timers remember how spartan were the facilities and procedures for managing that sort of thing. Sometimes, they say, it would take hours to pull 10 people from the river, and even then only a few would survive.

Though the number of victims in the river has increased greatly in recent years, the good folks of Downstream have responded admirably to the challenge. Their rescue system is clearly second to none: most people discovered in the swirling waters are reached within 20 minutes — many less than 10. Only a small number drown each day before help arrives — a big improvement from the way it used to be.

Talk to the people of Downstream and they’ll speak with pride about the new hospital by the edge of the water, the flotilla of rescue boats ready for service at a moment’s notice, the comprehensive health plans for coordinating all the manpower involved, and the large numbers of highly trained and dedicated swimmers always ready to risk their lives to save victims from the raging
currents. Sure, it costs a lot but, say the Downstreamers, what else can decent people do except to provide whatever is necessary when human lives are at stake.

Oh, a few people in Downstream have raised the question now and again, but most folks show little interest in what’s happening Upstream. It seems there’s so much to do to help those in the river that nobody’s got time to check how all those bodies are getting there in the first place. That’s the way things are, sometimes.

Merging the tender and fierce sides of self-compassion means not only tending to the damage, pain, or vulnerability we experience downstream but also finding out what’s going on upstream – and doing something about it. Self-compassion wakes us up to what is happening and the role we play in creating, accepting, or causing harm. It can motivate and incite us into compassionate action - for ourselves and others (Neff et al., 2005; Neff & Pommier, 2013). When we cultivate a self-compassionate mindset, we are not only tending to our pain, but we are reducing our suffering overall by changing the circumstances (or climate) upstream and, as a consequence, downstream, as well.

**How Self-Compassion is Revolutionary: 5 Downstream Effects of Self-Compassion**

As Neff (2021b) describes, self-compassion is a journey of opening our hearts. This is an inherently vulnerable process - and a revolutionary act - that most of us have not been taught. By practicing this upstream habit and cultivating a self-compassionate mindset, we allow ourselves to be transformed by the healing and mobilizing power of self-compassion.

For girls and women especially, self-compassion is a revolution against the habits and ways of being that cause, increase, or prolong our pain or suffering. With self-compassion, we create a safer and more stable home base for ourselves. In doing so, we enable ourselves to be
more resilient and agentic in the world. The revolution thus starts within us and naturally extends outwards, affecting what we choose to do with our lives and how we go about doing it. Specifically, the downstream effects of self-compassion include a greater sense of belonging, safety, wholeness, resilience, and self-authorship and agency. By way of these effects, self-compassion transforms how we experience ourselves - and how we show up in the world.

**Belonging**

“*True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.*”

– Brene Brown

To truly be ourselves in the world, we need to feel that we belong. According to May (2011), belonging can be defined as “a sense of ease with oneself and one’s surroundings” (p.368). Belonging requires that we recognize the self in others; that we identify with our social and relational environment (Miller, 2003). Rather than something we achieve, belonging is an active, ongoing process as we adjust to constantly shifting circumstances and environments (May, 2011).

Miller (2003) argues that belonging is fundamental to who and what we are. The need to belong likely has an evolutionary basis to it, offering us survival and reproductive benefits (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this sense, belonging may be a protective factor when facing difficult circumstances. In fact, a sense of belonging seems to be a better predictor of mental and physical health (and less depression) than both perceived and actual social support (Hagerty & Williams, 1999). Belonging thus has significant implications on our overall well-being. When
we perceive ourselves as integrated into a bigger whole, we allow all of who we are to rest within the broader circle (Hagerty & Williams, 1999).

Prilleltensky (2005) asserts that belonging is a fundamental pillar of mattering; of knowing that we are valued and that we count. He further suggests that our need to belong is almost as fundamental as our need for food. Similarly, Smith (2017) maintains that belonging is one of the four pillars of meaning, which is central to a life well-lived. For us to source meaning within our experiences, we need to know that we are part of a larger tribe; that no matter how tough things get, we are in this together. Furthermore, Smith (2017) asserts that compassion lies at the very center of belonging. The ability to open up our hearts - to ourselves and others - is the doorway to belongingness.

The degree to which we feel a sense of belonging also affects how we show up in the world. Research shows that belonging impacts our emotional patterns and cognitive processes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For example, even women with impressive academic accomplishments are susceptible to the negative effects of a low sense of belonging, such as reduced persistence in their pursuits (Lewis et al., 2017). Moreover, Walton and Cohen (2011) refer to belonging as a psychological lever. When belonging is increased, we seem to be significantly bolstered across different domains. In their 2011 study with college students, for example, they found that increasing a sense of belonging consequently enhanced social initiative and integration, improved academic performance, and benefited overall health and well-being. In this study, students were exposed to a narrative that framed adversity as a common and transient experience. Seeing their distress and personal challenges as part of the overall college and human experience (i.e. common humanity) increased their sense of belonging.
Generally speaking, it seems that when adversity increases, our sense of belongingness falls (Walton & Cohen, 2011). With self-compassion, however, we can consciously cultivate a sense of belonging to both self and others during these times. In fact, research shows a significant and positive correlation between self-compassion and belonging (Alizadeh et al., 2018). With mindfulness, we learn to welcome all of our feelings as they arise and without discrimination. With kindness, we embrace ourselves – flaws, imperfections, failures, and all. By connecting to a sense of common humanity, we remember that we are part of a larger tribe; that others are struggling just as we are; that we are, indeed, in this together.

Like in Brown’s quote above, Brach (2020a) suggests that we can’t experience real belonging in the world until we experience it with ourselves. When we welcome all of who we are, we cultivate inner belongingness. As Brach (2020b) describes, “our deepest suffering comes from feelings of separation, and as a species, our great task is realizing our belonging – to our bodies and hearts, to each other, to the living web of all beings, to formless loving awareness.” With self-compassion, we develop and tap into our inner wisdom that we inherently belong, exactly as we are. The more that we practice, the more that we may feel at home within ourselves – and in the world, at large.

**Safety**

Like belonging, our need for safety is fundamental to our well-being. However, it appears that our human brains evolved to be threat-focused so that our ancestors could survive. Even though most of us don’t face life-or-death situations often, threats to our self-concept may trigger a similar reaction to our ancestors’, causing us stress, anxiety, and even depression (Neff, 2016). When we criticize ourselves, for example, we activate our defense system, stimulating our amygdala, releasing off-balancing hormones, and sending us into fight, flight, or freeze mode.
(Gilbert, 2020). Considering that many of us launch self-attacks on a daily basis, we repeatedly trigger this threat response. We are thus routinely on guard and perpetually feeling unsafe.

Alternatively, when we give ourselves compassion, we activate our parasympathetic nervous system, the rest-and-digest processes that promote health and restoration (Ceccarelli et al., 2019). Not only do we subdue our threat system reaction in doing so, but we turn on our mammalian care system that helps soothe the reactivity of fight or flight responses (Arch et al., 2014). We may trigger this response largely through physical gestures of compassion, such as touching, holding, or stroking, as well as through a soothing and reassuring tone of voice; all of which have physiological regulating effects that promote feelings of safety (Gilbert, 2020).

In practice, we might do this by placing our hand over our heart; gently cupping our cheeks in the palm of our hands; lovingly rubbing our upper arms; or tenderly whispering “It’s ok, honey. I’ve got you.” A truly self-compassionate response resonates with us and feels authentically soothing, supportive, or encouraging. While it might feel awkward at first, physical touch seems to be especially effective in activating this system of self-care and internal safety (Field, 2014). Much like a mother holds her child’s hand as they cross a busy street, or gently strokes her cheeks while she cries, we can learn to offer ourselves physical reminders that we are safe, held, and protected.

Indeed, our sense of safety in the world is affected by the quality of our relationships - to self as well as others. Bowlby (1982) identified three core functions that promote healthy attachment: proximity-seeking, a secure base, and a safe haven. In the context of a parent-child relationship, proximity-seeking relates to a child detecting that a “caring other” is nearby and accessible; that staying close to that person will offer her protection. Next, providing the child with a “secure base” ensures that the environment is safe and unthreatening; that guidance and
encouragement are provided. Finally, a “safe haven” is where a parent acts as a “soothing and emotion-regulating other” when the child is in distress (Bowlby, 1982). Through self-compassion practices, we can learn how to re-parent ourselves; how to establish this healthy attachment, or bond, with our own self. We can thus create an internal secure base and safe haven, where understanding and care are always accessible. Through this process, we can counteract shame, self-criticism, and other ways in which we harm ourselves or otherwise shut ourselves down (Gilbert, 2020).

In this sense, self-compassion is a pathway to cultivating psychological safety within ourselves. While the term psychological safety typically describes our perception of the consequences of taking interpersonal (rather than intrapersonal) risks, we may apply it to the relationship we have with ourselves (Edmonson, 1999). If we know that we will berate ourselves if we fail or disappoint another, we are less likely to take risks or stretch outside of our comfort zone. We create our own fight or flight reactivity and learn that it is not safe to try again (Cassisa & Neff, 2019). However, if we know that we will provide a soft landing for ourselves no matter how much we might miss the mark, we are far more likely to risk, reach, and expand our limits. Offering ourselves compassion is a way of establishing a safety net within ourselves; a hammock that can hold and cradle our vulnerable hearts.

**Wholeness**

“*On this sacred path of radical acceptance, rather than striving for perfection, we discover how to love ourselves into wholeness.*”

– Tara Brach

At its roots, self-compassion is a practice of integrating all aspects of ourselves – our feelings, identities, motivations, values, etc. – and holding them with acceptance and open-
heartedness. In this sense, it can be seen as a pathway towards greater wholeness. To be whole is to include all of who we are - the full range of the human experience, such as the desirable and the undesirable; that which lifts us and that which brings us to our knees. While the concept of wholeness has not received a lot of attention in the field of psychology, it has long been central to Buddhist philosophy. In Buddhism, wholeness is understood as the sum of what it means to be a human being. When we stop turning away from discomfort and embrace all aspects of being alive, we become more whole.

From a psychological perspective, wholeness can be understood as having three components: (1.) a capacity to see life with breadth and depth; (2.) an ability to hold a life-affirming view of oneself and the world; and (3.) the faculty for organizing one’s life journey into a cohesive whole (Pargament et al., n.d.). Wholeness is the integration of all of our thoughts, actions, values, emotions, and relationships into a holistic view of self (Pargament et al., n.d.). It is how we make sense of the seemingly fragmented aspects of ourselves and our lives (Hart et al., 2020). Russo-Netzer (2018) refers to wholeness as ‘a delicate dance’ between us and the world in which we live, in all of its complexities and contradictions.

This dance requires that we fully embrace all of our emotions. We are complicated beings who experience a range of psychological states - all of which serve a purpose. As Kashdan & Biswas-Diener (2014) point out, while positive emotions may feel better, negative emotions are our evolutionary birthright. Fear alerts us to danger, hunger to our need for food. By valuing all of our emotions, we increase our well-being (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014). Indeed, the Latin root for the word ‘health’ is _hal_, which means whole. Being healthy means being whole, and being whole includes seeing undesirable emotions, like sadness and anger, as part of a full,
authentic life. Self-compassion helps us to integrate both the positive and the negative, allowing us to experience the true depth of our human capacity.

With self-compassion, we can also use negative emotions as a springboard to become more accepting and even appreciative of our human experience. We learn to hold positive emotions alongside negative emotions, not to overshadow or deny them, but rather to deepen our capacity to be with – and work with - them. The goal of self-compassion is not to make any emotion go away. Wholeness is the integration of all of our human emotions and experiences. However, when we hold our fear or anger with tenderness and love, we create more balance. We learn to hold both light and dark together, rather than being consumed by the darkness alone.

Moreover, research shows that positive emotions may broaden our perspective and mindset and help us build psychological resources, which Fredrickson (2004) calls broaden-and-build theory. When we hold our pain with compassion, we may potentially create an upward spiral of positivity that helps us move from a place of paralysis or over-identification to one of greater perspective, wisdom, and choice. This is the essence of wholeness; learning to integrate challenging experiences and difficult emotions in a healthy and holistic way. Self-compassion enables us to take a meta-view of our emotions and experiences.

A self-compassionate mindset allows us to include the paradoxes of life and move beyond binary categories and definitions (Russo-Netzer, 2018). For example, we may see happiness as fixed and binary; if we are not happy, we might assume that something is wrong. Wholeness, however, includes embracing a both/and perspective, as opposed to an either/or (e.g. “I am sad right now and I am ok”). To be whole is to join opposites - and hold seemingly contradictory experiences - in service of recognizing the complexity of our human experience (Russo-Netzer, 2018). With self-compassion, we hold pain with tenderness, disappointment with
acceptance, and shame with love. We sit with our failures and remind ourselves of our worth. We embrace both the yin and the yang sides. Indeed, we need both fierce and tender self-compassion to be whole; to fully accept who we are without condition, and to take action in service of our individual and shared well-being.

Yet none of us are fully whole. We all experience some degree of “brokenness” as Pargament (2007) calls it. Rather than trying to eliminate our flaws, or undo our brokenness, we can deepen our compassion around our inherent vulnerability as a human being – and particularly as a female in this world. Being whole thus means learning how to incorporate our brokenness in a cohesive way (Hart et al., 2020). With self-compassion, we can, in essence, reconfigure the fragmented pieces of ourselves into a greater sense of wholeness.

Pargament and colleagues (n.d.) use the ancient Japanese art of Kintsugi, or golden joinery, to illustrate how brokenness can become the whole; its beauty enhanced in the process. In Kintsugi, broken pieces of pottery are mended with an adhesive that is mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum, creating rich veins that flow throughout the piece. Rather than trying to disguise the cracks or edges, each piece is joined by these unifying threads. The beauty of each object is a result of its imperfection, rather than despite it. Each one has its own story; its uniqueness that can’t be replicated or compared to another. Beauty is found in the fusion of all the fragmented pieces; in the wholeness that was crafted from brokenness.

Self-compassion is like kintsugi; we are mending our human brokenness with a mix of mindfulness, kindness, and common humanity. Rather than seeing ourselves as inadequate, we join the bits and pieces of ourselves and hold them with tenderness and care. We learn to see ourselves as whole and inherently worthy human beings; to accept ourselves without judgment or condition; to integrate the good and the bad, the desirable and undesirable. In practicing self-
compassion, we learn to dance more gracefully between what needs acceptance and what needs to be changed. We embrace the yin and the yang.

**Resilience**

“The art of life is not controlling what happens to us but using what happens to us.”

– *Gloria Steinem, Revolution from Within*

Beyond enhancing our sense of belonging, safety, and wholeness, self-compassion facilitates healthy coping and resilience (Leary et al., 2007). Resilience may be defined as “the ability to persist in the face of challenges and to bounce back from adversity” (Reivich et al., 2011). Without resilience, we would likely be in a perpetual state of languishing. Resilience, however, allows us to bend without breaking; to withstand even the gale force winds of life. When we do get knocked down, whether it’s from something within or outside of our control, resilience helps us to get back on our feet.

Masten (2001) refers to resilience as ‘ordinary magic’. She describes resilience as an innate capacity that all humans have. Yet how we approach and respond to the events and experiences of our lives affects the degree to which we are resilient. Researchers Brown and Gilligan (1993) point out the challenges that girls are facing regarding their ability to respond to life’s difficulties. Based on their longitudinal study, they observe that “…girls who seem by standard measures to be developing well psychologically are showing evidence of loss, struggle, and signs of an impasse in their ability to act in the face of conflict” (p. 13). Given the higher risk that girls and women face regarding our psychological well-being, cultivating resilience seems paramount.
Each component of self-compassion contributes to healthy coping and resilience. Mindfulness prevents us from exaggerating the difficulties in our lives and dwelling on the negatives. Evoking kindness, we attend to what we need; to what might help us through whatever emotional turmoil we are facing. Finally, with common humanity, we take comfort knowing that we are not the only ones who struggle or endure hardship; that others may be finding their way through similar challenges. The intent is not to minimize our pain, but to reduce feelings of isolation and separation from others in the midst of it. We can recognize that problems and difficulties are a normal part of life; that loss, failure, rejection, and humiliation are universal experiences from which we all must recover.

Overall, self-compassion seems to be a powerful way of coping with everyday stress (Allen & Leary, 2010). When balls are dropped, mistakes are made, and goals are missed, self-compassionate people are more likely to pick themselves back up and carry on. Specifically, self-compassionate individuals are more able to admit mistakes, make necessary reparations or modify their behavior as needed, and take on new challenges (Neff, 2009). Rather than berate themselves for falling short or making a mess of things, self-compassionate people respond to their imperfections with gentleness, understanding, and commitment to doing the best that they can in service of their long-term well-being and fulfillment. Because self-compassion is associated with a lesser fear of failure - as one’s worthiness is not dependent upon external goal achievement or measuring up to some held expectation - self-compassionate people are more likely to take risks - and, when they fall short, try again (Neff et al., 2005).

In addition to steadying us through life’s daily ups and downs, self-compassion has been shown to increase resilience around major life stressors as well, including divorce, adolescent peer victimization, and serious health conditions (Sbarra et al., 2012; Przezdziecki et al., 2013;
Jiang et al., 2016). With divorce, in particular, self-compassion was the strongest predictor of positive adjustment outcomes for divorcees (Sbarra et al, 2012). Self-compassion also appears to be a protective factor around body image and eating disorder-related struggles in females, as well as help mitigate against anxiety and post-traumatic stress (Braun et al., 2016; Neff et al., 2007; Warren et al., 2016). In part, the absence of self-criticism in a self-compassionate response seems to provide a buffer against prolonged suffering and even psychological disorders. For example, in female survivors of domestic violence, self-criticism was the differentiating factor between those who developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and those who did not (Sharhabani-Arzy et al, 2005).

One of the ways that self-compassion increases resilience is by reducing negative affect (Leary et al., 2007). When we are caught up in a whirlwind of shame or filled with self-doubt, it can be difficult to bounce back or move forward. Learning the skills of self-compassion, however, can help lighten our emotional load, making it easier to carry on. Even for those vulnerable to depression, simply writing a daily, self-compassionate letter to oneself for one week has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms for three months and increase happiness even six months later (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010). Self-compassion thus provides both a buffer and a buoy; it protects and lifts us in times of difficulty, making us more resilient overall.

To add nuance to how self-compassion might enable resiliency in girls and women, its effects on cognitive flexibility, psychological flexibility, and shame resilience are explored below. All of these constructs may be impacted by a self-compassionate response and mindset, which helps us to carry on in the face of setbacks and struggles - with our heads up and our hearts open.

**Cognitive Flexibility**
Cognitive flexibility, or the ability to effectively shift our thinking in adaptive and effective ways, is key to cultivating resilience (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Most of us naturally engage in distorted thinking patterns, to some degree or another, which is often the root of our suffering (Beck, 1976). Given our proneness to shame and self-criticism, girls and women are even more likely to hold distorted views of themselves. For example, we may get stuck in thinking traps such as me-thinking (“it’s all my fault”) or over-generalizing (“I always say the wrong thing.”) (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). These cognitive habits then shape our emotional and behavioral responses to the stressors in our lives. If we believe that we are doomed to failure, for example, we are less likely to take risks and try again.

Self-compassion may be considered a cognitive strategy that promotes a more balanced appraisal of the situation, rather than exaggerating the risks or fall-out, minimizing our capacity or competence, or blaming and criticizing ourselves unfairly. For example, with mindfulness, we can take stock of when we might be stuck in a thinking trap or an imbalanced way of thinking. Using common humanity, we can shift perspectives, recognizing that others also experience failures and disappointments; that our suffering is not a reflection of some unique, inherent flaw within us. By responding with self-kindness, we can engage in more supportive self-talk, such as “it’s ok, sweetie, you’ve got this” or “this is hard but I will get through it. I’m not alone in this.” Allen and Leary (2010) refer to this kind of positive self-talk as “mental acts of kindness.” We offer ourselves small but meaningful words of encouragement, support, and love.

Cognitive flexibility is especially important for girls and women since we engage in more ruminative coping than males do (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). Rumination refers to the rehearsal of persistent and repetitive thoughts that are usually negative, self-focused, and unproductive (Shors et al., 2017). Rumination is highly correlated
with depression; it also amplifies chronic strain and a low sense of mastery (or control over the forces that affect our lives) amongst women (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999). When we ruminate, we tend to undervalue our capacity to handle or improve the situation at hand. In addition, we feel more stressed and depleted. Research shows that self-compassion reduces rumination around negative thoughts and emotions and helps us replace negative spiraling with more supportive self-talk, or mental acts of kindness (Warren et al., 2016). In other words, we learn to switch cognitive gears.

Optimism

We can also create a more flexible mindset by positive cognitive restructuring, which involves changing our view of a stressful or difficult situation so that we see it in a more positive or optimistic light (Allen & Leary, 2010). The term optimistic doesn’t mean that we deny the pain or difficulty that we are facing; rather, optimism is the tendency to expect good things (rather than bad) to happen (Carver et al., 2009). Research shows that we can boost optimism through cognitive exercises such as self-compassion (Neff et al., 2007; Smeets et al., 2014).

Self-compassion helps us hold a more benevolent view of ourselves in relation to the challenges we face. We are kinder in our self-assessments and less likely to blame ourselves for everything that goes wrong. In this way, self-compassion helps us cultivate attributional optimism, which is an explanatory style that mitigates feelings of helplessness (Seligman, 2006). Our explanatory style refers to how we habitually explain things to ourselves, such as why certain things happen. When things go wrong, an optimistic explanatory style means that we assign cause to temporary, specific, and external reasons, as opposed to permanent, universal, and internal reasons. In other words, we are less likely to respond in a self-critical or self-shaming way. For example, if we receive a rejection after a job interview, we might tell
ourselves “it’s ok – it wasn’t the best match for my skill set. There are plenty of other jobs out there. I’ll find one soon.” On the contrary, a pessimistic (and self-critical) explanatory style might have been: “They hated me. I don’t have what it takes. I’ll never find a job.” Through mindfulness (a more balanced perspective), kindness (less blameful self-talk), and common humanity (it’s not “just me”), self-compassion enables us to explain our misfortunes, misadventures, and mistakes in a more gracious and optimistic light.

In addition to impacting our explanatory style, optimism enables problem-focused coping with controllable stressors and emotion-focused coping with uncontrollable stressors (Carver et al., 2010). In other words, optimism helps us find ways to change or impact things that are within our control and effectively self-soothe when things are not. Self-compassion helps foster this optimistic coping tendency. As one example, Neff et al. (2005) performed a study focusing on college undergraduate students who perceived recent test scores to be failures. The researchers found that self-compassion was strongly associated with emotion-focused coping strategies, including positive reinterpretation (i.e. making the best of a situation; seeing it as an opportunity for growth) and acceptance. Additionally, self-compassion was negatively associated with avoidance-coping strategies (e.g. denial, giving up, disengagement), as well as dwelling on negative emotions (i.e. rumination).

Overall, optimism allows us to find the good within and around us, rather than beating ourselves up, sabotaging our efforts, or giving up in the face of adversity. With self-compassion, we are likely to be more optimistic and see failures as learning opportunities, rather than a reflection of our self-worth (Neff et al., 2005). We learn to approach our difficulties with an orientation towards possibility and growth; to search for ways to get back up on our feet - and head towards the light. In other words, we become more resilient.
**Psychological Flexibility**

In addition to cognitive flexibility, self-compassion also seems to enable greater psychological flexibility. According to Gloster et al. (2011), psychological flexibility is “the process of contacting the present moment and the thoughts and feelings it contains, without needless defense, fully as a conscious human being and, depending on what the situation affords, persisting or changing behavior in the service of chosen values.” (p. 970). This description of psychological flexibility in many ways describes a self-compassionate response. With the yin and yang sides of self-compassion, we ground ourselves in the present moment experience and then find ways to self-soothe and/or take empowered action in service of our needs, goals, and values. As self-compassion is an orientation to care for one’s self, it involves fully attending to our experience and what it is that we most need (Leary et al., 2007). By offering ourselves compassion, we practice – and build - psychological flexibility.

This flexibility, however, requires a willingness to be with our discomfort (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Self-compassion can help us towards this end. The practice of self-compassion involves turning towards, rather than away from, feelings of shame, inadequacy, or disappointment. This is important because when we attempt to suppress negative thoughts or emotions, they often emerge with greater strength and persistence than if we had attended to them initially (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Self-compassion may help us conserve energy that is otherwise spent resisting emotions or tending to their elevated intensity. In the process, we are likely to discover a greater capacity to tolerate distress, which is a key part of psychological flexibility.

To this point, Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010) stress the importance of cultivating an open and accepting attitude towards all of our emotions on the pathway to greater psychological
flexibility and well-being. A poem by Rumi, called *The Guest House*, speaks to the possibilities that might arise when we greet – rather than resist – even the most difficult emotions. It goes as follows:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

While self-compassion does not mean that we must greet our suffering with gratitude or humor, it helps us stay open to the possibilities or wisdom that may arise from our pain or distress. With self-compassion, we cultivate a curious and receptive attitude towards negative emotions much like we might greet an unexpected guest who shows up at our door. Instead of shutting the door and locking them out, we open ourselves up to what they (the sorrow, anger, grief, despair, etc.) might reveal to us; we say yes in service of our growth and long-term well-being.

Another component of psychological flexibility is the ability to adapt to fluctuating demands and circumstances, as well as to balance competing needs and desires (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). One pathway to cultivating this flexibility and resourcefulness is to increase
our positive emotions. Positive emotions help us build personal resources, such as psychological resilience, and expand our thought-action repertoire, enabling us to cope more effectively (Fredrickson, 2004). As Fredrickson (2013) asserts, “little-by-little micro-moments of positive emotional experience, although fleeting, reshape who people are by setting them on trajectories of growth and building their enduring resources for survival” (p. 15). Compassion itself is a positive emotion. Beyond that, a self-compassionate response may evoke other positive emotions, such as love, hope, gratitude, or even serenity.

The more that we respond in a self-compassionate way, the more likely we are to create an upward spiral of positivity that may help us effectively address the demands and circumstances of our lives. As Fredrickson (2013) describes:

> Emotions (…) are self-organizing systems that operate to maximize and maintain their own existence. Despair, for example, triggers narrowed, ruminative, and pessimistic patterns of thought alongside behavioral withdrawal and sluggishness, thought–action tendencies that serve to increase the odds that despair will continue and exacerbate in a self-destructive cycle. Positive emotions, by contrast, trigger broadened, curious, and optimistic patterns of thought together with more spontaneous and energetic behavior. These thought–action tendencies increase the odds that people find positive meaning in their future circumstances in ways that seed further positive emotions that decrease stress, provide emotional uplift, and support resilience. (p. 34)

While mindfulness may help prevent downward spiraling, self-kindness and common humanity may both give rise to enough positive emotions to potentially reverse the direction of our spiraling. As such, we may become more agile in our ability to respond to the challenges at
hand. The positive emotions generated not only help us bear negative emotions, such as shame, despair, and grief, but also enable us to see more possibilities and pathways to coping (Braehler & Neff, 2020).

In sum, self-compassion facilitates our growth by helping us become less contracted versions of ourselves. By summoning a self-compassionate response, we may expand our mindset and build psychological resources - and agility - in the process. Given the vulnerability that we face as females regarding depression, anxiety, and other psychological distress-related conditions, this enhanced psychological flexibility can help protect and bolster us throughout our lives.

**Shame Resilience**

As established previously, shame is a complex, powerful emotional experience that deeply affects us. Anyone who has been caught up in a spiral of shame can attest to how difficult it can be to bounce back from it. In 2006, Brown conducted a grounded-theory study to better understand shame and its impact on women. From her findings, Brown (2006) devised shame resilience theory (SRT), which suggests that we develop resilience to shame by decreasing feelings of being trapped, powerless, and isolated and increasing feelings of connection, power, and freedom. Not only does self-compassion increase our sense of connection (common humanity) and, arguably, freedom and power (which will be explored next in self-authorship), but SRT suggests that the opposite of shame is empathy.

Wiseman (1996) describes the attributes of empathy as (1) seeing the world as others see it; (2) being non-judgmental; (3) understanding another person’s feelings; and (4) communicating your understanding of those feelings. Based on this description, empathy towards oneself would involve communicating a non-judgmental understanding of our
experience to ourselves. In other words, when we apply self-compassion, we are being self-empathetic. We are acknowledging our shame – and the feelings or thoughts it triggers – with understanding and acceptance. When we are self-empathetic, we become more resilient to shame (Brown, 2006).

Additionally, becoming aware of specific areas of personal vulnerability seems to increase our shame resilience (Brown, 2006). When we recognize our vulnerability or capacity for being wounded, we are less likely to be caught off guard by a strong shame response. For example, we may be especially sensitive to our identity as a mother and easily triggered when we feel that we’ve behaved badly or fallen short of some standard. Self-compassion can help us to identify these tender areas and provide us with the foresight and wisdom to recover from the shame they may evoke.

We may also increase our resilience to shame by eliciting a sense of common humanity. Brown (2006) found that when we recognize the universality of our struggles - and the shared experience of shame - we are less likely to withdraw and hide out. On the contrary, we are more likely to reach out when we remember that others make the same mistakes and feel the same overwhelming sense of inadequacy and hopelessness. Recognizing our common humanity may thus increase our ability to seek outside support and help; to reduce our shame by “speaking shame” to others (Brown, 2006).

Other studies further reveal that self-compassion is correlated with shame resilience. For example, a study of mostly women (98%) being treated for eating disorders showed that higher self-compassion early in treatment led to faster reductions in shame over a 12-week period (Kelly et al., 2014). Shame reduction was then linked to lesser eating disorder symptoms. In another study with young women athletes, self-compassion was negatively linked with shame-
proneness (Mosewich et al., 2011). Similarly, a study of undergraduate students showed that self-compassion can significantly reduce shame-proneness in socially anxious individuals (Candea & Szentágotai-Tătar, 2018). Thus, self-compassion seems to be an effective resilience strategy when it comes to shame; the more that we apply the skills in our lives, the less compromised we are likely to be by the dark shadow of shame.

Self-Authorship & Agency

In Revolution from Within, Steinem (1992) calls for girls and women to develop self-authority, or command over their own lives. As Steinem argues, rather than allowing others to determine what is best or right for us, or how to act or behave, we can assert control over our choices and how we show up in the world. Another way of thinking about this is to consider how we, as girls and women, might effectively author our own lives, or determine how to respond to the circumstances, situations, and choices presented to us.

Self-Authorship

The term self-authorship refers to the internal capacity to be self-initiating and guided by our own beliefs, vision, and values (Magolda, 2008). According to research by Magolda (2008), self-authorship has three components: (1.) trusting one’s internal voice; (2.) building an internal foundation; and (3.) securing internal commitments. The first element refers to knowing oneself deeply enough to decipher when we might need to act versus when we need to allow things to be as they are. We learn to facilitate an internal dialogue with ourselves; to ask ourselves what it is that we need and to listen to our inner voice. The second element, building an internal foundation, refers to cultivating a grounded, more stable internal core. It is the process of finding and sourcing our power so that we have greater freedom and choice over the direction of our lives. The last component, securing internal commitments, includes making decisions and
choices based on our values and needs. Said differently, we employ the wisdom that we’ve gained in service of living a life on our own terms.

In Brown and Gilligan’s (1993) longitudinal study, they found that girls struggle with authorizing their own thoughts and experiences. By adolescence, it seems that we begin to disconnect from ourselves and repress our voices, desires, and thoughts (Brown & Gilligan, 1993). In other words, we lose our place at the helm of our lives.

Self-compassion is a practice that can help us cultivate self-authorship – and steer our lives according to our values, desires, and needs. As previously stated, the question that we continue to ask ourselves when embracing a self-compassionate mindset is “what do I need right now?” More than simply posing the question, we learn to hold a safe space for ourselves where we can explore and authentically respond to that question. Through this process, we are building a more solid internal foundation based on the values we discover and the wisdom we gain. As we move between the tender and fierce sides of self-compassion, or acceptance and action, we learn what it means to be the author of our own lives. With fierce self-compassion, we secure commitment within ourselves to take brave actions. And when we fall down or fall short, we employ tender self-compassion to pick ourselves back up and re-orient towards our desired future.

When it comes to self-authorship, fierce self-compassion may especially help us in securing internal commitments and addressing our needs. With kindness, we commit to doing whatever it takes to care for ourselves. Common humanity helps us balance giving to ourselves and giving to others, which is especially important for females (Neff, 2021b). We recognize that our needs are important and include ourselves in the circle of worthiness. With mindfulness, we gain clarity and understanding of what we honestly need. We become willing to pause and notice
what is true for us. We can then challenge or disrobe ourselves of the socially prescribed standards or expectations of what we, as girls and women, should do, be, or want. In this way, fierce self-compassion feels like fulfilling, balanced authenticity in action (Neff, 2021b). We no longer allow others to be the authors of our lives; we assert our freedom to craft our own stories.

Thus, through self-compassion, we engage in an ongoing process of building internal authority, as Steinem (1992) implored us to do. We learn to integrate our needs and values – and trust our own voices – as we reclaim our place at the helm of our lives. In doing so, we also gain a greater sense of agency over our lives.

**Agency**

“There is inherent strength in agency. #MeToo, in a lot of ways, is about agency.”

— Tarana Burke, founder of the #MeToo movement

Whereas self-authorship is about determining our own paths, agency is about taking self-directed action in our lives. More specifically, Bandura (2006) describes agency as our capacity to exercise control over our thought processes, motivation, and action, or our capacity to affect change in ourselves and the outside world. According to Bandura (2006), agency has four core principles: (1) intentionality (our ability to form intentions related to action plans), (2) forethought (anticipating likely outcomes to use as motivation), (3) self-reactiveness (using self-regulation strategies in course of action), and (4) self-reflectiveness (reflecting on self-efficacy beliefs and increasing our self-awareness through the process). Self-compassion practices cultivate intentionality through mindfulness and self-kindness (e.g. how can I be compassionate to myself right now?), promote self-reactiveness and self-regulation (e.g. choosing a self-compassionate response when triggered versus getting caught up in reactivity mode), and create
space for self-reflectiveness (e.g. what is it that I need right now?). In addition, self-compassion builds optimism, which is a type of positive forethought.

As an alternate definition of the construct, Seligman (2021) claims that agency has three components: (1) self-efficacy, (2) future-minded optimism, and (3) imagination. As previously established, self-compassion is a practice that boosts optimism. Additionally, while there have been no direct studies on the relationship between self-compassion and imagination, self-compassion has been shown to positively correlate with creativity, for which imagination serves as an impetus (Vygotsky, 1930/2004; Zabelina & Robinson, 2010). Given that self-compassion frees us up from self-judgment and enhances curiosity and exploration, it seems likely that it might boost our imagination or at least allow us to focus on what’s possible, versus ruminating on what’s likely to go wrong (Neff et al., 2017).

The link between self-compassion and self-efficacy, the third element of agency according to Seligman (2021), has been well-established. First, self-efficacy is the belief that we can affect the changes we desire through our actions. When we believe that we can be effective in the world, we are more likely to take action and persevere through challenges. When we are low in self-efficacy, we are more affected by failure and tend to think in self-debilitating ways (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992; Schwarzer & Warner, 2013). Unfortunately, and perhaps unsurprisingly, women tend to be lower in self-efficacy than men (Soysa & Wilcomb, 2015). As females, we often under-rate our competence and our ability to affect positive change, overall.

Research has shown that self-efficacy may be cultivated through self-compassion practices. For example, a three-week self-compassion training program (versus time-management training) led to a significant increase in self-efficacy in female college students (Smeets et al., 2014). Another study with Turkish college students found a positive association
between self-efficacy and compassionate responses (self-kindness, sense of common humanity, and mindfulness), as well as a negative association between self-efficacy and uncompassionate responses (isolation, self-criticism, and over-identification) (Iskender, 2009). A recent meta-analysis on the relationship between self-compassion and self-efficacy further confirms a positive association between the two (Liao et al., 2021).

Because self-efficacy increases our adoption of healthy behaviors and our withdrawal from harmful behaviors, enhancing self-efficacy is likely to create a positive feedback loop that reinforces self-compassionate tendencies (de Souza & Hutz, 2016). Additionally, self-compassion offers the perspective that failure is part of the shared human experience, which challenges perceptions of failure that may decrease self-efficacy (Maddux, 2009). Rather than beating ourselves up or berating ourselves over our missteps or shortcomings, self-compassion reminds us that failure is normal and that we are fundamentally ok.

Thus, based on both Bandura's (2006) and Seligman’s (2021) definitions of agency – and the effect of self-compassion on each of the elements - it seems reasonable to conclude that compassion towards oneself promotes agency. This is especially important because, as girls and women, we are socialized away from agentic behaviors from an early age (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). It seems that we absorb gender stereotypes of males as agentic and females as communal from as early as five years old (Kite et al., 2007). As an example, “acting like a girl” is considered a less powerful way of being than acting like a boy.

One study found that these stereotypes have remained virtually unchanged since the early 1980s (Haines et al., 2016). Consequently, girls learn to adopt more socially acceptable (and less agentic) behaviors by adolescence, such as using more tentative language, focusing on their appearance, and downplaying their competence (Nelson & Brown, 2019). We continue to
experience social pressure to act more communally as women, including deferring to others in order to gain approval. We often experience backlash when we act assertively or in a more self-assured way (Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Women who have been able to resist typical gender stereotypes (i.e. are more androgonous) report both high communion and agency. As a result, they show better mental health as well as higher self-compassion levels (Thornton & Leo, 1992; Yarnell et al., 2015). These findings suggest that we don’t need to become less communal or disregard aspects of our femininity in order to thrive; however, we can employ self-compassion as a means of cultivating a more agentic - and healthier - way of being.

While fierce self-compassion is more directly related to claiming our power, the yin and yang sides of self-compassion work together to build a sense of agency. Tender self-compassion helps us to create a safety net upon which we can fall back; it gives us the grounding from which we may be fierce. The tender side also allows us to acknowledge and hold strong emotions like anger, while fierce self-compassion then helps us recognize the power of anger to wake us up and call us into action. Females often have a hard time getting in touch with anger, and yet anger is often the most appropriate response to the kinds of harms, injustices, and threats to our safety and well-being that we face (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). When we balance tender and fierce self-compassion, it allows our anger to be constructive, rather than destructive; to use it in service of repairing harm, rather than retaliating (Neff, 2021b). Consider the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements which were indeed born of constructive anger; of women standing up and saying, “enough!”

As stated earlier, a common misunderstanding about self-compassion is that it may make us soft or passive; that it might impede our motivation or ability to act powerfully in the world.
Yet, self-compassion has repeatedly been shown to increase our motivation, proactivity, conscientiousness, perceived competence, and sense of mastery (Neely et al., 2009; Neff et al., 2007); it also appears to decrease submissive (or less powerful) behavior (Akin, 2009). When we replace self-criticism with self-compassion, we are more likely to move confidently towards our desired goals, fostering a greater sense of agency. Whereas self-criticism diminishes our autonomous motivation (i.e. our motivation around goals that are tied to personal interests and values) and interferes with progress towards those goals, self-compassion fosters autonomous motivation and is associated with higher goal progress (Powers et al., 2007). The more that we achieve our goals, the more self-efficacy and, by extension, agency we are likely to have.

Overall, self-compassion means having the voice of a supportive, encouraging coach in our heads, as opposed to a harshly critical one who verbally beats us up for any misstep or wrongdoing. With encouragement rather than verbal abuse, we are more likely to take risks in service of our goals and values (Neff, 2009). We learn to believe in and trust ourselves; to value our needs; to take action for our greater good. In other words, we set ourselves up for a more agentic way of being in the world. Thus, while self-compassion may be tender and gentle, it is also a powerful and motivating force in our lives. As Neff (2021b) says, “our force is more effective when it’s caring because it combines strength with love.” (p. 5).

**Self-Authorship + Agency = Empowerment**

Through enabling self-authorship and enhancing our agency and motivation, self-compassion is arguably a source of empowerment for girls and women. The Oxford Dictionary defines empowerment as “the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one’s life and claiming one’s rights.” Alternatively, Staples (1990) defines empowerment as an “ongoing capacity of individuals or groups to act on their own behalf to
achieve a great measure of control over their lives and destinies” (p. 30). In other words, to be empowered is to be able to act or take steps to prevent action (Staples, 1990).

Alkire (2005) suggests that empowerment is a subset of agency and that increases in empowerment are likely to augment our sense of agency. It also stands to reason that a greater sense of self-authorship and agency are likely to empower us, as girls and women, to create meaningful change in our lives and the world around us. The more able we are to determine our path and affect change around us, the more empowered we are likely to feel.

Not only does self-compassion help us meet our own needs, but it can empower us to stand up, speak up, and compassionately act in service of others, as well (Neff, 2021b). We are not driven by our need to look good in the eyes of others or because our worth depends upon it; rather, we become loyal allies and fierce advocates (for ourselves and others) because we know the inherent worth of every human being, including ourselves.

In a sense, the more self-compassionate we are, the freer we may become. We can shed gender role limitations, our need for social approval, and unrealistic expectations of ourselves, such as the need to ‘have it all together’. We empower and free ourselves by embracing ourselves exactly as we are, right now. As Brach (2003) says, “there is something wonderfully bold and liberating about saying yes to our entire imperfect and messy life.” (p. 86).

Likewise, Neff (2021b) encourages us to strive not towards perfection, but towards becoming “a compassionate mess.” The messiness of life, with all of its challenges, conflicts, unknowns, and complicating factors, will never go away. But we can stop wasting precious energy trying to change, fix, or undo parts of us. Rather, we can harness the power of self-compassion to foster unconditional self-acceptance and radical self-care. By opening our hearts
to all of who we are – and choosing both tender and fierce self-compassion - we may awaken to our potential and our power.

Summary

In sum, self-compassion revolutionizes how we relate to ourselves, others, and the world around us by bolstering our sense of belonging, safety, and wholeness – and increasing our resilience, self-authorship, and agency. We create a home base and safe haven for ourselves from which we can take risks, stretch, and grow. With a strong sense of belonging to both self and within the world, we can show up as our most authentic selves, knowing that we are never truly alone in our struggles and difficulties. We learn to embrace the fullness of our experiences – the dark and the light – so that we may be more whole. And, finally, we are able to respond to the challenges and opportunities that life presents with greater resilience and agency.

With self-compassion, we call a truce in the war within ourselves. We stop the cycles of shame and self-criticism that impede our well-being and progress as girls and women. We no longer accept that we are unworthy or that we must earn love or acceptance. Rather, self-compassion helps us to become self-allies, recognizing that we have the capacity to trust ourselves and act powerfully – and with greater compassion - out in the world. As Neff (2021b) argues, “by claiming fierce and tender self-compassion as guiding principles in our lives, we might just have a chance to put the world right.” (p. 303).

A Revolutionary Act: Modeling Self-Compassion for the Next Generation

“The women’s movement gave us access to the professional realm, but to succeed in it we’ve needed to act like men, suppressing tender qualities that are devalued in a man’s world. At the same time, we’re disliked for being too aggressive or assertive. This leaves us with a false choice: to succeed and be scorned or to be
liked and remain disempowered (...) The bottom line is this: the current setup isn’t working for us anymore. I believe that by integrating fierce and tender self-compassion, women will be better equipped to realize our true selves and make needed changes in the world around us.”

– Kristin Neff

As girls and women, we have internalized messages that we are the weaker sex (Neff, 2021b). We have learned to criticize our bodies, downplay our strengths, undervalue our competence, and seek validation from others in order to feel worthy, lovable, and (smart, kind, attractive, etc.) enough. Even in 2021, we continue to be passed up for leadership opportunities, get paid less than our male colleagues for the same work, and experience a shockingly high rate of sexual aggression and assault. We are often overlooked, silenced, and aggressed.

Especially for girls and women who are in an ethnic or racial minority, or non-white, or who identify as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex or asexual), the minimizing, silencing, oppressing, and harming is often much worse. The playing field is far from even; the beliefs that we absorb - and coping behaviors that we learn – often perpetuate and intensify our pain and suffering.

While self-compassion is a personal revolution - a fundamental shift in how we relate to ourselves and, by extension, the world around us - perhaps the most revolutionary thing we can do is help the next generation self-empower. We can collectively teach our girls how to truly, bravely, and lovingly show up for themselves. Through tender and fierce self-compassion, we can help our daughters, nieces, colleagues, supervisees, etc. dismantle the beliefs - and challenge the unspoken rules - that hold them back. We can show our girls – the future generations of women - what it looks like to harness the power of self-compassion.
Unfortunately, self-compassion is not something that we frequently witness in other females. We are far more likely to hear our friends, mothers, daughters, sisters, and others criticizing their appearance or performance and apologizing for their imperfections and perceived flaws. These learned behaviors seem to be contagious. Many of us have experienced this phenomenon firsthand. When a friend starts criticizing her physical size or shape, or some aspect of her appearance, we may begin to criticize – or feel a rush of shame around - our own bodies. Similar to emotional contagion, or the transfer of moods among people in a group, research suggests that another person’s level of self-criticism or self-approval permeates our own levels of self-criticism or self-approval (Marsten, 1965). We are constantly observing and learning from others how to relate to ourselves.

**Social Learning Theory**

As humans, it seems that we are prone to mimicking the behaviors of those around us. Referred to as social learning theory, our capacity to learn through observation allows us to acquire new behaviors by example, rather than needing to build up behavioral patterns over time through trial and error (Bandura, 1971). In other words, we learn vicariously through witnessing behaviors, and the perceived consequences of those behaviors, in others. The term ‘vicarious reinforcement’ refers to “a change in behavior of observers as a function of witnessing the consequences accompanying the performance of others” (p. 230). Through this process, we may change the way we relate to both ourselves and others. We adopt standards of self-evaluation, for example, through witnessing behavior modeled by others (Bandura & Kupers, 1964).

Many social constructs are perpetuated through observational learning. We witness certain behaviors being consistently reinforced (such as girls and women criticizing their bodies), and subsequently draw conclusions about which behavioral responses are valued and/or
considered appropriate (Bandura, 1971). We can learn through behaviors modeled directly, such as in a close friend or parent, or more distantly, such as through social media figures.

Social learning theory may help explain Neff and Berertas’ (2013) findings regarding a correlation between self-compassion levels in romantic partners. If one partner demonstrates self-compassion and reaps the benefits (higher positive affect, optimism, etc.), the other partner may be motivated to be more self-compassionate as well. When individuals model a compassionate, versus critical, self-evaluation, others are likely to witness the positive consequences. Whereas self-criticism may leave us feeling deflated or ashamed, self-compassion is likely to leave us feeling supported and buoyed.

Vicarious learning is also a pathway to cultivating greater self-efficacy (Maddux, 2009). When we see others relate to themselves with compassion, we may come to believe in our ability to do so, as well. We see what self-compassion looks like in action and how we might be able to apply it in our own lives.

Moreover, Goldstein and Cialdini (2007) suggest that we often integrate behaviors that we see in close others into our self-concept. For example, if we consistently witness our mother or best friend displaying self-compassionate behaviors, we are likely to see ourselves as more self-compassionate, as well. Neuroscience can at least partially explain this phenomenon, as it shows that when we observe others performing certain actions, the neural pathways responsible for that action are triggered within us, as well (Buccino et al., 2001). In essence, we may get a taste of self-compassion and its soothing, comforting effects when we see others model it for us.

The good news is that self-compassion is a skill that we can learn - and a mindset that we can cultivate. Most of us have experience treating other people in our lives with care and concern when they are suffering in some way. While responding self-compassionately might feel
awkward or uncomfortable at first, or even elicit an initial backdraft of held pain, the more that we practice, the more natural it begins to feel (Neff, 2021b). The more that we model it for our girls and each other, the more socially acceptable and normative it may become.

**A Personal Story**

Early this year, I was driving with my teenage daughter who began speaking to me in an angry and impertinent way. I was emotionally triggered by her tone and language; my first impulse was to respond with equal amounts of anger and incredulity. But at that moment, I turned to my suffering instead. I placed my right hand over my heart, took a few deep breaths, and whispered to myself, ‘I’m sorry. This is hard.’ My daughter quietly watched from the passenger seat. Her posture seemed to soften and, a minute or so later, said, “I’m really sorry, Mama. I’m in a bad mood and I’m sorry that I took it out on you.” Because I had already soothed myself, I was able to receive her apology and offer her love, as well.

Days later, when I was knee-deep in researching self-compassion, I curiously asked my daughter, “what do you think self-compassion looks like? Would you say that you’ve seen it modeled?” She quickly responded, “yeah, it’s that thing you did in the car when you touched your heart and whispered something to yourself.”

Admittedly, it felt strange at first to behave this way in front of my daughter. In general, we are not used to speaking to ourselves as we might speak to a loved one - let alone out loud. But I wanted my daughter to witness what a self-compassionate response looks like when we are triggered and might otherwise ignore our pain or lash out.

I have since continued to model self-compassion for her at different times, trying new things and learning as I go. I regret that I didn’t begin earlier; that my daughter has witnessed me being hard on myself when things go wrong and often acting out when triggered, rather than self-
soothing and finding a more grounded and empowered place from which to act. Still, it’s never too late to model self-compassion for both of my daughters, as well as other beloved girls and women in my life. The more conscious I am of modeling self-compassion for my girls, the more consistently I practice it for myself. When it is authentically modeled, we all benefit.

**Self-Compassion in Action**

“The best way for us to cultivate fearlessness in our daughters and other young women is by example.”

- Gloria Steinem

Modeling self-compassion means outwardly, or visibly, affirming our commitment to our well-being. There are many ways in which we might do this. A self-compassionate response may look markedly different from one moment to the next – and between one individual and another. Because self-compassion is inherently concerned with being kind to ourselves, whatever we choose to do needs to come from a place of authenticity and respect for ourselves. We are fully at choice with what we do and how we do it.

Given that, when we find ourselves emotionally triggered or facing some difficulty, we might start by taking a deep breath and asking ourselves what it is that we need. Do we need tender self-compassion – or more fierce self-compassion? Simply pausing amidst emotional turmoil to determine what we need is, in itself, a radical act. We are modeling self-compassion right there.

**Modeling Tender Self-Compassion**

“There is a healthier self within each of us, just waiting for encouragement.”

- Gloria Steinem
Going further, we can use physical touch to self-soothe when we’re needing more tender self-compassion, as described in my personal story above. As touch activates our parasympathetic (rest and digest) nervous system - and is a natural way of showing care to others - we may put our hand over our heart, gently stroke our arm, or even cradle our cheeks in the palms of our hands (Ceccarelli et al., 2019). Once again, we find what feels comforting and appropriate to us. Neff (2021) suggests finding a ‘go-to’ touch that we begin to automatically use in stressful situations. In doing so, we prioritize our self-care even in the presence of another.

We can also model self-compassion in how we speak about our pain or difficulty aloud. For example, we might say “I’m caught up in a whirlwind of shame right now. I know that I am not alone in feeling this. It’s hard to hold.” or “I can see that I’m being hard on myself. I tried my best – and I know that this (failure) is part of the human experience.” We are far more accustomed to hearing others verbalize self-criticism, rather than self-compassion. Even simply saying “this is a hard moment for me. I need to give myself some compassion” may precede a more intimate moment where we privately offer ourselves support and encouragement.

Whatever we choose to say, the tone in which we say it makes all of the difference. Many of us often use a harsh and critical tone when we speak to or about ourselves. Tender self-compassion includes consciously choosing a tone that communicates care, warmth, and self-acceptance. As we become more conscious of what we’re modeling to our girls, we may begin to notice how harsh, unforgiving, or critical our tone tends to be. As we change this way of speaking to and about ourselves in the presence of others, we may contribute to shifting some of the norms of girlhood and/or womanhood.

*Modeling Fierce Self-Compassion*
“Self-compassion is a superpower that we can access at any time – hidden in our back pockets. We simply need to remember that we have this superpower, and then give ourselves permission to use it.”

- Kristin Neff

Modeling fierce self-compassion, on the other hand, may involve setting limits and drawing boundaries that help protect us. We can stand up to harm or injustice; or challenge behaviors in others that are causing us pain. We do this by focusing on the behavior or threat, rather than the person. Fierce self-compassion is not about attacking someone else; it is not personal or vindictive. On the contrary, fierce self-compassion is non-reactive and comes from a place of clarity; it seeks to repair or protect, rather than retaliate or do further harm (Neff, 2021b).

When our words are not effective in establishing healthy boundaries or protecting our well-being, we can find a way to remove ourselves from the situation altogether. With fierce self-compassion, we summon the courage to let go of that which no longer serves us, whether it be a situation, habit, or relationship. Alternatively, we may need to renegotiate an expectation or commitment in order to better address our needs or limitations. In other words, we speak up when something feels wrong or causes us unnecessary distress; we vocalize our needs without apology or justification.

We can also model fierce self-compassion in how we apologize and take responsibility for our mistakes. We summon the courage to own up to our actions (or lack of action). Because we hold our mistakes with compassion, we are better able to face them head-on. We can then make reparations without overgeneralizing our behavior (“I always do that”) or beating ourselves
up ("I am a terrible mom") but instead with humility, responsibility, and a deep sense of respect for our shared humanity.

The more that we practice both tender and fierce self-compassion, the more natural it will become. We know from neuroscience that our brains continue to change throughout our lives; by changing our patterns of thought and behavior we form new neural pathways (Smalley & Winston, 2010). As Brach (2020) says, “if we practice regularly, we discover that we can maintain a balanced, openhearted presence in the midst of the storm” (p. 24). Thus, we will more naturally be able to model what it looks like to befriend ourselves and tap into our internal source of strength and power.

A Call-To-Action

“The global expressions of suffering – violence, the oppression of nondominant populations, the unsustainable and addictive consuming that threatens this earth – all arise out of fear and are rooted in feelings of separateness and otherness. Radical compassion expresses the truth of our interdependence and mutual belonging. Living true to ourselves becomes, in its fullness, living true to our collective path of healing and freedom, our shared yearning for a peaceful, loving world.”

– Tara Brach

Choosing to model self-compassion is an act of love – for ourselves and each other. Being creatures of habit (and creatures of repeating the habits we see in others), it takes practice, perseverance, and dedication to cultivating a self-compassionate mindset and way of being in the world. Up until now, we have not been socialized to prioritize our self-care in this way. Quite
likely, we have not given much consideration to how our relationship with ourselves might impact those around us – near and far. And yet, we are always modeling something.

When we recognize our inherent interconnectedness to others, we may begin to see the rippling effect of all of our actions. A mere five minutes of reading self-compassionate quotes on social media has been shown to increase body appreciation, body satisfaction, and self-compassion, as well as reduce negative mood, amongst women (Slater et al., 2017). If posting a simple quote like “be gentle with yourself” can positively impact how others see and relate to themselves, imagine the impact we can make by modeling self-compassion in our everyday lives.

The ripple – or downstream – effects of self-compassion can prevent and alleviate the suffering that so many of us girls and women experience. Not only has self-compassion been shown to reduce stress, depression, and anxiety, but it may also help prevent eating disorders, suicide contemplation, and drug and alcohol addiction (Braun et al., 2016; Cleare et al., 2019; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Phelps et al., 2018). By modeling self-compassion, we light the way to a wiser, healthier, and more resilient way of being. We can show the next generation of girls what it looks like to take responsibility for our future – and exceptional care of ourselves (Zhang & Chen, 2016).

Neff (2021b) asserts, “while each of us is the central protagonist in the story of our lives, all our stories are intertwined” (p. 301). I would go even further and say that each one of us has an opportunity to elevate the rest of us; to affect the narratives and events of each other’s lives. By embracing self-compassion, we send the message to other girls and women that we are worthy of love and acceptance, exactly as we are.

*Fourth-Wave Feminism: Our Opportunity*
“Every revolution begins as consciousness because some group of people has to imagine change.”

- Gloria Steinem

Gloria Steinem has played a central role in the feminist movement for decades – and continues to do so. Alongside many others, she has fought long and hard to secure equal rights and opportunities and greater personal freedom for girls and women. We have seen many wins and uncountable losses. Like us, it has been imperfect.

We are now in what some call fourth-wave feminism, which, according to Wikipedia, is characterized by “a focus on the empowerment of women, the use of internet tools, and intersectionality. The fourth wave seeks greater gender equality by focusing on gendered norms and marginalization of women in society” (Fourth-wave feminism, 2021, para. 1). As each one of us learns to embody – and model - self-compassion, we are challenging gender norms. We are also, in essence, de-marginalizing ourselves and sourcing our own power to stand up against the marginalization of others, as well.

With self-compassion, we can recognize the collective path of healing and freedom that we are on together. While we need radical, systematic change to truly demarginalize girls and women (and so many others) across the globe, each one of us has a tremendous source of strength and power that also resides within us. As the well-known quote attributed to Victor Frankl, psychologist and Holocaust survivor, says “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Let’s choose self-compassion.
“The only path that can carry me home is the path of self-compassion.”

- Tara Brach
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