

10 Steps To Fostering Gentleness and Compassion in Yourself

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Step One: Consider each of the following questions: Have you ever felt cared about unconditionally? Are you someone who has gone through life feeling unloved? Have you felt misunderstood and hurt by others? How do you treat yourself?

Is there a critic in your head that lectures you daily, going into humiliating detail about what you did not do well enough? Does it tell you that you are worthless, deserving of nothing? Does it rigidly define everything that you should and should not do? Does it ever call you names? This type of internal critic succeeds only in heightening self-doubt and shame. Take some time to reflect on and explore the questions above. Try writing your thoughts down on paper or in a journal. Note any patterns emerging.

When you are finished writing, reread what you have written. Are you surprised by the intensity of loathing or disregard that you have for yourself? The primary purpose of this exercise is to increase your awareness of how you are accustomed to being treated. The information you glean may feel painful, enlightening, or both at the same time. Either way the information is important for you to have.

Step Two: Set aside time to think about the concepts of gentleness and compassion. Everyone deserves gentleness and compassion. Consider treating yourself that way. What would it be like? What would it feel like? Would it feel uncomfortable and foreign to you? Could you enjoy it? Do you believe that you don't deserve it? Investigate these concepts in your journal, or if you prefer try thinking out loud with someone you trust. Clear a space for you to just think about what it would be like. You needn't reach any conclusions; you only need to consider all the angles.

Step Three: Because it is not possible to leap from self-hate to self-love in one fell swoop, you will need to find a compromise. With that in mind, learning to be nonjudgmental becomes the next logical step in this journey. Consider what it would feel like if you were to be nonjudgmental with yourself. What would it be like if you could not judge anything about yourself as good or bad? What if you had to accept all of your thoughts, feelings, and actions simply as legitimate and existing? Take some time to really think about this. Explore

your thoughts by writing in your journal or talking with someone you trust.

Once you have examined the idea, try it. Take an entire day and just accept all of your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Whenever you find yourself using words like stupid, dumb, bad, smart, etc., redirect yourself with: "this thought (feeling, action) exists." Wait until the following day before reflecting on your experience.

Step Four: It is now one day later; think back to your experience yesterday. What was it like not to judge yourself? Was it difficult? How many judgments did you find yourself making? How did you tend to talk to yourself? Based on your experience yesterday, how long is your journey from self-loathing to self-love? Are you willing to make the trek? Are you willing to try? What do you have to lose?

Step Five: Now it is time to begin changing the way you talk to yourself. Deliberately incorporate words like, "gentle," "compassion," and "comfort" into your everyday language. Make it a point to use these words when you talk to others; most importantly use them when you talk to yourself. Throughout the course of each day, remind yourself to be gentle and then make a concerted effort to do so.

You must literally train yourself to think differently. Whether you feel hatred for yourself, general unworthiness, or deeply undeserving, changing the way you talk to yourself will begin to transform those feelings. Using written and verbal reminders and affirmations will help turn your harsh feelings into ones that are more kind. Reminding yourself to 'be gentle' will help you to stop being cruel to yourself. Affirming: "I am a good person," can help lessen feelings of unworthiness. If you are someone who relieves emotional pain by hurting yourself (be it through cutting, purging, etc.) it is important that you work to reverse this thinking. Try using the affirmations: "I deserve to be comforted and supported in times of pain and sorrow," and, " I deserve to have peace and joy in my life."

Step Six: Visualization is a powerful tool in any kind of metamorphosis. What do you think it will be like when you are kind to yourself on a regular basis? As vividly as you possibly can, imagine caring about yourself as much as you care about your friends. Picture what a day would look and feel like. What are your beliefs about peace and happiness? Do you believe that those things exist only for others and not for you? Do you feel undeserving of those things? When you feel happy do you also feel guilty? Take some time to scrutinize

your feelings and beliefs about these questions. You may wish to devote a therapy session or two to exploring them. Use writing, artwork, or talking with a confidant to explore what it will mean when you have a positive relationship with yourself. Will you be free to experience joy? Will you experience a new kind of peace?

Step Seven: Treating yourself well is important, but it is also something that takes time to learn how to do, especially if you are used to treating yourself badly. No one goes from beating themselves up to embracing themselves in one quick, easy step. Again there must be a compromise. In this case stopping all destructive behaviors is the middle ground. Simply stop. Just like that. Stop. Do nothing.

Once you do this you may find that all of your urges intensify (e.g. to purge, restrict, exercise, cut etc.). If you feel like you have to sit on your hands to keep from doing something destructive, then by all means do it! Do whatever it takes to not act on any of your self destructive urges. When your urges surface, adopt a fierce attitude and refuse to act on them. Keep reminding yourself to be gentle. Tell yourself that you have had enough pain in your life, and you do not need anymore. Lean on the people you trust. Talk to your therapist, family, and close friends about this difficult period. Describe your experience to them. Use your journal to express how you feel. Keep in mind that when you change your methods of coping it may take a little time for the new alternative methods to bring the desired amount of relief. This is normal. Because they are foreign to you, you may need to try them several times before they feel familiar and begin to work well for you. Keep experimenting during this inevitable adjustment period. Hang in there, you can do it. Stopping destructive behaviors is something like going “cold turkey.” It comes with its own withdrawal of sorts. It can be an awful period of time with urges arising from seemingly all angles. Relentlessly fighting your urges will leave you feeling tired and rough around the edges for a time—But hold on! It really does pass. You will emerge in tact.

Step Eight: Once you make it through the withdrawal period, or as soon as your urges have lessened in intensity, it becomes time to make the most vital connection of all. You need to find a way to feel in your heart all of the things you have trained yourself to think in your head. By now you are probably very good at reminding yourself to be gentle and compassionate. Now you need to experience them.

Try this exercise: Collect pictures of yourself as a child. Take some time to sit down and

study them. Pick up a picture, how do you feel? If your thoughts and feelings are primarily negative, try looking at the pictures and pretending that the person you are looking at is someone other than yourself. As vividly as you can, imagine spending a day with this child. What would you do? What would it be like? What is she like? What does her laughter sound like? Can you see the wonder in her eyes? Can you feel her innocence? Incorporate information you know about yourself into this child. How do you feel? Did you used to do nice things for people when you were little? Did you pick flowers for your mother, grandmother, or favorite teacher? Imagine the little girl in the picture picking flowers and giving them to you. How do you feel? Remember something sad that happened to you and imagine that the same thing happened to this little girl. How do you feel? Do this everyday for a little while, paying close attention to how you feel inside. Eventually you will come to realize that the child in those pictures is really yourself. All of the joy and sorrow that you feel for the little girl in the picture, you will begin to feel for yourself. The joy may be a soaring happiness and the sorrow may be a soul shattering pain... these are some of the most important feelings you will ever have, for they are the beginning of true healing.

Step Nine: Recognize that self-hate is taking the easy way out. This concept is easier to understand once you have made the head-heart connection. You see, when you really love yourself you will feel the pain from all the injustices that you have ever suffered. It is often much easier to hate yourself than it is to feel the heart wrenching pain that comes from having been thrown away, betrayed, unprotected, and unloved. That kind of hurt defies description. It is both a courageous and gentle act to allow yourself to walk through that pain and heal. It has long been said that time heals all wounds, but it does not. Love does. And part of that healing love needs to come from you. Self-hate is abandoning yourself. It is when you walk out on yourself the same way others may have walked out on you in the past. You deserve more than that. Be a warrior and be there for yourself.

Step Ten: As you continue in your quest for gentleness, challenge your harmful beliefs about yourself. Do you feel beneath others and undeserving of even the most basic respect afforded to every human being? Ask yourself why you feel that way...what have you ever done? What it is that makes you so different from others? What did you ever do to deserve to be treated harshly? Your inability to answer any part of these questions is an answer in

itself. In not finding some of your answers you will discover that you are not necessarily any different from other people who were treated with love and respect. You will find that you are no different from other people whom you believe deserve good things, and whom you believe are valuable, worthy people.

Once you are able to look upon yourself with gentleness and compassion you will clearly see how hurtful self-destructive behaviors really are to you. Ask yourself honestly: can you really hurt something you love? Be kind to yourself. Embrace yourself, your heart, your dreams, and even the mistakes that make you so lovably human. Embrace everything about yourself. Life only requires that you be just exactly who you are, and there is no one else in the world quite like you. You are a valuable, beautiful person—Celebrate that!

The Tides of Recovery

Once gentleness and compassion arrives you may find that it does not always remain constant. There is a lot of ebbing and flowing in the healing process. At times you may be consciously aware of the fact that you have lost a certain level of gentleness, and you will need to actively search for it. If you have lost a particular helpful perspective, try to consciously remind yourself of it. Very often that alone will help it to return. Remember that this ebbing and flowing is natural and to be expected. Rest assured that once you have experienced gentleness, you can never again lose it for good. It will always return at some point. Keep in mind that gentleness may mean different things at different times.

Sometimes being gentle means letting yourself cry, while other times it means forcing yourself to move despite pain. Sometimes it may mean making yourself do something that will be good for you even though you do not really want to do it. Still other times it means putting everything on hold and just going out and doing something fun. It always means setting gentle but firm boundaries for yourself that are in your best interest, much the same thing a good parent would do for their child. Throughout your recovery remind yourself to accept where you are in your own process. And above all keep striving!

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