

FIERCE SELF-COMPASSION

Dr. Kristin Neff

Websites

Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (For information on MSC 8-week courses and intensives and MSC teacher training): www.CenterForMSC.org

Self-Compassion website (Self-compassion survey, videos, research articles, guided meditations and exercises): www.Self-Compassion.org

Books:

Germer, C. K. & Neff, K. D. (forthcoming, summer 2019). *Teaching the Mindful Self-Compassion program: A guide for professionals*. New York: Guilford Press.

Neff, K. D. & Germer, C. K (2018). *The Mindful Self-Compassion workbook: A proven way to accept yourself, find inner strength, and thrive*. New York: Guilford Press.

Neff, K. D. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. New York: William Morrow.

Online Training:

Live Online MSC. 10 week live online course: www.CenterforMSC.org

The Power of Self-Compassion (2017). Neff & Germer: www.soundstrue.com

Audio Training:

Self-Compassion Step by Step (2013). Kristin Neff: www.soundstrue.com

The Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion (forthcoming, fall 2019). 3 hr audio training by Neff: www.soundstrue.com

The Science of Self-Compassion

Kristin Neff, PhD

What is Self-Compassion?

- Informal definition: Treating yourself like you would treat a close friend who was struggling.
- The three components of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b)
- Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment:
 - Treating self with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment
 - Desire to alleviate suffering
- Common humanity vs. Isolation
 - Seeing own experience as part of larger human experience not isolating or abnormal
 - Recognizing that life is imperfect (us too!)
- Mindfulness vs. Over-identification
 - Allows us to “be” with painful feelings as they are
 - Avoids extremes of suppressing or running away with painful feelings

The Yin and Yang of Self-Compassion

- YIN – Yielding, passive, soft, feminine
- YANG – Forceful, active, hard, masculine
- Yin - Tender aspect of self-compassion
 - “Being with” ourselves in a compassionate way
 - Allows us to heal
 - Kindness: Comforting and soothing ourselves
 - Common humanity: Reassuring ourselves we aren't alone
 - Mindfulness: Being present with and validating our pain
- Yang - Fierce aspect of self-compassion
 - Acting in the world to alleviate suffering
 - Protecting
 - Kindness: Fiercely protect ourselves, draw boundaries
 - Common humanity: Finding strength in numbers
 - Mindfulness: Clearly seeing and speaking the truth
 - Providing
 - Kindness: Fulfilling our needs
 - Common humanity: Balanced giving to ourselves and others
 - Mindfulness: Understanding our authentic needs
 - Motivating
 - Kindness: Encouraging growth
 - Common humanity: Learning from our human mistakes
 - Mindfulness: Seeing what needs to change

Purpose	Self-Kindness	Common Humanity	Mindfulness
Yin (Be With)	Loving	Connected	Presence
Yang (Protect)	Fierce	Empowered	Clarity
Yang (Provide)	Fulfilling	Balanced	Authenticity
Yang (Motivate)	Encouraging	Wise	Vision

The dialectic of yin and yang

- Yin and yang must be balanced and integrated for wholeness and wellbeing
- Girls are socialized to be yin and not yang
 - Disempowers women
- Boys are socialized to be yang and not yin
 - Creates fear of vulnerability in men
- The gendering of yin and yang helps to lock patriarchy in place
- Both energies are needed for inner healing and outer change
- Yin and yang self-compassion must be balanced and integrated to alleviate suffering: Caring Force

Near enemies of self-compassion when yin and yang out of balance

- Self-acceptance can become: complacency
- Self-protection can become: hostility
- Self-providing can become: greed
- Self-motivation can become: perfectionism

Research on self-compassion

- Explosion of research into self-compassion over the past decade
- Most research conducted with the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003a)

Self-compassion linked to wellbeing (Zessin, Dickhauser & Garbadee, 2015)

- Reductions in negative mind-states: Anxiety, depression, stress, perfectionism, shame, body dissatisfaction, disordered eating
- Increases in positive mind-states: Life satisfaction, happiness, self-confidence, body appreciation, immune function

Misunderstandings stem from not understanding the yang of self-compassion

Belief it's weak

- Self-compassion is linked to coping and resilience
 - More effective coping with divorce (Sbarra et al., 2012)
 - Less likely to develop PTSD after combat trauma (Hiraoka et al., 2015)
 - Better coping with chronic health conditions (Sirois, 2015)
 - Better able to raise special needs children (Neff & Faso, 2014)

Belief it's selfish

- Linked to more concern with others
 - More caring and supportive relationship behavior (as rated by partners)
 - More forgiveness and perspective-taking
 - More willingness to compromise in conflicts rather than dominating or subordinating

Belief it's self-indulgent

- Self-compassion is linked to healthier behaviors (Terry & Leary, 2011)
 - More exercise, more doctor visits, safer sex, less alcohol use

Belief it will undermine motivation

- Self-compassion is linked to greater motivation (Breines & Chen, 2012)
 - Less fear of failure, more likely to try again and persist in efforts after failure
 - More personal responsibility and motivation to repair past mistakes

Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC; Neff & Germer, 2013)

- 8-week workshop (2.5 hours each session) designed to teach self-compassion
- Empirically demonstrated to increase self-compassion, mindfulness, wellbeing
 - All gains maintained for one year

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PRACTICES

(This handout contains practices not taught in the workshop due to time constraints)

Soothing Self-Compassion Break

Instructions

- Think of a situation in your life that is difficult, that is causing you to suffer, and that you feel what is needed is to be with yourself in a loving and gentle way. Maybe you're feeling inadequate, or you're really upset about something that's happening, and you feel that you need some loving, connected presence to help you heal. Please choose something in the mild-moderate range, not something overwhelming.
- Bring the situation to mind.
- Feel the discomfort in your body.
- We're going to use language to bring in the three components of self-compassion so that you can, soothe, connect with and validate your pain. First, say to yourself, slowly and kindly:
 - *"This is a moment of suffering"*
That's mindfulness - can we be present with our pain. Other options include:
 - *This hurts.*
 - *Ouch!*
 - *This is stressful.*
 - *"Suffering is a part of living"*
That's common humanity. Other options include:
 - *I'm not alone. Others are just like me.*
 - *We all struggle in our lives*
 - *This is how it feels when a person struggles in this way*
- Now put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and the gentle touch of your hands.
 - *"May I be kind to myself"*
That's self-kindness. Other options might be:
 - *May I accept myself as I am*
 - *May I be understanding and patient with myself*
- If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person, heart-to-heart, to soothe and comfort them. Now, can you offer the same message to yourself?

Fierce Self-Compassion Break

Instructions

- Think of a situation in your life where you feel you need to protect yourself, draw boundaries, or stand up for yourself. Maybe you're feeling taken advantage of, or you're being treated unfairly, or there is something happening in the world that is unjust and that you want to stop. Again, please choose a situation where you feel mild to moderately threatened, but not in real danger, so that we can learn the skill without overwhelming ourselves.
- Call up the situation in your mind's eye. What's happening. What's going on. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions are arising. Fear, anger, frustration?
- Make contact with the discomfort as a physical sensation. Then we're going to bring in the three components of self-compassion so that you can protect yourself as you need to.. First, say to yourself slowly and with conviction:
 - *I clearly see the truth of what's happening.*
That's mindfulness - we see things as they are. Other options are:
 - *This is not okay.*
 - *I am not safe.*
 - *This is unfair.*
 - *"I do not stand alone, I stand with others."*
That's common humanity - we draw strength from our brothers and sisters to stand up for what's right. Other options include:
 - *I am not a victim, I am empowered.*
 - *All human beings deserve just treatment.*
 - *Me too.*
 - Now put a fist over your heart, as a gesture of strength and power.
 - *"I will protect myself"*
 - That's self-kindness. We our fierce in our commitment to drawing our boundaries and preventing harm. Other options might be:
 - *I will not yield.*
 - *I will take whatever action is necessary to prevent this.*
 - *Stop!*
- If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that someone you really cared about was being mistreated or taken advantage of in the exact same way you are. What would you say to this person to help them be strong, to stand tall, to have fortitude? Now, can you offer the same message to yourself?
- Finally, putting your other hand over your fist and holding it tenderly. The invitation is to combine the yang energy of fierce, empowered clarity with the yin energy of loving, connected presence. Give yourself full permission to feel the force of yang, your anger, your resolve, your truth, but to also feel the love. Aim your fierce compassion at the harm or injustice itself, not at the person causing the harm. They are human and you are human, can you call on your yang energy to commit to taking action, while still keeping the thread of love alive?
- See if you can allow both energies to flow.

Breathing Yin and Yang

This practice is designed to help you balance the energies of yin and yang self-compassion. It should be done in a seated posture.

- Relax and settle into your body.
- Put your hands on your heart or some other supportive place.
- Start to notice your breathing. Don't change it or control it, just let it be.
- Your mind will naturally wander. When it does bring back your attention with the same gentleness you would use with a young child who has wandered off. Come back to your breath without judgment.
- Now focus on your in-breath, feeling each inhalation.
- With each in-breath imagine breathing in tender yin energy - loving connected presence. Let it fill you, nurture you, heal you.
- If you like you can image a golden healing light filling your body.
- Do this for five minutes.
- Now take a big breath in and hold it for about 15 seconds, then release.
- Next we are going to call up some yang energy by breathing deliberately in a practice known as breath of fire.
- Put both hands on your abdomen, your center.
- As you breath in expand your abdomen, and as you breath out contract your abdomen, taking each breath firmly and deliberately.
- Now start picking up the pace, but going at a speed that feels comfortable. The most important thing is that expand your abdomen on the inhale and contract it on the exhale.
- Do this for three minutes
- Now take a big breath in and hold it for about 15 seconds, then release.
- Allow your breathing to return to normal.
- Feel the energy flowing up and down your spine.
- Now, as you breathe out imagine that you are breathing out fierce yang compassion. That it is arising within you and flowing out into the world. Fierce empowered clarity.
- (Do this for two minutes.)
- Now bringing the two together, putting one hand on your heart and the other on your belly. As you breath in imagine that you are breathing in tender yin compassion and as you breath out imagine that you are breathing out fierce yang compassion.
- Allow these two forms of love aimed at the alleviation of suffering to flow freely in your body, merging and integrating.
- Allow the flow inward and outward to be as natural as the movement of the ocean, waves going in, waves going out.
- Do this for five minutes.
- When you're ready, gently open your eyes.

Soften-Soothe-Allow

- This is a good practice when you need to be with yourself in a tender and accepting way.
- Please find a comfortable position, sitting or lying down, close your eyes, and take three relaxing breaths.
- Place your hand over your heart, or another soothing place, for a few moments to remind yourself that you are in the room, and that you, too, are worthy of kindness.
- Let yourself recall a *mild to moderately difficult situation* that you are in right now, where you think you need some self-acceptance or healing. Perhaps a health problem, or sadness, or some way in which you're feeling inadequate. Do not choose a very difficult problem, or a trivial problem—please choose a situation that can generate a little stress in your body when you think of it.
- Clearly visualize the problem. Who was there? What was said? What happened? Or what *might* happen?

Labeling Emotions

- As you relive this situation, notice if any emotions arise within you. (pause) And if so, seeing if a *label* for an emotion comes up—a *name*. For example:
 - Sadness?
 - Grief?
 - Confusion?
 - Fear?
- If you are having many emotions, seeing if you can name the *strongest* emotion associated with the situation.
- Now, repeating the name of the emotion to yourself in a tender, understanding voice, as if you were validating for a friend what they were feeling: “That’s longing.” “That’s grief.”

Mindfulness of Emotion in the Body

- Now expanding your awareness to your body as a whole. (pause)
- Recalling the difficult situation again, if it has begun to slip out of your mind, naming the strongest emotion you feel, and scanning your body for where you feel it most easily. In your mind’s eye, sweeping your body from head to toe, stopping where you can sense a little tension or discomfort. Just feel what is “feel-able” in your body right now. Nothing more. (longer pause)
- Now, if you can, please *choose a single location in your body* where the feeling expresses itself most strongly, perhaps as a point of muscle tension in your neck, a painful feeling in your stomach, or an ache in your heart.
- In your mind, inclining gently toward that spot.
- See if you can experience the sensation directly, as if from the inside. If that's too specific see if you can just feel the general sense of discomfort.

Soften-Soothe-Allow

- Now begin ***softening*** into that location in your body. Letting the muscles soften and relax, as if in warm water. Softening...softening...softening... Remember that we’re not trying to *change* the feeling—we’re just *holding* it in a tender way. If you wish, just softening a little around the edges.

- Now, **soothing** yourself *because* of this difficult situation. If you wish, placing a hand over the part of your body that feels uncomfortable and just feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hand. Perhaps imagining warmth and kindness flowing through your hand into your body. Maybe even thinking of your body as if it were the body of a beloved child.
Soothing...soothing...soothing.
 - And are there some comforting words that you might need to hear? For instance, you might imagine if you had a friend who was struggling in the same way. What would you say to your friend? (“I’m so sorry you feel this way.” “I care deeply about you.”)
Can you offer *yourself* a similar message? (“Oh, it’s so hard to feel this.” “May I be kind to myself.”)
- If you need, feel free to open your eyes whenever you wish, or let go of the exercise and just feel your breath.
- Finally, **allowing** the discomfort to be there. Making room for it, releasing the need to make it go away.
- And allowing *yourself* to be just as you are, just like this, if only for this moment.
- Softening...soothing...allowing. Softening...soothing...allowing. Taking some time and going through the three steps on your own. (pause)
- You may notice the feeling starts to shift or even change location, that's okay. Just stay with it. Softening...soothing...allowing.
- Now letting go of the practice and focusing on your body as a whole. Allowing yourself to feel whatever you feel, to be exactly as you are in this moment.

Working with anger

The purpose of this exercise is just to practice working with the yang energy of anger itself, and to integrate it with the yin.

Instructions

- Please close your eyes and think of a situation that is making you angry, it could be past or present. Please choose wisely. If you choose something that makes you very angry it could become overwhelming and it will be difficult to learn the practice, but if it's trivial it won't challenge you - something that is between a 3 to 4 on a scale of 10.
- Think of the details as vividly as possible, getting in touch with the situation. What happened. Were your boundaries violated, were you not given respect or due consideration, did an injustice occur?
- Let the feelings of anger arise.
- Please put both hands on your solar plexus to help hold yourself steady as you feel the anger.
- Also feel the soles of your feet touching the floor. Ground yourself to the earth through the soles of your feet.
- Now see if you can let go of the storyline of what's causing the anger and feel your anger as a physical sensation in your body. Where is it located? What are the sensations? Hot, cold, pulsating, throbbing?

Owning your fierceness

- Know that it's completely natural for you to feel as you do, this is your fierce momma bear energy protecting you. It's a form of self-compassion. Perhaps saying to yourself, "It's okay to feel angry! This is fierce compassion - the natural desire to protect myself."
- *Fully validate* the experience of being angry, while trying not to get too caught up in what happened - stay with the anger itself.
- See if you can allow the yang energy to flow freely in your body. There is no need to stifle it, to contain it, to judge it. This too is an important aspect of the compassionate heart.
- Staying grounded through the soles of your feet, and feeling your hands on your solar plexus.
- Can you fully embrace your yang energy? Perhaps you can even feel it flowing up and down your spine, giving you strength and determination.
- Maybe your anger wants to say something, has a message it wants to express.
- From a place of stability and centeredness, what does your anger have to say?
- Can you listen to this part of yourself and thank it for its efforts to protect you?

Bringing in the love

- While continuing to let the energy of protective yang flow, and while continuing to be grounded to the earth through the soles of your feet, leave one hand on your solar plexus and the other on your heart.
- Feel the space between your two hands.
- Staying in contact with the strength and determination of your yang energy to protect you, and from this place of strength, turning toward your heart.

- See if you can call up some yin energy, some tenderness. Recognizing that there may be feelings of hurt and fear underneath the anger that need to be held in a loving way.
- Getting in touch with some of vulnerable feelings that your anger is protecting if it feels right to do so, if not just stay with the anger.
- Is there anything this tender part of you wants to say, a message it wants to express?
- Can you listen to this part of yourself and honor its efforts to care for you and hold your pain?
- Allowing yourself to be fierce and tender at the same time. Like a tree with a strong trunk and flexible branches. Letting the energies merge and integrate and do whatever dance they need to do in this moment.
- Now letting go of the exercise, and simply resting in your experience, letting this moment be exactly as it is, and yourself exactly as you are.
- And gently opening your eyes.

Providing Self-Compassion Break

Instructions

- Think of a situation in your life where you feel your needs aren't being met. Maybe you are a caregiver and aren't taking enough time for yourself, or maybe you're overworked, or maybe you are constantly giving to your partner in a relationship and aren't getting back what you need to be happy.
- Call up the situation in your mind's eye. What's happening? Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions are arising. For example, are there feelings of exhaustion, unfairness, resentment, hopelessness? Make contact with the discomfort as a physical sensation.
- Now focus on the need that is not being met. For example, the need for rest, for peace, for reciprocity, for fun, for balance, whatever you've identified.
- Then we're going to bring in the three components of self-compassion so that you can commit to giving yourself what you need. First, say to yourself slowly and with conviction:
 - *This is what I need to be authentic and whole.*
That's mindfulness - we see things as they are. Other options are:
 - *This is really important to me.*
 - *My needs exist.*
 - *My true self needs this to be happy.*
 - *"I will honor my needs and as well as your needs."*
That's common humanity - we recognize and respect the needs of all, so maintain balance and equity. Other options include:
 - *All humans have important needs.*
 - *My needs count as do those of others.*
 - *Life involves receiving as well as giving.*
- Now put both hands over your solar plexus, feeling your center.
"I will commit to fulfilling my needs as best I can"
 - That's self-kindness. We take action to give ourselves what we need .
Other options might be:
 - *I deserve to be happy.*
 - *I will provide for myself.*
 - *I will do what's necessary to be well and thrive.*
- If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that someone you really cared about was feeling unfulfilled. What would you say to this person to help them respect their own needs, to put in the time and effort needed to be happy? Now, can you offer the same message to yourself?
- Finally, putting one hand over your heart and leaving the other hand over your solar plexus. The invitation is to combine the experience the yang energy of pursuing what you need to be fulfilled, balanced and authentic with yin energy of knowing you already have what you need - loving, connected presence.
- You can take action to meet your own needs from a place of love and wholeness, so that others benefit from your love as well. See if you can let go of the notion that self and other are separate, and feel the sense of interconnectedness. When we realize our oneness, then we all benefit from kindness and compassion.

Motivating Self-Compassion Break

Instructions

- Think of a behavior you habitually engage in that's causing problems in your life and you would like to change. Maybe you overeat and don't exercise enough and it's starting to impact your health. Or maybe you're unhappy in your job or your relationship and you want to make a change, but you just can't seem to summon the energy or willpower.
- What feelings arise for when you when you think about making this change - frustration, disappointment, fear, excitement? Make contact with the emotions as a physical sensation in your body.
- Now we're going to bring in the three components of self-compassion so that you can try to motivate yourself to make the change with encouragement and support. First, say to yourself slowly and with conviction:

- *I can see this behavior needs to change, it's not good for me.*

That's mindfulness - we have clear vision of the way things are and what needs to change. Find your own words, for example:

- *I am not happy in this situation.*
 - *I am not where I want to be right now.*

- *The second phrase is: - "This is a life learning experience."*
That's the wisdom of understanding common humanity - we accept that everyone gets stuck, makes mistakes or get things wrong, but we can learn from our experience. Other options include:
 - *Change and growth are part of being human.*
 - *We usually get it wrong before we get it right.*
- Now adopt some supportive way of touching yourself, patting yourself on the shoulder, or simply holding your own hand in a gesture of encouragement.
- The third phrase is: *"I will do my very best to change this behavior and to do something different."*
 - That's self-kindness. We encourage and support ourselves to make needed changes. Not because we're inadequate as we are, but because we want to alleviate our own suffering and be happy. Other options might be:
 - *I have your back. I will support you.*
 - *Just try your best and see what happens.*
- If you're having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that someone you really cared about was struggling with the exact same behavior you struggle with, and you wanted to encourage them and support them in making a change. What would you say to this person? Your tone of voice? Is there any constructive criticism you would offer? Now, can you offer the same message to yourself?
- Finally, the invitation is to combine the yang energy of encouraging, wise, vision with the yin energy of unconditional self-acceptance. We can try our best to make needed changes, but the bottom line is we're also okay as we are. It's okay to be imperfect. We will try to do what we need to be happy and to alleviate our own suffering because we care, but we can let go of the need to get it exactly right.

Giving ourselves what we need

The quintessential self-compassion question is, “What do I *need*?” Self-compassion is not just about being kind and loving toward ourselves. It is also about discovering what we need to be happy, then taking action to do something about it. One way of understanding what we need to think about what we value most in our lives—our core values. Core values are what give our lives *meaning*, such as the value we place on learning or creativity or nature in our lives.

This exercise will not only help us discover our core values, but we will try to use our providing yang energy to commit to taking action to live in accord with them.

- This is a written reflection exercise so kindly take out a pen and paper.
- Now, please close your eyes and, in your mind’s eye, find yourself in the room. Placing your hand over your solar plexus, your core, and trying to feel your center.

Looking Back

- Imagine that you are in your elderly years. You're sitting in a lovely garden as you contemplate your life. Looking back to the time between now and then, you feel a deep sense of satisfaction, joy and contentment. Even though life hasn't always been easy, you managed to stay true to yourself to the best of your ability.
- Which core values are represented in that life? For example, adventure, creativity, learning, spirituality? Please write down some of your core values.

Not Living in Accord with Values?

- Now drop back inside and ask yourself if there are any ways that you are *not living in accord with your core values*, or ways in which your life seems to be out of balance with your values. For example, perhaps you are too busy to spend much quiet time in nature, even though nature is your great love in life. (pause)
- If you have several values that feel out of balance, please choose one that is especially important for you to work with for the remainder of this exercise and write it down.

Obstacles

- *External.* We all have obstacles that prevent us from living in accord with our core values. Some of these may be *external obstacles*, like not having enough money or time. Often the obstacle is that we have other obligations, for instance we may need to support a family, and this interferes with our ability fully meet our own needs. Please reflect on this for a moment and then write down any external obstacles.
- *Internal.* There may also be some *internal obstacles* getting in the way of you living in accord with your core values. For instance, are you afraid of failure, do you doubt your abilities, do you feel its selfish, or maybe to don't feel you deserve to be happy? Please drop inside and reflect, and then write down any internal obstacles.
- Now consider if calling up some *yang energy* could help you live in accord with your true values. Feel the deep yearning and desire within you to meet this need. Can you get in touch with it as a physical sensation?

- Can you bring more balance into your life, giving yourself permission to take care of yourself in this way? It is not selfish. The more you meet your own needs the more you will have to give to others. The more you honor your true self, giving yourself what you truly need to be happy, the more you can honor the authenticity of others.
- Now write down any ways you think self-compassion could help you overcome any of the obstacles that are getting in the way of meeting your needs. Could it help you feel safe and confident enough to take new actions, or risk failure, or let go of things that aren't serving you? What can you do to make yourself happier and more fulfilled?
- Of course, sometimes there are *insurmountable obstacles* to living fully in accord with your values, part of being human is we can't have everything exactly the way we want it to be. For this we need some yin energy of acceptance and tenderness.
- So closing your eyes for a moment and putting your hands on your heart or some other soothing place. Can you make space for the reality that we can't always be fully authentic, we can't always meet our needs the way we want to, and that's okay too? We can still hold ourselves in loving, connected, presence.
- Finally, we need to integrate the yin and the yang. At the same time that we need to accept and open to our present moment experience as it is, we can still make a good-willed effort to do what we can to change our circumstances. For instance, is there any creative way you can express your core value in your life that you haven't considered before, even if this expression is incomplete? For instance, if you love nature and you work in an office all day, can you bring in plants and stones to make your environment more natural? Are there small things you can do to keep the flame of your values alive? If so please write this down too.

Motivating change with compassion

Ironically, when we criticize ourselves to make a change often we are often *also* trying to help ourselves and protect ourselves safe. We may be afraid other people will reject us if we don't change, or that some of our behaviors are harmful. So we criticize ourselves to protect ourselves from harm, but it actually usually just makes things worse. Tapping into the encouraging, supportive energy of motivating yang can be a much more productive and sustainable way to motivate ourselves over time and keep ourselves safe. Harsh self-criticism tends to undermine our self-confidence and make us afraid of failure. The constructive criticism of motivating yang self-compassion gives us the encouragement and support we need to do our best.

This exercise explores the difference between motivating a change with self-criticism versus yang self-compassion. This is a writing exercise, so please take out something to write with.

Instructions

- Think about a *behavior* that you would like to change—something that is causing problems in your life, and one that you often criticize yourself for. Please select a behavior that is mild to moderately problematic; not one that is extremely harmful. Examples of behaviors you might be criticizing yourself for which are causing problems in your life are: “I eat unhealthy food,” “I don’t exercise enough,” “I procrastinate,” “I am very impatient” ...
- Please write down the behavior that you would like to change, and also write down the *problems* the behavior is causing.

Finding Your Self-Critical Voice

- Now please write down how your inner critic expresses itself when this behavior occurs. Is it through harsh words, tone of voice? For some people it's more a feeling of disappointment or inner coldness. How does your inner critic show up?

Compassion for Feeling Criticized

- Now switching perspectives, and taking a moment to get in touch with the part of yourself that feels criticized. Please take a moment to notice how it *feels* to receive this message. What is the impact on you?
- If you wish, bring in some yin energy to tenderly hold the fact that it's hard to be the recipient of harsh treatment, perhaps by validating the pain: “This is hard.” “This hurts.”

Turning toward Your Inner Critic

- Now, turning toward your inner critic with interest and curiosity. Please reflect for a moment on *what's motivating your inner criticism*. Is the inner critic trying to protect you in some way, to keep you safe from danger, to help you, even if the result has been unproductive? If so, please write down what motivates the inner critic.
- If you cannot find any way that your inner critic is trying to help you—sometimes self-criticism has no redeeming value whatsoever—or if you feel your inner critic is the internalized voice of someone who abused you in some way, please just

continue to give yourself compassion for how you've suffered from self-criticism in the past. And discontinue this exercise

- But if you did identify some way your inner critic might be trying to protect or help you, see if you can acknowledge its efforts, perhaps even writing down a *few words of thanks*. Let your inner critic know that even though it may not be serving you very well now, its intention was good, and it was doing its best.

Finding Your Motivating Yang

- Now that your self-critical voice has been heard, let's see if we can get in touch with our motivating yang energy.
- Close your eyes, and feel your desire to make a change. Get in touch with this part of you that has encouraging, wise, vision. That wants you to be happy. See if you can feel this form of yang self-compassion flowing in your body.
- This energy clearly sees the problems this behavior is causing in your life, and can use vision, wisdom and encouragement to help you make a change.
 - Our inner critic usually is simplistic and sees our behavior as the result of being bad or inadequate. But the wisdom of yang self-compassion can see bigger patterns, can learn from our mistakes. Can you see any patterns or reasons that this behavior keeps occurring? For why you are stuck? Maybe you are extremely busy or stressed, or it's a habit you have from the way you were raised. Are there any lessons you can learn from your past failures to change? Please write your response.
 - Close your eyes again. Now see if you can call up the supportive, encouraging energy of yang self-compassion to motivate you to make a change, not because you're unacceptable as you are, but because it wants the best for you. Begin to repeat a phrase that captures the essence of your compassionate voice. For example:
 - "I deeply care about you, and that's why I'd like to help you make a change."
 - "I don't want you to keep harming yourself. I'm here to support you."
- Now please open your eyes and begin to write a little letter to yourself in a compassionate voice, freely and spontaneously, addressing the behavior you would like to change. What emerges from the deep feeling and wish, "*I'm here to encourage and support you to make a change?*"
 - If you're struggling to find words, it might be easier to write down the words that would flow from your kind heart when speaking to a dear friend who is struggling with the same issue as you.
- Finally, holding this encouragement to change together with the fact that it's also okay to be where you are, a work in progress. We don't need to be perfect, or to get it all right. We can allow the yin of self-acceptance to co-exist with the yang of our intention to change. To do our best, and then accept whatever happens.
- Please write some words of acceptance, to remind yourself that whether you are successful at making a change or not, you're okay as you are.