

Commentary...

Manage suffering with self-compassion

By Mitchell Luftig
Columnist

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended our lives, bringing in its wake uncertainty about the future, financial hardship, social isolation, and it has frustrated our efforts to support vulnerable loved-ones.

The pandemic has created the ultimate double-whammy: It poses both a physical threat to our survival and a psychological threat to our sense of well-being.

The brain's amygdala responds identically to physical and psychological threats, preparing our body to fight like a lion, flee like a gazelle, or freeze in place like a rabbit, responses more effective against a physical threat than one which is psychological in nature.

When we treat ourselves with kindness, understanding, and acceptance—that is with self-compassion—we have the greatest chance of managing the painful emotions that are triggered by the pandemic and responding rationally to the challenges that face us.

For a variety of reasons, individuals may have difficulty treating themselves compassionately — they think of self-compassion as one big pity-party; they believe that self-criticism is the best way to motivate themselves; they downplay the extent to which they are suffering (other people's suffering is so much greater than mine!); or they may not feel worthy of being treated kindly.

Research shows that individuals who treat themselves compassionately:

- Possess stable self-esteem that isn't dependent on external validation.
 - Recognize when their efforts go badly, take responsibility for their mistakes and learn from their experience.
 - Respond to a poor evaluation with sympathy for themselves and self-comforting behaviors rather than rumination and self-criticism.
 - Are less afraid of failure and rejection, better able to accept and benefit from feedback.
 - Are better able to regulate their emotions.
- High scores on a measure of self-compassion

correlate with wisdom, personal initiative, happiness, optimism, positive affect, and coping.

Self-compassion is a skill that can be learned. For interested readers, Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer offer a series of excellent guided exercises in "The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook."

Drs. Neff and Germer have identified three research-based practices to help us grow our self-compassion:

Learn to treat ourselves with kindness:

- We accept that our suffering is real and just as valid as the suffering of others.
- When we are suffering, we benefit from and deserve compassionate treatment.
- We contemplate how we have supported friends when they were struggling—what words did we use, what tone of voice, what body language?
- We imagine how we might treat ourselves with the same kindness and compassion that we demonstrated to our friends when they were struggling.

How do we care for ourselves physically, keep our minds calm, manage our stress and regulate our emotions, connect with others, and meet our spiritual needs? Are there new strategies we can practice that will enable us to take better care of ourselves? How can we adopt our strategies to meet the special demands of the pandemic?

Recognize our common humanity:

- The universe has not singled us out to suffer; all human beings suffer at one time or another.
- Our suffering connects us with other people who suffer, helping us to realize that we are not alone.
- Although we make mistakes, that, too, is part of the human condition. We are all a work in progress.
- As we learn to accept that everyone has faults, we become tolerant of the less pleasing parts of our personality.

Approach our suffering mindfully:
We learn to focus on our

breathing...

- The breath provides an anchor to the present moment.
- We follow the breath all the way through its cycle (I'm breathing in; I'm breathing out).
- We ask ourselves, where do we feel the breath most vividly?
- We notice when we become distracted and return our attention to the breath.

We expand our focus to include the body as a whole—

- Working at a pace that is comfortable for us, we discover where in the body we harbor painful emotions.
- If we become too anxious during this process, we return our focus to the breath or take a break, returning only when we are ready.
- We learn to label painful emotions...
- This is the location of my fear, my anger, my depression, my anxiety; this is how I experience it.
- We learn to turn towards our emotional pain, approaching it with curiosity, openness, and reflection.
- As we learn to accept, rather than resist, the emotional pain that surfaces during self-compassion practice, we shrink the amount of our suffering.

When the immediate physical threat of COVID-19 passes, the psychological threat to our well-being will linger, keeping the body's emergency response system cranked up, depressing our immune system. Self-compassion resets the amygdala, shutting off the alarm bells so that we can move towards calm.

Additional Resources: A test to measure your level of self-compassion, along with self-compassion exercises and guided meditation are available at www.self-compassion.org.

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RACE: Sisters-area runners trained for months

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The other ladies had signed up to do the half marathon (13.11 miles) and they were going to either run it or walk/run. My mom ultimately decided to run/walk the half marathon."

Neither mom nor daughter have ever done a half marathon.

Sarah went on to say that when she was in her 20s, she participated in several sprint triathlons, a 0.5-mile swim, 12.4-mile bike ride, and a 3.1-mile run.

She added, "We've had family in the Sisters area for a long time. My grandparents lived here, and my parents have lived in Sisters off and on for years. I retired from my job in law enforcement in Reno in 2018 and knew I wanted to live here, so I relocated to Sisters last year."

Silvey was the motivating force behind the training.

"Virginia was very supportive and as a group we did several training sessions," Sarah said. "Everyone runs

or walks at different speeds so maintaining social distances was not difficult. We tried to get together for training at least once a week for the last 4 months. My mom and I did several walks near our homes, and I take Mabel out almost every day on walks near our home."

The participants for the race were: Pam Christ, 61; Sarah Griffin, 51, with Mabel her dog; Marna Griffin, 75; Joan Blancett, 63; Heidi Franz-Tremblay, 54; Sara Euser, 65; Anna Blumenkron, 62; and Virginia Silvey, 71.

The non-runners who helped out with their own creative talents were Susan Wilson who crafted the winning medals for everyone. Patti Piper was their finish line official, along with Miki McFadden, and Debbie Barns took the finish-line photos.

Susan Wilson and Peg Luken rode their bikes checking on the runners and providing moral support throughout the race.

Silvey added, "The Avenue of the Giants Marathon, Half Marathon & 10K will be happening in October and we are continuing the training."

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